

Balsall Common U3A: Social and Political History Group November 2020

The Black Death

When I suggested this as a subject in November 2019, little did I think the presentation would be made in the midst of the second wave of the most lethal worldwide pandemic for at least 100 years.

The Black Death of 1348-9 was a cataclysmic event in English (and wider European history): a pandemic with massive population loss and consequent economic, social and political repercussions. It is a massive subject, so I have had to limit what could be covered. I will start by looking at what this pandemic was, then how contemporaries in the 14th century described and accounted for the disease and its consequences, and the steps they took to manage these. In the latter part I will then analyse the impact of the plague on English society and economy, as understood by modern historians. It is important to think of these consequences, not just in terms of immediate effects and counter-actions, but also in terms of the *longue durée* – that is the pattern of changes that become visible when taking a long-term view of the period and the working through of the impacts over several generations.

1. What was the Black Death?

The Black Death is a more modern term for what contemporaries usually called ‘The Pestilence’. It was a combination of bubonic and pneumonic plague. Bubonic plague was spread by the fleas carried by black rats and transmitted to humans by flea bites. It resulted in first, coldness then extreme tiredness and depression, followed, after few days, by the appearance of bubos or painful swellings in the armpits, groin or, less often, the neck. A high fever resulted and often unconsciousness before death.

However, a more virulent form of the disease, because it was human to human transmission, probably accounted for the majority of deaths – pneumonic plague. It was transmitted by what we would in 2020 with our understanding of Covid19, now call ‘aerosols’ and the time from first symptoms to death was often less than a day. It is perhaps more possible now, in view of events of 2020 to appreciate the fear and horror that this disease caused to people who were faced with a major epidemic for which they were unprepared and against which they had little in the way of defences.

2. The Arrival and impact of the Black Death as seen by Contemporaries

The Black Death struck all of Europe in the mid-fourteenth century and arrived in England in the summer of 1348. The following are some contemporary English accounts describing the arrival and persistence of plague, and its initial impacts.

The Anonimalle Chronicle, probably written as a contemporary account at St Mary’s Abbey, York, contains this entry:

In 1348, about the feast of St Peter in Chains, (1 August) the first pestilence arrived in England at Bristol, carried by merchants and sailors, and it lasted in the south of the country around Bristol throughout August and all winter. And in the following year, that is to say in

1349, the pestilence began in the other regions of the country and lasted a whole year, with the result that the living were hardly able to bury the dead.

A fuller contemporary account was The Eulogium, written at Malmesbury Abbey in the 1350s. it contains narrative descriptions of the effects of the plague:

In 1348, about the feast of the Translation of St Thomas the Martyr (7 July) the cruel pestilence, hateful to all future ages, arrived from countries across the sea on the south coast of England at the port of Melcombe in Dorset. Travelling all over the south country, it wretchedly killed innumerable people in Dorset, Devon, and Somerset. It was, moreover, believed to have been just as cruel among pagans as Christians. Next it came to Bristol, where very few were left alive, and then travelled northwards, leaving not a city, a town, a village or even, except rarely a house, without killing most or all of the people there, so that over England as a whole a fifth of the men women and children were carried to burial. As a result, there was such a shortage of people that there were hardly enough living to look after the sick and bury the dead. Most of the women who survived were left barren for many years. If they did conceive, they generally died, along with the baby, in giving birth. In some places, because of a lack of burial grounds, bishops consecrated new sites. And this pestilence reigned in England for two years and more before it was purged.

By the time the plague ceased at the divine command, it had caused such a shortage of servants that men could not be found to work the land, and women and children had to be used to drive ploughs and carts which was unheard of.

In London, Robert of Avebury was a clerk at Lambeth Palace and an eye-witness to the arrival of the plague. He wrote:

The pestilence, which first began in the lands inhabited by the Saracens, grew so strong that sparing no lordship, it visited every place in all the kingdoms stretching from that land northwards, up to and including Scotland, striking down the greater part of the people with sudden death. It began in England in the county of Dorset, about the feast of St Peter in Chains (1 August) and immediately progressed without warning from place to place. It killed a great many healthy people, removing them from human concerns in the course of a morning. Those marked for death were scarcely permitted to live longer than 3 or 4 days. It showed favour to no one, except for a few of the very wealthy. On the same day 20, 40 or 60 bodies, and on many occasions many more, might be committed for burial in the same pit.

The pestilence arrived in London at about the feast of All Saints (1 November) and daily deprived many of life. It grew so powerful that, between Candlemas (2 February 1349) and Easter (12 April) more than 200 corpses were buried almost every day in the new burial ground made next to Smithfield, and this was in addition to the bodies buried in other churchyards in the city. It ceased in London with the coming of the grace of the Holy Spirit that is to say at Pentecost (31 May), proceeding uninterrupted towards the North, where it also stopped about Michaelmas (29 September) 1349.

The pestilence spread to the whole country. Monastic communities, because of their communal living and close proximity to each other, were particularly affected. Its impact,

including economic impact, was described in the Chronicle of the Abbey of Meaux, in the East Riding of Yorkshire:

When Abbot Hugh had ruled the monastery for 9 years 11 months and 11 days (at which time there were 42 monks and 7 lay brothers, not counting himself), he died in the great pestilence along with 32 monks and lay brothers. This pestilence grew so strong in our monastery as it did in other places that within the month of August, the abbot, 22 monks and 6 lay brothers died; of whom the abbot and 5 monks were buried together in a single day. Other deaths followed, so that when the pestilence ceased only 10 monks and no lay brothers were left alive out of the 50 monks and lay brothers. From this time the rents and goods of the monastery began to dwindle, largely because the majority of our tenants had died, and because after the abbot, prior, cellarer and bursar and other experienced men and officials had died, the survivors made misguided grants of the goods and possessions of the monastery.

