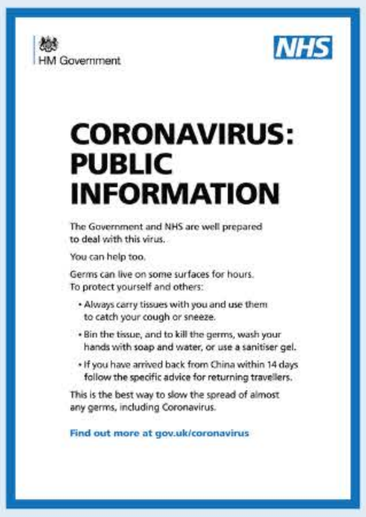






REFLECTIONS ON COVID 19: THE HUGHES HALL EXPERIENCE

In 2020, the COVID 19 pandemic struck and on the 23rd of March, the UK went into lockdown.

This exhibition captures a small snapshot of that time at Hughes Hall and how the staff supported the welfare of its community.

The information and quotations are from a number of staff who worked at Hughes Hall during the pandemic. The images, also from that period, are not linked to any specific quotations.

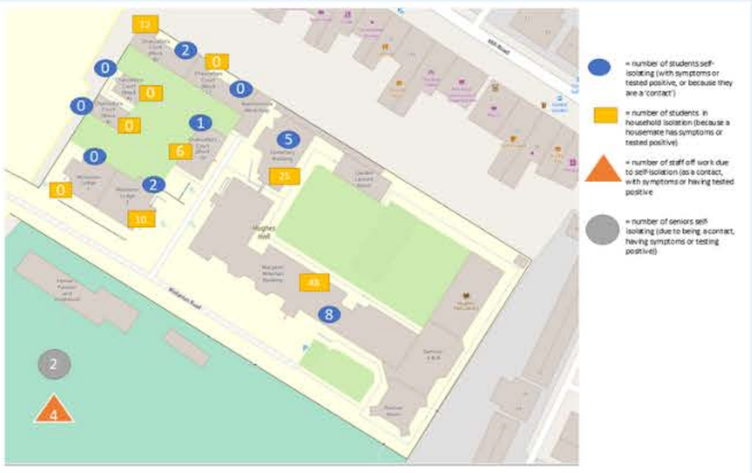
If you feel affected by the exhibition and would like support, the College Welfare and HR teams are available to Hughes Hall members.

- Dr Ben Marshall, Head of Student Wellbeing and Welfare: bmarshall@hughes.cam.ac.uk
- Dr Ruth Holdstock, Health Practitioner: health@hughes.cam.ac.uk
- Human Resources: HRmanager@hughes.cam.ac.uk
- University wellbeing resources: www.hr.admin.cam.ac.uk/wellbeing



