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Dee frozen on Heswall Shore

Older readers will remember the deep freeze of the winter of 1962/3, one of the coldest winters on record when snow started to fall over the country at Christmas and remained until the beginning of March. The sea started to freeze in the Dee Estuary, causing huge sheets of ice to pile up on the shore. John's story shows how close Heswall got to a power outage on Christmas Day. The following June, in complete contrast, was scorching hot, and a serious fire broke out on the Dales which destroyed 150 acres of gorse and undergrowth. Eight fire engines and local residents fought the blaze, which at one point threatened Cleaver Hospital and local houses.

A Fitting (in) Time

The time, Christmas, or at least the lead up (say a week before). The year 1962 (I think, memory is dimmed with time). For those who share a memory of that particular year, you will recall how cold it was, with much snow and ice to chill the bone.

The weather was of significance to those of us who worked for the local Electricity Board (MANWEB), given that the peak loading on Christmas Day was always touch and go with respect to the system capacity. Added to this was the fact that many of our consumers were already switching on heating appliances because of the extreme weather. As a result, the main substations (Pye Road and Glegg Arms) which 'fed' Heswall (including Lower) were showing signs of stress with the switchgear running very warm to hot and it was likely that the Christmas peak load would result in massive system failures. It was, therefore, decided at a very senior level that extreme measures were necessary if a 'blackout' of the surrounding district was to be avoided. System

reinforcement was called for, and that's where I come into the story. At the time, I was employed as an Electrical Fitter, working in the Heswall and district section. I recall enjoying the warmth of said Pye Road substation one Friday afternoon when my section engineer came and told me to stand by to carry out some emergency work which would entail late evenings and weekend work, a very welcome piece of news on the approach to Christmas.

I, and my mate, were to make our way to North Drive where a temporary substation was to be erected and fitted out by yours truly and one other fitting team. Under the circumstances no expense was to be spared – just get the job done at all costs. Thus instructed, we 'tore' into the task in hand and erected a temporary substation on a bed of old railway sleepers, and surrounded it with a metal structure to keep inquisitive little hands out from the 'danger' points. We worked throughout the weekend in conditions that were, to say the least, atrocious (no H&S at work in those days) and completed the job by Sunday evening (a record of which I am still proud to this day).

Next we were moved to Station Road (as I recall) to find high voltage cables laid in the gutter to the local substation where I was to install a transformer, outdoors, in the grounds of the 'sub'. The actual placement of the transformer was relatively straightforward; the worst, however, was yet to come. The cover had to be removed from the transformer and I then had to work in ice-cold oil to prepare the transformer after which it was necessary to secure the cover working with bare hands, gloves being impractical when working with spanners in confined spaces (did I mention that it was damned cold?). Anyway, all the jobs were completed in time and Heswall and district were spared the dreaded blackout and our customers enjoyed their Christmas dinners without disruption, totally unaware of the near disaster that had been averted, whilst I and my colleagues (of whom there were many) could look back at a job well done.

As a postscript, the network feeding Heswall and its surrounds was strengthened soon after and never again was there to be a repeat of the near disaster of Christmas 1962.

The authors would like to thank Peter Connah for access to the archives of Harry Connah and to Stephen Ross for providing John's account.

Submitted by Roger Lane and Jenny McRonald (roger.m.lane@btinternet.com or 0151 342 9269) on behalf of the Heswall Society, which was established in 1953 "for the public benefit to conserve the heritage of the Ward of Heswall". For more details of membership and activities please call Roger Lane or visit theheswallsociety.org.uk