**RIDE + STRIDE 2020 - CANCELLED**

We have finally, and with great regret, concluded that holding the Ride and Stride in September 2020 will not be feasible.

Lock-down has not been an easy time for anyone in this country, and has made planning the usual annual events almost impossible. The consensus, when Government measures were originally announced in March, was that this was a phenomenon that would last a few weeks, but that a combination of economic necessity and the warmer weather would lead to a prompt return to normality. As we all know, this hasn’t happened.

Early in the pandemic, it was agreed nationally that no decision needed to be taken until early May, at the earliest, but that it would cause chaos if the event were to be moved from the regular spot of the second Saturday in September. Some counties then decided to go ahead, while others resolved to cancel and to start preparing for a re-launch in 2021, by when it is possible that a vaccine may make the current measures unnecessary. The problem for Essex is that it includes parts of East London, which, at that time, were regarded as ‘hotspots’ for coronavirus. As restrictions seemed to be gradually easing, and the daily statistics seemed less terrifying as summer advanced, there was a lot of encouragement to hold the event, but I was then in conversation with some of the non CofE churches in North Essex. They alerted me to how few of our churches felt that they could adequately comply with the government’s requirements for opening. Subsequent conversations with several regular cyclists brought home the message that, for Ride and Stride to work, there needs to be a sufficient number of churches actually open – it doesn’t matter if some are closed, but there have to be a few that are reliably open throughout the day, *and capable of providing the necessary toilet and refreshment facilities*.

So I have been trying to contact as many churches as possible who have been able to offer these. A few have been enthusiastic and even supportive about holding the event as usual. Some churches immediately responded to say that they could not be open, as it would be less than 72 hours before a Sunday service, or that they could not provide the stewards, particularly people not shielding, to supervise the event. However, most have been cautious, preferring to ‘wait-and-see’ whether the advice on social distancing, cleansing, taking names and contact details etc was going to be relaxed. I have been frequently asked to provide a risk assessment for the unusual circumstances of a R+S where half or more of the churches are shut; although I can’t see that it makes much difference to the riding (or the striding), it is not acceptable to presume that participants can make alternative arrangements to use washroom facilities. And it makes planning one’s route almost impossible.

It is now time to conclude that the guidelines/rules aren’t going to be relaxed in time for the Friends of Essex Churches Trust to hold the event either “safely” or satisfactorily. Indeed, the threat of a localised lock-down still hangs over certain areas.

There is nothing to stop our regular contributors from having an ‘unofficial’ ride on Saturday 12th September (indeed, we now seem to be encouraged to get out and about, and I’ll be on my bike then). But please don’t plan your route around churches that have been open in previous years, as it is likely that they won’t be open. And please maintain social distancing, which means cycling in groups of no more than 6. If you feel like doing so in support of your church and the Friends of Essex Churches Trust, please could you send any contributions to me (address below), and I’ll process any payments in the way that our Treasurer, Ray Clements, has done for so many years.

Needless to say, this will leave a gaping hole in the finances, so it is really important that we find a way to ensure that Ride + Stride 2021 is a big success. This doesn’t just mean raising money through an enjoyable bike ride (or any other way of visiting our churches) – it means getting as many of our churches to open their doors as is practicably possible. Churches up and down the county have had a miserable year, and it will be vital for many of them that they return to normal as quickly as possible.

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