

The Plague in Colchester—1579-1666

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THE importance of the plague in the history of Colchester in the 16th and 17th centuries has often been stressed. Morant recorded outbreaks in 1579, 1604, 1631 and 1665-6 and listed the plague deaths in 1665-6.¹ Two historians of the plague, Creighton and Shrewsbury² have also dealt at some length with epidemics in Colchester, in particular the final catastrophic plague of 1665-6. The present survey attempts to establish the extent of plague mortality in Colchester, to examine how the local administration tried to cope with the ensuing problems and to estimate the part played by the plague in the economic and social life of Colchester during this time.

On the basis of an analysis of the parish registers of St. Leonards, St. Marys and St. Peters³ and borough records, mortality of epidemic proportions seems to have occurred in the following years: 1579, 1586, 1597, 1603, 1626, 1631, 1644, and 1665-6. There are, however, important qualifications to be made at this stage. The term 'plague' was then used generically; it was invariably synonymous with 'epidemic'. Although the local authorities refer to the 'plague' of 1579 its seasonal incidence (December 1578 to August 1579, according to Morant⁴) suggests that it was in fact smallpox.⁵ Very few causes of death (apart from unusual deaths by misadventure) are noted in the parish registers. The four deaths by smallpox in 1652 recorded in the register of St. Peters are an exception. Moreover, during a very severe outbreak parochial registration broke down. Thus, paradoxically, a high number of burials in a particular year, whilst it undoubtedly shows the presence of an epidemic of some kind, suggests that the outbreak was not of a catastrophic nature. For the yearly totals see Table I.

There is, in fact, no parochial evidence for the visitation of 1579. Registers for St. Marys are extant for this year but no peak is apparent in annual mortality totals. However, there are three documents in Morant's collection which show that an epidemic did occur. Two concern the selection of persons to view the corpses to establish whether the plague had been the cause of death and these are dated December 1578. The third, dated August 1579, refers to a bill of mortality for St. Leonards and lists four persons who were still stricken with the disease.⁶ These manuscripts are clearly the basis for Morant's assertion that the plague lasted from December 1578 to August 1579. Although this suggests that it was smallpox rather than plague (which is virulent during the late summer months) it is impossible to confirm this. Moreover, this study is concerned with the incidence

¹ P. Morant, *History of Colchester* (1748), Vol. I, pp. 50, 52, 70, and British Museum, Stowe MSS., 840, ff. 44-5.

² C. Creighton, *A History of Epidemics in Britain*, Vol. I (1891), pp. 348, 498, 525-6, 688 *et seq.*, and J. F. D. Shrewsbury, *A History of the Bubonic Plague in the British Isles* (1970), pp. 233, 234, 269, 348, 404, 407, 499-502.

³ E.R.O. D/P 245/1/1 (St. Leonards) and D/P 178/1/1 (St. Peters). The St. Mary's registers are to be found at the parish church.

⁴ Morant, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

⁵ Shrewsbury, *op. cit.*, p. 233.

⁶ E.R.O. D/Y 2, Vol. XLII, pp. 23-5.

TABLE I
Burial totals for three Colchester parishes, 1560-1670
 (Note: only complete years have been included)

