

THE EFFECTS OF THE PLAGUE ON A PROVINCIAL TOWN IN THE SIXTEENTH AND SEVENTEENTH CENTURIES

by

I. G. DOOLITTLE*

ALTHOUGH HISTORIANS have long been fascinated by the plague they have largely been content to trace the extent of the mortality without considering its precise effects. The recent national survey of the subject makes no such attempt, probably because the local work has simply not yet been done.¹ An examination of the effects of the plague will throw much light on the development of pre-industrial society which was regularly afflicted by devastating epidemics. This study considers the evidence for Colchester in Essex and attempts to describe the effect the plague had on the town's population and economy.

Colchester experienced outbreaks of plague in 1579, 1586, 1597, 1603, 1626, 1631, 1644 and 1665–1666. These visitations have been examined elsewhere so there is no need to describe in detail the mortality of these years. Here attention will centre on the last and greatest outbreak of 1665–1666 when no less than 4,500–5,000 townsfolk died. Perhaps half Colchester's population was destroyed in these two years.²

The demographic effects of this epidemic may be examined on the basis of the Hearth Tax data. Returns are extant for 1662, 1666, 1671 and 1675.³ Unfortunately the assessment of 1662 does not include those exempt by certificate. An estimate of the number of households has been made by using the ratio of those exempt to those assessed in 1671,⁴ and inflating the earlier figures accordingly. Of course, this may overestimate the population in 1662 since the numbers of those exempt may well have risen after the ravages of the plague. But since the concern here is to show the recovery of Colchester's population to pre-plague proportions, this is not of real significance. A little more serious is the omission of paupers from most of the Colchester returns. Happily they do not seem to have constituted a large proportion of the population. In 1671 only four were said to be on the parish in All Saints where over sixty names were recorded. At Lexden there were eleven paupers, a tenth of

* I. G. Doolittle, B.A., Lincoln College, Oxford.

¹ J. F. D. Shrewsbury, *A history of the bubonic plague in the British Isles*, Cambridge University Press, 1970. See the review by Paul Slack, *Eng. hist. Rev.*, 1972, 88: 113–115.

² I. G. Doolittle, 'The plague in Colchester, 1579–1666', *Trans. Essex archaeol. Soc.*, 1972, 4: 134–145.

³ Essex Record Office (E.R.O.), Q/RTh 1 (1662), 5 (1671); Public Record Office, E.179/246/20 (1666), 22 (1675). Unfortunately no comparisons may be made with the Compton Census for which the returns for only six parishes survive. E.R.O. T/A 420 (transcript of the original).

⁴ The assessment of 1666 cannot be used for this purpose. It is dated Lady Day (25 March) and therefore fell between the two outbreaks of the epidemic.

I. G. Doolittle

those who paid or were exempt. Twelve were assessed at Berechurch where there were two paupers.

Population estimates have been calculated by employing Gregory King's urban multiplier of 4.4. Studies of the Hearth Tax and more specialized investigations have tended only to confirm King's findings.⁵ It is difficult to see exactly how King arrived at his multipliers but in view of his sophisticated approach and the corroboratory evidence from other sources this almost contemporary estimate may be used with some confidence.⁶

Nevertheless the population figures given in Table 1 must be treated with some care. Certainly the total for 1666 cannot be considered trustworthy. The assessment is dated 25 March and therefore falls between the two outbreaks of plague in the late summer months of 1665 and 1666. Many inhabitants must have escaped the net of the officials. All that can be said about that year is that Colchester lost somewhere in the region of half its inhabitants.

TABLE I
THE POPULATION OF COLCHESTER 1662-1675⁷

1662	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	10,305
1666	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	4,114
1671	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	9,526
1675	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	9,937

It is striking how rapidly Colchester recovered from the plague. Even though the 1662 total may overestimate the size of the population at that time, it is clear that Colchester had almost regained its former numbers within ten years. In 1662 there had only been thirteen empty houses recorded in the returns, a small figure even allowing for the omission of those exempt from payment. In 1666 the figure was 279, a striking indication of the extent of the mortality and the large numbers who fled the town. By 1671 the total had fallen to eighty-five, and four years later it fell still further to sixty-two. With remarkable speed Colchester was filling its ranks again.