140 YEARS 1885-2025

A visual representation of COVID-19 at Hughes Hall College



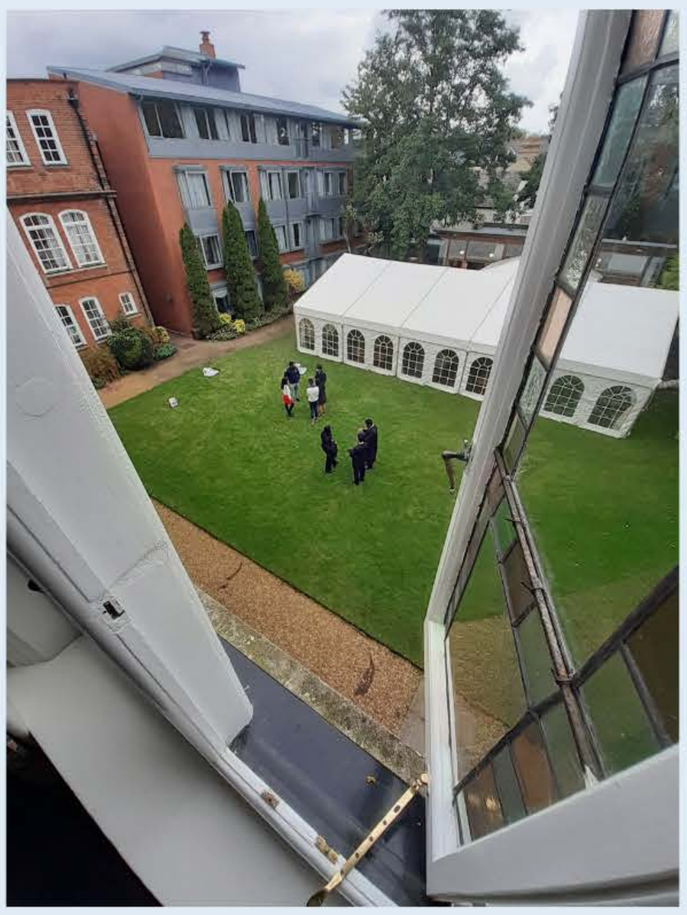
The College Transformed

"At the beginning we were receiving COVID updates from the college nurse, mainly regarding travelling advice and self-isolating when arriving from different areas. The IT department were working hard to make everything available online. From the 3rd of March we started using Teams. ***All events and conferences were cancelled.***

From the 18th of March the University entered the 'red' phase. All students who were able to leave for home should do so without delay. ***College gates and building locks would stay closed****, so people needed to use their cards to access different areas. Visitors were not permitted.*

On the 20th of March, ***the University ceased normal operations****, closing the majority of the University Buildings. Hughes Hall remained open for those who needed to stay here. The MCR and students onsite created a Facebook group to support each other including shopping and delivering food for those self-isolating. From the 24th of March students sharing kitchen facilities were grouped in households."*





"We had a skeleton team on site - mainly housekeeping, catering, maintenance and porters - to ***provide essential services for students*** *who were unable to return home, to* ***ensure they stayed safe*** *and had access to food and basic provisions."*





"We were suddenly aware of the ***challenges and fear*** *experienced by more vulnerable colleagues, moved by the* ***loneliness*** *shared by isolating students in small rooms with no fresh air hundreds of miles from home, and acutely aware of the* ***differences in day-to-day demands*** *upon different members of staff."*

View from the Top

Former College President, Dr Anthony Freeling, captured life at Hughes as the pandemic evolved



Writing in the College magazine, Michaelmas Term 2020:

In Lent Term, COVID-19 and lockdown arrived. A huge effort was made by all the different teams in the college to meet the challenges on several fronts. Thanks go to all, but particularly to everyone working directly with students, in housekeeping, the tutorial, porters and welfare teams, and the college nurse who worked unstintingly to secure their wellbeing. We ***had to respond to the pandemic with minimal warning****. Apart from a few hiccups, we coped very well with a rapid transition to a virtual learning regime. We supported over 240 students who had to remain in Cambridge in a healthy and safe manner, as well as the continued learning of all our students.*

Going forward, we can't legislate for everything but have used the time to anticipate a range of scenarios and develop contingency strategies for further lockdowns. We are sharing best practice with other colleges and the University. We have ***a strong plan in place*** *for the coming academic year so we can react swiftly, in a more organised manner, to the evolving knowns and unknowns.*

Writing in the College magazine, Lent Term 2021:

It is too early to be entirely reflective about the pandemic and what it has meant for us as the landscape is constantly changing. As I write, there is a tangible ***sense of renewed hope*** *and anticipation, from effective and affordable vaccines and treatments emerging around the world to closer knit, supportive communities pooling resources.*

As part of our crisis recovery work in late Spring, we created several scenarios to aid our strategic planning. What we didn't predict, however, is that college catering, cleaning and portering would be able to remain 'open for business' every day during the pandemic; that we would avoid mass redundancies; that we would fill our accommodation; and that we would attract more students this academic year than ever before, from all over the world.

