



People play in a public garden following an overnight snow storm in Grenoble

Europe meets winter unexpectedly early

Winter has come early to parts of Europe as snow and freezing temperatures surprised many

The earlier than usual wintry weather was greeted stoically by some while the slippery conditions caught others out. Road traffic organisations reported a rise in accidents as some parts were blanketed by up to 20 centimetres of snow.

The clocks have gone back on the European continent and winter has arrived, all on the same day. There were wintry scenes on last Sunday lunchtime in the centre of Moscow, after up to six centimetres of snow fell. Forecasters have been warning of the longest cold snap for 20 years

and it seems their predictions could come true.

It was the same story in the alpine region of France. Snowfall in the region of Isère was quite heavy, up to 40 centimetres in places. Here they are used to it, albeit not quite so early. The cold snap brought power cuts with up to 50,000 households in the Isere region in the Alps deprived of electricity. Authorities have issued an 'Orange' warning, the second highest alert, and rescue services have been fully mobilised. Up to 50 centimetres of snow fell in

some parts making driving hazardous. An icy wind and fresh falls of snow on top of the ice only added to the dangerous conditions. Many drivers were forced to abandon their cars while emergency services were called to clear trees from roads felled in the high winds, with gusts blowing up to 130 kilometres per hour recorded in one area.

Parts of the south of France were the worst hit by the high winds where on the Riviera two people have been reported missing.

Snow has also fallen across most

of Switzerland — just a week after record high October temperatures were recorded in some valleys. One person was slightly injured in an eight-car shunt in the western canton of Fribourg. The road was closed for several hours.

Meanwhile, in Venice, the unseasonable weather led to a much more familiar problem. The heavy snow fell as rain, leaving 30 percent of the historic city centre under water. But that didn't put the tourists off — they just had to get their feet wet.

New future at fingertips for amputees

British engineers are launching a bionic hand they claim is as sophisticated as many prototypes, but cheap enough to meet the needs of a mass market

The new owners are familiarising themselves with the devices and are managing to perform quite difficult tasks like lacing up shoes. Individual motors in each finger allow the amputee to move the hand and grip in a more natural, coordinated way. The hands are built in Leeds at RSL Steeper, a company which specialises in prosthetics.

"The design intent really is to go for as close to the human form as possible. The hands that kind of exist on the market at the minute are single articulation, so just a standard grip, whereas this hand is multi-articulated, it can grab hold of a wine glass as easily as it could grab a grapefruit, or something like that," said Operations Director Ted Varley. There are two small sensors on the amputee's arm, using signals from muscles there to open, close and grip, giving the hand a remarkably 'natural' feel.

Microprocessors continuously monitor the position of each finger, giving the amputee a precise control over hand movements. Options mean even small objects are less of a challenge.



RSL Steeper's own market research claims there are 130,000 amputees in Western populations; about five per cent of these involve hands and arms. It is the state of the art, but in such a tight market it is hard to predict the future of this device.

Spain and Germany also ban Novartis flu vaccines



Italy, Switzerland and Austria have banned the sale of anti-flu vaccines made by Swiss drugmaker Novartis

The move follows a report into small particles within the vaccine. The pharmaceutical giant says however that it is confident that its vaccines are safe. In Germany, authori-

ties are maintaining their advice to elderly people to get vaccinated, saying that 14 other vaccines can be used.

Anne-Claire Siegrist, President of the Swiss Vaccination Commission said, "The only potential risk, as we've seen in past years with the flu vaccine, is that particles can cause a slightly worse inflammation in the hours following the injection. Those who've already been vaccinated have nothing to worry about, nothing gives us any reason to think there is a problem. But we are asking doctors to wait a day or two or three until we can confirm that there is nothing to worry about."

The move comes as drugmakers are struggling to meet demand in Switzerland, where it's estimated only one million out of the 1.3 million doses ordered will be delivered. The vaccines concerned are Agripal, Fluad and Influpozzi.

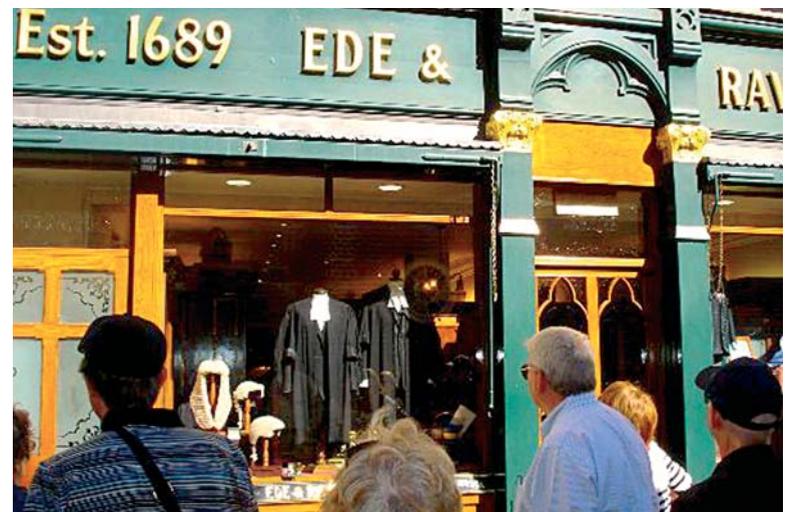
UK out of recession with help of Olympic Games

Britain rebounded strongly from recession in the third quarter

GDP growth — up one percent — was the strongest in five years, partly thanks to ticket sales and other spending from the London Olympics. Finance Minister George Osborne said the figures vindicated the government's economic policies, coming as they do after falls in UK unemployment and inflation.

The British economy returned to growth after three consecutive quarters of contraction which makes another stimulus injection of cash from the UK Central Bank less likely. GDP has expanded by 0.3 percent so far this year, but that is still 3.1 percent below its peak in early 2008 and economists warned underlying growth remains weak.

The UK has not fully recovered the output lost during the 2008-2009 slump that has left many



Britons worse off and the economy slipped back into recession at the end of last year. Most economists agree that a sustained recovery is far from certain after business surveys have indicated a weak start to the

final quarter of the year and one-off factors — like the London Olympics and a rebound from an extra public holiday in the previous quarter — were the main drivers behind the strong bounce in Q3.