

Lockdown Scrapbook

Julia Bennett¹

The Covid-19 lockdown in England began on 23rd March 2020, when people were told to stay at home and only go out for essential purposes, which included an hour's daily exercise. These measures were originally scheduled to last for three weeks, but were then extended for a further three weeks. On 17th April, shortly after the three week extension began, I started to record my daily walks. For just over a month I chose a word which signified the current moment in some way and took photos related to my chosen theme. I posted four pictures per day, most days, on Twitter (@drjuliabennett). I began with 'enclosure' and ended with 'lost'. I photographed both nature (trees, flowers, ducks – lots of ducks) and 'gritty' urban scenes (broken windows, empty building sites, litter on empty pavements). My favourite photos are where these two themes collide: the buddleia poking out from under the rusty girders of a bridge; the traffic lights emerging from an overgrown bush.



On the whole I avoided photographing people for privacy reasons but some do appear: queuing in a socially distanced way outside local shops, dog walkers standing apart to chat, friends sitting at opposite ends of a park bench, but mostly on bikes. Men on bikes by the canal on my first morning of the project; a small child free-wheeling down a hill on a balance bike enjoying my theme of freedom; teenage boys on bikes, roaming in unsociable packs; families on bikes, children racing ahead or struggling to keep up, or carried along in a trailer. Sometimes dogs too, in the trailer. A lot has been written about the increased popularity of cycling during this period and the hopes that it would become a permanent change to the way we move around urban areas.

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I have been living in Chester for five years and am lucky enough to have plenty of green space on my doorstep despite being only just over a mile from the centre of the city. I can easily reach the Shropshire Union canal which passes under the city, and the River Dee. There are formal parks and playing fields just yards from home alongside the Greenway – a shared cycle and walking route on an old railway track. I mostly walked in the afternoons, but also in the early morning and at sunset. I began the themed walks as a way of taking time out of the everyday and concentrating on my surroundings during the walk, to avoid thinking about all the issues that lockdown was throwing up. There is a plethora of research telling us that walking and time spent outside is good for our mental health which is a sufficient reason in itself to create a regular practice of walking. In choosing to focus on the minutiae of what I saw around me, however, I saw the walks as a way of engaging more closely with the spaces I was walking through. Walking has been shown to be a way of connecting to place, in the past and the present, through the body². The themes I chose to focus on can mostly be grouped into overarching subjects of space/place, time and change. Action or activity is present throughout as my emotions and the pressures of the lockdown come through in my choice of words: escape; isolation; patience; fragility. Together place (or more specifically landscape), time, and activity form what Tim Ingold³ termed a ‘taskscape’. Ingold, in his original discussion of the term, analysed the painting ‘The Harvesters’ by Pieter Brughel the Elder, discussing the shade of the tree where people were eating their lunch, the pathway worn into the hill by many feet over time, the church in the background and its significance for the harvesters. Similarly, in discussing my walks, words and photos I am thinking about the everyday acts of sitting on a park bench (forbidden under lockdown), the routes that I take and their telling of the history of Chester and the bigger picture: the latest news headline which has influenced my choice of theme.

What this narrative tells is the story of a hiatus in everyday life, in many ways. Traffic stopped. Shops and pubs and building sites, all closed. People walked and cycled, but didn’t sit still, on benches by the river, to enjoy the sunshine. Life slowed down. Slowing down enables us to notice the textures, the separate elements of our days. The impact of the weather on mood and activities. The communal feeling as we smile and skirt around each other on paths and pavements. The shared understandings of the rainbows suddenly apparent everywhere. The unstoppable continuation of the seasons seen in the gradual move through spring documented in the different flowers and plants. The ubiquitous nature of the natural world as the birds pondered the lack of humans and made the most of it, inhabiting parks and pavements. And, of course, the enormous potential in exploring a small area of a couple of square miles to gain a feel for the place, a sense of belonging.

² See for example: Julia Bennett, “Walking to the beat: (re)producing locality through Walking Days,” in *Senses in Cities Experiences of Urban Settings*, edited by K. E. Y. Low and D. Kalekin-Fishman (London: Routledge, 2017); Tim Edensor, “Walking in Rhythms: place, regulation, style and the flow of experience” in *Visual Studies* 25:1 (2010) 46–58; and Kelvin E. Y. Low, “The sensuous city: Sensory methodologies in urban ethnographic research,” *Ethnography* 16:3 (2015) 295–31.

