

The Coronavirus Plague in Alne, 2020

A Personal Diary by Robert Brech (continued)

The Oxford University team involved in preparing a Covid 19 vaccine has highlighted the key global events as follows:

Dec-2019 : First detection in Wohan, China.

30-Jan-2020 : WHO declares an international public health emergency.

11-Feb-2020 : Officially named as Covid-19.

11-Mar-2020 : WHO declares a pandemic.

Back on the UK front, rainbows of hope had sprung up across the land, some done by enthusiastic children and others by those of a more artistic bent. Pictured here is the one from Fairhaven in Main Street with the rainbow fashioned from tiny hearts as can be seen in the close-up. [Courtesy Iain and Angela Darby]

One month on from the anniversary of VE Day, the lockdown is easing, many more activities are permitted, primary schools have re-opened for Years Reception and 6 (although many pupils are not attending), people are starting to go back to work and tennis singles and doubles are now permitted. The 2-metre social distance rule is still in force, which prevents the re-opening of pubs and cafes, while a new quarantine rule has been introduced for UK arrivals, this latter being hotly disputed by the travel and hospitality industries. Non-essential shops are due to re-open on 15-June at which time masks will become compulsory on all forms of public transport in England, although buses, trams and trains are conspicuous by their current emptiness.

Now, in the middle of June, there is an overall sense of muddle. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland all have different rules despite the fact that we are supposed to be a United Kingdom. Why? Because they are devolved and because their leaders can show that they can. If you get on a train in Scotland, you must put on a mask when you cross the border into England. If you journey from Paddington to Swansea, you must wear a mask at the start but you can take it off when you cross into Wales! You can travel as far as you like in England, you are confined to five miles in Wales. Everyone is supposed to be “*all in it together*” but clearly we are not. The government regularly U-turns on policy but never apologises or says “*we got that wrong*”.



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And no one seems to have a proper understanding of risk or statistics. I said to the local grandchildren, when we started a regular Sunday morning country walk at the beginning of May, “*you have more chance of being struck by lightning than of dying from coronavirus*”. They were mightily impressed when they saw the newspaper headline four weeks’ later! We are given the daily death figures “*died with Covid-19*” (which are currently averaging about 160) but they are not figures of “*died from Covid-19*”. For example, if you had a positive Covid-19 test in February and were knocked down by a bus in May, you would (astonishingly) be included in the “*died with Covid-19*” figures. We do not ask how many of these people would have died anyhow and how many people die per day in normal circumstances (which one needs to make a comparison) and no one has a clue. And not only are international comparisons impossible as there seem to be as many different ways of counting cases and mortalities as there are countries but, even within the four countries of the UK, there are different methods of presenting the data.



I started the table in Chapter 1 to show how the disease was progressing in terms of deaths but the inconsistencies outlined above made it less and less useful. Finally, from the end of July, the UK government changed its method of counting and dropped the casualty list by about 5,300 cases. At this point, I gave up the table as being of little use or significance.

As I update this at the end of July, lockdown has been eased in some respects but tightened in others. The two-metre social distancing rule has been relaxed to one-metre, travel and holidays are now permitted all around the UK but, from 24-July, masks became compulsory in English shops (but not Welsh) as well as on public transport. With the creation of quarantine-free “air bridges”, overseas holidays had resumed from early-July but a spike of cases in the north-east of Spain has forced an immediate 14-day quarantine for travellers returning to the UK from any part of Spain from 27-July. Considering that the Spanish Canary Islands are twice as far from Barcelona than is London, and has a lower infection rate than the UK, this blanket policy seems bizarre! And the government continues to be at sixes and sevens in its advice, different ministers saying different things on different days with the result that clear and well-defined rules and well-reasoned principles are conspicuous by their absence.

As far as Alne is concerned, some things have returned to normal. Tennis singles resumed on 01-June and twice-a-week club doubles on 03-June. I initiated a fun mixed-doubles tennis league with those clubs in the Hovingham League area that were keen to participate and this kicked off on 20-July. The recreation field and playground are now busy at most times and the Blue Bell Inn continues to serve the local community with takeaway meals as well as re-opening its indoor restaurant. But nothing is taking place in the Village Hall and the usual gatherings of village folk for social, entertainment and organisational reasons have not resumed.

On the personal front, our house move had run into difficulties. Our buyer’s buyer pulled out of the transaction and our buyer then followed suit. We put Alne Croft back on the market on 25-May and had three viewings in the following days, interestingly all looking to move up

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from the south. We had two offers, agreed on one from a retiring military couple on 12-June, and started what turned out to be a glacially-slow sale process. Not only was there pent-up demand, as the housing market had been frozen for the last two months, but staff at Hambleton DC and the Land Registry were furloughed or working from home and responses to enquiries were taking twice as long as usual. Then our buyer's surveyor made an appointment to survey Alne Croft but couldn't do anything for three-and-a-half weeks owing to the pressure of other work. It was into August before we had made sufficient progress to consider the legal step of exchanging contracts, at which point the buyer developed a medical condition which required hospital tests which were not immediately forthcoming. We gave them until 14-August to exchange contracts but they were not able to do this and pulled out of the sale. Our Estate Agents, Blenkin & Co, fortunately had a perfect couple to pick up where the others had left off and we were able to move seamlessly into negotiations with them. This couple were moving from Wimbledon Park and had two small sons – we felt that they were much more suitable buyers of what had been a happy family house for so many years.

