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# Editorial\*

## Plague and pestilence

I gave a lecture at the University in February of this year as part of a course in England's population history. For the first time I can recall, there was a full attendance by every student registered on the course. The theme of the lecture was plague and mortality in England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

It has been fascinating, frustrating and appalling to live through the past few months as events which were believed only to happen in past times manifested themselves again in modern society. Fascinating, because problems with which population historians have spent long hours grappling, such as the difficulty of interpreting cause of death statistics, have assumed a grim relevance: government policy and the expenditure of millions of pounds can depend on how causes of death are categorised by doctors, and how their categorisations are interpreted by analysts. Frustrating, because it seems that we know simultaneously too much and too little about historical epidemics. Many of the models which epidemiologists used in the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic to try to predict its course were based on the enormous amount of analysis of the 1918–1919 influenza pandemic when, as we now know, the Covid-19 virus and the disease it causes are, in key respects, different from the H1N1 influenza virus that led to so many deaths among young people of working age in the autumn of 1918. Appalling, because of the likely economic, social and psychological consequences of shutting down the economy and shutting up people in their homes for long periods, which do not seem to have been considered by those advising the government.

Alas, those advisors do not include historians. This is a shame, because history does teach us some things about epidemics. One is that they are unpredictable. Many diseases have emerged apparently without warning and done enormous damage to susceptible populations. Long before the H1N1 influenza virus, for example, there was the mysterious English 'sweating sickness' which appeared in 1485 and returned several times before disappearing in the mid-sixteenth century. A second is that the virulence of a new pathogen can change and decay over time as, for example, it becomes endemic. There is some evidence that this is happening with Covid-19. It has certainly happened with diseases in the past, such as scarlet fever in the late nineteenth century. A third is that it has always been much easier to prevent a new infection getting into a population than it is to bring under control an infection that is already circulating within the population. A fourth is that context matters. The Covid-19 pandemic spread largely because of the massive amount of international travel that has typically taken place in the early twenty first century: it spread from China to Italy through long-established connections between the Chinese

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communities in northern Italian towns and their homeland; it spread in Europe through hubs of infection in ski resorts; cities which are global hubs for international travellers (such as London, Paris, New York and Singapore) have found it particularly hard to keep infection under control. The spread of the 1918-1919 influenza pandemic was greatly affected by the fact that the world was at war, with thousands of soldiers moving great distances. The same had been true 300 years earlier during the Thirty Years War when epidemics of typhus were spread by troop movements. These kinds of contextual effects are hard to incorporate into the statistical and epidemiological models which seem to have informed so much of the decision-making surrounding the pandemic.

### **This issue of *Local Population Studies***

Local population historians continue to be interested in the Poor Law. This issue of *Local Population Studies* includes an article by Prisca Greenhow on the way the Old Poor Law worked in the parish of Mattishall in Norfolk. Greenhow compares Mattishall with four parishes in Huntingdonshire, and also makes reference to other work on Bedfordshire by Samantha Williams and Essex by Thomas Sokoll, and more general studies by George Boyer and Steven King. The main conclusion of the paper is that Mattishall, unusually for a parish in the south and east of England, managed to keep the total amount of poor relief paid out within reasonable bounds, and seems to have made considerable efforts to do this. Other parishes in the south and east were happier to allow total disbursements to rise as economic difficulties increased demands on the system.

Sue Jones's contribution, which is more of a research note than a full article, examines the days of the week on which parents had their children baptised in sixteenth-century Surrey. The publication of the *Book of Common Prayer* in 1549 ushered in a new emphasis on Sunday baptisms, where the new-born was introduced to the community as represented in the congregation at the main Sunday service. Prior to that, baptism had taken place as soon as possible after birth. Jones shows that, as the sixteenth century wore on, Sunday baptisms became more common, so that by 1600 they comprised more than 60 per cent of all baptisms.

Preceding these two contributions is a piece by Peter Solar which is a companion to an article entitled 'Background migration: the Irish (and other strangers) in mid-Victorian Hertfordshire', *Local Population Studies* 82 (2009), pp. 44–62. The article published in this issue deals with the Irish in mid-Victorian Cornwall. It breaks new ground in comparing the Irish population of the county in 1841 and 1851, either side of the Great Famine. Solar's main finding is that the Irish in Cornwall were a transient population, spending only a short time in Cornwall before moving to other places. They were predominantly unmarried, or married English spouses. Of the few Irish couples, most had some government or military connections. Perhaps surprisingly, the Irish migrants did not (for the most part) find work in Cornish industries such as mining or agriculture.

This issue is somewhat smaller than usual. Partly this is a result of the Great Pestilence, which has delayed the work of one or two contributors. Partly, however, it is because issue

105 will be larger than usual, as we plan that it will include the contributions to the re-arranged Roger Schofield Memorial Conference, which is now scheduled for 12 September 2020.

### **Parish Register Project website**

The Local Population Studies Society is pleased to announce the development of a new website from which the data in the 404 parishes used by E.A. Wrigley and R.S. Schofield, *The Population History of England 1541–1871: a Reconstruction* (Cambridge, 1989), can be accessed. Visitors to the site will find Excel files with the data for each of the 404 parishes in the form of monthly counts of baptisms, marriages and burials together with some summary data. There is also a list of parishes with the start and end dates of their sequences of baptisms, marriages and burials. Visitors to the web site will be able to download a second edition of Roger Schofield's *Parish Register Aggregate Analyses*, which is a guide to the data base. Access to the data from the 404 parishes is free to anyone who is interested. The web site will be launched in the near future: members of the Local Population Studies Society will be the first to hear of it. The web site will be augmented over the coming years with aggregate data from additional parishes as these become available.

### **Local Population Studies Prize**

The Local Population Studies Society (LPSS) has decided to reintroduce a prize for the best article published in *Local Population Studies* by a student, a young academic or a non-University-based author. There was, in the past, a similar prize (referred to as the Local Population Studies Essay Prize) but it fell into abeyance. If you are either a student (at any stage), a young academic (within five years of completing a PhD) or not based in a university, you stand a chance of winning three years' membership of LPSS, to include the registration fees for all conferences organised by LPSS during those three years. The reintroduced prize will be offered for the best article by an eligible author published in *Local Population Studies* issues 106 or 107. Papers written by more than one author are eligible, but all authors must meet the criteria, and only one prize will be offered for each paper.

### **Future format of the journal**

The traditional format of *Local Population Studies* for many issues has been to publish two or three full Articles, one or two additional items, such as Research Notes or Sources and Methods pieces, and Book Reviews (in the spring issues) or a Review of the Recent Periodical Literature (in each autumn issue). While no abrupt changes from this format are envisaged, from issue 106 we intend to expand the number of shorter pieces or Research Notes we publish. We hope that by encouraging shorter contributions we might reduce the barriers which make it somewhat daunting for amateur local historians and those who have come from a family history tradition to consider publishing their work in *Local Population Studies*.

At the same time, we remind all readers that the members of the Editorial Board are always happy to offer advice and support in the editorial process to those who have limited experience of publishing their work. Please do send us anything you think might be worth publishing, even if it is in a very preliminary form, and we can suggest ways to improve it, or new avenues to investigate.

### **Thanks and acknowledgements**

My thanks are due to the members of the Editorial Board for their contribution to this issue, especially Chris Galley and William Farrell, who copy-edited and proof-read several sections. As ever, Viv Williams at Cambrian Typesetters and Malcolm George at Argent Litho have played their part with their customary goodwill and efficiency.

Andrew Hinde