

### III.—THE BLACK DEATH IN THE PALATINATE OF DURHAM.

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It is only within the past fifty years that historians have realized the important part played in the history of our country by the great pestilence of 1348-9. In the early numbers of the *Fortnightly Review*—in 1865—there were articles on the Black Death by Mr. Frederick Seebohm and Mr. Thorold Rogers. Both agreed upon the importance of the calamity but differed somewhat as to the rate of mortality. Afterwards the Rev. Augustus Jessop investigated the ravages of the Plague in East Anglia and abbot Gasquet devoted considerable industry and ability to a general survey of our available evidence. Curiously enough, he gives but the most cursory glance at this district, and, although he evidently knew of the existence of the bishop's Court Rolls, he only dips into them or else quotes at secondhand from some authority I have been unable to identify.

Some time ago I was asked to write the article on the Social and Economic History of Durham for the forthcoming Victoria County History volume, and I hope in this, and perhaps other, papers to give in more detail the results of my investigation of the manuscript evidence. In this paper I propose to deal with the Black Death.

The Black Death is said to have taken its rise in China about 1333. Pestilence was always latent then as now in the squalid cities of the east, and a series of earthquakes and other natural phenomena intensified the normal overcrowding by terror, and terror rendered men easier victims. And indeed the aspect of a plague-smitten person was terrible. Dark purple blotches ap-

peared on the skin, the outward sign of a thoroughly disordered blood and tissues, and even before the plague arrived men were terrified by stories of the fetid mist that went before it like a pillar of cloud. In Europe, too, the earth quaked in an uneasy fashion and the light of the heavens took strange hues. Along the caravan routes the plague ran like wildfire and men's terror can be understood when we read of the earthquakes that desolated Italy and Greece in 1348, or of the icebergs that formed about the once green isle of Iceland. Iceland remained after this a land of lava and snow, but Greenland was cut off entirely from the mother country by ice-barriers, which men may not even yet pierce with impunity.

In August, 1348, the plague first made its appearance in England in the neighbourhood of Weymouth. Soon every town had its plague pit. The story of the visitation in the midlands and south is told ably and picturesquely in *Social England*, and from it we must fill in the outlines given to us for Durham. The plague was at Norwich by January, 1349, and it had entered Durham by the end of the following July. The miserable inhabitants narrowly escaped a Scottish invasion at the same time. The Scots were gloating over the miseries of their neighbours and invented a new oath, 'By the foul death of the English.' They gathered in Selkirk forest in their thousands, but before the raid could take place the pestilence broke out among them and ravaged Scotland as severely almost as England.

We can fix the outbreak of the pestilence in Durham very closely, but it is less easy to say which place was first attacked. Under ordinary circumstances we should expect to find it travelling along the great roads and entering by way of Darlington or Stockton. However, this view has given place in my mind to the belief that the pestilence entered by sea either at Sunderland or Hartlepool, probably the former, although, of course, the latter port could not escape long.

The story, as we read it even in the dry records of the halmotes, is dramatic. The bishop's Court Rolls, which alone survive for the year 1349, tell us that the years preceding the plague had been most prosperous. Volume XII. of the cursitor's records begins with a mutilated record of the January halmote of 1349, the earliest extract. We see the steward counting his gains and enrolling the increased rents from the mills and the new rents for fresh holdings. He even begins the summer halmote without a qualm in July, 1349, although he must have known that the plague was raging south of the Humber. On Tuesday, July 14th, he opens the sittings at Chester-le-Street and the peasantry, cut off from the outer world, take the few vacant lands that are open, not knowing how near death is. Little business is transacted, and it is probably in the evening of Tuesday that he arrives at the next centre—Houghton-le-Spring. Here an unpleasant surprise awaited him. No one would fine for any land in the hands of the lord, at the halmote held next day, Wednesday. They had heard that the pestilence had come into the bishopric at last and they feared that it would reach their village soon. The steward was not unreasonable and he issued a common or general proclamation dealing with the refusals, to hold good 'until God should bring some remedy,' as he piously puts it. We know from the sequel that the proclamation tried to re-assure the frightened peasantry and promised them remissions of rent which were allowed next year.

If we can press the curious dog-latin to its literal meaning, the steward actually found the pestilence the next day (Thursday) at Easington, apparently just introduced. At Houghton the refusals to fine were for fear of the pestilence (*pro timore pestilencie*); at Easington we are told that the refusals were on account of the pestilence (*propter pestilenciam*). We are repeatedly told of the poverty of the Easington villagers, both now and later on, and there seems to have been already a previous misfortune,

the effects of which were heightened by this new pestilence. First we are told that on account of the pestilence all refused to pay the usual fine for vacant lands. One man was constrained to take over a holding which had been destined for him at the last halmote, but he only paid the nominal fine of 6d., and the two other transactions referred to were of a special nature; in one case a man took over the land of his father and in the other apparently the land of his father-in-law. After each case occurs a formula explaining that the pestilence and poverty were responsible for the low fine. One of the men was said to be on the point of leaving the bishopric altogether if he got the chance. The steward's perplexity can be read in the bad Latin—less intelligible even than usual—in which he explains that if he did not accept these low fines he could not let the land at all. He tells us that even his proclamation had no effect. They would not work the land at the reduced rent, they would not agree to take the land, even if they escaped the pestilence, and no conditions reassured them. The steward adds a reflection that after all it is better to let these lands at a low fine than to allow them to lie fallow—the only alternative.

