

TASMANIA'S EARLY SNOWFALLS 1800–1900

Keith Roberts

366 Huon Road, South Hobart, Tasmania 7004; email: tufoic@yahoo.com

INTRODUCTION

The appearance of snow on the slopes of Mt Wellington generates a strange response from the citizens of Hobart. Cars can be seen streaming up the mountain road with the ensuing delays and frustrations, generating the annual calls for a cable car access.

However, a search for information on snowfalls since Hobart's settlement indicates that in early times, the snow came to Hobart rather than the citizens going to the snow. The warming trend of the last 100 years, coupled with a recent decline in rainfall, has brought about a lifting in the snowfall levels.

Setting the parameters for what constitutes a low-level snowfall is no easy task due to the changing detail available over the years. A brief reference in the early 1800s to snow in Hobart and the interior could well hide what today would be headlined as "Icy Blast Grips State".

Initial information comes from the diaries of the Rev. R. Knopwood (1804-07) recounting inclement weather in the colony's early years. Little if anything is recorded until well into the 1820s when some weather events are noted in the *Hobart Town Gazette*. The development of newspapers in the following years gave an improved coverage of snowfalls. In the period 1860-80 we are fortunate for the meteorological data recorded by Francis Abbott of Murray Street. Abbot, a jeweller by profession, had been transported to Tasmania for a misdemeanour but was soon released and established a business in Hobart. Another of his interests was to record snowfalls and snow duration on Mt Wellington. Abbott's departure from the scene was to some extent replaced by the establishment of the Weather Bureau at Anglesea Barracks in 1882. More snowfall data came from early notes at the Springs and the visit of Clement Wragge with his mountaintop weather station in 1895.

EARLY SNOWFALLS

The first note of snow on Mt Wellington pre-dated the settlement of Hobart in 1804. La Perouse, visiting the island for a second time in January 1793, noted that the summit of the mountain was still carrying snowdrifts. Brown and Humphries climbed the mountain on March 13, 1804 and arrived at the peak in snow showers.

It wasn't long before Knopwood noted that a south-easterly wind had brought snow to all the low hills about the town (July 19, 1804). A lengthier burst of cold weather saw snow in the town on three days over the period May 1-5 in 1806. The major snow event in his diary occurred July 20-22 of 1807: "Snow more than ever seen before fell; all the ground was covered; there was a great quantity of snow with all the low hills also covered". There was a repeat performance on August 13-14 when a great quantity of snow fell and the temperature fell to 31°F.

Information is sparse for the next 20 years, although references from the 1830s suggest that Knopwood's snowy weather may have been absent for some winters. *Bents News* (1836-38) refers to heavy snow in Hobart Town between August 15-18, 1814. The first mention of snow in the interior occurs in July 1819. The Jericho district withstood three continuous days of snow, and when it cleared, the cover was reported to be 3 feet deep. The interior in the early 1800s appeared to be anywhere beyond the Derwent from Granton. Hobart Town featured with several inches of snow on September 6, 1820, with similar events in 1826 and 1829. In the later snowfall, the interior once again was well covered with a 6 inches to one foot fall.

The Hobart fall of 1820 was replicated in 1830 when, following 3 days of snowy weather, several inches covered the town on July 14. The interior had an unparalleled cover again of up to 3 feet. The Hobart Rivulet in the following days was noted to be thick with snow melt and debris.

NEWSPAPER REPORTS

With the appearance of several newspapers in the 1830-50 periods, items of news about various weather events both in Hobart and the interior give us a wider view on snowfalls.

In July 1831 for 10 days the country from Clyde to Shannon and beyond lay under considerable snow, the ground being too frozen to plough. September of that year also saw more snowy weather; ice on the Shannon was thick enough to walk on. Meanwhile, severe frosts killed tracks of wattle and eucalypt trees in the same districts. A new term was now being used for windy days, as they were described as "boisterous".

August 22-23, 1832 produced boisterous weather, which included sleet and snow that eventually covered the Hobart streets as if it were Edinburgh in Scotland. An additional note said that winter snow on Mt Wellington usually lasted six to seven months of the year. Our next snowfall mentions unheard of depths for Hobart Town. June 8-9, 1836 tells of heavy overnight snow coupled with thunder and lightning. The residents awoke in the morning to find the town a mass of white with a fall of 6 inches with up to 1 foot in some other parts of the town.

