

THE PLAGUE OF CHESTERFIELD, 1586-7.

By W. E. GODFREY.

WHEN the Derbyshire Muster of 1587 was held at Derby in November, no troops from the Hundred of Scarsdale were present. This muster was of a very important character, because earlier in that year Mary Queen of Scotland had been executed, and it was common knowledge that Spain was making preparations for a forthcoming attempt at the invasion of England when conditions should be favourable. In view therefore of the gravity of the times, it will be appreciated that only some quite unusual and vital circumstance would be allowed to interfere with the full attendance of the very considerable Scarsdale contingents. There *was* such a circumstance: it was the truly dreadful plague of Chesterfield.

That the plague was not rigidly confined to the tiny borough of half a square mile is true. There were certainly plague cases at Calow, for instance, but it does seem probable that the town itself bore practically the whole of the incidence, for no other chapelry is mentioned apart from Calow as contributory to the great number of burials taking place. The likelihood is that, once the plague was known to be at Chesterfield, the inhabitants of the satellite hamlets kept very decidedly away from it. That would be only sensible and natural. Very soon the markets and fairs ceased to be held and much normal occupation of the townsfolk came to a standstill. Thus to the ever present threat of a painful death were added want, hunger and privation for all the humbler people. With these difficulties, apart from help given by the Earl of Shrewsbury, then Lord Lieutenant of the shire, the better class burgesses found themselves left to grapple as best they might, for little assistance arrived from anyone else.

It seems likely that the same fears and shortages that kept people from entering Chesterfield would also operate to cause a considerable exodus amongst those who, believing themselves still uninfected, foresaw what would probably ensue from infection, hunger and loss of employment. The population, whatever it was then, was no doubt considerably less in a very short space of time. There is a letter from the Earl of Shrewsbury, given as a footnote to p. 151 of *Three Centuries of Derbyshire Annals* by Dr. Cox, which shows to what a state the town was reduced, and that ninety Chesterfield householders, plague or no plague, had intended to call upon him in Sheffield about the town's condition, had he not very providentially chanced to be absent at the proposed time.

The pestilence seems to have been of the same type as that which was later noted at Brimington (1603), Chesterfield again in 1608/9, and Derby, Eyam and London (1665). It was undoubtedly a product of filth, want, overcrowding and air pollution. Proper sanitation there was none. The narrow little alleys which intersect the Shambles were then the main shopping streets of the little Tudor town. The passages were probably even narrower then and also rendered darker and more stagnant by the overhanging upper stories of the houses of the time. One main open drain, a deep gutter, ran in each little streetful of mean little overpopulated warrens and when rain came, the offal, rubbish and accumulated filth of perhaps weeks progressed into the river Hipper. At other times it did not progress, but putrified until the stench became so unbearable that some attempt to swill out the gulley had perforce to be made. It is very apparent why the death rate tended to rise in the hot months. The older parts of the town, the Shambles, Soutergate, Holywell Street, Lordsmill Street, Knifesmithgate, etc., would be veritable "rookeries", and probably not so hygienic as real ones in any respect.

There were, too, special contributory circumstances contingent upon the visitation which appear often to have been noted before the advent of pestilences. It frequently chanced that the resistance of the future victims was reduced before the onset, and in the case of Chesterfield in

1586 there had been remarkably wet weather for the greater part of the year. This of course premises a reduced sunshine period, a thing bad in itself, but leading to the more patent fact that the harvest was light. In turn this produced a rise in local prices, which added the next link to the chain in inability to purchase enough to maintain normal health. Thus the poorer classes, already assailed by inclement weather, were exposed to food shortages and malnutrition at the same time, and all the circumstances thus being favourable, the plague struck.

It is necessary at this point to try to get some sort of picture as to what constituted normality in Chesterfield at this date. Figures collected in 1767 by Dr. Thomas Short show that from 1562 to 1635, Chesterfield's annual burials (excluding the plague period) averaged 82 per annum. Hall, dealing with the year 1560, enumerates 56 only for the year 1560, but then both 1559 and 1560 were "good, seasonable, healthy and plentiful years". His figure therefore cannot be accepted as an average, for there were then no social services of any kind, the monasteries having been dissolved some years prior to this. Thus in a "good" year the poor were not so hardly pressed, with the result that the death rate fell.

The months of the incidence of the plague extended from October 1586 to November 1587, both inclusive, and taking the same fourteen-month period between October 1584 and November 1585 it is observed that the latter had 85 burials, or just over 6 per month, as against 1560's record of 4.2/3 per month. Thus the figures given by Hall, Ford and Cox in varying statements are evidently misleading, for they were based on insufficient evidence, or on "favourable" periods of the year, or on a favourable year as a whole. It is useless to quote figures covering months like June and July only, one of the healthiest periods of the year. They naturally show a minimum of burials. Had they cited January, February and March, they would have found themselves faced with a monthly average of eight instead of the three they give. To imagine that a market town, with a number of dependent chapelries, would only register three per month

in Tudor times, under Tudor conditions and with a Tudor low expectation of life, is really rather extraordinary. It was, in fact, misleading to the extent of some 50 burials per summer.