The Historia Roffensis – a contemporary account of the Cathedral priory of Rochester – has this account of the impact of the plague, and how workers of all sorts, including priests, tried to profit from the shortage of labour:

The shortage of labourers and of workers in every kind of craft and occupation was then so acute that more than a third of the land throughout the whole kingdom remained uncultivated. Labourers and skilled workers became so rebellious that neither the king nor the law and the judges who enforced it were able to correct them, and more or less the whole population turned to evil courses, became addicted to all forms of vice, and stooped to more than usually base behaviour, thinking not at all of death or of the recently-experienced plague, nor of how they were hazarding their own salvation by uniting in rebellion; and priests making light of the sacrifice of a contrite spirit, took themselves to where they might receive a stipend greater than the value of their benefices. As a result, many benefices remained unserved by parish priests whom neither prelates nor ordinaries were powerful enough to bridle. Thus, spiritual dangers sprouted daily among clergy and laity.

This contemporaneous account of the impact of the plague on a previously successful nunnery at Malling in Kent I find particularly moving. From the Registers of Hamo Hethe, the Bishop of Rochester.

Memorandum that on Wednesday 6 May 1349 at Trottiscliffe it came to the notice of Hamo, by the grace of God Bishop of Rochester, that the lady Isabel de Perham, Abbess of the house of Malling, had died the previous night; and promptly in the morning of the same day, the bishop sent the following letter to the precentress, the subprioress (since the house was then lacking a prioress) and the convent.

“..... Since the lady Isabel de Perham of happy memory, the last abbess of your house, has rendered her spirit to its creator, and the house still remains bereft of the comfort of an abbess, we order (as is our right by custom) that you should be present at the chapter meeting on Thursday 7 May (a date chosen because of the various grave dangers which we can clearly see are likely to arise because of your lack of an abbess) along with all your sisters, who are entitled to attend, and who are willing and able, without inconvenience, to

be present, and whom you have had summoned, to discuss with us or someone delegated by us the future choice of an abbess. And the meeting is to be prorogued from day to day until the choice has been made.....”

The following day Thursday 7 May in the chapter house of Malling, the precentress and subprioress and the nuns of the house entered and presented themselves before the prior, who had some of the bishop’s clerks helping him. they (the nuns) all appeared in person before the lord prior except for Joan de Rokesle, Margaret de Huntingfield, Mary de Godwyneston, Benedicta de Grey, Joan de Wye, Christine Nasard, Mary de Norton, Margery de Patshull, Margaret de Northwood and Alice Cotoun, who were lying gravely ill in the infirmary.

(The election was then held among the nuns present and a clerk was sent to take the votes of those who were unable to be present because of illness as a result of plague)

The Commissary and the clerks then counted the votes cast, as is the custom, and found that 11 nuns had voted for Benedicta de Grey, and that the others had each voted for other candidates. The said commissary elected the said Benedicta.

Because the abbess-elect was lying sick she could not, as custom dictated, be led or carried to the high altar..... But on that very night Benedicta the abbess-elect died.

(The news of Benedicta’s death of the plague reached the Bishop of Rochester the next day 8 May, and the whole process began again, with a new election taking place on 9 May.)

By this time there were only 10 nuns eligible to vote, of whom 8 were lying sick: Emma Port, Margaret de Huntingfield, Joan de Wye, Katherine Levenoth, Mary de Norton, Margery de Patshull, Margaret de Northwode and Alice Cotoun. Seven voted for Alice de Tendring, two for Margery de Patshull and one for Joan Colkyn. The election of Alice was confirmed and she went to the bishop at Trottiscliffe to take her vow of obedience.

Plague cut a swathe through the nunnery reducing the size of the community and prompting this note from the Bishop several months later.

On 27 October 1349, the lord bishop of Rochester directed a formal monition to the Abbess of Malling that from the date of the order she and all of her sisters should eat and sleep in one house, and that they should all be present at every one of the day time and night time offices, remaining until the end of the office, except in cases of bodily infirmity or self-evident necessity. And this because of the small number of people performing divine worship there, which is a result of the pestilence.

Henry Knighton, an Augustinian canon at Leicester, wrote a Chronicle in the early 1390s, although he had been an eye witness to events in 1340s. Here he describes the impact on one locality:

At Leicester, in the little parish of St Leonard, more than 380 died; in the parish of Holy Cross more than 400; in the parish of St Margaret 700; and a great multitude in every parish. The Bishop of Lincoln sent word throughout the whole diocese, giving general power to every priest (among the regular as well las the secular clergy) to hear confession and grant

absolution with full and complete authority except only in cases of debt. In such cases, the penitent, if it lay within his power, ought to make satisfaction while he lived, but certainly others should do it from his goods after his death.

This record shows the loss of life in 1349 in one wealthy family, that of William de Wakebridge in Crich, a village in Derbyshire – from the Cartulary of the Chantries he later endowed.

- 18 May *Nicholas, son of Peter de Wakebridge (the founder's brother)*
- 27 June *Elizabeth de Aslaccon, sister of the wife of William de Wakebridge*
- 16 July *Robert, son of Peter de Wakebridge, formerly Vicar of Crich (the founder's brother)*
- 5 August *Peter de Wakebridge and Joan his daughter (the founder's father and sister)*
- 10 August *Joan, wife of William de Wakebridge and Margaret his sister*
- 15 August *John de Wakebridge, Chaplain*

The first outbreak of the plague lasted from 1349-51. It was followed by a second major pandemic in 1361 described in the Chronicle of Henry Knighton; he was not alone among chroniclers in noting the particular mortality among the young:

In 1361 a general mortality oppressed the people. It was called the second pestilence and both rich and poor died, but especially young people and children. Eleven canons of our house died.