At the same time, and as the concomitant of this demographic recovery, Colchester showed a considerable economic resilience in the face of the plague's destruction. Of course, town officials were ready to stress the debilitating effects of epidemics in order to escape public charges,⁸ and it is true that in 1665-1666 Colchester's trade

⁵ R. S. Schofield, 'Estimates of population size: hearth tax', *Local Population Studies*, 1968, 1: 33 (4.5); P. Laslett (ed.), *Household and family in past time*, Cambridge University Press, 1972, ch. 4 (4.75).

⁶ D. V. Glass, 'Two papers on Gregory King', in D. V. Glass and D. E. C. Eversley (eds.), *Population in history*, London, Edward Arnold, 1965, pp. 176-178, 198-203.

⁷ In the case of three parishes slight adjustments have been made to compensate for defective or missing returns.

⁸ *Acts of the Privy Council, June-December 1626*, London, H.M.S.O., 1938, pp. 103-104; *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic, 1640*, London, H.M.S.O., 1880, p. 371.

The effects of the plague on a provincial town in the 16th and 17th centuries

was naturally hindered and her goods treated with understandable suspicion.⁹

Yet despite the siege of the town by Parliamentary forces in 1648, and the plague of 1665–1666, it is clear that Colchester continued to thrive as an important centre for the production of the so-called “New Draperies” until the very end of the century. Even Philip Morant, Colchester’s most famous historian, who believed that “the unhappy Siege brought universal distress and poverty in this place” acknowledged that “trade and riches flourished amongst us again, till towards the end of King William’s reign the French influence at the Court of Spain prejudiced our interest and the sale of our woollen goods there . . .”¹⁰

Unfortunately there are no reliable indices of the production of Colchester’s most important cloth, the bays and says, with which to trace statistically the town’s economic recovery. There is, however, the evidence of the “English Fines”, fines paid by English clothworkers for goods which failed to pass examination at the Dutch Bay Hall. The figures are not without their difficulties. Inefficient weavers might begin manufacturing in periods of prosperity or stop production in times of hardship. This would tend to produce exaggerated up- and down-swings in the totals. It is probable too that the ratio of English to Dutch clothworkers rose during the century. Nevertheless the obvious trends suggested by the figures do not seem far from the truth. Certainly the pattern they reveal of production before and after the plague of 1665–1666 is clear enough. The totals (to the nearest pound) are given in Table II.

TABLE II
“ENGLISH FINES” AT COLCHESTER 1661–1670¹¹

1661	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	£86
1662	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	£77
1663	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	£94
1664	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	£97
1665	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	£92
1666	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	£31
1667	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	£61
1668	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	£101
1669	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	£115
1670	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	£121

The fines suggest that Colchester made a rapid recovery from the troughs of 1666 and 1667. In consequence, the trade in fuller’s earth at Colchester increased during the post-plague period. The coastwise shipments of “New Draperies” from the town regained pre-plague proportions, and if, as seems likely, the figures relate only to textiles produced at Colchester which was never a finishing centre for cloths made elsewhere, they too are an indication of economic vitality. The export of oysters also

⁹ L. C. Sier, ‘Experiences in the Great Fire of London, 1666’, *Essex Rev.*, 1942, 51: 134; W. G. Bell, *The Great Plague of London 1665*, London, The Bodley Head, 1951, p. 322; R. Latham and W. Matthews (eds.), *The diary of Samuel Pepys*, London, G. Bell, 1972, vol. 6, p. 30.

¹⁰ Philip Morant, *The history and antiquities of the most ancient town and borough of Colchester*, London, W. Bowyer, 1748, Book 3, p. 19.

¹¹ For the figures and their interpretation see K. H. Burley, ‘The economic development of Essex in the later seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries’, London University Ph.D. thesis, 1957, pp. 148–149.

reached new heights during these years.¹² It is plain then that the plague of 1665–1666 did *not* transform Colchester from the thriving industrial centre of Stuart times into the slow-moving market town of the eighteenth century.¹³ This, as Morant recognized, was a later development, beginning in the 1690s and accelerated by the War of the Spanish Succession.¹⁴

The striking resilience of Colchester’s economy and population suggests that the way in which the decimated town was able to recover its enormous losses should be studied more closely. This demographic recovery might, of course, take two forms: an upsurge in the town’s internal, natural growth, and an influx of immigrants in the years after the plague. In fact there is evidence that Colchester benefited from both these phenomena.