	St. Mary's	St. Leonard's	St. Peter's		St. Mary's	St. Leonard's	St. Peter's
1560	18	19		1606	•5	20	
1	10	13		7	12	7	
2		18		8	9	'4	
3	10	16		9	'3	5	
4	13	8		10	9	26	
5	8	10		1	22	32	
6	10	10		2	32	25	20
7	9	9		3	22	20	8
8	22	11		4	15	17	>3
9	'9	8		5	'3	24	17
70	'7	'5		6	9	'9	15
1	18	11		7	12	33	11
2				8	12		13
3	9			9	19	7	•7
4	19			20	19		17
5	11			1	10		'7
6				3	16		18
7	7			3	•7		6
8	'4			4	23		40
9	20			5	38		'9
80	19	11		6	32		79
1	'9	4		7	7		•7
2	27	5		8	16	21	19
3	9			9		'5	
4		26		30		20	
5		10		1	26	37	
6	43	>5		2	13	10	
7		21		3	22	20	20
8		13		4	18	7	
9	25	'4		5	'3	22	17
90	8	'5		6	8	19	23
1	21	22		7	11	25	
2	14	24		8	9	47	'4
3	21	14		9	7	43	26
4	20	17		40	20	26	35
5	16	15		1	23		12
6	15	9		2	22		
7	34	35		3			
8	12	20		4		24	
9	14	'5		5		11	
1600	8	17		6		12	
	8	14		7			
2	21	18					
3	26	7°		•655			25
4	48	>9					
5	3'	×4		1667		3'	

of heavy mortality and its effects on Colchester rather than with the precise nature of the epidemic.

There may also have been visitations of plague in 1586 and 1597. There were some 43 burials (more than twice the yearly average) in St. Marys in 1586, mainly during July and the following months. In addition, there was a grain shortage in September 15867 and this may be an indication of some kind of

demographic crisis at this time.⁸ The only evidence that remains for 1597 is the coincidence of two high totals of burials in St. Marys and St. Leonards when the deaths occurred mainly during the latter half of the year.

There is more substantial evidence for an outbreak in the autumn of 1603. The 70 burials registered at St. Leonards is approximately three times the usual annual figure and the Assembly Book contains a memorandum of November 1603,⁹ concerning the relief of those afflicted with the disease. But the large number of burials at St. Marys to which Morant refers¹⁰ mainly occurred in fact during the months of December 1604 and January 1605 and this suggests that it was not plague. On this point a marginal note in an apparently contemporary hand is not helpful. It reads:

'pestis hoc anno saevissima grassata est unde clades haec sepulturae solito numerosiores'

(a particularly savage pestilence raged this year and the larger than usual numbers of burials are to be ascribed to this slaughter).

A pedantic or scholarly later clergyman (possibly Morant) corrected 'grassavit' in the original to 'grassata est'.

According to the clerk of St. Peters the first person to die of the 1626 plague in that parish was buried on 14 June and in all 79 deaths were registered that year; 19 and 17 are the totals for 1625 and 1627 respectively. There is a good deal of other documentary evidence for the outbreak. The Privy Council ordered the transfer of the County Gaol from Colchester to Stratford and told the Justices to restrict the movement of people from Colchester during the plague. Colchester for its part petitioned the Privy Council, putting forward the plague as a reason for its inability to fit out a ship for the King's fleet.¹¹

Although the 37 burials registered at St. Leonards in 1631 is not a startlingly high figure the clerk stated that the plague arrived in the July of that year and that by November the parish was 'cleare'. Moreover, a tell-tale grain shortage was reported in February 1631.¹² Morant also drew attention to the evidence of the St. Marys register.¹³ The July burials are significantly numerous and another marginal comment confirms that the victims died of the plague:

'hi omnes peste correpti obierunt in aedibus illis iuxta caemiterium ad orientem sitis'

(all these who were killed by the pestilence died in those houses situated in the east next to the cemetery).

One such house belonged to the Cooks. No fewer than five members of the family died during the month of July.

By contrast Josselin's assertion that Colchester was visited with the plague in 1644¹⁴ is not substantiated by the St. Leonards register where figures remain for this year and, in fact, Shrewsbury had misgivings about Josselin's evidence.¹⁵

⁸ E. A. Wrigley, *Population and History* (1969), p. 66.

⁹ Borough Records (B.R.), Assembly Book 1600-20, f. 38.

¹⁰ Morant, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

¹¹ Acts of the Privy Council (A.P.G.), June-December 1626, pp. 316-17, 267, 103-4.

¹² P.R.O. SP 16/184/30.

¹³ Morant, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

¹⁴ *The Diary of the Rev. Ralph Josselin, 1616-83*, ed. E. Hockliffe (1908), p. 16.

