



## BIROn - Birkbeck Institutional Research Online

Harding, Vanessa (1993) Burial of the plague dead in early modern London. In: Champion, J. (ed.) Epidemic disease in London. London, UK: Centre for Metropolitan History, pp. 53-64. ISBN 9781871348188.

Downloaded from: <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/id/eprint/17936/>

*Usage Guidelines:*

Please refer to usage guidelines at <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/policies.html>  
contact [lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk](mailto:lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk).

or alternatively

## Burial of the plague dead in early modern London

VANESSA HARDING

---

---

"Tis certain they died by heaps and were buried by heaps; that is to say, without account'.<sup>1</sup> Disposal of the bodies of those who died in the major plague epidemics of the early modern period undoubtedly presented huge problems for the responsible authorities; but did it descend into chaos, as Defoe suggests it did in 1665? And if it did, how and when did normal patterns of burial and funerary observance break down?

Although the gross figures of 35,000 dead in the epidemic of 1625, or 69,000 in 1665,<sup>2</sup> do in some sense represent a problem facing the city as a whole, in practice the problem was confronted at an intimate and local level. The way in which disposal of the victims was tackled was shaped by what was regarded as normal burial practice, by contemporary views on the role and competence of government, and by the epidemiology of the disease itself. In sixteenth- and seventeenth-century London, these factors combined to place the major administrative responsibility on the parish. In normal times burial of the dead fell largely within the scope of parish government - almost all places of burial in London were parish churchyards, all parishioners had the right to be buried there (and most chose to do so), and it was the vestry and churchwardens who controlled burial within their own parish. They set and collected burial fees, directed the layout of graves, and organized the acquisition of new space for burial when necessary. Parishes were seen as the natural unit of local government, within and without the city, and undertook an increasing burden of administration in this period. The government of the city of London had general responsibility for public hygiene in a broad sense in the city, and of course issued the plague orders, which make some reference to burial, but even these delegated

<sup>1</sup> Daniel Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Year* (Penguin Classics edition, 1986), p. 246.

<sup>2</sup> Attributed plague deaths of 35,417 (1625) and 68,596 (1665) from *A collection of the yearly bills of mortality from 1657 to 1758 inclusive* (1759); hereafter cited as *Yearly Bills*.

most tasks to the parishes.<sup>3</sup> Only, it seems, when the parishes' ability to cope was breaking down did the city government itself take action.

The burden of disposing of the dead, and the resources to do it with, were very unevenly spread across the capital. The 120-130 parishes covered in the Bills of Mortality varied hugely in size, population and social character, and in the space they had for burial. Moreover, as we know, the plague epidemics of early modern London did not hit all areas of the capital with equal force. By the seventeenth century the inner city was less severely affected by plague mortality than extramural and suburban areas, and it also had greater resources to deal with the problem: the average size of the parish was much smaller, the wealth of inhabitants greater, while mortality rates were higher and absolute numbers of dead each parish dealt with very much greater further from the centre.<sup>4</sup> Local responses also reflected varying local conditions and traditions of burial, often established over a long period.<sup>5</sup>

The epidemiology of the disease contributed to the problem: its rapid spread over short distances, its high case-fatality, the geometrical increase in weekly deaths once it had taken hold in an area, helped to concentrate most of the deaths in a parish in a relatively short period of time. The practice of shutting up whole households after one confirmed case may have increased local mortality, and also meant that the family could not take its usual share of responsibility for organizing and paying for burial - even had participation in funerals and processions not been restricted by the Plague Orders. An important factor shaping the parishes' response to the problems of epidemic burial was the strong popular attachment to traditional practices: the individual funeral and interment, in which the family played an important role; the attendance of friends and neighbours; the desire for commemoration.<sup>6</sup> These desires were in conflict with the Plague Orders and orders of the Privy Council, which aimed to

<sup>3</sup> Plague orders for 1665 quoted in Defoe, *Plague Year*, pp. 57-66; cf. Paul Slack, 'Metropolitan government in crisis' in A.L. Beier and Roger Finlay (eds.), *London 1500-1700. The making of the metropolis* (1986), p. 68.