His account is supported by the Chronicle of Thomas of Walsingham a monk at St Alban's Abbey, who also notes how the disease afflicted the nobility and prelates as well as ordinary men and women:

Also, in 1361 there was a great pestilence, which devoured men rather than women. There died at this time Reginald, Bishop of Worcester, Michael Bishop of London, and Thomas Bishop of Ely Among the nobility Henry, Duke of Lancaster, Reginald Cobham, William Fitzwaryn and John Mowbray died.

There followed a third outbreak of the plague in 1369, as briefly described in the Anonimale Chronicle, which prompted similar comments:

In 1369 there was a third pestilence in England and in several other countries. It was great beyond measure, lasted a long time and was particularly hard on children.

In fact, the plague did not end in 1369. It was endemic in England and regular outbreaks occurred throughout the late 14th and 15th centuries, including major national or regional outbreaks in the following years:-

- 1379-83
- 1389-93
- 1400
- 1405-7
- 1413
- 1420

- 1427
- 1433-34
- 1438-9
- 1457-8
- 1463-4
- 1467
- 1471
- 1479-80
- 1485

Indeed, plague continued to affect England throughout the 16th and 17th centuries, culminating in the 'Great Plague' of London in 1665, and the outbreak the same year in Eyam, Derbyshire, where the community chose to 'self-isolate' to prevent transmission of the disease, resulting in the deaths of around half the villagers.

3. How did contemporaries understand the Pestilence and respond?

Contemporaries lacked the scientific knowledge of the 21st century to explain or understand the pandemic but they had a variety of explanations for its origins. Their 'scientific' explanations included

- A belief that the disease was caused by a corruption of the air (hence the use of flowers and other scented objects to ward off the evil smells)
- Astrological explanations focussing on a belief that it had been caused by the malign influence of the planets
- A simple understanding of the principles of contagion, which led for example town authorities to seek to quarantine infected areas, arrange prompt burial of the dead, and promote rudimentary public hygiene measures
- This limited scientific understanding led to 3 principal 'scientific' solutions being promoted:
 - segregation of infected areas;
 - medicine (though 14th century medical knowledge was by modern standards, primitive and unscientific in its basis), but this did not prevent doctors being sought and their 'treatments' followed.
 - flight – escaping the infected areas or regions, a solution not easily available to the bulk of the population

Other explanations that found favour with contemporaries included

- That the pestilence was an Act of God, as a punishment for the sins of the people. As a result, Bishops called for religious processions to appease God, advocated that the faithful undertake pilgrimages to secure divine favour, and that the faithful commit to following the teaching of the Church. **See this letter of William Zouche, Archbishop of York to his official 28 July 1348, which is the earliest episcopal reaction to the threat of the plague in England:**

Therefore we command and order you to let it be known with all possible haste, that devout processions are to be held every Wednesday and Friday in our cathedral church, in other collegiate and conventual churches, and in every parish church in our city and

diocese, with a solemn chanting of the litany, and that a special prayer be said in mass every day for allaying the plague and pestilence, and likewise prayers for the lord king and for the good estate of the church, the realm and the whole people of England, so that the Saviour, harkening to the constant entreaties, will pardon and come to the rescue of the creation which God fashioned in his own image.

- Moralists claimed the plague was a result of, and divine punishment for, the immoral behaviour of individuals and by extension, wider society. Examples given included the apparently outrageous behaviour of women at tournaments held in the previous year, and the extravagant clothing worn by both men and women. **Henry of Knighton disapprovingly described this behaviour:**

In those days a murmuring and great complaint arose among the people, because whenever and wherever tournaments were held a troop of ladies would turn up dressed in a variety of extraordinary male clothing, as if taking part in a play. There were sometimes as many as 40 or 50 of them, representing the showiest and most beautiful (but not the most virtuous) women of the whole realm. They were dressed in particoloured tunics with short hoods and liripipes like strings wound around the head, and wore belts thickly studded with gold and silver sling across their hips below the navel, with knives called daggers in ouches suspended from them. Dressed thus, and mounted on chargers or on other horses with elaborate trappings, they rode to the tournament ground. In this way they spent and wasted their goods, and (according to the common report) abused their bodies in wantonness and scurrilous licentiousness. They neither feared God nor blushed at the criticism of the people, but took their marriage bond lightly and were deaf to the demands of modesty. Nor, in following these pursuits, did they remember how much favour and outstanding support God, the liberal giver of all good things, had shown the English army against all their enemies, and with what special backing he had carried them to triumphant victories in every place. But God, present in these things as in everything, supplied a marvellous remedy to prevent their frivolity; for at the times and places appointed for these vanities, he sent down heavy rain, with thunder and flashing lightning, and tempestuous winds, and thus scattered them.

It is to be noted that the first Sumptuary Laws, which sought to regulate the type of clothing worn by persons of different status in society, were passed in 1363 and re-issued at intervals throughout the late medieval period, to counter this 'immoral' and decadent behaviour.

