

Colyton Parish History Society Newsletter 21 April 2020

Sorry to report the sad passing of Maureen Turner. Maureen was a long standing member of the History Society, serving as its Secretary for a number of years. As a young girl she attended Manor House School in Seaton and later worked as a Sister in a maternity ward in Plymouth. Maureen was a Quaker. She was also an active member of the local community working for a time with both the Theatre Group in Colyton and the Art Society in Seaton. She loved history and studied with Dr Todd Gray, writing a thesis on Shute House. By dint of her researches she discovered the name of the architect of Shute House whilst studying this painting which now hangs above the stairs at Antony House (the paper in the right hand of the subject.).



We have now been in lockdown for almost a month. I trust you are all staying well and safe at home. After painting the garden furniture, taking up knitting again and going for long walks all round Colyton, I have been driven to take my own advice and do some more research. Amazing how much you can find on-line these days! So as I unfortunately have no exciting events to tell you about this month I have attached below a little piece I have written on Colyton's contribution to the understanding of pandemics. Happy to receive feedback! If anyone else has been encouraged by the lockdown to do some research about your house, or a member of your family or a local historic event do please share it. Email me what you have written and I will include it in next month's newsletter.

Sarah Charman, Editor

Colyton's contribution to understanding the nature and causes of pandemics

The numbers in brackets relate the end-notes that give the source of the information

The plague reached Colyton in November 1645. Within twelve months a fifth of the population was dead. (1) As we face the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic today it is interesting to reflect on the impact the plague had on everyday life here in Colyton and what lessons we can take from those times. By way of comparison the impact of the Spanish flu pandemic of 1918-19 on the town is also examined.



The Colyton Parish burial register declared on 16 November 1645: "Here ye plague began and in November 1646 'Here ye plague ended'. The fact that the outbreak was deemed significant enough for a contemporary note to be made of this in the town records suggests it was an unfamiliar occurrence in this rural community. (2) That it was an unusual event may also be inferred from the fact that the plague did not apparently affect any neighbouring parish to Colyton and few other places in Devon. (3)

It was also a time of much social upheaval in the town in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War where Colyton had been on the front line between the Royalists and Parliamentarians. There had also been a recent typhus outbreak.

Four hundred years later a team from Cambridge University used Colyton's historic archives to develop a 'family reconstitution' model which has become a world standard for population studies. The meticulous reconstruction of Colyton families from information which the team extracted from a variety of documents in the town's archives has provided a gold mine for academics from many different disciplines to study ever since.

Roger Schofield in a paper published in 1977 entitled "*An anatomy of an epidemic*" (4) - forensically sought to establish the causes of the 1645 plague epidemic in Colyton, the mechanisms by which it was spread and the nature of the disease. He hypothesized that diseases like bubonic plague and typhus were more likely to be associated with "geographically clustered patterns of death" while airborne infections like influenza were likely to show much less clustering. Analysis has revealed for example that there were 5 burials each from the Spiller and Turpin families during July 1646 and seven from the Bird family in August. (5)

Having analysed the data derived from the Colyton archives which involved 406 households containing 1513 persons, 298 of whom died – an overall mortality rate of 20% - Schofield concluded that on the balance of evidence "person to person transmission of the disease in close physical proximity was not an important element in the Colyton epidemic." He went on to state that in his opinion the epidemic was "unlikely to have been caused... by an airborne disease...and that the most promising candidate would seem to be bubonic plague...." And rat fleas – rather than human fleas – which leave their rat host when it dies and alight upon a human host taking the plague with them! (6) Extraordinary what can be deduced from the

faded pages of a burial register! Schofield also found that the sex ratio of burials was similar at 93.7 males to 100 females and that mortality rates were higher among the very young and lower for those over 45 years of age.