<sup>4</sup> Slack, 'Metropolitan government', pp. 62-4, 70. The parish of St Bride in the western suburbs of the city (about 29 acres) buried 2111 persons in 1665 (5½ times its normal yearly mean of 375), while in an area of equivalent size in the city centre, 13 parishes (All Hallows Bread Street, All Hallows Honey Lane, St Antonin, St Benet Sherehog, St Lawrence Jewry, St Martin Pomary, St Mary Aldermary, St Mary le Bow, St Mary Colechurch, St Mary Magdalen Milk Street, St Mildred Poultry, St Olave Old Jewry, St Pancras Soper Lane: total area, 28.56 acres) were responsible for disposing of only 611 corpses, 2½ times the annual mean of 238: *Yearly Bills*.

<sup>5</sup> Most London parishes had at least one churchyard, but a few had none, and several had two or more. Some of those acquiring new burial space in the early modern period made status distinctions between old and new churchyards: Vanessa Harding, ' "And one more may be laid there": the location of burials in early modern London', *London Journal*, 14 (1989), pp. 115-118.

<sup>6</sup> 'Plague epidemics provide a touchstone against which to measure the strength of commitment to the traditional and customary burial rites in early modern England': Clare Gittings, *Death, burial and the individual in early modern England* (1984), p. 80.

restrict public assemblies and processions. Parish officers coped as best they could with these conflicting pressures, and with the enormous financial burden the epidemic placed on their straitened resources.

The principal sources for this study are parish records: burial registers, vestry minutes, and churchwardens' accounts. These are plentiful and often very explicit, and survival has been good, but the data for an overview of plague burial is scattered among hundreds of manuscripts.<sup>7</sup> A major problem with parish records as a source for the study of epidemic burial, however, is that normal practices of record-keeping were liable, under the extreme pressure of the epidemic itself, to break down. Parish clerks and officers might die, or quit their posts, or the volume of events for recording might simply overwhelm them or their successors. Parish registers, accounts, and minutes were not always written up event by event, even in normal times, but were made up from contemporary notes, which may not have survived the confusion.<sup>8</sup> Even when records were kept, they may have become attenuated and patchy, with many silent omissions. Many parishes have defective registers for 1665-6: the Great Fire of September 1666 probably destroyed a quantity of papers, less carefully conserved than the registers and parish books themselves, which would otherwise have been used to complete the record.

The records of St Bride Fleet Street, in the western suburbs of the city of London, offer an example of how one parish coped during the plague of 1665.<sup>9</sup> Total deaths in the parish in the year 1665 came to 2,111 (five and a half times normal), of which 1,427 were attributed to plague.<sup>10</sup> The disease established itself in the northern and western suburbs of London in the month of May. St Bride's burial register does not distinguish plague deaths, but no elevation of deaths above normal levels is visible until mid-June. Thirty-two people were buried in May, 22 in the first half of June, 34 in the second half.<sup>11</sup> The first reference to plague in the vestry minutes is a meeting called on 16 June, before the publication of the Plague Orders, 'to consider of several things necessary in this time of visitation'.

<sup>7</sup> See Joan Bullock-Anderson, Clare Clubb and Jacqueline Cox (compilers), *A guide to archives and manuscripts at Guildhall Library* (1989).

<sup>8</sup> The churchwardens of St Dunstan in the West were unable to include the usual itemized list of burials and burial fees for the period July-December 1666 in their final fair account, 'the particulars ... being lost [by the parish clerk] in the tyme of sickness'. The parish clerk died in November 1666, before the account for 1665 had been audited. GL MS 2968/4, ff. 432v-436v.

<sup>9</sup> Unless otherwise stated, the sources for this section are GL MS 6540/1, Register of baptisms, marriages and burials, 1653-72; GL MS 6552/1, Churchwardens' Accounts 1639-78; GL MS 6554/1, Vestry Minutes 1644-65.

<sup>10</sup> These figures, and the average of 373 deaths per annum 1660-4, are from *Yearly Bills*.

<sup>11</sup> Thirty-five and 30 had been buried in May and June 1663, 39 and 31 in May and June 1664: GL MS 6540/1.

