

# Radley during Covid



## Introduction: Joyce Huddleston

In early 2022, the Club's Oral History Group began recording a series of interviews to capture the memories of people in the village about the effects that the Covid pandemic had had on them, with a view to making a record for future generations. This talk presents the common themes uncovered by these interviews and the insights gained from them. I'm going to start with a few words of introduction.

## About the project

- Oral History Group members
- How did the Covid pandemic affect people in Radley
- From start of first lockdown in March 2020 to Spring 2021
- Project began in December 2021
- Getting started: timeline, framework of questions

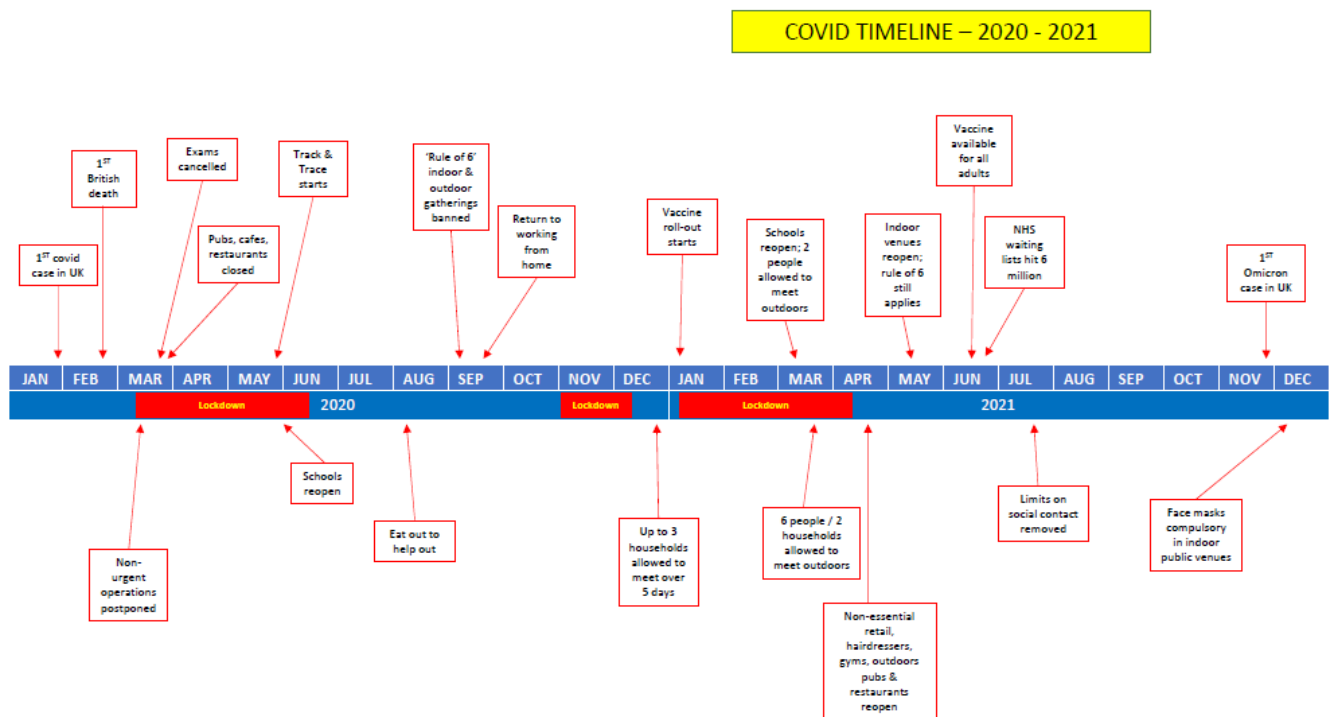
The Oral History Group has four members. I coordinate the group. Colin Orr Burns and Tony Rogerson are responsible for carrying out the interviews. Tony Gilman is our audio expert and

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a key person working away in the background. He looks after the audio equipment, edits the recordings to remove extraneous noises, etc., and then converts them to a more accessible audio format.

