

The Coronavirus Plague in Alne

A Personal Diary by Robert Brech

The UK entered 2021 with a steadily rising number of coronavirus cases, hospital admissions and deaths. On Monday 04-January, the government announced a third national lockdown in England to take effect immediately and with the force of law from Wednesday. But on the brighter side, the first vaccinations in Alne took place at Oak Trees care home on Thursday 07-January and this was followed one day later by the first vaccination of an “ordinary” Alne resident (i.e. not a health professional nor in one of the two care homes). This latter “jab” was carried out in the Easingwold Health Centre using the Oxford University/AstraZeneca vaccine which had been approved for use in the UK by the MPRA¹ on 30-December. A number of other Alne folk aged over 80 had their own vaccinations on Sunday 10-January so the local programme seemed to be rolling out successfully. The government’s plan is to vaccinate all over-75s and all others with serious underlying medical conditions by mid-February, a total of some 15 million people.

Over the weekend of 30/31-January the local vaccination team moved to the Galtres Centre and switched to the Pfizer vaccine. On Tuesday 02-February, Alison and I had our own vaccinations and they were carried out like a military operation. We arrived at 10:36 and 10:42 as requested and we were immediately given a seat in the waiting room. There were eight vaccination stations, each manned by two health professionals and we were directed to one of these within minutes of our arrival. My jab was given by Dr Mike Potrykus, recently retired Tollerton GP, so it felt very homely! The Pfizer jab requires a 15-minute sit-down afterwards just to check that one isn’t the one in seven millionth person who gets an anaphylactic shock. And that was that.

The government successfully completed its target of 15 million vaccinations by 15-February with a day to spare and then moved the programme on to the next groups most at risk. On Monday 22-February, the Government issued a “Roadmap” of how the restrictions would be lifted over the next several months and this was summarised as shown below.

This seemed a fairly sensible middle course but debate immediately began to heat up between those who thought that restrictions should be eased immediately and those who thought they should stay forever.

We learnt of another parallel from history when we attended another webinar from Magdalen College, Oxford on 18-February. The Nuffield Professor of Clinical Medicine, Professor Richard Cornall, talked to us about his own 2020 recollections “*A Journal of the Pandemic Year, 2020*” which included the work done by Professor Sarah Gilbert in his department on the Oxford University vaccine. We found it interesting to learn of the quote from Daniel Defoe who, writing of the great plague of 1665, observed conditions very similar to our own, particularly in our first lockdown in April and May, 2020:

‘It was a most surprising thing, to see those streets, which were usually so thronged, now grown desolate, and so few people to be seen in them’.

1 Medical and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency



During the course of March, an extraordinary row blew up between the UK and the EU on the subject of vaccines. The UK had, in hindsight, worked a marvel in establishing a private-sector-led group which put lives ahead of costs and pursued a large number of strands, ordering huge quantities of vaccines from all those research groups who had a likely project under way with the astonishing results already described. The bureaucratic EU, however, insisted on managing the purchasing on behalf of all 27 countries and then spent much time arguing about prices and favouring French vaccines which, as it turned out, didn't work. By the time they actually placed orders, they were well back in the queue and so were at least three months behind the UK in the procurement, production and rolling-out of vaccines into the EU population. EU leaders then worsened the situation by first of all stating that the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine didn't work for over-65s, then deciding that it caused blood clots, stopping using that vaccine to the detriment of their own populations, but then reversing direction and giving it only to over-65s, all the time threatening to cut off UK supplies from both AstraZeneca's and Pfizer's European production houses, an act which usually only takes place in time of war.

Two commentators amused me. Nick Timothy in the *Daily Telegraph* of 22-March summarised the chaos with: "Europe has managed to demand more jabs of a vaccine it says does not work, threaten a company whose products it says it does not want, and block exports of something it says it will not use. All the while undermining public confidence in a vaccine approved by regulators, administered safely to millions already, and which will be vital in saving lives and resuming normality in Europe. It is just a coincidence, of course, that the product they have targeted is from Brexit Britain."

And the *Daily Star* of the following day had it more succinctly as shown below.

