

Sample

# How Norwich Fought Against the Plague

Lessons from the Past

Frank Meeres

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The Parish register of St. Giles, for the year such documents became compulsory, 1538.



Norwich Guildhall, where the Mayor and aldermen met twice a week to impose restrictions to try and prevent the spread of the plague.

Poppyland Publishing is pleased to announce *How Norwich Fought Against the Plague: Lessons from the Past* by Frank Meeres.

The global pandemic of 2020-21 has upset the lives of millions throughout the world bringing into stark reality the fragility of our way of life or even human existence. It has highlighted how well we react in a crisis and how the decisions taken by civic authorities can ensure the safety or otherwise of the population.

In this book the author, through a close examination of surviving records from different periods, looks at the outbreak of bubonic plague in the city of Norwich from the first wave in 1348-1349 to its last in 1666-67. The reader will find they used familiar ways of combatting the disease: isolation, lockdown, shielding, movement restrictions, closure of schools and places of entertainment and social distancing. There was also a recognition that certain 'key workers' were needed to ensure society continued to function as normally as possible. While some made fortunes, the devastating effect on the economy, with the poorest in society being the worst hit, is perhaps the least well documented.

Some historians argue that plague heralded in seismic changes as a 'new normal' led to rapid social change: this book shows how decisions made at the time affected the city in many ways.

### **About the author**

Frank Meeres is a well known historian of Norwich and the county of Norfolk. His best selling books include, *A History of Norwich*, *A History of Great Yarmouth*, *Strangers—a History of Norwich's Incomers* and biographies of Norwich MPs Dorothy Jewson and George Roberts.

The author studied at King's College, University of London and his long career at the Norfolk Record Office gives him significant insight into the wonderful resources available there.



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## The Black Death in Norwich, 1349

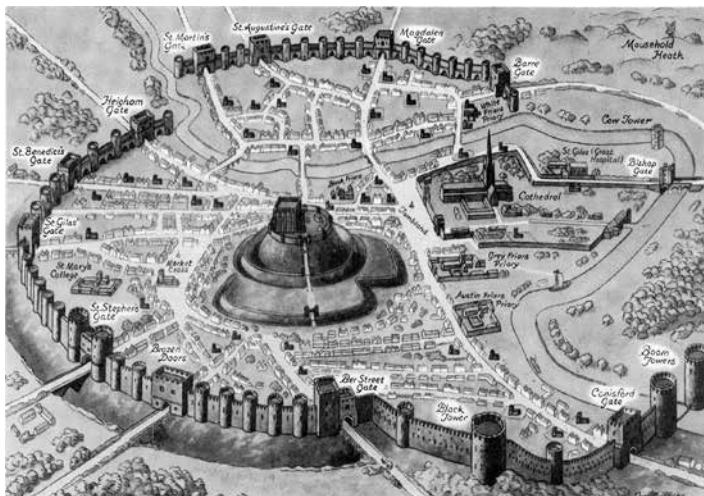
**W**E do not know how many people were living in Norwich before the plague struck in 1349. Estimates are really little more than guesses. Jim Bolton writes:

At Norwich, England's second or third city, with a pre-plague population of some 10-12,000, the plague arrived in January 1349 and raged until spring 1350. Perhaps 40-45% of the population died.' P Lindley makes a higher guess: 'East Anglia, indeed, seems to have been particularly hard hit by the plague. Norwich, with a population of well over 13,000 before the plague, lost over half its citizens and not only did it never recover its position in relation to the rest of England but, in absolute terms, had barely regained its vanished population by the end of the sixteenth century.'<sup>1</sup>

More recent work has suggested that the population of Norwich was considerably higher than previously thought. Elizabeth Rutledge has looked at tithing records for the two parishes of St Peter Mancroft and St Stephen and extrapolated from these that the population was between 15,000 and 17,000 in 1311, 'rising to nearly 25,000 by 1333.'<sup>2</sup>

