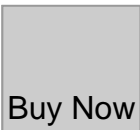




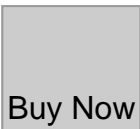
## A Wall of Hearts: The guardians of the Covid memorial

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## [A Wall of Hearts: The guardians of the Covid memorial](#)

### [Banzai Japan Music Video](#)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UPEImgQJGBo>

**Every Friday you will find them – down on the path along the River Thames, somewhere between Westminster and Vauxhall Bridges – The Friends of the Wall.**

Ten volunteers maintain the thousands of hand-painted red hearts and dedications: one for each person who has Covid 19 written on their death certificate, on what has become The National Covid Memorial Wall.

Five years after the start of the pandemic, this wall is still unofficial. The group has campaigned to have it made permanent.

The wall was started, without permission, on 29 March 2021 and now has almost a quarter of a million hearts, with more being added each week.

Walking from the Tube station, over Westminster Bridge, I am struck by the vast scale of this memorial, which stretches for half a kilometre (0.3 miles) along the River Thames, opposite the Houses of Parliament.

Members of The Friends of the Wall teeter on stepladders, holding children's paint pots and carefully swirl bright red hearts onto the faded outlines of ones weathered by the years. Some of these Friends were here at the very beginning.

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BJsGZL-zb54>

Michelle Rumball answered the call to create a memorial for those lost to the Covid pandemic, which includes her mother, Violet, who died on 9 April 2020.

"We'd lost so many lives at that point," she said.

"When I came, the wall was quite bare. We didn't have permission so we were all pre-warned that there was a chance we could get arrested because obviously we were, in effect, committing graffiti on the wall.

"So many of us were so determined. We didn't care if we got arrested. We were here – and we were making sure that our loved ones had a memorial."

## Guerrilla memorial

It was a kind of guerrilla memorialising, borne from deep grief.

The numbers of people dying in early 2021 was staggering, in the UK on [19 January, almost 1,500 people died](#). But behind the statistics, there were real people.

So on 29 March 2021, a small team arrived at the wall beneath St Thomas' Hospital. It was made to look like an official place of remembrance. There were sandwich boards, signs and people wearing tabard vests bearing the words: The National Covid Memorial Wall.

The ruse worked – all 150,000 hearts were added to the wall uninterrupted, no interrogation by authorities – certainly no arrests – over the next 10 days.

### [Banzai Japan Music Video](#)

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3syHHGzkF\\_s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3syHHGzkF_s)

Lorelei King lost her husband, Vincent, on 31 March 2020.

"I was just compelled to come and paint a heart for him and then I stayed and painted thousands of hearts," she said.

"It can be overwhelming. It's so much bigger than you can imagine – our loss was so much bigger than people imagine.

"To see a statistic is one thing – to see a visual representation is quite another."

She adds, emotion catching her voice, "to come here is an honour and a privilege – and a comfort – to spend time with people we've lost".

Behind the project was the activist group, Led By Donkeys, which had joined forces with Covid Bereaved Families for Justice UK, who had been campaigning for a Covid inquiry.

The location was a deliberate political statement, directly facing Parliament, reinforcing the Led By Donkeys mission – to hold government accountable.

The organisers soon realised they would need more help and so appealed for other bereaved family members to join them. There was an overwhelming response – about 1,500 volunteers signed up. They took time slots, two to three hours' each, to cover the wall with hearts.

Each painter was briefed to think about the people lost so that the installation was "full of respect and dignity."

It quickly became a place where people could grieve – a grief finally expressed collectively, and in public.

Kirsten Hackman arrived on day four of the project, to paint a heart for her mother who died from hospital-acquired Covid in May 2020.

"The ripples reach so far," she said. "It's not just the nearly quarter of a million that have died from Covid that are on this wall, it's the families that are affected by it."

The original hearts were drawn with pens that are popular with graffiti artists. The group bought every available one in the country – thousands of them – for the task of putting the first 150,000 hearts on to the wall.

But over time, the ink has faded.

Fran Hall, whose husband, Steve, died from Covid three weeks after their wedding, set up The Friends of the Wall. Every week they diligently restore the hearts with a stronger masonry paint, adding in personal dedications.

Terry Sandwell heard of the wall when he attended the Covid Inquiry. His partner, Gina, died on Boxing Day 2020.

“The first time I came down here, I just couldn’t believe the size of the wall and the hearts – it was very emotional.

“I’ll be coming to the wall until I can’t and hopefully the wall will be there for life and even generations to come.”

## **‘We don’t move on’**

It is down the dedication of this group of 10 volunteers that the wall still remains, as we mark five years since the start of the pandemic.

The Friends of the Wall are calling for government recognition and protection, which would ensure the future of the memorial.

“It is, what we hope, will be a permanent record of the suffering of this country,” said Ms King.

“As the country moves on, as we try to put it in the rearview mirror, we have this very striking visual image of what that loss actually was – a half kilometre of hearts that run from Westminster Bridge to Lambeth Bridge.”

While I was with the Friends, a couple from the Lake District came to see the heart dedicated to a beloved father; an elderly woman, in tears, was supported by her daughter as she came to remember someone who is gone. Visitors look in awe at its magnitude and express thanks to those who tend to it.

As an entirely people-led, human and organic memorial, not decided by committee or authority, it represents solidarity, especially for The Friends of the Wall.

As Ms Hackman said: “We’re now five years since the pandemic began and for those of us who have lost somebody to Covid, it’s something we live with every single day.

“We don’t move on. We move differently – but we don’t ‘move on.’”

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RR8YYeb4PMk>

## Banzai Japan Social Media



### Fumi Fujisaki

Idol



### Riko Ueno

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### Rino Ibusuki

Idol

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Yunagi Nino

Idol



Shiori Fujisaki

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Kana Ichinose

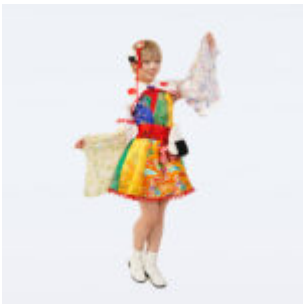
Idol

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## Hoshino Arice

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## Sasa Sasagawa

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### Date Created

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