

NOTES AND QUERIES

THE LANCASHIRE POPULATION CRISIS OF 1623 — further comment

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I read with interest Winchester's 'Response to the 1623 Famine in two Lancashire Manors' in **LPS** 36, but I would like to comment on his conclusion that instructions given in manorial records, not to provide beggars with alms or flour during 1622-4, was to prevent harassment of the more fortunate. Also I think his assumption that the 'well-established view' that the crisis in 1623 was caused by famine is questionable without a fuller discussion of other research. Seldom does any crisis have a single cause.

Appleby¹ and Rogers² did indeed conclude that the 1623 crisis in Lancashire was caused by famine. But Appleby was seeking evidence of mortality due to disease **or** famine, and research within such limited parameters psychologically precludes serious consideration of possible alternatives. Rogers' group concluded that a fall in conceptions must have been caused by famine-induced amenorrhea, yet Appleby states that only the effects of plague would have been severe enough to induce this.

My recent research into mortality in seventeenth-century Lancaster shows clearly that marriages had been falling sharply since 1620. This was probably due to, in part, a combination of bad weather and a succession of poor harvests³ which could have reduced matrimonial chances. More importantly however, a recession in the woollen trade, a vital industry in the upland parishes of the north-west,⁴ leading to a fall in the demand for labour and a fall in wages could have also reduced the opportunities for marriage, thus lowering fertility and conceptions. It is this factor which Wrigley and Schofield⁵ have identified as the important variable in controlling population size.

It is also interesting to note that Dr Howson⁶ was convinced that the 1623 crisis was caused by an outbreak of plague on a national scale, whilst Creighton⁷ described it as a complex of typhus, dysentery and smallpox, with typhus pre-dominating. In addition Sharp-France⁸ found that 'a malignant spotted fever', symptomatic of both typhus and septicaemic plague, raged throughout the north-west during 1622-4.

In Lancaster in 1623, burials rose to nearly four times the average for the period, and whilst mortality increased during the plague months of August to October, it peaked from October to January 1623-4. This could be suggestive of pneumonic plague⁹ but the crisis lasted from 1622 to March 1624 and no mention of plague, or any other cause, was made in the registers nor in the Quarter Sessions Records. Also, as only 16 per cent of the estimated population died, plague can safely be excluded, at least in Lancaster, as a diagnosis of the crisis.

But if it is accepted that the criterion of a peak in burials during the summer months is indicative of plague, then it may also be possible to consider that a high level of burials, sustained over long periods with peaks in the winter months could be indicative of typhus, which is a famine-related disease of the winter. No doubt in cold and hungry winters the poor and starving huddled together for warmth, and remaining unwashed, provided perfect breeding conditions for the body lice which transmit typhus.

So little was known about the disease at that time and therefore it was unlikely to be recorded as the cause of so many burials. However the Lancaster register does mention specifically the burials of the old, widows, paupers and wanderers, which may be indicative of a shortage of food and of the hardship experienced by the less well-off in society. This must have placed a considerable burden upon parish relief. Therefore it seems reasonable to conclude that measures, via the manorial courts, would be instituted to lessen this burden by fining anyone who encouraged wanderers and paupers to gather and beg for food and so increase the possibility of contagion and of further funeral expenses. There was probably much more to it than just the desire to preserve richer men from harassment by beggars!

NOTES

1. A. B. Appleby, 'Disease or Famine? Mortality in Cumberland and Westmorland 1580-1640', **Economic History Review**, 1973, Second Series, vol. 26, no. 3, pp. 403-32.
2. C. D. Rogers, **The Lancashire Population Crisis of 1623**, 1975, p.26.
3. P. Laslett, '**The World we have Lost — further explored**' 1983, University Printing House Cambridge. Chap. 6, p. 130.
4. M. Drake, 'An Elementary Exercise in Parish Register Demography', **Economic History Review**, 1962, Second Series vol. 14, no. 3, p. 436.
5. E. A. Wrigley & R. S. Schofield, **The Population History of England 1541-1871 A Re-construction**, 1981, p. 467.
6. W. G. Howson, 'Plague, Poverty and Population in parts of North-West England, 1580-1720', **Transactions of the Historical Society of Lancashire and Cheshire**, vol. 112, 1960.
7. C. Creighton, **History of Epidemics in Britain A.D. 664-1886**, 1891-4, reprinted in 1965, vol. 2, p. 258.
8. R. Sharp-France, 'A History of the Plague in Lancashire', **Transactions of the Historical Society of Lancashire and Cheshire**, 1938, vol. 90, p. 51.
9. **The Plague Reconsidered**, 1977, p. 121. A Local Population Studies supplement.

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