¹⁵ Shrewsbury, *op. cit.*, p. 407.

The documentary evidence for the plague of 1665-6 is almost daunting in its extent. Original bills of mortality have survived for the final weeks of the outbreak¹⁶ and there are very comprehensive lists of deaths in the Gray MSS.,¹⁷ Stowe MSS.,¹⁸ and in Ralph Josselin's diary.¹⁹ The list made by Morant which is to be found in the Stowe MSS. giving weekly totals of deaths has been transcribed by Creighton and a condensed version was printed by Morant in his *History of Colchester*.²⁰ In addition, the Quarter sessions and Borough Records contain many entries concerning the organization of relief and these will be examined below.

It is virtually impossible to assess statistically the extent of plague mortality before 1665-6. On the basis of parochial evidence the plague of 1626 seems to have been particularly severe. A very high total of burials at St. Peters, together with the administrative activity which has been referred to already, gives an indication of the virulence of this epidemic. Indeed, in the Privy Council's reply dated 20 July 1626 to Colchester's petition of 1626, it was stated that more than 20 houses were already infected.²¹ This seems a large number at such an early stage of the outbreak. The plague was so widespread that the Archdeacons Court which was usually held at St. Peters Church moved to Lexden in September and did not return to Colchester itself until the beginning of February.²²

The 70 burials at St. Leonards in 1603 and the entry in the Assembly Book in November of that year suggests that this too was a severe outbreak and although there is no confirmatory parochial evidence, the epidemic (smallpox or not) of 1579 was probably equally serious in view of the provisions for examining the dead made at that time.

The other probable plagues of 1586, 1597, 1631 and 1644 were less severe although this assertion is based simply on a lack of evidence and the outbreak of 1631 in particular may prove to have been an equally serious epidemic.

By contrast, the exact number of plague deaths in the years 1665-6 may be estimated with some accuracy. Morant speaks of a total of 5,259 deaths between 14 August 1665 and 14 December 1666, comprising 4,731 plague and 528 non-plague deaths. The validity of these figures may be checked against three bills of mortality to be found in the State Papers.²³ The totals compare in this way:

	Bills of Mortality		Morant	
	Plague	Non-plague	Plague	Non-plague
7-14 September 1666	22	2	22	2
14-21 September	15	3	16	2
28 September to 5 October	8	1	7	2

»« P.R.O. SP 29/185/159-61.

¹⁶ E.R.O. D/DRg 1/226, pp. 132-5.

¹⁷ B.M., Stowe MSS., 840, ff. 44-5.

¹⁸ Josselin, *op. cit.*, pp. 148-56.

¹⁹ Creighton, *op. cit.*, p. 690, and Morant, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

²⁰ A.P.G., June-December 1626, pp. 103-4.

²¹ E.R.O. D/ACA 45.

²² See notes 18 and 16.

Thus, although the ratios of plague to non-plague deaths show some discrepancies the overall totals are identical. In addition, the figures for three weeks (2-9 February, 2-9 March and 19-26 October 1666) given by Morant are exactly the same as those recorded by Henry Muddiman writing from London at that time as he followed the course of the plague in various parts of the country.²⁴ Thus Morant's figures seem particularly trustworthy.

Certainly they agree for the most part with the three other totals of plague deaths which have survived. An entry in the All Saints Parish Registers states that 4,526 people died from the plague between 8 September 1665 and 21 December 1666. Five hundred and eight deaths from other causes were also noted, making up a total of 5,034. A very comprehensive, parish by parish, list of monthly deaths is to be found in the Gray MSS.²⁵ The deaths are recorded from 29 September 1665 to the beginning of December 1666. The figure here is slightly lower—a total of 4,559 made up of 4,145 plague and 414 non-plague deaths. Finally, Ralph Josselin listed in his diary the grim weekly totals of deaths in Colchester.²⁷ Not surprisingly, there is little attempt at statistical accuracy and, although the figures agree in general terms with the other sources, it is not always clear whether the totals refer to deaths from plague or simply, all deaths. Some 4,743 deaths are noted between 12 September 1665 and 2 December 1666, of which 21 are explicitly stated to be non-plague deaths. In addition, Josselin gives no figures for six separate weeks.