³ Tim Ingold, “The temporality of the landscape,” *World Archaeology* 25:2, (1993), 152-174, DOI: 10.1080/00438243.1993.9980235

Themes

Enclosure

17th April: Dominic Raab (Secretary of State and Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs) told us that UK lockdown could go on until June (which it ultimately did). I felt stuck, caged, enclosed. My daughter found out the headaches and fatigue she'd had were in fact Covid-19. What happened to the headline symptoms of a temperature and persistent cough, we wondered? How many others were missing a diagnosis by not have the 'right' symptoms? In the park, there's a laminated A4 sign attached to the tennis court fence with cable ties. 'Closed until further notice' and the local council logo at the bottom. Sport and exercise restricted to what can be done alone. Trees are greening at the edges throwing dappled shade onto the path. The joy of signs of spring tinged with sadness at the vacant benches lining the path. Red and white tape surrounding the empty playground flaps forlornly in the breeze. The memory of screams and laughter fill the air on this hot sunny day. Children otherwise occupied drawing rainbows which fill the windows along the street. Bluebells peek out from a sea of bright green ground elder on the ancient hollow way now tucked between opposing sets of back gardens. Sycamore buds start to unfurl towards the sunlight. A plastic box on the pavement contains 'letters for the elderly'.

Escape

18th April and medics are running short of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). The country is a mess. The government seems unable to do anything right. A refusal to acknowledge the likely impact of the pandemic early on did nothing to stem its tide and we are now suffering the consequences of the lack of preparation. Engulfed by feelings of helplessness, I walk along the canal and spot ducklings swimming away from their parents, trying to escape the clutches of family. Buddleia are beginning to reappear in the usual unlikely places - reaching out overhead from the side of a bridge. Beer barrels spill untidily across an alleyway at the back of a closed pub. Unsold ale emptied into drains. Cyclists whizz past as CCTV cameras watch and I wave to a man on a balcony in the flats across the water. He waves back. This would not happen on a 'normal' Saturday. There is a queue to get into Waitrose, two meters marked out across the car park with blue tape. Water escapes through the closed lock gates.

Freedom

Sunday papers are still discussing the lack of PPE for medical staff and likelihood, or not, of a vaccine. Freedom seems a long way off. A dog runs across the field then stops to watch me as I take a picture. Although the sun is still out there is mud in the hollow way and bicycle tracks signal the route of groups of teenagers. A pigeon surveys the changed world from a rooftop. More bikes fly past on the Greenway and a family of three kick a ball on the empty football pitches. A small child freewheels their balance bike down a hill: a first taste of speed, wind, freedom. On the always busy main road I wait a couple of minutes and get the elusive traffic-free shot.

Home

Four weeks in and the papers are discussing when lockdown might be relaxed. For now, though, we are stuck at home. Even the trains are sitting in their sheds at the station, not needed by commuting crowds. Birds fly in and out of the boxes on the trees by the playing

fields, busy with their family lives. 'Sold' house signs are starting to look forlorn as moving days are indefinitely postponed. Deep blue sky blankets us all.

Patience

21st April and the lockdown versus the economy debate is in full swing. Patience seems to be running out. Along the canal dandelion clocks tell of time passing. Stationary vans and shuttered buildings mirror the slow movement of the water in the canal. Unopened locks full of detritus. Buddleia sprouting on the lock walls. Cyclists swerving around pedestrians on the narrow towpath. The pub still advertising opening hours and live sport. Sycamore sprouting through gravel, life continues.

Dis/order

PPE and nursing shortages, the government's blame game continues. I spot oak apples amongst the bright new leaves and bluebells nod shyly beside the path. Days' rhythms are in sync, one following another. Clinging on to a focus I note the texture of the backyard walls in the alleyway behind the community centre where the brick has eroded or been replaced. A wall composed entirely of regular breeze blocks. Another of corrugated iron striped with rust and green patina. Weeds growing between bricks. Moving from order to disorder I spot a beer bottle on a wall and another bobbing in the canal. The buddleia spilling down the wall by the bridge is growing fast. Silent building sites appear abandoned. Machinery left behind 'keep out' signs and advertised completion dates long past. Blue, blue sky frames my pictures and is reflected in the empty windows of an office building. A graffitied sign by the railway bridge calls for Revolution. Everything is turned on its head.

Hope

Another weekend and the economic impact of the pandemic is the news. Pale blue forget-me-nots are blossoming beneath the trees and bright red azaleas in the park. Buttercups shine yellow amongst the green undergrowth in the depths of the hollow way. Pink and blue graffiti under the Greenway bridge thanks the National Health Service (NHS) for their work. White clusters of yellow-centred may blossom.

Change

28th April. The Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, is back at work after being hospitalised with Covid-19 and wanting to end lockdown. The mask discussions have begun. It rained all day. Bliss. Very few people out and about. Ducks in the park sheltering under the trees. Down by the river black-headed gulls and huge herring gulls have to source their own food. Fish jump joyously out of the water, shining silver in the grey light. Boats silent. Purple wisteria climbing over a wall. Empty car parks. A red peony collects rain drops.

