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How Students at Ashwell House Survived the Lockdown

Estelle was a resident in Ashwell for 3 years. She was curious to see if other students who were in Ashwell during lockdown had the same experience as she had: did they also feel Ashwell as a home away from home?

04/03/2021

To find out, Estelle interviewed several of the students who were in Ashwell a year ago between March and June 2020. She was happily surprised to find that not only did these Ashwellians survive the lockdown, they also succeeded in their studies, developed deep bonds of friendship and learnt just how resilient, creative and resourceful they could be. Here is what Estelle found out.

During the first COVID lockdown in England, the residents of Ashwell House were in a very different position than the vast majority of people in the world, living together as one household of 25 people. A number of students were from overseas and unable to return to their countries. They had to adjust to sharing social spaces, studying at home all day, to contributing to the cooking and cleaning for a large number of people – all whilst not

being able to visit their friends or spend longer than an hour outside Ashwell's premises.

Something that I experienced when I was in Ashwell, was that the friendship and support each resident gave and received was essential to the wellbeing of the residents. It was the community we all created, the friendship we extended and the efforts we all put into making everyone feel comfortable and supported that made Ashwell a home for me, and it was this that also saw these students through the lockdown period.

“Living in Ashwell allowed me to have peace, to have support from so many residents; and that helped me - even preparing all the documents for my dissertation which had to be transformed from physical design objects into digital ones. I had so much support from everyone in

Ashwell that it gave me a lot of confidence.” Andrea

How did they survive being “locked down” for so many weeks?

When they weren't studying, the students organised fun activities to lift their spirits and keep themselves entertained. From being able to enjoy sunny days on Ashwell's roof terrace to having a talent show, the residents did not fall short of ideas when it came to having fun and having a laugh. Space helped.

“Ashwell is a very big space compared to other places [...] and we had space to do lots of workouts in the main Hall. We went out on the roof terrace, which was amazing because the weather was great during lockdown. Considering we were about 25, we did many cool things, like film marathons and badminton matches in the hall [...] which made everything more fun.”
Marta

“We did lots of fun thing together; we continued celebrating birthdays – for one birthday we did a beach theme on the roof terrace – I never thought you could do that. We had a few BBQs and even a talent show.” Wen

It’s amazing how you can get to know each other and even enjoy doing everyday chores and tasks around the house when you have to. Some of the students were surprised to learn so much more about each other by helping out together.

“I helped a lot in Ashwell but it was the same as at home; my mum would ask me to help in the kitchen or with cleaning. I cooked pizza and pasta for them.” Marta

“I even made new friends by working in the kitchen or doing the washing up. You see different aspects of the people; in ordinary life they would be more independent, going about their own studies, friends, etc. So we got to

know each other much better. [...]

Eloise

“During lockdown there was no staff in Ashwell, so we all had to help in the running of it. I was helping with cleaning, washing up and setting tables after meals; it was the normal tasks you would do at home. For me, it was a time when I got to know people much better; we were all doing this together, we were playing music – I got to know their tastes - and we had interesting conversations. I didn’t have a clue of other people’s music tastes.” Femi

Breaking bread

Sharing mealtimes has always been a huge part of the Ashwell way of life. The food has always been home cooked and though simple, it’s made with so much care that it is always delicious. So it comes as no surprise that during the lockdown, mealtimes were a pivotal part of the day for the

residents. With so many students from around the world, the residents got to share their own recipes, their different cuisines and their love for food with each other. They also made a point of celebrating *everything* - from Easter to birthdays to submitting dissertations - there was always an excuse to celebrate and share good food.

“My favourite moments were the special lunches on the terrace - one day with Peruvian and Mexican food, another day with pizza and a barbecue for Easter Monday - and the weather was really amazing. Plus the golden-hour cocktail party on Easter Sunday!” Marta

Strengthening the Faith

But most importantly, what helped many of the Ashwellians to be resilient was their Faith. They

regularly took the time to be in communion with God by coming together and praying. For many, this strengthened the faith and connection they had with God and helped them grow as individuals.

“Being in Ashwell during lockdown helped me to see that the spirit of the Work was real, not just something theoretical I would hear in classes; I could see other people living it, even when the circumstances were hard. It definitely strengthened me. Many of us prayed the Rosary together and went to Mass on-line. We also felt very united to the Holy Father; we followed Holy Week with the services in the Vatican. You really felt it was a pandemic, the whole world together in this.” Eloise

Ashwell House made the most out of a challenging time, making it a memorable experience for everyone involved. This was only possible

because Ashwell House is more than just a student residence. The community Ashwell House creates every year is the reason that students who pass through always excel in their studies. It offers them more than just a room: it offers them friendship, guidance and support. It offers them a home.

Ashwell House is a students' residence in London, whose pastoral care is entrusted to Opus Dei, a Personal Prelature of the Catholic Church. A similar residence in Manchester is Coniston Hall.

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(04/11/2025)