It should be noted that other studies give a considerably higher figure for all burials recorded in Colyton during that period: An early analysis of the data derived by the Cambridge team as reported by Wrigley, which was published in 1968, found that 392 names were recorded in the burial register between November 1645 and the end of October 1646 most probably from the plague (7). Scott and Duncan state that “the plague at Colyton began on 16 November 1645 and continued to January 1646, which was a cold month with much snowfall. It re-erupted in April 1646 and then continued until the late autumn when 459 had been buried, a typical...epidemic with perhaps 40% of the population dying.” (8) The devastating impact of the plague is revealed when comparing these figures with the average number of deaths per year in Colyton over the previous decade which had been 65.5. (9)

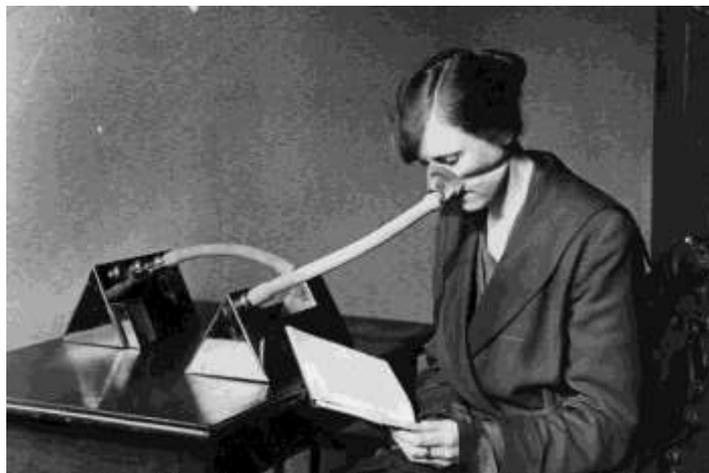
Some academics vigorously contested Schofield’s conclusions while others just as strongly supported him. The debate has served to focus interest ever since on the contribution which the Colyton archives have made to the development of academic understanding of the plague (10)

In Colyton in 1645 the plague started among wool workers – many of whom worked in small craft workshops in their own homes - this was one of the reasons why commonly several members of a family household might be infected while close neighbours apparently went unscathed. Pam Sharpe used the family reconstitution model and other information contained in the Colyton archives to analyse the occupation and wealth of the victims. (11) Her work revealed that all the families involved in the wool trade in the Parish suffered the loss of members to the plague. Similar studies in other locations have also demonstrated the vulnerability of cloth workers to catching the plague. (12)

Within two months the plague had spread to the wider craft community in the centre of town. But it took several months for the disease to spread to other sectors of the community with agricultural workers seemingly far less affected. The gentry class suffered the least number of victims with only 20.5% affected, while roughly 30% of labourers and the poor suffered compared with 46.4% of the families engaged in wool manufacturing.

So what impact did the plague have on daily life in the parish of Colyton? It seems likely that the community was already aware of the need for isolation and ‘cordon sanitaire’ techniques and burning the clothes and bedding of victims of the plague. Marriages and fertility rates dropped for a while after the plague. Social and political unrest continued with the removal of the incumbent vicar Thomas Collyns in 1647 and his replacement with a puritan John Wilkins who proved unpopular with the community. (13)

While the local economy suffered in the short term and the wool industry undoubtedly took some time to adjust to the loss of so many of its workers – and arguably never fully recovered - it is worth noting that the Feoffee’s and Churchwardens’ accounts for this period nevertheless show that the seasonal round of community life continued pretty much as before: rents were paid and properties let (14.)



In 1918 the Spanish Flu affected some 500 million people worldwide. It was so named because Spain, which was neutral during the Great War and was therefore free to report on the severity of the pandemic, while countries like Britain, France and the US that were still fighting, censored reports on the influenza outbreak to try and maintain public morale -. It caused an estimated 20 – 50 some even suggest 100 million deaths globally including 228,000 Britons which was more than died in the War - around 2% of the population. Global mortality figures are estimated to have been between 10 and 20 percent of those who were infected. (15)

There are no statistics for influenza deaths in Exeter in 1918 but in 1919 some 76 deaths from influenza were recorded out of a total of 807. (16) 516 schools across Devon were closed. Many foreign troops were still based here at the end of the War and 100 American soldiers died at Oldway War Hospital in a fortnight and were buried in a mass grave in Paignton cemetery. There is a war memorial in Torquay cemetery to New Zealand servicemen who came to the area to recuperate and died of the flu. Contemporary photos show people wearing face masks. (17 and 18)

