

RESEARCH IN PROGRESS

FURTHER ANALYSIS OF THE VICTIMS OF PLAGUE IN COLYTON 1645-46

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The victims of plague in a mid-seventeenth century epidemic in the town of Colyton have already been scrutinised by Roger Schofield and the results set out in a Local Population Studies publication, **The plague revisited**¹. I have recently completed a 'total reconstitution' of the parish of Colyton by linking other documentary material to the original reconstitution based on parish records.² The aim was to assign occupational or wealth indicators to each family reconstitution form. From the resulting index it was possible to determine the social status and other details of the unfortunate victims of plague, and therefore extend Schofield's observation that the majority of those who died were family groups while many other families were untouched by the disease.

The exact time of the plague is easy to determine as the burial register states 'here ye plague began' in November 1645 and 'here ye plague ended' in December 1646. The disaster came soon after the civil war which had already wreaked considerable chaos in the town, a battleground between the Royalists stationed at Axminster and the Parliamentary garrison from Lyme. The ruination of one Colyton sergemaker, John Hewes, by looting troops, is well chronicled in the records.³ Before the plague started, Colyton was experiencing a high death rate, and the mortality patterns indicate that a typhus epidemic preceded the plague outbreak.

A fifth of Colyton's population died in the plague. Analysis of the victims by linking them to the total reconstitution shows that all the families in the parish who were recorded as being involved with the wool trade had members who died of plague. That clothworkers were particularly vulnerable to catch plague is also suggested by the study of the disease at Eyam as well as other textile centres.⁴ The cloth was seen as a seat of infection and the disease spread with the interaction of producing and marketing of wool. In Colyton there is a clear pattern. The plague started amongst wool workers and within the second and third month spread to the wider craft community. Only in later months did the disease attack all sectors of the population.

It is noticeable that the agricultural population was far less affected than the 'industrial' and consequently, sickness remained fairly confined to the town area of the parish. A breakdown of the victims socio-economic status is made according to families in the following table where the socio-economic standing of plague victims was compared with the status distribution of all FRFs on the

Table 1 Status of plague victims Colyton

Status	1600-49 FRFs n	Plague families	% affected by plague
Gentry	132	27	20.5
Crafts	129	65	43.4
(not wool)	101	43	42.6)
(wool)	28	13	46.4)
Labourer	81	26	32.1
Poor	131	38	29.0

1600-49 cohort. In 147 cases the families could be given a status of 'class' attribution.

This table indicates that relatively few plague victims were from the gentry class, whereas a roughly similar proportion of plague victims were labourers and poor as in the population as a whole. The craft sector 'was the most seriously affected group as 43 per cent of families contained in this cohort had plague victims.

Wool manufacture had been a major industry in medieval Colyton, but it seems that its importance diminished over time. Sixteenth century records, which detail fulling mills in the town, indicated that there was a highly capitalised finishing sector in the parish.⁵ By the second half of the seventeenth century there still seems to have been a small but thriving wool sector which survived the onslaught of both civil war and plague. Just fifteen years after the plague ended the feoffee's recorded that there was still enough wool making in Colyton for it to create a public nuisance, as they agreed at a meeting 'that no person or persons whatsoever shall after this present day put, dry or hang any wool on the Lyddes (leads) of the church'.⁶ The evidence that wool making in Colyton survived as an industry despite the extermination of most of the wool making families casts some doubt on the belief of David Levine that Colyton was by-passed by the technology of the new draperies in the early seventeenth century and left as an economic backwater.⁷

Many questions remain unanswered however, for the scanty records of textile industry in the early modern period raise more issues than they answer. The plague death pattern brought out here suggests that, as has been assumed, much of the wool making in this period took place in family craft shops. Yet some of the records for Colyton suggest that other people also made wool. The dyeing and finishing operations employed expensive capital and waged (mostly male) labour. Employment in the wool industry was also a feature of early poor relief policies. Wool spinning took place in a spinstry which seems likely to have just employed women, not families. It may have been due to the existence of this sector, employing the textile making proletariat, that wool manufacture was sustained in Colyton after the mid-seventeenth century upheaval.

NOTES

1. R.S. Schofield, 'An anatomy of an epidemic – Colyton, November 1645 to November 1646', *Local Population Studies*, **The plague revisited: a new look at its origins and effects in sixteenth and seventeenth century England**, (Matlock, 1977), 95-126.
2. P. Sharpe, 'Gender-specific demographic adjustment to changing economic circumstances: Colyton 1538-1837', (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Cambridge, 1988).
3. W.H. Hamilton Rogers, **West country stories and sketches: biographical and historical**, (1894), 70.
4. L. Bradley, 'The most famous of all English plagues: a detailed analysis of the plague at Eyam 1665-6', in **The plague revisited**, 63-94.
5. For instance, the Feoffees charter 22/10 of 1546 mentions that there were six fulling mills along the River Coly. The few extant seventeenth century inventories all show evidence of wool making and storage, for example the inventory of William Hill 2 June 1627, copy in Colyton library.
6. R.G.C. White, **The history of the feoffees of Colyton 1546-1946**, (1951), 12. There is evidence of a new fulling mill being built in Colyton in the second half of the seventeenth century in a lease book for the manor of Yardbury, Cornwall Record Office PE/29/1B. S.D. Chapman ed., **The Devon cloth industry in the eighteenth century: Sun Fire Office inventories of merchants' and manufacturers' property 1726-1770**, (Devon and Cornwall Record Society, 1978) indicates that there was still wool making in Colyton in the eighteenth century.
7. D. Levine, **Family formation in an age of nascent capitalism**, (London, 1977), 107-15.

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