At this meeting they organized searchers of the dead, appointed bearers for the plague dead, fixed their wages, and established accommodation for them in the churchyard where they would not mix with other people. The churchwardens were to direct the gravedigger where to make graves; and they decided, 'because our ground begins to fill', not to accept any more bodies from the neighbouring parish of St Martin Ludgate except on payment of double duties. On 3 July they decided to give extra remuneration to the gravedigger to encourage him to dig graves deep 'as it is ordered [in the Plague Orders] and as the time requires'.

On 7 July they agreed to appoint and pay bearers of plague dead jointly with the neighbouring parish, St Dunstan in the West, and four days later appointed two more bearers to replace one who had died. Payments to these bearers recur several times in the accounts, and in the accounts for St Dunstan's parish.<sup>12</sup> On 11 July the vestry of St Bride also decided to bury no more plague victims within the church, but to allow parish notables and the better-off who died of the plague ('and none other') to be buried in the upper churchyard. In the early weeks of the plague the parish paid for the burial of several individuals, including parish pensioners and children, but there is no reference to their buying a coffin for anyone between 26 July and 8 October; the implication is that between these dates all burials paid for by the parish were in sheets or shrouds only. Mortality began to soar upwards from mid-July: 110 were buried in the last two weeks in July, and 189 in the first fortnight in August. By 12 August the vestry was concerned at the rapidity with which burial space was filling up. Although they thought it necessary to appoint someone 'to see the ground be well husbanded', and to take charge of paying the gravemaker and the labourers employed to dig graves, no one could be found willing to undertake this. Perhaps as a result of this failure, as well as of increasing mortality (heaviest between mid-August and mid-September, when recorded burials totalled 831, often over 30 per day), traditional burial practice began to break down. What Defoe calls 'burial in form'<sup>13</sup> - the individual service and interment - was in part at least replaced by mass burial in a common grave. The parish's first substantial common grave or pit was dug in late August.<sup>14</sup> We do not know how this was used, but the probability is that it was filled up over a matter of days or weeks and then closed, and a new one opened. Payments in the churchwardens' accounts suggest that a second pit was dug in early September and perhaps a third in late September, with more work 'digging in the pit' in mid-October.

At the end of August the vestry felt sufficiently in control of things to defer a petition for a gravemaker's place until suitable competition could be found, and

<sup>12</sup> For St Dunstan's, see GL MS 2968/4, Churchwardens' Accounts 1645-65.

<sup>13</sup> Defoe, *Plague Year*, p. 106.

<sup>14</sup> Two labourers worked on the pit for six days and five for four days, and were paid on 26 August: GL MS 6552/1.

rejected a petition for a bearer's place since the present bearers were able to cope.<sup>15</sup> In fact mortality did not begin to decline until late September: deaths did not exceed 20 per day after 18 September, and were in single figures from 11 October, but the first day with no burial at all was 11 November and not until December was the monthly total (29) down to previous levels. More work was done on or in 'the pit' in December 1665 and February 1666, but probably by the latter date this was consolidating and levelling.

St Bride's, though a large and populous parish, nevertheless had a reasonable amount of churchyard space, having acquired a new site for burial of about a quarter of an acre (large by London standards) in 1610.<sup>16</sup> This new site was a few hundred yards from the church, near Fleet Ditch, and was known as the 'lower churchyard'; the 'upper churchyard', also superior in status, was the older graveyard by the church. The burial register gives no clue to the location of burials, either before or during the plague, but the vestry order cited above, banning church burial of plague victims and restricting the upper churchyard to a few, should have meant that nearly all plague victims buried within the parish went to the lower churchyard, and this is almost certainly where the pits were dug.

The records of St Bride's seem to show the parish as an administrative unit and as a community struggling under the pressure of events but not overwhelmed. The accounts are in remarkably good order, despite the deaths of the senior churchwarden and his successor in late September and early October. The clerk or sexton continued to send in monthly accounts of burial fees, indicating that individual interments continued alongside the mass burials throughout the period of the plague (even, by October, in the church), though not all those listed were necessarily plague victims.<sup>17</sup> The only major loss is of the vestry minutes from 28 August onwards, and this may be due to the Fire, not the plague.<sup>18</sup>

The records of St Bride's also show that at least two of the expedients often considered characteristic of plague burial in London, the organized collection of corpses and the opening of mass graves, were at least to begin with parish initiatives. St Bride's and St Dunstan's jointly employed a party of bearers from

<sup>15</sup> GL MS 6554/1, f. 290.