The following year (1837) was to provide more extreme moments. Firstly, *Bents News* reported ice cover on the Hobart Rivulet (July), the cover being thick enough to walk on and of sufficient cover to let the children play “sliding games”.

However, a letter from Hamilton told of a more dangerous experience for two men trapped in the interior. Incessant snowfalls and cover from June 19 to August 24 had trapped two men in huts at Three Mile Marsh and then Bashan Plains. The snow had lain 5 feet deep at the Marsh and 4 feet at the Plains. The weather was so cold that Lake Echo was frozen and they were able to walk out a distance of 200 yards onto the lake. Many kangaroo and cattle had been killed by the extreme cold conditions.

Bents News was proving to be a good source for cold weather events. This time it was the stage coach from Launceston to Hobart (July 20, 1838). Heavy snow across the Midlands was so thick the coachman could hardly see where the coach was heading as a 6 inch fall covered the road.

Following the demise of *Bents News*, the editors of other newspapers did not seem as interested in snowfall stories so that some years appear to be devoid of any cold weather.

There were snowfalls of varying intensity in Hobart in 1839, 1841, 1842, 1843, 1844 and 1849. Then a ‘melancholy’ incident in June 1847 suggested that the winters of the 19th century were somewhat colder than today. Two sawyers were working on Bagdad Tiers (between Constitution Hill and Colebrook), when it was decided one should go away to collect provisions. Returning a few days later, the sawyer could find no sign of his companion. Subsequently two bushrangers were apprehended and found to have the missing man’s gear. The murdered sawyer’s body was located on a hilltop in the Tiers. It was perfectly preserved after spending five weeks under several inches of snow.

Despite at times the lack of news, the first 50 years of settlement had provide some interesting tales. On May 11 1851, a “Mystery” hurricane occurred near Mt Ponsonby on the Oatlands to Jericho road. Thunder preceded a shower of ice that covered the ground, and then a hurricane wind tore up trees in a direct patch. About 40 to 50 trees were felled or split over a period of 5 minutes before all was calm again.

Gold was the lure now for expeditions into unexplored areas of the state, but this time in September 1851 the chase for the elusive gold was to prove fatal. The “Gold Party” was in the “New Country” around the Marlborough district. Heavy snow overnight caught the party in their camp, and it was with a deal of difficulty they prevented the snow from collapsing the tents. Two men set out to obtain fresh provisions from the nearby Shepherd’s Hut. Their failure to return prompted the remaining four men to abandon the expedition. The men had experienced great

difficulty as they struggled through the snow to reach safety. The two missing men were never found.

The second half of the century made a good start with snow in Hobart in both 1852 and 1853, but it was rain not snow that made the news in 1854. February 6 brought over 4 inches of rain to Hobart with the rivulet in flood causing damage to houses and sinking boats in the harbour. More was to follow between March 19-22. This time 6 inches-plus fell, sweeping away Sandy Bay Rivulet bridge, O'Briens Bridge, and inflicting more damage on houses alongside the creek. Three men were drowned when they were caught in the rivulet near the town's centre and swept away. The Coal River at Richmond was only 4 feet below the arch so immense was the flow of water, whilst Capt. Chalmers reported the Bagdad Creek had risen by 12 feet.

Henry Butler Stoney in his book "*A Residence in Tasmania*" (1856) remarks that there are snowdrifts which do not entirely melt all summer, out of which little rivulets run from miniature glaciers. "I have seen such drifts on the side of Mt King William and Mt Field etc: snow covers areas like Great Lake, St. Patricks and King William Plains for weeks at a time".

THE 1860S, A GREAT TIME FOR SNOW

For the next 20 or so years, we no longer have to rely on the vagaries of the newspapers as the notes of Francis Abbott and E. Swarbreck Hall provide extra detail on Mt Wellington snowfalls. In 1861, a very late fall of snow occurred in Hobart on November 26. However, the following year, 1862, saw snow over the town on four occasions.

The more impressive fall was on June 26 when snow covered the low hills, then settled overnight in the town. The Cascades reported snow up to 6 inches deep. Mr J.M. Wilson (MLC) had his men load a 4 foot diameter snowball on to a dray and brought to Murray Street. The huge snowball was displayed for all to see in front of the Duchess of Kent Hotel.