Despite the various qualifications which must necessarily be made the various sources seem to agree that the plague claimed about 4,500 victims during the two black summers of 1665 and 1666 and that a total of some 5,000 Colchester town-folk died in the short space of sixteen months.

It may be of interest at this point to briefly glance at the evidence parish registers yield as to the impact of a plague outbreak by considering the epidemics of 1603 and 1626. Seventy burials are recorded in St. Leonards for the year 1603. Exactly half were described as 'children of. . .' and there were 28 males and 42 females afflicted with the disease. This is in marked contrast to the findings of the Hollingsworths who have recently studied the 1603 Plague in a London parish.²⁸ But although demographers concentrate upon the age and sex-ratios of plague victims (this is possible only by the time-consuming method of family reconstitution) local historians are more concerned with less abstract aspects of the plague. For example, although 66 deaths occurred after 14 June 1626 (when the plague is stated in the register to have come to St. Peters) only 35 families were afflicted. Some households were truly ravaged by the epidemic. John Storman and six of his children died during the outbreak and six members of the Prior family (John, his wife and four children) all died between 26 June and 10 July. Sometimes facts speak for themselves.

²⁴ p.R.O. SP 29/148/38, 29/151/23, 29/177/6.

²⁵ S The registers are kept at St. James' church.

²⁶ See note 17.

²⁷ I See note 19.

²⁸ Mary Hollingsworth and T. H. Hollingsworth, 'Plague Mortality Rates by Age and Size in the Parish of St. Botolphs Without, Bishopsgate, London 1603', *Population Studies*, 25, 1 (1971), pp. 131-46.

Apart from the problem of the exact extent of plague mortality, it is of equal importance to examine how the authorities attempted to deal with these crises. Only fragmentary evidence of administrative activity survives for the plagues before 1665. On 20 December 1578 the Justices of the Peace directed the Bailiffs of Colchester to organize the selection of reliable persons to ascertain the causes of deaths during the epidemics. On the 25th the Bailiffs wrote to the Sargeant of the East Ward giving the same instructions for the selection of these men and calling a meeting of all concerned on the 29th of the same month. Thus an apparently efficient response was made by the town's officials to the initial directions from the J.P.s. The system which was thus instigated may be seen in a note, to which reference has been already, for St. Leonards dated 15 August 1579, which states that no one had died in that parish since the bill of mortality was last completed but that four were still sick.⁹

The first mention of organized relief is to be found in an entry in the Assembly Book dated 28 November 1603.³⁰ It reads:

At this assembly it is ordered that the double collection for relief of the infected sick people shall be from henceforth continued until Christmas Day next. And if that double collection will not extend to the satisfaction of the charges of the said infected that then the money of the towns paid in by Robert Baker of Bromley received by Mr. Alderman Wade shall be disbursed to the answering of the said charge.

(Spelling modernized as in all further transcriptions of original MSS.)

Although it is of interest to have details of the organization of such relief the memorandum poses some problems. What is the 'double collection' to which it refers? It may be some form of church collection made on fast days as took place during the 1665-6 plague but it is impossible to substantiate this. Again, the 'money of the towns' is by no means explicit. It is possible that this was similar to the levy that was made in 1665 on villages within a five-mile radius of Colchester. Thus the entry gives only a perplexing if tantalizing glimpse into the system employed in mitigating the effects of the plague.