Our staff team has worked harder and more flexibly than ever, and with a dedication beyond that which I could have asked for. Our porters, for instance, have delivered nearly 3,000 parcels in the first six weeks of term. Our students are running Zoom socials and cooking meals for their isolating housemates. They have shown ***stoicism and selflessness*** *in the face of restrictions on socialising. I am particularly moved by the experiences of those seniors who continue to make* ***very real contributions to the fight against COVID-19****, and our students who are* ***on the frontline*** *in hospitals, laboratories and classrooms. I have played a part in the wider crisis efforts by sitting on the University's COVID-19 Gold Team, helping to coordinate the responses of 31 colleges and over 150 departments.*

Looking back, in an interview on the Hughes Hall website, September 2022:

"I believe that Hughes got through COVID extremely well, and this was due in a large part to the strong systems and processes we had put in place and the great teams we had developed as well as the sheer resilience of staff, seniors and students. But the inevitable turmoil over the last couple of years has meant ***our community has been stretched and strained****, and another rebuild is required as we take a breath and recover.*

Playing a greater role as a leader amongst the college Heads of House was largely a matter of timing. The colleges had to do things together more effectively and efficiently. I happened to be chair of the Cambridge University Colleges' Committee during that period. It was critical for the colleges to find ways to work together, which the rapid deployment of Zoom made possible. I chaired weekly 'Friday at 9' meetings, when all the Senior Tutors, Bursars and Heads of House were able to receive updates on plans, comment on them and speed up information flow. It also meant we got to know each other better and, paradoxically at a time when most communities were unable to gather, ***we built mutual trust and supportive relationships****.*

As Chair of the Colleges' Committee, I was also elected a member of the University Council. This body is responsible for much of the oversight and coordination in education, welfare, finances and managing COVID, together with its multiple subcommittees and working groups. I believe we helped the collective collegiate University make progress, often catching problems at an early stage, and helping the Vice Chancellor to achieve his objectives."



"On site work remained similar, but more demanding: cleaning areas to new 'COVID standards', catering for isolating or quarantining or unwell students, matriculation in a tent, dining far from one another, all accompanied by complicated risk assessment protocols for every task, room, department. ***The two-metre stick was everyone's companion****, and signs, stickers and screens appeared at random in every building. Our porters became adept at administering complex COVID testing logistics whilst helping care for scared or sad students, new to Cambridge and feeling unwell. Postdocs moved all contact online, we started selling basic groceries from the dining hall, and children did maths homework in the background of most (online) team meetings."*

"Actions and tasks were dependant on the changing guidance from the government and the numerous risk assessments in place. The ***welfare of the Hughes Hall community*** *was at the heart of the decision making process."*



"HR introduced a Microsoft Teams site named ***'Charlie's staff wellbeing site', named after our College cat!*** *This allowed staff to keep in touch and post photos or stories throughout lockdown. The real Charlie was sent to a former staff member's house to ensure he received the care and attention he had become accustomed to."*

"I would leave home a lot later than normal as I would only see perhaps one or two cars all the way from Ely to Cambridge. But I was never stopped by the police although some of or Porters were, so I had to issue them a note from the College explaining that they were essential workers.

I would walk through the Margaret Wileman building and ***see nobody all day****. I would firstly check for any maintenance jobs. The next day I would ask the maintenance person in, to come in and carry out repairs. On a weekly basis, I had to do* ***the most boring job ever*** *and that was to run all the taps and showers in unoccupied rooms (Legionella requirement).*

All staff were invited to a Teams meeting every Wednesday morning and I used to tell a joke for the week. This was the beginning of the now staff coffee mornings.

Towards the end of COVID when isolation rules were reduced a seating area was created on the drive, where it still exists today."



HUGHES HALL
UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Facilities

From: **John Horwood**
Head of Facilities

To Whom It May Concern
Ref **Employee:**

Please be advised that the above named employee is required to attend Hughes Hall, Wollaston Road, Cambridge, CB1 2EW to perform the following essential services on behalf of the College.

- Emergency Maintenance.
- Security Checks.
- Emergency sanitation related to Covid-19 isolation and distancing protocols.
- Student welfare checks.
- College contact for both students and external bodies.