However, during the fourteen-month plague period, the registered burials (carefully checked) rose to no less than 358. Out of these, eleven can be left out of consideration, for one was of a child who died at birth, nine were plague cases from the chapelry of Calow (out of two families), and the eleventh was the compulsory "apophoretum" from the daughter church of Brampton, which had to bury its first parishioner who died, in each successive New Year, in the parish churchyard of Chesterfield.¹

Nevertheless, despite this deduction of eleven, there is still the dreadful fact that Chesterfield town proper (the Borough, that is, as opposed to the ecclesiastical parish) seemingly bore the whole of the other 347 deaths, unless some arrangements had been made for the chapelries to dispose of their dead elsewhere. This however seems not to have been the case, for the Calow bodies were all brought in to the parish church. Obviously, even had there been no plague, Chesterfield church would, in a fourteen-month period, have dealt with some 84 or so burials as a normal occurrence. But one cannot merely subtract this number from 347 and say that the remainder represents the total of plague deaths, because of those destined to die in any case during that period from accident, senility and normal disease incidence, quite an appreciable number must have been prematurely seized with plague and have died from that cause instead. Thus while the actual plague deaths of the town probably did not attain the figure of 300, they must have been somewhere in the region of 275-290 by mere averages, since during the whole plague period the borough's death rate rose by over 300 per cent.

Where it is quite impossible to single out any particular name and say that this person did *not* die of plague, great numbers of certain victims can easily be identified.

¹ Incidentally, as the first death did not occur in Brampton until mid-February it is fairly evident that the village was free from plague, and it is most surprising that, even in the dire circumstances obtaining in 1587, this rigid obligation had yet to be carried out.

This can be done from surnames, relationships and dates, and when one discovers that a husband, wife, and half a dozen children have all died in quick succession, it is highly probable that most, if not all, were plague victims.

On the other hand any one of the bearers of a surname which occurs but once in the period may have concluded life from some other cause entirely.

Turning to a consideration of the baptisms, Hall gives 70 in A.D. 1560 and 88 in A.D. 1600, so the probabilities are, allowing for the reduced population of the town after the plague, that the year's baptisms in 1586 and in 1587 would be in the region of 80. During the fourteen-month period of the plague, however, they amounted only to 60, though a few may have been postponed or performed elsewhere. One pathetic touch is the baptism, near the end of the pestilence, of John Woodward's baby girl, by the wistful name of Hope. The father survived the plague and lived to be an alderman. Marriages at this period numbered some twenty annually, but during the fourteen months of the visitation there were only eleven, and during June, July, August, September and October 1587, which included the greatest death rate period, not a single marriage took place. Another significant fact is that not one "stranger" was buried in the town in all the fourteen months. Normally every year saw two or three entries in the burial register followed by the word "stranger", "vagrant" or "peregrinus". Ill news has its own wings and no wanderer was so foolish as to wander into Chesterfield. Possibly however some townsfolk left when, long after the onset of the disease, their nerves were unable to endure any more.

The most difficult point of all is estimating the probable population of the town at the beginning of the plague. From the Chantry Roll it appears that some forty years prior to this date there was a population of 2,000 over the age of sixteen years. This is in itself an obvious approximation and might represent a population of 2,800 or so. But this figure almost certainly refers to the borough itself, plus all its out-members, Brimington, Dunston, Calow, Holme, Tapton, Hasland, Newbold, Temple Normanton, Walton and perhaps Spital. The

difficulty at once arises as to the relative percentage of this number domiciled within the borough boundaries. This proved an insuperable difficulty to me until Mr. F. N. Fisher very kindly furnished figures he had obtained from the 1670 Hearth Tax statistics. This shows the number of houses paying tax within the ecclesiastical parish to have been exactly 400 a century after the plague. Non-taxed houses were relatively few as this tax was rigorously pressed, and he estimates that a round figure of 450 would cover all. Of these the borough population occupied about 240 taxed and untaxed. Probably the population in 1670 was no greater than it was before the plague, as there had been a severe reduction of population which could not at once, or for many years, be entirely replaced. Allowing an average family to be one of $4\frac{1}{4}$ persons, Mr. Fisher suggests a population in the borough before the plague of about one thousand, perhaps a little more, though he warns that calculating population in such ways is naturally a difficult thing to do with any close accuracy. At once it becomes apparent from this figure that the births, deaths and marriages figures previously given cannot possibly be related reasonably to a population of 1,000 only, but must refer to the whole population of the ecclesiastical parish.