Even before the advent of the plague in 1626 the town was taking stringent precautions against any possible infection. This is evident from a letter to the bailiffs from John Norman, a Norwich trader, dated 25 August 1625.³¹ He assured them that his house was not infected by the plague which was then prevalent at Norwich and asked that his embargoed goods sent by him to Colchester might be released. His letter ends in the following way:

And this much I assure your worships, that if my house had been infected, I would not for the gain of any goods whatsoever in the world, sent any commodities whereby I might endanger others. The Lord knoweth my heart, I make a conscience of my ways. And further there is such a course taken by Mr. Mayor, his worship, that those houses that are infected, their doors are shut up and a watch continually kept that they go not out. Thus making bold to write the truth herein I commit your worships to God's protection.

⁹ For these three documents see note 6.

³⁰ See note 9.

³¹ E.R.O. Morant MSS., D/Y 2, Vol. XLVII, p. 365.

It is difficult to say whether the humble tone of the letter is evidence of a merchant's avarice or of the prevailing heart-felt concern over the threat of the plague. Norman also referred to a certificate signed by the Mayor of Norwich which stated that his house was clear of the plague. This, too, has survived;³ the fact that such a certificate was deemed necessary may be taken as an indication of how seriously town officials dealt with anything to do with the plague, or again it may simply be further proof of the desire to ensure that nothing stood in the way of trade.

Despite these and, no doubt, other similar precautions, the plague reached Colchester in the following summer. Some form of relief for those afflicted was organized as it had been in 1603. This is apparent from a Privy Council order concerning Colchester's obligation to fit out a ship of 200 tons for the royal fleet.³³ The town had put forward 'the decay of trade and the charge of relieving their poor by reason of the plague' as reasons for its inability to obey the Council's instructions (the town was in fact relieved of half the charge, the rest being levied on the county). The Privy Council for its part attempted to contain the disease at Colchester by instructing J.P.s to ensure that only townspeople with certificates were allowed to go to fairs or markets, in particular the Braintree fair.³⁴ In addition, they stopped further prisoners being taken to Colchester Gaol where 'sundry of the prisoners there are lately dead of that contagious disease' (i.e. plague).³⁵ Thus there is clear evidence that both the central and the provincial authorities were fully aware of the practical problems posed by the outbreak and they acted in a seemingly efficient way to try to curb the virulence of the epidemic.

Unfortunately, very few of the documents shed any light on the plight of the townspeople themselves. The letter³ which follows shows how the arrival of a family from plague-ridden Colchester affected the villagers of Polstead in Suffolk; it seems to deserve a full transcription:

To the right worshipful the Bailiffs of the town
of Colchester his Majesty's Lieutenants there.

We the inhabitants of the parish of Polstead do earnestly crave your favour in the behalf of John Jernais a poor man of our town whom John Bennet of your town of Colchester hath most unjustly and maliciously cast into prison the case standing thus between them. In the time of God's heavy visitation the last summer upon your town John Bennet a wretched fellow not having the fear of God before his eyes and being maliciously bent against our town did purposely send one William Hare with his wife and children to a little base cottage of his which stood empty in our parish next to the King's highway, this William Hare dwelling in the most dangerous street in your town where the infection was round about him nay within the very roof under which he dwelt, and himself having the infection upon him for within six days after his coming he died of it. Whereby it pleased God that the infection did spread itself so dangerously in the street next adjoining, that within a very short time there died ten of the plague. Now in regard the cottage whither these persons infected came was a very unwholesome

3» *Ibid.*, Vol. XLIV, p. 71.

33 A.P.C., June-December 1626, pp. 103-4.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 267.

35 *Ibid.*, pp. 316-17.

3« E.R.O. Morant MSS., D/Y 2, Vol. XLVI, p. 97.

room being unrepaired and uninhabited long before and standing just upon the King's highway dangerously for passengers, we the inhabitants of the town did direct the wife of the said Hare and likewise the wife of this John Jernais whom we did send into these persons infected to be a helper and a keeper of them in the time of sickness, we directed these women for their own safety and for the better clearing of the room with fresh air to pull down all the windows and to thrust off some of the tiles off the roof of the chamber which was made very noisome by the sickness of Hare. Now because the wife of John Jernais being then the keeper of these persons infected did this by our appointment, this lewd fellow John Bennet hath arrested this poor man merely out of a malicious mind to the great hindrance of the said Jernais. We therefore whose names are underwritten do earnestly entreat you to commiserate the case of this your prisoner and show him what favour may be and so commit your worships to the blessing of God in Christ and rest always.