The aim of the project was to find out how the Covid pandemic affected people in Radley. To do this, the Group sought to interview people from a range of different categories – particularly those involved with key village institutions like the village shop, the church, the school and then people running a business, working from home, retired, medical professionals, looking after their children, caring for someone – a whole range of people.

We set a timescale that covered the three lockdown periods. Colin produced a timeline as an aide-mémoire, both for interviewees and interviewers [available to a separate download].



It's a lot of detail. I just want to show it to you so you've got the idea of what we were working to. Then we developed a framework of questions. We wanted the interviews to be informal chats, but with a loose basis on that framework. Again, I appreciate you're not going to be able to read it all, it's just to give you some idea.

## Framework of questions

1. What was your situation at the beginning of Covid with regard to:
  - health
  - home
  - family
  - work
  - leisure
2. How did Covid affect you with regard to these areas?
3. What were the hardest things you had to handle?
4. What long-term changes have resulted for you?
  - negatively
  - positively

## About the project continued

- Number of interviews completed: 18
- Transcription – use of artificial intelligence
- Anonymity of interviewees
- Structure of talk

We were aiming for 20 interviews; in the end we completed 18.

The use of AI to transcribe some of the recordings was a really exciting facet of the project. For the *Radley Remembered* series of recordings made between 2003 and 2007, which are more factual, written summaries of each recording were produced in tabular form based on a common framework of topics. However, we felt that approach wasn't going to work as well for this project, which is much more about people's thoughts and feelings. So we decided we needed to have a written transcript of each interview to make it easier to analyse.

There is free transcription software available, such as Microsoft Word for Web, but that produced pages and pages of very raw text, which took a long time to correct and edit down to a useful form. It was clear we needed a better way of producing a decent transcript, so we took advantage of the rapid advances in the technology and the use of AI by the summer of 2023. Using an extract from one of the recordings, Colin investigated various paid-for online

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transcription services based on AI and obtained quotes from four companies that offered free demonstrations. It's all done online and it's very simple and straightforward. AI produced a considerably better result. Group members unanimously chose one company and we paid £3 to £4 per interview to generate a transcript of the remaining recordings. This saved us hours of work. The transcripts were very good. They were produced very quickly and just needed a light edit to produce usable text. The talk today is based on those edited transcripts.

One final thing about the talk. It doesn't give the names of the people who were interviewed, though I think it's inevitable that some people will be identifiable from the context.

Colin's now going to talk about the key findings and the key takeaways from recordings. And then Tony Rogerson is going to use three examples from the interviews he did to give a flavour of the detail and the views expressed. I'll be back to wind things up with a few words.

### **Key findings and take-aways from the interviews: Colin Orr Burns**

I'm going to talk about the key findings from the work that we did: I could probably ask any one of you to come up here and give the talk about what I'm about to say.

## KEY FINDINGS

- NO SURPRISES – FOR US BUT NOT FOR SUBSEQUENT GENERATIONS
- MEMORIES AND RECOLLECTIONS FADE QUICKER THAN WE PROBABLY REALISE

Basically, there's no surprises in what we found. But that's not why we're doing it. We're not doing it for us. We're doing it for subsequent generations: these records will still be here in 20, 30, 40, 50 years' time. We have the transcriptions and we need to decide what to do with them – maybe in the form of a book or something like that. But in the future they will make extremely interesting reading of what people went through because memories and recollections fade quicker than we probably realise. As you know, it seems a long time ago that we went through this: some people forget we had three lockdowns. So that's why it's really worth going through this exercise. I'm just going to run through very quickly some of the key takeaways from what we found.

## KEY TAKE-AWAYS 1

- FEW ACTUALLY HAD COVID
- FOR SOME IT WORKED OUT FAIRLY WELL
- OTHERS HAD MAJOR PROBLEMS
- BIGGEST FRUSTRATION – LACK OF FAMILY PHYSICAL CONTACT
- SOME OPPORTUNITIES MISSED ARE GONE FOR EVER
- LOST HOLIDAYS
- BIGGEST HELP - ZOOM AND INTERNET
- WORKING FROM HOME
- ROLE OF THE CHURCH – BOTH POSITIVES AND NEGATIVES
- ROLE OF THE VILLAGE SHOP
- SHOPPING WAS A CONCERN

Interestingly, few of the people we interviewed actually had had Covid, and some people knew hardly anybody who had, which is somewhat surprising given the age of the people we were talking to and the demographics of the village and so on. That maybe came a bit as a slight surprise. I personally didn't have Covid. My wife has never had Covid. So that was one of the key takeaways – we'll come back to that at the end.