- Others felt the Plague was a sign of the end of the world and this led to extreme behaviour by Millenarian believers. The most extreme examples, in England and on the continent, were the Flagellants, who sought to mortify their bodies in expiation of their, and the wider community's, sins, since the mass death from the Pestilence convinced them that the end of days was in sight. Their arrival in England was described by **Robert of Avebury:**

In that same year of 1349, about Michaelmas (29 September), more than 120 men, for the most part from Zeeland or Holland, arrived in London from Flanders. These went barefoot in procession twice a day in the sight of the people, sometimes in St Paul's Church and sometimes elsewhere in the city, their bodies naked except for a linen cloth from loins to ankle. Each wore a hood painted with a red cross at front and back and carried in his right hand a whip with three thongs. Each thong had a knot in it, with something sharp, like a needle struck through the middle of the knot so that it stuck out on each side, and as they walked one after the other they struck themselves with these whips on their naked bloody bodies; four of them singing in their own tongue and the rest answering in the manner of a Christian liturgy. Three times in each procession they would all prostrate themselves on the ground with their arms outstretched in the manner of a cross. Still singing, and beginning with the man at each end, each in turn would step over the others, lashing man beneath him once with his whip, until all of those lying down had gone through the same ritual. Then each put on his usual clothes and, always with their hoods on their heads and carrying their whips, they departed to their lodgings, it was said that they performed a similar penance every night.

Contemporaries understood the problems and disruption that the massive death created in the workings of the economy. **Henry of Knighton described the situation:**

... And because of their fear of death, everything fetched a low price. Here were very few people who cared for riches, or indeed for anything else. A man could have a horse previously valued at 40s for half a mark, a good fat ox for 4s, a cow for 12d, a bullock for 6d, a fat sheep for 4d, a ewe for 3d, a lamb for 2d, a large pig for 5d, a stone of wool for 9d. and sheep and cattle roamed unchecked through the fields and through the standing corn, and there was no one to chase them and round them up. For there was a great a shortage of servants and labourers that there was no one who knew what needed to be done.

An immediate issue was that because there was a shortage of labour due to the high death rates, wage rates rose for labourers and artisans, as has been described in the chronicles quoted above. The royal government of Edward III moved swiftly to address this issue, as one historian described it 'by making an emergency response to what was seen as a temporary problem'. Spoiler – it was not a temporary problem! This was the 1349 Ordinance of Labourers, followed in 1351 by the Statute of Labourers. Briefly these laws sought to return wage rates to those before the plague, and were enforced by a newly created Commissions in each shire, composed of local gentry and notables, armed with powers to hear complaints of breaches of the provisions of the Ordinances or Statutes, and impose penalties for breaches.

Henry of Knighton describes the measures thus:

Meanwhile the king sent commands into every county that reapers and other workers should not take more than they were accustomed to take, under penalties laid down by the statute which he had introduced to that end. But the workers were so above themselves and so bloody-minded that they took no notice of the king's commands. If anyone wished to hire them, he had to submit to their demands, for either his fruit and standing corn would be lost

or he had to pander to the arrogance and greed of the workers. When it was brought to the king's attention that people were not obeying his orders, but were giving higher wages to the workers, he levied heavy fines on abbots, priors, greater and lesser knights, and on others, of both greater and lesser standing in the country; taking 100s from some, 40s and 20s from others, depending upon their ability to pay. Then the king had numerous workers arrested and sent to prison, and many of these escaped and took to the woods and if they were captured, they were heavily fined. And most took oaths that they would not take more than their old daily wages and thereby secured their release from prison. The same was done to artisans in boroughs and towns.

These measures appear to have been effective in the first instance in restricting wage levels and enforcing discipline in the peasant workforce, and were historically significant: later in 1361 these Commissions evolved into the Commissions of the Peace, the primary local bodies administering justice in the counties and the members became Justices of the Peace. This is the origin of the system of local justice that remains with us to this day.

The majority of the peasantry were subject to manorial discipline: called villeins, they were unfree, required to work the Lord's lands, pay various dues and services to their Lord and be subject to the Lord's authority, in return for the right to work their holding of land, which provided them with both subsistence, and if they held sufficient holdings, a surplus of produce to sell at market. They were subject to the jurisdiction of the manorial court of their lord, and were not free to leave their holdings to seek improved working or tenancy conditions. These obligations included, in addition to sowing, weeding, harvesting, carrying and other labour on the lord's land, payments on the marriage of their daughters, entry fines called heriots, payable by the heir on the death of the villein (usually their best animal), aids payable to the lord as custom required and attendance at the Lord's court, being bound by its judgements on disputes. Considerable efforts were made to enforce these conditions by landlords in conjunction with royal officials in the years after 1349, whereas the response of many peasants was to try to take advantage of the shortage of labour by either escaping the manor, seeking paid employment as a wage labourer or else negotiating a new or replacement tenancy on better terms.

4. The impact of the Black Death – Population decline and stagnation

Population numbers in the medieval period are not easy to assess. There was of course no national census, and therefore estimates must be made of the population based upon records – whether national records, like Domesday Book or Tax records – or local records of estates, manorial courts or particularly religious communities, from which trends can be deduced. In 1086 using Domesday as the basis, it is reliably estimated the population of England was between 1.75 and 2.25 million people.

By 1300, the high point of English medieval population, the number was between 5-6 million. This increase in population had been possible as the amount of land under cultivation expanded in the 12th and 13th centuries, though increasingly it was marginal land brought under the plough. There followed a check to the population in the 1310s, as a series of poor harvests, animal diseases and bad weather put pressure on agriculture, particularly

on the marginal lands, and led to widespread famine and the loss of perhaps 10-15% of the population. By 1348, there are indications that the population had started to grow again and therefore the pre-plague population was probably in the region of 4.5-6 million.

