

THE BRANSCOMBE PROJECT – November 2021

History Snips 17

Barbara Farquharson: Pandemic diaries

I seem to remember that, towards the beginning of Lockdown that Sue Dymond and I suggested that people might want to keep diaries, and that, if it seemed like a good idea, we might try and assemble some of them... Later last year, with other more important things on my mind, I forgot all about this idea.

Now I return to it. I wonder whether people did keep diaries? Did Lockdown conversations take place on Facebook or other social media? It seems to me that the Pandemic marks an extraordinary moment in our lives and affects every level of society. We thought the beaching of the Napoli was a big event and faithfully recorded it. The Pandemic is far more significant. What have we, as individuals and communities, been feeling over these long, and still not ending, months?

If there are people who would like to take this project forward, perhaps they could tell me, and we could think about how to proceed. Perhaps there are already people in the community have begun to put things together?

To start things rolling, I looked back over some of the entries that John and I made in the early months. John, typically, read Daniel Defoe's *Journal of the Plague Year* (1665) and Samuel Pepys's *Plague Journals* (1660s), and called his diary '*The Plague Diary*'. He addressed his entries to his children, as a way of staying in touch with them. Mine was simply entitled '*Diary of an Eighty Year Old*'.

As everyone knows, no two people, even if they live together and talk all the time, see things the same way. I've just cherry-picked a few dates to prove the point.

Barbara: Sunday March 22 2020:



Time for a haircut

Time seems much more capricious – or capacious. Welcomingly flexible. The days now go on for longer. Often it's not evident what day of the week it is. No fixed punctuations except for meals and tea. No particular order to the day, except that it usually starts with some phone calls. Getting dressed can come earlier or later. Looking at emails comes fairly early.

It's been a beautiful day. John did some path weeding. I wanted to go out, but time went by, and then we had a siesta, and then Mairinara rang to wish me happy Mother's Day, and now it's dark and nearly supper time.

John: Sunday March 22 2020:

After lunch, the cloudless blue sky invited me out to hoe paths round the house, which had grown very weedy in the warm wet weather (a local kind of www). For the same cause, the grass in our patch of lawn is several inches high and full of daisies in flower. 'They' say that if you refrain from shaving your lawn it will become a carbon sink, an excuse for idleness on which I gladly lean.

Finished Defoe on the plague year, with a lot of skimming because it gets very repetitive. London continued to be fed adequately by farmers and market-gardeners, who put pots of vinegar on their stalls in which shoppers placed their money. Imports of luxuries like tea, coffee, wine, oranges, spices etc seem to have dried up. Starvation faced the poor who, having lost work and wages, had no money. Defoe says they received lots of handouts from Court and government, city authorities, and gentry throughout the country, but that may just be a version of the 'benefit scrounger' trope. The big hit was to foreign trade, as rumours of the plague ran round the world and closed foreign ports to English shipping. The Dutch seized as many markets as they could.

John: Tuesday March 24 2020:

This morning a routine urine sample was due to be delivered to the surgery, and Dr Dove told Barbara to let me hand it in because I'm less at risk than she is. Nice to have a medical opinion on the matter, but I wish it was the other way round.

Delivering it was interesting. The surgery's automatic doors wouldn't open, but a sign told me to press a button and speak to an intercom for someone to come and open them. The button being the weak point in this system, I pressed it with my sleeve. A smiley lady came and made the doors open, then held out a plastic box at arm's length from within, into which I dropped the sample at arm's length from outside. My arm's length is only 80 cms, so I really should have thrown it in. But what if I missed?

Afterwards we drove to Seaton Wetlands bird sanctuary for a walk. Cloudless sky, no wind, willows putting out their first leaves and catkins. The bird hides were closed, but there are viewing slots in the fences through which we watched shelduck on the water, together with other duck we couldn't identify, having forgotten our binoculars. But the real wonder of it was nature having the world to itself: no noise of traffic or machinery or construction, no pollution, hardly any people anywhere. Just the fresh, clear air of the Axe estuary, twitter of small birds and burble of little streams, and the empty wooded hills beyond, all shining in a vast blue silence. If only that were a foretaste of what the world will be like after C-19! But I fear not; we should make the most of this interlude.

We had a delivery of 100 single-use latex gloves ordered online by Barbara from presco.eu. I guess they might have their uses.

Barbara: Tuesday March 24 2020:

We walked around the Seaton Wetlands, and paused and chatted and sometimes took a photo, and felt, as we often do, a huge sense of gratitude. For the first time I

found myself saying, 'And if this is going to be the end for me or you, how wonderful to have this moment'. Actually, it wasn't quite as pompous as that ... but something along those lines ...