Any queries to be directed to me on: 07856 000725

Yours faithfully

John Horwood
Head of facilities

Wollaston Road, Cambridge, CB1 2EW, United Kingdom
T: +44 (0) 1223 334898 E: enquiries@hughes.cam.ac.uk F: +44 (0) 1223 311179 W: www.hughes.cam.ac.uk
Hughes Hall, a College of the University of Cambridge, is incorporated by Royal Charter Registered Charity No. 1137471

[The note permitting essential workers to travel to the College during lockdown]



View from the College Nurse

Former College Nurse, Maria Gloag, reflects on her pandemic experience

"The main thing I remember at the start of the first lockdown in 2020 was being incredibly grateful to our IT team (at that time led by Paul Blaxhill) for their foresight in insisting that we all move to cloud-based working. This meant that I was able to immediately switch all my clinics online, and was able to offer appointments via Zoom (initially) and later Teams without any gaps in the service provision. I ***got to know students on a different level*** *as they were often speaking to me from their homes which created more relaxed atmosphere than meeting in the health centre. My little Cavalier King Charles Spaniel, Buddy, had a tendency to appear onscreen and became a favourite with some of the students I saw regularly.*

Undertaking online clinical assessment and providing remote medical advice was ***a huge learning curve****, and the support of the College Nurse community in sharing good practice and encouraging one another was invaluable. The Porters were very much my eyes and ears on the ground, and I worked closely with them and the Catering and Housekeeping teams to support students who were in self- or household isolation. One of the positive outcomes of the pandemic was that I was able to gain an insight into the operational side of the college, working with Katheryn Smart, the Domestic Bursar and Victoria Espley, the Bursar to produce policies and risk assessments around infection control, social distancing and self-isolation.*

I was very impressed by the ***resilience and determination shown by the students****, despite their student experience being so different from that which they had been expecting and hoping for. However, many students did find things difficult at times, and it was a privilege to be able to be alongside those who needed someone to talk to or were anxious about their health. Our fantastic team of tutors, support by Chloe Bevan and the Tutorial Office team, worked incredibly hard to provide a support network and were able to flag up any concerns they had about individual students to enable me to reach out to them quickly.*

I found the experience of working from home whilst trying to juggle home-schooling for my two daughters (aged eleven and nine at the start of the first lockdown) quite challenging at times, and ***it was easy to feel isolated and overwhelmed****. One thing which really helped was the regular online staff coffee organised by HR manager Suzanne Bedford, which meant it was possible to keep up with colleagues and support one another.*

I sometimes felt guilty *that I wasn't working in the NHS, especially when I saw the toll the pandemic was taking on some of my NHS colleagues. I found at these times that the feedback I received from students saying that I had made a positive difference and that, in a few cases, they felt that they might not have been able to continue their studies without my support, made a huge difference. This brought home to me* ***the importance of expressing appreciation and encouraging one another****, both in college and in our wider community, and I've tried to continue that in my life."*

Life in the Library





The library team swiftly changed practices to make sure students were able to access library resources and services throughout the pandemic.

- library services moved online, creating a Moodle site as a hub
- library induction videos for new students
- online library guide
- online library desk booking system
- click-and-collect library book service
- 'ask a librarian' Zoom calls
- group study sessions via Zoom
- virtual new books display
- academic skills teaching via Zoom
- tailoring academic skills sessions towards skills for remote study eg how to use recorded lectures, how to set up your desk, how to find online resources

In the library itself, the furniture was moved around to provide socially-distanced study spaces, and we provided hand sanitiser and wipes and free masks. The team took over the Pavilion room and set it up as overflow library study space. Library books were delivered to students' doors when they were self-isolating. Returned books were even quarantined and wiped down, as per official guidance.





Fully-blind since the age of five, Celine Lean Yew Lin, from Selangor in Malaysia, came to Hughes Hall in 2019 to study for a BA in Law. Her Tutor, By-Fellow and College Disability Champion, Alison Nicholson, caught up with Celine to reflect on her experience during the pandemic.