There has been debate over the years among historians about the extent of loss of population as a result of the Black Death. In the post-war years, there was an accepted belief that the loss was in the region of 25-30%. In the 1970s revisionist historians challenged the assumptions about the fall in population. Some argued that the plague was not as deadly as indicated by the chroniclers' accounts; others argued that the population decline in the 1310s had been understated and that that population decline occurred over a longer time frame, with plague as only one factor explaining it. One even went so far as to estimate the loss of population attributable to the Black Death as only 5% of the population!

The current consensus however, based upon detailed analysis of local records, particularly of deaths resulting in the transfer of holdings on manorial or monastic estates, as well as such national records that exist, including the Poll Tax records of 1377-81, seems to be that the reduction of population in 1348-50 was of the order of 40-50%, giving post-plague estimate of population as around 2.5-3 million people. That suggests the death over 3 years of some 2-3 million people.

The loss of population however did not end with the pandemic of the 1340s. There were, as we have seen, further national outbreaks of the Pestilence in 1361 and 1369. The population of England continued to decline in the last quarter of the 14th century; and for the majority of the 15th century either was stagnant or experienced yet further decline. Thus, it is estimated that the population of England was around 2 million by 1400, 1.9 million mid-century and by 1522-3 had only recovered to 2-2.5 million. Even as late as 1700, the population of England was only around 5.2 million, probably still below the population in 1300 and possibly less than the pre-plague population in 1348.

This long-term population stagnation had as its cause not only the mortality in successive outbreaks of plague. Evidence also suggests that changing economic circumstances led to changes in behaviour and fertility. In particular, there is evidence young peasant women, who previously would have married young in their home village, more frequently left the family lands and sought paid employment in other villages or towns, which resulted in their marrying later and having fewer children. Similarly, men were more mobile in their search for better wages or conditions of tenancy and therefore also married later. The net result was that England in the fifteenth century had a population much less than a half, perhaps a third, that of 1300. Such major and sustained changes in population had major effects on the economy and society of late medieval England.

5. The impact of the Black Death – prices, land values and the cost of living.

We have seen that the reaction of the government to the loss of population and the opportunities for peasants and other workers to increase their profit from the shortage of labour was to clamp down via the Statute of Labourers. It seems clear from the records of wages and prices that this was initially largely successful. Wage rates were held at or about pre-plague levels; lords were able to enforce discipline and maintain their servile workforce

on the land. There were however frequent cases where landholdings could not be let on the death of a villein as no heir existed or there was a reluctance on the part of heirs to take on new holdings on servile terms. The following record illustrates the issue for the Lord, with several holdings thus being left vacant.

Deaths in Walsham le Willows, Suffolk. Extracts from the manorial court roll 15 June 1349. Records the deaths since the previous court sitting and the heriot or entry fine to be paid by the new tenant, normally the new tenant's best beast.

Adam Hardonn held a cottage and garden; heriot, a mare, heir William, his brother who does not come. (Meaning he did not take up the inherited tenancy)

Emma Fraunceys held a cottage and garden and 1 rood; no heriot because she has no beast; heir John Fraunceys her brother, who declines to hold the tenement

Matilda Robbes held a bakehouse and half an acre; no heriot because she had no beast; heir, her brother John who does not come.

Juliana Deneys held 1 acre and 1 rood; no heriot because she had no beast; Nicholas le Deneys her kinsman, who comes and declines to hold the tenement.

Walter Noreys held a messuage, 3 acres and 2 ½ roods; heriot, a cow; Walter his son, who died before the court was held and no one comes to receive the tenement.

These are examples where the heir did not take up the holding. From the same Manorial court roll, there were examples where holdings could be let and the following are a few examples:

John le Syre held a messuage (a dwelling with outbuildings and land assigned to its use – OED) and 12 acres; heriot, a cow before calving, Adam his son enters.

John Deeth held a cottage; no heriot because he had no beast; heir, Katherine his daughter, who pays 3d for entry.

Walter Deneys held a messuage, 5 acres and half a rood; heriot, a cow after calving; heir, Robert, his son, who has died. After his death the lord had as heriot a ewe after lambing and before shearing; heir, John, his son who enters.

There is thus evidence that sufficient people were available and willing to take up at least some vacant holdings, to enable estates to continue to function in the immediate years after 1348, perhaps indicating that the country was experiencing a degree of over-population in the years before the Black Death and that there were, even after the ravages of the plague, landless peasants, who were able or willing to take over the vacant lands, or other tenants, wishing to increase their meagre holdings to support their families. As a result, it is estimated from several studies of the estates of the nobility, that landlords either maintained their incomes from their estates in the period 1350-75 or in the worst cases, suffered a 10% decline.

The picture changed from the 3rd quarter of the 14th century and thereafter, as the shortage of labour continued.