<sup>16</sup> GL MS 9531/13, pt. 2, ff. 394v-395v

<sup>17</sup> GL MS 6570/1, items 62-9. These accounts only list a small fraction of the burials recorded in the register (89 out of 610 in August, 107 out of 635 in September, 58 out of 246 in October). In June 1665 the vestry had instructed the clerk to take the usual fee paid for bearers from 'the persons visited that are able to pay' and account for it to the churchwardens with pits and knells: GL MS 6554/1, f. 275v.

<sup>18</sup> GL MS 6554/1 is written right up to the flyleaf, and the last meeting recorded is 28 August. Presumably some record of continuing meetings was kept, but the next surviving volume of minutes begins in 1681.

July onwards; an early reference to 'slinges to carry the dead corpses',<sup>19</sup> and the absence of any later references to carts suggests that bearing was always done on foot in these parishes. Other parishes, perhaps especially the larger ones, bought or hired carts as they found necessary.<sup>20</sup> It is difficult to discover whether a centralized system of dead-carts ever existed, or whether it was always carried out by parishes, perhaps acting together in groups. Defoe says that 'the dead carts in the city were not confined to particular parishes, but one cart went through several parishes, according as the number of dead presented,'<sup>21</sup> but, if this is so, the means by which this was organized and financed is not clear.

Whoever organized the bearing, the restriction to night-time collection and burial was imposed by the Privy Council. The City had at first resisted the idea of night burial, believing this might facilitate the concealment of plague deaths, but by the seventeenth century this requirement was the norm.<sup>22</sup> It was not always observed, however; Pepys commented on 12 August that the nights were too short to bury all the dead, and though he was particularly conscious of the danger of meeting corpses being carried out at night, he also saw public, presumably daytime, funerals. On 6 September he noted 'strange to see in broad daylight two or three Burialls upon Bankside' and in mid-September encountered corpses being carried though the city at noonday.<sup>23</sup>

Mass graves were probably never dug in London outside epidemics: the individual burial was standard, though two or three might share a grave, and new graves might well disturb earlier burials.<sup>24</sup> There is literary evidence for communal graves in the 1603 and 1625 epidemics, but an extensive search would be necessary to discover the earliest reference among parish records.<sup>25</sup> Many, probably most, of these large pits were in existing churchyards, created by the parish when its need for burial space became critical. In the 1665 plague,

<sup>19</sup> St Bride's accounts (GL MS 6552/1), 14 June 1665.

<sup>20</sup> The dead carts did not 'begin to go about' Defoe's parish, St Botolph Aldgate, until the beginning of August 1665: *Plague Year*, p. 78. The parish of St Margaret Westminster began with a board to carry the dead on, then hired a cart, and later bought one: Walter George Bell, *The Great Plague in London in 1665* (1924), p. 51.

<sup>21</sup> Defoe, *Plague Year*, p.108.

<sup>22</sup> Charles F. Mullett, *The bubonic plague in England. An essay in the history of preventive medicine.* (1956), pp. 69, 111, 149.

<sup>23</sup> *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, ed. Robert Latham and William Matthews, Vol. VI, 1665 (1972), 12 August, 15 August, 20 August, 3 Sept., 6 Sept., 14 Sept.

<sup>24</sup> Harding, 'And one more', pp. 116-117.

<sup>25</sup> 'Open graves where sundry are buried together': J. Balmford, *A short dialogue concerning the plagues infection* (London, 1603), p. 32, quoted by Slack, 'Metropolitan government', p. 75; 'an hundred hungry graves' each to be daily filled with 60 bodies: Thomas Dekker, *The wonderfull year* (1603), in F.P. Wilson (ed.), *The plague pamphlets of Thomas Dekker* (1925), pp. 28-9; 'they are compelled to dig Graves like little cellers, piling up forty or fifty in a Pit': Dekker, *A rod for run-awaies* (1625), in Wilson, op. cit., pp. 158-9.

