

The Coronavirus Plague in Alne, 2020

A Personal Diary by Robert Brech (continued)

Early in September, there was a significant increase in the number of positive Coronavirus tests in the UK although no increase in hospital admissions or fatalities. The government was nervous about similar increases in France and Spain and introduced a further restriction on groups in England on 14-September. The different UK nations once again refused to harmonise their own rules and the result was another hotch-potch of regulations, as shown in the BBC summary shown alongside. The public was less inclined to follow along with these new rules and there was much discussion once again as to whether increased testing equals increased positives and why were we worrying so much about Covid-19 when the figures for July and August showed that more people were dying from seasonal ‘flu and pneumonia’¹.

	England	Scotland	Wales	Northern Ireland
 How many people outdoors?	Six from multiple households	Up to six aged 12+ from two households*	Up to 30 outdoors	Up to 15 outdoors
 At what distance?	1m ‘plus’	2m apart - aged 12+ only (less in some premises)	2m apart - age 11+ only (less in some premises)	2m apart
 Indoors	Six from multiple households	Up to six aged 12+ from two households*	Up to six aged 11+ from an “extended household”**	Six from two households
<small>*In Scotland, under 12s from the two households don’t count towards total **In Wales, under 11s from “extended household” don’t count towards total</small>				

BBC

As we came into October, there was quite a startling increase in positive cases and local restrictions (or tiers) were introduced in various conurbations including Manchester, the North West, and parts of West Yorkshire. These included pubs and restaurants closing at 10:00pm although the anticipated effect was somewhat diminished when crowds of people were all turfed out onto the street at the same time and promptly went to supermarkets to stock up on alcohol and take it home to party! Pubs and restaurants in these areas were understandably miffed when they had spent much time and money in making their premises Covid-safe and all that was happening was that the danger was transferred outside and to homes! Scotland went one step further and closed all hospitality venues in a wide swathe of central districts including Glasgow and Edinburgh. Despite the increasing number of positive cases, hospital admissions were increasing much more slowly and opinion was sharply divided as to whether the various governments knew what they were doing. There was no doubt that the short-term political downside of lots of deaths heavily outweighed the longer-term destruction of the economy.

In Alne, as in the rest of the Hambleton district, we were in the lowest tier and were not much affected. Pubs and restaurants were still open, we could still play doubles tennis and we could

1 : Office of National Statistics

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go for walks with family, provided we remained in a group no larger than six. York itself was put into Tier-2 but we visited on a couple of occasions and there wasn't much difference in the number of people out and about.

Back on the house move front, our new buyers had moved ahead with alacrity; we exchanged contracts on 02-October, moved into 6 Hallgarth on Tuesday 20-October and completed on 23-October. This long-running saga had at last ended and, as it turned out, we were just in time! We stayed in the Premier Inn down on the York ring road for the Monday and Tuesday nights and got their usual dinner, bed and breakfast; there seemed to be fairly reasonable business despite their Tier-2 status.

A further increase in Covid-19 cases brought forward a further four-week lockdown in England which started on 05-November and replaced the previous 3-tier arrangement. The main difference from the lockdown earlier in the year was that schools and universities remained open. But children's sports were outlawed as also were all adult sports activities such as golf and tennis which seemed very much over the top, particularly in rural areas.

Differences of opinion about the validity of the various 'scientific' evidence behind the government's decisions continued to rage and there seemed to be a statistic for every opinion. Former Prime Minister Theresa May highlighted the issue in parliament saying:

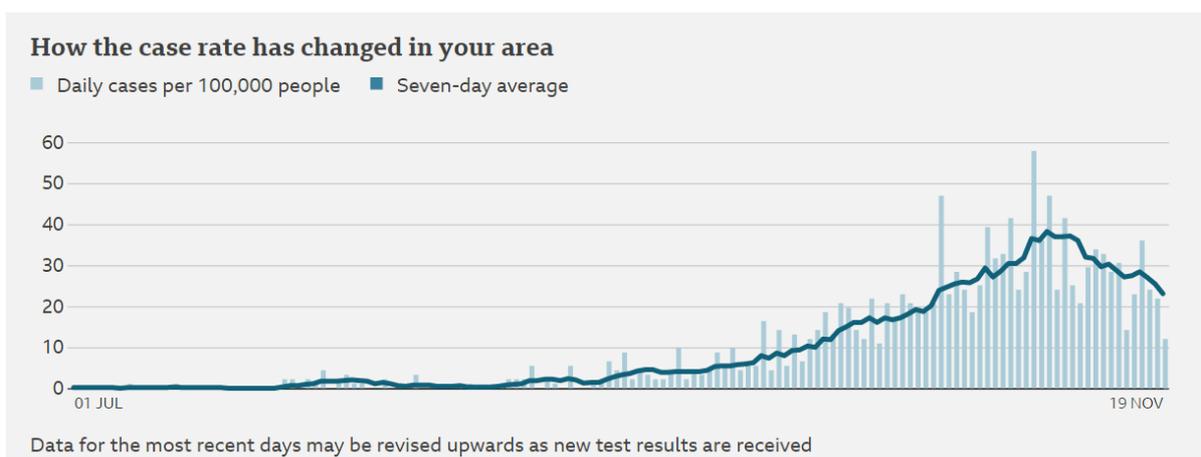
"It looks as though the figures are being chosen to support the policy, rather than the policy being based on the figures".

On 06-November, the Daily Telegraph ran the front page headline as shown, while the BBC helped to add fuel to the fire by running with:



“Covid: Regulator criticises data used to justify lockdown”.

