

My time during Covid-19 in The Digby. Patsy Wooldridge, Matron, The Digby.

The end to the Lent term 2020 was awful. It was such a sudden closure with total uncertainty as to when we would be back.

The government announcing examinations were cancelled was a terrible blow to the boys, especially as a lot of them would use the mocks as a guide to what they needed to revise and work on before the actual exams but, of course, they were not given the opportunity and this led to a lot of distress and dismay as to their future.

The abrupt end leaving us all devastated with an almost "bereft" feeling. It was a dreadful week leading up to all the boys departing. The houses closed so suddenly the following week on the Monday, with so many jobs left unfinished.

No end of summer term closure for the upper sixth boys was also devastating as they were robbed of the Commem celebrations and Leavers' Ball. We had a virtual drinks evening but that, as you can imagine, was not quite as any of us had hoped and not being able to celebrate with them personally and give them a hug or handshake to see them off, was such a shame as there was no marking of their time here.

Coming back again in September was equally as devastating as there was so much to do and we weren't given the opportunity to come back and do it in an orderly way. It was just thrust upon us and meant we were running around like headless chickens because no one had given thought as to how long it would take to get everything back up and running again and as well as the problems faced by everything being turned off and left for over 5 months. This was unnecessarily stressful for all concerned. Anyway, as usual, we managed to get through it all and most things were in place by the time the whole house returned. Such a shame it couldn't have been done in a more considered way.

The boys took to the new zones quite quickly, though did need reminding that they were unable to go into certain areas or use certain staircases because they weren't in the correct zone!

Washing was also zoned. We use coloured bedsheets for each zone to make it easier for everyone concerned. We are fortunate enough to have 3 washing machines and 3 tumble dryers, so these were also allocated to each zone so that as much as possible is separated to prevent cross-contamination.

With everything changing constantly as the rate of infection rises, we now wear face coverings when mixing with the boys to safeguard them and ourselves. Socially distancing isn't always easy, but we all try our best. Having the boys in bubbles works well.

Mealtimes are designated so that each house goes up at a set time. It certainly makes life easier when the whole house goes together.

The only downside has been not seeing all the boys every day because they are in separate zones. Normally, they all would have come through the main kitchen area to collect break. Pastorally this is quite an important way of seeing how the boys are, passing on information and picking up on issues, which we haven't been able to do as well.

Social events were cancelled, and any Saturday night socials confined to houses. Sporting activities curtailed and fixtures cancelled. All of which have an impact on school life and the boys' mental wellbeing.

Staff have takeaway lunches which works well, but I also miss going to the dining hall to eat with other staff members as this is a good way of catching up with what is going on and discussing any concerns with boys.

These times are interesting and challenging and not something that will be remedied quickly so everyone has had to adjust to the new ways of working and living. The teaching staff deserve a massive pat on the back and a huge thank you for all their hard work in continuing to provide the boys with an amazing education and array of activities to keep them going throughout the closures. 2020 is a year none of us will forget as it has changed all our lives and devastated so many families.

We returned to work in the New Year 2021 and were just starting to get into the swing of sorting everything out ready for the boys' return when yet again, we were closed! Fortunately, the Government's furlough scheme throughout our periods of closure has been a godsend as it has kept us employed and salaried.

So, March 8th, 2021 came. Schools could reopen, and we were glad to be back. The vaccination programme was well underway with staff being vaccinated during the first few weeks of returning, if not before. It is currently the end of April 2021 and we are looking forward to further restrictions being eased in May and subsequently again in June. The overriding concern of those I have spoken to is that we have all been very careful keeping ourselves to ourselves that when things finally do get back to "normal" and we are able to mix in larger groups, this is causing some angst as many are wary about mixing with large crowds and being in close proximity to them. Time will tell, but for 2021 there is still a great deal of caution that needs to be considered before we re-enter the world we once had.

Trinity term is here once again with lighter days and warmer weather. We are still in bubbles within houses, have set times for meals in the dining hall and staff continue to have takeaway lunches. Parents and visitors still aren't allowed in House. Sporting fixtures are being resumed. This is a great step forward. The boys were delighted that they would get to play against other schools. Socials are starting to re-emerge and we had a Whole House BBQ (in zones) with the next one being the U6 Leavers' Dinner, though this will be going ahead without parents.

We are all hoping that September 2021 will bring new hope and normality back to school life allowing social interaction between year groups and staff which has been greatly missed.

September 2021.