at St Dunstan in the West, the first pits were dug in mid-August; at St Bride's, as we have seen, in late August.<sup>26</sup> At St Botolph Aldgate a number of pits were dug in August, but the 'great pit' in the churchyard, and which came to contain over a thousand bodies, received its first corpse on 6 September, according to Defoe's account. 'Some blamed the churchwardens for suffering such a frightful thing ... but time made it appear the churchwardens knew the condition of the parish better than they did': within a fortnight it had been filled up with 1,114 bodies.<sup>27</sup> It seems likely that most, perhaps all, of the larger suburban parishes of London ended by burying their plague dead in mass graves, but that the smaller city-centre parishes did not need to do so. The main motive for digging mass graves was obviously to accommodate the maximum number of corpses in a small space, but the parishes may also have been driven to it to save money. They were shouldering the massive financial burden of supporting 'visited' families, watching houses, searching and reporting the dead, and by the height of the epidemic the great majority of families could make no contribution to the cost of burial.<sup>28</sup> Though the pits were expensive to dig, taking several days' labour, they were cheap to fill, while individual graves and interments would have been more costly, even had space been available.

One of the most popular elements in the mythology of London is the plague pit, and especially the idea that many pits were dug in unconsecrated ground and afterwards forgotten. The site of any discovery of plentiful human remains in a location no longer used for burial tends to be identified as a plague pit, unless a more reliable history is quickly attached to it. There were undoubtedly some temporary and irregular plague burial sites, but though few are well documented, their overall number may have been quite limited. Defoe is our main source for new or temporary burial grounds opened in 1665. He suggests that 'many if not all of the out-parishes were obliged to make new burying-grounds', though he concentrates on the northern and eastern suburbs of the city rather than Westminster or Southwark. He mentions 'the great pit in Finsbury Fields', and lists sites or grounds (not necessarily pits) near Goswell Street, in Shoreditch, at Moorfields, and off Bishopsgate Street, and eight in the huge parish of Stepney. His account clearly associates several of these with use by a particular parish or hamlet, though some may have been shared, and the dead carts may have used them more indiscriminately.<sup>29</sup> These new grounds seem to fit within the general pattern of parish responsibility for burial outlined above;

<sup>26</sup> GL MS 2968/4, 16 August 1665.

<sup>27</sup> Defoe, *Plague Year*, pp. 77-8.

<sup>28</sup> At St Bride's, fees were paid for 89 burials in August, 107 in September, and 58 in October: GL MS 5570/1, items 62-9. The register records 610, 635, and 246 burials in the same months: GL MS 6540/1. The clerk had been instructed to take the usual fees from 'the persons visited that are able to pay': GL MS 6554/1, f. 275v.

<sup>29</sup> Defoe, *Plague Year*, pp. 192, 240-2.



the scarcity of evidence for them in parish records may suggest that these were late and desperate expedients, invoked when record-keeping had already broken down. W.G. Bell, in general a rather uncritical reporter of plague pits,<sup>30</sup> suggests another group of new burial sites, those attached to pest-houses. The pest-house in the parish of St Martin in the Fields (which also served a number of other parishes) had a fenced burial ground, used by a number of parishes at the height of the epidemic; dead from the pest-house at Westminster were probably buried in a marked-off part of Tothill Fields, along with plague dead from the parish of St Margaret's as a whole.<sup>31</sup> The City pest-house returned separate numbers of dead from the parochial totals in the Bills of Mortality, but it is not clear where they were buried; possibly the nearby 'great pit in Finsbury Fields' accommodated them.

