

## **First the bad news, then the good**

No sooner were we out of lockdown and starting to hope for better times in December in tier 2 than the number of cases began to rise exponentially again and the threat of more stringent measures loomed. Rules that allowed a 5-day Christmas gathering of up to three families were shortened to Christmas Day only. And on Boxing Day Oxfordshire was added to the list of counties in the southeast that were in a new, more restrictive tier 4. Essentially this meant stay at home – if at all possible.

A new variant of the virus had been found that spread much more rapidly and among younger people. Cherwell was the worst infected area in Oxfordshire with 359 cases per 100,00 (the highest in Oxfordshire and higher than the national average), and a grouping of Deddington, Steeple Aston and the Heyfords showed over 30 cases (at 25 December). UK-wide, alarmingly deaths had risen to over 70,000 by the end of the month, and hospitals were struggling more than at the outset of the pandemic.

Locally, the Windmill opened in early December and then had to close again. Pubs could serve takeaways only and some of our local hostelrys chose to close completely. Non-essential shops like dress shops and hairdressers opened – and then closed again. Back to where we were in March.

Our annual carol singing round the Christmas tree in the Market Place was off, as was the New Year's Eve Auld Lang Syne. Church services were reduced to ticket only (although they were streamed by Church TV). The church encouraged doorstep carol singing on Christmas Eve; but where I lived there was little take-up, it was just too cold.

The annual tractor run through nearby villages did go ahead on a dank Friday evening, with over 100 noisy and brightly lit tractors trundling through the centre of Deddington, an annual fund-raising event for the local Katharine House Hospice.

The church bells did manage to ring, three bells for the midnight service, two for the doorstep carol singing, and two for Christmas Day. Not the full peals, but it was good to hear them, they provided a continuity and a certainty that has been missing that year.

But – reasons to be cheerful number one:

Our magnificent Covid team, along with the church, provided Festive Takeaway Christmas dinners for anyone who could benefit. Vicar Annie and the zone captains asked around in their patches to judge demand and take orders for Christmas Day delivery.

Al Kitchen and Alex Moss (plus some others) co-ordinated the event, Alex was chief chef, Daire Dowling on the gravy, Milson Westbury on sprouts, the O'Briens did the spuds, and Al was king of the carving knives.



Three chaps were in the church kitchen to take in the cooked meals on an agreed timetable, assemble the meals and bag them up. There was turkey, stuffing bread sauce, sprouts, parsnips, carrots, roast potatoes and gravy – and – Christmas pud, brandy butter and mince pies to follow – and – a festive hat and Christmas decoration, each bag tailored to

individual needs. It sounded am-az-ing! Twenty-six Christmas dinners were supplied to people who might otherwise have gone without for a variety of reasons. Feedback said the meal was delicious and much appreciated.

It was a brilliant community volunteer effort by the combined Covid/church team, our County Councillor who found the funds in his back pocket, and lots of willing volunteer cooks, delivery bods and clearer-uppers.

And reasons to be cheerful number two:

The rollout of vaccinations started, with the over-80s hot-footing it to Chipping Norton Health Centre mid-December onwards. There were logistical problems with this Pfizer vaccine in that it had to be kept at  $-70^{\circ}\text{C}$  until just before use, so no hanging around with this one.

And even better, the AstraZeneca vaccine, more commonly known as the Oxford vaccine as it was developed in a little town just down the road from Deddington, cleared the regulatory hurdles and was ready for distribution from early January. This really was the game-changer we had been waiting for as the government had purchased 100 million doses and it had no temperature restrictions, making it much easier to distribute.

But it was still likely to be another six months before the majority of UK residents could be vaccinated. There was the added problem of the anti-vaxxers who saw nothing but state conspiracy, micro-chips and G5 telephone masts behind it all and refused the jab. You couldn't make it up!

Right at the end of the month the decision was made to extend tier 4 restrictions even further, meaning around three-quarters of the country were now almost under total lockdown. The return of secondary schools was delayed for two weeks, in the hope the spread of the virus could be brought under control while mass testing of children and staff took place. And hospitals struggled like never before, many close to breaking point.

Was this the darkest hour before dawn?