And then comes the surprise. The steward went on to Middleham on the Friday and to Stockton on the Saturday. At each of these halmotes the tenants paid the usual fines, regardless of the plight of Easington, with which there was little intercourse. Only in one place besides Houghton and Easington do we find anything that points to the Black Death. Under Wearmouth, at the Houghton halmote, we are told that Agnes, wife of Walter, is fined for brewing against the assize, and the roll refers to four other offenders who have died 'mendicanter,' in poverty or miserably. Both Houghton and Easington were in close connexion with the bishop's borough of Wearmouth and they alone show signs of panic. We learn later that Sunderland suffered heavily from the pestilence insomuch that Nicholas de Skelton,

who farmed the borough (probably for William of Esh, whose steward he was), had to obtain a remission of four marks from his firm. We have no record of the pestilence being in south-east Durham in July, 1349, and so it is perhaps safe to assume that it entered the Palatinate by way of Sunderland.

This seems the more likely, because the steward proceeded on his way to Sadberge, Darlington, Wolsingham and Lanchester; finding, in each centre, no difficulty in obtaining tenants. He was at Lanchester on Thursday, July 23rd, and the record leaves him here somewhat abruptly. There is an ominous blank in the records for the rest of the year and no halmote was held in November. Probably the pestilence had become generally prevalent by this, for it was certainly raging in the western districts in August and September, as the few surviving bailiff rolls show.

The records now begin to be tantalizing and full of lacunae for some months, but when examined and compared are very interesting. The prior's rolls are missing for several years about this time and we only possess the cursitor's fair copy of the bishop's rolls which contains no mention of any halmote until April, 1350, when the panic had subsided a little. It is from these later entries that we learn of the havoc caused by the plague and they are supplemented, so far as the prior's villis are concerned, by three very interesting rolls containing 'a list of the tenants of the prior, deceased in the first pestilence, who held their lands at the will of the lord and not as free tenants.' Practically every vill of the prior occurs in this list, and it is quite clear that the tenants of the prior and the bishop suffered equally.

Let us take specimens of the prior's villis. In Billingham itself forty-seven unfree tenants died, twenty-eight died at Wolviston and fifteen at Newton Bewley. The mortality seems huge in this quarter, but unfortunately we cannot fix the percentage either here or in the other districts. In the Sunderland district the prior lost four tenants at Fulwell, eleven at Monk-

wearmouth and eight at Southwick. Sixteen died at South Shields, eight at Harton and seventeen at Westoe. Jarrow lost sixteen, while across the water, Wallsend and Willington, very tiny villages, lost nine and seven unfree tenants respectively. A mutilated roll apparently contained the names of the free tenants who died, but it is mostly illegible. As to the proportion who died, can we assume that the case of the Heworths was normal? Eight died at Over Heworth and thirteen at Nether Heworth, twenty-one in all, and a later entry in the prior's roll for 1373 tells us that at the Heworths two-thirds of the tenantry died. Durham was never thickly populated till last century and so we can imagine the situation in 1350.

Our information as to the bishop's villis is fuller and yet less precise. Approximate mortality returns could be obtained by taking out the numbers of the tenants who took land, and comparing these figures with similar ones from bishop Hatfield's Survey, but there are one or two striking passages in the rolls. Under Rowley we find that in June, 1350, only one tenant was left. At West Thicklely the case was worse. The entry is simply, 'No tenants come from this vill, for they are dead.' Elsewhere the tale is the same, though on a less severe scale. And what of those tenants who were alive? Dispirited, terrified and threatened with famine, they had no heart to go about their daily work and it was quite impossible for them to pay their dues. The lowest class of tenants—the *nativi* or serfs—began to be unruly, and a serious outbreak in the Chester ward was narrowly averted. Many of the inhabitants of various ranks fled out of the bishopric, and in some cases wandered up and down the land, driven insane by their fear. At Boldon and many other places the steward was told outright that the people simply could not pay any rent at all and in some places the peasants said they could not work the land, as they were too few and feeble.