Polstead

Your worships' assured loving friends

This 22nd of October 1626

James Bromell

Minister

(The other names are apparently lost.)

The plague of 1665-6 posed altogether bewildering problems for the town's officials. It is possible that no other provincial town faced such a virulent outbreak in proportion to its size. They were taking active steps to cope with the epidemic by August 1665 when according to an entry in the Oath Book dated 16 August the Bearers were paid 10s. a week with an additional 2s. for every corpse buried.³⁷ The rigid precautionary measures in force at this time are reflected in the Bearers' and Searchers' Oaths which are also to be found in the Oath Book.³⁸ The men were isolated entirely from the community even from their own families and they were to carry a white wand as a means of identification. The Bearers also swore to carry the corpses 'to the ground' which has been traditionally identified with the 'Mount' close to the Mersea Road which appears on a number of maps of Colchester, including Monson's of 1848. The pesthouses pose a problem. It is clear from the Chamberlain's Accounts of 1665³⁹ that there were at least two of them, one in St. Marys parish, the other at Mile End. But at the foot of the parish lists of plague deaths recorded in the Gray MSS. the deaths at only one pesthouse are recorded. Whether this means that only one pesthouse was used (which seems improbable) or that the deaths at both houses were included together is not clear.

The Assembly Book at this time is almost entirely devoted to the receipt and distribution of relief.⁴⁰ It is possible to establish a chronological pattern of how relief was organized.

1. The first relief seems to have come from collections in Colchester churches on fast days authorized by the Bishop of London. Between 9 October and 13 December 1665, this source realized over £71.

2. When it was obvious that church collections would be insufficient the J.P.s levied a tax on villages within five miles of Colchester. Lists showing the

³⁷ *The Oath Book of Colchester* (transcribed by W. Gurney Benham), p. 258.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 257.

³⁹ B.R., Chamberlain's Accounts, 1664-5.

⁴⁰ B.R., Assembly Book, 1646-66, ff. 315-46.

assessment of villages in the Lexden, Tendring and Winstree Hundreds have survived.⁴¹ The villages were rated at £108 a month for November and December 1665 and a total of £217 4s. was raised.

3. This too proved inadequate and early in 1666 the J.P.s ordered that £250 a month for the three months be levied on the Hundreds of Lexden, Dunmow and Hinckford.⁴² In addition £121 was received from the Hundreds of Clavering, Uttlesford, Ongar and Witham in July 1666.

4. Then in May 1666 weekly collections were made in London churches by order of the King and these amassed £1,307 10s.

5. Throughout the outbreak donations had been received from private individuals, from other towns and from dioceses and these amounted to some £270.

In this way Colchester received the huge sum of over £2,700. The very fact that it is possible to estimate the exact sum of relief money which Colchester received is perhaps testimony to the diligence with which the corporation attempted to alleviate the suffering. Parish lists were regularly compiled for the distribution of even the smallest sums received and persons were named to organize relief in the parishes. Individuals who were to receive relief were also recorded together with disbursements for the various tasks which had to be performed. In May 1666, Halloway of St. Giles was paid for making the crosses on the doors of infected houses and payments were made at the same time for bedding.

Further evidence of the day-to-day administration is afforded by the Chamberlain's Accounts for Christmas 1665. Apart from disbursements for the payment of Searchers and Bearers substantial payments are recorded to masons and carpenters and glaziers for the building of new pesthouses in St. Marys parish and at Mile End. Beds and blankets were bought for the pesthouses and a Samuel Younger was employed to kill dogs and cats to prevent the spread of infection. It also appears from the payment of 12s. 6d. to the Mayor for four proclamations and the searching of corpses that the townsfolk were kept informed of plague regulations by public proclamation.

