

## *A Personal View of the weather by Harry Aslett*



*Harry Aslett at Age 57 (1974)*

*(Interview carried out by Jenny Wood )*

### *Introduction*

Harry Aslett worked at the Meteorological Office until 1974 when he took early retirement and took on the job of presenting the weather on Anglia TV until he retired in 1982.

### *Have you been involved with the weather for a long time?*

I have been a weatherman for over 40 years and have been in many places, not only in England but in Gibraltar , the South of Spain and as far east as Iran and as far west as the Azores in the Atlantic Ocean.

### *Why did you want to be a weather man?*

It was many years ago and I don't really remember why. I just wanted something with a scientific interest. I've worked with weather nearly all my life. My first job was only for a few months working for the Government as a Chemist. That was analyzing bottles of wine for the alcohol content when Customs took them off ships, so they knew how much duty to charge.

### *What did you do in the time you were abroad?*

When I was abroad, the most important place I went to was Gibraltar and there, among other things I used to do forecasts not only for the RAF planes going on anti-submarine patrols, but we also did flights back to the UK and also had to do forecasts for the Royal Navy Fleet in the Western Mediterranean.

## *What is the Meteorological Office and where is it?*

The MET Office is a Worldwide organisation but the headquarters in the UK is at Bracknell, Berkshire. They get information from all over the world so they can construct their weather reports showing the weather spread across the whole of the globe.

Nowadays all of the information that comes in code is a five figure code that is fairly easy to understand, but so much of the work is done on computers that all these figures are fed into a massive computer. Using this information the computer prints out what it thinks the weather charts will look like, that is where the high pressure system and the low pressure system in 24 hours, 48 hours and up to five days ahead will be.

## *How do they measure the weather?*

There is always a right way to do things and a wrong way. To measure temperature the thermometers should be in a white screen (called the Stevensons screen) to reflect the sunshine, louvred sides so the wind can circulate through it and the height of the bulbs of the thermometers must be four feet above the ground and underneath the screen there should be closely cut grass. Why you ask? Well, it's simply to compare the temperature (eg in London with that in Nice)they've got to be done under exactly the same conditions.

That is why they should be four feet high in a white screen with louvred sides and the underneath should always be grass. The reason for that? If you have a light sandy soil it gets very hot on a summer's day, it radiates the heat upwards and so records a much higher temperature than it would otherwise do. So if you're in one of those places where it is important to you that you should have a high temperature during the day, get rid of the grass and have a nice sandy soil! The only trouble with that is that at night the sandy soil will lose heat very quickly and so you would have a slightly lower temperature than you would normally have.

Another way to affect the temperature reading, is to build a hedge all round the screen to stop air circulating through it, so you get stagnant air that tends to record a different temperature to what it normally would be. This applies particularly in seaside places. If they want a high temperature, the best thing for them to do is to keep their thermometers as far away from the sea front as they can, have a hedge round it and have a nice light sandy soil!

The rainfall gauge is just a circular container to gather the rain in, and I always remember one place I went to. I was sent to have a look at this weather station as there was something wrong with the rainfall readings – they didn't seem to fit in the pattern of the surrounding ones. When I got down there I found the meteorological enclosure was next door to the fire station and the fire station was spraying hoses all

over the place! The water was splashing into the rain gauges and so they were getting much higher reading than they should have had!

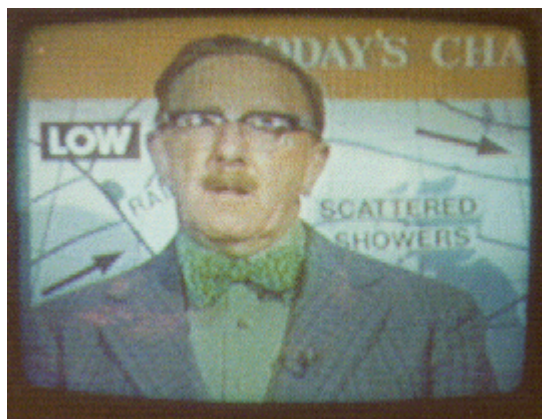
Seaweed is sometimes a good indication of what the weather is going to do. If the air is getting fairly moist and humid (that's an indication that it is going to rain) the seaweed will be limp and damp, whereas if the weather is going to be dry the seaweed is usually quite hard and sometimes when people ask me what the weather is going to be, I say "I'm sorry I haven't got my seaweed with me!"

### ***What else (if there IS anything else) did you do at the Meteorological Office?***

I also used to be involved in the system of providing weather forecasts for pigeon racers. During the summer months the pigeon clubs always used to run races for their pigeons and these races could be a hundred to five hundred miles long, and on these occasions the fanciers would like to have a weather forecast so they could decide whether the conditions were suitable for the pigeons to race or not. For instance, there were things the pigeons didn't like – they didn't like a very strong head wind against them or thunder or fog so a race might be delayed by 24 hours because of this.

### ***What did you do after working at the Meteorological Office?***

After I retired from the MET Office headquarters in Bracknell, Berkshire, I took a part-time job as a weather forecaster at Anglia TV.



*A picture taken at home whilst watching Harry Aslett on the TV!*

### ***Where did you get your information to forecast the weather?***

We had lines connecting us to Bracknell and used to get charts sent by fax and other information was sent by teleprinter from the MET Office. (Note: this was in the early 80s)

## *What is it like to do the weather on TV?*

I've enjoyed being a weather man even though sometimes it's been a bit difficult like at Anglia TV. You've got a fixed time to do the broadcast in but when you go to the studios, sometimes the floor manager will ask you to cut your forecast by eg 15 seconds because we are running late. Well, 15 seconds may not sound a lot but it is an awful number of words! So the best thing to do is to have a little topic that you can add or take away if time is going to be different to what you expected.

Even if you're only on for a few minutes presenting the actual forecast, you've been there all day preparing it – you've been drawing charts up and seeing what changes take place from one chart to another, and then estimating how they will progress into the future.

Of course, the weatherman never had a tele-prompter he had to remember everything he had to say, and sometimes what I used to do was pencil a little note on the chart which when in front of the camera was so faint the camera couldn't pick it up!

Because I wore glasses, I had to have special lenses to prevent the lights reflecting off the front of the lenses.

One of the nicest things was said to me by an old lady. She said that because I always faced the camera and spoke clearly, she could lip read me because she was deaf.

One thing I was known for was wearing bowties and they were quite colourful – my wife used to make them and on one occasion she said to someone "You'd better watch out, you may see my daughter walking around Norwich wearing the same colour as his bowtie!"

## *Did you ever get the weather wrong?*

If you got the weather right every time, you'd be working for yourself and you would be a millionaire! I always remember the occasion when I was walking in Norwich and a bus pulled up behind me and the driver leaned out of his cab and said "You got it wrong that time, didn't you!"

## *Has weather forecasting changed in recent years?*

Selling weather forecasts is now big business. For instance, Electricity Boards need forecasts of temperature some days ahead in order to plan the supply across the country eg if the weather is expected to become exceptionally cold in the East while remaining mild in the West, the Boards will arrange for the surplus unneeded electricity in the West to be fed into the Eastern regions.

It has become a profitable business and now a few private firms compete for the business of accurate weather forecasts. Also on TV some firms are sponsoring weather forecasts as a means of advertising.

END OF INTERVIEW

**Harry Aslett 1917 – 1998**

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