

THE GREAT BRITISH WEATHER

Portraits of the city.

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Our comparator for today's London weather is the great diarist Samuel Pepys. When not impregnating his domestic staff – Pepys was a handsy lothario who had 50 sexual encounters through the 1660s – he staked his claim as a weather obsessive.

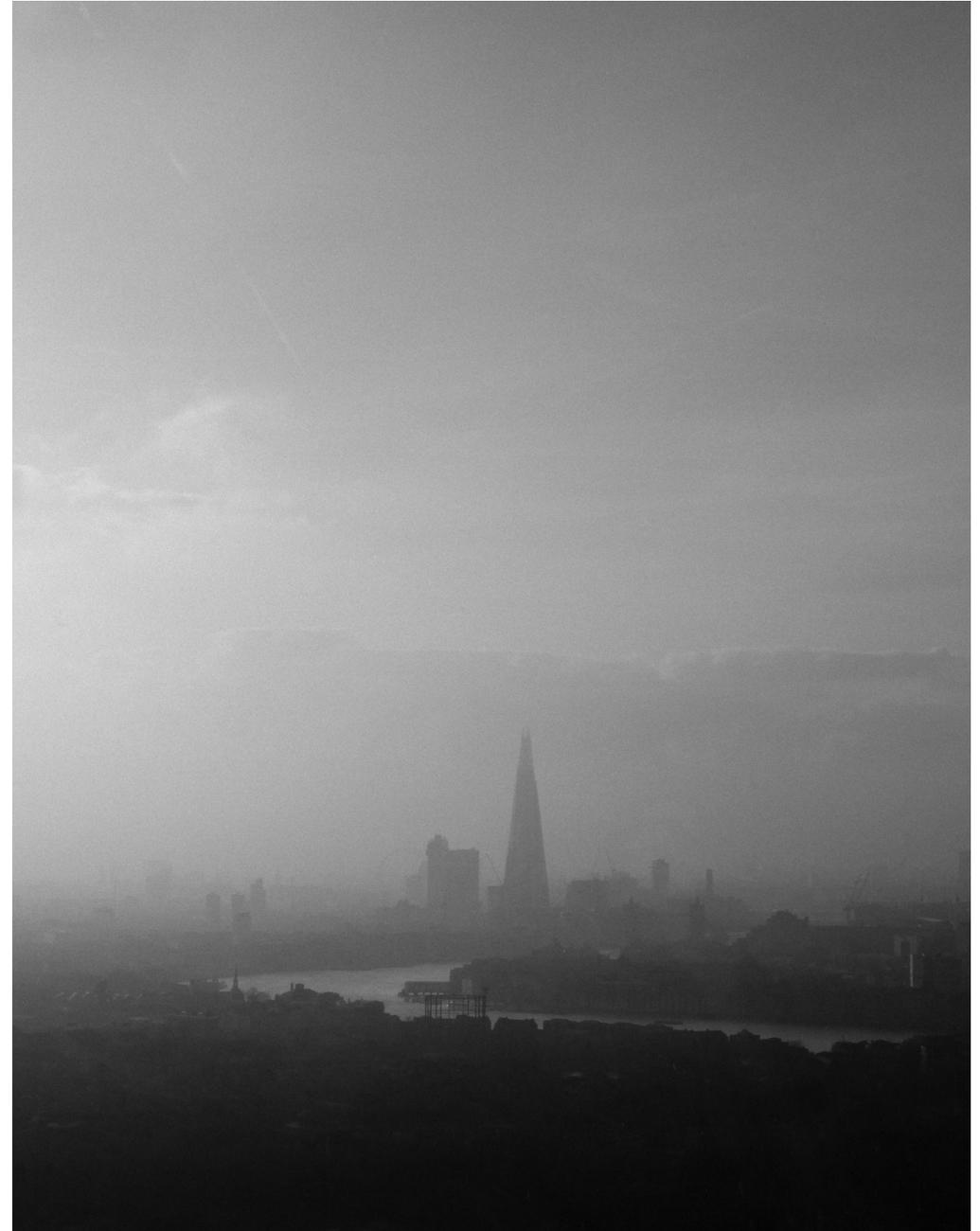
During Pepys' diarist decade the nation was gripped by a mini Ice Age. "The Thames was clogged with ice-floes," marks his first diary entry from 1667. London's main artery froze solid. This allowed bear-baiting, cock-fighting, all-comers-boxing and other Neanderthal

pursuits to take place in a Siberian stadium of unmitigated violence. The last 'Frost Fair' took place in 1814. To prove the ice's durability, an elephant was led below Blackfriars Bridge, surely the frigid nadir of an unworldly and insular capital.

