

THE PLAGUE AND BIRCHINGTON

During its history Birchington has suffered on several occasions from visits of the Plague. The first that we know of, but of which there is no written record, was the **Black Death in 1348-9**. But although written evidence is not forthcoming, we see the visible evidence every day in the shape and design of our church of All Saints in the Square. It was planned to add a large new South aisle in **1343**, but although work was begun, the arrival of the bubonic plague in 1348, halted everything. When it was finally possible to restart the building programme, the enlargement was altered into two half aisles instead – matching the plan of the church we see today.

The plague was probably the bubonic plague, caused by fleas carried by rats, and seems to have carried off more men and boys than women. Birchington, like all other places had no main drainage, only earth closets, and no proper water supply. All their water came from wells, and there was no collection of rubbish. Hence disease spread quickly.



Several less catastrophic, but no less terrible outbreaks of this dreadful pestilence to the poor villagers can be traced in the Churchwardens Account Books, the Parish Registers and in the Poor Books in our archives. The earliest recorded visitation was in the 16th century. Some of it must have been recorded in the second book of the Registers, which became known as the “black boke”, and in **1603** in the Churchwardens’ Account Book we find this entry –

“for 11 prayer bookes in the time of the Plague - XVIId”

The first book of the Registers ends in **1553** and then follows this entry –

“Here endethe the first boke of the Register of Birchington. The second boke, called the blacke boke, was spoiled by an ignorant woman.” The third book commences **1564**. This six year span is the only break in our register records from start to finish. The book was probably mutilated with ink by the ‘ignorant woman’, because it recorded her bastard child.

The year **1544**, during the reign of Henry VIII, was a bad year when there were 50 burials. The usual average was about 12 only, and the population of Birchington was only about 350 to 400. The visitation lasted from the June to the following March, September and October being the worst months when there were 13 burials in the September and 15 in the October.

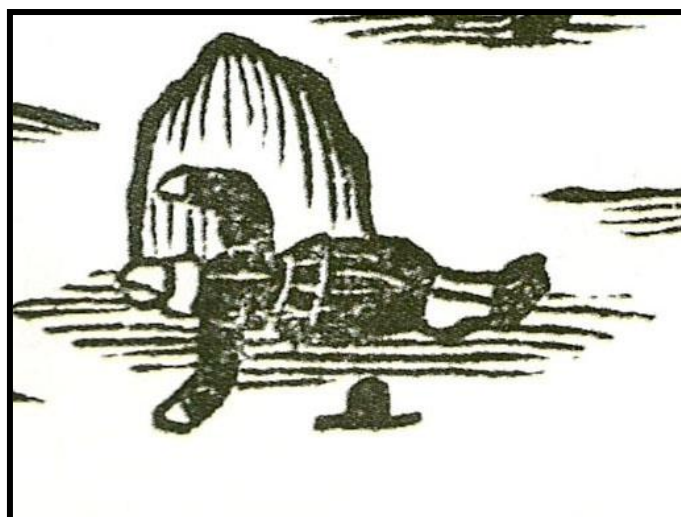
In the years **1625 and 1626**, the time of James I and Charles I, there was an outbreak of the epidemic which may have been brought to Birchington by a “traveller” or beggar from Canterbury, who died here and was buried in the churchyard. His burial is recorded in the burial Register. In **1625** there were 31 deaths and in **1626**, 41, when the average death rate was about 12 in Birchington.

Of these 72 deaths, many were the breadwinners of the family, in fact 14, so the widows and orphans had to be provided for by the 40 ratepayers of the parish. Only those who owned land or property or were worth a substantial sum paid rates, so the majority of villagers did not contribute to this burden.

The year **1637** was a year when Birchington was again “visited” by “God’s heavy hand” when there were 64 burials. This year is the blackest in Birchington and Acol’s documented history. The Minister at the time was George Stancombe who remained at his post and buried all 64.

Of these, in the Burial Register, he marked the word “plague” against the names of 35. Of the 64, 14 were the breadwinners so the 40 ratepayers of Birchington had to find quite large sums of money to provide for the widows and orphans and the sick. During that year there were no less than 5 “cesses” or rates levied for “the necessary relief of the poor and visited sick people.”

The Overseers of the Poor and the Churchwardens raised nearly £70 by these 5 cesses, a considerable sum in those days, and this sum was spent in various ways to help the poor and sick. These accounts, though simply containing the items of expenditure, form one of the most striking histories of the visitation. They tell us of the efforts made to cure the disease, of its infectious nature carrying off almost whole families, of the method of burial, and of help given to widows, orphans and the sick.