Now, for some people, it actually worked out pretty well. Some people were okay with the lockdowns. They didn't get sick. They actually liked the peace and quiet. And I was one of those people. I thought it was for me personally. I rather enjoyed it. I'm not a very sociable person, so it was nice not to have to meet other people, and lock myself away for a year and get everything delivered. So surprisingly though, seriously, for some people it wasn't as bad as you might have thought listening to the news. Others, however, had terrible problems, particularly people who were on their own, people who were ill, people whose family had gone through a major experience, such as a death or a serious illness or couldn't get to a wedding. So it was very, very mixed results. Some liked it and some of the stories are quite, not difficult to listen to, but really do make you think and make you count your blessings.

The biggest frustration, probably for most people, was a lack of physical contact with the family, particularly elderly members of the family who you couldn't go and see, and couldn't visit. And there were all the scares about care homes and people falling sick in care homes. This was a particular frustration for some of the people that we spoke to who had elderly parents or elderly relatives, or others who had relatives living overseas, and they couldn't get

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in contact and couldn't get together at Christmas. This was probably, I think, one of the biggest frustrations that most people had. Again, not surprising, but it's important to document it. Again, frustrating. Some opportunities are missed, some can come back again, but some, once gone, will be gone forever. For example, some people delayed a wedding. That can be done again, maybe not the same, But funerals, for example, had to be carried out with a very small number of people present. It was very, very difficult and some of those opportunities will never, ever come back. And that was difficult for quite a few people who missed these opportunities with young children or elderly parents and so on. Lost holidays was a frustration. People had paid and they said, right, you can delay your holiday. Then that came and it was delayed again. So clearly that was disappointing.

Probably the biggest help – again not a surprise to you I'm sure – was 'zooming' using the internet. I'd never heard of Zoom until Covid came along and we used it extensively in the Club. A lot of people found this to be extremely beneficial modern technology. Some people required some help to use it, but this really made a big, big difference to people with families, people who couldn't contact their families. And for people at work.

The internet was used not just to work, not just to zoom, but to do things like order food, order groceries, make appointments. That was very, very, very useful. And for working from home, a thing that people hadn't done very much of previously. But a lot of people said they found this very useful. And a lot of people continue to work from home, though not as many as during Covid. This has been a fundamental change. Working from home will probably continue for the foreseeable future. It really has changed the way in which a lot of people work.

The role of the church had both positive and negative aspects . The church was very supportive. It did a lot going around and building a community spirit. I got a lot of very positive feedback, not just from people who attended the church, but from people from whom the church interacted. The negative bit was just frustration over not being able to attend meetings, not being able to attend funerals and services – something that gradually improved as time went on. And there was a feeling amongst some, possibly driven by the government, that it wasn't maybe necessary for the church to tighten down and 'batten down the hatches' in the early stages as much as it did.

But what was particularly positive was the role of the village shop. Not just supplying toilet rolls, but actually people getting out, walking to the shop, not driving, going to the shop and meeting other people ,and being able to buy things that they couldn't get elsewhere. But in

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spite of that, shopping was a big concern, particularly for people who weren't familiar with the internet and felt uncomfortable with it, or weren't sure how to order food online. And then when you went to the shop, having to queue outside and having to pick things up. Accessing things such as somebody on a particular diet being unable to get a particular food or unable to get a particular milk for the children was difficult.

