

Covid Tales from Tom's Bench

A photo-story by Jim Grover
September 2020

The exhibition:
The images and personal stories

Introduction

At the side of Mount Pond on Clapham Common there is a 24-hour/365 days a year 'snack wagon' ('Honest Tom's'). It has been there for 30 years and was owned and operated by Tom, who passed away last year. In his memory a bench has been erected by it, with an inscription plaque and a flower vase (which Nadine, who has worked in Honest Tom's for 27 years, fills with fresh flowers each week).

Every day during the month of August 2020, I went to photograph someone or some group sitting on this particular bench and asked them a few questions, focusing on their personal experiences of Covid.

It was, deliberately, a random process; whoever sat down on 'Tom's bench' became my subject for the day.

On one day I had to wait for 3 hours for someone to sit on the bench (it's not the only bench!). On another day, despite going twice no-one sat on it, so the empty bench became my mute subject that day. The project was paused in the middle of the month for 4 days while I went on a brief 'staycation'. The final photo-story comprises 28 sequential photographs, with accompanying captions and stories.

August had some typically British variations in climate, including a heat wave and heavy rain. So the set of sequential images also conveys the passage of time: through the weekly new flowers, that wilt and die, and the green that peppers the scorched grass as rain swept in at the end of the month.

The diverse sitters' (from all walks of life) experiences of Covid cover the complete spectrum, from surprisingly rewarding...through indifference...to harrowing. Their stories are like many we read and hear about each day but are now made very real as we see the faces behind the words.

Yvonne's incredibly moving story, on the very last day of the project, the 31st, puts all the others into context.

Jim Grover

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Saturday 1st August



Timothy first came to Honest Tom's in May, when he started working on Clapham Common for Lambeth Council at the weekends; during the week he works for himself as a painter and decorator in Sydenham. He is of Jamaican heritage.

Has Covid impacted you in any material way?

'It didn't really bother me because I know that I can't get it. I take certain things to prevent getting it...guava leaf and soursop leaf in the morning, and when I go home in the evening...and I make special teas with them...and sometimes I will take a bit of bicarbonate. It's part of my culture. So I lived my life normally...I didn't really think of it because I know I can't catch it. It's fate. I know one girl that caught the virus...she is still alive...I visit her and help her out a bit.'

Sunday 2nd August



Dave owns 'Dave's Paws', a professional dog walking, cat feeding, and pet sitting business. He has been coming to Honest Tom's for 6 years as it's on his daily dog-walking route. Today he is walking only Luna.

Has Covid impacted you in any material way?

'Our business has taken a massive hit. We lost a few dogs where clients lost their businesses...although we're still walking their dogs for free. All our cat business went out of the window because, obviously, no one is going away and leaving their cats.'

Monday 3rd August



Three generations wait for their lunch on Tom's bench: Penelope, her daughter Rebecca and Rebecca's partner Jamie, who is a director of a food ingredients business, and their son, Max. Jamie discovered Honest Tom's a month ago on one of his walks, and they now come all the time, typically for lunch.

Has Covid impacted you in any material way?

Penelope: *'Not unduly.'*

Rebecca: *'Only not going to baby groups.'*

Jamie: *'Only in terms of work and working from home...which has its ups and downs. I wouldn't be able to be here today; I'd be in an office in Wapping.'*

Tuesday 4th August



Larry has been coming here for over 40 years. He loves this place. For him, it feels like the countryside. He's now retired having been a road sweeper for Lambeth Council. He's waiting for a friend to join him for a cup of tea.

Has Covid impacted you in any material way?

'No. I've still been out and about and exercising.'

Wednesday 5th August



Emin (on left) and his friend Paul. Honest Tom's is a big part of Emin's life; he's been coming for around 20 years and typically comes several times each day, sometime with his wife Sheila, to meet and chat with his many friends. Paul has been coming for at least 30 years; he was born around here and used to bring his dogs.

Has Covid impacted you in any material way?

Emin: *'It hasn't really affected me. This place was closed for 7 weeks...so I missed the people up here. Other than that...it wasn't too bad. I had Sheila to keep me company. I know a couple of people who got ill but they came through it all right.'*

Paul: *'My mother died back in February. I went to her bungalow in Suffolk and got grounded there for 5 weeks...I couldn't get a coach back. I got badly ill there...it was horrible. In the end I panicked and managed to get a mini-cab company to bring me back to London for a lot of money...and then straight to the doctors...but it wasn't Covid...I thought it might have been.'*

Thursday 6th August



Victor (on the left) has been coming for just a few weeks. Harvey has been coming for a year or two; he's an electrical engineer but sometimes helps his friend out with food deliveries. They are part of a group of motor-biker friends who meet up most days at Honest Tom's. Some of them use it as a base, glued to their mobile phones, as they wait for courier jobs to bid for from the likes of Deliveroo and Uber Eats (beneficiaries of Covid). On a typical day they earn around £50-60; a really good day is worth £100-£150. At 17, Harvey isn't quite old enough to work for one of the food courier firms (*'I wish'*).