Unfortunately it is impossible to illustrate the first points from the parish registers for 1665–1666. The plague naturally played havoc with the registration of those

TABLE III
ST. LEONARD’S DURING THE PLAGUE¹⁵

	Burials	Baptisms	Marriages
1593	14	16	6
1594	17	17	–
1595	15	13	–
1596	9	20	6
1597	35	18	5
1598	20	–	6
1599	15	24	6
1600	17	23	7
1601	14	18	–
1602	18	32	10
1603	70	20	–
1604	19	21	9
1605	14	19	8
1606	20	26	5
1607	7	22	4
1627	–	16	15
1628	21	27	12
1629	15	28	7
1630	20	25	5
1631	37	9	–
1632	10	15	–
1633	20	25	6
1634	7	23	5
1635	22	24	6

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 304, 312–313, 280.

¹³ This was suggested by Shrewsbury, *op. cit.*, note 1 above, p. 501.

¹⁴ Burley, *op. cit.*, note 11 above, pp. 151–152, 365; J. E. Pilgrim, ‘The rise of the “New Draperies” in Essex’, *Univ. Birmingham hist. J.*, 1959, 7: 59. These studies have superseded the account in William Page and J. Horace Round (eds.), *Victoria County History of Essex*, London, Archibald Constable, 1907, pp. 397–398.

¹⁵ E.R.O. D/P 245/1/1. The burial entries for 1631 during the plague months of July to November

The effects of the plague on a provincial town in the 16th and 17th centuries

years, and the bills of mortality which have survived do not record "christenings". But for earlier, less virulent, plagues such figures do exist. Table III shows the effect of the plagues of 1597, 1603 and 1631 on the parish of St. Leonard's, Colchester. The figures suggest that the number of burials in the years immediately following the plague fell to their previous yearly average, if not below it. Baptisms recovered rapidly, regaining their earlier numbers within two years of the epidemic. Whether the same can be said of marriages is uncertain since the numbers involved are smaller and the pattern less clear. Happily there is evidence on this point elsewhere. At St. Peter's, where the plague claimed seventy-nine victims in 1626, fifteen marriages were registered in 1627 and twelve in 1628, figures approximately twice the yearly average.¹⁶ At Bocking in Essex forty-two marriages, again twice the usual number, were recorded in the year after a severe outbreak of plague in 1666, and the total was still as high as thirty-three in 1668.¹⁷

The same demographic recovery has been noticed in passing elsewhere. London, of course, may be exceptional,¹⁸ but it is significant that other places seem to have responded in similar fashion.¹⁹ It might reasonably be suggested that the upsurge of marriages and baptisms was due simply to the delay of marriage and baptism until after the plague. This, however, does not seem likely. All four marriages registered at Berechurch, Colchester, between June 1665 and November 1666 were between widows and widowers,²⁰ and it is inherently plausible that the sudden loss of a husband or wife, or the vacation of homes or land-holdings, should have produced a rush of new marriages or re-marriages.²¹ Moreover flight is unlikely to have deterred couples from marrying. Marriages of "foreigners" are a common feature of these years. Indeed three of the four couples married at Berechurch were from other parishes in the town. Nor is baptism likely to have been delayed in plague years. In

were written at a later date. This is evident not only from a change in handwriting but also from an erased marginal entry which reads: "Joseph Wells Senior was buried this month of August as I remember". (It was erased because Wells' burial had already been entered under 20 July.) This practice, however, probably does not affect the relative value of the registered entries. It might make the dates of vital events less trustworthy (as in the case of Joseph Wells) but these are not required for the present purpose. It can only serve to underestimate the total of baptisms, burials and marriages during a plague year and the arguments here are based on their magnitude.

¹⁶ E.R.O. D/P 178/1/1.

¹⁷ E.R.O. D/P 268/1/2.

