

The Coronavirus Plague in Alne

A Personal Diary by Robert Brech

Back to the “plague” in Alne, everything was quiet throughout October and November and we began to believe that the vaccination programme had indeed solved the problems, particularly as a third or booster jab was being rolled out.

But towards the end of November came news that a new variant had been detected in South Africa. Named Omicron, evidence seemed to be that it spread much faster than existing variants but was less severe in its effects. The government speeded up the booster vaccination programme and reintroduced some restrictions from 30-November, making masks compulsory on public transport and in shops and other indoor venues, and further complicating overseas travel. Further measures were also being trailed by cabinet ministers as a possibility (probability?) and the modellers rolled out their usual worst-case scenarios.

So another conflict broke out between those who believed that we should trust in the vaccination programme (including the booster) and carry on with life and those who believed that the NHS must be protected, regardless of anything else. The politics was made worse by evidence coming to light of Christmas parties taking place at this time last year in 10 Downing Street which would have been in breach of the then rules. It was generally thought that one of these news stories was being used as a “dead cat” strategy¹ to mask the other story but which was which was uncertain!

Covid struck home in Alne with the death on 01-December-2021 of Dennis Myers who had been a stalwart of the village since the mid-1970s. Aged just 72, he died of Covid-related pneumonia and the turnout at his funeral was indicative of the respect in which he was held.

Alison and I were able to travel south for four days prior to Christmas, stay in a Premier Inn and meet up with both daughters and all the grandchildren for walks, games, Murder in the Dark and lunches and dinners out. It was also the first time that I saw my vulnerable 81-year-old London-based sister for almost two years.

Christmas 2021 came and went with no further restrictions but Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland all introduced more stringent measures immediately afterwards. England remained the least restrictive of all four home nations.

The Omicron variant did seem to be spreading faster and those who tested positive were obliged to go into isolation. Some of the restaurants and bars were seeing extensive cancellations as people protected themselves from this possibility and focused on saving their Christmas Day. But hospitalisations and deaths did not increase as a result of the increase in infections and this gave credence to the belief that Omicron was less severe in its effects.

As we came through January-2022, it was clear that the additional restrictions imposed in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland were not making any material difference to the health effects of the pandemic and that England’s approach had been more temperate and much

1 The dead cat strategy is the introduction of a dramatic, shocking, or sensationalist topic to divert discourse away from a more damaging topic.

Chapter 7 (Sept-2021 to 23-March-2022)

more economically beneficial. But the stories of lockdown parties in 10 Downing Street were getting more widespread and diverting attention from the real economic, foreign policy and energy-supply issues facing the country.

As we moved through February 2022, there was a sea change in how the pandemic was being treated in England, with the emphasis on living with the disease rather than trying to eradicate it. From 27-January, it was generally no longer required to wear a face mask and it was no longer required to show a Covid Pass at venues and events. From 11-February no Covid test was required on arrival in England if one was fully vaccinated. And, from 24-February, all remaining restrictions and requirements in England were removed with the exception of inbound travel requirements which themselves were ended on 18-March.

The First Ministers of Scotland and Wales and the Mayor of London continued to exert more control on their own populations (as they were legally entitled to do) but this did give rise to some anomalies. *Rail Magazine* in February reported that, if travelling from Reading to London Paddington, you could take an Elizabeth-Line service from Platform 13 and be required to wear a mask (under TfL regulations) or a GWR service from the adjacent Platform 14 and remain maskless. Two different services on the same route with different rules. No wonder people were confused!

I travelled from York to Birmingham and back by train on 14-February and would estimate that 75% of passengers on the trains and the platforms were not wearing masks. We went down south a bit later in the month for a few days and I did a more formal count on the passenger footbridge at Clapham Junction which backed up my initial observations. Much the same could be observed in supermarkets and other venues generally. In the Premier Inn, they were taking down precautionary and one way signs – although those which had been on the floor for nearly two years were taking some eradicating!

And the family skiing party (twenty-one of us this year) was booked for April, third time lucky we hope after the cancellations of 2020 and 2021. Rules and regulations are easing day by day but depend both on the outbound carrier rules and the inbound destination rules (Italy). As at mid-March, fully-vaccinated travellers need their NHS Covid pass but do not need a pre-flight Covid test although a “passenger locator form” is still mandatory. Ryanair (for the northern party) are requiring face masks on the flight while easyJet (for the southern group) are not.

Many folk in Alne have been taking holidays abroad in the last few weeks. But I thought that we were really back to normal when, on trying to contact a lady in the village on Alne Street Fayre business, I was told: “*Sorry, but she is away at a hen party in Las Vegas*”!

The End (we hope!)

Earlier chapters can be found by going to <https://www.alnevillage.co.uk/alne-annals.html> and scrolling down to the entry for 10-Oct-2021.

An overall pandemic timeline can be found in the appendix (attached)

Chapter 7 (Sept-2021 to 23-March-2022)

Appendix : Pandemic Timeline

12-Dec-2019	Setting the scene. General election, new government
31-Jan-2020	Setting the scene. The UK left the EU
05-Mar-2020	First UK death from Coronavirus
11-Mar-2020	World Health Organisation officially declares a pandemic
16-Mar-2020	Formation of the Alne Coronavirus Support Group
23-Mar-2020	Start of the first lockdown. Lockdown 1
06-Apr-2020	Boris Johnson into intensive care
16-Apr-2020	Further 3-week period of lockdown announced
08-May-2020	75 th anniversary of VE Day. Impromptu socially-distanced tea parties
05-Jun-2020	Some restrictions eased. Some primary schools re-open. Rainbow hearts
24-Jul-2020	Masks are compulsory in all shops
15-Aug-2020	A-Level results chaos
05-Nov-2020	New 4-week lockdown takes effect. Lockdown 2.
09-Nov-2020	Announcement of successful Pfizer vaccine
23-Nov-2020	Announcement of successful Oxford University/AstraZeneca vaccine
02-Dec-2020	End of lockdown but tiered system took its place.
08-Dec-2020	World's first post-trials vaccination took place in the UK
04-Jan-2021	New lockdown. Lockdown 3
07-Jan-2021	First vaccination of an Alne resident
15-Feb-2021	15 million UK vaccinations completed
08-Mar-2021	Step 1A relaxation of Lockdown 3, step 1B on 29-March.
12-Apr-2021	Step 2 relaxation of Lockdown 3
17-May-2021	Step 3 relaxation of Lockdown 3 but worries about the "Indian" variant. Alne resumed a normal tennis season.
July-2021	Crowds allowed for the finals of Euro 2020 and Wimbledon but hundreds of thousands of children away from school self-isolating while more than half-a-million workers were self –isolating away from work. Health Secretary Matt Hancock caught <i>in flagrante delicto</i> .
19-July-2021	Step 4 relaxation of Lockdown 3.
19-Sep-2021	Alne Village Hall held their first public event for 18 months.
30-Nov-2021	Some restrictions re-imposed, following the discovery of a new variant, Omicron. But no increase in hospitalisations or deaths.
24-Feb-2022	All remaining restrictions removed in England. Inbound travel restrictions removed from 18-March.