It is to the credit of bishop Hatfield and Sir Thomas Gray,

his steward; that they were merciful and kept the promise made by the latter in his July proclamation. In June, 1350, the steward and the chancellor held a special court in the Durham Chancery and there sealed a formidable list of concessions in the way of remissions of rent and other dues for the year beginning March 20th, 1350. The cursitor's copy is probably an unfinished document, but from it we can gather that the following places suffered somewhat severely:—Sunderland, Ryhope, Newbottle, Houghton, Easington, Shotton, Cornforth, Sedgfield, Wolsingham, Heighington, West Auckland, Bedburn, (perhaps) Chester-le-Street, Whickham and Bedlingtonshire.

These concessions were generally but not always with respect to the demesne lands held by the villeins. Other remissions were made during the next few months of ordinary rent and dues. The peasants who farmed the mills of course suffered heavily by the fall in population, and they received remissions for many years after. It would tire you were I to quote remissions at length and so I will only say that because of their poverty none of the bondsmen of Easington were fined that year (1350), and there are numerous entries in the later rolls with reference both to east and west Durham, which show that the bishop had very great difficulty in getting any rent at all from some villis.

I reserve for future papers the story of the disappearance of serfdom and the manorial system, both of which were accelerated, though perhaps not caused by the Black Death. I would just point out in conclusion that the essence of economic life before the Black Death was co-operation, but when the mortality was so great co-operation of the old kind was impossible, and a new order had to be born, whose birth cost the nation pains and anguish that were not understood. In 1348-1350 the death knell of custom was rung, but the bells were ringing in a better tune, the new year of liberty, clad, though inevitably, in an icy, cheerless garb.

## APPENDIX.

The following figures are extracted from certain rolls in the treasury of the Dean and Chapter of Durham.

The first roll bears the reference Loc. 4, No. 146, and is headed 'De tenentibus prioris mortuis in prima pestilencia qui tenuerunt ad voluntatem et non fuerunt liberi tenentes,' *i.e.*, 'Concerning the tenants of the prior who died in the first pestilence (usual name for the Black Death) who held at will and were not free tenants.'

Billingham, 47 deaths.	West Merrington, 12 deaths.
Acley [Aycliffe], 15 deaths (including William the chaplain).	(?) East Merrington, 2 deaths.
Mid Merrington, 17 deaths.	Newton Ketton, 6 deaths.

The Roll, Loc. 4, No. 147, contains—

Fulwell, 4 deaths.	Dalton, 12 deaths.
Monkwearmouth, 11 deaths.	Wolviston, 28 deaths.
East Raynton, 4 deaths.	Neuton (? Bewley), 15 deaths.

Partly illegible roll inside No. 147 contains—

Wylington, (?) 7 deaths.	the Reeve who held three cottages, an orchard and 12 acres of land).
Walisend, 9 deaths (including Richard the Reeve who held 23 acres and Robert the Pinder with a cottage and 2 acres).	Harton, 8 deaths.
Monkton, 3 deaths.	Sheles, 16 deaths.
Wyvestowe, 17 deaths.	Suthwyk, 8 deaths.
Over-Heworth, 8 deaths (including John de Heworth, chaplain).	North Petingdon ( <i>i.e.</i> , N. Pittington), 11 deaths.
Nether-Heworth, 13 deaths.	West Raynton, 12 deaths.
Hetheworth ( <i>i.e.</i> , Hedworth), 3 deaths.	Moreslawe, 6 deaths.
Jarowe, 16 deaths (including Robert	South Pet. ( <i>i.e.</i> , S. Pittington), 14 deaths.
	Hesilden, (?) 18 deaths.
	Fery, (?) 12 deaths.

Possibly the missing villis of the prior appeared on the third and damaged roll in its original state.

It would be tedious to print all the entries, as they indicate little variety in their list of household goods. The following entries, which appear under Billingham, may suffice :—

Terra capta: Johannes filius viduae obiit seisitus de j bondagio, Diota filia Thomae, uxor ejusdem Johannis obiit seisitus de j bondagio; qui habuerunt ij ollas aeneas j patellam j plumbum ij affros ij carectas j carucam iij bestias v equos iij boves j vaccam xii bidentes xiiij acras bladi hyemalis et xx acras bladi vernalis.

Terra capta: Johannes Been obiit seisitus de cotagio et vj acris terrae et Agneta uxor ejus manucepit satisfaciendo domino et aliis ut decet.

It should be observed that these figures and entries only refer to the deaths of holders of villein tenures. We possess no statistics as to the decease of non-tenants such as wives and children. Unfortunately the only information dealing with the prior's free tenants (Loc. 4, No. 141) is in such a state that we dare only present the following incomplete figures with considerable hesitation:—

Hesilden, 3 free tenants died.

Wolviston, 2 or (?) 5 tenants died.

Coupon, 1 free tenant died.

Fery, 1 free tenant died.

Acle, 4 free tenants died.

The rest of the roll is ruined by damp and decay.