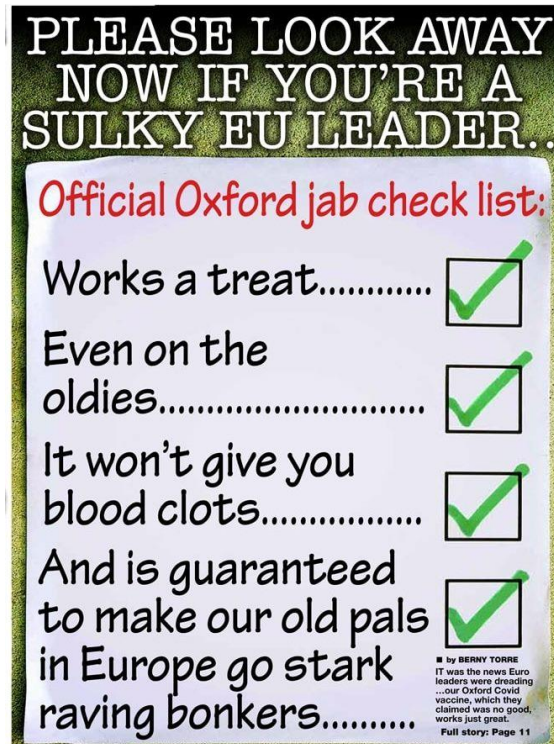
The possibility of rare blood clots in the brain following the AstraZeneca vaccine was the next issue to raise its head. Again, European countries raised the temperature despite the fact

that there was little evidence that the incidence was any worse than in the population at large, regardless of vaccination. But the UK press picked it up and soon some people were cancelling vaccination appointments as a result of the messages on social media. An understanding of risk was once again noticeable by its absence. Statistics were many and varied but, generally, a young woman was four to ten times more likely to die as a result of a blood clot from taking the birth control pill than if she was vaccinated. A young person who drove more than 50 miles to get a Pfizer vaccine rather than the AstraZeneca vaccine was more likely to be killed en route than to die from a post-vaccination blood clot.

Lockdown in England was gradually released according to the roadmap shown above. On 29-March, more outdoor socialising was permitted and organised sports such as tennis and golf were allowed to resume. Pub gardens and non-essential retail were allowed to open from 12-April together with libraries, hairdressers and barbers, although anti-Covid measures such as social distancing and masks remained in force.

I had been lent a copy of *The Black Death* by Philip Ziegler, a 150,000-word treatise on the subject of the bubonic plague which swept Europe in 1347-51. Not an easy read but some points of interest were worth noting:

- The term *Black Death* (maybe from the black abscesses?) was not used at the time and didn't come into general use until the later plagues some 250 years' later.
- It is generally thought that about one-third of people died in England from the *Black Death*. Since the actual size of the population at that time was unknown, this is difficult to nail down, but about a million to a million-and-a-half deaths out of a population of three million to four-and-a-half million seems about right. Compare this 33% death rate in England to our current death rate from Covid-19 of 0.2%.
- The clergy, of whom better records were maintained, lost nearly half their number.
- Since there was no real knowledge of how the plague spread from person to person, there was generally no 'lockdown' at that time to prevent transmission. Ziegler's book includes a whole chapter on a mythical Mediaeval village, compiled from various sources. It postulates how a man in Tollerton might lose his wife and child to the plague and then walk to Alne to seek consolation from his friends and get away from diseased Tollerton. He had no idea that he was carrying the plague with him and was thus a danger to all around.
- The plague was clearly sent by God so various schemes were instigated to assuage the anger of the deity. Self-flagellation in Germany merits a significant part of a chapter in the book but this form of atoning for sins was clearly more widespread as indicated by



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this 1349 picture of sinners scourging themselves in the Netherlands in an effort to persuade God to send the plague away.

(Photo courtesy Britannica Online).

- The Jews were next in line for blame, as was always the case. It is generally thought that the *Black Death* was the reason for probably the biggest massacre ever of the European Jewish population until the 20th century.



Mentions of earlier plagues reminds me to include photographs of the Alne plague stone at Alne Cross. Meticulously maintained by Alan Daniels², it is thought to date from 1604 when it was better understood that human contact was best avoided in plague circumstances³; photos and references to that particular plague are to be found in Appendix 1.

Back to the present day, on 14-April, the Office of National Statistics released information that the Covid death statistics are probably 25% overstated as the definition of “*died with Covid*” includes too many people who would have died anyway. See my example of being included in the statistics when hit by a bus after a positive test – way back in May 2020!

