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## Weather and Walking: Sensing Snow on Suburban Paths and Trails

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## Weather and Walking: Sensing Snow on Suburban Paths and Trails

### Cover Page Footnote

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ABBI FLINT

## *Weather and Walking: Sensing Snow on Suburban Paths and Trails*

For the walker out of doors, however, the weather is no spectacle to be admired through picture windows but an all-enveloping infusion which steps [their] entire being.

– Tim Ingold (2010, pp. S131)

There were two days last winter when I woke to freshly fallen snow. The first in December, just a light dusting of icing-sugar on the street. The second in early March was heavier, shin-deep and drifted softly up the back door of my house. Both days I set out early, with the still-present moon as company, along local footpaths to be with the snow before it melted.



Image 1: Snow on a public footpath (A. Flint)

Generally, the image of being on paths we are sold is in fine weather. Take a glance at the *National Trails* website and you'll see people enjoying paths on long sunlit days with clear blue

skies and dry terrain. There is no rain, never mind snow. My experience tells a different story. Sure, snow is relatively unusual in the part of the UK I live in, but we get several snowy days each year, and it frequently rains. Thomas Cropper and Paul Cropper's analysis of weather data collected between 1883 and 2015 from a meteorological station in Sheffield's Weston Park suggests trends of increasingly warmer and wetter conditions, with increased precipitation intensity across all seasons. Could potentially warmer and wetter winters in the future mean that encounters (albeit short-lived) of moving with deep, wet snow on paths and trails become more common?

On these wintry days, I was not on a National Trail but on paths that are part of my local public rights of way network<sup>1</sup>: a collection of suburban footpaths and bridleways that criss-cross the parks and fields on the outskirts of Sheffield in South Yorkshire. These routes provide vital public access to green spaces for recreation, physical and mental wellbeing, and traffic-free ways of getting between places on the city's periphery. As part of the *In All Our Footsteps* project, I have a professional interest in the histories of these everyday routes and how they are experienced and perceived. As my project colleagues, Clare Hickman and Glen O'Hara, explain:

Such an emphasis on the human use of space can take us in new directions, away from the more common heroic stories of time-hallowed trails or long-distance treks, and towards men's and women's movement in quite humdrum settings that still might be thought of as simply 'everyday.' (57)

## Setting Out

I am the first to make footprints in the snow on the street: a kind of first footing that I hope brings good fortune. I cross the main road, which although gritted is also thick with snow, through two cul-de-sacs of mid-twentieth century social housing, and into the park. The park is one of twenty district parks looked after by the local council, and holds a mixture of open grass, woodland, and scrub landscapes navigated by paved and unpaved paths.

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<sup>1</sup> For more on Public Rights of Way in England see, <https://www.gov.uk/right-of-way-open-access-land>

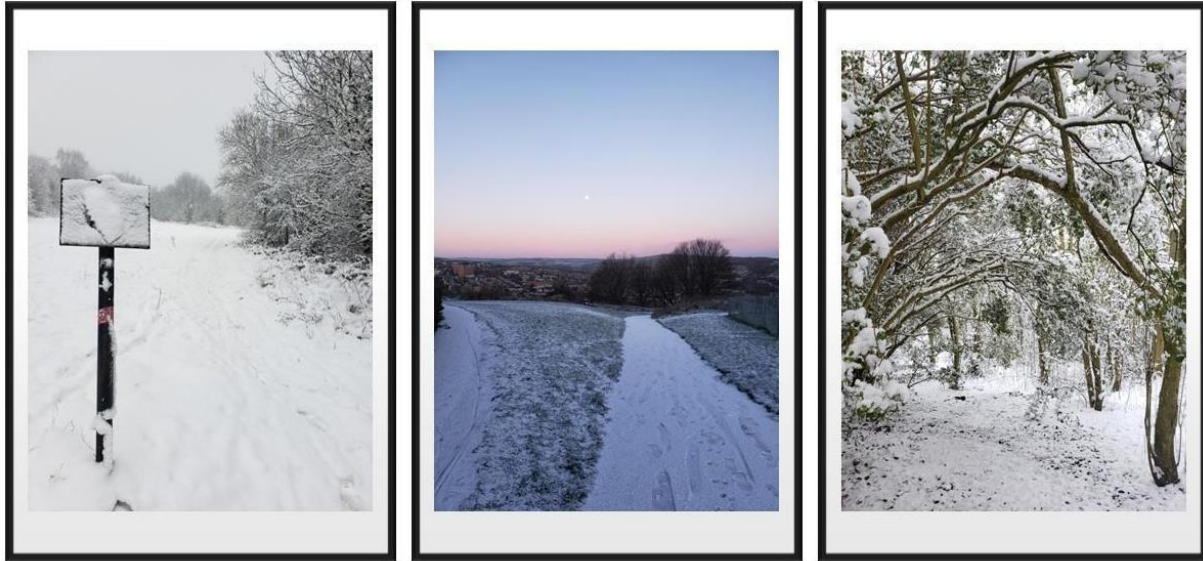


Image 2: Park paths in the snow (A. Flint)