Although, as has been shown, the greater part of the burden of accommodating the plague dead fell on the parishes, there were two important civic initiatives in this period, which helped to relieve pressure on burial space without resort to irregular burial. The first of these was the creation of the New Churchyard at Bethlem in 1569. Until then London had had no significant extra-parochial burial ground, though St Paul's churchyard in the city centre had always been a popular burial site, especially with inhabitants of the small parishes around the cathedral. Some of the dead in the plague of 1563 were buried there.<sup>32</sup> The high mortality in this epidemic spurred the Mayor and Aldermen to action: in 1569, believing that space in the churchyards of the City might be insufficient if such an epidemic happened again, they decided to establish a new burial ground 'before the time of necessity requireth it'. They chose a site of about one acre already belonging to the City, adjoining the NE side of Moorfields, part of the lands of Bethlem Hospital. The plot, until then used as a tenterground, was walled in, at the expense of Sir Thomas Rowe, then Lord Mayor, usually credited as the New Churchyard's founder.<sup>33</sup> Though the immediate incentive was the fear of an excessive number of plague dead, and the New Churchyard was certainly used for many burials in later epidemics, it was also used extensively in non-plague years by a number of parishes with limited local accommodation, and remained in use to the mid-eighteenth century.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Bell, *Great Plague*, esp. pp. 48-9, 281-4.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39, citing BL Add MS 10,117 (Rugge's 'Diurnal'), f. 147; pp. 47-8.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. e.g. registers of All Hallows Bread Street (Harl. Soc. 43), All Hallows Honey Lane (Harl. Soc. 44-5). St Margaret Moses also buried there in 1625: Harl. Soc. 42.

<sup>33</sup> CLRO, Journal 19, ff. 180, 180v; Repertory 16, ff. 476v, 491v, 492; Letterbook V, ff. 237, 274b. The site is shown as 'Bethlehem Church yard' on Ogilby and Morgan's map of 1676: *The A to Z of Restoration London*, ed. Ralph Hyde, John Fisher, and Roger Cline (1992), spreads 17, 18.

<sup>34</sup> Harding, 'And one more', pp. 119-20.

Over-use of the New Churchyard in 1665 produced a new crisis. The 'noisome stench arising from the great number of dead' buried there, together with the plea from many parishes that their own churchyards were now full, forced the Mayor and Aldermen to seek new accommodation. On 6 September they deputed Sir John Robinson, Alderman, to treat with the City's tenant of Finsbury Fields, to the north of the city, to obtain a piece of ground there for burial 'during this present visitation'.<sup>35</sup> Their intention was that it be 'speedily set out and prepared for a burial place', and Robinson must have acted fairly quickly, since the site ('the new burial place in Bunhill Fields') had been walled by 19 October, though the gates were not finished until 1666.<sup>36</sup> This burial ground later became the famous Dissenters' ground, Bunhill Fields. There is some confusion over whether the ground was used for plague burials: many writers follow the statement in Maitland's *History of London* (1756) that it was 'not ... made use of on that occasion', but Strype (1720) does not say this, and Defoe (1722) refers to Bunhill Fields as one of the new burying-grounds made during the Plague.<sup>37</sup> It seems highly improbable that a ground created specifically for plague burial and presumably available for use by October at the latest, when weekly deaths were still running at over 4,000,<sup>38</sup> would not have been used extensively. Indeed the City's order, on the same day as the commission to Robinson, that the keeper of the New Churchyard should desist from making pits there and dig only single graves (and its later comment that he had done so) implies that alternative space was quickly made available.<sup>39</sup> References in some parish registers to burials in 'the new ground' from September 1665 could be to Bunhill Fields, though they might also be to new parochial grounds.<sup>40</sup>

The patterns and practices of burial of the plague dead in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century London suggest that it was seen principally as a problem of quantity, not quality. Traditional practices were adhered to as long as possible; only when they were seen to be completely inadequate were alternatives employed. Certainly the problem grew worse as the size of the city increased, and as the built-up area extended, and as the heaviest mortality occurred in

<sup>35</sup> CLRO, Repertory 70, f. 153v.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, f. 155v; John Strype's edition of John Stow's, *Survey of the cities of London and Westminster* (1720), vol. II, book IV, p. 54. The site is shown as 'Church Yard' in 1676: *A to Z of Restoration London*, spread 6.

<sup>37</sup> William Maitland, *The history of London from its foundation to the present time* (1756), vol. II, p. 1370; Strype, *Survey*, vol. II, book IV, p. 54; Defoe, *Plague Year*, p. 240. Maitland's account is followed by Isabella Holmes, *The London burial grounds. Notes on their history from the earliest times to the present day* (1896), p. 134; Alfred W. Light, *Bunhill Fields* (1915), vol. I, pp. 2-3; and Bell, *Great Plague*, p. 211.

<sup>38</sup> J.F.D. Shrewsbury, *A history of bubonic Plague in the British Isles* (1970), p. 476, table 40.