On the national front, the government continued to use a sledgehammer to address the various nuts that needed attention. The number of positive cases was always rising but the government seemed unable to appreciate that the more testing you do, the more positive cases you would find. The rate of positives per number tested was remaining stable if not declining¹ but increased testing meant increased positives and the focus seemed to be on this rather than the rate. The city of Bradford had some increase by this positive-results measure and so the whole of the Bradford Metropolitan Council area was given more restrictive measures from early August. This impacted people in leafy Ilkley and rural Menston (where our daughter, Sarah, lived) despite the fact that the cases were virtually all in more central areas of the city.



And, on the international front, the government declared that arrivals back in the UK from France would have to enter 14 days of quarantine which meant confinement to one's house and garden and not even being allowed to take the dog for a walk. This restriction was announced late on the Thursday evening, 13-August, with it coming into effect from 04:00 on the Saturday morning. There was much anger both on the sledgehammer approach (French cases were not dissimilar to the UK apart from the two geographical areas of Paris and Marseille and were prone to the same increase-in-testing means increase-in-cases errors as in the UK) but also on the very short notice. Huge numbers of British tourists in France fled to the Channel ports in an effort to beat the deadline. This included three of our grandchildren; they terminated their holiday in Brittany one day short and managed to rebook onto a ferry from Le Havre to Portsmouth, arriving back in the UK late on Friday evening. The last ferry to arrive pre-quarantine into the UK docked at Newhaven from Dieppe at 03:52 on Saturday, with just eight minutes to spare before the deadline expired! There were thousands of British tourists left behind, many of whom had driven all day from the south of France.

Further confusion from the government now appeared on A-Level results which were announced on Thursday 13-August. No exams had actually been sat so teachers had given an

¹ See, for example, the work by Professor Carl Heneghan, Director of the Centre for Evidence-Based Medicine at the University of Oxford.

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estimate of grades. It was found by the Examination Regulator that this had increased the number of As and A*s by 12% over normal years so the government introduced an algorithm that reduced them back to a more normal year. This caused outrage, and the press and opposition piled in, taking the inevitable individual losers as case studies. The Education Secretary and the Examination Regulator Ofqual gave conflicting advice on how the appeals system would work, Ofqual changed their mind within hours, and the government eventually caved in on Monday and allowed the higher of teachers' grades or the algorithm grades to be awarded. This then created a further set of problems. Archie, who had been predicted AAA by his teachers, had been awarded AAB by the algorithm and had missed out on his offer of a place at Cambridge. By the time his grades were reassessed back to AAA, he had accepted a place at Nottingham through clearing and his Cambridge place had been given to Bertie. Archie now wished to reverse the process, as he was perfectly entitled to do, and the onus fell on Cambridge which now had to try to accommodate both students on what might already be a full course, never mind the restrictions of their social-distancing regime. This was yet another completely self-inflicted and chaotic example of how our government, of which we had had such high hopes at the beginning of the year, seemed unable to manage anything at all with a modicum of coherence, organisation, foresight and political common sense.

The Church of England has also been given heavy censure in the media for its lack of courage and leadership. Here we are in mid-August. I can go to the pub, I can go to a restaurant, I can go to a bowling alley, I can attend an optician's appointment, I can have my hair cut; but I am unable to go to St Mary's Church in Alne, even for private prayer, let alone to attend a service. The church remains resolutely shut as their leaders seem to be terrified of being accused of helping to move even one virus from one person to another. One wonders what Jesus would have done. He mixed with lepers and even touched them², it seems unlikely that he would have shut himself away from people who had only a 0.05%³ chance of carrying a virus.

A further bone of contention in the Church's bailiwick at a local level was the Parish Newsletter in Alne. Run by the Church for countless years, it was distributed ten times a year to every house in the parish. While being of lesser importance as a medium of information since the introduction of the Alne Village website in 2012, it was nevertheless a lifeline to the more elderly of the population who might not have ready access to the website, and was a more permanent reminder of what was happening in the immediate locality. It was understandable that the mainly elderly volunteers who did the usual distribution might have some qualms about doing this after lockdown, especially as some of them might be self-isolating. But the mainly young Alne Coronavirus Support Group offered to take over this distribution and were amazed when the newly-appointed vicar turned down this offer of help. She thought that putting the newsletters in a plastic box with a lid (touched by everyone who wanted a copy) was more hygienic than having a small number of young distributor volunteers putting a copy through every letterbox as usual. Not only did this not seem to be "following the science", it also resulted in a dramatic fall in circulation. And this at a time when the Church, in my view, should not have been scared and hiding away, but should have been taking a lead in every aspect of life.

(... to be continued)

2 : Luke 5, 12-16 and Luke 17, 11-19.

3 : Source: UK Government 19-Aug-2020