Philip Ziegler says that the plague reached East Anglia in March, peaking in the summer months of May to July. The manor court rolls for Hunstanton confirm this chronology: they show no effects of the plague in March, but many deaths in April and these deaths continue throughout the summer months, stopping only in October. The chronicle of the Lynn Grey Friars' says the same, 'In 1349 at about Easter or a little earlier, pestilence broke out in East Anglia and lasted for the whole summer'<sup>3</sup>

A crisis like that of the Black Death would today produce an enormous amount of documentary material. Things were very different in 1349: few records were made, and not all of these have survived. One key difference is in the recording of individual lives. Since 1837, every birth and death in the country has been recorded. Between 1538 and 1837, although there was not a registration system of births and deaths, each church kept a record of baptisms and burials. Before 1538, there was no kind of registration at all: names are only recorded when



Representation of Norwich at the time of the Black Death.

one person succeeds to the property or official job of another. We can look at some examples of the forms of record for 1349 that tell us about these groups of people: even where there are obviously an unusual number of deaths, the plague will almost never be directly mentioned as the cause of the upheaval.

The three principal types of sources are the archives of the city of Norwich; the records of the Church; and, for the areas outside Norwich, manor records.

## 1. THE CITY ARCHIVES

The great eighteenth-century historian, Francis Blomefield, looked at the city archives and found this evidence in the **Norwich Mayor's Book**:

In 1348, Jan 1, the plague broke out in this city, from which time, to the first of July following, as our historians assure us, there died no less than 57,104 (or more rightly as others have it, 57,374) persons, in this city only, besides religious and beggars; the great numbers that all historians agreed died here in this mortality, surprise some, who imagine, that because there are not so many now in the whole city there must be a mistake in the figures, but there is not, for thus sith the best record for this purpose, 'In this yere was swiche a dethe in Norwic that there died of ye pestilence 57,374 beside religious and beggars', and our historian afore quoted is only mistaken as to the time, it being computed from Jan 1 1348 to Jan 1 1349, namely a whole year.

Blomefield made his own deductions from what he saw as the recorded facts. He guessed that there might have been over a thousand people in each parish in the city and that there were over 70 places of divine worship, so that the population of Norwich before 1349, including its suburbs, could have been over 70,000. Stow gives a similar figure. He says that between 1 January and 1 July in Norwich, 57,104 people died of plague: he excludes 'ecclesiastical mendicants and Dominicans' (meaning, friars).

Blomefield also quotes a passage from the **Norwich 'Book of Pleas'**:

In the year of Our Lord 1349, God Almighty visited mankind with a deadly plague which began in the south parts of the world, and went through even the north parts thereof, attacking all nations of the world: this plague equally destroyed Christians, Jews and Saracens, killed the confessor and the confesses in many places this plague did not leave the fifth part of the people alive, it struck the world with great fear, so great was the pestilence, that the like was never seen, heard, nor read of before, for it was believed, that there was not a greater number of souls destroyed by the flood in the days of Noah, than died by this plague.

Blomefield is quoting from two different volumes among the Norwich city archives. That from the Book of Pleas is a dramatic quotation, but it is not meant to describe Norwich in particular, but rather to describe the whole world. It is actually a copy of a chronicle written in Louth Abbey in Lincolnshire and copied word by word into the Norwich book.

The actual figure comes from a list of events in the Mayor's Book. This book was not even bought by the city until 1526 so it is in no sense contemporary evidence.

Other evidence comes from the lists of names of the bailiffs of the city. There were four of these, appointed for a year: but they could serve the office on more than one occasion. Do these names suggest a great change happening at the end of the 1340s? I have looked at the lists: in the 1330s, 29 men served as bailiff, five serving twice and three serving three times. In the 1340s, 33 men served as bailiff, seven serving twice. Fourteen of the men had served in the previous decade. In the 1350s, 35 men served, three serving twice and one serving three times. They included fourteen men who had served in the 1340s, so there had been **no** sudden mortality amongst these group of men. Historians, William Hudson and J C Tingey, confirm my figures: according to their calculations, of 54 men named in the ten years before 1350, 27 are known 'from various sources' to have survived.<sup>4</sup>

