



**Paul Walker, Chairman, and Chris Hutchinson, Honorary President, of Spitalfields Market Tenants Association**

Lockdown for the wholesalers at New Spitalfields Market was a very different experience to that of the majority of the population of Great Britain.

I'm not sure many people in high office would have been thinking of us when they came up with the definition of key workers, but while much of the country ground to its collective halt, we were among those who couldn't and didn't stop. In fact, as we watched supply issues dog the supermarket aisles, our oft overlooked value to the nation's food supply chain was put into stark context. Without us, a large swathe of London's population would have had real trouble accessing fresh fruit and veg at a time when they really needed it.

We worked incredibly hard to maintain our own supplies, in order to support our core independent retail customer base, then just as hard to help the delivery services that sprung up, the new box schemers, the charities and of course, each other. We knew that extra effort was not going to translate into significant financial gain, but the fact that we were still able to ply our trade and at the same time help the country keep running was vital.

We pride ourselves in the wholesale game for being a close-knit community and in times like these, that togetherness really shines through. The catering supply firms in the market saw their business disappear overnight, once the government took the decision to close down the hospitality industry. It didn't stop them contributing to the immense charitable efforts of the market though. So many charities and charitable organisations benefited from the incredible generosity of the people at New Spitalfields, including Free Serve, City Harvest and Fuel Our Frontline, a fantastic organisation which we provided with fresh produce in a joint initiative with the Fruiterers. More than 30 tonnes of fruit and veg were delivered to charity on the catering companies' vehicles.

We faced plenty of difficulties. There was for a long time the threat hanging over us that we could face closure if guidelines weren't strictly followed or, God forbid, there was an outbreak of COVID-19 at the market or amongst our customers. Thankfully, that didn't come to pass. Spitalfields Market Tenants Association was fighting a constant battle to ensure traders, suppliers and customers alike were furnished with the correct health and safety information throughout. The general public were told not to come to the site – enforcing that is far easier said than done, but we did our utmost.

All in all though, we've got through it. We've demonstrated our worth, kept ourselves and the market afloat, but most importantly we've done our bit for the country.

Now for the next challenge...

Workwise, lockdown was OK for me. I'm a freelance writer and PR/Marketing consultant, so a lot of my work dried up, but I was kept busy by a couple of clients who needed to keep the communication flow going with their network of colleagues, suppliers and customers.

Why I thought my experience might interest you is that my wife Lizzy is Lead Nurse in the Critical Care departments at Kings College Hospital, one of the largest hospitals in London and therefore, of course, the country. She didn't have a lockdown and her experience was hellish.



**Lizzy and Tommy Leighton**

We live in Orpington, Kent, and the Princess Royal University Hospital (PRUH) is part of the same Trust that owns Kings, which is in Denmark Hill, in south London. From the day in March when the first rash of COVID-19 patients began to arrive with life-threatening multi organ failure, the working lives of Lizzy and all of her colleagues changed dramatically.

Lizzy spent the first five weeks of the pandemic at the PRUH and selfishly, it was truly heartbreaking for me to come home each morning having walked her to the hospital for another gruesome groundhog day. You've all seen, heard and read about the horrors that the 'frontline' nurses, doctors and everyone else who donned the PPE to do their jobs had to endure. The patients, of course, had it worst of all. Lizzy would tell you that these were by far the sickest patients she has ever had to nurse in her 20-odd years in the profession. The NHS had never dealt with anything like this before, so every day brought new and often confused guidelines, more patients, new challenges and tragically and unavoidably, more deaths.

Like so many of her colleagues, she came home drained every night having worked many hours more than her contract requires. At the beginning, there were tears, both of frustration and sadness, there were feelings of hopelessness and at times those feelings bordered on despair. It's her vocation. She loves it. But it was never meant to be like this.

But it never quite got to despair. The nation's support for the NHS helped keep spirits off the floor at a time when it was most needed and gradually, the chaos and the unknown became organised chaos and a new way of working. Within a few weeks, Lizzy was back in Denmark Hill, which was the busiest hospital in London for COVID patients. It's not over yet, but if there is a second wave, which seems likely, then the steely resolve will this time be accompanied by a greater level of preparedness for what lies ahead.

By being at home, I was able to support one of the tens of thousands of brave and committed NHS staff we clapped every Tuesday. Sometimes, just sometimes, business takes a back seat.

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My first reaction was, I must admit, *“are we over reacting to this?”* but of course, with the benefit of hindsight, it seems as if we were not reacting enough. As I saw flights back to the likes of Italy, Spain and France being cancelled, I was checking daily the flights back to the UK as my time in Jeddah started to draw its scheduled close. I was told by the airline *“that if there was one last place in the world we would still fly to, it will be London”*. So that's OK then, I thought!



But – the hotel I was staying in was showing signs of beginning to shut down. I also began to find that for meetings I was due to attend, people were saying *“we would normally like to meet you face to face, of course, but we are not accepting international visitors”* so began to do these meetings on line etc. Little did I know how long this was likely to go on for at the time! I began to think *“I could do this from home in Reading really!”*.

3 days before I was due to come home, I rang the airline, asked if they had spaces for that evenings flight (they did) - and next thing I knew I was on the way home and back in Reading for breakfast the following day. It was also my mum's birthday, so it was especially good to get back - and that kept me in her and my 3 sisters *“good books”*.

2 days later – all flights were cancelled back to the UK.....

Now, Jeddah is a great place, but the thought of being there for an extended period on a time like this in a shutdown hotel? I think they call it a lucky escape!

Since then I have been confined to barracks, as it were. I am quite used to working from home 1 or 2 days a week, but a normal working pattern sees trips to London, our Head Office in Cheshire and elsewhere around the UK. But day after day, week after week and now month after month? Safe to say, the novelty has worn off a bit! I don't however miss being stuck on the M6 at 8.30 on a Friday night.

I am fortunate though - we have a small, but pleasant back garden we sat in in over the summer months. We have had a fridge full of food and the odd can of cold beer. My parents are OK. My 3 kids are all OK. Work has been busy throughout - at times – very busy! This, for me, could have been a lot worse. I realise how lucky I am, compared to many, who have had an exceptionally tough time of it over the last 6 months.

I hope all my friends in the Livery are well and hope to see you at some stage soon. In the meantime, take care and stay safe.

Root & Branch, forever.

John Giles