The 1860s was one of the best decades for snowfalls. As settlement expanded across the state, so did reports of winter snows. July 7, 1863 saw mention of snow from more widespread locations than in previous events. The stage coach heading south travelled through a snow covered Midlands, and by the time they reached Hobart, the roof was covered by 6 inches of snow. At Evandale, the depth was between 6 to 8 inches, whilst snow was even reported falling in Launceston, with some of the nearby hills covered. In the far north-west snow fell at Circular Head and the snow settled across the low hills. The Huon Valley is mentioned also for the first time as snow covered the district, whilst rivers such as the Derwent, Forth and South Esk were in flood. Abbott's records for the first time hint at the life of winter

snow banks on Mt Wellington. The snow from June, with continued falls in following months, lasted until washed away by heavy rain on December 13.

Another four snow events were noted in Hobart during 1864, with the snow arriving on Mt. Wellington in May and lasting (Abbott) until the start of December. Only a few snowfalls reached the town in 1865, but the winter snow lasted until the start of January 1866. The snow started to accumulate in May and despite varying fluctuations persisted until the close of the year, complete with a top up on Christmas day.

Winter, according to the old residents, made a slow start in 1867, so that an item on an ascent of Mt Wellington on November 17 makes fascinating reading. Mr Woods at The Springs could not dissuade three walkers from heading for the Pinnacle. The trip to the summit was a feat not normally accomplished so early in the season or attempted this early in the spring. When the climbers reached the summit plateau, they found it covered by a 3 foot layer of snow. There was no sign of the track and it was slow going as the fissures and rocks were under snow. The flagstaff at the summit was covered in ice and had a flag of ice projecting from it. With snow falling and a fog moving in, the intrepid climbers still managed to make a safe return to the town. In comparison with today's weather, 3cms on the mountain in November would be noteworthy.

The trend of low-level falls continued during 1868. This time snow covered Hobart and the whole island on two consecutive days (July 17-18). Drifts in the Midlands were 2 feet deep with snow along the main road for almost the whole distance. Melton Mowbray received 4 inches, Oatlands 6 inches, Ross, Campbell Town and Longford ½ inch falls. Snow fell in Launceston but did not settle, whilst heavy snow covered Fingal.

1870-1880

The next few years appeared to bring a respite from the annual visitation of snow to Hobart (dare we say signs of a change?). However, Abbott's notes still show the mountain cover appearing about May/June and lasting well into November. The Mt Arthur landslide was a feature of 1872, with heavy rains bringing floods to southern areas and a mass of rocks and trees rushing down the creek through Glenorchy and sweeping away O'Briens Bridge. Severe weather at the start of August saw snow in the capital city again, settling around Launceston with a very heavy fall of 18 inches at Oatlands. A party of timber workers on the Tiers near Glenora fled for their lives as heavy snow brought down tree limbs on their camp and deposited knee-deep snow over the countryside. Another Mt Wellington story supports Abbott's snow notes; this time it involved a lost boy. The boy became separated from a walking party on a visit to the mountain on November 11. He went missing whilst crossing the plateau which was under knee-deep snow. The

hapless youth found shelter for the night and then spent another day and a half struggling down the mountain before searchers found him on the Finger Post Track.

Snow and wind made the news in 1874. First it was spring snow in September. Hobart saw snow, as did northern areas. Westbury received 8 inches, the West Tamar hills were all white, and a first mention of snow at such places as Don and Ulverstone occurred. October and November produced boisterous winds as houses were damaged, horse cabs blown over, vessels blown across the harbour, timber stacks swept off the docks into the water, persons rescued from the river, and telegraph lines blown down.

