

during the early days of the first lockdown, the BBC Radio 4 programme *PM* asked listeners to write 400 words about their lives. All the submissions would ultimately find their way into the British Library as a *Covid Chronicle*. After some thought, I wrote:

"The lane to the recycling centre is narrow, running between the old gravel quarry and the marshy ground that surrounds a meandering stream, grandly called a river on the maps. Normally cars speed down the road, often with clouds of dust rising from the rough surface; or, if wet, with mud splashing from the potholes. But at the moment it is a peaceful route out of the town, ultimately leading to a path across a vast field. It offers the chance of an hour's walk, with few encounters other than an occasional dog walker or parents with reluctant children following behind.

"Two railway lines have to be crossed. The first is the link between the 'heritage railway' and the main line, so now it is silent; but the second is active, linking Norwich to Cambridge and the Midlands. Crossing needs care, even with the reduced service. The trains that pass appear to be empty, suggesting that lockdown is being respected.

"Both the lane and the railway are part of history. 'Strayground Lane' is the official name, but often local people simply say they are going down to Strayground. Presumably it led to a parish field that was used to hold wandering animals before they were reclaimed. The railway was the first line between Norwich and London, opened in 1845. So when walking today there are reminders of earlier times – the farming community and the industrial age of the 19th century. Now we are adding to history, a period that will be named and remembered 'the Covid-19 pandemic'.

"But in walking along Strayground there is an encouragement that I have missed when driving to the recycling centre. I have only noticed it now, in the peaceful afternoons. Between the road and the old quarry is a bank, and on its slopes are elms, growing with vigour in the spring sun. They are probably English elm, a tree that was almost wiped from the landscape in the 1970s by the invading fungus called, probably unfairly, Dutch Elm Disease. These thickets will not grow into magnificent trees, but they continue the presence of elm in our landscape.

"So today we see life after the devastation that occurred 50 years ago. We hope the recovery from our present pandemic will be far shorter and that skilled scientific work will lead to protection from this Coronavirus. Meanwhile, we are able to enjoy a quiet Strayground, and take encouragement from signs of continuing life."

Looking back at this piece, in a simple way it sketches just part of the history of

a short lane, itself only a fraction of a modest community. The physical features of that small area of land are not striking or impressive and have been extensively modified by the gravel extraction. The vegetation is not exceptional but still contributes to the landscape. Reasons for the name of the lane deserve further exploration in the town's archives, as does the development of the two railway lines. So far more could have been explored and written about, but in a restricted number of words I tried to capture and convey moments in my own life – the geographical place I happened to be in as well as its past history. The piece was not selected for broadcasting but the thought that it will be a contribution to a national archive is comforting – a recognition that individuals can contribute to history.

*The road to Strayground, Norfolk*