Has Covid impacted you in any material way?

Victor: *'It didn't really affect me because I kept on working right through...doing deliveries for Uber Eats. I work every day. I was fine.'*

Harvey: *'No...not really...I kept on doing the daily things in life. But there hasn't been enough part-time work for me as an electrical engineer.'*

Friday 7th August



Matt comes once or twice a week and has been coming for around 3 years; he's an electrician.

Has Covid impacted you in any material way?

'Yes. Covid put the company I work for completely out of business. I'm self-employed and they told us to sit at home until further notice...they're still shut down today. I had no income and had to find other means of employment. I've got some work now, if you can call it work, for my uncle...it's still money but it's not what I was earning before.'

Saturday 8th August



I waited for over an hour at lunch-time but no-one sat on the bench. I went back later in the day; still no luck. Alas I had missed the Yazoo drinker!

When an angler doesn't catch anything they 'blank'. So a 'blank' for me.

Sunday 9th August



Mark and Stephen are brothers. They have been coming *'hit and miss'* for around 20 years but have been regulars for the last 4; they come every Sunday to have lunch together (Stephen travels all the way in from Beckenham).

Has Covid impacted you in any material way?

Mark: *'I don't go out as much...only for the basic stuff...food and exercise. But I have been able to keep working in grounds and gardens...as a gardener.'*

Stephen: *'It was challenging for us during the lockdown...it's always been very important for us to be able to meet in the open on a regular basis. When Honest Tom's closed I realised that Covid was more serious than I'd first thought...I don't remember it being closed in all the years I've been coming to the Common. In terms of work...it hasn't really had an impact on me. I haven't been furloughed...I work for the government. I used to work from home a few days, now I'm working from home full-time. The government wants us all back in the office to help the economy...my guess is they'll be requesting us to return before the end of the year...as long as circumstances permit.'*

Monday 10th August



Pedro (left) and Rico are, like Victor and Harvey, motor-bikers. Pedro has been coming for around 3 months, attracted by ‘the vibe’ and his biker friends. He also sometimes fishes the pond, in front of the bench, for carp. Rico has been coming for 3 or 4 weeks, attracted by the food at Honest Tom’s and the bikes.

Has Covid impacted you in any material way?

Pedro: *‘No...I was doing my day to day life...work...home. I work in construction...I worked through it...painting and decorating...business is fine.’*

Rico: *‘I’ve been keeping busy...I work in construction...I’m self-employed. I wish I was a courier rider!’*

Tuesday 11th August



Michael has been coming for around 10 years. He's ex-army and lives in a flat in Balham provided by the ex-services housing association; his son is a doctor. *'There's not many jobs for anti-tank gunners round here unless you decide to become a mercenary!'* so now he does a bit of film extra work, plays the classical guitar (*'it keeps me alive'*), and has recently been learning some 17th century poetry (*'which will be good for a pint in the pub!'*).

Has Covid impacted you in any material way?

'To be quite honest I never expected to be still here with all the fear around...totally exaggerated. But touch wood I have survived. I have saved a lot of money...there's more money in my bank accounts...and it makes you realise how you fritter it away. There is a bright lining to every dark cloud...there's something to be learned from everything.'

Wednesday 12th August



Max (on the left) and Gary are bricklayers working a short walk away. Max has been coming to Honest Tom's for around 3 years and comes whenever he is working in the area; for Gary this is his first time, brought along by Max.

Has Covid impacted you in any material way?

Max: *'I had my holiday cancelled...I've booked another holiday to Croatia with the money I got back. I had a little bit of time off work but got the money back from the government. So all OK really.'*

Gary: *'Not really...I was off work for around a month. I'm self-employed...I had a short break and that was it.'*

Thursday 13th August



Holly is Tom's granddaughter. Her dad, Simon, now owns and runs Honest Tom's where Holly works the afternoon shift, following in her grand-dad's footsteps. She started work in January, a few weeks before Tom's was forced to shut in March, the first time it has been closed in its 30 year history. Holly is also a graphic artist.

