

Ten deadly weather events that shook Britain

Video transcript: 1947 The Big Snow

Bob Wellings, BBC Nationwide 1973, looks back at unique archive from the winter of 1946/47: The crisis began in December 1946 when the coal began to run out. The restarting of industries after the war, combined with manpower and equipment shortages, led to a demand that the coal mines simply could not meet. There were threats of widespread lay-offs in the struggling motor industry, factories were unheated and production lines came to a stand-still.

Then came the snow and the great freeze-up. Ten foot drifts and persistent frosts and blizzards paralysed the country and the railways came to a halt. The mines froze up and even miners couldn't get to work. By February the country was in chaos and at the end of the first week, power stations began closing and much of England had to live with permanent daytime blackouts. Emanuel Shinwell, Minister for Power in the Labour government, warned that the country faced complete disaster. The blackouts soon extended to the entire country. On 10 February 1947, the TUC appointed fuel watchers to stamp down on anyone wasting power. BBC television – yes they had television in 1947 – closed down together with Radio's third programme. Greyhound racing was banned and it was announced that London had six days coal left.

Emanuel Shinwell, Minister for Power 1947 News archive: This is the most serious blow that's ever befallen British industry in its long history, and incidentally it comes at a time when the nation can least afford it. It must not happen again. The cry must be for more coal and again more coal to meet the ever increasing demands that indicate prosperity and progress. It is the government's task to see that enough coal is produced and fairly divided. I beg the government to concentrate on this task and this task alone for the nation's plight is perilous.

Bob Wellings - BBC Nationwide 1973: All offices were reduced to candlelight. Passenger trains were withdrawn to help to get the coal trains through and still it snowed. By mid-February unemployment had reached two million. Even when the thaw began in March, shortages persisted. It wasn't until July 1947, and one of the hottest summers in years, that all the restrictions could be lifted.