I am immediately struck by what I can and can't hear from the path. The park feels muted, muffled—the usual birdsong largely absent, the distant roads quiet. I wonder if everyone is staying home. Later, I learn that birds do indeed hunker down during snow<sup>2</sup> but also that snow quiets the world; its crystalline structure absorbing sound, drawing it into the spaces between<sup>3</sup> (Datt et al. 15). I, too, am physically muffled by the extra clothes I wear, a mantle between my skin and the surrounding air—only my face is exposed to the chill—yet I am acutely aware of the sounds my body makes as I move. Snow simultaneously makes soundscapes quieter whilst emphasising other noises: the *schwip-schwip* of my arms against the padded body of my winter coat, its rustling hood. Snow crunches underfoot, where my boots usually meet with softly-spoken mud. My breathing is audibly heavier and suddenly visible as steam.

Colour, too, is muted to monochrome; the path and surrounding ground takes on a bluish hue. What colour there is, stands out—pink cherry blossom caught out by the late snowfall in March, the bright yellow of a roadside grit-bin. Much of what lies on the ground is hidden by the snow, but this soft covering also makes the normally invisible visible. The path is haunted by physical traces of the movements of others who have passed this way. Various sizes and directions of footprints are imprinted; the tracks of animals and the thin lines of bicycle wheels all pattern the snow-covered path. Some of these create their own new paths, individual lines of desire, leading alongside and from the formal route into open fields or the cover of nearby woods. The small prints of mammals and birds remind me of their quiet companionship as we move

<sup>2</sup> See this article by Emily Silber on the Audubon website <https://www.audubon.org/news/gimme-shelter-how-do-birds-survive-snow-storm>

<sup>3</sup> See also this piece on Science Daily <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2016/01/160121150503.htm>



through the environment, both together and apart. Each set of tracks telling a different story of being.

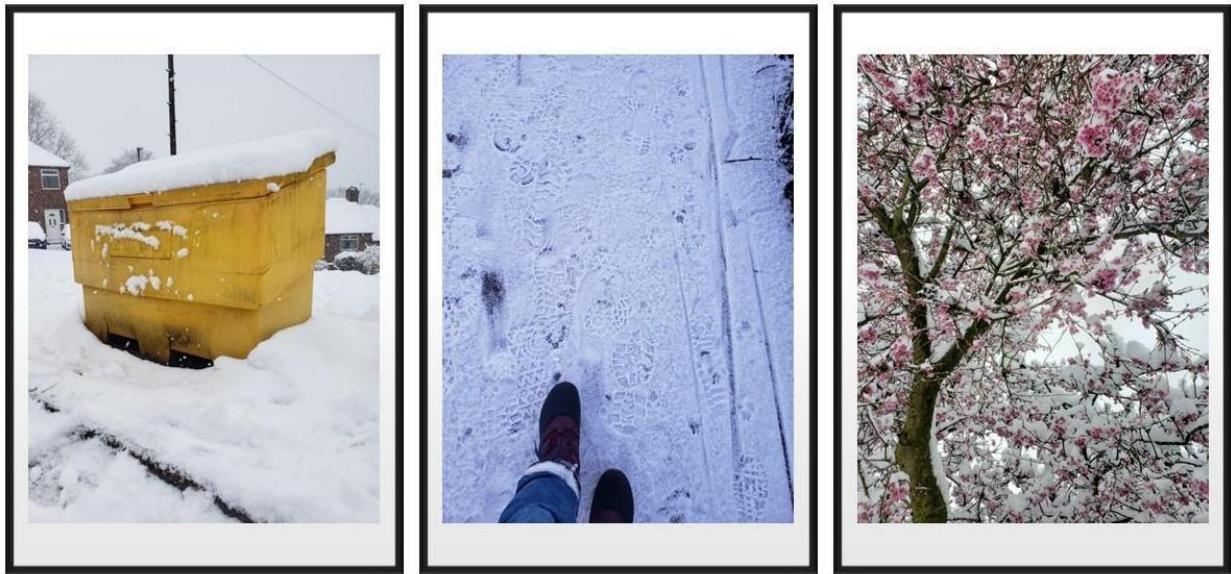


Image 3: Colour contrasts in the snow (A. Flint)