They also suggest strongly that the population of this latter parish in 1547 had been considerably over-estimated. This is quite a possibility as no accurate census would be taken, as the round number of 2,000 over the age of sixteen shows. Evidently the number of houses was around 240, but this does not mean that there were only the same number of families. There would certainly be more, and the families of the substantial burgesses with servants and of the tradesmen employing apprentices would take the total to considerably above a thousand, but to how many hundreds above that figure it is quite impossible to say.

There the matter must rest, though the death register figures suggest a total for the actual borough as high as 1,500, if 35 years be taken as an average expectation of life including all infants born. This figure is probably too high, as 35 is probably an optimistic estimate for

Tudor times. But at all events Mr. Fisher's data have overcome the difficulty of having to deal with the population of the ecclesiastical parish on the one hand and a plague death rate almost entirely confined to the borough on the other, so a great deal has been gained in accuracy. One thousand five hundred may be regarded as a generous maximum, likelihood being much against so high a figure.

Assuming 300 separate families as a possible population (equivalent to about 1275 people), we find that from them were registered 347 deaths from all causes, of which perhaps 275 were plague cases. Now for the effects of the plague. Taking the same fourteen-month period, but for the years October 1588 to November 1589 it is noted that the deaths, which were 85 for that period four years earlier, have now become 75. But the number of deaths in the parts of the ecclesiastical parish outside the borough would have remained reasonably constant, so that this deficiency of ten is almost entirely attributable to the borough, and this, *ceteris paribus*, suggests in turn that the population of the borough after the plague may have been reduced by some fraction in the region of 1/6th. (This may actually be too small a fraction.) In other words there were perhaps not five townfolk where there had been six prior to the plague. An interesting fact is that the vicar, Cuthbert Hutchinson, was 73 when he was confronted by the plague with all its chances of infection for one of his calling. He not only survived them but lived until he was about 95, dying in 1608.

On the assumption that there were some 300 families in Chesterfield from which to account for 347 deaths due to plague and normal causes together in the fourteen-month period, an examination of the burial list discloses that a likely maximum number of 175 families bore the whole of the deaths on both accounts, and that about 125 families had therefore no single death amongst them. Then, of the 347 deaths, almost exactly half the deaths occurred in some forty-odd of the families, so that the remaining families suffering bereavements were affected lightly in comparison. This suggests that there may have been definite plague areas where the chances of survival were greatly diminished. It almost seems as though

these forty-odd families must have been virtually wiped out of existence. For even if they were the largest, and therefore often the poorest, of the families, not many could have remained alive after 170 deaths had occurred amongst them. For them the appearance of the plague must have meant near extinction as units.

Unfortunately the registers give no ages or occupations, and in many cases no parentage or relationship. The forty or so badly affected families are easily distinguishable by their many deaths in short periods as well as by mention of relationships between the various buried members of the families.

It is difficult to say which family was the first to suffer loss from the plague. Below the names of Margaret, wife of Francis Cade, and John her son, both buried together on 2nd October, 1586, is a note that "here began the great plague of Chesterfield", which of course could only have been inserted later, after it had developed and proved its virulence. But this may have been a mother dying in childbirth along with her son. On the 22nd October was buried Reginald Shershaw, to be followed by his wife on 9th November, his son Nicholas on the 18th and his daughter Frances on the 22nd. This definitely looks like plague, of course, though the father may have died from some other cause. Another possibility is William Allen, buried on 5th October, and another is Margaret, wife of William Crampton, buried on the 11th, though this does not appear to be the same Crampton family which later lost four members. Yet another possible first victim may have been John, son of Richard Cade, buried on 16th October. There is however no doubt about the fate of the Harry family. Robert Harry senior was not a poor man, for he kept a servant, and had a wife and five children. This is what happened to them: his sons Richard and Humphrey were buried on 24th October, 1586, he himself and his servant Elizabeth (no surname given) on 30th October. His wife followed on 5th November and his daughter Jane on the 2nd. Then a relative, Nicholas, buried his son on 12th November and was himself buried on 25th November. Robert Harry's family was not the worst case. There was the Forthe

family which lost six members — and a possible seventh — in about a month, the Lee family which appears to have lost father, mother and four children, and worst of all the Smyth family. This family lost Johanna in the early stages and then seven months later buried Ellen the wife on 6th July, Alice a daughter on the 14th, William a son on the 15th, Anne and Troth, daughters, on the 16th, Agnes, daughter, on the 18th and finally the father, John Smyth, on the 24th. Another Smyth, Robert, lost his children Thomas, Robert, Alice and Lucy. It now becomes possible to appreciate how some forty-odd families account for 170 or so burials.