"You started at Cambridge in 2019 and for much of that time life was hugely affected by the pandemic.
*Yes, I remained in Cambridge whilst many students were able to return home and the college site was certainly very quiet! But the Porters and welfare staff were great, as were you as my tutor – **everyone really went above and beyond** in supporting me throughout it all.*

Aside from the obvious impacts around isolation and loneliness, what were some of the other challenges you faced?
*Having been at boarding school, I was used to being self-sufficient, and fiercely so. However, I did find online supervisions a real challenge. Trying to listen in and contribute to group discussion, whilst taking notes at the same time, and keeping an eye on the group chat meant a lot of juggling! And for much of the lockdown period, **it felt like I was living in a completely virtual world**. Like other students, I feel like I would have benefited so much more from live interactions you get with your fellow students during non-pandemic times – casually debating various lines of academic thoughts, whilst walking down the street to supervisions, for instance.*

*Moreover, the pandemic lockdowns meant **I missed out on a great deal** of extra-curricular activities. Being fully blind, I rely far more on everyday, in-person contact so was more vulnerable than most during times of strict social restrictions. The activities open to me were very limited. For example, I couldn't continue with archery, as it would mean being too close (for social distancing) to a spotter; an able-bodied guide for archery.*

Were there other surprising challenges the pandemic presented?
Mask wearing was particularly difficult for me as it partially hinders my sense of echo location. With a total loss of sight, I am more reliant on my other senses, and I found I was bumping into things more frequently, because the presence of a face mask makes it feel like there is something in the way of my spatial perception.

You commented on my heightened senses during a visit to the Botanic Gardens. Standing in front of a huge redwood tree I knew exactly how tall it was – it felt like I was standing in front of a huge, vast wall. That same visit, whilst sitting in the rose garden, I became aware of a very loud insect buzzing around in the grass – however you couldn't see it to tell me what it was, let alone hear it – which we both found amusing.

*I also **struggled with barriers to information** during the pandemic. There was suddenly a lot of new, often urgent, and quite last minute information flying around! Sadly, some of that was inaccessible to me. For example, a corridor I needed to access in my accommodation block was under quarantine for a short time, however I had no idea. It turned out that there was a huge printed sign outside the doors to the corridor but, of course, I walked straight past it! I understood that there was a lot going on, and everyone was doing their best, but it was at times like these more than any other that accessible communication was critical for me."*

You can read the full interview on the Hughes Hall website:
www.hughes.cam.ac.uk/about/news/in-conversation-cambridge-through-anothers-eyes/

"From end of January 2020 ***the feeling was of uncertainty****. Not knowing what was happening and seeing the spread of the virus globally. Contradictory information and daily changes coming from different sources."*

"From the outset, I was impressed by the support given to staff and students by the College. For those staff who provided critical services and were not in a position to be furloughed throughout the pandemic, ***fatigue set in****, however, we pulled together and* ***were driven by the overwhelming sense of 'doing our bit' during an unprecedented and difficult chapter*** *at Hughes Hall and for humanity."*







"As a new part-time employee, I had four days at my new desk, meeting colleagues and completing my onboarding, before I exchanged it for remote working. It was challenging to build relationships with colleagues and ***I often felt isolated and lonely****. The weekly Zoom coffee morning became a way to get to know people and share the feeling that we were all in this together and* ***it felt great when we came back to College and saw each other in person****. We learned a lot about critical incidents that year, and I will not be alone in wishing we never need that specific knowledge again, though I still have some masks, just in case."*

"Being in (any) college in Cambridge during the pandemic was different, sometimes difficult, but also ***dotted with kindnesses and surprises*** *often only seen in times of shared ordeal."*

"Looking back, I realise how effectively ***our brains have allowed us to move on*** *and in some cases bury the harder parts of those months. I remember* ***juggling working and home-schooling, caring for parents, worrying about friends*** *who were very ill with Covid in those first few weeks, and later comforting those who lost loved ones, including my father-in-law."*



"I just came to work every day and did my job which I enjoy and get a lot of satisfaction from. ***There was always the worry of if I would catch the virus*** *while doing my job, but that was a risk doing every day usual tasks. It was a nice bonus to finish early on some days, as it was so* ***quiet in college****."*