I also suddenly realised that if this had been 'normal' times, John and I would be working flat out. We'd be needing to get the exhibition boards ready for the printer. We wouldn't be walking the Wetlands. So maybe – I hope so – if we get through, we'll slow down. John wants more time to think about his poetry ... and, yes, what's that corny saying? *'What is this world, if full of care, there is no time to stand and stare.'* I hope we'll still have the chance!

Barbara: Thursday March 26 2020

John and I exchanged our diaries, and had to laugh. They're so exactly what might have been expected. John eyeing events, creating parallels, responding to what he sees and hears in the landscape and around him. Picking up on Defoe's description of the plague and comparing then and now. Me, trying to get a bead on my feelings, and how other people are reacting and interacting ...



Lunch-time & Barbara still in a dressing gown

Today we were supposed to use Zoom to chat with the French conversation group in Axminster. We zoomed. We found the others, but we didn't find, or hear, ourselves. *still* John fiddled around and almost managed to capsize the whole show. We switched off and left them to it.

John Thursday March 26 2020:

... Our French conversation group, which meets on Thursday, had been set up on Zoom by its cleverest member, John Crabb, who sent everyone clear and complete instructions. Come eleven o'clock, there we were apparently on Zoom, yet not apparent: just a black square called Barbara. I clicked on every button I could see, thinking I was trying to improve what was on our screen, but it turned out my random clicks affected everybody's screens, so they found themselves turned into a gallery, then a thumbnail, then nothing at all, then everybody at once . . . Loud protestations in Anglo-French, a barrage of excited instructions that I couldn't hear — we had clearly reduced the meeting to chaos. Fortunately I found a button saying 'leave meeting', which we did. I expect John Crabb clawed it back together.

Figures bemuse me. The USA has 69,000 cases, 100 deaths (about 1.5%); New York has 37,250 cases, 385 deaths (say 1%) and the UK apparently has about 9,500 cases and 460 deaths (4.8%). Obviously we have no idea how many cases there really are, but a 1.5% death rate ought to equate to 30,667 cases. Britain seems to proceed in much more bumbling ignorance than other countries.

It seems consistent with this that Bronte, Jenny's grand-daughter, who is a doctor on maternity leave, anxious to get back to the hospital to help, is unable to get a test ... Philippa's daughter Yvonne, at a hospital in Portsmouth, has to nurse C-19 patients in a face-mask and apron. Just two anecdotes from two families, so what's the whole picture?

8 pm: we all opened our windows and cheer and clap. Our noises sail out seawards into the vast space in front of our house, not likely to be heard in the village below, or anywhere, but probably good for morale.

Barbara: Thursday March 26 cont.

Today the NHS letter arrived saying that I was in the 'most at risk' category. Which of course I sort of knew, and also sort of didn't want to know. I did suddenly feel more vulnerable. The letter said, amongst many other things, that I was not to go out for walks. But why? John felt we had to do what they said, because, apart from anything else, there are now police patrolling and asking people in cars what they're doing and where they're going. I'd take the risk. In the way that other people, families cooped up in small flats with bored kids, must feel a hundred-fold more, I feel my freedom being squeezed.

Barbara: Monday, April 6 2020

Yesterday we went for a marvellous walk – up Bovey Lane, back via Peasen Lane. We met one very old man with an even older dog who refused to socially distance (the dog, I mean); one flustered grandmother with a yappy small dog and a grand-daughter with a much better behaved dog, and one 'country' lady – elegant, well shod. All well distanced. Bovey Lane, going uphill, my lungs protested mildly: Peasen Lane going downhill, John's knees protested – mildly. On one short stretch of Peasen lane, on one side, a steep bank thick with primroses, on the other, in quick succession, celandine, stitchwort, blue-bell, dandelion and primrose.

Lunch outside. John's soups get better every day. This one a mushroom soup with garlic pesto and chicken stock and much besides.

John: Sunday & Monday, April 5 – 6.2020

Sunday was a lovely spring day. Barbara and I drove to the west end of Beer and walked up Bovey Lane, along a stretch of road past Bovey House at the top, and back down Peasen Lane to the car. Two to three miles, two stony tracks about 3 metres wide, and we passed three people, three dogs and a child. Primroses in profusion. Lunch in the garden.

Monday. Last night being one of the not so rare occasions when I realise at about 2 a.m. that I haven't put out the recycling boxes for Monday's early morning collection, I got up and went out into a mild drizzle. In consequence, my first of row of lettuces were showing this morning, and I've sowed a second.

... A delightful BBC4 programme about the eighth-century Chinese poet Du Fu, footstepping through the new China his travels in the old China, as a refugee from civil wars.

... Then came the news that the PM is in intensive care. So we are in the snake-oil-stained hands of Raab and Gove ...