DID THE PLAGUE VISIT MILFORD?

By Chris Sanders

Slide Milford-on-Sea Historical Record Society Logo

Slide Did the plague visit Milford?

In 2020, the arrival of the Coronovirus and the subsequent pandemic prompted some dark thoughts. Was this unprecedented for our community in Milford? We remembered learning at school about the Great Plague of 1665 and wondered if the plague ever came to Milford? How might we answer this question? Perhaps our Parish Registers could give us an insight into life and death in Milford all those years ago. What we found gave us a new perspective on Milford in the early 17th Century.

Slide Milford Parish

Milford is a parish on the south coast opposite the Isle of Wight and in the early 17th century it could draw on the fruits of the land and the sea to sustain itself. The Ancient Parish consisted of the parish church of Milford and three chapelries Milton, Hordle and Pennington. Of course, the coast was further south than it is today and in total the Parish was some 16,000 acres and a population at the start of the 17th century of around 1000.

Slide Parish Registers

The parish church of All Saints held the Parish Registers. They start in 1594. We focussed our investigation on the period from 1594 up to 1670, five years after the Great Plague had ended in London. As the population of the parish grew then additional registers were kept at local chapels and from 1658 burials were also recorded at Milton. Unlike for some parishes, Milford parish registers do not record any causes of death except the occasional drowning and one person being killed by a windmill in 1626.

Slide Milford Burials

Let's see what we found. The chart shows numbers of burials per year on the left hand side and along the bottom the years from 1594 – 1670. Let's look at Milford's recorded burials over that period.

It is particularly striking that in some years burials were many times the average for the period.

1613 burials were over 3 times the average
1639 burials were over twice the average
1659 to 1662 burials were also over twice the average.

So what might account for these peaks in mortality? So where can we look?

Slide History of Epidemics

Well, we can now turn to what is even today regarded as an outstanding work of scholarship. The *History of Epidemics* published in 1894. It was written by Charles Creighton and was the crowning achievement of his scholarly career. Importantly for our research, he notes that major plague deaths were 5 times the average rate of deaths and could account for up to 20% of the population.

Slide London's plagues

Although seen as a constant danger, the plague might erupt with particular ferocity in just a few years. In 17th-century London, the severest years were 1603 when 30,000 died, 1625 when 35,000 died, 1636 when 10,000 died and finally 1665 when over 70,000 died.

It did not escape the notice of some mischievous commentators of the day that the early ones coincided with the death of the monarch and it was suggested that the plague might be associated with some form of penance for the sins of the reign!

We can see that there is little matching of these plague years with the Milford peaks in burials and at no time did Milford burials reach five times the average. So we need to look elsewhere.

Slide Hoskins work on harvests

At that time the very existence of communities depended upon the success of the harvest. It is no coincidence that the fasting of Lent comes at the end of winter when stocks of food would be at their lowest. Might the peaks in burials at Milford be due to harvest failures?

Again we are fortunate in being able to call upon some authoritative work. In the 1960's the Agricultural History Review published some invaluable work tracing the success and failures of harvests in England from 1480 until 1759. This was the work of Professor William Hoskins, a historian of the English landscape. He used wheat prices to identify the quality of the harvest in England showing bad harvests and abundant harvests. Here the higher the peak the worse the harvest the more people might starve.

Slide Harvest failures

The worst crisis comes when successive harvests fail and people starve. The years 1594-1597 are an example of this. The Great Famine, as it was known, spread all over Europe. In England there were food riots in many of the counties.

In 1630 and 1631 two successive harvests failed and the harvests failed again between 1647 and 1649. The government attempted to manage the crises by controlling wheat prices and encouraging imports. Milford seems to have avoided both these famines. This may have been because there was more reliance on the harvest from the sea or perhaps other local conditions.

As we can see from 1659 through to 1662 the harvests were terrible and it looks as though that had an impact on Milford – particularly in the west of the parish – as most of the burials were in Milton.

Slide Local outbreaks of plague

But bad harvests do not explain the other peaks. So we should look elsewhere. Perhaps there were local outbreaks of the plague?

The Hampshire Record Office offers a number of records which identify outbreaks of plague in and aorund the county.
There were local but small outbreaks of the plague:

- in Winchester in 1603
- in Basingstoke and Fordingbridge in 1626

- in Salisbury in 1627-8
- in Farringdon (between Alton and Winchester) in 1646

Ports were particularly susceptible to outbreaks of plague. Portsmouth itself was no exception. Special watches were arranged locally at Lymington to give alert of any ships from Portsmouth. No plague was reported.

As we can see, local outbreaks of plague do not explain the peaks in Milford's burials.

So where else to look?

Slide Graunt's Bills of Mortality

In the 1660s, pioneering work was carried out by John Graunt using the Bills of Mortality of the London parishes. Helpfully, he also wanted to compare the rate of deaths in the city with those in a rural parish. He had access to the records of a rural parish in Hampshire and experts believe he used the Parish Registers of Romsey only some 20 miles north of Milford.

Slide Romsey and Milford

So looking at the burial figures which Graunt found in the parish register, we can plot the peaks around the average burials. You will see that average burials in Romsey were four times the average in Milford parish.

We can see that there is some matching. How did Graunt explain these peaks in burials?

Looking at the burials in Romsey, we can see the impact of the Great Famine of 1597 although Milford looks to have avoided this. The peak in Milford's deaths in 1613 is matched to a lesser extent by a peak in Graunt's parish.

The year 1638 looks most interesting. What does Graunt have to say?

Here we need to watch out for the Restoration English

Slide Graunt on Malignant Fever

Of all the said 90 years the year 1638 was the most *Mortal,* I therefore enquired whether the *Plague* was then in that parish, and having received good satisfaction that it was not (which I the rather believe, because, that the *Plague* was not then considerable at *London)* but that it was a Malignant *Fever* raging so fiercely about *Harvest,* that there appeared scarce hands enough to take in the Corn: which argues, considering there were 2700 Parishioners, that seven might be sick for one that died: whereas of the *Plague* more die then recover. Lastly, these People lay longer sick then is usual in the *Plague,* nor was there any mention of *Sores, Swellings, blew-Tokens,* &c. among them.

Slide Malignant Fever at Milford

In 1638 deaths are due to a Malignant Fever which, while fatal for one in seven who caught it, affected fewer than half the parishioners. Milford burials also match this but to a lesser extent. I think we can speculate with some confidence that the spike in deaths at Milford in 1638 and also possibly in 1644, was the result of something similar to Malignant Fever rather than the Plague.

Slide summary of mortality at Milford

So to summarise - the peaks in Milford burials over the period may be accounted for by outbreaks of malignant fever in 1613 and 1638, and by possible harvest failures between 1659 and 1662.

The smaller spikes in the early 1650s reveal another side to mortality. In 1655 the infant mortality in Milford accounted for over 50% of burials compared with an average for the period of 20%. Some childhood disease may have caused this spike. It may also have been due to malignant fever or other outbreak of disease such as small pox or influenza.

Slide the end of the Great Plague

The Great Plague of 1665 was the last plague. During the 1660s plague abruptly disappeared from England. As Andrew Hinde tells us "the causes of its disappearance have been the subject of debate among historians… partly because the ending of the plague era could be said to mark the beginning of the secular decline in mortality."

Based on the evidence to date, it would appear that the Plague never visited Milford in the 1600s. But it is clear from our analysis that there were a number of significant threats to the lives of the parishioners of Milford at that time. From the end of the 17th century, Milford baptisms started to exceed burials by as much as 20% and the community began to grow.

Our investigations will continue.

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