Snow and light work together in interesting ways. In low light, or an overcast sky, the light becomes what skiers and snowboarders call ‘flat’: hard to pick out the contours and textures of surfaces and making it trickier to judge the way the ground meets one’s feet. In bright sunshine, the surface glitters and dazzles—sometimes oppressively so. Recalling a walking trip to Wales, a 1938 article in the *Manchester Guardian* describes this effect: “As we climbed by the Llŵch to Logyn it was almost too sunny, the light was so painful on the untrodden snow” (13). I, too, can *feel* the light as I move along the path, sometimes straining to read the path in the shade, elsewhere squinting and marvelling at the reflected glare from the low sun.

### **Moving and Knowing**

Of course, it’s not just about seeing the weather. Alongside the visual changes snow makes to landscapes, and to light, it alters our physical and sensory engagements with paths and the ways we move in connection with them. The difference between formality and desire is blurred and harder to discern. It becomes difficult to read where official paths and trails are; snow unfixes them. This ‘clean sheet’ might have changed the visibility, but in thin snow I can still feel the presence of hard surfaced paths as more compacted, firmer ground; it responds to the pressure of footfall in a different way to the ground beside the path. I am feeling my way.

*During heavy snowfalls, the landscape becomes a snowscape, where earlier nuances, details, and references on the ground disappear. The character of the snow changes significantly both during the season and on a daily basis, and these changes define mobility, visibility and availability of different landscapes. (Myrstad et al., 322)*

Snow changes the material fabric of paths and, in turn, the way I move *with* them. In light snow I notice this most in the way I walk downslope. My stride more tentative, flat-footed, almost penguin-like. Walking in deep snow is a different matter. I find myself lifting each leg high in the air before placing it, then rocking over to shift my body weight. In Norway, they have a special word for this movement—*grynne*—a way of being in snow that children in the north of the country learn through experience (Myrstad et al. 326). Here, movement itself becomes a form of knowing weather (Ingold S121). In Yorkshire, where I live, snow is a temporary accompaniment to walking and wheeling, and no such word exists. As a child my language of snow was limited to whether it was of good enough quality to make snowmen or snowballs. As an adult this has shifted to how easy (or not) the snow is to walk in. Is it slushy? Is it crisp and fresh? Is it icy? Other societies, who have long histories of engagements and experiences within snowy landscapes, have rich terminologies for snow conditions. For example, in North Sami (one of the languages spoken by Indigenous Sami people of parts of Fennoscandia) snow is not described solely by its physical properties, but in ways that express the relationships between people and reindeer, ways of being, knowing and moving with landscapes, and changing weather conditions (Magga 32-33). This depth of language tells how snowed routeways not only impact the movements of people, but the other-than-human beings that share these spaces, and our relationship with these others.

I leave the park, walking a short way along a road, before picking up a public footpath that leads through fields by allotments and a stable. I walk this route most days and it is largely uninterrupted by boundary structures—there are a couple of offset step-through stiles and otherwise open gaps. However, there is one stile which has long been missing a lower step. Today, the snow on the wooden post of this lost-step makes it difficult to negotiate. I watch two poodles hesitate, then tumble onto the path below, followed by their owner who clutches the wooden handrail and lowers one foot gingerly.



Image 4: A missing step on a footpath stile with snow (A. Flint)

## Feeling

As the anthropologist Tim Ingold points out, too often when we think of the materiality of the world we think in terms of hard materials, landscapes and artefacts, and less of the ephemeral materiality of weather like rain and snow. The ground is not a singular thing but is made up of multiple constituents, living and not. Weather can draw our attention to these material qualities of paths and recognises that they are composite interfaces, always in flux (Ingold S125): in a sense, always moving. Weather is part of the lived experience of undertaking activities outdoors, and can affect mood and motivation, although its influence is not often explored in detail. As Jacquelyn Allen-Collinson notes, “there is currently a considerable social-science lacuna in terms of qualitative research on the weather and people’s weather experiences, even though the ways in which people experience and talk about weather are highly significant in social life” (64). These less certain aspects of materiality can evoke strong and sometimes contradictory emotions. Consider these three examples of personal experiences



of being with snow in the north of England. In the first, Margaret Bailey (a former Peak Park Ranger) evokes a sense of fear coming down from the Pennine uplands in heavy snow:

I remember once being on Kinder Downfall when it was snow covered and you'd be amazed how different everywhere feels. The landmarks are camouflaged and snowed in and I remember standing at the Downfall and it became misty and I thought 'I hate this, I'm getting off' [...] we did not know where we were until we got below snowline and we were on the correct route. But all the paths were obliterated. (Bailey, *Moor Memories Project*, 8)

In the second, a resident of the Calder Valley describes a sense of shared wonder and playfulness in deep snow:

I went out for a run one winter a few years back, over the moors, and there had been a phenomenal snowfall. You could run over walls! In fact you could hardly see where the walls were. I ran back down and it must have been 20 foot high, so I fetched everybody, said 'come and have a look at this!' It was awesome. Just incredible. It had snowed a lot and frozen on top so you could quite happily walk over these places you hadn't walked before, and you could just walk over walls. You'd be walking on the top bar of a gate! Really random things you could do. The boys were doing crazy things. They were special days. It lasted for weeks. (Mason 96)

The final short reflection describes Mr. and Mrs. Frodsham's amusement at a family member's childlike joy at following paths made by wild animals in the snow:

He's a grown man with a family and he's following these rabbit tracks. He was just like a little kid in it he were; he'd never ever seen snow like it. (Frodsham, *Moor Memories Project*, 15)

Moving with snow can evoke a childlike wonder and playfulness, or be a source of fear and danger. Certainly, snow brings with it risks: risks of slipping and failing, of misreading paths and losing one's way, or simply from the concrete physical risks of being out in the cold and wet. These risks are different in different places and are not experienced in the same way by everyone. Philippa Clarke et al. describe how many older people restrict their outdoor walking in snow and ice and how wintry conditions can clog up the wheels of mobility devices and vehicles. Deep snow on high and remote fells is a different, and perhaps less playful, proposition to deep snow in a city park. Recalling a moorland walk in his youth, former Peak District warden Ian Stuart describes how walking in snow can be painful:

There was an east wind blowing and the weather, the snow, had thawed and refrozen, thawed, refrozen, over obviously a number of days when the sun had been out, and very large ice crystals had formed a 'crust' [...] so we were confronted with [...] sugarcube-size lumps of snow [...] and with bare legs it was absolutely catastrophic. It was horrendous! And we stuck it out for a bit and then we gave up and packed it in. (Stuart, *Moor Memories Project*, 9)

Across the moors that edge the skyline from my suburban footpath, heavy snowfall led to tragic consequences in 1964, when three young men lost their lives attempting the Four Inns Challenge walk. The tragedy had a long-lasting impact: becoming part of the social history of the moors and central to the origin story of the local Mountain Rescue service<sup>4</sup>. Those involved in the search and rescue operation gave moving accounts of their experiences, often with strikingly detailed sensory memories:

we found one of the bodies [...] in Alport, in the river itself, and all we could see, because the river surface had frozen over, a little bit of snow had fallen on the ice, all we could see were the tips of his toes, boots and his nose just sticking out of the ice. Anyway we recovered him. (Ian Hurst, *Moor Memories Project*, 2)

On the snake summit there was a howling gale, snowing like mad and ice underfoot and I can still visualise all the men, their eyebrows and their hair was thick, absolutely iced up [...] and that's how bad it was when those four boys died there didn't they? [...] And that was the beginning of the Mountain Rescue (Margaret Bailey, *Moor Memories Project*, 10)

### **Remembering and Caring**

Snow is a strange-maker, rendering familiar places unfamiliar. It builds imaginative bridges between distant landscapes and evokes memories of different snows in other places. In the *Manchester Guardian* article from 1938, the author describes how snow conjures Japanese landscapes from *Bannau Brycheiniog* (Brecon Beacons): "Pen y Fan looked like Fujiyama" (13). The way snow evokes memories of past experiences is tied up with what it felt like to be there: a bodily and multisensory experience not just of movement in place, but in weather. When thinking about sense and memory it is often Proust's madeleines that come immediately to mind, but memories can be evoked by all sensorial experiences and movements (Schine 100). The physical, tactile experience of walking through deep snow evokes a strong memory for me of one winter from my childhood, when waist-deep snow closed the roads to the small village where I grew-up. I walked, or rather waded, with my mother across fields to collect fresh milk from a local farm. The resistance of deep snow to my movement in the present, recalls that experience in the past. It also unearths other sensory memories I had forgotten, such as the taste of that milk: sweet and still slightly warm.