Repeat

29th April. The middle of another week in lockdown. British Airways plan to make staff redundant. Cloudless skies have no criss-cross aeroplane trails. Days follow one another seamlessly. The geometry of flowers repeated in a wall of pale pink clematis; the multiple flowers of a purple rhododendron in the park; the five leaflets of a horse chestnut leaf. Reflections in puddles from yesterday's rain. Blue skies and cirrus clouds. Long shadows

from the lime trees separating the football pitches. Empty benches by the also empty bowling greens.

Distance

By the beginning of May the talk is of being over the worst. But we still have to keep our distance. Official looking signs have appeared: a big banner from the council in the park two meters long. Cow parsley lines the hollow way. By the river a copper beech colours the canopy with hints of rose gold. A heron stares at me across the canal. The ducklings are getting bigger. Green alkanet is flowering by the base of the bridge: spots of dark blue in a mass of green. The government announces a short delay in easing lockdown restrictions, having set out five tests which must be met. The term 'new normal' enters our vocabulary.

Community

As lockdown easing becomes inevitable the government is trying to maintain a sense of community across Britain. Scotland and Wales are about to break away and have their own sets of rules. A local pub has filled its windows with rainbow pictures and messages of thanks to the NHS. I notice a group of dog walkers chatting in the park, respectfully standing a good two metres apart from each other. Signs have been put up announcing a 'Virtual Dog Show' in aid of a local hospice, which is struggling for funds whilst their shop is closed.

Horizons

The death toll from Covid-19 in the UK is over 30,000. Friday 8th May is a bank holiday to commemorate the 75th anniversary of VE day, the end of the second world war in Europe. I go for an early morning walk to the river, around the city walls and along the canal. This takes me from the earliest days of Chester as a major port, to Roman and medieval times when the city walls kept some people in, and some out, to the canal which brought industrialisation to Chester. I realise how much I miss the views from the hills where I would often choose to walk if time and travel were not restricted. The landscape of the city is flat, but from the walls and bridges I can glimpse wider horizons. I notice some bunting up on the way home. Street parties are later criticised for ignoring the social distancing rules.

Isolation

10th May. Boris Johnson made a speech regarding changes to the lockdown rules. These feel very minor. Some people are allowed to go back to work and we all need to 'stay alert'. The blue skies and warm weather of April have gone and there was a cold wind today. Benches by the river await better times. Deserted playground in the park. A piece of cloth caught high up in a tree seems to shout 'let me go' into the wind.

Rainbows

During lockdown rainbows have been appearing everywhere. Always a sign of hope, they have been co-opted as a 'thank you' to the NHS for looking after people during the crisis. Previously rainbows' political status was as a symbol for the LGBTQ+ community. Running a little short of ideas for themes by now as I expected this period of walks to last only a couple of weeks, on 12th May I make rainbow colours my theme. Avoiding flowers and other nature-based photos as being too obvious, instead I opt for the gritty urban realism of recycling bins and an abandoned wheelbarrow. On the radio Matt Hancock, the health

secretary, was interviewed about the changes to the Lockdown rules Boris Johnson announced on Sunday which seem to have confused everyone. Mr Hancock did not seem to understand them either.

Time

This week felt long. Time has taken on a new quality for many of us. Instead of being subjected to transport timetables and being in different places at different times of the day or week we are stuck in a loop of moving from bed, to kitchen, to desk, every day the same. The local church clock, at the end of my road, has stopped and the bells, which would, in pre-lockdown times, be rung every Thursday night, remain silent. Instead clapping for the NHS does continue to mark the evening at 8pm. A new ritual before the perennial one of putting out the rubbish for collection on Friday morning. The clapping has started to grate on me. At first, it was nice to see neighbours and feel part of something. Now it feels tokenistic. Some super-enthusiastic neighbours along the road play loud music and have been known to set off fireworks. Although I appreciate this is an effort to cheer us up, I am not sure that it is entirely appropriate in the circumstances.

Hiatus

Despite some shops reopening and an exciting excursion to a DIY superstore on the weekend to buy plant pots and compost, I am still thinking about the period we're in as *les temps perdu*, a pause in 'real' life. On 18th May an early morning walk along the canal avoids meeting too many people, a few dog walkers and runners are out. My eyes are drawn to half open lock gates and flat tyres on a fleet of white vans which have been parked up for months now. Despite some relaxation of the lockdown rules last week 'normality' seems a long way off. But there are also young moorhens, pausing on the edge of the canal, and flowers coming into bloom. Life goes on. A virtual Chelsea Flower Show begins. Over the past two months more people have turned to gardening and growing food. Perhaps this detailed attention to the natural world provides some assurance that the world keeps on turning.

As the lockdown in England gradually eases my themed walks peter out. I begin to travel a little further afield to walk in the local hills again. Although we are far from what was 'normality', what is being called the 'new normal' seems to be here to stay for a while.