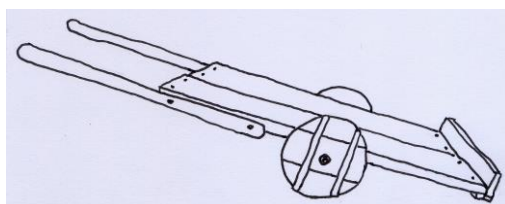


Here are a few extracts for 1637 from the Birchington Poor Book –

“It(em) to Dr Randolfe at 2 sevall tymes 5s and to Mr. Watson ye Apothecary at 2 sevrall tymes 27s for phisicke for ye visited people and one jronery (journey) to Canterbury about ye same business 4s in toto 01 16 00

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It to Jo(hn) Penny for ye use of his wheel barrow to carry ye visited dead people for burying 00 02 00



It to Roberts and his wife for burning old rags yt(that) lay about	00 00 06
It to Will Twiman and his wife during ye tyme of their restraint for necessaryes from Aug 2 1637 unto ye 14 following	00 19 06
It to Jo Thorpe his wife and children from Sept 6 1637 unto Sept 28 following ye tyme of their restraint	01 19 00
It to Edw Smith his wife and children from Sept 28 1637 to Nov 26 following ye tyme of their restraint	04 04 06
It for ½ chauldron of coales ye poore visited people and fetching ym from Margate	00 11 06

These extracts are from the Acol Poor Book.

It to Will Derricke from May 7 1637 unto June 11 following 5 weekes at 6d ye weekes	00 02 06
It to him from thence unto Sept 3 following 12 weekes at 1s ye weeke	00 12 00
It to his wife in ye tyme of her sickness extraordinary	00 03 00
It to ye widd(ow) Twiman for looking to her one weeke then	00 02 00
It to Nic Hoskins wife for looking to her one other week	00 01 00
It for coales for them	00 00 09
It for burying her first child 6 Aug (Sarah Derricke aged 4 months)	00 02 06
It for burying her second child Aug 23 (Joyce Derricke aged 4 months)	00 02 06
It for burying herselfe Aug 31 (Alice Derricke)	00 02 06
It to ye women for watching with her, laying her forth, socking ¹ her, and washing her clothes	00 04 03
It for beere to ye men yt(that) brought to ye church	00 01 00
It for Cloath to make Derrickes other children cloathes	00 08 00

Then follows a number of items for making the clothes, for gloves, stockings, aprons, bodices, neckcloathes etc. and for keeping the other children

This gives some idea of what was done in those days to help the sick and distressed.

1669, the time of Charles II, was another bad year when there were 57 deaths in a population of less than 400.

The year of the **Great Plague of London 1665+** was a good year in Birchington, as there were only 11 burials, so it seems as if the Great Plague did not reach here until nearly 4 years later in **1669**. Birchington has only 11 deaths in 1665 and in 1666 there were only 8.

But the people of Birchington did think of the sufferers in London as there were 5 collections to help these sufferers and it appeared that the people gave generously.

These extracts from the Churchwardens Account Books show this –

¹ 'socking' was the term used for tying up the shroud round a corpse

1. Made **August ye 2 1665** being ye fast for ye averting of Gods heavy visitation of ye Pestilence there was collected in ye Parish Church of Birchington ye sume of Twenty five shillings.

This is signed by J. Ayling, Vic Ibid, William Drayton, John Turner, Churchwardens.

2. **October ye 4th 1665.**

Collected in ye Parish Church of Birchington for ye releife of ye poor visited people the summe of 1 li 03s 00d

J. Ayling, Vic Ibid, William Drayton, John Turner, Churchwardens.

3. **Nov 8 1665.**

Collected yn ye Parish of Birchington being ye Publick fast for ye Averting of ye Pestilence ye summe of Twelve shillings.

Jo Ayling, Vic Ibid, William Drayton, John Turner, Churchwardens.

4. **Dec 6 1665.**

Re for ye visited of ye Plague nine shillings and sixpence in ye pish of Birchington

William Drayton, John Turner.

5. Red the **7th day 1665/6 (Jan)**

Collected for the visited of the Plague five shillings in the pish of Birchington

J. Ayling, Vic Ibid, William Drayton.

There does not appear to be any further large number of deaths in Birchington, from an examination of the Registers.

In **1637** in Birchington most of the deaths occurred during the summer and early autumn.

July	6	Oct	15	Jan	2
Aug	11	Nov	4		
Sept	13	Dec	2		

