Spairging

Damply

Angin

Mizzle

Kelsher

Dreich

Cow-quaker

Petrichor

Flisky

Soft day

188 WORDS FOR RAIN

A delightfully damp tour of the British Isles, led by natural forces

ALAN CONNOR

BBC WEATHER

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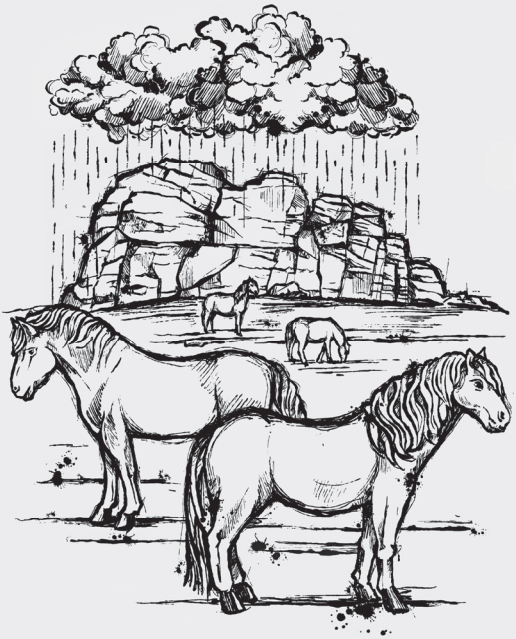
A MIZZLE COMES TO DARTMOOR



You're in the sky, seven thousand feet above the bottom bit of the British Isles. You gaze down first at the figures lining and crossing the heaths and bogs of Dartmoor. They gaze up.

'Looks like rain.'

They're right, of course. They will spend, we're told, five months over the course of their lives discussing whether it's going to rain. They might or might not have forgotten the clouds' Latin names; they might or might not have ever properly understood how they appear above them and why they sometimes suddenly disappear.

But they can tell from a glance which of the masses of water up here will stay up here, and which will come down and make them wet. Without thinking, in the same moment, they pick up on dozens more cues and clues from the air, from plants and animals and from everyday things in their kitchens – clues we will return to.

And the rain will brighten their day.

There on the edge of the moor, a picnic will take a different form. The decision will be made by the **mizzle**. The picnickers are comers-in, not from these parts and here on holiday, and they don't call it mizzle. But mizzle is the local word in sundry spots and, right now, it's the local weather. It's also our **rain word #1**.

In 1983, weatherman Francis Wilson joined the *BBC Breakfast* team and gave forecasts in a new way. The graphics were generated by computers, replacing the magnetic clouds that viewers were accustomed to seeing. (They were also accustomed to hoping that today might be one of the days the clouds would slide comically off the map.)

Francis, as the nation knew him, also brought with him a less formal set of words to describe the weather. Not for Francis the *th*underst*orm* when he could instead tell of a coming 'thorm'.

Likewise, mist that's apt to turn to drizzle was, in Francis's reports, some mizzle. But this term was much older than Francis. In Dutch, the word for this kind of rain has long been 'misel'. And 'mizzle' is older even than 'drizzle'. So old, we find it in one of the first books in English: Caxton's translation of Virgil's *Aeneid*. An already-challenging

journey is made more difficult by 'mysell', followed by 'grete heyle stones'.

In the 1490s, mizzle was a more aggressive rain than the kinds that are nowadays called mizzle in the West Country. Mizzle has been applied to milder and milder rain over time. By the nineteenth century, we find it handily placed in a sequence of types of rain in a wildly popular book called *The Miseries of Human Life*, a catalogue of 'petty outrages, minor humiliations, and tiny discomforts that make up everyday human existence'.

One petty outrage described is the experience of setting off for dinner without the right coat . . .

> *. . . in a mist, which successively becomes a mizzle, a drizzle, a shower, a rain, a torrent.*

Like that sodden Georgian dinner guest, our would-be picnickers, waiting in their car, once again consider that adage: there's no such thing as bad weather, only the wrong clothing.

— Who was it that said that? The Lake District guy, who wrote the books?

— I thought it came from an ad for Gore-Tex?

— Don't be obtuse. What was his name? With the handwriting I said you could learn a lot from? Look it up, would you?

— I can't look it up, remember? If we had a signal, we'd have been able to check the forecast.