## KEY TAKE-AWAYS 2

- LACK OF SOCIAL INTERACTION
- MIXED VIEWS REGARDING SERIOUSNESS OF COVID
- RULES WERE ADHERED TO
- EVERYONE HAD THE VACCINES AND WORE MASKS
- SOME DAY-TO-DAY PRACTICES LAPSED OVER TIME
- COMMUNITY BUILDING
- CONCERNS ABOUT SCHOOLING AND UNIVERSITY
- CONCERNS OVER LONG-TERM HEALTH IMPACTS AND MENTAL HEALTH
- VIEWS OF GOVERNMENT'S ROLE AND TRUSTWORTHINESS WERE MIXED

A lack of social interaction was a major cause for concern, somewhat alleviated by Zoom. Clearly clubs didn't meet, people didn't meet, choirs didn't meet, authors didn't meet, schools stopped.

We found some mixed views about the situation. Some people felt that it was a very serious, not the end of the world, but you know, we're all doomed type of scenario. Others felt a little bit easier, more comfortable with it, possibly depending on age. The demographics of the people who fell sick and who died, was reflected in some of the concerns, but it was very much a mixed view. And that view changed during the course of the pandemic.

By and large rules were very much adhered to, particularly in the early days. People didn't go out. They limited themselves to meeting people, adhering to the 'bubble' rule over one Christmas, and wearing masks and things like that. People were quite serious about adhering to the rules made by the government. And everybody we spoke to had the vaccines and had the boosters, and everybody wore the masks. Some continued to do so even at a later stages. So very much law-abiding citizens.

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In Radley, some day-to-day practices did lapse over time. But in the early stages people, particularly those who were very susceptible or were getting over serious illness, they were sterilising all the food that came in. They would bleach the food, they'd wash the bottles. If something came in from the shops, they'd leave it to one side for a day. They were very careful about touching, very careful about washing hands. But as things went on, some of those practices did lapse slightly, particularly once the vaccines came in.

There was sense of community building, like people going out and clapping for the NHS – a sense among some people, depending of course on where they lived, that we're sort of in this together. And it did help overcome some boundaries. People did speak to neighbours who maybe they hadn't spoken to regularly. So this was quite a positive thing to come out of it.

This was a huge concern about schooling with children and students. And about missed opportunities, some of which are gone. They will never come back. Students at university missed out. This was particularly frustrating, particularly if you're paying £9,000 or £10,000 a year for fees and you're receiving very poor quality education. Young children couldn't go to nursery schools and primary schools stopped. The way in which teaching was done changed. We're still seeing some effects of this on the mental health and social interaction, in particular of young children who missed out on these opportunities. Parents at home also found it difficult – imagine you're a single parent trying to homeschool kids – very, very difficult. This was something that will have impacts for some time to come. For long-term health, the number of people seeing a doctor or going to A&E reduced significantly.

There were some people who we spoke to had health concerns, but didn't get them checked or couldn't get them checked. If you look at the national statistics, things like men presenting with prostate cancer for checks for example dropped hugely during Covid. Some of the people we spoke to felt that effects like these will have impacts in future years. Those diseases have not gone away. And mental health. Pretty much everybody mentioned mental health, if not for themselves, maybe for some family member, maybe for someone they knew, particularly for people who were on their own.

One interesting point was that the views of the government's role and the extent to which it was to be trusted were quite mixed. Some people felt the government did an excellent job. Some people felt that we were conned, particularly once news came out about parties and things like that. And when asked whether they would adhere to the rules in future, if a future epidemic comes along, there wasn't the same consistency. There was a feeling that people may not adhere to the rules as much next time as they did with Covid.



## **In conclusion**

That's really all the key take-aways from the project. There were no surprises. However, it was really worth documenting the interviews and the discussions for future generations who I think will find it astonishing that we were locked up and how this impacted so many lives over the future.

## **Examples from the interviews: Tony Rogerson**

How do you actually document a village? I mean, everyone's got their own Covid story. Is that really the only way to do it properly – interview everybody? That obviously wasn't technically possible. We had to make choices. You can see the range of people we were trying to cover from the ones that I interviewed.

