

Mortality and epidemic disease in London city and suburban parishes, 1538 to 1665

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Abstract

During the period when plague affected London, overall mortality as measured by the number of burials per year was more volatile and subject to more intensely episodic and seasonally dependent peaks than the subsequent period. These bouts of epidemic mortality vary substantively by parish. The number of deaths was sometimes quite differently recorded in the Bills of Mortality than in parish burial registers, but the Bills may nevertheless provide a useful benchmark when there are gaps in parochial burial registration. This paper investigates epidemic mortality from both parish burial registers and the Bills of Mortality for a cluster of Cheapside parishes in the city centre and in suburban Clerkenwell.

The timing of epidemic deaths are investigated in order to test W H Neill's high potential mortality model, as adopted by Landers. More frequent periods of excess burials (measured as months where the average monthly frequency of burials is greater than 2.75 times that expected) suggest that Clerkenwell was much more susceptible to epidemic outbreaks. Epidemic outbreaks also affected Clerkenwell for a longer period than the city parishes, and, disregarding the exceptionally long-lasting 1593 excess mortality, there is a steady increase in the duration of excess mortality in Clerkenwell that parallels its rapid rise of population.. In Clerkenwell the first month showing excess mortality in most plague years comes earlier than in Cheapside, but it is unclear whether this is the result of new pathogens arriving or developing in Clerkenwell before being transmitted to the city, or simply a side effect of the period of excess mortality lasting longer. It may be that a greater extent of endemic infection within Clerkenwell's diverse and changing population will necessarily give rise to longer peaks in burial totals when there is an epidemic. However, it is also observed that while the onset of the Clerkenwell peaks anticipates those of Cheapside, there is no corresponding lag, as the peaks cease either at the same time in both areas or earlier in Clerkenwell. This supports the idea that diseases arrived in the suburbs before being transmitted to the city centre.