

My notes from the 150th Anniversary Meeting of the founding of the British Rainfall Organisation

The Huxley Lecture Theatre is on the Outer Circle of Regents Park not far from the London Zoo entrance and backing onto the Regents Canal. George James Symonds lived in Camden Square only about a mile to the north east. Over 60 people were present at the meeting.

In the adjacent exhibition room was a display of 21 historic documents concerning rainfall. On the front table was a display of artifacts including various certificates and medals awarded to Symons, example volumes of the British Rainfall Series, early documents produced by Symons and a modern Kif mushroom mirror rain gauge assessment device.

The content of most of the presentations will be published in the May edition of RMetS Weather magazine. One item that is of particular significance though is that Symonds grave at Kensal Green cemetery about 3 miles west of Regents Park is to be restored. It is currently dilapidated and overgrown but new tablets of Honister slate are going to be added with a new inscription. There will be a rededication ceremony at 1:00pm on Thursday 15th July 2010 (St. Swithins Day!) to which all are welcome.

I spoke to Stephen Burt of RMetS about the possibility of visiting the Seathwaite and Stye rain gauges and to John Prior from the Met Office about the lack of published rain gauge data since the demise of the Rainfall Books. Extracts of their responses through e-mail correspondence since the meeting are reproduced below.

Stephen Burt; RMetS –

“Philip Eden and I have been thinking of a RMetS ‘summer meeting’ event over a couple of days to make the long trip worthwhile for those of us not based in the North-West of England. With accommodation in the Seathwaite area we could see the rain gauges there, have a meeting and perhaps a hike to The Stye, Sprinkling Tarn and Honister rain gauge sites. I would like to also include Honister Slate Quarry to show some appreciation to Mark Weir for donating the slate to the Symons memorial. Hopefully someone could do something on Seathwaite’s long rainfall record? This year’s RMetS Summer Meeting is already booked, so I think the best time of year would be May/June 2011.”

Roy Chetham; Huncoat -

“As you will be aware from the BRO Event in London there is considerable dismay at the lack of national rainfall records following the demise of the British Rainfall Series after 1991.

This occurred because a decision was taken on economic grounds to discontinue the publication and the section employed to collate the data closed down.

I know that any individual can visit the Library Archive in Exeter to search for information and some selected data is published on the Met Office website.

However, neither of these facilities fulfill the role previously met so successfully by the Rainfall Books leaving a very distinct and important gap in continuity.

Moreover, I understand that some if not many of the rainfall returns are now made by electronic means instead of the manual cards.

The point was well made at the BRO meeting to Tim Allott that it was unfortunate that the work his section does in maintaining the network of rain gauges is incomplete without a means of communicating the returns to interested parties and preserving in the form of an historic public document the rainfall data of Britain for posterity.

There is a vast amount of information out there, from official Met Office gauges and amateur weather stations that could be gathered together in the spirit set by George James Symonds a century and a half ago.

I know there would be cost implications in such a function but like in RMetS and COL, students and researchers would probably be prepared to pay a modest fee.”

John Prior; Met Office National Climate and Information Centre -

“Thank you for the chance to explain the situation. At the BRO meeting I must admit that I was somewhat taken by surprise at the references to the lack of published rainfall data! I’ve never seen a request for the NCIC to publish more, as done in British Rainfall in the past, but I can appreciate the value of those volumes as we frequently use them to digitise past monthly data (~ 100 years ago).

First, a little background. The NCIC responsibilities mainly concern provision of climate information for use by the general public, education, business etc. To satisfy this audience, monthly gauge data are analysed and presented as maps on the web at <http://www.metoffice.gov.uk/climate/uk/anomacts/> and regional rainfall series to 1910 are downloadable at <http://www.metoffice.gov.uk/climate/uk/datasets/index.html> . Monthly totals for ~ 35 gauges are also available at <http://www.metoffice.gov.uk/climate/uk/stationdata/>, and we have plans to expand this (a little). We gather feedback through surveys such as the one at http://www.metoffice.gov.uk/pws/climate_survey/index.html.

NCIC also provides some more specialised rainfall services to government departments, such as the Environment Agency, the Centre for Ecology & Hydrology and the water industry. CEH manages the Surface and Groundwater Archive, including all official gauge data, and produces publications <http://www.ceh.ac.uk/data/nrfa/index.html> (eg a monthly Hydrological Bulletin) and so is another source of rainfall data. In addition, for academic research, BADC makes rainfall data available (<http://badc.nerc.ac.uk/home/index.html>).

So I think the ‘general public’, ‘academic’ and ‘water professional’ requirements for rainfall data are largely being met, but as you say we are not making summaries (annual/monthly) for all gauges generally available as in the days of British Rainfall. Incidentally, since those days, ‘data ownership’ seems to be more of an issue – the Met Office ‘owns’ only a small % of the gauge data and the EA and SEPA provide most of it. That’s not necessarily a reason for not making more data available, but a point to consider!

On a positive note, I understand that government policy is to make data more freely available, and the weather data that is available/appropriate is being considered by colleagues at present. Any future ‘publication’ is likely to be on the web eg as downloadable text files – it seems unlikely that we’ll ever produce books again.”