*What lingers are affective sensations that may fall dormant for years but that once reawakened by weather conditions can bring one back into a particular weather-place and into the lived bodily experience of the time.* (Vannini et al. 373)

Many people who recounted their experiences of living and working in the Peak District moorlands through the Moor Memories oral history project recalled the heavy snows of 1947 and its impact on everyday life and work. For example, Ian Stuart recalls a member of a walking group sinking completely through a deep snow drift against a wall. These memorable snow

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<sup>4</sup> See this piece from 2014 by the Buxton Mountain Rescue Team

<https://www.buxtonmountainrescue.org.uk/news-articles/rescuers-remember-1964-four-inns-tragedy>

events are also shared with other-than-human animals. *Clarion Ramblers*, a silent film recorded that same year (1947), shows the Sheffield Clarion Ramblers who “lend a hand” to rescue a farmer’s sheep from deep snow on a winter ramble in the Peak district . This incident shows us that a shared sense of experience, and care for one another, is not limited to that between humans; the ramblers tend to the sheep then physically carry it on shoulders—body to body—to, one presumes, warmth and safety.



Image 5: Screenshot from the silent film *Clarion Ramblers* (1947).  
Included with kind permission from Yorkshire Film Archive.

Just as weather plays an active role in the care between people (as evoked in memories of the Four Inns tragedy), weather is an actor in relationships of multi-species care<sup>5</sup>. In another oral history interview from the Moor Memories project, a farmer, sheep, and dog are drawn together in an act of care in which the experience and impact of snow is crucial.

I remember our first winter here, the farmer next door, came out one day and the snow had drifted up the wall, it was feet deep, you could hardly see the top of the wall and he was walking up and down on top of the wall and he had a long rod, a long pole and he was feeling down with this probe and he had a sheep dog with him, the sheep dog was sniffing and they were trying to find sheep which had been buried in the snow [...] The

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<sup>5</sup> See Westerlaken (2021) and Harraway (2016) for more on ideas of multispecies care and multispecies worlding.

dog would then confirm that by barking and then he'd get a spade and have to lift the sheep out. (John Gill, *Moor Memories Project*, 10)

This is a mobile and multi-sensory engagement, involving touch, sight, smell, and sound working together. As Yannis Hamilakis says, "All sensorial experiences are not only synaesthetic but also kinaesthetic" (114); sensing requires movement of some sort. The farmer *feels* through the snow for the trapped sheep using the rod as an extension of his body. In another account, people *looked* for "breathing holes" melted by the warmth of the sheep's breath from beneath the snow. The dog *sniffs* out the sheep and alerts the farmer to their location through *barking*.

### **Returning**

Passing just above the stables, the public footpath brings me out into a playing-field where I turn back towards home. Across the expanse of white, it's hard to pick out the small, sunken, gap in the trees on the far side where a desire-path connects the field with the residential streets beyond. The field is a popular spot for dog-walkers, and I often see familiar faces and dogs on this route. Usually we acknowledge one-another in a light-touch way, a nod or mumbled 'morning' as we pass by. Today, fewer people have ventured out; maybe holding out until the day warms up. Perhaps it is the association of snow with the sociability of the festive period in the northern hemisphere, but folk seem keener to pause and pass time together, acknowledging the sense of shared experience the weather brings. People comment on the cold, the beauty, the chill air. The sensory experience of snow is shaping social interactions. Perhaps this sociality also reflects a sense of mutual care for one-another? Much in the same way, as I emerge from the field-path into the suburban streets, residents—neighbours—are out clearing snow from the pavements and roads, performing a collective act of care to facilitate one another's movement. But I am also aware that others are inside behind closed doors and drawn curtains, for many reasons unable to be part of this shared experience. Snow can hinder the accessibility of paths and trails, increasing the sense of exclusion for some.

Snow is not something which happens to paths, but something which becomes an active part of the path itself. It shapes not only how we move with weather and paths physically, but our social relations with others—human or not—as we move together and apart through the landscape. It can make visible the often-invisible world of multi-species entanglements and care; it also prompts cognitive and emotional shifts. Snow on paths can simultaneously create a sense of fear or joy, danger or playfulness, mutual care or isolation. It can evoke rich and multi-sensory memories and connections with other snows and other places. Snow moves us.

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