### People interviewed by Tony

3 children (11, 16, 18)

1 university student

1 younger working man

1 wife/mother with three children

Couple at forefront of the NHS

3 retired people (including one whose wife died during Covid, and one who totally isolated)

A key person in the Village Shop

A local farmer and wife

So I covered, for instance, children, a university student, working people, retired people, married, single, widowed, widowed. One or two of them in terms of institutions – a key person in the village shop, and a farmer and his wife. And then a variety of people who had different experiences, like one retired man whose his wife was recovering from cancer, and he and his wife literally did not go out for a year; everything came to them and they were totally isolated. And the other retired man had lost his wife in the middle of Covid and his daughter got married. Both the funeral and the marriage took place during the lockdowns, so there was the frustration of only having a few people at the wedding and lots of people not being able to go to the funeral.

Colin's summarised the important lessons that came out of the Covid pandemic. I just want to put flesh and blood on them by looking at three of the interviews I did.

## Example 1: Wife with 3 children

Husband – master at Radley College

Wife – LAMPS Theatre Company

Children – 11, 13, 14

First of all, a lady with three children whose husband was a master at Radley College. They lived on-site in a College house. The wife helped to run a local professional company, the Lamps Theatre Company. The three children were at secondary school, with one in the first year of secondary school.

When Covid first came, none of the family were frightened of Covid for themselves. They were young and it didn't bother them very much when it first came on the scene. But they were concerned about their older friends. The wife was much involved in the church here and knew a lot of older people in the village; also her mother was elderly and isolated.

### Effect of Covid

Attitude to Covid

Husband – difficulty of teaching online

Wife – Theatre Company 'no-shows'

Children – education affected and missed out socially

Mother – isolated, and with husband in a Care Home

Church and Bible Study Group

So what happened to them when Covid came along? The College boys were all sent home, so the husband didn't have any pupils present and had to teach online. We've come across a number of children who suffered because how hard it was to learn online. This man talked about how hard it was to teach online. And as far as he was concerned, half his class could have bunked off because he hadn't got visual sight of half of them. The interaction of a

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teacher and pupil in such a personal thing and he found the lack of it really hard. He was also operating in different time zones because the boys came from other countries. The wife's theatre company of course couldn't put on any live shows. I don't think they performed in public for 18 months. They did some things online, but that really disrupted her work.

As far as the children's education was concerned, it was mixed. First of all, it was quite difficult – the three children, a husband and wife, all trying to work from home. The husband then quite wisely went to his empty classroom and taught from there. But the wife was at home with the three children. The next thing was a scramble to make sure they all had laptops, and then which child was going to work in which room. So some difficulties in that. All three no doubt suffered to some degree, but not too badly. Since then the two older ones have gone onto take actual exams while furthering their career and both don't seem to have suffered much from that Covid interlude. The greater problem for younger children – a much greater problem for all those I interviewed – was the lack of social interaction. For kids, it's about other kids. That's what life's about. And they really struggled with it – the two girls, more than the boy though that might just have been a personality thing on his part.

The wife's mother was a real problem for them. She was on her own and, for the first ten weeks, she didn't go out. The family couldn't visit her. And worse, for the mother, her husband (the wife's stepfather) was in a care home and neither the family nor his wife could visit him. That was extremely hard.

Church and Bible studies came to a halt, but the church moved to online services and so did the Bible Study Group. For an older generation like myself, Covid really accelerated our computer skills!

So overall, that family didn't do too badly and they made a contribution to the community because the wife had the brainchild of what was called SERV – Serving Everyone in Radley Village. She realised that a lot of people couldn't get out or were worried about going out, and needed things done for them. So a lot of publicity went out (posters, flyers, etc.) and they invited people if they had a problem to get in touch with one of the three coordinators. Each coordinator had a team of about 30 or 40 willing to help.

## Serving Everyone in Radley Village (SERV)

Scope

How it worked

Village pulling together

There were a lot of people from Radley College, amongst others, who are kicking their heels and are only too pleased to help. Requests would come in, the coordinator would post the request online and one of their 30 or so 'volunteers' would pick it up. They did things like collecting shopping, getting prescriptions, walking dogs – just a whole variety of things. As Colin said, there was a much more of a community spirit, as often happens in times of difficulty. And this was a real example of the village pulling together.