- Firstly, it became increasingly difficult for lords to maintain manorial discipline. As it became increasingly difficult for landlords to let vacant holdings on customary terms, peasants re-negotiated their labour services owed in their favour and were thus able to increase the size of holdings and reduce the services required of them; or convert their tenure to a money rent without servile bonded labour services.
- Wage rates for day labourers increased as the demand for labour increased while supply remained stagnant or declined further. There were opportunities for peasants to take on waged employments in towns, particularly as replacement labour for those lost to the plague, or as day labourers working for fellow peasants or landlords. The restrictions and requirements of the Statute of Labourers increasingly conflicted with the economic realities and the self-interest of landlords, who were the people, as Commissioners under the Statute, who were required to enforce them; as a result, the Statute increasingly fell into abeyance.
- As a result, the incomes of the lords declined throughout the 15th century and it was no longer generally profitable to directly manage their own lands (demesne lands) using customary labour of an unfree servile peasantry. As a result, by 1500, most lords' estates were either rented out on cash terms (often to the very peasants who generations before had cultivated the lands on villein tenure) or directly managed but using waged labourers instead of unfree peasants performing customary services. Often this direct management led to a shift away from arable cultivation to pasture.
- The consequence of this was the decline and disappearance of serfdom and villeinage in England and the removal of the restrictions customary tenure had placed on peasants both in their economic activity but also their social standing and rights. No more would a peasant be at risk of forcible return if he left his holding, have to pay a fine to the lord for the right to enable his daughter to marry, or perform unpaid work on the Lord's lands.
- The shift away from servile holdings to rented tenure came when economic circumstances were moving in favour of the tenants and away from landlords. Rents fell as the supply of land outstripped the demand for it. Tenants were able to withhold rent to the Bishops of Worcester in the 1430s indicating a shift in the balance of power in the rural economy. Where lands, often whole villages, could not be rented for lack of tenants willing to take up the holdings, they often fell into disuse, and the peak period for the 'deserted villages' in England was in the second half of the 15th century.
- There was a shift from cereal production on both Lord's estates and also the larger peasant holdings to pasture, aided by the lower costs of labour associated with managing sheep and the higher prices for wool in light of the growth in the wool and especially cloth trades. It was not happening everywhere, but presages the enclosure movement of the 16th and more widely, 18th centuries which transformed the English landscape.
- At the same time the prices of agricultural produce fell during the period 1375-1500. As wage rates rose and prices fell, the net result was a transfer of wealth from the

landlords to the peasantry. The latter, now free of servile burdens, were better off than in previous centuries and it is argued, in several centuries to come. This is illustrated in the following table showing the comparative indices of wages, based on the records of the Estates of the Bishops of Winchester:

Wages of Artisans			
Years (selected)	In pence	In Wheat	Agricultural wages in wheat
1300-9	100	100	100
1340-59	122	136	148
1380-99	153	190	235
1440-59	193	241	236

What this indicates is that wages nearly doubled in cash terms and more than doubled in terms of the wheat it would purchase. There was never a better time to be an agricultural worker in England than in the 15th century.

This is not to say that there were not periods of difficulty for the peasantry. Apart from the recurrence of plague and the mortality it brought, weather conditions and other factors affected the harvest, and prosperity or famine were real possibilities. It is estimated that medieval technology and agricultural practices enabled a yield (for cereal crops) of 8x in a good year – that is to say, 8x the amount of grain was harvested compared to that sown. From that harvest, one part would be retained for seed the following year, and the rest used for bread, ale (the staple drink of the medieval peasant) and winter animal feed (since an ox or oxen were essential for ploughing and carting). In a cold, wet year such as England experienced in successive years in the 1310s, and periodically during the 15th century, yields could reduce to 3x or 4x, leaving much less for human consumption, at a time when prices also rose as supply fell at a time when demand increased. So, while the post-plague period was economically beneficial to the peasantry as a whole, there remained significant elements of precarity in their experience year on year.

6. The impact of the Black Death - differential impacts on the different strata of society

In summary, the effects of the depopulation caused by the Black Death were:

- The end of villeinage and serfdom in England, and the creation of a free peasantry earlier than in most other European societies – in comparison feudal tenures persisted in France until the Revolution and serfdom was not abolished till 1861 in Russia.
- Lords responded in the longer term by changing the management of their estates, replacing servile labour with wage labour on their estates, or ceasing directly to manage their lands and instead renting them out. However, in general their incomes were reducing in the period from about 1375 - 1500 as a result of lower rents, a depressed land market, high wages and low prices for agricultural produce. This encouraged the landed classes to seek to improve their incomes through other ways – through the profits of war (this was the period of the Hundred Years' War and profits were possible

via ransoms, land acquisition in France, pillage and the like), through local or national office under the crown, or through advantageous marriage (especially to heiresses or widows)

- A significant improvement in the living standards of the peasantry as a result of the same conditions – lower rents, increased wages, lower prices as well as the loosening and eventual abandonment of the servile bonds that tied them to the manor.
- A change in the fertility of the population resulting in a stagnating population throughout the 15th century.
- The creation of a substantial farming class in England – often misleadingly called ‘Yeoman Farmers’ – essentially holding substantial amounts of land either by rent or in freehold and able to profit from the economic circumstances of the period.

Modern economies use GDP – the total sum of all the product of economic and financial activity – as a measure of their overall prosperity. Such calculations in the medieval period are not possible as the available statistical data is partial, local, and with major gaps. It is however possible to assume that overall economic activity declined in the period as a result of the massive population reduction but that within that reduction there were significant changes in the way that wealth was distributed throughout the economy and society that overall benefitted the peasantry as a whole to the detriment of landowners as a whole.

Towns

Most of England was rural in nature and most of the above discussion is about rural England. There is a much fuller discussion to be had re the position of towns in this period. Towns were as affected by the plague and depopulation as the rest of the country (in some cases more so). The largest town was London, but its population probably never exceeded 100,000 in this period and the next most populous towns - places like York, Bristol, Coventry – had populations much less than 10,000. The expansion of the cloth trade in the 15th century saw some towns rise in fortune especially towns like Colchester and Coventry. Others found new prosperity servicing the increased demand for manufactured goods among the relatively prosperous peasantry. There is evidence for example that by the mid-15th century, many peasants were using metal or earthenware platters for their meals as opposed to simple wooden boards or bowls typical in earlier centuries.

