



# Communication is More Important Than Travel

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'Flu in Ireland!', screams the headline on an article in the *Freeman's Journal* of 30 October, 1918.<sup>1</sup> The article tells us that as a precaution against the spread of the disease libraries and schools would close with immediate effect and that all public buildings were to be disinfected. History shows us that 2020 was not the first time Ireland experienced a pandemic, nor is it the first time public libraries have been required to close due to a public health issue.

<sup>1</sup> <https://archive-irishnewsarchive-com.ucc.idm.oclc.org/Olive/APA/INA.Edu/Default.aspx#panel=document>



In an effort to stem the tide of the COVID-19 pandemic in Ireland, the Government, echoing the earlier decision of its predecessor, resolved last March to close all public libraries. In the intervening months, libraries have been unable to fully operate, with physical access severely curtailed. As a Senior Library Assistant with special responsibility for Local Studies in Waterford Libraries, my first thought when we were told to close last March was: did this ever happen in Ireland before? My question was quickly answered and some preliminary searches proved that the 'Spanish Flu' pandemic of 1918 had triggered a similar response from authorities, which resulted in the closure of public libraries for up to 6 weeks.<sup>2</sup> In 1918 when the libraries closed, many thousands of people were immediately shut off from easy access to books, newspapers, magazines and journals. This, is where the comparison ends. In 2020/21 library users not only have full access to e-books, e-newspapers and e-magazines, along with online classes and other learning opportunities; they can also carry out much of the research for which they previously used physical Local Studies resources, online. Working in the areas of history and learning, I decided to look on the temporary closure of the libraries as an opportunity to explore and embrace other methods to enable people to access Local History online resources and, reach out to a wider audience.

With a natural interest in learning and researching, I latched onto the many webinars that began to spring up as 'lockdown' became the norm. One by one universities and educational institutions around the world opened up the doors of their lecture halls and seminar rooms to the wider public, and invited everyone in, albeit in a virtual manner. For me, 2020 was undoubtedly the year of the webinar. Larger institutions such as the Universities of Cambridge and Oxford started the trend by allowing free access to their research seminars.<sup>3</sup> Suddenly speakers were addressing upwards of 300 attendees

2 'What was life in Ireland like during the 1918 flu pandemic?' . Ida Milne and RTE Brainstorm, <https://www.rte.ie/brainstorm/2020/0309/1121159-ireland-1918-flu-pandemic/>

3 <https://www.eua.eu/events/134:eua-webinar-COVID-19-and-changes-in-learning-and-teaching.html>

from across the globe, instead of the usual 20-30. Not only were speakers able to disseminate their research faster than ever before but they found that their audience had changed too. Whereas once it had been presumed that only academic colleagues and coerced students would attend these seminars, now everyone from secondary school students to retirees were watching, participating and learning. As the idea of the webinar took hold across the world, it seemed that this would be an ideal medium for Local Studies to use.

The easiest way to exploit the idea of the webinar was to record a series of short introductory pieces telling people how to access the library's online Local Studies resources: <http://waterfordlibraries.ie/video-tutorials-online-resources/>. These are on the website for anyone to access and you do not have to be a library user to access them. Another great opportunity that presented itself was the ability to substitute the planned in-branch talks for Heritage Week in August 2020 with online versions.

By the late summer I had been attending academic and informative webinars for some months and was very taken by their content, presentation and production styles. While various organisations across the globe tried different ways of presenting their webinars, I watched, listened and learned. Consequently, the libraries' Heritage Week talks were recorded and uploaded onto the libraries' website, and they are still there: <http://waterfordlibraries.ie/heritage-week-2020/>. That is the beauty of a recorded presentation on a website: it is always there and can be accessed by anyone, anywhere in the world, at any time.