¹⁸ For which see the readily available figures from the Bills of Mortality and the remarks of Nathaniel Hodges in *Loimologia*, London, E. Bell & J. Osborn, 1720, edited by J. Quincey, pp. 27–28. Historians have commented on this point: F. P. Wilson, *The plague in Shakespeare's London*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1927, pp. 114–115; Norman G. Brett-James, *The growth of Stuart London*, London, George Allen & Unwin, 1935, p. 498.

¹⁹ For Hampton-on-Thames, see B. Garside, *Their exits and their entrances*, Hampton-on-Thames, G. Scrimshire, 1947, pp. 30–31; for Staffordshire, D. M. Palliser, 'Dearth and diseases in Staffordshire 1540–1670', in C. W. Chalklin and M. A. Havinden (eds.), *Rural change and urban growth 1500–1800*, London, Longman, 1974, pp. 71–72; and for Norwich, E. A. Wrigley, *Population and history*, London, Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1969, p. 114 (Table 4.1). In general see W. G. Howson, 'Plague, poverty and population in parts of north-west England, 1580–1720', *Trans. hist. Soc. Lancashire and Cheshire*, 1960, 112: 29–55.

²⁰ E.R.O. D/P 199/1/1.

²¹ Wrigley, *op. cit.*, note 19 above, p. 69. See also Shrewsbury's remarks on the Black Death, *op. cit.*, note 1 above, p. 41. Howson, *op. cit.*, note 19 above, asserted that for a young man at this time "his prospects of marrying and living in a home of his own were a matter of waiting for a death vacancy" (p. 36).

fact, there is evidence that couples naturally tended to be unwilling to wait even until the following Sunday, as they usually did, to have their new-born child baptised in the face of imminent death.²²

It is clear then that severe epidemics were often followed by an upsurge in baptisms and marriages,²³ and that "a simple equation of a succession of plague outbreaks with a decline in population will not make sense by itself".²⁴ It is also becoming increasingly evident that family limitation was not unknown to couples in pre-industrial England, even if this only took the elementary form of delaying or bringing forward the age at marriage. This suggests that societies at this time were able to respond to the economic opportunities ironically afforded by large-scale loss of life. Houses and jobs were now in plentiful supply. It is true that in the parish of Colyton, where family limitation was first analysed, fertility rates fell sharply after the plague of 1645–1646. But since Colyton's population was never larger than 2,000 and its economy mainly agricultural (apart from a small, and declining woollen industry), this need not lead to the assumption that larger, more prosperous towns responded to heavy mortality in similar fashion.²⁵ Two studies of family life based on Essex material have also provided slight but suggestive evidence of birth control in the seventeenth century.²⁶ Society then was ready and able to make good some of the losses created by the plague by an increase in both marriage and birth rates in the following years.

But towns in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries could not overcome plague losses simply through internal, natural growth. Certainly, by the seventeenth century even in plague-free years baptisms in Colchester rarely kept pace with burials, if the evidence from St. Leonard's is representative.²⁷ Colchester's recovery must have been partly due to immigration. Pre-industrial towns relied on immigration for their

²² Mary F. and T. H. Hollingsworth, 'Plague mortality rates by age and sex in the parish of St. Botolph's without Bishopsgate, London, 1603', *Pop. Stud.*, 1971, 25: 137. For the shortness of the interval between birth and baptism in general, see B. M. Berry and R. S. Schofield, 'Age at baptism in pre-industrial England', *ibid.*, 1971, 25: 453–463.

²³ There are parallels to be drawn with the effects of the years of high mortality in the late 1720s. See, for instance, J. A. Johnston, 'The impact of the epidemics of 1727–1730 in south-west Worcestershire', *Med. Hist.*, 1971, 15: 278–292, and for a village a few miles to the north of Colchester, F. R. Grace, 'The population of East Bergholt, Suffolk, 1653–1836', *Suffolk Rev.*, 1970, 3: 266.

²⁴ The comment is by Bean on an earlier period. J. M. W. Bean, 'Plague, population and economic decline in England in the later Middle Ages', *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, 1963, 2nd series, 15: 432.