The County records give an indication of how conscientiously the J.P.s administered the relief of Colchester. After ordering the levy of £250 a month they ensured that the tax was stringently applied and they summoned before them those who refused to contribute.⁴³ They also had to make alternative arrangements for prisoners who would normally have gone to the Castle Gaol at Colchester—they sent one Pebmarsh labourer back to Chelmsford Gaol—and they were petitioned by a woman anxious about the safety of her husband kept at Colchester Gaol awaiting trial.⁴⁴ Their vigilance did not cease with the departure of the

⁴¹ E.R.O. Q./SR 407/66-7.

⁴² E.R.O. QJSBa 105. Here it is stated that the money was to be raised in all the Hundreds but this is contradicted by the Assembly Book which lists the following contributions to be made:

Lexden	£92
Dunmow	£50
Hinckford	£78

£250 per month

⁴³ E.R.O. Q./SR 410/22, 412/47, 415/59.

⁴⁴ E.R.O. Q./SR 409/61, QJSBa 2/104.

plague. They were not satisfied with the distribution of the relief money 'there being a surplusage left undisposed of, which ought to be repaid to the county'.⁴⁵ But this is a strange charge in view of the efficiency which seems to permeate the orderly accounts recorded in the Assembly Book⁴⁶. In fact an entry under 30 April 1667 specifically states that there was only £81 of the relief money left in the hands of the officials. What the outcome was of this mystifying complaint is not apparent.

Any consideration of the economic effects of the final plague of 1665-6 must concentrate upon the dominant industry of Colchester at this time—the bay and say trade. In the opinion of K. H. Burley the 'English Fines' collected at the Dutch Bay Hall in December each year provide an approximate index of production.⁴⁷ The following figures are the amounts (to the nearest pound) collected before and after the plague:

1660	£83
1661	£86
1662	£11
1663	£94
1664	£91
1665	£92
1666	£31
1667	£61
1668	
1669	£ " 5
1670	

Thus there was not only an immediate recovery of production after the plague but a subsequent expansion too. It may be fruitful at this stage to glance briefly at the other great crisis which Colchester's economy faced some seventeen years earlier—the siege of 1648. These are the relevant totals of 'English Fines', again to the nearest pound.⁴⁸

1645	£53
1646	£42
1647	£38
1648	£36
1649	£67
1650	£72

Once more a rapid recovery and expansion is evident. How was Colchester able to overcome both these crises with such apparent vigour? Papers in the Stowe MSS. collection show just how concerned the corporation was to help those who had suffered hardship during the siege.⁴⁹ The £2,000 remitted by Fairfax was carefully distributed. As in the plague some years later, long lists of individuals who were to receive relief were compiled. The interests of the cloth industry were always

⁴⁵ E.R.O. Q./CP 3, p. 402.

⁴⁶ B.R., Assembly Book, 1646-66, f. 356.

⁴⁷ K. H. Burley, *Economic Development of Essex in the later 17th and early 18th Centuries*, thesis (1957), at E.R.O., pp. 148-9.

⁴⁸ * My own figures taken from the Assembly Book.

⁴⁹ B.M., Stowe MSS., 842, ff. 39 *et seq.*

to the fore in the distribution of relief. £2 6s. was paid 'for a loom by Mr. Mayor's order burnt at Mile End' and a Mr. Reade was paid £1 'for a loom for a poor man'. The parallels are strikingly obvious. The remarkable recoveries made after the siege and the plague may be at least partly ascribed to the vigilance of an active and economically-minded corporation.