Other towns however, experienced a decline in population and their economic health was also adversely affected by the decline in activity (trade, industry) caused by depopulation and hence a lack of demand in their hinterland. For example, Grimsby lost 30% of its population in the initial epidemic in 1349, but of greater significance is that a further 40% reduction in population is evident between 1377 (first Poll Tax records) and 1524 (lay subsidy (tax) records). Another Lincolnshire town, Boston, a prosperous port in the 13th century, experienced loss of population in 1349, but a more serious loss of over 50% of its population between 1377 and a mid-16th century diocesan household survey. Given circumstantial evidence that its population had risen through the 16th century, this suggests a catastrophic reduction in the later 14th and 15th centuries.

On the other hand, as the bonds that tied peasants, and particularly the sons and daughters of peasant families, to the villages and the land were loosened, there was increased migration of those people to towns often for short periods to work as wage labourers or a live-in servants until they had built sufficient capital to return to the countryside and take up landholdings at advantageous rates. Thus, there was increased exchange of population between towns and the countryside in this period, and this enabled the population of the more successful towns to be maintained or even to rise during this period.

Political impact – a digression on the Peasants' Revolt.

In 1381 there was a major outbreak of unrest by the lower classes, particularly in the south-east of England. The outline of the narrative is well known. Groups of disgruntled peasants took up arms and coalesced into a force which marched on London to protest about their lot, in particular against the Poll tax levied that year, the 3rd of its kind in 4 years. They massed in the city, were supported by elements among Londoners, assassinated among others Simon Sudbury, Archbishop of Canterbury, the Lord Chancellor and Robert Hales, Lord Treasurer, and sacked John of Gaunt's Palace at the Savoy before being placated by a personal appeal by the young Richard II prior to their forcible dispersion and the suppression of the revolt.

It was traditional to view the rising as a revolt against 'unfair' taxation (the Poll Tax) that bore hard on the peasantry at a time of economic distress. But modern research, focussing on what is known of the leaders of the revolt and the communities from which they came has come to a more nuanced conclusion linked to the growing 'centralisation' of authority in the shires consequent upon the creation of the Commissions for the implementation of the Statute of Labourers and the subsequent use of similar commissions to oversee the Poll tax. It is significant that the leaders of the Revolt were from the upper echelons of the peasantry, not the poorest villeins. As one historian has written its principal cause was not the tax itself, but how it was implemented; resentment by the village elites at the intrusion of gentry-dominated peace sessions into local government, as a result of the Statute of Labourers, which undermined and attacked a long tradition of self-policing and self-government in the manorial and village community. This tradition had hitherto enshrined a delegated responsibility to each village community as a community, to manage payments of the traditional taxes, the 10th and 15ths of the Lay Subsidy, totals due from each community having been fixed in 1334.

By this reading the government's efforts to restore the pre-plague norms in the labour market through the Statute of Labourers created the groundswell of resentment because it was seen as central bureaucratic control of matters hitherto the responsibility of the communities themselves.

7. The impact of the Black Death – Church, Religion and Belief

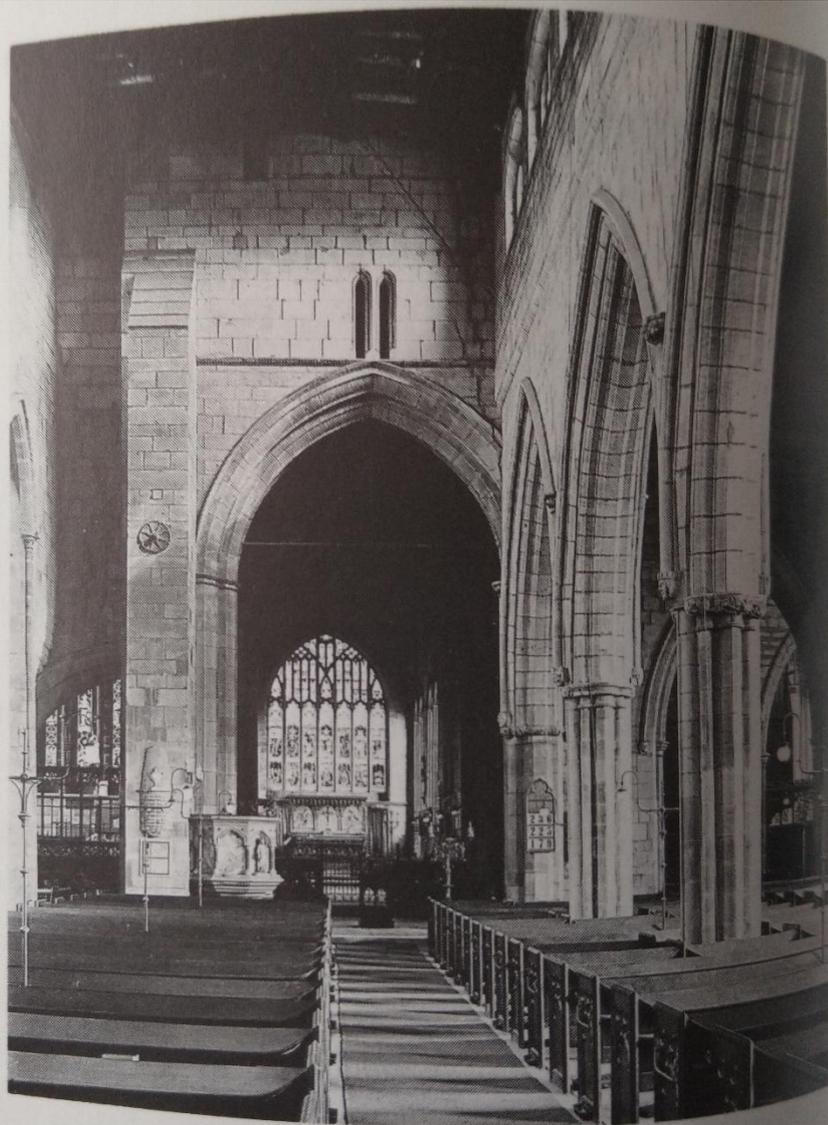
As noted above, there was a particular impact on the Church from the pestilence, carrying off large numbers of secular and religious clergy. But the plague had wider impact on the church, religious practice generally and popular belief.