After a respite of one year, wild weather was back to test Hobart's residents. A severe thunderstorm in late January 1876 saw lightning strike the Mt Nelson Signal Station. Oatlands and Richmond experienced a hurricane wind that blew in doors and windows, brought down trees, and stripped the vegetation from others with marble-sized hailstones. Just for a contrast, the upper slopes of Mt Wellington were swept by a bushfire about a month later. Mid May saw an unusually heavy snowfall for time of year with the first mention of the Lake Country receiving a one foot cover. The Mt Wellington snow drifts were to persist right through until November. Just to keep the variety going, mid June was all wind. More houses were damaged, the Fern Tree Inn suffered damage from falling timber, and trees were brought down on the Domain. The local ferry steamer was unable to cross the Derwent, whilst a sailor drowned when two ships capsized. Down the Huon things were no better, with timber mills and tramways in the Southport district were damaged, and an estimated 300 trees were blown down at the Narrows. By mid July, it was all about frosty weather as ice was up to 2 inches thick on pools and lasted all day in the shade. Bothwell experienced intense cold as the Clyde River iced over and the ground was frozen to a depth of 3 inches. The mountain snow had not gone away either, as one man found out on August 24. The walker had apparently disappeared on South Wellington and there was concern for his safety due to the depth of snow. The summit of the mountain was under 3 to 4 feet of snow, with even deeper snow on the Hobart side up to 6 feet. Despite spending the night out in the open, our determined walker managed, despite snow-covered gullies and boulders, to find his way down the east face of the mountain to safety. The closing years of the 1870s saw more benign conditions, although heavy snow on November 7, 1877 lay well down on the mountain ranges, and covered from St Georges Bay to Oatlands. The last of the Mt Wellington drifts melted away in early December. The following year Abbott again noted the last of the mountain's snow lingering until early December.

In 1879 the major snow event was at the beginning of August with snow settling thickly in the city. Many parts of the colony were under snow, mention being made of some new locations. There was a heavy fall in the Midlands and snow fell at

Sorell, Swansea, Beaconsfield district, Carrick, and Hadspen. Snow was also reported in Launceston but only settled on hills about the town.

THE BIG FALLS OF THE 1880s

The 1880s were away to a good start in early 1880 when late April saw “winter snow now started”. There were Statewide floods, gales, many trees brought down and ships grounded or wrecked and it was soon followed in May by more of the same. Snow fell in the Midlands and Huon, whilst Hobart experienced a great quantity of rain and hail. The more benign conditions for the rest of the year and through 1881 were to be more than made up for in the big snowstorm of 1882.

Heavy snow fell for a while in Hobart on the evening of June 15 before clearing. However, more was to fall in the early hours of June 16 and by morning, the citizens of Hobart awoke to a countryside carpeted in white down to the river’s edge. Snow was thicker in Sandy Bay than in the city which recorded a 3 inch snowfall. The eastern shore hills and paddocks were also under snow to sea level. Overnight snow had also left a thin cover in Launceston with snow almost to the coast at Beaconsfield. Snow covered a wide area of the Midlands and Huon. Just when the snow started to melt, another snowstorm swept over Hobart late in the afternoon to settle again over gardens and rooftops. Out in the west, snow was 2 feet deep on the Waratah tramway, whilst snow was reported from Burnie to Deloraine.

There was another snowfall on the morning of July 13 that once more clad the city and hills in snow, also delaying the arrival of the overnight coach from Launceston. The snowfalls kept coming with another day of snow on September 13. There was a fierce south-west wind in the city and after each snowstorm the hills on each side of the river were white right to the water’s edge. Snow was reported all along the rail line to Launceston. The cold weather just did not want to relent as more rain and snow fell in Hobart on September 26. Then on October 20th snow 6 to 7 inches thick settled over the Midlands.

A respite of two years followed until an early fall to lower levels hampered transport on May 15, 1884. Heavy snow in the Huon saw the stagecoach arrive at the Bristol Hotel (Hobart) with 2 feet of snow on the roof. The trains on the mainline fared no better as snow on the rails delayed movements. It snowed all day at Glenora in the Derwent Valley with the cover building up to 18 inches. The Derwent Valley and Midlands received further good falls of snow on July 16.

The next year (1885) there was again an early fall of snow in the suburbs and city on April 27, then frequent snowfalls were noted in the city on July 28. Tasmania’s unpredictable weather is no better illustrated by the spring snow on the late date of November 10/11. Sleet was seen in Hobart with snowfalls in the north, Midlands, west, and Derwent Valley, 2 inches covering Macquarie Plains.

The next two years provided fairly average winters, with some snow in the city and across the State. An interesting note from June of 1886 mentions the snow and Hobart's water supply: "Early snowfalls on the mountain remain as the sun does not have the strength to melt it. This in turn supplies water to the town later in the year with the gradual snowmelt".

The biggest fall as the century slowly moved to a close occurred between July 21-24, 1888. It had already been snowing on Mt Wellington for three days when colder weather spread a wider snow mantle. Wide areas of the Huon, Midlands, and north were under snow. Locations not normally known for snowfalls included George Town, Beaconsfield, Low Head, Scottsdale, Latrobe, Penguin, and Circular Head. The East Tamar hills sported a cover of white, whilst Waratah, as expected, recorded 6 inches of snow.

