

## Unseasonable Seasons

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When tourists venture to Wales they are usually greeted by friendly smiles, green fields and thousands of sheep. After a few days staying in one particular place they can expect to chat with locals (probably in a pub) and will no doubt touch upon the topic of the weather.

I have been living in western Japan for over ten years, and believe I am as accurate as anybody else in my Kyoto neighbourhood at predicting the weather for the next three hours or so. In Japan, we simply tip our heads back, gaze at the sky and can tell from what is above us whether we will need a sunhat or an umbrella.

Here in Wales things are not so straightforward. I am currently back in my homeland for a holiday and am sitting in my parents' living room in front of a computer. It is 2.50pm on August 3rd. The outside temperature is 15 degrees Celsius and there are grey clouds in the sky. No rain, slightly breezy. I will bet this evening's dinner that the weather will be significantly different when I approach the end of this short essay.

In Japan there is an abundance of literature referring to the four seasons. Japanese people seem rather proud of their seasons and often ask me if we have such clear divisions of climate in Wales. Of course we do! Do the Japanese really believe that God favoured their lumps of volcanic rock and forgot the hills and valleys of Wales? Fat chance. The truth of the matter is that the seasons in Wales can be unseasonable, totally inappropriate for the time of year. So although the memories from my childhood I am about to share with you are true, please do not visit this part of the world expecting any kind of weather – expect EVERY kind of weather!

I will begin with January 1977, a month in an exceptionally harsh winter. My birthday happens to be in January and as a child I could often play in the snow after opening my presents. The summer of 1976 brought water shortages and stagnant rivers to Wales, and the following winter saw our village cut off from the local town by massive snow drifts. This was wonderful for us children, as schools were shut for over a week and we could toboggan down roads which were normally used by cars.

Nevertheless this winter was vicious for the elderly as they could not access shops to buy their provisions. The unluckiest passed away, some while digging themselves out of their homes.

One common activity for children was skating on frozen ponds and canals. Our mothers always warned us of the dangers of ice breaking beneath us, which of course encouraged us even more to jump onto the slippery stuff! I shall always remember my friend heading out towards the centre

of the school pond. All of a sudden there was a loud crack, and he became significantly shorter. A few of us managed to haul him out of the numbing brown water and get him to the school nurse. Ice is sometimes not nice.

The daffodil is the national emblem of Wales (as well as the leek, but let's stick with the prettier one!). March 1st is our national day and people proudly pin daffodils on their lapels before heading to school or work. It also reminds us that warmer times are on their way as wild flowers begin to bloom in the hedgerows and newborn lambs take their first few steps on grass. The last weekend of March sees the country "change the clocks" – summer time starts. This advance of one hour means that children can play outside after dinner. (Come on Japan – you need this!). The days of April, May and June become progressively longer, and I have vivid recollections of playing soccer in the local playing fields until half past nine at night. Summer evenings are designed for outdoor activities such as walking dogs, playing tennis and drinking real ale in beer gardens.

The longest school holiday runs from mid-July to early September, and the magnetic forces of the beaches of Pembrokeshire and West Wales draw people from all over the United Kingdom and even the continent. During this season caravans clog country lanes in the rush to the seaside, deckchairs come out of garden sheds and supermarkets sell burgers and sausages by the ton to be charred on barbecue grills until late at night.

I always dreaded September. Not only did it signify the end of the summer holiday, but it meant the start of a new school year, and an increase

in homework. This extra workload coupled with fewer hours of daylight would make me as miserable as sin. Numerous varieties of apples are harvested at this time of year, but not even these delicious fruits could cure my depression as I could no longer kick balls around after dinner. The final weekend of October sees time revert to that of Greenwich and doom and gloom is well in place for Halloween and Guy Fawkes celebrations. Fireworks and hot soup are about the only positive things that happen in dark, wet November, and if Jesus Christ had not been born in December I wonder how many Welsh people might throw themselves down disused mineshafts. Winter here is awful, truly awful.

This brings me back to January again, and it is now 4.00pm. Outside, light drizzle is falling and yet much of the sky is blue. How can that be? I am in Wales. My dinner is safe!