Firstly, there was a shortage of clergy, particularly parish priests, as a result of the plague, particularly as officiating with the dying and administering the last rites brought them into close contact with highly infectious people. Such was the shortage of priests that Bishops enjoined lay men and in extremis, women to hear the confession of the dying. Bishops also wrestled with the problems of finding sufficient clergy especially for the poorer parishes. As an example, between 1379 and 1455 in the diocese of Exeter, the annual average number of priests ordained was 25, less than half the average for 1308-21, and this led to many vacancies in an area with 521 parishes churches.

Alongside this was the familiar complaint of Bishops and others about the poor quality of the remaining clergy, in particular their poor level of knowledge, their insufficient instruction of their flocks and lack of preaching in particular.

The personal impact of plague on monastic institutions has been graphically described earlier. Perhaps the most important result of this was a decline in the number of monks and nuns and the appearance of a large number of what had been previously functioning communities now with reduced, often tiny numbers of monks and nuns, and throughout the 15th century a process began, accelerated by Cardinal Wolsey in the 1520s, of either amalgamating these institutions or closing them, a process taken several steps further by Thomas Cromwell under Henry VIII. Monasteries also faced the same economic issues as the great landowners – falling rents, and incomes, rising prices and some particularly the smaller foundations, therefore faced an economic as well as a spiritual crisis.

51. The mutilated interior of Ashbourne Church, in Derbyshire, is one of the best examples of an ambitious rebuilding programme which was almost certainly a casualty of the Black Death. Here a new chancel, crossing and transepts had been built before 1349, and a big new south aisle (right) had been added to the existing nave. Work stopped short at that point, so that the matching north aisle, although clearly intended, was never built. *RCHME Crown copyright.*



Picture: Ashbourne Church.

Church building in many cases came to a halt as a result of the shortage of masons and other skilled artisans, as well as the impoverishment of benefactors. At Ashbourne, Derbyshire an ambitious 14th century rebuilding programme ground to a halt. By 1349, the remodelling of the church, which intended to encompass the whole of the west of the building had stopped on completion of the south aisle. The church today lacks a north aisle and is seriously lop-sided. Similar examples can be found at Delamere Church at Northborough, Cambridgeshire and Partington, Derbyshire.

William of Edington, Bishop of Winchester and Treasurer to Edward III was a rich and powerful man and he used his wealth to found a collegiate chantry in Edington, Wilts., the place of his birth. But the building consecrated in 1361, is, unlike most pre-plague buildings

of this sort, austere and sombre in its architecture, reflecting a change in mindset caused by the shock of the mass death caused by the plague.

In terms of the church as an institution, one of the most significant developments in the later Middle Ages was the development of the Chantry Guilds, bodies like the Guild of Holy Trinity at Stratford, which provided a collegiate support network for the community. In an age when death was even more commonplace and apparently more random than hitherto, to belong to an organisation that was set up to employ priests to say masses and pray for the souls of its departed members was reassuring, at a time when belief in purgatory was orthodox among the church and laity and concern for the afterlife and their place in it, was a central concern. Most Guilds also operated as welfare and insurance bodies, providing support for widows and dependents, offering education to children and spiritual solace for the bereaved. Their popularity grew in the post-plague years and they became an important part of local communities.

It is perhaps no coincidence that the post-plague years also saw the rise of England's home-grown heresy, Lollardy. The enormous and seemingly unstoppable loss of life seems to have led to a search for spiritual meaning, an increased interest in contemplative devotions and piety, and a deeper desire to communicate personally with God. Wyclif, Lollardy's founder and an Oxford Doctor of Theology, believed this close relationship, unmediated by the Church, was essential for salvation, hence his translation of the Bible into English to bring God's word closer to the people. This was viewed as a heresy by the Church and Wyclif's views were condemned by a council of the English church in 1382, although he was allowed to retire to a village parish in the years before his death in 1384. His views however struck a chord for their devotional and spiritual meaning, initially among a number of knights and nobles especially in the affinity of John of Gaunt, the son of Edward III, but later more widely among literate townspeople and artisans. Lollardy was largely discredited as a movement by the political classes following the attempted revolt led by the Welsh knight and Lollard, Sir John Oldcastle against Henry V in 1414. It continued as an informal, minority, clandestine sect throughout the 15th century, occasionally coming to light in the records when religious inquisitions revealed small groups of Lollards, mainly in the towns.

Another current in the post-Black Death world was a reduction in charitable activity by the Church and its institutions and a hardening of attitudes towards the poor. Pre-1348, charity to the poor in the form of alms, and other support was a key element of what the Church taught being a Christian meant. Indeed Henry III (1216-1272) was by no means viewed as an ideal monarch, but his piety, particularly his mass feeding of the poor, was widely lauded even by his enemies. By contrast, as wages rose and poverty declined in the post-Black Death years, there appears a hardening of attitudes among churchmen, moving more towards the view that the poor were responsible for their fate. This led to a consequent reduction in the emphasis on alms and charity as central to the Church's teaching in the 15th century.

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