The recovery from the plague appears even more remarkable when it is considered that it would be the crowded industrialized areas which suffered the heaviest mortality. The wealthier townspeople such as Nicholas Corsellis^{5°} were, by contrast, able to leave Colchester. Unfortunately, no accurate pre-plague population figures exist for Colchester parishes with which to discover which parishes suffered proportionally more deaths than others. Apart from mentioning that the four outlying parishes—Berechurch, Greenstead, Lexden and Mile End—not surprisingly received little or no relief according to the parish lists in the Assembly Book and that the industrial parishes of St. Giles, St. Peters and St. Botolphs always figured prominently in the relief disbursements, little more can be deduced.

The effect the plague had upon the town's administration has been touched upon already. Despite the charge that not all the relief money was distributed, the officials seem to have coped remarkably well. It even proved possible to organize a parish by parish collection for the poor of London in October 1666 which raised £103 8s.

What part did the plague play in the demographic growth of Colchester? Certainly there can be little danger of over-exaggerating the immediate effects. The figures for the Hearth Tax (given in Table II with plague-death totals) show large numbers of empty houses and of those exempt from payment even before the second outbreak of the epidemic during the summer. It is true that some of the empty houses may have belonged to those who left the town but many households were undoubtedly ravaged by the disease. The 935 households recorded suggests a population of just over 4,000 if a multiplier of 4 - 4 is employed.^{5'} Since the figures do not take into account the recrudescence of the plague (involving at least half the 4,500 plague deaths) a total of 4,000 inhabitants is too low to be credible in view of a probable pre-plague population of at least 9,000. But it would have been remarkable indeed if a comprehensive assessment could have been made at such a time. Whatever the exact population of Colchester may have been at the end of 1666 it remains evident that a rapid recovery took place in the following years for the population was probably as high as 9,000 in the early 1670s. E. A. Wrigley has suggested that the natural growth of a community will increase rapidly in response to the sudden impact of an epidemic.⁵³ (Whether this occurred in Colchester can only be ascertained by a painstaking study of the parish registers.) In addition, it is probable that a large-scale immigration into Colchester took

^{5°} L. C. Sier, 'Experiences in the Great Fire of London, 1666', *Essex Review*, Vol. LI (1942), p. 134.

^{5*} B.R., Assembly Book, 1646-66, f. 356.

⁵³ For this and other points in this paragraph see my 'Population Growth and Movement in Colchester and the Tendring Hundred, 1500-1800', *Essex Journal*, Vol. 7, pp. 31-6.

⁵³ E. A. Wrigley, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

TABLE II

	Hearth Tax, March 1666 ¹			Gray MSS. plague deaths ¹	
	Taxed	Exempt	Empty houses	Plague	Non-plague
All Saints	26	32	14	76	8
St. Botolphs	57	5°	32	502	47
St. Giles	32	68	20	581	47
Holy Trinity	16	>7	9	124	19
St. James	45	42	17	493	37
St. Leonards	32	46	27	265	17
St. Martins	25	15	8	300	19
St. Marys	34	54	27	364	49
Mary Magdalen	7	5	5	183	24
St. Nicholas	38	28	19	264	45
St. Peters	66	67	49	691	81
St. Runwalds	17	20	19	64	5
Berechurch	5	7	4	1	0
Greenstead	8	15	7	85	5
Lexden	11	28	16	82	8
Mile End	3	•9	6	47	3
Pest House				23	0
	422	513	279	4.H5	414
	935 households			4.559 deaths	

¹ P.R.O. E.i79/246/20.

» E.R.O. D/DRg 1/226, pp. 132-5.

place which was part cause and part result of the continued growth of the cloth trade until the end of the century.

The plague therefore played an important and recurring role in the history of Tudor and Stuart Colchester. The effect that it had on the everyday life of the town was profound; the generalizations of the historian cannot and should not hide the harsh realities of death and suffering. At least half the town's population died during the two tragic years of 1665 and 1666. Yet, in the long term, the vigilance of the local officials and the resilience of the cloth industry ensured that the plague did not prevent Colchester from continuing to grow in numbers and in economic strength until the end of the 17th century.