



Collecting water from a standpipe in Lowtherville, early 1963



Today the bug-bears in daily life are road closures, some inflicted by Island Roads, others by landslides, of which Leeson Road is currently the worst. But spare a thought for this apparently jovial group of Lowtherville residents who are queuing with buckets to draw water from a tap on a standpipe that draws direct from the water main. A lot of younger people today would be somewhat mystified by this sight, for the use of standpipes, which were once commonplace, is now rare. When there was a recent alert from Southern Water over an interruption to supply in the town, people quickly found large packs of bottled water on their doorsteps or at their front gates.

The early winter months of 1963 were the time of what became known as the Big Freeze. After an exceptionally sunny December, when almost 110 hours of sunshine were recorded, beating the 1946 record of 92 hours, the last days of 1962 saw winter arrive with a vengeance, the temperature dropping to -5 degrees celsius on Boxing Day. Three days later, the snow started falling, with nearly a foot of snow settling on the Saturday night and gale force winds giving rise to massive drifts that blocked most roads. All bus services were soon suspended in the area. That left just the railway to link Ventnor with the rest of the Island. Despite drifting snow on the lines, it kept going. But there was worse to come, for there followed nearly two months of bitter freezing weather and more snow falls. Every thaw proved to be short-lived.

Frozen water pipes were the biggest casualty during this spell and the photograph above shows residents filling buckets from a standpipe near the bottom of Lowtherville Road in February 1963. The 'snap' was almost certainly taken by the late Fay Brown who was always alert to a photo opportunity, especially in the area near where she lived on Newport Road. However, there was a rather unhappy twist to this story, for most of the residents in the photo came from the houses on the north side of the road which were built towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and, consequently, had very rudimentary plumbing systems. None had a bathroom and most had an outside toilet and just a scullery tap, which quickly froze up, making them unusable. The only option for obtaining water was to go to the nearest standpipe and hope that was not frozen as well! By contrast, most of the houses on the south side of the road had been built after the Second World War and had much more modern plumbing systems, limiting any freezing of the plumbing which was largely indoors. Just imagine the air of superiority that the residents there must have felt.

*I recognize a few of the people in the photo, but if any readers can identify any of the others, please let us know at the Heritage Centre in Spring Hill. The ones I can name are, starting from the left: Freda Grant, Hilda Sprack, Cis Wood and Ruby Westmore.*

Ventnor & District Local History Society: Colin Beavis. Photograph from Society archives



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The Society and Heritage Centre are run and managed by volunteers.

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