Editorial

To mark a year which none of us will forget, this special edition of Christ Church Matters draws together reflections on the Covid-19 pandemic from across the Christ Church community. It explores its impact in a variety of disciplines – around the UK and abroad – and considers how life has changed both for those living, working, studying and researching in the House over the last year, and alumni members across the globe. We, as a community, can feel proud of the ground-breaking global contribution that researchers at the University of Oxford have made in response to this crisis.

We are grateful to our contributors for sharing their expertise, reflections, and personal experiences. We have only been able to include a selection of contributions here, although every submission will be archived, or, alternatively, may be used in the regular e-Matters newsletters. CCM is not intended as a record of news, but brings an eclectic mix of experiences and thoughts. The Annual Report, of course, is the House’s chronicle.

As Members will appreciate, the last twelve months have been particularly challenging for those pursuing their studies at the House. The Covid-19 Student Support Fund offers alumni the opportunity to support current Members who are faced with unforeseen costs because of the pandemic. It also helps to finance those changes required to make College buildings ‘Covid-19 secure’. We are hugely appreciative to those who have already contributed towards this Fund – and we would be delighted to hear from anyone who feels able to offer their support.

Valediction

I think Dante was my age when he said from the crossroads of his desk that he found himself in a dark wood – you might call it Dantesque: his wood was common or garden bosk and the shadows were – the kind of shadows that clot between branches at dusk where things hide.

I was fitter than Dante when, out for a run, I stopped by a badger who lay on the road with her lower jaw mangled: her tongue and her mouth were a mess. She was dead and her sleek humbug head had collapsed, as it would, on the impact of steel. She’d been scuffling home, taking food – her teeth were small.

Days drop from the calendar, and the press doesn’t roar as it churns out the news any more. It just hums, and we tune in, more or less immune to the shocks: twenty four schoolkids on some shore at a jamboree, swept off by a breaker – lives and hearts and GDP hit the floor, still we wait for the bright coin that’s owed us, the glint of an end to this, to all this – to the florist’s wreaths that say Paula, Joey, Nana, Charlie, Ben, the candles, the chorister’s cheekbones and Ave Maria. If I could start again I would begin by saying adieu every day to everyone I love – then I would be less afraid to lose you.
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CCM online...

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If you are interested in supporting this initiative, please contact: development.office@chch.ox.ac.uk

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Christ Church Matters 45
It seems astonishing that it is a year since we were first following the news of the passage of coronavirus from China and other countries of the Far East into India and Europe. In the modern era, we don’t expect to see disease rage across wealthy western nations, but it has happened frequently throughout history up to the present day.

We all remember learning about the really big outbreaks of bubonic and pneumonic plagues in 1348 and 1349 (the Black Death) and in 1665 but, in reality, there was rarely a time when some sort of disease – including influenza, typhoid, and malaria – wasn’t raging across the country and particularly in the cities. Medieval and later monarchs would leave London when things were especially bad, taking refuge in country houses.

The Black Death came to Oxford in November 1348, five months after it had arrived on our shores at Weymouth. It is probably no coincidence that a guild of barber-surgeons was incorporated in Oxford that year and maintained a light in
the Lady Chapel. Oxford suffered particularly in the early months of 1349 but St Frideswide’s priory, and the other monastic institutions, fared better than most. The residents were better-fed and so healthier and, of course, could easily shut themselves off from the town. Even today, that ability to be able to retreat behind the gates and operate almost as a closed community has stood us in good stead.

One dangerous ‘plague’ that spread almost exclusively within the United Kingdom was the much-feared ‘sweating sickness’ which spread around the country – apparently affecting young wealthy gentlemen in rural surroundings more than anyone. It first appeared in 1485 and disappeared in 1551 but not before it had caused huge numbers of deaths. Thomas Cromwell, who had ‘project-managed’ the building of Cardinal College, lost his family to the illness in 1529. Anne Boleyn and Cardinal Wolsey were two of the lucky ones who came through the other side – or perhaps they weren’t… There is still no certainty over the nature of the disease although it is thought to be a variant of hantavirus contracted through contact with the bodily fluids of rodents.

With all these ghastly diseases doing the rounds, it is hardly surprising that, very soon after its foundation, the Dean and Chapter of Christ Church purchased its property in Wallingford specifically to be a place of refuge, at least for the senior members, during times of infection in Oxford. Far enough away to be safe but close enough for business to continue as usual. It was quite a substantial property, and had gardens and orchards to keep the residence supplied with fresh fruit and vegetables. Some members of Christ Church were resident there for half of 1564 and again in 1577. Undergraduates were generally left to their own devices in Oxford or went home. At least one tutor went with his charges; John Buste accompanied Robert Sackville and Edward Montague to Montague’s home in Boughton so that their education could continue unbroken.

In 1665, however, when the Great Plague took hold, Oxford was seen as a far better and healthier place to be than London so Charles II, his Court, Parliament, and the judiciary came here having decided that Hampton Court was not sufficiently distant. Charles was resident in the Deanery from September 1665 until February 1666 with the Duke of York established in the brand new lodgings on the north side of the Great Quadrangle. Once again, students stayed at home, some no doubt continuing their reading, while others enjoyed the forced absence. It was a Christ Church man, Nathaniel Hodges, a medical adviser in the City of London during the outbreak, who recommended the isolation of the sick and of those who had been in contact with them, and cleanliness. He also suggested the consumption of sack – or sherry – to draw out infection!

Another disease hit Oxford in the mid-nineteenth century – cholera. In July 1832 after forty people had lost their lives, there was a tremendous hue-and-cry over the disgusting stream which emptied itself into the Thames at Folly Bridge. This was, of course, the Trill Mill Stream, which ran round two sides of the worst-affected areas – the parishes of St Ebbe and St Aldates – before making its way down the west side of the Meadow to the river. Christ Church did its best to make things better by releasing flashes of water through the sluices to cleanse the muck away. But we also built the wall alongside the stream to hide it from the view of anyone using the Meadow! Conveniently, the outbreak occurred at the beginning of the Long Vac and had died down before the students were due back in October. In 1849, the same thing happened again and then once more in 1854 when the University decided to delay the return of the students by a week. One of the men who worked hard to eliminate cholera from the city was Dr Henry Acland, a Christ Church man who was appointed to the Lee’s Readership in Anatomy in 1845. It was he who identified that the root cause of the cholera in the city was inadequate drainage and the quantity of raw sewage which poured into the Thames and the Cherwell. He instituted better medical care during the crisis as well as campaigning furiously for the improvement of water supply and sanitation. Acland was behind an immense overhaul of the water and sewage system at Christ Church, a topic which fills pages of the archive.

Then there was influenza. The start of Hilary Term 1892 was delayed because it was too dangerous for the students to return and then there was the outbreak which struck worldwide in 1918. A third of the world’s population was infected with a death toll of between 20 and 50 million. A quarter of a million died in the UK. The Armistice Day celebrations in the cathedral had to be postponed as the choir and organist were all down with the illness. Members who had served in the armed forces, and as medical personnel, during the 1st World War died from flu rather than from injuries. As recently as 1970, influenza laid the nation low again, with an R number of about 1.8 but once again it struck just as the winter vacation began.

And so to the current pandemic – the effects of which are explored in this edition of Christ Church Matters from the perspective of Members spread around the globe, as well as those based at the House.
The Christ Church Community
The view from Tom 8: censorial perspectives on the pandemic

Professor Geraldine Johnson, Senior Censor, Student and Tutor in History of Art

At the start of every meeting of Governing Body, Members are reminded that the charitable “Objects of The House” include “religion, education and learning.” While our colleagues in the Cathedral focus on the first of these, the latter two are the responsibility of the Senior and Junior Censor through what the Statutes call the “provision, support, conduct and maintenance of Christ Church as a College” and “the promotion of research in any branch of learning.” Under normal circumstances, carrying out the business of teaching our more than 700 undergraduates and postgraduates, supporting our nearly 170 teaching and research staff, and looking after our many dedicated administrative and other support staff is a challenge. Doing so during a pandemic…well, that is uncharted territory! Or to use a rather different analogy, while all this requires the agility of a Fred Astaire even in normal times, in a pandemic, it feels more like being Ginger Rogers, who did everything Fred did, just backwards and in high heels.
“Dirk and I have worked on a wide range of projects intended to enrich our students’ lives and ensure that our academic colleagues can concentrate on their teaching, supervision, and research.”

Ever since the first lockdown began at the very end of Hilary Term 2020, the Junior Censor (Professor Dirk Aarts, Student and Tutor in Chemistry) and I have been trying to learn a whole new set of steps to a tune that has never been heard before. When we each agreed to take on the Censorship – which consists first of two years as Junior Censor focusing on student welfare and (occasionally) discipline, and then two further years as Senior Censor with responsibility for the academic mission of The House – we could never have guessed that we would be discussing lateral flow tests, socially-distanced tutorials, and just how long virus particles can survive on a copy of Thucydides in the West Library.

Before and then during the pandemic, Dirk and I have worked on a wide range of projects intended to enrich our students’ lives and ensure that our academic colleagues can concentrate on their teaching, supervision, and research. Setting up Christ Church’s first Equality and Diversity Committee; formalising the Welfare Committee; supporting new research and teaching initiatives in Computer Science, Sustainability, and African studies; helping our students revive Arts Week; hiring Christ Church’s first in-house mental health counsellor; commissioning portraits that better reflect Christ Church’s diversity; supporting new access initiatives such as Aim for Oxford in the North East and Target Oxbridge; and working closely with our students and alumni to fund new scholarships for undergraduates from low-income countries and for Black, Asian and ethnic minority postgraduates in Law – these are just some of the initiatives that we imagined and then implemented. What we couldn’t have imagined was that we would also be ordering Perspex screens, disposable face masks, and gallons of anti-viral hand gel for the Academic Office in Tom 8, while at the same time helping students navigate the technical and administrative mysteries of tutorials, classes, Collections (both kinds!), and even final exams all held online.

Luckily, we’re fast learners, whether it’s the quick-step when trying to avoid coming into too close contact with a student or colleague during a stroll around Mercury, the jitterbug when worrying about how lockdown is affecting our most vulnerable students and staff with caring responsibilities, or the tango when trying to slice through the thicket of guidance emerging from yet another Covid-19 update from the University. The pandemic playlist may not yet have come to an end, but, like Fred and Ginger, we remain ready to put on our dancing shoes at a moment’s notice.
Covid-19 put paid to most activities planned for 2020 including the Easter and summer conferences, the College Ball, Gaudies and other alumni events, Alice Teas and the Chef’s Table. Students were unable to return in Trinity Term and many staff were furloughed. Although we managed some private college tours in August and early September, our visitor numbers were insignificant – an *annus horribilis* all round!

We prepared for a return to some normality in Michaelmas Term, with endless risk-assessments and protocols to ensure that the college was Covid-secure. Soon to be seen were floor markings, posters, screens, miles of tenser barriers, disposable aprons, gloves, masks, visors and thermometers. The custodians and lodge staff oversaw the phased return of Junior Members, and so term began with a full House.

My main preoccupation during Michaelmas, apart from the usual committees and operational woes common to all domestic bursars, was an Infection Control Spreadsheet which I devised over the summer, based on government and university advice on the formation of so-called student household bubbles. The spreadsheet allowed the monitoring of both student-isolation periods and Covid-related sickness for those in residence, and quarantine periods for those returning from abroad. One weekend was particularly worrisome with 91 junior members held in isolation. Of these, 19 caught the virus. We fared better than some colleges, but it was an exhausting, tense and anxious time.

The staff were, and remain, outstanding: throughout Michaelmas Term they continued to produce and serve...
meals in Hall, albeit with social distancing, mask-wearing, temperature-checking and sanitisation at both entrance and exit. They provided no fewer than six dinner-sittings, seven days a week, to accommodate socially distanced dining, as well as ‘grab and go’ breakfasts and lunches every weekday, and brunch on the weekend. In addition, they produced and delivered three meals a day to students who were in isolation or quarantine.

Despite challenging circumstances, and all with social distancing, Members were able to enjoy the College’s Diwali dinner, and ‘Oxmas’, with mulled wine, mince pies and music around the Peck Christmas Tree to accompany the switching on of the Christmas lights. The College Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners also went ahead, with the catering team rising to the challenge with a smile and a ‘can do’ attitude day-in and day-out.

“In a similar vein, our hard-working housekeeping team have been adapting to new cleaning regimes which are de rigueur during the pandemic. Seeing images of staff in PPE, you may be forgiven for thinking this was a hospital or even a department of virology. But no: it’s the new housekeeping protocols in action at Christ Church.”

The only department on site, that continued almost without change, was the Porters Lodge. Whilst the atmosphere in the College was subdued, especially during the full lockdowns, the workload was not. Covid-19 and the need for increased cleanliness added to the time taken for many of their tasks.
The Porters took on many new tasks from other departments, as did the Custodians. The biggest one of these was the packing up of hastily vacated student rooms from March 2020. How do they ever fit everything in their rooms?! Some were stored elsewhere, others were sent via couriers to where the students were staying. The sheer volume of this work meant that the Custodians were called to the rescue and the Bowler Hat Brigade could remove those hats, role up those sleeves and become professional ‘parcel packers’, which was greatly appreciated.

One visitor did remain throughout, though, our (almost) resident Heron. Regular security patrols were run in an attempt to prevent it getting any of the carp. However, it’s capture rate increased so we purchased a very bird-like plastic replica heron on eBay; £14.00 well spent or so we thought. In the first instance our pond predator was VERY sceptical, but over time realised the purchase was indeed a spoof and dare I say it, at times it looked as though they had become ‘bosom buddies’…Therefore it was back to plan A, and a brief sprint over Tom to the pond for the porters!

Some of the students, and notably some of the Clergy, clearly used the time to develop their baking skills and therefore on the odd occasion the porters were treated to homemade brownies, muffins, cookies or even a pumpkin pie!

We have continued to try and keep some of our commercial activities afloat during this difficult time: having taken online orders, the Buttery staff made up, sold and delivered cases of wines and spirits to Senior Members and to alumni residing in Oxfordshire, and the Shop Manager (Elena Conway) inaugurated our first online shop: https://christ-church-university-shop.myshopify.com.

Now, in Hilary Term, things are different again. We began term in a full lockdown and we have very few students in residence – 75 undergraduates and the same number of graduates – and, although we continue to provide lunch and dinner, all meals have reverted to ‘grab and go’ due to the ever-greater threat from mutant strains of the virus. The temporary Buttery bar set up in a marquee in Michaelmas Term in the Masters’ garden is sadly firmly shut. But, Life goes on: our housekeeping staff clean and disinfect; our Lodge staff continue to undertake fire-call-point checks and fire-drills along with their other duties; the custodial staff maintain security, and administrative staff who are not on furlough continue to deal with purchase ledgers, battels and payroll.

Notwithstanding all of this activity, the college feels eerily quiet. Mercifully, we currently have no sick students or staff, and the international students who started Hilary Term in quarantine are now free to amalgamate with their designated household. One must not, however, tempt fate: we remain ever-vigilant and continue to monitor infections and lateral flow test results.

The porters tell me that they feel that it would be good to have some more life back in Christ Church, and can’t wait for the return of the student BOP! And, when normal life eventually returns, we look forward to welcoming alumni back to the House too!
Starting my full second year as Clerk of Works at Christ Church in January 2020, I felt as though I was settling into the role and grasping how this wonderful establishment worked – with its vibrant atmosphere bringing new and exciting challenges every day. Little did I know how the escalating stories of a virus – Covid-19 – spreading around the world and breaching our shores could potentially bring everything to a dramatic halt. During the months of February and March, much of my time was consumed with formulating plans for the well-being of this glorious establishment. I planned work for the summer months that would keep us all busy.

Then came the announcement by the Prime Minister, on 23 March 2020. The ‘Stay home – Protect the NHS – Save Lives’ slogan came to reality and dramatically changed life and times at Christ Church. In the following days, as the majority of Christ Church staff started to work from home, or were placed on furlough, a skeleton team were left to tend to Christ Church. I remained at Christ Church, fulltime, in my capacity as Clerk of Works to ensure that essential everyday building and maintenance matters were attended to. I also dealt with issues reported by our tenants within the grounds as well as others in other Christ Church-owned properties offsite. Our lively and vibrant surroundings soon became very quiet – at times deserted. I was joined by one of the team, Mr Andy Maisey, along with a few trusted contractors.

Our teams pulled together to complete large tasks that would otherwise not have been possible with students in residence. We soon adapted to these extraordinary circumstances, developing a revised and more extensive program of

Life within the walls of Christ Church during the national lockdown

Steve Brown, Clerk of Works

Far left: Newly refurbished tables in Hall.
Left: Tom Tower illuminated in blue in tribute to all frontline NHS workers.
Photos by Steve Brown
maintenance to ensure the upkeep of the establishment. I even turned my hand to a spot of grass cutting – an enjoyable, albeit challenging, task to get the lines straight as the gardeners do! There were some highlights: illuminating Tom Tower in blue every Thursday evening in appreciation of the key workers, and cutting ‘NHS’ into a segment of Tom Quad lawns. Grass cutting took a large portion of the day in the warm summer months. Not long before the teams were furloughed, the gardeners had fertilised and fed the lawns – so with the warmth and a few showers the grass only had one way to go: and that was up to the sky! The mowers were out in force – Andy and I would go for days without seeing each other while trying to keep on top of the rapidly growing grass!

We were also visited by a few unexpected feathered friends who become accustomed to the delights of Tom pond! On the warmest of days, you could walk straight up to our new Member and have a chat at the side of the pond while our friend would be looking for dinner. In the evenings, with the quiet Meadows around, it was enjoyable to be able to exercise without too many people in the grounds: the gates were closed early to help with the lockdown rules. It was time for the few staff left at Christ Church to do something different. They too enjoyed the grounds on most evenings – running or walking around.

Having recently taken up golf, I was disappointed when all golf clubs were closed; however there was a light at the end of the tunnel as the sports field became my local driving range in the evening (with the added benefit that no one could witness my terrible efforts to hit the ball in a straight line!). Golf indeed was a welcome entertainment during a lonely evening if I stayed over at Christ Church during the week. The lockdown months passed quickly and, as permitted and required, my team slowly returned to work. Who would have guessed that I would find myself in a similar position at the start of 2021? Let us hope we do not have a similar year ahead. ☹️
In my first few months at Christ Church I have been privileged to be part of the internment of two sets of ashes in our Cathedral garth, that peaceful area of garden just outside the south transept. Every time I walk past the marker stones I think of the people commemorated, their families and friends who I met and the contribution they made to the life of the House. On the bookshelves behind my desk sits a folder (kindly lent me by our archivist Judith Curthoys) cataloguing the memorials inside the cathedral and cloister. The entries, one for each memorial, are carefully numbered and end at three hundred and fifty five, with a few additional sheets for stragglers.

I am fascinated by this congregation of the departed who inhabit these walls and who represent just a fragment of the great ‘cloud of witnesses’ who have studied, worked and prayed here over the centuries. Not wanting them to be strangers, I have taken to researching one of these memorials on most days when I am in the Cathedral. Sometimes there is much online, or in the Dictionary of National Biography (DNB), and on other occasions there is very little. With the memorials to infants, there might be only the initials and it takes some effort – perhaps even a visit to Judith – to work out whose children they were. Baptismal registers are less helpful than I had expected: as many mothers returned to their own homes for the birth and baptisms subsequently took place in their familial home church.

Occasionally there is an obvious tragedy. A young person who drowned in the river, or the heroism that is signified in war memorials. For the more recent of these, there may be newspaper reports or family members still living. In this strangest of years when for much of the year (and as I write) public worship has ceased in the Cathedral, this unseen congregation can seem very important: somehow as present as those who are watching our live-streamed services online.

Naturally, I take particular interest in my predecessors as canons of Christ Church, including the occasional Sub Dean. During one period of lockdown, I celebrated the Eucharist every day in the Lady Chapel. Very close to that altar is the memorial slab for Jasper Mayne. I quickly developed a fondness for Jasper. The DNB has a particularly rich level of detail on his life, despite not being politically prominent or especially famous for his poetry or plays. Born in Devon, in 1604, Mayne died in 1672 – so his life can easily be said to have straddled ‘interesting times’.

A playwright and poet, Mayne followed the traditional route to Christ Church from Westminster. However, Mayne gave up writing poetry and plays when he was ordained, which seems a shame. I haven’t read Mayne’s plays, but hope to do so. Some of his poetry is available online. His poem *Time* is startlingly good and reveals Mayne to be a character of some depth:

**In praise of Jasper Mayne**

The Revd Canon Richard Peers, Sub Dean

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**TRYING TIMES**

**WK 2**

**DEAR DIARY**

*Have been making huge progress in my spiritual life. Thanks to the lockdown*

**HAVE DOWNLOADED**

*The entire Old Testament*

**HAVE WATCHED**

*The whole of the Sunday service on-line*

**... AND HAVE MASTERED THE ART OF MEDITATION!**

Jim Godfrey
We are fortunate to have much to remember about Mayne. This glimpse into his life is also, of course, a reminder that every memorial in Christ Church contains stories, and that we are surrounded by multitudes.

I hope that you will join us online for our live-streamed services as long as this is necessary. Most of all, we look forward to welcoming the living back to fill these walls with praise.

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**Time**

TIME is the feather’d thing,
And, whilst I praise
The sparklings of thy looks and call them rays,
Takes wing,
Leaving behind him as he flies
An unperceived dimness in thine eyes.
His minutes, whilst they’re told,
Do make us old;
And every sand of his fleet glass,
Increasing age as it doth pass,
Insensibly sows wrinkles there
Where flowers and roses do appear.
Whilst we do speak, our fire
Doth into ice expire,
Flames turn to frost;
And ere we can
Know how our crow turns swan,
Or how a silver snow
Springs there where jet did grow,
Our fading spring is in dull winter lost.
Since then the Night hath hurl’d
Darkness, Love’s shade,
Over its enemy the Day, and made
The world
Just such a blind and shapeless thing
As ’twas before light did from darkness spring,
Let us employ its treasure
And make shade pleasure:
Let’s number out the hours by blisses,
And count the minutes by our kisses;
Let the heavens new motions feel
And by our embraces wheel;
And whilst we try the way
By which Love doth convey
Soul unto soul,
And mingling so
Makes them such raptures know
As makes them entranced lie
In mutual ecstasy,
Let the harmonious spheres in music roll!
Music has been an integral part of life at Christ Church since the establishment of the collegiate foundation nearly 500 years ago, which included provision for an organist, lay clerks, and choristers. Today, the Cathedral is home to four choirs that, between them, sing for services on an almost daily basis throughout the year. They also pursue a busy schedule of concerts, broadcasts, recordings, and tours. This choral activity was brought to an abrupt halt in March last year, when the country entered lockdown, and public worship was suspended. As Holy Week and Easter approached, the choir stalls were empty and silent, and music for online services was restricted to what could be recorded by musicians within their homes.

By the start of Trinity Term, we had several challenges to overcome: we had to work out how to incorporate choral music into online worship; how we could continue the musical education of our boy and girl choristers; and how we would preserve a sense of community for our musicians.

Thanks to the combined efforts of the staff of all of our choirs, the organists, the singers, the Cathedral School staff, and chorister parents, we were able to devise and provide an extensive online programme for our choristers during the first lockdown, which has been reinstated at the time of writing, as schools are closed for a second time.

The boy choristers receive a daily vocal warm-up before online school begins, which is extended into a longer rehearsal on two days each week. We are currently looking at movements from Bach’s *St John Passion*, and Handel’s *Messiah*. Each child also receives individual tuition several times a week through sessions taught by our organists and lay clerks.

Frideswide Voices is the Cathedral’s girls’ choir and the Cathedral’s newest choir. During lockdown they receive weekly one-to-one singing and theory lessons, weekly rehearsals in small groups, as well as a rehearsal each week with all 27 choristers and probationers. The girls also join the boys, along with choristers from Pembroke and Worcester Colleges, for our morning warm-up on Mondays and Fridays.

Although online rehearsals are not without their problems, particularly when it comes to video latency, they provide an invaluable opportunity for the children to continue their musical development, and to replicate aspects of the usual daily routine, providing a sense of normality and community.

The Cathedral Singers is the Cathedral’s mixed voice voluntary adult choir, and they usually sing services outside of term or when the Cathedral Choir is away. If you have listened to any of the Cathedral’s online services, you have very likely heard them singing the hymns. Some of these are from prior recordings, but some are newly-recorded, distance-sung hymns, with individual singers’ recordings mixed together to form a virtual choir piece. The Singers are also working on a new project which will involve commissioning new music from a wide range of composers to augment the choir’s repertoire.

The College Choir, made up of students and other volunteers, has been singing the service of Compline (Night Prayer) during the past term, and has also undertaken various remote recordings. They joined with the Cathedral Choir at our December Advent Carol Service.

In the initial period of lockdown, the Cathedral Choir and organists recorded a significant number of items for inclusion...
in online services, including weekly keyboard music, plainsong mass settings and a plainsong St John Passion, as well as various other vocal items. We also produced a remotely-recorded virtual Evensong featuring new music by Piers Connor Kennedy to mark the end of term.

In September 2020, our choirs were able to return to singing in the Cathedral after government guidance changed to allow a return to choral worship. Significant Covid-19 mitigations were put into place for the safety of the singers and congregations. These include social distancing for all musicians who are not in a ‘bubble’, use of Perspex screens to prevent aerosol transmission, the use of ventilation and a fogging machine in the Cathedral to promote air flow, as well as protocols for the handling of music, arrival and departure, and the storing of robes.

We are very fortunate that, through the generosity of the Friends of the Cathedral, we have been able to install high-quality equipment to allow live-streaming of services and other events. These broadcasts are available on our YouTube channel. Guidance on singing continues to change, and we are currently singing services with solo singers and an organist, as well as providing other services with keyboard music.

These have been challenging times, and there are, no doubt, further obstacles to overcome. But I am heartened by the resilience and flexibility of our musicians, who have striven tirelessly to continue our performance output, and our ongoing commitment to education.
It should all have been so different. The hashtag for 2020, trending even before the new decade had begun, was to have been #Beethoven250. Musicians the world over were gearing up for a year-long celebration of the 250th anniversary of the birth of a German composer by the name of Ludwig van Beethoven, with performances of works planned to culminate in December around the date of his birthday (thought to be the 16th, but no-one is entirely sure). Things got off to a flying start, including student performances in Oxford, but then the coronavirus took over, concert halls were shut, music-making – professional and amateur – was prohibited, and Beethoven’s hashtag rapidly disappeared from our Twitter feeds. The pandemic is a tragedy for performing artists. While some ingenious online concert activity continues, for the most part musicians are starved of work and income, and now with the double whammy of Brexit (with no deal agreed on artistic passports for musicians touring EU countries) the future looks pretty grim for so many. It’s not just Beethoven’s voice that’s been silenced.

Above: The Cathedral Choir. © Hugh Warwick
For Christ Church’s Music students, things were pretty tough too. Like all undergraduates, they quickly had to adapt (as did their teachers) to an entirely online life from March until October: tutorials and lectures on Teams and Zoom; reading lists of e-only materials; exams taken at home; often poor working spaces and internet connections alongside conflicting domestic pressures; illness and bereavement to bear; overwhelming feelings of isolation and anxiety. Graduate students, too, fought to adapt their projects when primary source material and fieldwork data became inaccessible; many had to return to their home countries across Europe, Asia and America where there was not the same access to research support. This was not the ‘Oxford experience’ they had signed up for. But they rose to the challenge and made the most of the as-near-normal educational experience as it was possible to organise.

But for so many Music students by far the greatest loss has been the impossibility of making music together – even performance examinations had to be cancelled or moved online. For a while everyone had a go at multi-screen Zoom spectacles, and some lovely results emerged, not least from our fabulous Cathedral Choir. The enterprising President of the College Music Society set up a YouTube channel to give college musicians a platform. But playing or singing your part in your bedroom to a click track on a set of headphones is hardly the nuanced musical/social experience that inspires and drives musicians forward. People quickly tired of it. With the welcome return of students to college in Michaelmas Term, the Music Society started to mount live concerts, before they were halted once again. The Cathedral Choir valiantly continued to sing in situ, streaming their beautiful sounds to us all for Advent and Christmas. But now (January 2021) we’re in full lockdown again, students will not return to Oxford, and music-making is back to Square Zero. The vaccine gives us hope, but it will take time. Once it’s possible to get together again, then we’ll do all we can to support the re-emergence of a vibrant student musical culture. This period of enforced reflection is also an opportunity to think about how we do things better in the future, with greater ambition, for a wider community.

And what of Beethoven? Well, I suspect he’ll fare just fine, even if deprived of his hashtag! What he did do was to serve as the focus of a timely and lively set of tutorials I ran with my Second Years, where we thought through contested questions of greatness, genius, the canon, late style, the work concept, and so on.
A few days ago, a tutorial fellow from another college, who has been on research leave since March 2020, told me he was about to try our Microsoft Teams for the first time. I confess to doing a double-take: hard to believe that anyone working at the University is still unfamiliar with Teams, when most of us have spent dozens, if not hundreds, of hours in Trinity and Michaelmas in online tutorials (with some face to face teaching in Michaelmas Term), in classes, in committee and other meetings and most recently in admissions interviews. Much happened very quickly from the beginning of the Easter vacation 2020: in my Faculty, the transition from one virtual learning environment to another, which was already in process but initially scheduled to take about 18 months, had to be largely completed in the space of those few weeks.

Those weeks were used by individual tutors to make reading lists accessible to those learning at home, while Christ Church library did exceptional work sending hard copies to students in their homes and the administration team tried to provide equipment to help those in difficult circumstances to engage more effectively with remote learning. Updating reading lists is always an ongoing process, but usually only requires the addition of recent, important contributions on subjects we are teaching. This was a different sort of task and continued to intensify through the course of Trinity Term, as new e-accessions were made at speed by university libraries and the emergency Hathi Trust library was made available, disappeared in October and was restored in the new lockdown in Hilary. Just as we have all incorporated ‘social distancing’, ‘furlough’, and other terms into our vocabularies, so even the more technophobic among tutors are now familiar with recording lectures on panopto, screen-sharing, incorporating ‘chat’ in classes and tutorials, as well as avoiding the semi-shaming phrases ‘legacy hand’ and ‘you’re muted’ in meetings. Others have been able to embrace the opportunities offered by the imposed situation more fully, providing voiced feedback to tutorial essays, increasing their provision of online reading lists (with links embedded), or setting different forms of assignment.

Examiners’ meetings to discuss mitigating circumstances in my Faculty lasted whole days. We have no doubt all found elements connected to the world of remote teaching that we shall continue to incorporate when we are able gratefully to return to something closer to normality, including the resumption of face to face tutorials and classes and in-person exams. But we shall not miss Teams-induced headaches or having to ask students to spend hours reading online.

The shift in forms of assessment to the hitherto almost unimaginable world of online exams had to be made equally rapidly, and was easier in some subjects (notably those with larger components of assessed coursework) than others. Exam papers were reset or reshaped, circulars were rewritten to respond to university definitions of ‘open book’, and although students were of course frustrated by waiting for details, Chairs of Examiners in fact did heroic work. They fielded hundreds of e-mails per week as they sought to build a system which, in the very imperfect world in which we all found ourselves, would allow all students to do themselves some kind of justice and have a degree result to take into the next stage of their lives. More hours of reading scripts online followed: easier than deciphering some candidates’ handwriting but again impossible to escape the screen.

On the joy of Teams

Dr Anna Clark, Student and Tutor in Roman History
The Art Room in lockdown

Peter Rhoades, Fine Art Tutor

Along with everyone else the Art Room has been subject to spells of both complete and semi lockdown. In semi lockdown the room has radically changed character to become primarily a studio space for use by the Ruskin School BFA and postgraduate students at Christ Church. This has been in response to the complete closure of working spaces at the Ruskin. I believe that, in this respect, our Fine Art students are particularly privileged in being members of the only college at Oxford with such emergency provision. To some degree the room has continued to serve some occasional participants making drawings, paintings and prints. The change of function was proposed by Dr Sarah Simblet who was very helpful with the logistics of the adjustments necessary. She also uses the room for tutorial supervision. During controlled access I have been attending regularly to monitor activity and give advice. Because the presence of cleaners has been prohibited, gardener David Weller and I have been undertaking quite a lot of cleaning. David has been invaluable as an informal caretaker, reporting problems to me.

Throughout the crisis I have managed to communicate with those interested in the Art Room mostly by email. It goes without saying that I and many others have sorely missed the habitual existence of the room which involves group activity such as the life drawing class, printmaking and special group projects as well as very varied individual studio work by many. All of which takes place in a lively and warm social ethos shared by Christ Church students and staff, students from other colleges and some from outside the university. This is all missed very acutely!

Below: The Art Room ceiling, which dates from the early seventeenth century during the refurbishment of the library by Otho Nicholson.
Introduction
The purpose of this article is to describe the effect of the pandemic on Christ Church’s finances in 2019/20 and 2020/21, as far as we can currently see.

Background to the House’s income and expenditure account
As shown below, Christ Church has a diversified income base, but relies on the endowment for about half its income. Over the last couple of decades the present Steward and her predecessor have successfully developed income streams away from academic fees and room rents. In the financial year to July 2019, gross income from Visitors amounted to £3.1m or 10% of total income. In addition, Christ Church is one of the top five conference colleges by revenue, generating £2.2m or 7% of total income in 2018/19.

Effect of Covid-19 in 2019/20
The pandemic has had a very significant impact on both these hospitality related revenue streams. The curtilage was closed to Visitors from 14 March 2020 and, despite a few bespoke guided tours in the summer, that revenue has essentially evaporated. Similarly, there were no conferences in the Easter or Long Vacations in 2020. There have also been reductions in the House’s rental income from students. All undergraduate and postgraduate teaching in Trinity Term 2020 was online resulting in far fewer students in residence.

The bottom line
The effect on Christ Church’s income in 2019/20 was significant. Room rents fell by £0.7m compared to the previous year, catering income was reduced by £0.1m and, with a 56% reduction in numbers, Visitor income dropped by £1.3m. Conference and function income fell by £0.1m to £1.9m. Fortunately, the endowment performed well and, using our usual 5-year averaging approach, we paid ourselves £16.4m, in line with budget and 1.2x covered by investment income. The furlough scheme generated £0.9m in income.

Expenses were £2.4m lower for the year compared to 2018/19, reflecting a pension write back £2.8m higher than the previous year’s pension charge. After adjusting for transfers between funds, a book loss on an interest rate swap and reserve movements, there was an increase in the loan from the endowment to Corporate of £2.1m to £5.9m, £1.4m more than budget, to balance the books. Corporate pays the endowment interest of 7% per annum to compensate for the perceived opportunity cost.

2020/21 implications
In the throes of Lockdown III, it now seems unlikely that Visitors or Conferences will return to Christ Church this financial year. Moreover, as a result of Lockdown III, until students can return freely we anticipate letting only 150 out of about 450 rooms in the curtilage in Hilary 2021. Compared to a ‘normal’ year, we are likely to forego a total of about £5.5m in gross income, but get some relief from the extended furlough scheme in 2020/21 and an extra £1m in return from the endowment. The Oxford colleges’ insurance policy includes a specific business interruption clause paying out a maximum one-time payment of £1m per college, but to date our insurers have not accepted our claim.

To try to balance the 2020/21 budget, about £2.4m of capex was postponed and we effected economies amounting to 10% of controllable operating expenses. However, with the Pandemic lasting even longer than we anticipated in June 2020, a further year of increase in the loan from the endowment looks a racing certainty.

Christ Church’s finances and the pandemic

James Lawrie, Treasurer

Endowment 50%
Academic fees 10%
Residential 11%
Visitors 10%
Conferences 7%
Spendable gifts 2%
Cathedral 1%
School 7%
The Library in the pandemic

Judith Curthoys, Archivist and Temporary Library Manager

The Library staff haven’t stopped since last March! As soon as it was announced that the students were to leave, systems were put in place to make sure that they would have access to everything they needed to continue their studies and prepare for exams. But how were we to do that? All the staff were being sent home too with only Steven, College Librarian, and me, the Archivist, being allowed in once a week or so just to make sure that the buildings were secure and environmentally safe. And the first of our small team who left us during the closed period, Leanne (our lovely library assistant), departed for a new job at St Hilda’s.

Our scout went on furlough and the reclassification project was put on hold, as neither of these jobs could really be done from home, but the rest of the student library staff went into overdrive. Books that were requested by the students were either gathered up on Steven’s occasional visits and posted out, or we ordered from Amazon and had books delivered directly. Cataloguing and processing was done from home with Steven, Emma and Georgie operating a socially-distanced delivery and collection service between themselves! Scans and digital versions of books and papers were made available as often as possible. Two months into lockdown, though, Emma (Reader Services Librarian) left to become the Librarian at Trinity College. Both she and Leanne had the bizarre experience of starting new jobs without being able to go on-site!

Meanwhile, the Special Collections staff all began to work from home, processing digital images and sending these out to researchers, writing blogs and newsletters and, as far as possible, continuing to catalogue at a distance.

During the summer vacation, we began to prepare for the students’ return in October. Social distancing was going to be a challenge if we were to accommodate as many students...
Chess, our graduate trainee, we were hugely down on staff. The Special Collections staff, some of whom had come back during the vacation, went back to home working for their protection and that of the students using the Upper Library. The students were terrific, embracing the new rules and supporting the library staff with their usual enthusiasm. When it was announced that the library would be closing for Christmas on 4 December in order to give the librarians a much needed break, and to allow them to use up some of their leave which they had not been able to take to keep the services going, it was the students who agreed that this was a good plan. Little did we expect that we would have to continue all these special arrangements into Hilary.

Standing in for a few short months after Steven's departure as Library Manager, I can only express my thanks to everyone who has kept the library running: all the staff who have been wonderful and have given up so much time and energy (and those who have, reluctantly, stayed at home); and to name just a few – the library clerks, increased in number by some of the custodians, who helped with the extra invigilation; the Clerk of Works department and the House Surveyor who dealt with all the technical requirements; Housekeeping who provided all the extra cleaning staff who were needed to keep us safe; the Visitor Manager who helped us sort out the seat booking system; the porters who handled so many of those incoming and outgoing parcels of books; and all those alumni who have contributed to the additional costs.

We re-opened the library to students on 18 September but, in August, Steven had become the third member of library staff to depart to pastures new, this time to Trinity College in Cambridge. He had been valiant in the extreme, sacrificing six weeks of unused leave to make sure that library services continued unabated throughout Trinity Term and the vacation. So, come Michaelmas Term, even with the return of Rachel, our reclassification project manager but coming back on a part-time basis wearing her old hat of Reader Services Librarian, and our scout, and the arrival of Chess, our graduate trainee, we were hugely down on staff. The Special Collections staff, some of whom had come back during the vacation, went back to home working for their protection and that of the students using the Upper Library.

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There is a long-held but erroneous belief that curators want to close their museums to keep the contents to themselves; to indulge in their own research and then publish it in obscure journals. If that were the case, lockdown (if one could ignore the heartbreak of a pandemic) would have been bliss. But the Picture Gallery has been closed since March. Our PR assistant and front-of-house staff are either on furlough or have moved on to do other things – working for the NHS, moving back to Costa Rica or – like our most faithful invigilator, John Lection – taking retirement at the age of 91, after 26 years at the gallery. Additionally, in the night of the 14 March 2020, the day the College closed due to Covid-19 and most of our undergraduates had left, we had one of the most spectacular art burglaries this country has experienced.

This is not the place to express my sadness, disbelief and anger about it, but just to say – lockdown was not the blissful quietness and the time to write, as we hear it was for Newton and Shakespeare during outbreaks of the plague. And yes, it felt very lonely, dealing with this without the usual Christ Church life, where one can air a thing or two during the daily encounters with people over lunch or in the common room.

However, looking after an art collection and art gallery and living ‘above the shop’ in Christ Church is probably one of the best places to be during a pandemic – for the collection and for me. Like most people I cleared and cleaned and tidied and started going through the ceiling-high piles labelled ‘when-I-have-more-time’. Beginning with small
things, like putting old photographs in picture files to tackling larger projects, like using the emptiness of the college to clean the Hall portraits, the walls and the staircase and to start cataloguing our print collection.

This meant that in summer we had four marvellous weeks with a group of conservators living on-site to conservation-clean the Hall and its contents. For me, it felt like being on a conservation holiday camp – probably not so much for the conservators. But the glorious summer allowed us to have picnic lunches and dinners in the Master’s Garden, socially-distanced, of course in the perfect group of six. We even did the unthinkable and celebrated the end of the project with a glass of champagne. A drink that otherwise had lost its sparkle in 2020. Regrettably, we could not show off the spotless Hall to many, but we circulated photos and films.

The most exciting and enduring pandemic project, though, was starting to catalogue Henry Aldrich’s (1648-1710) print collection, a project that was 310 years in the making. It will take some time to catalogue 3,000 or so prints, even in their briefest form, but I am at it!

We also explored what to do in regards to virtual and online content – but, like people who thought they could become a piano virtuoso during lockdown, it was not something that could be done quickly and easily. But – we will be here and ready when people can mingle again and want to see and experience the real thing, in a real place, with real people. How important that became even more obvious when I decided to continue the face-to-face teaching inside the gallery – with the appropriate safety measures in place, of course. What a difference in teaching and understanding it makes and what a joy it brings.

No, curators do not want to close galleries – they want them open, they want to share the things, and their research, and not just in obscure journals. And for thieves to steal and take that away from all of us is utterly deplorable!

Above: Portrait of Henry Aldrich, Dean of Christ Church, mezzotint by John Smith after Sir Godfrey Kneller (1699).
Left and below: During, before and after conservation cleaning in Hall.
In common with much of the UK, the garden team were put into lockdown on 24 March and furloughed members of staff did not start to come back until early June, the last not returning until August. We were very lucky that the Clerk of Works and one of his team were on site. They watered the plants in our nursery and kept on top of much of the grass cutting: huge thanks are owed to Steve and Andy!

I was able to pop in and carry out some essential jobs now and then, and it was gratifying to see the plants growing away – oblivious to what was going on. The Meadow was largely unaffected and, apart from the normally short areas of grass cut for public enjoyment beginning to look like a farmer’s hayfield, all was well. Indeed, the wildflowers were actually benefiting from the hugely reduced number of visitors trampling on them.

As the Meadow was kept open, many locals appreciated the opportunity to take their daily exercise there and enjoy the sights and sounds of nature.

What was obvious, though, is how quickly nature starts to reclaim our best endeavours: weeds began to take over the paths and paved areas where normally thousands of trampling feet wear them away and prevent them establishing. We may
progressed and I now have a renewed respect for nature and the countryside. On the first day of lockdown, I walked across a field being drilled with wheat by the local farmer, I was then able to see it develop through the season and then finally be harvested – only to be replaced by the next crop. We are lucky that the cycle of nature continues despite pandemics and lockdowns.

At the time of writing the country has, once again, been put into lockdown, but – on this occasion – the majority of the team are able to continue working. Hopefully things will be a bit easier for us on this occasion. Winter is still a busy time for us with all the jobs to do to prepare for the coming spring and summer.

For updates on how things progress and to see highlights of the Gardens and Meadow, please follow my Instagram account: @christchurchgardener
Covid-19 affects all our lives. Initially, the University and College had closed down and life had to continue on a smaller scale. Trinity and Michaelmas 2020 would have been active terms, but have been converted into an unprecedented challenge for us all. Physical social gatherings had vanished and we spent more time with fewer people. While this may sound post-apocalyptic, ‘life found a way’, be it in the form of walks on Port Meadow or online poker. The details of Michaelmas 2020 were largely unclear, but, looking back, we are happy to see our new students fully integrated via a Covid-19 safe Freshers’ Week and the regular college-based dinners!

As GCR President, I was faced with numerous new issues and concerns by my mostly international colleagues, such as quarantining or testing upon arrival and departure, and general welfare due to the reduction of in-person events. Before lockdown, the pubs were open and students could see the non-2D faces of their peers. In the second lockdown, that reduced but was still possible at college dinners in the Freind room and occasionally Hall.

At any given time, the majority of students can work from home. Luckily, for those who can’t, most departments are open again and enable secure lab-based work. The following summarises and shares my personal experience of the pandemic.

Before the lockdown, my daily work was based in an office and involved frequent travel to conferences, experiments at large-scale physics facilities such as particle accelerators, and more. The bulk of my time involved working at a desk and on computing clusters, which luckily is largely unaffected. Every now and then there is some down time on these servers, while servicing of the physical components can be slowed down due to social distancing. However, most physical meetings have been transformed into virtual ones, e.g. via Zoom or Microsoft Teams. Lectures and seminars related to the accelerators I am usually working at are held via WebEx.

Some of these changes are time savers. Personally, I am sure that even after the lockdown, much will stay transformed as it is. Meetings are well attended and collaborators can easily join without any extra travel. However, the networking and social aspect as of now can hardly be replaced by a computer screen.

While physical meetings are tricky, at work and in private we came up with numerous ways to stay in touch. One of my research groups holds a weekly quiz, I had friends holding virtual birthday cake sessions and I’ve never spoken with as many family members and old friends on the phone as I have in the past weeks! In college, we ran an exercise challenge via Strava, where the JCR, GCR, SCR and college staff compete during the month of May by collecting minutes of exercise. This reached its peak in the final week, where we competed (and won) against Trinity College, Cambridge! Even before that initiative, I spent a large part of my free-time cycling through Oxfordshire. The picture above was taken after a hill climb between Elsfieed and Beckley and is a prime example of how beautiful this region of England can be, even in such times. It also is an acceptable alternative to rowing machines, although, at the end of the day, all rowers very much enjoyed the brief return to the Boathouse for the IWLA regatta in November.

How ‘life found a way’

Oliver Karnbach (2018, Physics), GCR President
2020 – not the year I expected

Layla Stahr (2017, Neuroscience)

After almost two years of planning and preparation work, I entered March 2020 ready to go into overdrive in what was meant to be the key data collection period for my psychopharmacology project. Amidst the backdrop of busy lab days I had been organising the Christ Church Boat Club’s training camp and Summer Eights campaign, excited about the adventures we’d have in Trinity Term and beyond. Then, like the rest of the world, my life in the lab and on the water suddenly came to a halt. Within a few days I had fully moved out of the lab and retrieved all of my belongings from the boathouse, uncertain of when, and if, life would return to normal.

I’d often been warned by colleagues and mentors that a DPhil brings with it a unique set of challenges and obstacles that you often can’t predict, and indeed a global pandemic provided just this. At first the realisation that months of planning had been nullified in an instant was quite disheartening, and I questioned how I could possibly continue to plan my life with such an uncertain global timeline. Yet over time I came to appreciate this step back from the busyness of my daily routine, working within the confines of this period to think more critically about science and work-life balance.

No longer able to collect the data I had planned, I instead turned to data analysis, working to find innovative analysis methods that could be used on single-subject rather than aggregate data. At the same time I worked to make the most of lockdown life, prioritising spending time outside and exploring Oxford and the surrounding areas when possible and permitted. Teams meetings to discuss data were followed by runs in the Christ Church Meadow, the Master’s Garden became my go-to place to spend hours writing code, and Zoom circuits were accompanied by virtual pub quizzes with friends from College and beyond. With a new passion for data analysis, a new love for nature, and a renewed appreciation for friends around the world, the next seven months proved to be some of the most fulfilling of my life despite being so different from what I’d planned.

In the fall, after months out of the lab, I returned, becoming one of the first Oxford neuroscience researchers to restart electroencephalogram testing under new policies for safe human research. And while we continue to oscillate between running participants and working from home as the UK likewise navigates the continued challenges of Covid-19, I’ve gained a newfound appreciation and passion for what I am able to accomplish both in the lab and in my living room. I have been incredibly fortunate to have endless support from my labmates, family, friends, teammates, and College, and thus while 2020 has not been the year I would have expected, I am immensely appreciative of the perspective and resilience it has fostered and the unique opportunities that have emerged to better myself as a scientist and more generally as a person.
Choosing to go to graduate school, whether for a single year or an extended research or professional programme, is a significant decision. Graduate students come from a wide range of geographic, cultural, educational, and experiential backgrounds – and usually, from different stages of their life and career trajectories. This year, however, their decisions were framed by even more considerations than usual: most students decided to apply and pursue their programmes before any suspicions of a global pandemic. The experience of a graduate fresher at Christ Church this year therefore truly is unprecedented, but it is also filled with the excitement of new academic, social, intellectual, and spiritual engagement that many graduates come yearning for.

Who comes to Oxford as a graduate student during a pandemic? Surely, people who were interested in pursuing their respective degrees at a similar time last year for a plethora of possible reasons; students not unlike any in the years prior. But it is also a select set of those, who were able to come to Oxford in the context of an on-going pandemic. This year, Christ Church GCR members are spread out across the world and those able to experience an altered 'freshers' adventure in the College are few. Many were unable to join, or stay, due to physical or mental health, family, financial, legal, or other strains. Those of us who are members of the GCR this year are also all united by our decisions, whether through volition or means, to pursue post-graduate degrees during an on-going global pandemic, in an experimental educational environment and amidst continuously changing life conditions. I must wonder how biased this set of graduate freshers is; and yet these differences will be for future and past sets of GCR freshers to evaluate, hence I will only claim expertise on my own experience as a Christ Church fresher this year.

The beginning of the term started with people trickling into College accommodation and some of the first six-person pub outings being organised impromptu, as students were recovering from challenging travel arrangements and emerging from self-isolation. An early GCR Zoom quiz, socially distanced College dinners at the Friend room and exploring the Cathedral by candlelight (or by glowsticks, to emphasise the mood more accurately) allowed for a more organised, formal acquaintance with both Christ Church and its members at large. As a fresher, I was impressed to see the GCR committee's active work during such unusual circumstances: some examples include food and dining officers organising prize drawing competitions and arranging more flexible dining for students' varied circumstances, social officers putting together socially distanced treasure hunts and themed give-aways, and welfare officers providing opportunities to find support via counselling or calm during weekly Brain Strain tea. Similarly, active students have organised football, fives and other games outdoors, as well as bike rides, hikes and runs, while the Christ Church boat club went above and beyond helping novices get experience from arranging sanitisation protocols, engaging dedicated coaches and seniors, all while battling the fickle Isis. All of these events, both formal and informal, have been able to nurture a GCR community with a character of its own.

This is an unusual time to live, not only to be a graduate student. And if GCR members weren't here, they would be somewhere else, also living through these unusual times we were faced with. For all of us, therefore, this should not be remembered as merely an 'unprecedented' freshers' experience, as all of them are individually, but as our freshers' experience. Because by making it our own, we're all in the same boat.

‘Unprecedented’: a graduate fresher’s reflection

Emilé Radytė (2020, Neuroscience)
Michaelmas 2020 was definitely an experience like no other, and not just because of the Covid-19 pandemic. While it was a massive honour and a privilege to be matriculated into Oxford and to find my feet in new and grand surroundings, all of us – new and old – had to navigate the challenges of conducting ‘business as usual’ as much as possible, while coping with the pressures of social distancing, face masks and a reduced experience for first term. Comparable to a horror movie, there were times when one of our friends and peers would all of a sudden disappear for ten days as they self-isolated due to contact with Covid-19. There were the frustrations of living a life virtually, through intermittent internet connections or Zoom meet-ups with people only a few yards away. Indeed, there was having to cope without even a toaster!

But, I think, what was integral to getting us all through the novelties of Michaelmas (indeed Freshers’ very first proper Oxford experience) was a good sense of humour and an unfaltering hope that better days were yet to come. While coping with the relief, or the ecstasy or even the nervousness, of knowing that, for real, we were now at Oxford, the first term was enjoyable for so many of us as we met friends from all across the country, indeed all across the world, each with a different story to tell or with a similar mind or interest to you. There were essays galore to complete, new tutors to get to know, and new surroundings to explore, in and out of lockdown that is! While one was heavily conscious of walking in the footsteps of great and good figures that went before you, one was also conscious to maintain (when your memory hadn’t slipped) a two-metre social distance with other people, but the only way to adapt was to take it into your stride, until it became the norm.

It’s so easy to think of what we don’t have in life and what we so conspicuously lack, but as I write at the distance of a different city in yet another lockdown with yet more uncertainty, I can’t help but think exactly of what I do have, or at least did have. Michaelmas to me was the moment when dreams became true, even if it was in circumstances unimaginable barely a year ago. And I give thanks daily for the many, many laughs, fun times and experiences shared with friends and peers alike as we navigated the double challenge of a new environment in new circumstances. It hasn’t been easy for anyone, but it is definitely in moments like this that one realises one’s depths of character and resilience so that, far in the future, we can look back with good humour and relief at this most odd but momentous first term of the academic year. Until then, all it remains for us to do is to breathe, to wait, and to hope.

Above: Household 23 on Matriculation: our household on this special day (Darian Murray-Griffiths far right).
The impact of Covid-19 has been felt across the world, across the country, across Oxford, and across Christ Church. Few areas of college life have been unaffected by the pandemic. As someone who is both a student and a Member of College staff, I’ve witnessed its effects from several different angles.

Coronavirus has posed a significant challenge to my doctoral research in medieval English history. Many archives which I needed to visit for my research – most notably The National Archives in Kew – were closed for substantial portions of 2020. The Bodleian Libraries were also closed to readers for much of the year. Similarly, many of the conferences that I had planned to attend – such as the Ecclesiastical History Society Conference at the University of Nottingham – were cancelled or postponed. Nevertheless, the tireless work of the librarians at both the Bodleian and Christ Church have done much to compensate for this. In particular, the Bodleian has provided a ‘scan and deliver’ service, through which their staff have scanned and emailed me numerous excerpts from the books in their collections. This has been complemented by the stellar work of the Christ Church librarians, who have sent me books in their possession, on subjects from medieval English government to the life of Anne Boleyn. Consequently, while my academic work has been disrupted by Covid-19, it has by no means been derailed.

In addition to my research, I also work as one of the Wardens at Christ Church, alongside Nader Raafat and Emily Swift. Together, we are part of the college welfare team, and support the Junior Censor and College Chaplain in providing pastoral help to students. This was particularly tricky in Trinity Term 2020, when the vast majority of students were sent home. Accordingly, rather than supporting students face-to-face, we had to adapt and provide virtual assistance. For instance, we spoke via video call or telephone to those who felt anxious or distressed, and ran a ‘Check In’ scheme, so that those remaining in Oxford could have a weekly one-on-one chat to talk through anything on their minds.

The return of students to Oxford in Michaelmas Term 2020 has brought a different set of challenges. For example, international students had to quarantine on arrival in college; students testing positive for Covid-19 had to self-isolate in their rooms; and everyone faced restrictions on their ability to socialise, which left some feeling lonely and cut-off. Although we continued to provide virtual support to those self-isolating, we made the most of opportunities (within government guidance) to support students in person. As such, we went on more socially distanced walks – around the Meadows, around Tom Quad, and along Oxford’s towpaths – than we can count!

As I write in early January 2021, in the wake of the announcement of new lockdown, it remains uncertain quite what form Hilary Term might take at Christ Church. Nonetheless, what is certain is that the College welfare team will endeavour to support students to the best of our ability in whatever ways we can.
The challenges of lockdown

Eoin Simpkins (2017, Maths)

My fourth Michaelmas Term was certainly very different than the previous three. Despite many aspects of the college experience being temporarily put on hold while the pandemic continues to dominate all aspects of life, I still found it very much worthwhile. Whilst the usual sense of college-wide camaraderie has at times eluded us, a real sense of community has emerged within staircases and ‘households’. Big, loud formals and college-wide sports events were replaced by more quiet and intimate dinner sittings and intra-college sports competitions, to be competed in as pairs. Evenings in the Buttery, Undercroft, and beyond gave way to movie nights and board game induced feuds; I’m informed the gift shop has made a fortune in selling the official Christ Church edition of Monopoly.

Although it wasn’t an easy transition to what I refuse to call ‘the new normal’, one area of House life that I have found less difficult is studying! In the absence of usual distractions, I found it much easier to stay focused on the intricacies of Stochastic Analysis and Analytic Topology. Moreover, the Library staff and my tutors did everything they could to ensure that my academic experience was as close to any other term as possible, though I’m convinced that the day that I remember to turn my microphone on before speaking in a video call will never come.

For the first four weeks of term, whilst it was still possible to row, the Boat Club provided a welcome opportunity for members to participate in team sport. As Club President, I spent much of my summer working with the committee and our head coach to put together procedures and protocols which would meet British Rowing and Government guidelines, so that the club could reopen. The senior squad were a tad rusty, some taking their first rowing strokes for nine months, but quickly looked as formidable as ever, with the women’s coxed four winning their category at the sole head race of term. However, the great success of the term was our novice recruitment. After putting ‘Alex Beard’, the 2017 Headship winning eight, in Tom Quad to turn some heads, over 80 students participated in the first few weeks of our ‘Learn to Row’ programme. Sadly, the announcement of a national lockdown cut this short, but we look forward to continuing their development as soon as possible. During the national lockdown, the novice squad captains organised a fantastic exercise competition. It was opened up to the to the rest of the college and to the wider university. Spirits remained high and rowers stayed fit: a roaring success. Additionally, rowers have been given a fitness programme and have been attending coached fitness sessions over Zoom, to try to get the edge over our competition once we can get back out on the water.

Despite the best efforts of all involved, it is hard not to miss some of the things that really make Christ Church, whether it be the term’s first uttering of ‘Nos miseris homines’ or a loyal support cheering the 1st VIII on from the river banks. These are just two of the quintessential aspects of life at the House that I hope to experience just once more before going down for good this summer.
Science & Health
Sarah Gilbert was at home at the start of the year when she received her first inkling of the perplexing new disease that within months would make her one of the best-known scientists on the planet.

With spare time over the festive break, the University of Oxford professor of vaccinology, highly regarded in her field for more than 20 years but little known outside it, scanned a website that logs infectious disease outbreaks, ‘to see if there was anything of interest’.

What she saw set her antennae quivering: reports of a Sars-like pneumonia, a discovery that resonated with the force of a call to arms for Gilbert, who had spent a decade developing technology that could summon an immune response against a human coronavirus.

“It could have been a storm in a teacup, it could have been something that went away very quickly and was understood to be something else, but it turned out not to be,” she says laconically about the disease that has upended every aspect of normal life.

Ensconced in an office that, from the portion visible through my Zoom screen, appears both impeccably neat and devoid of personal memorabilia, she is clutching a mug with the slogan ‘Keep Calm and Develop Vaccines’, an injunction I suspect she rarely needs.

Gilbert appears the cool, rational scientist of stereotype, although I cannot help wondering if her reserved manner is partly the result of exhaustion: for the first few months of the year, she admits, “I wasn’t getting very much sleep at all” as she and her team raced to develop a defence against this deadly new invader.

When I invite her to describe what, in my imagination, must have been a cinematic rollercoaster of dispiriting setbacks followed by eureka moments, she patiently points out that the approach she and her colleagues deployed had already proved successful against Middle East respiratory syndrome.

“So, a lot of this, it’s not elation, it’s not excitement, it’s not breakthroughs,” she says. “We know what to do and we do it, and everything has worked as expected. It’s really good when things work as you expect, but it’s just confirming what we already knew.”

Histrionics are clearly not her way, despite something of a thespian background: her mother, a primary school headmistress, and her father, an office manager in a shoe firm, were both members of amateur dramatic societies and she played the oboe in the county youth orchestra. I tell her I have been struck by what a good communicator she is in media interviews, speaking with clarity but not condescension about the science behind the vaccine her team has developed with pharmaceutical giant AstraZeneca.

“I was always very shy as a child but I was still able to go on a stage and perform because it’s not opening up yourself, it’s giving a performance. So, I suppose, maybe I rely on that when I need to talk to [BBC presenter] Andrew Marr these days.”

For all its scientific rigour, my impression is that the trial – which began as “an intellectual exercise” but quickly assumed the aspect of a global rescue mission – had a certain improvisational quality as it took shape in January. The rapid assembly of a large team, many of whom had not previously known each other, created its own concerns.

“My main worry in the early part of the year was that we would have omitted to do something that was really important because none of us had realised that nobody was doing it, but in fact that didn’t happen.” When I suggest that the process sounds like building a plane mid-flight, she says: “Yes. And then making it a bigger plane.”
I am uncomfortably aware that our conversation is a distraction from a demanding to-do list. We are speaking at a time of maximum pressure for her programme — two weeks later the long-awaited results of late-stage trials showed the vaccine was up to 90 per cent effective against Covid-19. (The good news was overshadowed by controversy after it emerged that the dosing regime that had produced that high efficacy rate had not been tested in over-55s, who are more likely to suffer severe effects from the disease, and had arisen by accident. Neither fact was initially disclosed by the university or the company.)

Challenges are everywhere. “Today, it’s about trying to find the money to pay for sample shipments from one country to another,” she says. “It’s about trying to find more space for the clinical trials because the building we’re using is going to be taken over and used for something else. It’s about the fact that my project manager is suffering from repetitive strain injury and isn’t going to be able to type things.”

Indeed, I am taken aback to learn how much of the past few months has been spent simply raising the cash to keep the work going. Presumably she would rather have been focusing on the science than the money? She confirms drily: “Writing grant applications in a pandemic is not really where you want to be.”

I wonder if she, as a prominent woman scientist, is conscious of acting as a role model for young girls? There’s a flash of froideur. “To be honest, I’m really disappointed that I would need to be, because this is 2020. Why are we even discussing women scientists? I’m not a woman scientist, I’m a scientist and more than half my colleagues are women and we do the job.”

Yet she adds women do not always make their voices heard loudly enough in the debates that are core to the research process and surprises me by including herself among their number. Arguments about “the data that is generated, the interpretation of it, [are] part of the scientific method . . . and it’s important that women are able to hold their own in that debate. I’m often too quiet.”

“It tends to be males who don’t [hold back] and they often haven’t maybe thought through their arguments but they have a loud voice.”

“Writing grant applications in a pandemic is not really where you want to be.”
Although a huge hurdle has been passed, with news that the Oxford vaccine is effective, along with those from Moderna and Pfizer/BioNTech, another big battle remains: convincing the world they are safe. Oxford is taking a leading role in busting some of the more damaging myths with its Vaccine Knowledge Project, part of a group led by Gilbert’s colleague Andrew Pollard, who is the chief investigator on the Covid-19 trial.

Her intellectual fastidiousness is clearly offended by those who dismiss vaccines for “the wrong reasons”, such as concern about the presence of formaldehyde in infant inoculations. “There’s already more formaldehyde in the baby than there is in the vaccine,” she says crisply. A greater degree of scientific literacy would help people grasp “that it is possible to hold opposing views and to debate them and then come to a greater understanding”.

She follows up with a plea that is plainly heartfelt: “Don’t dismiss science, because science does so much for us. If you feel uneasy about science, go and understand the science. Go and find out what’s going on.”

Extract courtesy of The Financial Times.
Sarah Neville is the global pharmaceuticals editor.
Building diagnostic capacity and mapping the spread of the virus

Professor Sarah Rowland-Jones, Professor of Immunology and Research Student at Christ Church

It started late last year with a trickle of reports of an unexplained respiratory illness in central China, flanked on the infection outbreak site ‘Promed’ by accounts of the ongoing Ebola epidemic in DRC and fatal cases of Listeriosis apparently linked to hard-boiled egg consumption in the southern USA. I was probably not alone in completely failing to predict that this seemingly isolated outbreak, linked to a live-food market thousands of miles away, would have such a devastating impact on all our lives...

For clinical academics in Infectious Diseases (ID), the call to action came in mid-March. My clinical work is based in the Teaching hospital in Sheffield, which already housed some of the first Covid-19 cases in the UK, evacuated from the Diamond Princess cruise ship in Yokohama. These were largely healthy people with mild symptoms, so provided no advance warning of the deluge of sick and terrified patients that was about to descend upon us. Over the ensuing nine months more than three thousand people with Covid-19 were admitted to our hospital, the majority under the care of the ID team. Whilst caring for Covid-19 patients in the first wave was tiring and relentless, there was nevertheless great camaraderie amongst the hospital staff, a feeling that everyone was pulling together in a crisis. The staff of the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) (where I conducted ID ward rounds) were particularly impressive, providing considered care to each patient, refusing to give up on apparently hopeless cases – this led to some incredibly sick people finally emerging from ICU after two to three months on a ventilator. During this period our management of the disease improved, from small iterative changes at a local level to the ground-breaking advances that came from the Oxford-led ‘Recovery’ trial, the first major study to test interventions in carefully-designed trials across the country. From Recovery we learned that Dexamethasone saves lives, whilst Hydroxychloroquine and Azithromycin offered no benefit.

There was so much to learn about this new virus! How does the virus’ genetic make-up vary between individuals and over time? What is the immune response to different degrees of infection and does it offer protection against future infection? How do changes in the virus sequence affect the immune response? There was an impressive response from the UK
Research councils, offering rapid funding for researchers to test their ideas, from small grants to massive consortia. In Sheffield, my research group is part of the national Covid-19 Immunology Consortium (https://www.uk-cic.org); we are studying the T-cell response to infection, which often persists for longer than antibodies and may be important in protection from re-infection. My Oxford group is contributing to a study of immune responses to Covid-19 in HIV-infected people, and we are also working with our long-term collaborators in Zimbabwe to build diagnostic capacity and map the spread of the virus. In Sheffield I have set up a research clinic to investigate ‘long Covid’, the mysterious constellation of symptoms and complications developing in around 10% of people after their acute illness, which can last for weeks and sometimes many months; this is part of the UKRI-funded national PHOSP consortium (https://phosp.org).

Now, as our second wave is close to peaking, with over 350 Covid-19 in-patients in Sheffield (and 19 new Covid admissions to the ID wards on a single day this week), there is an overwhelming sense of weariness amongst my colleagues. But we can keep on going, knowing that the elderly and most vulnerable are already receiving effective vaccines - and soon most of us will be protected from the worst that this virus can do. ■
Dr Robin Thompson was visiting research collaborators in Japan in early January 2020 when he first heard (via Twitter!) about a cluster of cases of pneumonia of unknown cause in China. These cases were some of the earliest in the Covid-19 pandemic, but at that stage little was known about the reason for the illness. Early infections were linked to the Huanan seafood market in the city of Wuhan, but it was not immediately clear then that the causative agent was being transmitted directly from person to person.

Scientific understanding about transmission of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes Covid-19, increased rapidly, and mathematical modelling has played a critical role in the global response. Epidemiological modellers like Dr Thompson had long been aware of the threat of a pandemic, and they had developed mathematical techniques and tools that could be used to assist policy-makers during outbreaks. As an example, Dr Thompson and his colleagues published a research article in 2019 about real-time tracking of the R number – the average number of people that a single infected individual goes on to infect. If the R number is larger than one, an epidemic will grow, whereas if the R number is less than one then the epidemic is in decline. Not only did they develop mathematical theory to track the R number, but Thompson and co-authors also developed a computational tool for this purpose that has been used to guide public health measures in countries worldwide during the pandemic.

In the earliest stages of the pandemic, attention was directed towards the potential for global transmission. Imperial College released a report suggesting that the number of cases in China was likely to be substantially higher than reported. On 23 January 2020, data were released describing the characteristics of infected individuals. Even then, Dr Thompson’s modelling warned about the need for intense surveillance in countries worldwide in an attempt to prevent or delay international transmission. His research from the first month of the pandemic led to him being awarded the Journal of Clinical Medicine 2020 Outstanding Research Award.
More recently, as well as developing his own models, Dr Thompson has contributed to the UK’s response to the Covid-19 pandemic by helping to run a rapid review service for UK government advisory groups, as part of the Royal Society’s Rapid Assistance in Modelling the Pandemic initiative. The scientific response to Covid-19 has been a collaborative one, and Dr Thompson and others organised a workshop at the Isaac Newton Institute in May 2020 to bring together a diverse international community of epidemiological modellers who were providing evidence to governments worldwide. This led to a publication summarising the key open questions for planning Covid-19 exit strategies. Dr Thompson also assisted the wider understanding of epidemic modelling by delivering public lectures and appearing in the media explaining concepts such as the R number and the need for social distancing.

His public lecture ‘How do mathematicians model infectious disease outbreaks?’ has been viewed over 100,000 times across different online platforms.

Going forward, as vaccines begin to be rolled out – including the vaccine developed in Oxford – significant uncertainty remains. Who should receive the vaccine first? Will the vaccine disrupt transmission entirely, or simply reduce severe disease? When and how can other interventions be relaxed? Will SARS-CoV-2 ever be eradicated completely?

Mathematical modelling remains a useful tool for exploring these questions, and many more, during this pandemic and future infectious disease outbreaks.

“Scientific understanding about transmission of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes Covid-19, increased rapidly, and mathematical modelling has played a critical role in the global response.”

Below: Mathematical models can be used to track changes in the R number – the average number of people that a single infected individual goes on to infect. Credit: Thompson et al., Epidemics 100356, 2019.
The pandemic and public health: a year of 100+ hour weeks

Ruth Tennant (1990, Modern Languages)

There are moments in history that stay with you like a photograph. At the end of a meeting over a year ago now one of the Directors of Public Health England asked for a quick word in private. “Just one to have on your radar at the moment, but WHO have picked up a new strain of coronavirus. We don’t know much yet but it seems to be causing acute respiratory complications in a corner of China. Nothing official yet, but you’ve got an airport on your patch so you need to know.”

We know how the story went from that point. We have seen the many heroes of Covid, many doing familiar jobs (doctors, nurses, care workers), some less so (immunologists, virologist, research scientists), others whose importance we only realised when the world shut down (supermarket staff, delivery drivers and bin-men). As one of 134 Directors of Public Health in the UK working in local government I have had a very specific role during the pandemic – the local glue on the ground in the pandemic response. As I write, a year into 100 plus hour weeks, we’re right at the height of the January lockdown, too soon to see how the end plays out or to really understand how the UK will come out of this.

It’s early January 2020. Covid-19 has yet to take off, but I’m in a room of around 150 people and we’re working through a live pandemic flu scenario. One of the areas I’m responsible for is emergency planning and it’s routine for my team to be called out to work alongside the ‘blue lights’ to deal with the humanitarian elements of flooding and the occasional unexploded WWII bomb.

They are great at developing unlikely sounding scenarios to test the system: at this point pandemic flu is top of the national list of risks. The day was scheduled well before Covid-19 emerged and for a different pathogen. But many of the issues are the same – how to run essential services with staff sick or caring for sick relatives, understanding which services will be under pressure and how to keep these going and crucially, managing public confidence and communication. Three hours in and one of our worry points is social care – it’s a fragile sector and has historically been the poor relation of the NHS.

A few weeks later, my team are fire-fighting outbreaks, transporting emergency PPE and coping with the sheer horror of the number of deaths in care homes. It already feels like the worst-case scenario from our exercise.

It’s mid-March and I’m in an incident control room at one of our major airports, repatriating a plane load of mostly elderly cruise passengers, some symptomatic, others just exhausted after an extensive period of quarantine and a trans-Atlantic flight on a converted cargo plane. We’ve been told this is being handled nationally but when I arrive on site it’s clear we need more people to manage a very complex incident. We hit the phones, get in extra staff & PPE and work through a gruelling 10 hours to get the last passengers home. They are exhausted but unbelievably stoical. Looking back, I see cracks in the response: siloed working across multiple parts of government and no clear point of control.

Early September. It’s 6am and as usual my day starts with a review of the latest numbers. And something’s not right. They have suddenly gone up and we don’t know why. After the first lockdown and once we were given access to the data, we’d had a firm local grip on the numbers. When prevalence is low, it’s easier to ‘spot’ patterns in the data: this is essential to get to the root of transmission and halt spread. Once case numbers rise and there is very general community transmission, it becomes almost impossible to stem the tide without major interventions such as lockdowns.

We start digging. NHS Test and Trace operates as a largely stand-alone national system. It has developed significant capacity to deliver large number of tests and follow up a large number of case and contacts. But it has limited local knowledge and at that point, had very little capability to join the dots between cases – essential for the management of pandemics and to identify routes of transmission. We hit
the phones, speak to everyone locally who’s recently tested positive and within two hours we find the source of a major outbreak. We mobilise healthcare assistants from our local hospital trusts to do testing, bring in the contacts of cases and test them too. We find more cases. We realise there is a gap in the system so we set up our own backward contact tracing team: they act like super-sleuths finding connections and investigating potential routes of spread.

“We’re in full crisis mode and on the daily calls I have with senior public sector leaders, you can see fear just below the surface. These are incredible people absolutely stretched to the limit.”

By the end of the week, we become one of the earlier parts of the country to go into national restrictions. The media spotlight turns on us and I have the odd experience of getting in my car, turning on the radio and hearing myself on Radio 4.

November. I’m on the sixth floor of a tower block. We have very high rates in a very deprived part of my patch and we can’t find a point source. We pull together a team to door knock and offer asymptomatic testing. I see distrust and weariness in the eyes of the people we talk to. It softens when I crouch down to talk to their toddlers but people aren’t used to door knocks coming with an offer of help. I’m with a team called REACT: established to mobilise former service people into disaster zones, these guys have now switched their brilliant skills to the UK Covid response and we’ve asked them for help. They’re doing it for free, sleeping in scout huts and when I’m confronted by an angry man in underpants who screams that Covid’s all a hoax, I’m glad I’ve got an ex prison officer with me.

It’s too soon to analyse our response. We’re in full crisis mode and on the daily calls I have with senior public sector leaders, you can see fear just below the surface. These are incredible people absolutely stretched to the limit. I have seen absolute brilliance nationally and locally. But we need to learn more about where our system could do better. Our systems of governance and delivery have been hugely tested and we need to analyse this. We can learn from good stuff – incredible cross-sectoral cooperation to deploy a very rapid on the ground response but we need to be up front about the failures too, including how we can better manage the very challenging policy trade-offs. Christ Church brains – who’s up for a debrief?


Below: NHS Test and Trace has limited local knowledge and, to begin with, had very little capability to join the dots between cases – essential for the management of pandemics and to identify routes of transmission.
Kate Bingham was appointed in May 2020 as chair of the UK Government Vaccines Taskforce (VTF), reporting directly to the Prime Minister and working within the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. The PM asked the VTF to deliver three objectives: first to secure access to clinically safe and effective Covid-19 vaccines for the UK population as quickly as possible, secondly to make provision for international distribution of vaccines and thirdly to support the UK’s industrial strategy by establishing a long-term vaccine strategy and to prepare the UK for future pandemics. The Prime Minister specifically emphasised his desire that the VTF consolidate the UK’s position at the forefront of global vaccine research and development.

Given the need to work at extreme speed, it was agreed that the Chair would recruit a team of specialists to develop the strategy, evaluate and prioritise the vaccines and make recommendations to a Ministerial panel responsible for approving spending commitments from a ring-fenced VTF budget. Without these measures it is inconceivable that the VTF would have been able to secure the desired vaccine portfolio and lay the foundations for the UK’s improved pandemic preparedness.

Since no vaccine had ever been developed for any human coronavirus before, the VTF’s strategy was to build a diverse portfolio of vaccines across different formats to maximise the chance of providing a safe and effective vaccine. Speed was essential since the sooner vaccination starts the more lives would be saved.

In six months, the VTF built a portfolio that put the UK way ahead in terms of access to the best vaccines, and timing of that access. The portfolio included exploratory but clinically advanced vaccines, including AZ/Oxford, Pfizer/BioNTech, Janssen and Moderna and more established vaccine platforms with proven safety profiles namely GSK/Sanofi, Novavax and Valneva and more. The UK was the first Western country to start mass vaccinations with Pfizer/BioNTech’s vaccine. AZ/Oxford’s vaccination started on 4 January 2021.

The UK Government is leading global efforts to ensure that everyone at risk, anywhere in the world, has access to a safe and effective vaccine, irrespective of their ability to pay. The VTF supported the Government’s £548 million commitment to the Covid-19 Vaccines Global Access facility (COVAX) to provide access to vaccines for low income countries and also shared expertise and people to support the global efforts.

The VTF led important activities to provide lasting benefits to the UK’s pandemic preparedness by expanding and reinforcing the supply chain for the manufacture of vaccines, improving the scope of the UK’s clinical development of vaccines; and communicating the breadth of the UK’s vaccine capability to all stakeholders to position the UK at the forefront of vaccine R&D.

Unsustainable agricultural practices and the climate crisis alter the way that animals and humans interact with one another, which intensifies existing zoonotic diseases and enables the emergence and spread of new ones. In the last century we have seen the outbreak of many zoonotic infections including AIDS and Ebola and at least six major outbreaks of novel coronaviruses. It is highly likely we will face new pandemics in the near term and so it is critical we establish a permanent robust pandemic preparedness capability in the UK.
In November 2020, Jonathan and Dame Sally Davies, former Chief Medical Officer for England, published *Whose Health is it, Anyway?* concluding that health is the most untapped opportunity for prosperity and happiness in the 21st. They explore how through collectively valuing health we can radically change the wider health environment to benefit all. They outline how a 21st healthcare system should expand the founding principles of the NHS to encompass a National Care Service. They describe the entities and processes that could underpin a new ‘total health’ system for a brighter future.

Across the world, Covid-19 has shown how vulnerable our society, economy, and day-to-day lives are to our collective illness, yet we still do not value the pivotal role of good health. Our healthcare system is now an illness service with little resilience, importing illness rather than exporting health into communities, not leveraging the digital technology innovations harnessed elsewhere.

These conclusions come in part from examining the impacts of Covid-19, which are broadly: i) Direct effects of individuals contracting the virus and dying; ii) Indirect impacts from the health system having to focus on Covid-19, and individuals not seeking medical attention for other symptoms, thus chronic disease mortality increases; iii) The wider social and economic impacts affecting, unequally, communities and the nation.

Excess deaths (based on work by the School of Public Health, Imperial College, London) is the best measure to assess the pandemic, and to inform ongoing strategy. The graph shows there were 206,000 excess deaths, representing an 18% increase on expected deaths. The total mortality impact was not felt equally. England, Wales and Spain felt the largest impact with approximately 37% and 38% increases. Furthermore: Excess deaths were 23% higher than deaths just recorded as Covid-19 deaths; a ‘gap’ possibly explained by undetected Covid-19, whether registering as a Covid-19 death required a test, and indirect deaths from other causes as a result of the pandemic. Secondly, the death toll was surprisingly even across sexes; 100,000 deaths in women and 105,800 deaths in men. Thirdly, the mortality impact was much greater in adults above 65.

There are several possible explanations as to why the mortality impacts varied so much across countries. Some will only become clear in time, but possibilities include: i) the public’s health and demography, ii) the resilience of health, care, and public health systems, and iii) the policy response by Governments and Public bodies to Covid-19, e.g. the timing of lockdowns.

*Dr Jonathan Pearson-Stuttard is a Wellcome Trust Clinical Research Fellow, School of Public Health, Imperial College London, and a Trustee, Royal Society for Public Health.*
Perhaps one of the most striking things about the School’s experience of lockdown is that there has not been a single term-time day since schools were closed when Christ Church Cathedral School has stopped functioning. Throughout the many lockdowns it has had pupils attending even though on one day we got down to a single pupil. The reason for this is that we have continued to have on site the children of key workers including some whose parents work at Oxford’s hospitals. I suspect, therefore, that the experience of the School has been far less odd than the lives of many. I remember on one occasion, in the first lockdown, when I was sitting in my study listening to an unusually silent Oxford, I heard Tom ring out, echoing round the empty City with an unusual resonance. As I was contemplating how surreal it was to hear the bells sound out with such clarity, break time began and the voices of our pupils rang forth, almost the only sign of life in the City. The process of education never stops!

But, of course, it would be wrong to say that things have not been very different. Even though we have had pupils in School, all our lessons have gone online. Our principle has been that we should mirror the normal timetable. Lessons have occurred at the same time as usual, with teachers continuing to teach their classes live. We have continued to hold assemblies with outside speakers, concerts have occurred with individuals playing from home and, probably most difficult of all, games lessons have been taught, boys being given instructions on pre-recorded videos. We also took the decision to hold our Speech Day and Prize Giving online. It all worked very well, partly because we welcomed as our Guest Speaker the radio and television personality Alexander Armstrong who, unsurprisingly, found the online medium to his taste as he spoke very movingly from his study.

As with most walks of life, adaptability has been the watchword and we found ourselves recently having to convert our changing rooms into a lateral flow testing centre. Our housemaster has been recast as the chief tester, complete with PPE, surely not something hinted at in his job description. Any member of staff or senior pupil attending the School is tested on a weekly basis. We are all now experts in locating our tonsils!

And what of the Choir? Fortunately our boys, because they are boarders, were allowed to operate as a single bubble. Therefore, unlike many choirs, they have been able to continue to sing together. Throughout last term the Cathedral again echoed to the sound of choral music, much to the delight of a small but loyal congregation. Under the November lockdown, when congregations were banned from churches again, but when schools remained open, services without congregations were allowed so long as livestreaming was occurring and so the choir continued to sing but to an empty Cathedral. Rarely has the music echoed so generously around the building, a wonderful consolation at a tricky time!

Right: Face-to-face academic teaching between lockdowns continued whenever possible.
In late February 2020, an Upper Sixth Former returned from skiing in Lombardy with a bad cold. We were hearing reports of a new SARS variant which had spread beyond China, and some parents were keen that any pupil with any corona-esque symptoms should be kept away from school. How would we contemplate that, we wondered, in an environment where someone has a cold all the time?

Three weeks later, on 18 March, the Magdalen College School Senior Team left a Governing Body meeting to listen to the Secretary of State speaking in Parliament. We knew what was coming - schools were to be closed. But there was more: exams were cancelled, and we were to open throughout the holidays for children of key workers.

I spent the following day giving seven assemblies back-to-back to each of our year groups. Normally, chapel is a daily whole-school event which sees over seven hundred pupils packed from floor to balcony. On 19 March, we set out chairs a metre apart and tried to prevent pupils from shuffling them closer together while I spoke. The most emotional time was with the Upper Sixth, who feared that this would be their last 'normal' day onsite together – and how right they turned out to be. During the previous fortnight, more and more
boys had been staying after school to play Kingball (a game unique to MCS) in the playground, an outbreak of nostalgia which we normally saw in May. I told them all that they were stronger than they could possibly imagine, and that no-one would forget that they had been the children of the 2020 pandemic. The Head Boy and Girl made everyone cry, and the rugby lads pushed the chairs aside for a group hug. They invited me to join in, and that was the first time I used the phrase ‘social distancing’ in explaining why I didn’t.

We had more than enough staff volunteers to cover the holidays. A small handful of us had the run of a sunny site, and one child of a key worker said it was the best Easter he’d ever had. We rent our sports fields from Christ Church, and it broke my heart every day last summer to see them stand so glorious and so devoid of cricket and tennis. Some pupils returned in June, and we managed a good run of summer sports in September and October—a change which is likely to endure. Everything passes, we reminded ourselves.

Last March we soon realised that there was nothing in our way of operating which could continue as normal. Everything had to be rethought, often in the light of half-cocked and contradictory Government guidance. Over the Easter holidays we conjured Virtual MCS out of the ether, and we transferred to online lessons with astonishing dexterity. (It would be an insult to the graft of my colleagues behind the scenes to say ‘ease.’) This prepared us for ‘blended’ learning when pupils had to self-isolate in the Autumn, and as I write this we are back in full lockdown. If anything, the cancellation of exams and a spring of uncertainty is harder for the current Upper Sixth, as it will be for Finalists in the House: last year, the experience was pioneering, and we cheered ourselves with the story that it would be unique.

“Some parents were keen that any pupil with any corona-esque symptoms should be kept away from school. How would we contemplate that in an environment where someone has a cold all the time?”
Teaching during a pandemic

Rebecca Ling (1999, Geography)

In March 2020, Covid-19 hit the UK in full force. New to the job of Manager of Digital Teaching and Learning at Lady Eleanor Holles in Hampton, my job title took on new meaning. In the space of two weeks we rolled out training on our Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) to all teachers so that the learners could continue to access resources. With the assumption of only a brief closure post Easter holidays, the idea of online live teaching was rejected as an unnecessary layer of complexity in an already stressful situation.

As the weeks progressed over the Easter holidays, it became increasingly obvious that we would not be returning to school for business as usual. So began the process of remotely training all of our staff in how to teach their lessons using Microsoft Teams. Another layer of anxiety was added to the global pandemic – many staff were panicked by the prospect, and yet they rose to the occasion. In terms of change management, the pandemic swept out all resistance! As Boserup would say: ‘necessity is the mother of invention’.

The response of teachers to the pandemic was interesting. On good days it was a pleasure to greet my tutor group in the mornings with ‘bring your pet to tutor time’, on bad days it was a struggle to get to the desk fully dressed. Everybody faced their own personal challenges, whether that be living alone for weeks on end or living in a confined space with others. Teachers, perhaps more than most, are used to the certainty of the rhythm of the school year. Here was a situation of ongoing uncertainty that challenged even the most rational of us.

During lockdown, my sixth-form students produced some of the best essays I have read. It seems that the enforced slowing down gave these students time to read around their subjects, debate them online with their teacher and produce highly rigorous essays. I began to doubt my essential role in their education. While for some students, lockdown brought them the denial of their opportunity to showcase their hard work in public examinations, for others it brought the opportunity of time for deep learning.

We are now back to school and after an initial period of readjustment, it is a joy to be back in the classroom. It may be a cliché, but teaching is a vocation and technology will never replace the warmth of a close relationship between student and teacher. What is clear is that the world is forever changed by the pandemic and we should think carefully about what we want to keep and what we do not wish to return to. It is especially important to recognise the privilege that comes with working in a school where students have personal devices, reliable broadband and a safe environment. This pandemic has only served to highlight the educational injustices and the digital divide that persist in this country.
2019-2020 marked a number of significant milestones in the history of Brixton House. We broke ground on our new purpose-built venue on Coldharbour Lane, within the heart of Brixton. We changed our name from Ovalhouse to recognise our vibrant, culturally diverse, yet economically challenged new home. Finally, and inevitably, we had to deal with the impact of Covid-19 on our own plans, on the performing arts and on society as a whole.

Brixton House was founded in the 1930s as Christ Church (Oxford) Clubs, by the graduates of Christ Church, to provide sports activities and education to the disadvantaged young people of Lambeth. Our focus shifted from sports to drama in the 1960s when Ovalhouse, as we were subsequently named, quickly became a leading light in experimental theatre and community engagement. We fostered the experimental theatre companies of the sixties and seventies, gay and lesbian and women’s theatre in the seventies and eighties, and new Black and Asian writing in the nineties – and into the current century.

The new Brixton House will be an equally pioneering creative hub for Brixton and for London – something much-needed in the eventual aftermath of Covid-19. The building will house two state-of-the-art black-box theatres with configurable seating and fully accessible lighting and technical rigs, so that people of all abilities can work, perform and engage in theatre. Seven accessible rehearsal studios will be used by Brixton House artists, visiting companies, local schools and community groups. Our café/bar and front of house spaces will be open all day and welcoming to all, and we will provide affordable office space for dozens of fellow arts organisations and creative industries.

Construction of the new Brixton House was progressing well until the first lockdown in March 2020, which led to a complete down-tools and closure of the site. Following nearly four months of delay, we were finally able to begin construction again in June – albeit under strict social distancing and Covid-safety regulations. Since then, progress has been slow but steady. Each week we can see more of the building taking shape and gaining a bit more character. We hope to move into our new home in July and to launch our first artistic season as Brixton House in October 2021, only seven months later than originally planned.

Despite the setbacks caused by Covid-19, we are thrilled to have almost met our target of just under £20 million to complete construction and equipping of the new Brixton House. We were very fortunate to receive a significant additional grant from the Arts Council England and DCMS Capital Kickstart Fund recently, and we remain extremely grateful to our other donors, including many alumni of Christ Church, for their generous contributions and commitment to this exciting new chapter in our history. Before we can rest on our laurels, however, we still need to raise a final £350,000 to realise our ambitions for Brixton House. If you would like to help in any way, please do get in touch at darryl.deprez@brixtonhouse.co.uk to learn more about our future plans. We look forward to many more decades of partnership and collaboration between Christ Church and Brixton House.
The Covid-19 pandemic has changed all our lives. For a health journalist it turned everything upside down. From a traditionally wide brief covering health policy and different medical conditions there was from late January 2020 only one story to cover, and it shows no sign of easing off.

Yes, the days have often been long from early morning radio output to the 10pm TV News. There has been a continuing and relentless demand from our editors for daily coverage. But there is a very talented and dedicated health team at BBC News who have consistently provided high quality research and analysis. In television news it is all about team work and I am fortunate to have wonderful colleagues – including producers, camera people and editors.

Nothing in a day’s work in the BBC newsroom can compare with life on the frontline working a shift in intensive care, as a paramedic or in a care home and facing the threat of Covid-19 every day. The weekly clap for carers last summer reflected the immense gratitude felt amongst the public after the first wave broke in March and April. But for NHS staff the second surge has been even more punishing. Fatigue and the arrival of the winter months have made their job even harder.

Looking back, the astonishing turn of events since the first coronavirus cases were detected seems like a blur. Almost every week there has been an unpredicted development. Nobody would have predicted then there would be more than 80,000 deaths with Covid-19 in the UK (at the time of writing). And nobody knew then that there could be long lasting symptoms for some of those who experienced coronavirus.

Some personal memories stand out. News one evening that Boris Johnson had gone into intensive care at St Thomas’ Hospital came as a huge shock in the newsroom as much as anywhere. The 10pm News running order was hastily rewritten. My brief was to explain the sort of treatment the Prime Minister might be getting. Careful and delicate phrasing was required and there were some rapid calls to contacts in intensive care at other hospitals as the bulletin approached.

In such difficult times it is not surprising that there is scrutiny of BBC output. We have been accused by some of exaggerating the threat of Covid-19. Others have said we are underplaying the reality. We have a duty to report calmly and objectively, presenting the facts without sensationalising what is happening. One intensive care consultant, asked about those who thought the Covid-19 situation was not as bad as reported, simply said they should come into intensive care and see the 30 and 40 year olds for whom there were no guarantees of coming out.

We should never forget families who have lost loved ones, the dedication of NHS staff and other key workers, and also those who have lost jobs and who are struggling to get by. There is hope. Widespread vaccinations and new drugs will make a difference. But this health journalist is likely to remain a full-time Covid-19 correspondent for a while yet.

“We have a duty to report calmly and objectively, presenting the facts without sensationalising what is happening.”
It crept up so quietly that I barely heard it coming. A messenger of death from a distant land, a war without trumpets or the sound of distant gunfire to fire up the senses. I was looking forward to summer, but summer never came. Only medieval pestilence.

I am a parliamentarian, but I take little pride in how we politicians have handled this challenge. Too slow, muddled. Yet how I have rejoiced in watching others rise to the challenge – not just the medical profession but those in business and research institutions who in the blink of an eye conjured up thousands of ventilators, millions of pieces of PPE, and who have done what was said to be impossible – built a vaccine. Those men and women of enterprise and bio-science have saved us as surely as have our nurses and doctors. We have learned how to deal with new danger – and done it brilliantly. Next time, we will be better prepared.

Early on I led a debate in the House of Lords to highlight these many miracles of innovation. It was almost the first time we had used Zoom for a virtual parliamentary sitting – so what did it matter that the link went haywire even as I was speaking and I ended up with a feed to a porn site rather than the red leather benches of their Lordships?

Silver linings lurk in these dark clouds. Yes, I’ve lost loved ones and had to attend funerals via a grainy video link. Yet somehow I found myself preparing for the moment, and reflecting on their special lives, far more intensely than I would normally have done had I been in a mingling crowd.

I have read more, reflected more, stumbled upon deeper values in life. I jumped on a plane to Venice for the joy of walking through empty, sun-filled piazzas rather than rushing down the crowded streets of life. It has left me better prepared.

My Parliamentary Fellowship at St Antony’s has temporarily fallen victim to the bug, yet its loss has reminded me how precious it has been to mix with so many brighter and younger minds. We will do it again. I’m not finished with Brideshead.

And in my Wiltshire village of Wylye we have built a more profound sense of community. Many of our residents are elderly, vulnerable, yet we have found more time to share and support each other. I will always cherish the whiskies I have sunk with my centenarian neighbour by his fire as he recounted his exploits as a naval captain, at Dunkirk and at D-Day, and watch as once again he is a young man taking on the world.

I am filled with optimism. We are capable of being a better community than we were. We have the beating of this virus, and the next. My grandchildren will grow up in a more capable world and, if we remember the lessons of this time, it will be a more compassionate world, too. Onwards!

Lord Dobbs is author of the ‘House of Cards’ trilogy.
A tumultuous first year in Parliament

Felicity Buchan MP (1987, Law)
Member of Parliament for Kensington

I want to first thank Christ Church. I was a comprehensive kid from the North of Scotland applying in 1986 and somehow Teddy Burn and John Cartwright saw something in me. I have no doubt that Christ Church will continue to change lives as it did mine.

I became the MP for Kensington on 12 December, overturning a Labour majority of 20. I won by the very fine margin of 150, the second slimmest Conservative majority in the country. I think my majority is better as a darts score! I was elected at 4am on Friday morning; on Saturday I was in Parliament for an induction. It was a slightly crazy first few months because if you win a seat off the opposition you start with no staff, office, telephone lines ... so while you’re still grappling with Parliamentary procedure, you are spending an awful lot of time in cafes and corridors setting up an office.

January was a whirlwind: the debate on the first Phase of the Grenfell Inquiry (in my constituency) was happening the second week of January so I knew I had to give my maiden speech in the Queen’s Speech debate. Having navigated those two milestones, we then became aware of the reports coming from China and the potential severity of the situation.

My constituency had some of the first cases of Coronavirus in the country – Central London is very international. Parliament also had an early case and I had to go into quarantine in early March, as I’d been in contact with the MP. Thankfully, she made a speedy recovery and I was able to return to Parliament for a few weeks before we went into the first national lockdown. It did however mean I missed my first Budget debate which as a member of the Treasury Select Committee, I had been planning on speaking in.

The House Authorities did an exceptional job over the Easter recess to get us set up as a hybrid Parliament. We were able to resume business immediately after Recess with the majority being broadcast in but with several of us continuing to go into Parliament. There are still some things you do have to be physically present for e.g. to make an intervention on a Minister during a debate. I am very conscious that we are making Laws and scrutinising Government on some of the greatest topics we will face for decades.

Day to day working routines have had to change. My staff work from home. Constituents have faced multiple issues so there is a much higher level of correspondence and casework. I have not been able to make the same number of constituency visits but we continue to hold surgeries and meet businesses, charities and groups by telephone. There is a way reduced number of seats in the Chamber so there are now call lists of MPs to speak and those on the Call List have priority for seats in the Chamber.

I am often asked – how have you found the first year in Parliament with all the changes that have had to be introduced in the Commons for Coronavirus?

“I take great heart from the rapid roll-out of the vaccine and look forward to my second year in Parliament hopefully being less tumultuous!”
I work with the media team in a central civil service department in Whitehall. I don’t claim to see everything that happened in the building and certainly wasn’t among those most in the loop on Covid-19, but the following is my perspective as a semi-insider.

I know that Coronavirus was something I’d heard of in January 2020 – I have the Facebook messages to prove it – but it wasn’t until mid-February that it started to cross my desk at work. I remember a ministerial meeting in the February half term and some media interest at the time but it was the number three issue on my list: flooding was the top – a big issue at the time but you’ll be forgiven for not remembering now if you weren’t affected. I won’t say anything about the second issue as we were relatively successfully at keeping it out of the public eye....

As February wore on I recall two people in the ‘emergencies’ team having a hushed conversation in the corner of the office. It turned out to be on Covid-19. I heard by late February that 50 people in the department were already working on the response. At the time some of it seemed excessive – some still does. The advice to a minister that we might have to convert Hyde Park into a mass grave seemed poorly considered – surely a more discreet location could be found even if excess capacity was required. The concern around imaging that the Britons being repatriated from China were being transported in four coaches all branded ‘Horseman’ didn’t seem like a genuine cause for concern either.

Then, by the end of the month, the occasional piece of written advice to ministers had become a steady run: large numbers of people returning to the UK unexpectedly, consequences of restrictions to travel abroad, health precautions for the most vulnerable. Then a minister who had been at an inter-ministerial meeting on Covid-19 started demanding significant updates about how the department would respond if the pandemic spread, even though it clearly wasn’t part of his portfolio. At this point I must confess it still seemed like an abundance of caution to me. I’d become a bit too cynical after seeing numerous emergency teams stepped up for various ‘no deal’ contingencies that never came to pass, and hundreds of officials stopping their day jobs to work on preparations that were never needed, leaving their previous teams drastically short staffed. Of course – I was wrong.

The big change fell on Monday 16 March 2020. This was the day the Prime Minister advised an end to all mass gatherings and unnecessary visits to family or friends. The previous week I think something like a fifth of the Department was working on Covid-19 preparations – by 17 March it was almost everyone. In civil service terminology, the entire department ‘pivoted’. For some it subsumed their previous roles but for many new teams were created (for example, to administer to a new category of 1.5m extremely vulnerable people who, overnight, were no longer leaving the house). It led to an ever-growing forest of new email addresses and organograms, making a daily challenge out of determining who was now in charge of what.

So many people needed to know what was happening across Government that the doors of information were thrown wide open to ensure everyone saw what they needed to. Minutes of sensitive meetings that would normally have a copy list of dozens stretched into the hundreds, meetings that would normally have taken place once a week with an attendance in single figures took place twice a day with 60-70 people watching online. There is a belief in some quarters that this new found openness is a genie that won’t go back into the bottle. I suspect those visionaries are going to be disappointed.

Since that point the flow of work has followed that of many employers. The first few weeks didn’t have ends: I worked seven days a week, and when one problem was solved the next was waiting to take its place.

“I worked seven days a week, and when one problem was solved the next was waiting to take its place.”
Economy & Technology
Recent business headlines make dismal reading: First come reports of thousands of jobs lost and even more at risk in the retail sector as one high profile corporate failure follows another. Then there’s the hospitality sector which instead of enjoying its customary seasonal high is said to be on its knees and further we’re told that our great city centres have been hollowed out and resemble ghost towns as so many people now elect to work from home. This is a relentlessly bleak picture.

Behind the headlines, however, REED’s job data tells a different story. A story of two very different lockdowns. When the pandemic first erupted in the early spring and Lockdown 1.0 followed in its wake, the impact on the labour market was seismic. The shock waves were even harder and faster than those experienced in the financial crisis of 2008/9. Job vacancies advertised on reed.co.uk fell by 72%.

Following this experience, when Lockdown 2.0 was announced, with next to no notice, for the month of November, my expectation was that there would be another big decline in job numbers. Much to my surprise, this did not happen. Instead, job numbers rose in November, by 4% over October. And the year on year position has recovered markedly since the spring. We are now down only 20% as opposed to 72%. This is a much more encouraging picture.

Tellingly, our data shows that year on year job numbers began to decline a good while ago, in June 2019 in fact. Although many did not notice it, this recession actually began in the early summer of 2019. It was then greatly exacerbated by the pandemic and became, regrettably, the worst slump in more than 300 years. But now our data is telling us that this recession will end in the last quarter of 2020, right on schedule.

How so right on schedule? Over the last 60 years, REED has experienced a number of recessions in the jobs market. We’ve learnt that typically they last for six quarters. When we emerged from the Global Financial Crisis in 2010, REED’s data showed that job numbers were recovering strongly, much more strongly than the Bank of England and many eminent economists expected. Initially these luminaries were sceptical of our data but eventually we became mainstream as the unlikely ‘jobs miracle’ that followed later that decade became an indisputable fact.

REED’s data has been shown to be a reliable leading indicator. This has been the case for many years now. Employers advertise their jobs on reed.co.uk, which is the country’s #1 jobsite online, long before they actually hire or their new employees start paying taxes and turn up in the official data. Significantly, our indicator is now turning from amber to green. This will be confirmed when job numbers on reed.co.uk pass 200,000, which could happen any day now. There were 196,000 advertised this morning.

I will go a step further and stick my neck out again; our data suggests that the year 2021 will see a strong revival in the jobs market.

It could play out like this: Sectors like transport and logistics, education, technology, social care and health and medicine will continue to be busy. Other sectors such as accountancy, business administration, hospitality and leisure will open up and these sectors will boost new job numbers significantly. The lights will go back on in Central London and our other great cities and people will return to them to work.

The first quarter of 2021 will certainly set the tone for next year, but more significantly it might well set the tone for the rest of the decade.

Hold on tight.
Covid-19 has transformed our lives – for better or worse. For me personally it has meant moving out of London to be based in our house in my former constituency of Havant. Much of my day has been spent on Zoom and Teams, and this way of working is now deeply embedded in the pattern of our lives. The House of Lords has moved to electronic voting so I have found myself voting whilst out on the South Downs. A colleague delivered his speech from the passenger seat of his car while his wife drove. Our son moved back in with us to complete his Oxford doctorate with his girlfriend, now his fiancée. So professionally and personally, life has not been bad. But I am very aware that there are many people who cannot so easily move their work online. And for those of us who are at the stage of our lives where we already have a wide range of friends and contacts it is much easier than for those who are younger and trying to make new friendships and acquaintances online. The think tank with which I am associated, the Resolution Foundation, has researched the economic impact of Covid-19 and found it is older and better-paid people who have found it easiest to work online. For them the main economic impact is forced saving as spending money on meals out or foreign holidays has got harder. It is very different for the young and less affluent. They tend to work in the sectors where personal contact is key such as retail, hospitality and entertainment. They are most likely to have lost work and income. Their very different circumstances are captured in the evidence that they are likely to be getting into more debt. Many of these younger people are furloughed or unemployed. Looking back I fear that one of the most powerful critiques of our response to the epidemic will be that we should have taken this enforced idleness as an opportunity to boost their education and training. There have been some initiatives but they could have been more ambitious and implemented more quickly. This is the challenge of delivering education during the epidemic, which Christ Church itself has had to wrestle with. Online education can be really innovative and vivid but that involves care and investment, not just putting a lesson or lecture on line and running a lesson or seminar on Zoom. But it can be done – even for a large part of many vocational courses too. It is the future and we have staggered towards it rather than embracing it.

David Willetts’ book ‘A University Education’ is published by Oxford University Press.
A deadly pandemic ravages the world as we stay at home - increasingly reliant on the web to deliver us food, work and tales of the outside. The year is 2021 and reads like a dystopian sci-fi novel, our craving for connection left unfulfilled despite our best efforts with a webcam. Yet the 2019 Coronavirus outbreak simply accelerated our inevitable technological progression towards virtual interaction.

Millions of us allow our AI Assistants to recommend products, heat our homes, even answer our front doors – and our gradual familiarity with machine-led interactions will likely make many of us more relaxed about our data being shared between apps. Take the ‘Quantified Self’ trend where people measure steps taken, pulse rate or even mood tracking - mix that with data available from AI assistants and that’s a recipe for a device telling you when it’s time to exercise. It may even discourage you from buying cake online, as it knows your current weight.

With the current emphasis on health, e-wellness is continuing to rise in popularity, especially as for many exercising online is more viable than in a gym. Increased screen-time may also pave the way for acceptance of more immersive tech like Virtual or Augmented Reality. Imagine a real-time heads-up display overlaid onto your glasses for real-time industrial diagnostics. While watching a movie, blink twice for a drop-down menu of remaining running time, or the name of that actor you can’t quite place.

Despite it being easy to predict trends, consumer behaviour is unpredictable in terms of which technology people eventually adopt. For example, the ‘Zoom boom’ brought one particular conference calling app to the fore, chosen over other well-established players offering similar features. We see this pattern repeatedly in tech. The iPod was not the first mp3 player – but it was easy to use and marketed brilliantly. The best doesn’t necessarily mean the most popular, but there’s always a benefit to the person that’s exquisitely visible. ‘1000 songs in your pocket’, ‘One click to join an event’. In all cases, familiarisation with new tech is the precursor to integrating it with our lives.

Currently, we need the web more than ever, especially in lockdown phases, from home-schooling to zoom-calling to online shopping. So many jobs have changed immeasurably – my business as a keynote speaker around the world evaporated at the same speed as the travel and hospitality industry. However, I’m fortunate in that the transition to online is a space I’m used to working in, having spent many years on live television and streaming. What was unexpected was my clients asking for online presenter training, and I’ve really enjoyed doing it.

The nature of presenting is more than learning the words, it’s about confidence. Many see public speaking as an activity to be feared, done out of necessity to get on with the ‘real work’. Yet as we continue towards more virtual interaction where AI, chatbots and avatars start talking with us more, it makes sense to nurture the most important connection we can make – with other humans.

2020 was a year of great upheaval. I was fortunate to spend the year in my home a few miles south of Christ Church. My focus has been working on a new way to connect people and their data, Solid. I have poured all the extra time that I would have otherwise spent travelling into Solid and Inrupt, which is bringing to life the Solid platform.

Solid began in MIT CSAIL five years ago. It is a new way to connect people and data. It’s an open source, web-based technology that re-architects the way data is stored and shared and as a consequence, how apps are developed. At Oxford, Sir Nigel Shadbolt and I along with our colleagues in Computer Science and the Oxford Martin School are researching the potential of Solid.

The Inrupt team have been working with commercial customers on pilot projects with Solid, including the NHS, NatWest bank, the Flanders Government, and others. The company has worked straight through the pandemic without a blip, as everyone works from home anyway.

While we all have been figuring out how to make our physical lives more comfortable as we work from home, from video lights to delivery services, Inrupt has been working on how to make our digital lives more effective, more powerful, and more in our own control.

The Solid technology separates the apps from the data. Whichever app you run, it asks you where you want to store your data. You pick a personal online data store – or ‘Pod’ we call them. You can have more than one. A Pod is something you have complete control over.

You can share anything with anyone – or no one. You can use all kinds of different apps on the same data.

The Solid world is empowering for users, developers and organisations. Solid is also about trust, and getting people to feel safe in the online world. I have found during the pandemic, I have spent a lot more time than usual getting my home working environment right. I can make it a comfortable and effective place to work, but I can’t include other people during the pandemic.

Online, by contrast, I can connect to lots of people but it is frustrating that I have to remember on which social media platform I saw a given photo, or a given person. Organising my Solid Pod is a social version of organising my home -- with the frustrations removed. I can start chats with anyone, no matter which social networks they belong to. I can share photos with anyone, like anything, bookmark anything. It is like arranging my house but more powerful, as I can connect in my family and friends and colleagues just as I want. The Solid world has a long way to go before it will do all the things we can imagine, let alone the things all the developers out there can imagine.

I hope that with Solid, we can be as comfortable in our online world as we are in our physical. There will always be advantages of the physical world and the connections we can make and sustain there, but the digital world allows us to break barriers between cultures and collaborate better to solve problems.
International postcards from...

Reading of the new coronavirus last January, I remember feeling relief it was so far away. That vaporized two weeks later as my new ‘language support’ class at Parsons School of Design introduced themselves: half of the students were from China and three had family in Wuhan. All were deeply worried about the spread of the virus, their first projects full of poignant Covid-related imagery. Their worry escalated in the face of our obliviousness when the first US case was reported in New Rochelle, just north of New York City. While Americans were advised not to wear masks, my students’ families insisted, and many sent them from China. Students wearing masks were attacked, some physically.
Ambulance sirens echoing through empty streets was the
early spring lockdown soundtrack. Teaching went online. My
students scrambled to get home – many taking classes from
quarantine hotels in China. We learned that 55 elderly nursing
home residents had died two blocks south of us on Henry St.
One late night walk, I remarked on the heaped gurneys visible
from the street without realizing the implications. I walk to
my studio. The huge 11-floor building in highly desirable
DUMBO has emptied out and few but the artists in my
subsidized studio program remain on our 20-unit floor.

There were some pleasures to a quiet NYC. We cooked, fed
birds on the fire escape, read, worked and had distanced
meetings with neighbors. The deep quiet and solitude
were shattered by George Floyd’s murder on 25 May.
Like Eric Garner, choked to death on Staten Island in
2014 for selling single cigarettes, Floyd’s slow death at the
hands of Minneapolis cops was filmed in broad daylight.
The eruption of Black Lives Matter protests was the more
dramatic for the seclusion of the previous months. Protesters
were of every color, mostly young, largely peaceful,
inspiring. There was looting in some areas, some by agents
provocateurs, and the first curfew in NYC since 1943. The
police response was immediate and military. Borough Hall,
Brooklyn, was a staging area packed with armored cars and
phalanxes of heavily armed and armored cops. I met Scottish
photographer Graham Macindoe (https://grahammacindoe.
com/social%20justice/blm%20-%20nyc/), jittery from
photographing the vicious police response to mainly peaceful
demonstrations at Borough Hall. I broke curfew to march
with a group down Atlantic Ave to the river park below,
joining three black nurses who’d come from Florida to help
swamped NYC hospitals. They were working long shifts on
Covid wards by day and marching at night. They walked
for miles – one had a broken shoe – but were ecstatic. They
loved New York, exhilarated that this was happening.

As the mob overwhelmed the Capitol, the US is deep in a
second wave. Both David and I are ill, and today waited in a
long line for Covid-19 tests. Fingers crossed.
In some ways, the last year in Washington DC has been like everywhere else – lockdown, working from home, broadcasting from a balcony of the building I live in more often than our spot at the White House.

But in other ways, it’s been a quite extraordinary time.

At the start, Coronavirus was something that happened somewhere else – particularly in the President’s view; a press photographer at the White House spotted he’d crossed out the word ‘Corona’ in his script, and written in ‘Chinese’ with a black Sharpie.

But it didn’t take long for the United States to become the epicentre of the pandemic. While Washington has never been affected as much as New York, friends and colleagues were falling ill, and our worlds contracted. Some of the restrictions are less severe than currently in the UK – at the moment ‘outdoor dining’ is still allowed; but eating at an outside table is less attractive in January than it was back in August – though still much more palatable than the President’s suggestion of warding off Coronavirus by drinking bleach.

Lockdown is hard for all of us, but for a blind person there are extra challenges – while we are practised at using our canes to avoid knocking into people, they’re not so good at helping us to keep two metres distance. Sometimes we have to take someone else’s arm to be guided – holding on near the elbow they’ve been told to cough into. And while we might sometimes guess who isn’t wearing a mask and should be avoided, it can only ever be just that – a guess.

While the DC government has always taken a fairly robust view on Covid-19, in other parts of the States, virus-denial became a political badge of honour. In places like Florida, early shutdowns were lifted, and people flocked back to work, to restaurants, to tattoo parlours and to the beaches – and unsurprisingly, the numbers soared.

Being maskless was almost part of the uniform for Trump supporters. There weren’t many masks to be seen at his election rallies – though at the end there was a sense that this

“President Trump had attacked Joe Biden for wearing a mask, and for spending part of the pandemic in Zoom meetings from the basement of his house in Delaware.”
could be provoking a backlash, and those in shot behind the President were asked to mask up.

Donald Trump even tried at times to force reporters to remove their masks when asking questions.

Very few of the violent protesters who stormed the Capitol to try to stop the election results being certified on 6 January were wearing masks – and neither were Trump-supporting members of Congress; several members of the House tested positive after sheltering in a small room with some of them.

And of course, the President himself succumbed to Covid-19 – after several ‘super spreader’ events at the White House, where his supporters sat inches apart, or stood close together, some of them embracing warmly.

For a few days, we were broadcasting live from outside the Walter Reed Military Hospital – with the medical bulletins interspersed with tweets from the President telling us how he was getting along just fine.

Donald Trump has been a very divisive figure in US politics – but even so, there were moments when the whole country held its breath.

But almost before we could all breathe out, we were back to the political theatre. The President didn’t look especially well when he arrived back from hospital, but that didn’t stop him tearing off his mask before striding into the White House.

And once the live TV feeds were over, the President and his team went back and re-shot part of that scene, so that their campaign videos could show him getting out of Marine One looking both Presidential and vigorous – a man who told us he was now ‘immune’ to the virus.

Just before he fell ill, Mr Trump’s rhetoric in the first Presidential debate hadn’t changed, even more than six months in. Coronavirus was the ‘China plague’, he said, which had destroyed America’s great economy. The second debate was cancelled after he said he would only agree to take part face to face – just twelve days after he was admitted to hospital.

President Trump had attacked Joe Biden for wearing a mask, and for spending part of the pandemic in Zoom meetings from the basement of his house in Delaware. But in the end, it was Mr Biden’s caution, and his emphasis on the need for strong measures to fight the pandemic, that caught the national mood. And tackling Covid-19 is President-Elect Biden’s top priority for his first 100 days.

As a news broadcaster, who can’t always work from home, I should be able to get a vaccine in the spring. And by then, too – a year after we first went into lockdown – outside dining at the restaurants round here will seem like a much more attractive bet.
I moved to the US in 1998, to pursue a career in biotech. Having read Biology at the House (1991), I ended up working at the industry’s vortex in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and settled nearby in Newton; fittingly known as the ‘Garden City’, a town of ~50,000 not so different to my home town of Guildford.

We first started hearing about the new virus in Wuhan in January (2020). There was general awareness, but no real alarm at the time. I recall heading off to speak at a partnering meeting in San Diego in February and donning a mask on the flight. While I didn’t receive funny looks, it certainly felt unusual to be the only person wearing a mask at that time.

As regions of Italy were becoming heavily affected, many in the US seemed to be thinking/hoping the virus wasn’t going to spread here. Then cases started building up in New York. Boston didn’t report any Covid-19 cases for another few weeks; until our super-spreader event occurred. One of the pillars of the local Biotech community, Biogen, held a meeting involving associates from around the world. Within days, rumours were spreading, followed by news stories, that some people from Biogen were infected with Covid-19. It turned out that 70 of Massachusetts’s first 92 confirmed cases came from this meeting.

Hand sanitizer, cleaning products, toilet paper and masks quickly became unavailable, but most other items remained in fairly normal supply.

Then came the lockdowns. I had a head-start on lockdown, having attended a conference in early March at which someone from Biogen had been present, I needed to self-quarantine for two weeks. A week into my quarantine, Massachusetts joined in, as the State went into lockdown. My family and I then juggled life, work, online deliveries and home schooling, all from one basement room for the first few months as the rest of our house was under construction (fabulous timing!).

Working in biotech offered opportunities to join the fray; hundreds of programs and collaborations were launched aimed at defeating the virus, decreasing the societal impact and easing patient suffering. Everyone involved in this work had the same opinion; we were thrilled and amazed that the normal boundaries that separate companies, academics and governments had all but ‘dissolved’ – the work had to happen immediately, the paperwork would ‘get done’, seemed to be the ethos across the board.

Massachusetts’s initial lockdown worked quite well, after a few months the Covid-19 numbers dropped from scary to almost feeling okay again. Masks were routinely worn and Newtonians didn’t seem afraid to let non-mask wearers know how they felt. We watched as Covid-19 numbers ballooned in other regions of the US while being effectively nixed in other countries, as priorities regarding the pandemic varied.

Autumn brought the return of hundreds of thousands of college students to this vicinity, which is home to Harvard, MIT, Boston University, Boston College, Tufts, Brandeis and many others. Locals were apprehensive but, anchored by the Broad Institute’s offer of $25 PCR testing and some universities repurposing labs for testing, almost all students and staff were surveillance tested, often weekly, with 24-hour data turnaround. While tens of cases were identified on campuses and the students quarantined, Massachusetts’s colleges avoided the experience of dozens of universities across the country which recorded cases in the thousands and had to send students home mid-term. Although, I can’t imagine Covid-19 restricted campus life was too much fun for the students, who risked being expelled and losing hefty tuition payments for transgression.

Covid-19 numbers in Massachusetts went up with the return to school, but not alarmingly. However, lockdown fatigue, Thanksgiving and the festive season really put our numbers back up, so at the time of writing we’re back to high infection rates, social isolation, and anxiously anticipating the rollout of the vaccines. Godspeed and all good wishes!

A Covid-19 letter from America

Dr Avi Spier (1991, Biology)
On 26 February 2020 one of my partners predicted at a large international private equity conference which our law firm had organized that this would be the last event of such kind for a long time. While numbers were already rising in Europe at that point, I thought that his prediction was a bit alarmistic. It was probably not until Friday 13 March that I fully realised the impact that the pandemic could have: On that day, the German government announced that the revised Federal budget would establish a guarantee framework with a volume of 460 billion Euros, with the option of an increase by another 93 billion Euros.

Bavaria’s prime minister Markus Söder said that the government would do “whatever it takes” to stabilise the economy. Those were the very words Mario Draghi, the then president of the European Central Bank, used when announcing the “bazooka” of fiscal policy during the financial crisis in 2008. When I heard Mr. Söder using this English language expression – during an otherwise all-German speech and thus clearly referencing Mr. Draghi – I e-mailed my fellow members of our firm’s strategy board straight away to discuss emergency measures to protect both our staff and our firm’s finances. As a result of this meeting, we decided to immediately prepare for an office closure, equipping everyone, including all non-fee earners, with laptops and other technical equipment to work from home, or, as it is commonly called in Germany, from one’s ‘home office’. Thanks to our modern IT infrastructure and a few night shifts by our fantastic IT staff, we ended up being one of the first law firms in the country to close shop and send everyone home. Luckily, our concerns that we would not have enough work and have to send our attorneys into furlough proved all but right. However, that is not true for all our clients and the country’s economy.

While state measures have so far prevented a large number of people being laid off, our economy has taken a hard hit and government debt has skyrocketed. We are also still in the midst of the so-called second wave; the vaccine is available for the most vulnerable, but it will take months for everyone to receive their two doses.

Now, that has been very much the business perspective on the pandemic in Germany, and I ask myself why it is not the health or social aspects that came to my mind first. However, since luckily no-one dear to me has fallen seriously ill, the well-being of the more than 100 staff employed by my firm is very much a priority for me at this time. As for the socio-economic impact, it is probably too early to tell. Although there are concerns that the pandemic has fueled disenchantment with democracy, I remain hopeful that it will change society for the better, not for the worse, making us more resilient and helping us better prepare for future pandemics, the effects of which may be even worse.
In the May edition of e-Matters I gave you a report from the Swedish lockdown. Little did I then expect that eight months later I would still be working mostly from home, with my major distractions being limited to trimming my corona beard and smoking cigars on my balcony (unfortunately less enjoyable in the winter). However, rather than writing 'A Journal of the Plague Year in Sweden', I will share my thoughts about some of the dichotomies that have been driving the different approaches to the pandemic in Sweden and elsewhere.

I will start by analysing four ‘fundamental’ dichotomies behind the different tactics to fight the virus.

**Good state vs evil state**

For historical reasons, the State is generally seen as something good by Swedes, which means that you are expected to be able to rely on support and advice from it in difficult times. This is of course primarily a result of the creation of the welfare state, but goes back much further than that. Already in the early sixteenth century the King, together with the Lutheran State Church, had established a control of the minds and daily life of the citizens, partly due to the lack of feudal structures and partly due to the limited size of the population. The idea of a contract between sovereign and subjects was further reinforced by the teachings of Martin Luther.

We can see the concept of the Good State mostly in Northern Europe, in contrast to countries like Italy and the US. In a country where the citizens believe (at least basically) in the idea of the Good State, there is obviously better ground for voluntary measures and less need for policing of restrictions. This explains some of the differences between measures taken in Sweden and elsewhere, although I admit that it does not necessarily explain the differences among the Nordic countries.
Until recently, the Swedish response to the pandemic was expert-driven and the officers from the Public Health Authority were the main stars of the weekly press conferences. This continued until late Autumn without much political debate. I cannot say that we have been entirely free from fake news and conspiracy theories in Sweden, but compared to what you see in other countries, our general reliance on experts has served us well to limit the impact of it. History will judge whether the measures taken were right or wrong, but they had at least consistency and more of a long-term perspective. However, new enabling statutes have now been enacted and the relevant ministers have started to take a more active role in media. This has unfortunately resulted in quicker swings and less predictability.

Centralised government vs devolution

Whether a country has one central seat of power rather than a number of regional power centres is normally a consequence of how and when the national state was created. This is certainly true for Germany and the US, where this results in substantive delegated powers to the constituent states, but devolution can also have other reasons. In the UK the modern devolution was created for political reason. Sweden is a very large country with a small population, which until relatively recently had an underdeveloped road network. This necessitated a delegation of powers to local representatives of the King and subsequently the Government.
The devolved structure of the Swedish public service has unfortunately not served us very well during the pandemic. It has made it difficult to take national initiatives and secure adequate supply of necessary resources. It has also resulted in a 'blame game' between central and local authorities. However, unlike in the UK, this has not resulted in different restrictions in different regions. I (and many with me) hope that the difficulties experienced during the pandemic will result in a general overhaul of the regional administration in Sweden.

Dependence vs independence of public authorities

This dichotomy is primarily an effect of the reliance of experts. If you believe in experts, the Government should not be allowed to interfere with the running of public authorities. This is a fundamental principle in Swedish civil service and on the whole a good thing. The historic reason is a desire to protect the civil service from the arbitrary interventions of the King. Although something good in normal circumstances, the Swedish response to the pandemic has undoubtedly been less efficient as a result of the Government's inability to intervene. Again something I hope will be at least partially reconsidered as a result of the pandemic.

Nationalism vs internationalism

The initial stages of the pandemic resulted in a parallel plague of nationalism, with closed borders and export restrictions for some of the necessary resources. I am proud to say that even the initial Swedish response to the pandemic did not show a nationalistic bias. Based on advice from experts we kept our borders open until we, as a result of an agreement within the EU, closed them for non-EU travellers. With the politicians now on the centre stage, we have recently seen some more travel restrictions being implemented.

If you live in a small country like Sweden, it is easy to conclude that internationalism beats nationalism when you have to fight a pandemic, something that has become obvious from the development and distribution of the vaccines.

Civil liberties vs interference

I was struggling with this dichotomy, whether it is fundamental or consequential. You would expect that a focus on the protection of civil liberties would be greater in the countries where the state is seen as evil, like in the US, and less in countries like Sweden. In the general debate in the US and the UK, you see the protection of civil liberties as a strong argument against far-reaching mandatory rules. In Sweden so far, we have actually seen the argument primarily being put forward by the Government as an explanation why we are not introducing stricter regulation.

The following four ‘consequential’ dichotomies can be described as results of the preceding fundamental dichotomies.

Binding rules vs recommendations

The reliance of recommendations rather than binding rules is in the case of Sweden a result primarily of the belief in the Good State, supported by the cult of the expert. Again this does not necessarily explain the difference among the Nordic countries, where the other countries have tended to rely more on binding rules. In an international comparison, this is perhaps the area where the Swedish approach stands out the most.

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Fighting pandemic vs avoiding side effects

The final dichotomy on my list is probably the most sensitive. Should we do everything we can to fight the pandemic, irrespective of the cost, or should we consider other long-term effects on society which the proposed measures may have?
We arrived back in Hong Kong on 21 January. I remember it clearly because my mother asked me whether I should be worried about a rising case of some virus in China. I didn't think much of it at the time. Did any of us? Well, in Hong Kong it was a different story. Unless you walked along the street wearing a mask, people would stare angrily at you. It was impossible not to feel guilty for forgetting to wear it. I quickly did. But they'd seen this all before with SARS. Entering my office building, you had to queue to get your temperature taken, even at the airport they were using infrared temperature scanners to see who might be infected. I just thought washing your hands was all that mattered. How wrong I was.

As the situation worsened in Hong Kong, and with a pregnant wife, we decided it would be safer to come back to the UK where we thought we would be out of reach of the virus. Again, how wrong we were.

I became ill on 20 February or so, I also remember that vividly because I called the 111 number only to be told that because it had been more than 14 days since arriving in the UK, I didn't qualify for a Covid-19 test. I spent the next week in bed, stupidly spending some of that at my parents' house just to be away from my wife. It seemed impossible to believe that I had Covid-19, we were all being told the chances were slim. Remember Cheltenham? How ludicrous was it to think a virus wouldn't hop on a plane. When it dawned on me that I might indeed have it, I remember texting those I had met to let them know and ask how they felt. Everyone said they were fine. It was a mystery. Unfortunately I passed it on to my wife, who also fell ill for the next two weeks. She found it hard to breathe so we called 111. They advised it was better to drive ourselves to A&E, so we did. And were duly told there was nothing anyone could do for us as her oxygen levels were thankfully high enough.

After a few weeks, we felt well enough to get out of London and went to my father's farm in Somerset. It was a joy to finally be out of the city and as soon as we arrived a nationwide lockdown was put in place, so we stayed put.

We spent the next three months on the farm, walking, cooking, reading, and having the most wonderful time. My heart goes out to everyone else who wasn't as fortunate as us to have the chance to be in the countryside or who experienced the more brutal side of Covid-19. As much as I understand the scientific need for lockdowns, they can be terrible for the soul.

Our baby was born in July, healthy and happy, again another blessing. There are so many things I would change about 2020 if I could, but that is one thing that I wouldn't.
“Unable to bring ‘Theatre of Voices’, the Grammy- and Pulitzer-prize winning vocal ensemble, to Hong Kong, we rendered them as holograms and presented them live anyway, a ghostly double for 2020’s existential challenge to the human species.”
Covid-proofing the arts in Hong Kong

Dr Eugene A Birman (2012, Music)

Despite many governments’ best efforts, the arts industry has not so much been devastated as ever-so-slightly reinvented. From my perspective as a composer and administrator of International projects, it has been a sobering experience to see the effects of outright bans on public culture and performance, but just like a breath of cold, fresh air (which is the norm this time of year anyway), also a fantastic challenge to adapt and adopt new solutions. Hong Kong, where I have been based since 2017, has so far survived the pandemic relatively unscathed, but at the price of almost completely closed borders and mostly closed concert halls.

Still, with a mix of determination, stubbornness, and some careful city diplomacy, my project ARIA, an 80-minute immersive opera where a giant greenhouse serves as stage and the audience and performers interact on a journey through it, was publicly presented in sixteen sold-out performances. Unable to bring Theatre of Voices, the Grammy- and Pulitzer-prize winning vocal ensemble, to Hong Kong, we rendered them as holograms and presented them live anyway, a ghostly double for 2020’s existential challenge to the human species.

The FT called it “a Covid-proof opera for our times” in its feature article back in November, while South China Morning Post simply labeled it “the future”. I look forward to presenting it in rather better times in its European premiere at Manchester International Festival in 2023 – slightly closer to home.

Several days after our final performance, cases in Hong Kong shot up again and all public events were banned yet again. But where there is a will, there is a way.

On a personal note, the many postponements and cancellations allowed me to actually write the music I was commissioned to write, something I realise would have been impossible had I kept up my travel schedule. And if anything, 2020 has been a timely reminder of the value of genuine human interaction, of cultural production, of technology’s great promise but also its inability to come close to supplanting modern society. Thinking back on my education and experience at the House, it is a further reminder to maintain and strengthen those personal bonds; a disembodied digital existence can only go so far.

The blessing of being rarely more than a sixteen or seventeen-hour flight from close family or a world premiere concert has been made particularly clear this year. Even when life returns to a (new) normal, the strength of hope, of renewed bonds, and of renewed commitment to culture, no matter the obstacles that have come out of this year will stay with me – and, surely, many others – for a lifetime. A baptism with fire, with nary a firework to mark its end.

Above: ARIA, the lush forest of the Forsgate Conservatory in central Hong Kong takes center stage. © ARIA

空氣頌
Life during the Covid-19 pandemic has been anything but normal. As with most issues and situations in Lebanon’s tortured history, it has been a study in contrasts and extremes. The country was one of the first to go into lockdown back in March 2020 and was managing quite well until midsummer. Daily cases never went beyond a figure of 10-20 until the end of June. The lockdown was generally well accepted even though the government, or what passed as one, did not introduce any legislation to assist those in need. My antique carpet business turned fully online as more homeowners and collectors around the world seized the chance of being stuck indoors in their respective countries to refurbish their homes or expand their collections. Social media, express courier services, online banking, business conducted A-Z without so much as interacting physically with another human being. The new normal?

Summer in Lebanon started off quite boisterously as the active and affluent Lebanese diaspora flew in in great numbers, escaping their countries of permanent activity and residence in favor of a Mediterranean destination with great medical care—and no more lockdown. Unlike say Europe (on/off restrictions), America (what on earth was happening there?), Africa (weak medical services) or the Persian Gulf states (summer at 50 degrees?). And then, at 18:07 on Tuesday the 4th of August ... the most devastating and largest nuclear explosion in peacetime history happened at Beirut harbor. It was felt all the way in Cyprus, a sea away. Approximately 300,000 people lost their homes; 50,000 units of housing were destroyed; 10,000 small businesses were partially or completely damaged. Mine included. My art gallery lies less than a mile away from the epicenter. My team and I had left at 18:02 and, miraculously, we were all away from the zone of immediate impact within those five minutes. However, I still vividly recall how my car levitated above the road and I felt the air pressure working inversely as its sides seemed to cave in from the pressure. My wife Hala and the kids were in Beirut’s largest shopping mall, ABC, a couple of miles further out but they suffered more as the entire glass roof fell upon them and they lost one another. They all were in a state of shock for days and suffered from PTSD for long weeks. My youngest son, aged 8, still asks me about death and dying almost every night before he falls asleep. My aunt was at the mall too and suffered from a broken shoulder, hip, elbow and thumb.

The country threw out the baby with the bath water and the explosion, so to speak. The government resigned. Covid-19 restrictions, minimal as they were, were not implemented anymore nor were any perpetrators punished. Daily numbers spiked to 700 by the end of August and 2000 by Christmas time. Attempts at further lockdowns proved futile as economic concerns gained more traction. With an abjectly incompetent and grossly corrupt political class, Lebanon was in freefall. I write this in January 2021 when we now have more than 6,000 daily cases in a nation of 4 million and the highest rate of positive PCR results in the world, hovering between 25-30%. More than 60% of new infections have been identified as the new British strain or mutation. Half my family have fallen ill with the coronavirus already, including my wife who caught it while sleeping in hospital with her mum who had open heart surgery. I’ve only seen my parents twice in the last six weeks (scandalous by Middle East standards) so we might as well be living in different countries. My children haven’t seen any of their friends since 1 March 2020. They have been engaged in online learning since then and have not even met their current teachers nor will they it seems before the academic year is out. They’re fond of getting our photo albums out and reminiscing about bubbly birthday parties, Sunday lunches with the family, and above all the exciting days when we used to travel. Hala and I worry a lot about their emotional and social well-being. But what can be done really? Will we ever go back to a normal normal?
There is only one way to arrive in New Zealand, by plane, and in general there are only two entrance doors, through Auckland or Christchurch. My experience of Covid-19 in New Zealand must be limited to my experience of it in Canterbury and in its principal town, the city of our eponymous Christchurch. I haven’t travelled outside Canterbury since arriving from Europe, on 1 February 2020.

When New Zealanders believe something is ‘right’ or appropriate, they have the potential to react uniformly and not simply because they are directed to do so by Government. The New Zealand lockdown in antipodean autumn was so widely embraced, because the public wanted the Government to act strongly.

Such national collectiveness has its roots: in the physical remoteness of New Zealand; in the colonial neighbourliness and mutual generosity towards one another caused by collective remoteness; in the very nature of its manifold and widespread farming communities, in the ubiquitous ‘mateship’ of social interaction and in its thorough culture of playing classless team sports from primary school age to near middle age.
Christchurch and Canterbury have been the most fortunate among the fortunate. Devastating earthquakes in recent years rehearsed factors such as deprivation, sacrifice and strong support of one another while accepting what fate delivers. The earthquakes resetted much of the city’s professional and working population from its centre to its many suburbs, making those suburbs increasingly self-sufficient. The earthquakes encouraged working at home and increased home schooling, a decade before Covid-19 arrived. There is comparatively little pub culture.

Christchurch and Canterbury are basically flat. Streets and roads are mostly unusually wide. In Christchurch, parks and trees are in serious abundance. Buses are plentiful but mostly rather empty; there is no underground system, there is no train service linking one centre to another. The prevailing wind is in off the Pacific Ocean, and it prevails regularly!

One travels in and around the city on foot, on bicycle or in one’s own car. One travels from centre to centre by car. One does not live in apartment buildings, semi-detached or terraced housing, but in detached bungalows surrounded by varying sizes of garden. One travels in one’s own bubble and dwells in bubbles, Covid-19 or no Covid-19.

Extreme discipline, during a short but severe lockdown period, removed nascent community Covid-19 and therefore made having the above-mentioned advantages very much worth that initial discipline. Since the end of May, life has evolved from almost normal to completely normal.

Admittedly, my wife and I can’t visit our European home, and our Narropea performances in Europe have all been cancelled, but such is a small price to pay for being able to live normally. In Christchurch, we live in a detached bungalow surrounded by a three-acre garden, which leaves us limited time for much else.

One hears often how one wishes in Britain to have had a Government like New Zealand’s in such a crisis. Such comparisons are only as relevant as comparing the complexity of the UK’s HMS Queen Elizabeth with the flexibility of New Zealand’s Black Magic.