²⁵ E. A. Wrigley, 'Family limitation in pre-industrial England', *ibid.*, 1966, 2nd series, 19: 92; Wrigley, *op. cit.*, note 19 above, pp. 81–82. See also J. D. Chambers, *Population, economy, and society in pre-industrial England*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1972, pp. 69–73. There is an interesting letter from D. Levine in *Local Pop. Stud.*, 1974, 13: 52. See the suggestion made by J. Patten in *Rural-urban migration in pre-industrial England*, Oxford University School of Geography Research Papers, 1973, 6: 24, that smaller towns may have been less attractive to migrants than larger provincial centres. It has also been pointed out that there are some difficulties concerning Wrigley's figures. The pattern of fertility rates before and after the plague of 1645–1646 does not agree with what Wrigley has had to say about the unwillingness of society to allow matters to reach a Malthusian extreme. R. B. Outhwaite, 'Age at marriage in England from the late seventeenth to the nineteenth century', *Trans. R. hist. Soc.*, 1973, 5th series, 23: 56.

²⁶ A. D. J. Macfarlane, 'The regulation of marital and sexual relationships in seventeenth century England, with special reference to the county of Essex', London School of Economics and Political Science M. Phil. thesis, 1968, pp. 149–155, and *The family life of Ralph Josselin, a seventeenth century clergyman*, Cambridge University Press, 1970, Appendix A, pp. 199–204.

²⁷ This statement is based on an analysis of the St. Leonard's registers: E.R.O. D/P 245/1/1–2.

The effects of the plague on a provincial town in the 16th and 17th centuries

growth and in Essex at least the proportion of urban to rural dwellers was increasing.²⁸

It would be a laborious exercise to examine here the sources for migration in the Colchester area. Let it simply be said that both the turnover of names on tax lists, and the biographical notes at the head of the depositions in the archidiaconal courts amply substantiate the growing evidence that pre-industrial society was remarkably mobile and that folk were ever ready to move in search of work.²⁹ As one observer has put it: "The drift townwards was a feature of the times as it is in many backward countries today."³⁰ It was the attraction of urban employment for the unemployed villager, it has been suggested, that explains the greater incidence of poverty in the towns of Essex than in the rural areas, as indicated by the Hearth Tax returns; and the problem seems to have been particularly acute in Colchester and other textile centres.³¹ At another cloth town, Norwich, at least half the city's poor at one time were not local born.³²

If then immigration played an important role in sustaining Colchester's expansion through the difficulties occasioned by the plague (and the siege too), it has to be asked whence these immigrants came. Some undoubtedly came from the surrounding rural areas. A detailed investigation of the demography of ten villages in the Tendring Hundred, to the east of Colchester, suggests that despite an occasional surplus of baptisms over burials these parishes did not expand in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In some, in fact, a decline is evident.³³ It is possible, therefore, that part of the natural growth of these rural parishes was expended in migration to Colchester. But it is doubtful whether the surplus of baptisms over burials was sufficient to explain much of Colchester's expansion at this time. Certainly other rural areas provided labourers and servants for the expanding cloth centres. There is much evidence to suggest that the Essex countryside as a whole was experiencing considerable population pressure during this period,³⁴ and this no doubt precipitated townward migration. But Essex towns too provided textile workers for the cloth industry,³⁵ and the "subsistence", as opposed to "betterment", migration analysed in the most comprehensive treatment of this subject has been as an essentially urban

²⁸ Burley, *op. cit.*, note 11 above, pp. 16–17.

²⁹ There is a wealth of published work on this subject but the best general study and the one most relevant to the problem under consideration here is Patten, *op. cit.*, note 25 above, see especially pp. 33 *et seq.* for the suggestion that Bristol, Norwich and York exhibit a pattern of migration 'pull' similar to London. For the transience of the population of another Essex town see W. J. Petchey, 'The borough of Maldon, Essex, 1500–1688', University of Leicester Ph.D. thesis, 1972, ch. 2.

³⁰ D. C. Coleman, 'Labour in the English economy of the seventeenth century', *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, 1956, 2nd series, 8: 29.

³¹ Burley, *op. cit.*, note 11 above, pp. 342–343, 345. See also pp. 131–132 for the recruitment of labour from the rural areas for the textile industry.

³² J. F. Pound, *The Norwich census of the poor, 1570*, Norfolk Record Society, 1971, 40: 12.