Has Covid impacted you in any material way?

'With Tom's being closed I was out of work for 10 weeks. It was a lovely holiday...it was a lovely holiday (she laughs slightly sheepishly). I spent all my time in the countryside...every day I was going on long walks in the fields...going up to the farm. And although I wasn't getting paid I still had support around me. Everyone else seemed to be working harder...my partner (a police officer) was working much harder.'

Friday 14th August



A rainy day; a wet bench is hardly enticing!

Saturday 15th August



This is the first time Zoe has sat on Tom's bench. She comes to the Common 'pretty much every day' but stopped here today for a break having just taken up running. Zoe is an NHS hospital speech therapist and works in mental health and forensics.

Has Covid impacted you in any material way?

'It has. I got stuck in Australia and unfortunately contracted the virus there. I went for a holiday for 2 weeks...but ended up there for two and a half months. It was pretty hard getting back...the airfares were expensive and they kept getting cancelling the flights...which happened to me...it was so unfortunate. But my work was good over here, I work for the NHS. I am fine now...I am one of the lucky ones. Work is busy.'

Sunday 16th August



Nadine (on the right) has worked at Honest Tom's for almost 27 years, she works the morning shift Tuesdays to Fridays and comes in from Croydon; she is here today to cover staff vacations. Nadine fills the vase on Tom's bench with flowers each week to commemorate Tom who died last year and who she worked with over all those years. Susanne comes every Wednesday attracted by the company, 'the lovely food, the absolutely lovely ladies' in Honest Tom's, and the opportunity to give her dog a sausage.

Has Covid impacted you in any material way?

Susanne: 'I have COPD (a lung disease) and had to stay locked in for 2 months, by myself, with my dog...it was horrible. I didn't speak to anybody...I didn't see none of my kids...my grandkids. It was depressing...awful...because I like to get out. I couldn't wait to get back out...I didn't feel anxious at all. Now I do anything...I spent the night with my grandkids last night...I baby sat and looked after them and cuddled up with them in bed. Someone died in my family of Covid...two days after...she was disabled and had a lot of issues.'

Nadine: 'It stopped me working with Tom's being shut. But I enjoyed being off...being indoors...getting things done...just me and Den (Nadine's husband). It was hard not being able to see my kids and grandkids...but you've got Facetime and all that technology now. But other than that, I quite enjoyed it. I am never off sick...I just have my holidays...and it was nice to have a long break. It's hard being on your feet for 6 hours each day at my age.'

Monday 17th August



This is Michele's first time at Honest Tom's; he stumbled across it whilst walking on the Common with his young daughter. Michele is originally from the north of Italy where Covid hit hard and has been here for over 15 years; he's an analyst programmer.

Has Covid impacted you in any material way?

'Well it depends how you define serious...but yes. We have all been constrained so it's been tough for everyone from a social and a mental health point of view. We keep balanced...but you need to make an effort...so it's not easy. We've been OK, so we are very lucky. I'm working from home; I had the opportunity to work from home before...some days a week...and to save some money and the commute...but I never liked it. Maybe it's because I'm Italian; I like to interact. It's a different rhythm...I guess we'll have to get used to it.'

We went back to see my parents in Italy a couple of weeks ago. It was tough; they want to touch you...and you're scared of giving them anything.'

Tuesday 18th August



During August John sat on this bench with his friend Bob (who is he waiting for) most weekday lunchtimes (*'We have a deposit on this bench!'*). He's been coming for some 20 years; he used to come on his motorbike on his Saturday and Sunday bike runs but now he makes this his daily stop-off point between his work commitments for Transport for London.

Has Covid impacted you in any material way?

'Only not going out to places...the pubs and bike places being closed...but, otherwise, no.'

Wednesday 19th August



A change of scenery and a new bench. A four-day interlude to the project to grab a much-needed 4 day 'staycation' on the south coast of Cornwall in a tiny village called Portwrinkle.

Sunday 23rd August



Martin and Maria are friends. Martin has been coming to Honest Tom's for 20 years and knew Tom. Maria has only been coming for 6 months but now comes a couple of times a week; she likes the peace and quiet to collect her thoughts. She's currently not currently working due to health issues but was previously an NHS receptionist. Martin is a carpenter although he is not doing so much at the moment having recently lost his wife to cancer.

Has Covid impacted you in any material way?