In Hambleton district, there was a marked increase in cases as we entered the autumn but a peak was reached in early November and the case numbers then declined, as shown below. There were a few rumoured and actual cases in Alne but this was to be expected – a village population of 750 might engender seven to eight cases on the national average so maybe five would be consistent in such a rural area. Life continued much as before, especially with the school still open, although many people continued to work from home and some were inevitably furloughed under the government's national scheme. Walkers round the village,



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taking their daily exercise, were more prevalent and many a garden gate discussion took place! And, at home, we settled down to jigsaws and box sets as before. Jigsaws are very popular and while Towler's in Easingwold has a huge choice, a group of us in Alne also share jigsaws so we all get a wider selection.

News of vaccine success reached us on successive Mondays, Pfizer on 09-November, Moderna on 16-November and Oxford University with AstraZeneca on 23-November. This provided some light at the end of the tunnel and some hope that we could see an end to the restrictions later in 2021.

But that hope went further away on 26-November as it was announced that the end of the lockdown on 02-December would be followed by a return to the tiered system of rules with just some relaxations over Christmas. Alne, which had been in Tier 1 previously, was now put into Tier 2 along with the majority of the country. Many urban areas were put into the more onerous Tier 3 and only Cornwall, the Isle of Wight and the Isles of Scilly remained in the original Tier 1. Tier 2 rules are shown in the box alongside.

Further to my earlier comments on the lack of leadership from the established churches, it was interesting to make the comparison as to how church leaders responded in earlier times. In an online University of York lecture on 27-November, Professor Sarah Rees Jones gave us access to mediaeval records of the 'Black Death' the bubonic plague in the mid-14th century which killed 30% to 40% of the then population – a far cry from the 0.1% death rate we are currently seeing. Archbishop of York, William Zouche, wrote in 1348 in a remarkable archive that still exists:

“There can be no one who does not know, since it is now public knowledge, how great a mortality, pestilence and infection of the air are now threatening various parts of the world, and especially England; and this is surely caused by the sins of men, who, while enjoying good times forget that such things are the gifts of [God]. Thus, since the inevitable human fate, pitiless death, which spares no one, now threatens us, unless the holy clemency of the Saviour is shown to his people from on high, the only hope is to hurry back to him alone,”

He went on to instruct that devout and solemn liturgical processions were to be held every Wednesday and Friday in his cathedral church and in every college, monastery and parish

Tier two (high) rules

- In tier two you can't socialise indoors with anyone you do not live with, or who is not in your support bubble
- You can meet in a group of up to six outside - including in a garden, or a public place
- Shops, gyms and personal care services (such as hairdressing) can reopen (if Covid-secure)
- Pubs and bars can only open if they serve substantial meals. Alcohol can be served with that meal
- Pubs and restaurants must shut at 23:00 GMT, with last orders at 22:00 GMT
- Sports can resume with up to 2,000 spectators, or 50% capacity (whichever is smaller)
- Collective worship, weddings and outdoor sports can resume (with restrictions)
- Non-essential foreign travel allowed, subject to quarantine rules
- People are advised not to travel to and from tier three areas

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church throughout the diocese and that a special prayer was to be said daily at mass to allay the plague. Somewhat different from the closed churches of today!

Wednesday 02-December was a red letter day as it was the day that the MPRA (Medical and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency) formally approved the Pfizer vaccine for use, making the UK the first country in the world so to do. Initial stocks of the vaccine were imported from the Pfizer plant in Belgium and vaccinations started on Tuesday 08-December.

A grimmer picture emerged on Saturday 19-December. A new strain of the virus was being transmitted much more quickly in London and the South-East and a new Tier 4 was introduced for these areas with much more onerous restrictions. At the same time, the relaxation of the rules which had been promulgated for the 5-day Christmas holiday was withdrawn and only on Christmas Day itself was some limited mixing permitted. We had already decided to cancel our usual Christmas Day lunch at our daughter Sarah's, complete with a walk, presents and *Murder in the Dark*, just on the principle of "better safe than sorry", and we found that this was the general outlook of most of our contemporaries.

Wednesday 30-December was a day of good news and bad news. The MPRA approved the Oxford University/AstraZeneca vaccine for use but almost everywhere in England, not yet in Tier 4, was moved up a tier. More than three-quarters of the country is now in Tier 4 and we in Hambleton are fortunate in only being escalated from Tier 2 to Tier 3.

As 2020, the Coronavirus year, draws to a close and, with it, the end of the Brexit transition period, it is interesting to remember 2019, the Brexit year. Only 18 months ago in June 2019, Theresa May was Prime Minister (remember her?) and everyone was fighting over Brexit. We then had the Conservative party leadership battle between Boris Johnson and Jeremy Hunt, which seemed interminable, then the parliamentary stalemate, the prorogation of parliament (remember that?), the Conservative party rebels (where are they now?), the supreme court (remember the spider brooch?) and the failure to leave the EU by 31-October-2019 as originally promised. This was followed by further parliamentary shenanigans, the general election and the final leaving of the EU on 31-January-2020. We were all settling down to a quiet life, which would include skiing and league tennis and cycling in France when we entered the Coronavirus year – it makes one wonder what is round the corner next!

(*to be continued in due course* – I have been lent a learned tome on *The Black Death* and you can expect more parallels from history in Chapter 4 of this diary! *The flagellation of the Germans*, for example, will show us how some God-fearing folk reacted very differently from God-fearing folk today!)