³³ These statements are based on an analysis of the 1544 Subsidy return (Public Record Office, E.179/108/255), the Ship Money assessments of 1637 (E.R.O. T/A 42: transcript of the original), the Hearth Taxes of 1662–75 (see above, note 3), the Compton Census of 1676 (E.R.O. T/A 420: transcript of the original), and the parish registers of Great Bentley (transcript with the incumbent) and Ardleigh (E.R.O. T/R 109/1).

³⁴ E. G. Farrell, 'Essex rural settlement. Some aspects of its evolution with particular reference to the sixteenth century', University of Wales M.A. thesis, 1969, ch. 4, 'Settlement expansion in sixteenth century Essex'.

³⁵ Burley, *op. cit.*, note 11 above, p. 386.

phenomenon.³⁶ The fifteen-twenty mile limit for the migration of Colchester deponents in the church courts, which agrees with most analyses of mobility in this period, would certainly encompass the cloth towns of Braintree, Bocking, Coggeshall and Halstead to the west of Colchester.

But if immigration was an important feature of urban growth it has still to be shown that the plague outbreaks prompted an influx of workers from the surrounding towns and villages. It seems clear that the rural areas near Colchester did not suffer severely from the plague.³⁷ There are few plague deaths recorded in the parish registers of villages in the Tendring Hundred, although there was a cluster of June-July burials in 1626 at Elmstead, and seventeen plague deaths were registered at Great Bentley in 1665–1666.³⁸ The Hearth Tax returns for these rural parishes give no sign of a slump comparable to that to be seen in the Colchester figures. Indeed in 1665–1666 neighbouring villages were called upon to relieve plague-stricken Colchester, and local churches felt able to give money to the smitten townsfolk.³⁹

Whilst there is no direct evidence that Colchester benefited from large-scale immigration after plague visitations, Defoe does give an example, from the 1720s, of the way in which even a temporary boom in the, by then, declining Essex cloth industry drew men and women in large numbers out of their country villages and into the cloth towns.⁴⁰ But if the material on this problem is scanty for Colchester, there are some important pointers elsewhere. Even if London is again considered exceptional,⁴¹ it is interesting that two provincial centres, Norwich and York, both seem to have experienced immigration during the post-plague period. Exeter's rapid recovery from the plague of 1590 has been explained in terms of "a large influx, as happened in London after the plague visitations".⁴² Since immigrants

³⁶ P. Clark, 'The migrant in Kentish towns 1580–1640', in Peter Clark and Paul Slack (eds.), *Crisis and order in English towns 1500–1700*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972, ch. 4.

³⁷ For a similar observation see C. W. Chalklin, *Seventeenth-century Kent*, London, Longmans, 1965, pp. 38–39, and for the plague becoming an essentially urban disease see J. Saltmarsh, 'Plague and economic decline in England in the later Middle Ages', *Camb. hist. J.*, 1941–1943, 1: 31, and R. S. Roberts, 'The place of plague in English history', *Proc. R. Soc. Med.*, 1966, 59: 103.

³⁸ E.R.O. D/P 168/1/1; transcript of the earliest Great Bentley register with the incumbent.

³⁹ E.R.O. Q/SR 407/66–7; Colchester Borough Records (in Colchester Castle), Assembly Book 1646–1666, ff. 315–46, 356–7; E. Hockliffe (ed.), *Diary of the Rev. Ralph Josselin 1616–1683*, London, Camden Society, 3rd series, 1908, 15: 149, 150.

⁴⁰ D. Defoe, *A plan of the English commerce*, London, Charles Rivington, 1728, pp. 267–268. The passage also appears in Burley, op. cit., note 11 above, p. 132, and A. F. J. Brown, *Essex at work*, E.R.O. publications no. 49, Chelmsford, Essex County Council, 1969, pp. 16–17.

⁴¹ For which see John Graunt, *Natural and political observations on the Bills of Mortality*, London, John Martyn, 5th ed., 1676, pp. 57–58. See also, P. Spufford, 'Population movement in seventeenth century England', *Local Pop. Stud.*, 1970, 4: 42, and Brett-James, op. cit., note 18 above, p.504.