But the next strange thing was a comment by the Prime Minister that the fall in cases, hospitalisations and deaths was due to lockdown and not to the vaccine. This was so much at variance with the science and public opinion that eyebrows were raised all round and when no correction was issued, the conspiracy theorists went to work. Were we being prepared for another wave and another lockdown? Did Boris Johnson know something we didn't? Were we going to follow India with a relaxation followed by a crisis?

On Wednesday 21-April, Alison and I had our second Pfizer vaccinations, eleven weeks and one day after the first. The procedure was the same as before, we were called by Tollerton surgery and given a time and date five days in the future to present ourselves at the Galtres Centre at Easingwold where the military-style operation was running as efficiently as before. Apart from a sore arm, neither of us had any side effects from either vaccination – in this, we are lucky as quite a few local folk reported headaches and flu-like symptoms.

Di Watkins, Chair of Easingwold District Community Care Association, reports on the volunteers aiding the vaccination programme as follows:

“Some 55 EDCCA volunteers have now supported the vaccinators on 19 separate occasions and worked nearly 2,300 volunteer hours to reach the ‘point’ of the 10,000 vaccination in the Galtres Centre. They have directed people to the Health Centre and latterly the Galtres Centre from the car park and people walking to their appointments. They have managed queues in a friendly and orderly manner. They have wiped chairs, directed people, chatted to everyone, offered reassurance and been so willing and cheerful in all weathers. They have

2 Alne Parish Councillor 1991-2003.

3 See also the story of self-isolation in the village of Eyam in the 17th century.

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been drenched and baked in the sun too. Alongside the amazing vaccination team they have done the people of Easingwold and EDCCA proud.”

On 10-May it was announced that 2/3 of the adult population of England had had their first vaccine dose and 1/3 had had two doses. This was also the date on which Alne resumed league tennis in the Hovingham Mixed Tennis League.

We were looking forward to Step Three of the planned release from lockdown on 17-May when we could hug people, stay overnight with family, travel on holiday (although to very restricted destinations abroad) and eat indoors in pubs and restaurants. And it was clear that many people in Alne had planned trips away this week (if they didn't have school-age children) and the following two weeks which included the half-term break.

But the Sunday papers on 16-May were full of the worry about the “Indian variant”, of which some 1,300 cases had appeared in the UK. Once again, scare stories were rife. It was reported⁴ that the minutes of the SAGE committee on Thursday had advised ministers that proceeding with the release of lockdown Step Three as planned would lead to a “*substantial resurgence*” of hospital admissions “*similar to, or larger than, previous peaks*”. In the same paper, Oxford University's Regius Professor of Medicine, Sir John Bell, said “*The data looks rather promising. I think the vaccinated population are going to be fine*”.

As we come to the end of Chapter 4, and you start enjoying your newfound freedoms, you can decide which theory you like best – and who was right will doubtless be revealed when we come to Chapter 5 later this year!

Robert Brech
17-May-2021

4 Sunday Times 16-May-2021

Appendix 1: The Plague of 1604 in Alne
as described within Alne Annals

From Vallis Eboracensis by Thomas Gill

In 1604, the plague raged to such an alarming extent in this neighbourhood that the markets were prohibited to prevent the contagion from spreading in the country; and stone crosses were erected in various places in the vicinity, where the country-people brought their goods (marked with the price demanded) and left them at or near the cross; afterwards the villagers came there, took away their goods and left their money in their place, which afterwards the owners of the goods came and took away; the parties thus never coming in contact, These stones were called plague stones, and the markets thus held, the fetch and carry market. One of those crosses still remains at the spot where the lanes cross each other leading to Tollerton, Youlton, Flawith, and Tholthorpe, to memorialize the period when so many thousands of our fellow beings were suddenly swept into eternity. This pestilence is said to have proved fatal to 11,000 persons in York. See photos below.

From a supplement to the Yorkshire Herald dated November 19, 1927

In 1604 the plague which, during the preceding year, had carried off 30,578 persons in London, raged to an alarming extent in York and district, no less than 3,512 inhabitants of York alone falling victims to it, though by the precautions used, it was not of long duration. To prevent the contagion from spreading into the country, stone crosses were erected in various parts of the vicinity of York, where the country people without coming into the city, met the citizens, and sold them their commodities.

David Newton's personal notes

In 1604 the plague raged throughout York and district. (In Alne in 1604 and in Huby in 1625.) Robert Bossal of Huby was prosecuted: "Brought, thought to be infected goods from London". His punishment was a fine of £40 and he was put in the stocks at Malton for three hours.