Martin: *'Not at the beginning...more now at the end with all the uncertainty. It didn't affect me directly, thank goodness.'*

Maria: *'Again, not at the beginning...but now it's all the uncertainty and the illegal raves going on on the Common. I'm worried about that...we were here late last night at 10 o'clock and there were two raves going on. There was no social distancing...the police had no one to send'.
Martin:* *'The litter they leave is the bit I don't like...I ride round here on my bike in the mornings...if it was just left they'd be the people complaining about it.'*

Monday 24th August



The tree over the bench provides some shelter for Freddie, Rob, and Te Keepa as the rain starts to fall. They are about to return to school for their final GCSE year. They have been to Honest Tom's a few times before.

Has Covid impacted you in any material way?

'It's been alright...staying indoors...not going out...working has been a bit harder.'

Tuesday 25th August



Junior (on the left) has been coming to Honest Tom's for over ten years; he comes from Bromley on his motorbike as often as he can, mainly to meet up with his friend Emin. For 27 years Junior ran his own car body repair business, before being injured in an accident which has left him with long-term illness. This is the second time Emin appears on the bench; he shared his story with me on August 5th.

Has Covid impacted you in any material way?

Junior: 'No, because I am trying to be careful...everything has been fine.'

Wednesday 26th August



This is Margaret's first time on Tom's bench; she has come along with Tony who is a regular and comes on his bike from Stockwell two or three times a week. They are friends and members of the same organisation for people 'of a certain age'.

Has Covid impacted you in any material way?

Margaret: *'No...because I don't worry about it. I'm 81...I haven't got time to worry about it. I don't feel alone. But I'm missing the Proms.'*

Tony: *'Yes...it's hard. I live alone...so I feel a bit isolated. I usually go to Sweden in the summer to see a very good friend for a couple of weeks...I've missed that this year. It's been tough.'*

Thursday 27th August



Tony and Michaela started to come to Honest Tom's six months ago, to meet up with their friends. They both now come almost every day. Tony does motorbike deliveries for a vegan restaurant; Michaela is studying engineering at university and just got a First in some pre-return exams.

Has Covid impacted you in any material way?

Tony: *'I got kept in lockdown, like everyone else...and was out of work...I'm back at work now. It's not like normal life; you're under control...like when you're younger and you're under control by your parents. I've missed my freedom...I don't like it.'*

Michaela: *'Not really...university stopped for a bit...but I didn't mind!'*

Friday 28th August



Tony is a local black cab driver; he's come for breakfast after a nightshift. He can remember Tom opening 30 years ago and has been a regular for the last 15 years or so, stopping to grab a cup of tea or a bite to eat. He now comes most days if he's working, attracted by a decent cup of tea and the sense of community amongst the regulars; he's made many friends up here. He sometimes helps out in Honest Tom's.

Has Covid impacted you in any material way?

'It's been terrible...the work has completely gone. I'm self-employed...the government money has helped out a lot. The business is still as bad now...the work hasn't picked up at all.'

Saturday 29th August



No room on the bench. Anglers!

Sunday 30th August



Theresa and William took pity on me, having heard that I had been waiting for 3 hours for someone to sit on the bench; by now it was early evening and the light was fading fast! This is Theresa's second time at Honest Tom's. William has been coming for some 20 years; he comes every morning at around half past 5 to get a cup of coffee on his way to work as an air conditioning engineer.

Has Covid impacted you in any material way?

Theresa: *'Yes I was in the travel industry...I was in sales...I lost my job. I had just moved to London in January for the job...and now it's gone unfortunately. They put me on furlough. They were very good to us and let us know every week and they still touch base with us...so it was a nice lay off. But they finally let me and a lot of people go due to Covid.'*

William: *'On a personal level it hasn't affected me in any way. As a maintenance engineer...I've have worked right the way through as a key worker. I've been lucky when so many haven't.'*

Monday 31st August



The final chapter in this month-long project and an incredibly moving encounter with Yvonne, whose experiences put all the others', who have come before her, into context. Yvonne has been coming to Honest Tom's for 'donkey's years', including when it was Tom working on his own and a much smaller snack wagon. She comes two or three times a week as she lives close by. A beaming smile illuminates Yvonne's face as she proudly tells me she is a 'great grannie'.

Has Covid impacted you in any material way?

'Well...yes...because my husband died. He collapsed at home and it took a couple of hours for the ambulance to come. We managed to get him to St George's...and they kept him in there. He just couldn't walk...he was in there a couple of weeks and then he caught this virus there...and he died. And my two daughters and I...we couldn't see him...no contact...we couldn't even say good-bye. And that was in March...he died in the beginning of April and we couldn't bury him until May. And now I am on my own. It was a nightmare. It's still a nightmare.'