— I *did* say we should have checked the forecast before we left . . .

Then it's quiet in the car for some long moments.

The light dims just a little as the mizzle rapidly becomes **#2**: **drisk** (a misty drizzle that makes everything seem to shimmer) and then **#3:** an actual **drizzle**. In the most technical of terms, a drizzle comes in droplets of a diameter of less than half a millimetre, but if it's moving too fast for you to measure with a ruler, it's also rain that won't splash in puddles. In practical terms, the decision is confirmed. It's going to be a car picnic.

As the cool bag is unzipped, as scotch eggs are passed around and as breadcrumbs begin to decorate the upholstery, they quickly remember: they enjoy a car picnic. Often, they prefer it. They recall the car picnics of the past: always with the occasional beat of the windshield wipers to offer a view of the drisky landscape; always with a vow

to remember to later use the hand-held vacuum cleaner to remove the breadcrumbs; always with a reminder that the hand-held vacuum cleaner can handle nothing more substantial than dust. And then the Lake District name is recalled: Wainwright.

Steamy, punctuated by pitter-patter, car picnics really are the best. The picnickers are lucky to be given one: unknown to them, the next road along is rainless. If they were there, they'd have missed their chance, stuck in the dry and windy quiet. So: where does this rain stop? Unlike with some, it's impossible to say. This rain, this mizzle-become-drizzle, is too fine and weak to have a proper edge. You couldn't find an edge, even from your vantage point above the contented picnickers.

A vague quality not possessed by the kelsher up on the moor.

Like many of our rain words, **kelsher** (**#4**) is not said only in the West Country. It's used in Lancashire, it's used by earth scientists and mineralogists, and it always means the same thing.

For rain to be a regular kelsher, it needs to be heavy and brought by a strong wind. It's one of those pieces of

language that tells you by its sound what it's up to. If you'd never heard the word and someone told you to expect them to come home having been kelshed, you wouldn't expect a mild spattering on their clothing.

In 1955, the kelsher's kelsher – the heaviest kelsher of all – fell the other side of the Blackdown Hills and the problem wasn't the wind that brought it: it was the lack of wind once it arrived. In summer 1955, the Dorset village of Winterborne St Martin saw temperatures close to 30°C for days on end. Gardeners yearned for rain, but you can have too much of a good thing.

At the same time, heading for the Channel was a Spanish plume: a very warm air mass from the Iberian peninsula which, when it reaches our part of the world, goes up, as warm air is wont to do. In this instance, it formed a lid over a package of incredibly unstable air.

And so the Spanish plume brought to Winterborne St Martin cumulonimbus clouds and all that comes with them: thunder, lightning and lots and lots of rain. After it arrived, the wind ominously and suddenly dropped – and the plume stayed over Winterborne for three days. In one 15-hour period, 11 inches fell. Roads became rivers, a dam burst, and all the rest of it. While a

Spanish flume is often a welcome arrival, the only decent thing that can be said for being stuck under one for days is that you should end up with better defences for any future floods, though there has been none yet to match 1955's kelsher.

For the pair of walkers you now see below you, today's kelsher is no trouble. Most importantly, there's plenty of wind today, so the rain will be shared across the moor. They too have no idea who first said that there's no such thing as bad weather, only the wrong clothing, but they've said it themselves and taken heed, so, apart from their faces, they're warm and completely dry.

Most happily for them, the kelsher has deterred other would-be walkers. They have the place to themselves.

Insects emerge as rain encourages them to explore the floor of the moor, a development that doesn't escape the attention of the birds. They leave the trees, giving the walkers a constant spectacle in the round as they descend. It pleases all the senses.

We can't usually tell who first used some weather word or other, but **#5**, **petrichor**, is the name that two Australian

scientists came up with in the 1960s when they saw that the English language lacked a word for the aromas released when rain hits soil, catches its scent and bounces it into the winds. Like the mist over a flute of prosecco.

They performed something called 'steam distillation' on rocks and found, trapped inside, a yellow oil. In warm weather, plants emit the base of this oil, which then mixes with chemicals emitted by the soil's bacteria. The smell arrives – even if faintly – before the rain, when air is humid and moisture disperses the oils into the air.

Something so primally evocative, if it doesn't already have a name, deserves a pretty good one and our Australians had scope to get poetic.

