

Snow slackers can be found around the world

February 4 2009, By Laurie Goering

The streets were strangely quiet as I walked my daughter to school Tuesday morning. Baby stroller traffic jams are the norm in our south London neighborhood, nicknamed the "Nappy Valley" for its prodigious birthrate. But we were alone as we tripped along through the remnants of London's biggest snowfall in 18 years.

Starting Sunday night, London - which these days rarely sees more than a dusting of winter snow - had been blanketed with eight inches of white powder, shutting down schools, buses, trains, airports and mail delivery on Monday, and sending everyone racing to the parks to build snowmen and throw snowballs.

Tuesday, however, was sunny and fine. The snow on the streets was melting, the cars largely swept off, the sidewalks a touch slick but passable. I dismissed my daughter's hopes that today would be another snow day.

Still, at school we were met by a big hand-scrawled "School Closed" sign and an apologetic school secretary.

"Some of the teachers still can't get here and the playground looks like this," she said, gesturing to the inch of packed snow on the sidewalk. "We can't have people falling down."

President Barack Obama isn't the only one baffled by the snow slackers of the world. Those of us with long experience trudging through hip-deep icy drifts can't help smirking a bit at the uninitiated as they puzzle

over how to get snow off the car roof (try a broom) or struggle to walk in elegant high-heeled winter boots never designed for contact with actual winter elements.

London's first big snowstorm in years caused plenty of complaint as business and government officials argued about who was responsible for slick roads and closed train lines that kept an estimated 6 million Brits away from work Monday.

Many people, however, saw the city's blanket of snow as a gift - a chance to forget for a day or two the economic crisis that has shut down businesses and kept people from work, and to enjoy a bit of beauty.

The Brits, it turns out, actually do know how to cope with winter.

Every Londoner who wasn't at work or school Monday and Tuesday was out on one of the city's parks or commons, celebrating. Families built not just snowmen, snow bears and snow bunnies but whole oversized living room sets out of snow. A block from my house someone constructed an entire igloo, large and sturdy enough to hold three kids standing up inside at once. The city's park benches were taken up with snow figures, some of them holding snow dogs on snow leashes.

On the city's hills, people were sledding on whatever they could find - cafeteria trays, inflatable pool toys - and discussing the best techniques for achieving speed and distance. Kids threw snowballs and shook the branches of snowy trees and made snow angels and caught snowflakes on their tongues.

My daughter and I discussed whether the red foxes who live in the common near our house might be having an easier or harder time finding dinner in this weather. We talked about how snowflakes are formed and wrote our names in the snow with sticks.

I realized, eventually, that for a city that sees such heavy snow only every decade or two, shutting down for a day might be costly - British officials estimated the nation's economic losses from the shutdown at more than \$1.75 billion - but in many ways it just makes sense. Buying snowplows and salt is expensive, particularly when they're rarely used.

And, as it turns out, school wasn't really out anyway. The city's parks and commons, for a day, were one big art class. Kids worked out physics problems on the sledding hills and everybody got plenty of throwing practice and other exercise.

Wednesday, the kids will surely trudge to the classroom again through the fast-melting slush. But the next snow day - headaches and all - can't come too soon.

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