<sup>39</sup> CLRO, Repertory 70, ff. 153v, 156.

<sup>40</sup> E.g. registers of St Martin Orgar (Harl. Soc. 68).

larger but poorer parishes, but it is difficult to see any qualitative change, any trace of an 'Enlightened' or 'Hygienic' sensitivity towards the problem, in the responses at parish level. It is true that plague victims were buried quickly, but the interval between death and burial was rarely longer than two or three days anyway,<sup>41</sup> and burying quickly was surely the only way to avoid a backlog of unburied bodies from building up. True, corpses and those who handled them were treated with great caution; the Plague Orders said that bodies must not be kept in church during public assemblies or services there, and made the searchers and bearers of the dead identify themselves and keep their distance in public.<sup>42</sup> But though many people were afraid of contact with the bodies of those who had died, they were almost equally afraid of their clothes and personal possessions, and it is never quite clear where the danger was felt to inhere. The Plague Orders say more about the bedding and clothing of the sick, and rubbish disposal generally, than about burial.

An important point that distinguishes plague burial in London from some other major European cities is that there never seems to have been any official attempt to override traditional burial practices in favour of specific plague burial sites. The instructions of the public health board for the country round Florence in 1630 banned the burial of suspected plague dead in churches, and indeed insisted that they be buried 'in the countryside far from the high roads, a hundred arms'-lengths from the houses'.<sup>43</sup> In Paris, plague dead were buried in city churchyards, but not inside the churches: among the few Parisian burial records that survive, there are several cases of high-status people excluded from church burial because they had died of plague. One young man was even dug up some months later (when presumably the danger had passed) and reburied in his rightful place in church near his ancestral chapel.<sup>44</sup> Though some English contemporaries advised burial outside the city, the London Plague Orders did not exclude burials from the built-up area, and are ambiguous on the question of burial inside churches.<sup>45</sup> Very large numbers of plague victims were buried, as we have seen, in small city churchyards in densely populated areas, and though St Bride's decided to refuse church burial to plague victims about halfway

<sup>41</sup> Stephen Porter, 'Death and burial in a London parish: St Mary Woolnoth 1653-99', *London Journal*, 8 (1982), p. 77.

<sup>42</sup> Plague orders for 1583 in CLRO, Journal 21, ff. 285-286v (reference from Slack, 'Metropolitan government', n. 18); orders for 1665 in Defoe, *Plague Year*, pp. 57-66.

<sup>43</sup> Carlo M. Cipolla, *Cristofano and the plague, a study in the history of public health in the age of Galileo* (1973), pp. 166-70.

<sup>44</sup> Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, MS Fr 32589 (extracts from parish registers of Saint André des Arts): burials on 5/11/1580, 15/9/1591 (exhumed and reburied 2/4/1592), 23/8/1606, 1/7/1628.

<sup>45</sup> Mullett, *Bubonic plague*, pp. 123, 380-3; Defoe, *Plague Year*, p. 62. The Orders appear to ban burial of plague victims in churches during service time, but not altogether. Church burial of plague victims was banned in the Privy Council Orders of May 1666, after the epidemic was over: quoted in Bell, *Great Plague*, pp. 333-5.

through the 1665 epidemic (having presumably allowed it thus far), several other parishes buried plague dead within their churches.<sup>46</sup> When the bodies of plague victims were transported out of the city to the suburbs for burial, this was because there was no space to bury them within the city, not because they were thought to be a cause of infection once interred.

Anxiety about the consequences of overcrowded churchyards and burial grounds seems to have surfaced after the epidemic was over, but concern about 'annoyances' mingled with fear of real danger. The City's order during the 1665 plague to cease pit burial in the New Churchyard and to cover the ground with a layer of fresh earth is expressed in terms of suppressing 'stenches and annoyances'; its order to bury all the bones lying above ground and to burn the pieces of coffin boards sounds more like a desire for tidiness.<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless there was real concern that plague burials should be adequately covered with earth: contemporary writers enlarged on the dire consequences if decomposing bodies were exposed, though they did not agree on what depth of burial was necessary.<sup>48</sup> In the months after the plague St Bride's parish paid for further work, including levelling, in its lower and middle churchyards, and probably many parishes consolidated or covered their burial grounds.<sup>49</sup> In February 1666 Lord Craven noted that the churchyards had been partly (though not adequately) covered with earth and lime, and that care was being taken not to open the same graves again. New orders issued by the Privy Council in May 1666 banned the burial of future plague victims in churches and small churchyards, prescribed the use of quicklime, and forbade the re-opening of such graves in under a year, for fear of infection.<sup>50</sup> Though 898 plague deaths were recorded in the London Bills between May and December 1666, the disarray of many burial registers in 1666, as a result of plague and Fire, makes it hard to see if these instructions were carried out.<sup>51</sup> Defoe's account of the abandonment, and subsequent re-excavation, of some plague burial sites suggests however that once the immediate danger was over, precautions were ignored, and people