So they took the old Greek word for rock (*petra*, as in petrified, as in turned to stone) and wedded it to the fancy *ichor* (also Greek: the sweet blood of the gods).

The greens are now greener. The trees, of course, appreciate the kelsher. And the walkers appreciate the trees. They too smell better. They also sound better. Each tree has its own sound in rain. Our weather words on these islands don't include a vocabulary for the music of trees – we lack, say,

the Japanese *matsukaze* (松風, the play of wind among pines) – but we know the sounds themselves.

In fact, if our walkers wished to, they could record the rainy sounds around them, loop them and release a very popular sleep-aid podcast. They don't, though. It doesn't occur to them.

They're not listening consciously, but they do notice the change in sounds before they notice that the kelsher is dissipating. They're in the trees. Water falls, not from the clouds. The leaves have held just enough water for a kind of rain that we need a word for: the after-shower that happens if, say, a breeze moves the wet leaves. It's happening now, because some other insects prefer to emerge when rain stops. This prompts more birds to leave and shake the branches. As they emerge from the dripping canopy, the scene becomes dimpsy, in more ways than one.

When the clouds are low and the drizzle is thin even for drizzle, the weather here is **dimpsy** (**#6**).

As it happens and as you might expect from the 'dim' bit of 'dimpsy', the 'dimps' are also the dusky twilight, and the sky as daylight fades is a dimpsy one – so to be sure

you're not misunderstood, you might use dimpsy to mean only those thin drizzles that sometimes come to us at twilight.

It was over as abruptly as it began. And it hadn't been forecast. Had it? 'Microclimate,' shrugs one of the pair. The other replies with a grin: 'Microclimate.' A word they've heard more often in the last few days than ever before. The woman in the post office who sold them the map: 'Microclimate up there.' The landlord at the bar discussing yesterday's weather: 'Microclimate down here.' So many conversations about the weather and, every time, a pride in the microclimates.

For a meteorologist, a microclimate is a small area – perhaps only 100 metres diameter – that has some combination of shelter and proximity to water which means that its weather is different to the weather in the areas around.

Monty Don, the presenter of *Gardener's World*, for example, happily uses 'microclimates', plural, for different parts of a single garden, since one side of some fence, say, will receive less rain than the other: no small deal for a serious gardener.

In everyday speak, 'microclimate' is used much more loosely and often to describe balminess.

Especially in coastal towns, it's used loosely and proudly enough to suggest: 'Feel that warm air. You should spend your summer holidays – and money – here.' In the place we're going to next, it means 'it hardly rains hereabouts'.

We let the wind take us up toward the Bristol Channel. Down to the west we see Bodmin Moor. That isn't where we're headed, but it's important. The clouds round here often come from the south. Not another Spanish plume; of the six air masses that visit these islands, this one here is the Tropical Maritime: air from the Atlantic Ocean bearing water that may have had an earlier existence as part of the warm seas around the Azores, which has cooled just enough in transit to keep its dampness, and arrives here, warm and moist.

As that air mass makes its way inland, it has an opportunity to break up when it crosses high ground like Bodmin Moor; there's less chance it will make it to our destination: Bude.

The highest point on Bodmin Moor is the hill that used to be called Bronn Wennili, the hill of swallows. Brown Willy, though, is the name used by everyone except a few worried dignitaries who sometimes launch mercifully

unsuccessful campaigns to have the hill referred to only by its Cornish name. And so the cause of heavy showers Bodmin enjoys remains known as **#7**: **the Brown Willy effect**.

The air experiences more friction as it passes over land, and the land is closest at Bodmin, where winds converge. As with over Winterborne St Martin, they then stick around; the moist Atlantic air becomes Bodmin rain. And the effect is not felt only in the southwest: in March 2006, they say, the showers did not stop until Oxfordshire's Burford, nearly 150 miles away.

Almost all of the time this landscape can take it: there's somewhere for the noisy rain to go. No such thing as bad weather, only bad drainage. Especially now that the people of these islands spend fewer of their working hours outdoors.

Rain may be the farmer's friend. No rain, no crops. But only up to a point. And the Brown Willy effect may bring what is still, in the West, referred to as **letty weather** (**#8**).

Elsewhere, this sense of 'let' is heard only in the clipped tones of the lawyer or parliamentarian, or on a passport: