



*Richard Howitt is well known to residents of this area as, for 22 years between 1994 and 2016, he was a MEP (Member of the European Parliament) representing the East of England (Labour). Richard has a unique perspective on the Lockdown crisis – he contracted the COVID19 virus and was hospitalised. Here he reminisces – about his time with the virus and his subsequent convalescence – in his house and amongst the local community.*

## **Notes on a crisis - how one road overcame the lockdown.**

The thing about a story in real life is that - at the time - you don't know it's about to begin.

One day this wasn't a crisis about your family, your neighbours or your street, but a drama being played out on television and other electronic screens.

Then virtual reality becomes real.

It starts with wondering how you're going to make that meeting. Then you just have to go to bed. Then the Doctor rings back and doesn't give you any choice: you have to go to hospital.

Pack a bag - you might be staying. Then the fear which was not inside me, but in the eyes of the Doctors and nurses as another unknown new patient, arrived through the special hospital entrance. That struck home.

What happened in the hospital is a different story, connected to a different community. At home, the telephone and social media messages beginning to arrive in numbers, of concern and of love, were with my family.

My only contact with them was a call from a ward nurse to tell them how I was doing.

Many people had it worse. But it's the worst illness that I've ever had.

The point about being that ill, is that you are unaware of what's going on around you, unable to move from bed, even when it was finally possible to return home. Quarantined from your own partner and children, despite all being under the same roof.

It felt like being a kidnap victim. In a way, it was. By that bastard virus.

The mirror I didn't have the strength to look in to, came in the later comments of neighbours.

"You had no colour in your face."

"You suddenly looked older."

(Thank-you).

But most telling of all, from our direct neighbour, listening from over the garden fence:

"I just felt so frightened, hearing your cough."

But this is a story of community and these were no casual observations.

They were expressions of care.

And the self-organisation which sprung up in our community, as it did across our city and around the country, sprung in to action.

At first, it felt like the need to do something.

There was the sewing of homemade face masks. The borrowing of a household appliance, a ladder, a garden hose. The sharing of garden produce, to put it to good use.

Our road has always had a sense of community, but suddenly the overlapping circles of friendship and neighbourliness coalesced.

People were comparing Coronavirus to the Spanish 'flu, a century ago. Yet a technology on our mobile 'phones of which few of us had heard but five years before, the WhatsApp icon, was suddenly the meeting place which brought us as one.

This being Cambridge, people worried anxiously about data privacy, as names and numbers were shared. But no-one complained. These were different times and the compulsion to be different drove us together.

Sitting in quarantine inside a house which was itself in total lockdown, without relatives nearby, demonstrated that these bonds of community - new and old - were far from abstract.

Getting a slot for home delivery of shopping was impossible. The vans may not have crashed, but the computers always did.

So every piece of shopping for food, a prescription, some vegetables from an allotment, freshly-baked bread, an entire meal, were delivered by different neighbours.

Generously. Unquestioning. And with a sense of humour.

Items left outside our front door and signals that they were. Better than any 1960s spy film.

Conversations took place through windows, with the aid of mime. For me, it was the distant sound of voices below, at once both familiar but too fragmented to hear.

Even the dustbin was brought around for collection.

Things you barely think about in normal times, but now vital.

My birthday came, lying in that bed, no opportunity for celebration.

Yet cards and presents arrived, from some who would never have sent them before. Not out of indifference, but because newfound friendship had been forged.

And children's drawings, like the pictures of thanks to the NHS, which adorned front windows up and down the street.

One incident symbolised it all for me.

It was my first night back home and it was cold. I was in our top bedroom where I could be separated from the rest of the household, but with only a fan heater for warmth. Not only did it fail to keep me warm, but the fan was irritating my cough. I lay awake frozen and contorted.

So at 7am, the first time we thought people would be up, we put out a message on the WhatsApp group. Within thirty minutes, no fewer than four portable radiators were sitting outside our front door.

Our inspired neighbour opposite was seen in his pyjamas literally running across the road, carrying his. You just had to cry.

The previous year, our son had been seriously ill and we had been recipients of many individual expressions of kindness.

But this was different. This was the whole community embracing itself. Air kisses not out of affectation but necessity.

The day came when I could emerge in to the street itself.

Then I began taking tentative steps up the road, as part of my recovery, my slow steps becoming slower still, as every passer-by stops to enquire of my health.

New institutions had been created in the street in the meantime, proving that at one and the same time, you could be distanced but still come together.

The Thursday 8pm 'clap' for the NHS. A street party, where we set up chairs and tables in our own front gardens, waving and calling across the street and down the pavement. And a Sunday evening ritual which started with talented children playing their musical instruments, and evolved in to something quite extraordinary.

The 'lockdown concerts'.

Fifteen minute doorstep recitals enjoyed by neighbours, listening from their own open doors.

A repertoire of pieces that had been learnt over many hours of practice, now shared.

And old, familiar music in times where warm memories of times past provided a collective reassurance, at a time of mutual anxiety.

'Les Miserables' classics. London's Burning. Somewhere over the rainbow. 'O Sole Mio' sung to the words of the 'Cornetto' television advert'...of course.

More birthdays were celebrated, with seemingly the whole street singing along.

Recorders. Trumpets. Cellos. Drums. Clarinets. Violins. Keyboards. An accordion. A home-crafted electric guitar. A ukulele. The human voice. Then whole bands.

Hidden talents from people of talent: teachers, journalists, charity workers, scientists, lawyers, artists, a sewerage engineer and the doctors, whose heroism we celebrated.

It was the stillness of everyone being confined to their own homes, which enabled the sound of a single instrument to float through the air, clear for all to enjoy.

We had our very own impresario, better than PT Barnum. But the quiet conversations from people stepping out from their front doors, around and after the concerts, what was what truly marked the enhanced sense of community which had been created.

Every house had its challenges. Children needing to be taught, teachers preparing to teach them. Work still to be done, and homes left with no work at all. A new baby being born, but elderly relatives unable to see the newborn of their own families.

We were the kith that substituted for the kin.

And music had become our therapy.

The performances began to spill out on to the road. Supermarket delivery vans proved they really did exist and music stands had to be quickly lifted, to enable them to pass. All in good humour.

Then on Midsummer's night, what became a festival of musicianship, from door to window to garden, snaking up and down the whole of the road. The final lockdown concert.

Some people from surrounding streets arrived. Welcomed because these new invisible bonds were never exclusive.

It ended with the 'Last Post'. A symbol better than any governmental press conference, that the worst was now over.

Did this really happen?

The programmes exist, as do photos and video clips on a myriad of mobiles. They will go in to digital clouds, like the notes ascending in to the clouds above as we played.

We'll tell our grandchildren about this. For some, it was their grandchildren who were taking part. So our grandchildren will tell their grandchildren. This is what they mean, when they talk about 'people's history'.

The lexicon of this pandemic may be forgotten: of spikes, social distancing, PPE, key workers, herd immunity...and of lockdown itself.

Some say life will return exactly as it was before, others that our lives have fundamentally changed.

In our short road, it is sure that the new friendships will endure.

You don't need to drive 300 miles away at a time of need, Mr Government Advisor, because the answer is there amongst your own neighbours all along.

This short story is written by way of offering thanks. To add words to the music.

We make jokes about on which side of the road you live? But no-one passed by in this crisis.

Our road, a road in the name of Bishop Mawson in Cambridge, a road of families, international visitors, students and retired folk, the road of the 'Live and Let Live' pub, showed itself to be the stuff of life itself.

Richard Howitt

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