

THE PLAGUE IN BIRCHINGTON

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Birchington during its history has suffered on several occasions from visits of the Plague. Several outbreaks of this dreadful pestilence can be traced in our Churchwardens Account Books, the Parish Registers and in the Poor Books. The earliest recorded visitation was in the 16th century and caused the second book of the Register to be called the “black boke”, and in 1603 in the Churchwardens Account Book we find this entry,

“for II [2] prayer bookes in the time of the Plague XVId”

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.

The **second book** was probably called the black book because of the many deaths recorded in it due to the plague. There is no doubt that Birchington had many attacks of plague before records were kept here, and no doubt Birchington was severely attacked by the Black Death in the mid 13 hundreds. The plague was probably 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 as we have now. All our water came from wells, and of course there was no collection of rubbish. Hence disease spread quickly. The year 1544, the time of Henry VIII, was a bad year when there were 50 burials, when the 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.

The **third book** commences 1564.



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 a year in Birchington. Of these 72 burials, 14 were the breadwinners of the family, so the widows and orphans had to be provided for by the 40 ratepayers of the parish.

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 history. The Minister at the time was George

Stancombe who remained at his post and buried the 64. Of these, in the Burial Register, he marked the word "plague" against the names of 35. Of the 64, 15 were the breadwinners so the 41 ratepayers of Birchington had to find quite large sums of money to provide for the widows, 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 of money in those days, and this sum was spent in various ways to help the poor and sick. These accounts though simply contain the items of expenditure from 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, of help given to widows, orphans and the sick.

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

"Item - to Dr Randolfe at 2 sevall tymes, 5s and to Mr Watson ye Apothecary at 2 sevall tymes, 27s for phisicke for ye visited people and one jorney to Canterbury about ye same business 4s in toto 01 16 00

Item - to Jo Penny for ye use of his wheel barrow to carry ye visited dead people for burying 00 02 00

Item - to Roberts his wife for burning old rages yt lay about 00 00 06

Item - to Will Twiman & his wife during ye tyme of their restraint for necessaryes from Aug 2 1637 unto ye 14 following 00 19 06

Item - to Jo Thorpe, his wife & children from Sept 6 1637 unto Sept 28 following ye tyme of their restraint 01 19 00

Item - to Edw Smith his wife & children from Sept 28 1637 to No 26 following ye tyme of their restraint 04 04 06

Item - for ½ chauldron of coales ye boore visited people and fetching ym from Margate 00 11 06



These extracts are from the **Acol Poor Book**.

Item - to Will Derricke from May 7 1637 unto June 11 following 5 weekes at 6d ye weeke 00 02 06

Item - 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 Twiman for looking to her one weeke then 00 02 00

It. to Nic Hoskins wife for looking to her one other weeke then 00 01 00

It. for coales for then 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 herself Aug 31 (Alice Derricke)	00 02 06
It. to ye women for watching with her, laying her forth, socking her, & washing her cloathes	00 04 03
It. for beere to ye men yt 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, (scarves?) 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** was **1665+** but this was a good year in Birchington, as there were only 11 burials, (and only 8 burials in 1666), so it seems as if the Great Plague did not reach here until nearly 4 years later in **1669**.



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 below, from the Churchwardens Account Books, show this:-

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 I 1i 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.

J. 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. 'Re 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.

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

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

The Plague and Fire of London left an indelible mark on England's psyche



Drawing of the Great Fire of London - 1666