Other families losing three or more members had the Chesterfield surnames of Aspin, Audeley, Birk(s), Baxter, Burgin, Browne (Robert — 3), Brown (John — 5). Bowman, Brownley, Cutt, Crampton, Fox, Frost, Frith,² Hage, Lawton, Oates, Peniston, Robotham, Robinson (5), Shershaw, Snyder, Shepley (5), Slack, Stubbing, Todd (?), Tattersall (5), Taylor, Townend, Vicars, Whitehead, Watkinson, Worrall, Wheelwright and Woodhouse (5). There are three burials without surname and one with no Christian name.

There exists at Sheffield Public Library a copy of a document of 1566 which contains the names of twenty-two of the principal families in Chesterfield. There were people buried during the plague bearing the same surnames in twelve cases, so it is evident that the better class residents did not altogether escape. On the other hand none of the twelve had three deaths recorded; most had only one, who may therefore of course not necessarily have died of plague. There is a distinct possibility that some Chesterfield families may have left *en masse* when they realised what was upon them. This was usually the case in a plague town. It certainly happened later in London and also at Eyam, as can easily be seen since the pre-plague death rate there was annually about twenty, thus postulating more normally resident than the number voluntarily braving the plague. We must therefore consider the possibility that the resident population of Chesterfield by the end of the plague may have been

² Forthe, Firthe and Frith appear actually to represent one register surname.

reduced to very much under a thousand, and the certainty that it would in any case bear little relationship to normality.

After eliminating such names as can safely be omitted, the mortality from all causes during the plague was, month by month, as follows:

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| Oct. 1586 | 14 | May 1587 | 25 |
| Nov. „ | 21 | June „ | 51 |
| Dec. „ | 12 | July „ | 52 |
| Jan. „ | 14 | Aug. „ | 45 |
| Feb. „ | 11 | Sept. „ | 26 |
| Mar. 1587 | 15 | Oct. „ | 32 |
| Apr. „ | 16 | Nov. „ | 13 |

Following the usual trend in a temperate climate, the plague rose steadily in its incidence with the rise in temperature, and also declined with the fall. The explanation of the big drop in September 1587, followed by a rise of some 20 per cent. again in October, is that in September there was an almost unprecedented spell of cold weather, consisting of cold winds, hard white frosts and falls of sleet and snow. When the weather became milder again in October the rate at once went up. Like all plague visitations, it was quite uninfluenced by sex, the deaths of females only exceeding those of males by four. The worst months, in midsummer, were about twenty-five to thirty times the normal number for those same months, because what were usually the healthiest months of the year became the most dangerous of all, and some houses must have been completely emptied. At Calow, an out-township, there were six cases in one family and three in another, all at the time of the height of the pestilence in Chesterfield, and this was the total of the Calow losses. Three sisters from one house there were buried on one July day in 1587.

At what precise date the plague ceased is as uncertain as the exact date of its outbreak. There was no burial at all between 23rd November and 11th December, 1587, so it was evidently by that time all over. The burial on 23rd November was of John, son of Ralph Birk(s), who had previously lost three children, so he may indeed have been the last victim.

A second outbreak came on 18th March, 1608/9, but lasted only two months or so, during which period there were about thirty burials. It was apparently very local, as most of the deaths were confined to four families. Nevertheless, coming only twenty-two years after the former visitation, it must have caused considerable and justifiable perturbation amongst the frightened inhabitants.

This has been an interesting study, even though necessarily speculative and approximate after such a lapse of time. It has scarcely been a comfortable one. As the tale of the afflicted families grows steadily under the pen, one becomes increasingly aware of some of the grief, misery and tears, the despair, desolation and want, and the mounting terror that reach out from the pages like ghostly fingers from that Tudor Golgotha that was ordinarily a little country market town. This dreadful calamity actually produced a hundred more deaths than the plague of Eyam, even though from a much larger population.

ADDENDUM.

To illustrate the effect of climatic conditions and good crops, the year 1575 was "a good rich seasonable plentiful year for all necessaries". This was reflected by an extraordinarily low death rate. The registers for this year shewed burials, month by month (exclusive of 14 from the out-chapelries), as being 23 for borough residents solely, and one of these was a wandering stranger. The other 22 were buried, starting with January, and progressing month by month, as follows: (Jan.) 2, 1, 2, 3, 4, 0, 1, 1, 1, 1, 3 & (Dec.) 3.

Of the 22 borough residents buried, one was an illegitimate child which was dead almost immediately, six were paupers, and one described as "widow". All of these eight were living in circumstances probably below the nutritional norm. Of the remaining 14 deaths, 10 or 11 (from the mode of entry) were apparently of children, so that we are faced with the astonishing fact that only 3 or 4 townfolk living in normal economic conditions and of adult years, died in the whole of 1575. Yet the average "townsmen" deaths in the next nine years of the decade averaged 41 of all ages.