Prime Minister David Lloyd George contracted the Spanish flu but survived as did Mahatma Gandhi and Greta Garbo. Like Lloyd George a century ago our current Prime Minister Boris Johnson has now contracted Covid-19 but thankfully has survived it. Ironically, Reg Lewis an old soldier from the Royal Devon Yeomanry artillery brigade, who survived the Spanish Flu epidemic has just celebrated his 107th birthday at a care home in Dartington. (19)

A highly infectious airborne disease easily transmitted from human to human its impact was swift and devastating. People were required to wear face masks offering some limited protection and to keep their bedroom windows open and to gargle with salt water as preventive measures but there was no cure and antibiotics had yet to be invented. It particularly affected the very young and otherwise healthy adults aged 20-40 and many pregnant women aborted and their babies died. They were blamed for running around in thin stockings! Sufferers could die within a day of developing a fever and becoming short of breath. Lack of oxygen meant their faces appeared tinged with blue. Haemorrhages filled the lungs with blood and caused catastrophic vomiting and nosebleeds, with victims drowning in their own fluids. In fact many actually died not from the virus itself but rather from secondary bacterial pneumonia. (20)

The source of the virus is still debated but a study published in 2014 by Humphries and reported in the National Geographic suggests it probably first emerged in China in the winter of 1917-18 and may have been brought here by 96,000 Chinese labourers sent to work behind the British and French lines on the Western Front. (21) In Britain it is thought the virus was spread by soldiers returning home from the trenches in northern France.

However the Colyton Chamber of Feoffees Minute book for the period from autumn 1918 to the end of 1919 shows the pattern of regular monthly meetings continuing unbroken throughout with a goodly number of Feoffees in attendance on each occasion (the average attendance at each meeting in 1919 was 13 Feoffees compared with twelve in 1918.) There is no suggestion in the Minutes that the Feoffees took any particular preventive measures like wearing masks at their regular Board Meetings in Old Church House.

Nor is there any reference in the Minutes to any community needs arising specifically from the pandemic. Indeed life seems to have continued pretty much as it had before. The ending of the War was marked simply with the observation by the Chairman, Mr Cuming at the Chamber's monthly meeting on 12 November 1918: "on the pleasant conditions under which they met that evening; viz, the Armistice signed, the War practically ended – for which he considered it behoved all to thank God."

Certain items appeared regularly on the agenda each month during that period such as plans for selling some of the Chamber's property portfolio and investing the proceeds, ongoing problems with the town's water supply for which the Feoffees were responsible at that time. Other issues included the disbursement of "Xmas gifts to aged persons", requests from the Devon Agricultural Committee for acres of corn and potatoes to be grown at various properties owned by the Feoffees, a contribution towards provision of seed potatoes for the "working classes of Colyton" and grants to individuals for the purchase of a new set of teeth, a contribution to enable someone to return to Canada, and a request from the Colyton Nursing Association for a contribution towards furnishing a permanent cottage for the local nurse.

Efforts to encourage post War readjustment also featured on the agenda, with the reopening of the bathing pool, along with judging and giving prizes for the best kept allotments. A contemporary report in *Pullmans Weekly News* in January 1919 about the unwelcome manner in which soldiers on leave were treated at the Social Club was discussed and dismissed by the Chairman (who was also Secretary to the Club) who said there were two sides to every story and he gave an account of the other side.(22)



A century on we are once again facing the reality of a global pandemic which at the time of writing has so far killed 7 people in East Devon and another 13 in Exeter (as at 21 April).(23) Here in Colyton the community is rallying around to support and protect its most vulnerable members and on a Thursday evening neighbours stand outside their houses and clap and bang pots and pans joining in the national campaign to demonstrate support for and thank the NHS and care workers.

The Chamber of Feoffees is fully engaged with the Government's lockdown regulations for controlling the coronavirus pandemic. The Town Hall is closed and individual Feoffees are participating in the lockdown and are self-isolating. But the Chamber is continuing to function and as ever stands ready to serve the needs of the community. It has held its first ever 'virtual' monthly meeting using email communications – and is considering using Zoom technology to enable video conferencing. The Parish Council too is looking at how best it can continue to function during lockdown.

Looking back it is interesting to see how everyday life here in Colyton has on each occasion adapted to the immediate vicissitudes of these different pandemics while continuing to follow the regular rhythms of community life.

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Bailiff

Colyton Chamber of Feoffees

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