### Example 2: Couple at forefront of NHS

Husband – specialist nurse in Intensive Care Unit (ICU)

Wife – senior physiotherapist in A&E department

Children – girls aged 6 and 9 at village primary school

My second example was a really moving one. This couple were at the forefront of the NHS. When Covid happened, the husband was an intensive care nurse in one of our local hospitals. His wife was a senior physiotherapist in the A&E department. They had two children who were six and nine, and who attended the village primary school.

When Covid came along, the husband and wife had much more information than most of us about it because the NHS was keeping track of it as it came from China into Italy, and then gradually over here. So they were somewhat prepared mentally for it. I won't go into specifics, but they really did feel the NHS was not ready and they were particularly upset about the lack of personal protection equipment (PPE). Their two girls – six and nine years old – were totally on board about it all.

## Attitude to Covid

Couple – somewhat prepared

NHS – not really ready

Scary for them, as they saw so many, including colleagues, dying

Girls remarkably unworried

In terms of the couple's attitude to Covid, they quickly came face-to-face with dying people and people who died, and that began to be scary. And of course, not long after the start of Covid, colleagues began to die. I saw on the news today that more than 900 NHS staff throughout Great Britain died during the epidemic. The husband in the ICU was working on a ward with people on life support and people dying. He found it hard, especially when colleagues began to get ill and die, and also be off work ill. So not only were you pushed, but you were also short-staffed. The wife's role continued in A&E. Her problem was that she was facing patients who came in because of some other injury without knowing they had Covid, and so they weren't immediately put into isolation. And whereas the husband was well equipped with PPE, the wife who was vulnerable because she was meeting people who would come with Covid unknown and was really unprepared.

## Effect on couple, at work and at home

Husband's role in ICU

Wife's role in A & E

PPE problems

12½-hour shifts

Relatives not able to see loved ones dying

Care of children interrupted

Being key workers helped

Their shifts were long – 12.5 hours or longer, with increasingly heavy loads with more and more people suffering and dying. It was not unusual to have four people die on a shift, with

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relatives not being able to see their loved ones. It was really very moving, almost heartbreaking to hear this. This man had dealt with so many dying patients. He said the hardest thing was when the loving husband couldn't come to see the wife, or vice versa, or whatever the relationship was. So often he was having to hold the telephone next to the ear of the dying person while their loved one tried to say goodbye. He was the kind of intermediary: that was emotionally very hard.

One of the problems this couple had was that, prior to Covid, if their shifts overlapped or they had to stay on because of some emergency, grandparents could stand in and take care of the children whereas, with lockdown, the grandparents couldn't do that. The key workers scheme for this couple was absolutely crucial. All credit to the local school – their children were looked after well because they were key workers.

### Looking back...

We coped

Children did not suffer

Garden and countryside helped

Great camaraderie

Great support from the public

Their parents were okay – they coped. Those two words pretty well set the tone of the voice in which you said it. But it was hard. It was really hard for them emotionally and physically. But they coped, particularly because the children didn't suffer – they had social interaction in being at school as a key worker's child.

Like many of us, the husband mentioned how important it was if you had a garden – being able to get out there, or even meet people at one end or the other of the garden. And of course, being here in the countryside, being able to walk out. And that first summer I remember really was such a nice summer and people were able to get out.

What particularly helped this couple was the great camaraderie at work. You can imagine the camaraderie that would be the NHS. We're all in the same boat. We're really doing the best we can and that's it. I was also really interested to hear how much the support from the public

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meant. My wife and I would go out doing our clapping on and this couple would come out too, and that it was really touching. We were clapping this couple who were doing the work at the forefront and they said how much that meant to them.

### Example 3: Farmer and wife

3 daughters

Mother in care home

Arable farming, plus turkeys at Christmas

12 business units on farm, including Farm Shop

My last example is the local farmer and his wife – you'll probably identify them but I'm not naming them. Of their three daughters, two had left home and had their own families; so although they were separated from their parents during Covid, they were no problem. What worried them was that the third daughter was halfway through her university course and that the wife's mother was in a care home.