⁴² Penelope Corfield, 'A provincial capital in the late seventeenth century: the case of Norwich', in Clark and Slack (eds.), op. cit., note 36 above, pp. 268, 271–273; D. M. Palliser, 'Epidemics in Tudor York', *Northern History*, 1973, 8: 56–57; and R. Pickard, *The population and epidemics of Exeter in pre-census times*, Exeter, the author, 1947, p. 33. For some general remarks, see F. Roberts 'The effects of epidemics on population and social life', *Proc. R. Soc. Med.*, 1955, 48: 786–787. Immigration of this kind has to be distinguished from the rush of vagrants into towns at times of dearth. See Paul Slack, 'Poverty and politics in Salisbury 1597–1666', in Clark and Slack (eds.), op. cit., note 36 above, pp. 168–173, and Clark, op. cit., note 36 above, p. 150. Towns often took measures to remove these unwanted folk, or prevent their arrival. For an example from Maldon, Essex, in July 1626, see E.R.O. D/B 3/3/404. In general see Paul Slack, 'Vagrants and vagrancy in England, 1598–1666', *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, 1974, 2nd series, 27: 360–379, which includes material on

The effects of the plague on a provincial town in the 16th and 17th centuries

tended to be among the reproductive age groups the birth rate could receive a considerable boost by their arrival.⁴³ The evidence then, if not conclusive, is certainly suggestive.

Another characteristic of plague mortality may also have contributed to the recovery of Colchester and other towns. It was widely accepted that it was the common folk who bore the brunt of the disease.⁴⁴ When a local diarist noted in August 1665 that "Colchester seek into the country for dwellings", this related in all probability to the more prosperous townspeople. It was Nicholas Corsellis, a wealthy merchant from nearby Wivenhoe, who fled when the plague came to Colchester in 1665.⁴⁵ In this way men of capital and business frequently escaped death and on their return were able to quickly instil life again into the town's economy. Labouring folk, ravaged by the epidemic, were sadly more easily replaced. Immigrants moving into the towns in search of work took their places in often unskilled trades.

These conclusions can only be tentative and there are many further lines of enquiry.⁴⁶ But despite the difficulties of the evidence it is to be hoped that this study has suggested that there is a most pressing need for an intensive examination of the demographic and economic effects of the plague. It may be, of course, that Colchester was in some ways exceptionally well equipped to weather such storms. Its size, its prosperity and perhaps also the nature of its cloth industry,⁴⁷ may all have helped in the process of recovery. But if subsequent studies yield results similar to the present survey, it may be found that there has been an uncritical, if natural, tendency to overestimate the effects of the plague on population and economic growth in pre-industrial England.

Colchester vagrants. Dr. Slack comments: "Epidemics of plague might provoke flight from centres of infection but equally draw an influx of strangers to fill empty houses when the crisis was over" (p. 374).

⁴³ Corfield, *op. cit.*, note 42 above, p. 265.

⁴⁴ For London in 1665 see A. Taylor (ed.), *The works of Symon Patrick*, 9 vols., 1848, Oxford, Clarendon Press, vol. 9, p. 446, and Hodges, *op. cit.*, note 18 above, p. 15.

⁴⁵ Josselin diary, *op. cit.*, note 39 above, p. 148; Sier, *op. cit.*, note 9 above, pp. 132, 134.

⁴⁶ It would be interesting, for example, to try to substantiate the remark made of the influenza outbreak of the late 1550s that "to some extent epidemics anticipate deaths that would have occurred in the near future . . .". F. J. Fisher 'Influenza and inflation in Tudor England', *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, 1965, 2nd series, 18: 127. The only thorough investigation of this problem, by the Hollingsworths, *op. cit.*, note 22 above, suggests, however, that the groups most at risk were children and adult males. A detailed study of the age of plague victims would be a daunting exercise but it is clearly required.

⁴⁷ Textile workers, it seems, were noted for their 'precocious nuptiality' (Levine, *op. cit.*, note 25 above). Clothworkers were also notoriously dependent on wages alone for their livelihood: hence their vulnerability at times of crisis but also their ability (and need) to move from place to place in search of work. For evidence on this point see Joan Thirsk and J. P. Cooper (eds.), *Seventeenth century economic documents*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1972, pp. 32-33.