### **Title Deeds**

Norwich has a series of enrolled deeds recording, among other things, transfers of property in the city. Unfortunately, there is a gap of 37 years in the series, from 1340 to 1377. Fifteen of the title deeds from which the rolls would have been subscribed do survive for the year 1349, and a further three deeds for the same year survive among the archives of Norwich Cathedral. Of the fifteen deeds, two are wills and are discussed below. The most important of the others is a grant of 16 September 1349 by the bailiffs of the city: they grant to Robert Bendiste, citizen, a *vacant* place in the parish of St Peter Mancroft, for which he agrees to pay rent. Here is direct evidence that, presumably because of the death of its former owner and any heirs he may have had, that here is unclaimed property in the centre of the city.

Several of the other deeds suggest there has been a recent death. Another property in St Peter Mancroft, in this case described as a shop, was sold by Adam de Illington in September 1349: he had bought it from the executors of Thomas Pestissane. In the same month, the executor of the late Robert Papungey, saddler, disposes of his property in St Mary the Less to his widow. In November 1349, John le Cook sells tenements and rents that he had bought from Matilda, the daughter of Geoffrey de Earlham: she is still alive as she quitclaims the new owner of any claim she has, but her father may have recently died and can have left no male heir as his daughter has inherited.

Two deeds relating to the property of the Godyng family in St Matthew suggest possible family deaths in 1349. In July, a brew house belonging formerly to Richard Godyng is sold off by William Godyng, presumably his relative. In December, William's daughter is involved in the sale of the property formerly owned by her father. Perhaps Richard and William Godyng have died in quick succession. We know from other evidence (see below) that there was a high mortality rate in the parish of St Matthew, which was on Holme Street, near the Great Hospital.

### **Freemen of Norwich**

Penny Dunn says: 'The largest number of entrants for any year in the history to the **Liber Introitus Civicum** or Old Free Book, is recorded in 1349-50, when 120 men paid to join the Norwich franchise. In the previous year only twenty-one individuals had taken up the privilege and it seems that immigrants from outside Norwich were mostly responsible for the gradual provision of new citizens in the months following the loss of so many leading residents!'<sup>5</sup>

Seventeen new freemen were registered on the Translation of St Edward 1349 (13 October 1349), and 70 on the Saturday after the Feast of the



Circumcision 1350 (3 January 1350). In terms of occupations, 24 of these 87 men have occupational surnames including three skinners, two mercers, two cutlers, two baxters (bakers) and two clerks, and the others having a wide variety of occupation. In terms of location, about 60 have names indicating the place from which they come, and these embrace a large number of Norfolk villages, especially along the Yare valley, the areas around Wroxham, Dereham and Swaffham. Some are very local such as 'John de Bracondale, mercer', while only two have names definitely suggesting that they have come from outside Norfolk: Semannus of Beccles, in Suffolk but only 20 miles from Norwich, and Thomas of Leighton Buzzard, in Bedfordshire and about 110 miles from Norwich. I have listed the names of these incomers, beneficiaries of the high mortality caused by the Black Death in the city, in Appendix One. There is one man from further afield among the 28 new freemen in the following year: Simon de Almannia, but most of the losses among city trades appear to have been made up by recruiting from within the county.

### **The City Assembly Records**

Two actions taken by the City in the twenty years after the Black Death, show that there had been a crisis and that it was still ongoing:

1. Assembly of 19 November 1354 (from the Book of Customs)

Whereas great injuries and dangers so often have happened before this time in the City of Norwich and still happen from day to day in so much as boars, sows and pigs before this time and still go vagrant by day and night without a keeper in the said city, whereby divers persons and children have thus been hurt by boars, children killed and eaten and others buried exhumed, and others maimed, and many persons of the said city have received great injuries as wrecking of houses, destruction of gardens of divers persons by such kind of pigs upon which great complaint is often brought before the said bailiffs and community imploring them for remedy on the misfortunes, dangers and injuries which have been done to them.

The Assembly ordered that pigs were to be kept in their enclosures: any pig found going at large without a keeper could freely be killed. Every pig owner could let their pig out each Saturday from noon in order to clean their sties. Similar measures were applied to dogs wandering in the city—but certain dogs such as greyhounds, spaniels and dogs used for sports were excepted.