### Effect of Covid

Youngest daughter continued to study at home

No physical contact with Mother

Farm much as usual, except farm-worker part-furloughed

Farm Shop adapted

Other business units continued

Turkeys – a great problem

The farming was arable – it's arable pretty much all around here – with a great boost at Christmas with the turkeys and geese reared on the farm. There were also 12 small business units, or 11 small business units and the Farm Shop (with café). They weren't the farmer's direct responsibility, but they were there and he was aware of them. And the Farm Shop sold

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much of produce from the farm. Both the farmer and his wife worked on the farm; she was very much involved, and she looked after and was responsible for the caravan site.

Covid came. The youngest daughter left university and came home to study. Of the two university students I interviewed, she actually found it not too hard. I think the subject she was doing, which I can't remember now, lent itself to studying a bit more at home. The biggest problem in terms of their close kin was the mother. Initially like many others her care home closed its heir doors and they couldn't see her. But when they finally were able to go in, they had to talk through plate glass with ineffective microphones and none of the hugging and kissing that can go on.

The farm went on as much as usual and, actually in terms of daily living, it was not that much different. They worked harder because the farm worker was part working, but they part furloughed him. So again, longer hours for both husband and wife. The Farm Shop adapted well and delivered some of the foodstuffs grown on the farm. There was one period where no other local farm had potatoes, and the Farm Shop and the farm together were a great asset. The café at Farm Shop also produced meals, which they would deliver and then later on when restrictions eased, would be collected. The small business units, as far as the farmer knew, continued in some way. They were usually run by one or two people.

The big problem for the farmer's wife was the turkeys. It's very labour intensive when it comes to preparing the turkeys and getting people to collect them and so on. And of course, their well-established teams couldn't come in because of the lockdown problems. The only way they managed to work was to form groups in bubbles. So they got families. That first Christmas it was all about getting in a family bubble of six, and that's how they coped. But it was a lot of long hours getting the turkeys ready and a lot of hours delivering them as well.

### Reflection...

Farm as usual, but much longer hours

People's greed

Social distancing / bubbles / disinfecting

Farm Shop adapted well

More use of Zoom continues



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Reflecting on events: well, actually, they said we were lucky. The farm went on as usual, but much longer hours – really long hours. As a lot of us realised, people were hoarding – Colin alluded to people tending to hoard. When the Farm Shop had potatoes and no other farm had potatoes, the farmer couldn't believe the size of the bags people were bringing with them to fill with potatoes. He got quite irritated to see the greed and the lengths people were prepared to go to save their own skins.

The hardest thing for the farmer was social distancing. Farming is quite a lonely profession, and one of the key things is meeting people. So it was hard to have to socially distance and not shake hands and so on with other farmers, suppliers, customers and so on. The bubble was a real issue for him, but actually it was a lifesaver, I suppose, because at least the farm was able to find enough people to get into bubbles to prepare the turkeys.

But it was a real frustration having to do that and the disinfecting. They had to disinfect a lot of the produce before they sent it out, which was a real bind. The Farm Shop was not the farmer's responsibility, but as I've said already, it adapted well. Talking online, which was a thing farmers didn't do much of because they were used to meeting people, that came into its own then – as for so many others. They're actually still working on Zoom: the farmer really regrets not meeting people as he used to.

### **In conclusion**

From these three interviews, two lessons came out to me. Two quite significant things. One was that, as human beings, we are incredibly adaptable. We quickly got into putting this stuff on our hands and the masks on our faces, 'click and collecting' and so on. It's a fortunate and good mechanism in human nature that we can adapt. But secondly, how quickly we forget. There were some pretty difficult things. Apart from the couple working for the NHS, most people just went through at the time and the bad times are now more or less forgotten.

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### **End of talk: Joyce Huddleston**

Thank you very much Tony and Colin for the interviewing you did and for your work in drawing out the findings from the interviews. I think you've brought it all back to us. There's a wealth of information in these recordings and we will be publishing more of the findings from the project in due course. I'd also like to thank Tony Gillman for all the work he did in the background. You don't recognise it from all this talking, but it was a lot. And also those people we interviewed for giving up their time. And finally thank you for listening. I hope you've enjoyed the talk – I'm not sure 'enjoy' is quite the right word – but that you found it interesting. And thank you once again to the Oral History Group for putting together this presentation.