<sup>46</sup> For St Bride's ban, see GL MS 6554/1, f. 208. Not all parish registers indicate both location of burial and plague as a cause of death, but among those which do, and which indicate the burial of plague dead in the church, were All Hallows Bread Street (Harl. Soc. 43) in 1607-8; St Helen Bishopsgate (Harl. Soc. 31) in 1603; St Mary Colechurch (GL MS 64) in 1603, 1625; St Olave Hart Street (Harl. Soc. 46) in 1609; St Pancras Soper Lane (Harl. Soc. 44-5) in 1563, 1603, 1625.

<sup>47</sup> CLRO, Repertory 70, ff. 153v, 156.

<sup>48</sup> Cited by Mullett, *Bubonic plague*, pp. 45-6, 57n., 193, 209-10, 235. The 1665 Plague Orders specify 6 ft.: Defoe, *Plague Year*, p. 62.

<sup>49</sup> GL MS 6552/1, entries for 10 Feb. 1666, 15 Feb., 11 April, 9 June.

<sup>50</sup> Quoted in Bell, *Great Plague*, pp. 315, 333-5.

<sup>51</sup> Shrewsbury, *Bubonic plague*, Table 42, p. 484.

were much less scrupulous that might have been expected; 'the people had cast off all apprehensions, and that too fast'.<sup>52</sup>

This brief survey of plague burial in early modern London prompts two queries or speculations. The first concerns the attitude of city government. The New Churchyard was established in 1569, and there was then no further major civic initiative in this field for a hundred years. Is it significant that the 1563 plague - a very severe one admittedly - which prompted this action was also the last to strike the city centre more heavily than the periphery? Were the seventeenth-century aldermen less sensitive to a problem whose worst effects were felt in the suburbs (even though some of these were within the City's jurisdiction) than their predecessors had been to a problem in the city heartland? If so, was there another change in attitude in 1665, which led to the establishment of Bunhill Fields, or was this just a panic response to the exceptionally high mortality - within and without the city - of the first major plague for 30 years?

The second concerns the long-term influence of plague-time expedients on normal burial practice, and on burial practice in later epidemics. Did the experience of massive mortality during the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century epidemics contribute to the evolution of new responses to the problem of burial, that put practicality and perhaps hygiene ahead of personal and communal sensitivities? The idea of opening a large trench or pit and leaving it open till filled with successive burials seems to have been novel in seventeenth-century London, and it would be interesting to know how soon after the early modern epidemics it became normal in London. It was clearly a feature of the crowded city churchyards by the early nineteenth century.<sup>53</sup> But it is striking that real change in burial practice and location did not take place until after the appearance of a new epidemic disease, cholera.

### **Related publications:**

'Whose body? The living and the dead in early modern London and Paris', in B. Gordon and P. Marshall (eds), *The Place of the Dead* (Cambridge University Press, 2000)

'Mortuary archaeology in London to 1800', in L. Hannigan, I. Haynes, and H. Sheldon (eds), *London Under Ground: the archaeology of a city* (Oxbow Books, 2000)

<sup>52</sup> Defoe, *Plague Year*, pp. 240-2, 255.

<sup>53</sup> George Alfred Walker, *Gatherings from graveyards* (1839), *passim*; *Report from the Select Committee on Improvement of the Health of Towns* (Parliamentary Papers 1842 (x), no. 327); J. Saunders, 'London burials', in Charles Knight (ed.), *London* (1841-4), vol. IV, pp. 161-74.