2. Order of 12 June 1368 (from the Old Free Book) allowing the church of St Peter Mancroft to enlarge its cemetery to take in part of the Market Place. The property consists of two lanes and a piece of vacant land. One lane,

called the Lindraperierowe had drapers' stalls on the south side and stalls of the worstedrow and spicerisrowe on the north side. The other lane had stalls 'late called the draperierowe' on both sides. Both lanes adjoined the common market at their east ends. The piece of empty land was at the west end of the lanes.

## 2. CHURCH RECORDS

There are several classes of record showing how the church was affected by the Black Death—appointments of clergymen, records of monastic houses, visitation records, and wills.

### Appointments of clergymen

Diocese of Norwich includes the whole of Norfolk and Suffolk. The annual average of episcopal institutions in diocese as a whole in the years before the Black Death was 81. In the single year 25 March 1349 to 24 March 1350 the number of institutions was 831. This equates to a mortality rate of 48.8%, joint highest of the English dioceses with Exeter and Winchester: some dioceses were rather lower, especially York at 39%. Christopher Harper-Bill improves on these figures: the average in the five years before 1349 was 77. In 1349, 800 parishes lost their incumbents, 83 of them twice, ten of them three times.

There was quite a high turnover in Norwich itself in the plague months. The situation is complicated because not all new appointments appear in the Bishop's register. Phyllis Pobst says that 20 parishes in the city, and possibly 24, were *donatives* - 'preferment was made to these by the patrons, without presentation to the bishop': so these would not be recorded in the episcopal records.

Presentations to Norwich parishes between June and December 1349:

June:	Augustine, Michael at Plea,
July	Stephen, Edward, Swithin, Lawrence
August	Augustine (again), All Saints
October	Margaret, Lawrence (again), Botolph
December	Michael in King Street, Mary Unbrent

Churches which were not *donatives*, but where there was no change of incumbent between June and December 1349: Peter Mancroft, Peter Southgate, Andrew, John Maddermarket, Peter Parmentergate, George Tombland, Clement, Edward, Mary Coslany, Michael Coslany. Thus about half of the parishes in Norwich that appear in the episcopal registers appointed new incumbents in the second half of 1349—two of them made two appointments.<sup>6</sup>

For comparison, I have looked at the same period in the previous year: there was not a single new appointment to a Norwich parish in the Bishop's register

in the months June to December 1348, so clearly something unusual was happening in the city in 1349.

The bishop at the time of the Black Death was Bishop Bateman. He was conducting peace negotiations in France. On his return, he landed at Yarmouth on 10 June, when the plague was raging in his diocese: he was told that his brother, Sir Bartholomew Bateman of Gillingham, was dead. He returned to Norwich but then retreated to his rural palace at Hoxne, where he stayed until the plague was over.

### Monastic houses in Norwich

#### St Mary in the fields

This was a college of priests on the site of the present Assembly House. There were six prebends and no less than four new appointments to these positions had to be made July 1349. One of these was himself replaced in October. This is clear evidence of a high mortality rate in this college.

#### Norwich Cathedral

There is evidence that there were about 65 monks in all in 1348, half of whom died in the plague. Numbers took time to rise, but there were over 50 again by the 1360s.

The figures are based on the St Leonard's cell account rolls: the cell paid a small sum as pocket money to each monk. H W Saunders, who researched the Cathedral account rolls, says that the figure dropped from an unknown number before the Black Death to 37. (He says that the sum paid in 1353-4 was £4, which is eighty shillings. The customary payment was two shillings a monk, but he thinks it likely that the prior took the share of four monks, hence his total of 37 monks). Sixty eight shillings were paid to the convent in 1354-5 and 98 shillings in 1373.

However, the Cathedral officials appear not to have succumbed at such a rate: Saunders points out that nine of the ten obedientiaries lived through the Black Death, the only exception being Ralph de Swanton.<sup>7</sup>

The accounts of the communar and pitancer also reveal evidence of crisis.



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