The following day (22nd) was even colder as Hobart awoke to a city of white as the snow kept falling at intervals throughout the day. Snow depths were also growing in country towns; Geeveston with 8 inches, and Franklin hills with two feet. Down the Channel, the snow had settled to sea level, with 5 inches at Woodbridge. Falls across the Tasman Peninsula were claimed to be the heaviest ever seen. All the Derwent Valley was white by nightfall, with Fentonbury groaning under 3 feet of snow. Snow continued virtually everywhere, having spread to locations such as Ringarooma, St Marys, and Launceston. Snow was all over the north and northwest, Deloraine with 3 inches, Dunorlan 6 inches, and Waratah now 14 inches. All the coastal towns noted snowfalls.

As if this was not enough, the State was still under snow on the 23rd, as snow just kept coming. Huon areas now had 5 inches of snow, New Norfolk four, Bushy Park eight, Bothwell three, and good old Waratah was under a cover of eighteen inches of snow. The train line from Waratah to Burnie was snow-covered the whole way.

Finally on the 24th, despite snow and rain in Hobart until night, it finally cleared by the next morning. Light falls had continued in the north at such places as Longford and Evandale. In the far north-east the Blue Tier was covered by 6 inches of snow. In the west, the huge fall of snow collapsed the roof of the mine dressing shed at Waratah. The snow was still on the low hills in the Huon at the start of August. One can only wonder at the immense cover on the higher mountains of the interior; probably enough to last until the next winter?

Cold outbreaks occurred in 1891, 1892, 1894, and 1895. However, whilst snow fell to low levels, none of these events were of the intensity of the great snow of 1888. The period had seen the establishment of telegraph lines to Queenstown and weather notes taken at the Springs (Mt Wellington). July 18-19, 1894 saw a fall of 14 inches at the Springs, whilst lines to Queenstown came down under the weight

of snow. Linesmen out to repair the break laboured through snowdrifts on Mt Arrowsmith 15 to 16 feet deep. It was no surprise that the rail from Waratah to Burnie was closed by the deep snow.

The last notable outbreak of the century was in September 1895. A traveller caught in the snow in the Derwent Valley perished only a few hundred yards from the Rosegarland Hotel. The same storm produced seas that broke over the buildings at the Iron Pot light house.

Was it the first hint of climate change? The last few years of the 1890s tended to produce less dramatic snowfalls almost as if the big events of the '80s had emptied the snow basket.

FRANCIS ABBOTT RECORDS

During the period 1862 to 1879 Abbott made some interesting notes on Mt Wellington snowfalls, keeping track of the continuous snow cover on the mountain until the disappearance of the last drift (Table 1). Abbott's observations indicate a predictable start to the snow cover about May to June, with cover lasting more often than not into November (and beyond, a few times).

A record of the last 14 winters (Table 2) appears to have no pattern, other than an unpredictable start to snowfalls, and a rapid decline in the period of cover. However, this appears to support the noted decline in rainfall (and snow) coupled with milder temperatures.

The mountain once held gleaming snowdrifts for a good six months; now it varies from a couple of months to no more than four. Climate change occurring right before our eyes!

REFERENCES AND INFORMATION SOURCES

Hobart Town Gazette, Colonial Times, Hobart Town Courier, Bents News, Hobart Town Advertiser, Mercury, Examiner, Advocate. Bureau of Meteorology. Rev. R. Knopwood, Francis Abbott (*Mercury*).

Roberts, K. & Roberts, M. (2000). One hundred years of snowfalls on Mt Wellington. *The Tasmanian Naturalist* 122: 2–8.

Table 1. Abbott records 1862-1879.

	MAY	JUNE	JULY	AUGUST	SEPT	OCTOBER	NOV	DEC	JAN
1862									
1863									
1864									
1865									
1866									
1867									
1868									
1869									
1870									
1871									
1872									
1873									
1874									
1875									
1876									
1877									
1878									
1879									

Table 2. Roberts records last 14 years.

	MAY	JUNE	JULY	AUGUST	SEPTEMBER	OCTOBER	NOVEMBER	DECEMBER
2008								
2007								
2006								
2005								
2004								
2003								
2002								
2001								
2000								
1999								
1998								
1997								
1996								
1995								