Yet nothing acts as a greater leveller than London's incessant rain, which eventually washed away Pepys' snow. It strikes conversation. Rich and poor get equally drenched. Potential lovers remain trapped underneath a Costa Coffee awning. As do Shia Muslims,

Hasidic Jews and Seventh Day Adventists, because thanks to more worldly times London has become Britain's most religiously observant city.

Still, the London skies are frequently pelting, teeming or raining sideways. December and January welcome an average of ten rainy days per month; July and August six. There is no dry season, just one long rather damp one. Londoners have another 50 words to describe rain. It can be mizzle (misty rain), drizzle (light rain) or a





sunshower (rain that must always be feared, even on the most Calippo of days). In Cockney rhyming slang we're never far from 'The King of Spain'. According to the world's most reliable source, the capital's weather is typified by "long periods of overcast skies and frequent light mist-type precipitation, which may account for the rainy image of the city". Thank you, Wikipedia.

If the city has an image, it's surely the umbrella. Rather cuttingly, the etymology of the word is Italian, where it means 'little shade,' as the device

was initially used to shield the sun. In London the umbrella was used for the polar opposite. Floods on the Thames were so commonplace that high water marks are logged along the river path.

The 1928 flood was so severe that it inundated the Tate Gallery's ground floor at Millbank. Rising waters damaged Turner canvases, which neatly depicted the ominous clouds, each pregnant with gloom, loitering outside. The Thames Flood Barrier at Charlton put a stop to such nonsense in 1984. The barrier also blocked frequent

London incursions by cetaceans, although a bottlenose whale made it up to the Albert Bridge in 2006.

London's rise as a global megacity in the 19th century meant it created its own weather. A rising population shivered around coal burners that wafted noxious heat. On arrival in London, the Esther character from Charles Dickens' Bleak House asks: "whether there was a great fire anywhere? For the streets were so full of dense brown smoke that scarcely anything was to be seen." For Sherlock Holmes in The Sign of Four:

"The 'Great Smog' became so bad that in 1952 it choked songbirds and reduced visibility to a single yard."



"Lime green rose-ringed parakeets, a native Indian species that burst free from garden aviaries during the Great Storm of 1987, now thrive as 8,600 breeding pairs."



"the day had been a dreary one, and a dense drizzly fog lay low upon the great city".

The 'Great Smog' became so bad that in 1952 it choked songbirds and reduced visibility to a single yard. A car carrying Sir Winston Churchill became marooned near Oxford Street, so the PM followed a lamp holder on foot to Claridge's to hunker down for the night. Habitually independent Londoners became enmeshed on Tubes and buses, and had to actually converse with one another. Oh, the horror. This 'Pea Souper' precipitated the Clean Air

Act of 1956. The resulting prohibition of domestic coal brightened both skies and wildlife prospects. Yet dark asphalt and slate roofs still render London a few degrees hotter than the rest of the UK.

Over the last decade 'The Big Smoke' has dispelled its moniker. The people's papers – The Express, The Sun, the Daily Mail – have screamed: "The HOTTEST July on record". Or "It's HOTTER than Rome", for at least three days out of 365. Britain's Urban Heat Island has become its Love Island, as abs, flabs, moobs and baps

have been exposed across the capital's rediscovered parks.

Flora and fauna have moved in tandem. Lime green rose-ringed parakeets, a native Indian species that burst free from garden aviaries during the Great Storm of 1987, now thrive as 8,600 breeding pairs. Alas, such clement weather threatens the timeless Londoner image of a perpetually grey character wielding an umbrella. As Groucho Marx claimed:

"I'm leaving because the weather is too good. I hate London when it's not raining."