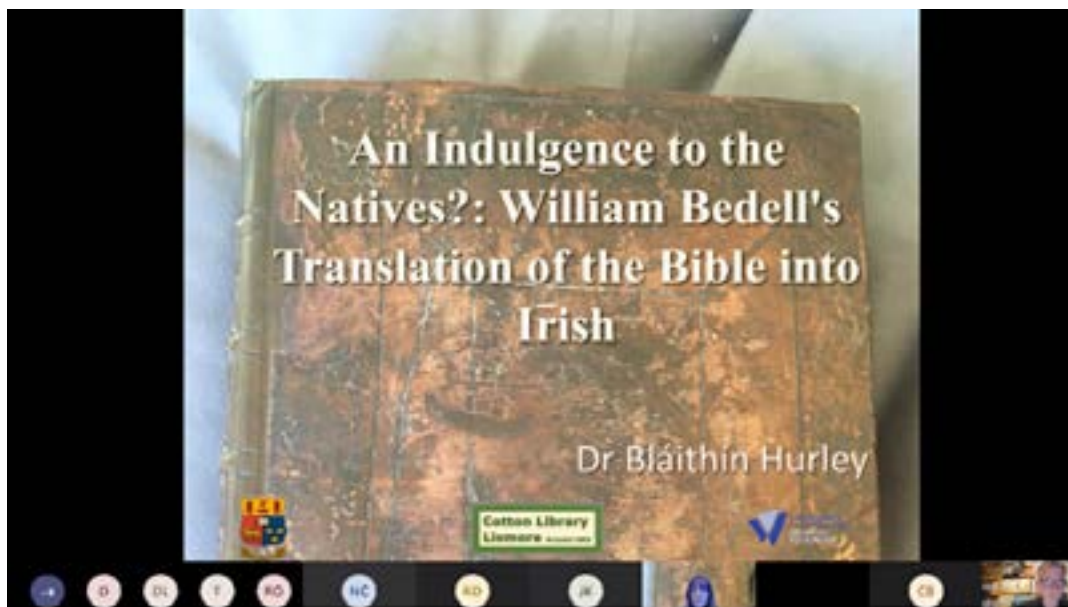
This very useful format was used again in September for Culture Night. Recordings of musical performances and historic-themed talks were made. Again, these recordings were uploaded and are still available: <http://waterfordlibraries.ie/culture-night-recordings-2020/>.

Building on these virtual successes, Waterford Libraries, has been able to promote itself and its Local Studies resources to a much wider audience than could have been anticipated. This led to my invitation to present a number

of virtual talks, representing Waterford Libraries and the research opportunities which the library offers. The first talk formed part of University College Cork's (UCC) History Department's Research Seminar Series on 17 December 2020: <https://ucc-ie.academia.edu/Bl%C3%A1ith%C3%ADnHurley>. This was a virtual shop window which offered me the chance to bring together three institutions under one umbrella. These institutions were: Waterford Library Services, UCC and the Cotton Library – Lismore, Co. Waterford. The Cotton Library is a small, private diocesan library, attached to St. Carthage's Church of Ireland Cathedral, Lismore. The Cotton Library purchased a first edition copy of the seventeenth-century *Bedell Bible* (the first Irish translation of the Old Testament), in November 2020. In collaboration

Once again, with surprisingly little effort, Waterford Libraries, found itself on a wider stage than would have happened if the paper had been presented in a small seminar room in UCC.

In December, Waterford Libraries' staff and interested members undertook training in podcasting and oral history collection under the title *Diverse Waterford*. This active integration of outreach access and cultural exchange has brought the library service and Local Studies even closer to the community. The skills acquired through this training are currently being put to use, with interviews being uploaded to the Libraries' website where they are accessible to everyone.



As we move into 2021, and find the pandemic is still with us, the time has come to ask ourselves what lessons we can learn from our ancestors who lived through the Spanish Flu outbreak? From my research into the era I learned that the consequences of that pandemic was the establishment of a better public health infrastructure, better housing and changes made in the social support system.<sup>4</sup> These are good lessons and are still relevant today, but what can libraries learn from the COVID-19 pandemic which can be used for the betterment, not just of the library service, but also for society in general? The provision of quality information appears to be the answer to this question.

with this library I had been asked to carry out some research on the book and I presented this research in the talk. By extension, Waterford Libraries, and its Local Studies, was showcased to a broad audience and is continuing to be promoted as this talk was recorded and is available online.

The easiest, and for the general public (both library users and non-users alike) most accessible option, is the uploading of information onto the library's website. Libraries are places of inclusion and library websites are available for everyone to read. Library buildings have long been used as meeting places and centres of creativity. This engagement and creativity can continue during closure, but online we just have to adjust what our concept of a library is. Regarding Local Studies, research and access to historical information and

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.ucc.ie/en/media/projectsandcentres/srerc/ColvinMcLaughlin-DeathDemographyDenominator-May2020.pdf>

documents are still available to researchers but we have to let people know where to go to find what they are looking for. In this way webinars, online tutorials and well-populated, well-signposted websites are an invaluable resource.

In Waterford Libraries one important lesson we have learned from the past year is that communication is more important than travel. As a researcher I have at times been frustrated by not being able to travel to the libraries and archives to access information, but I have also learned that there is another way to carry out research. More and more is being made available online and Local Studies in public libraries need to stay in touch with their users and provide as much virtual research documentation and information as possible. You might have noticed that all the references in this article are to online resources. Through providing historical and research-themed webinars Local

Studies can reach out to the community and assist in Lifelong Learning programmes, school and university research, and cultural exchange to anyone who is interested. Libraries, schools and public buildings may have had to close and restrict their physical services in 2020/21, just as they did in 1918, but we do not have to restrict our provision of information. The closure and altered work practices we encountered over the past year gave us, in Waterford Libraries Local Studies, the time to step back and think about how best to get our resources out to those who needed them. We had the opportunity to change how we communicate with our users into the future, and this change can only be for the better, no matter what the travel situation.

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