
Plague and Poor Relief in Cambridge, 1665–1666*

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Abstract

Plague and the poor law were inextricably entwined, yet there has been little research into the extent to which poor relief contributed to the economic costs of plague epidemics. While much of the huge expense plague represented to local communities was met largely by special plague rates, fasts and fines, and income from charitable briefs, poor relief was a part of this mixed economy of funds. Through a microhistory of the parish of St Benedict in Cambridge in the town's worst outbreak of plague in 1665–1666, this article indicates that poor relief supported a substantial number of families and paid for their burials. The costs met by overseers represented around one month's additional parish spending. If this was scaled up proportionately to all fourteen parishes this would represent a significant sum of money.

Introduction

Plague and the poor law were inextricably entwined. Plague regulations and the poor law were part of a bigger project of reform by the Tudors and Stuarts. Paul Slack argues that the plague regulations ‘marched forward in step with the poor law’.² The establishment of the poor laws over the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries enshrined in legislation a new obligation by the rich to the poor through poor rates.³ This was only in a small part to do with relief of the poor and those suffering from plague; it was in large part an attempt to impose order upon an unruly commonwealth. Moreover, order and disease were linked. The ‘social diseases’ of vagrancy and poverty were thought to encourage plague.⁴ To an extent plague was a symptom of the poverty of overcrowded and unhygienic tenements and was also one of the leading causes of poverty because plague disrupted employment and markets.⁵ Pest houses for plague victims were only intended for the ‘meaner sorts’ and were frequently located on the fringes of communities.⁶ These policies worked in opposite directions, however: the plague orders were imposed from the centre while the poor laws had ‘originate[d] in provincial experiments, which were then adopted by parliament and the

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2 P. Slack, *The Impact of Plague in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford, 1985), p. 306.

3 Slack, *Poverty and Policy in Tudor and Stuart England* (London, 1988), pp. 122–31.

4 Slack, *Poverty and Policy*, pp. 138–41; J.F. Merritt, *The Social World of Early Modern Westminster* (Manchester, 2005), p. 295.

5 Slack, *Poverty and Policy*, pp. 50–1.

6 Slack, *Impact of Plague*, p. 306.

Privy Council'.⁷ This article engages with two of the themes Roger Schofield researched: disease and the social order, and taxation.⁸

The relationship between the plague regulations, the poor law, and relief of the poor and the sick was not straightforward and was not under statute until 1604. The first plague regulations date from 1518.⁹ Although few towns made compulsory plague rates for relief of the infected before the 1570s, there were some exceptions, such as York in 1538, Lincoln in 1550, and Cambridge in 1556.¹⁰ Under the 1572 Poor Law rates were raised for the relief of the poor and for plague rates, while the Plague Orders of 1578 allowed magistrates to impose a 'general taxation' for the relief of those infected.¹¹ The Poor Law Acts of 1598 and 1601 established a national system of poor relief.¹² The Plague Orders received the support of statute in 1604: this allowed justices to raise local rates for the sick within a five-mile radius or, if necessary, within the county, with the first penal sanctions for those not complying with the plague regulations. These requirements were made permanent in 1641.¹³ The principle to isolate and support the sick poor from public funds was accepted in larger towns by 1610 and in the counties by 1625.¹⁴ The entwining of the poor laws and plague regulations is clear in the short printed book *Four Statutes* (1609, reprinted in 1630 and 1636) which included the Vagrancy and Poor Law Acts of 1598 and 1601 and the book of Plague Orders.¹⁵ Likewise, the Book of Orders of 1631 included the compulsory apprenticing of pauper children, the clearing of the roads of vagrants, and the relief of the poor.¹⁶ The 1662 Act of Settlement codified who was entitled to poor relief and how a person might earn a settlement in a particular parish.¹⁷

Nevertheless, poor relief was not the normal method of paying for the economic dislocation caused by the plague. Communities raised the money in a variety of ways. As just noted, from 1604 plague rates could be levied within five miles or the county. After 1625 charitable briefs (a more systematic form of charitable giving) were also issued.¹⁸

7 P. Slack, *Impact of Plague*, p. 200.

8 R. Schofield, '“Crisis” mortality', *Local Population Studies*, 9 (1972), pp. 10–22; J. Walter and R. Schofield (eds), *Famine, Disease and the Social Order in Early Modern Society* (Cambridge, 1989); R. Schofield, *Taxation under the Early Tudors, 1485–1547* (Oxford, 2004).

9 Slack, *Impact of Plague*, pp. 201–3.

10 Slack, *Impact of Plague*, p. 204.

11 Slack, *Impact of Plague*, pp. 210–12; Slack, *Poverty and Policy*, p. 139.

12 Slack, *Poverty and Policy*, p. 126.

13 Slack, *Impact of Plague*, p. 211; Slack, *Poverty and Policy*, p. 128.

14 Slack, *Impact of Plague*, p. 200.

15 Slack, *Poverty and Policy*, p. 140.

16 Slack, *Poverty and Policy*, p. 142.

17 Slack, *Poverty and Policy*, pp. 192–5.

18 J. Field, 'Charitable giving and its distribution to Londoners after the Great Fire, 1666–1676', *Urban History*, 38 (2011), pp. 3–23, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0963926811000010>; I.W. Archer, 'The charity of early modern Londoners', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 12 (2002), pp. 223–44, here at p. 241, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0080440102000075>; C.S. Schen, *Charity and Lay Piety in Reformation London, 1500–1620* (Aldershot, 2002), p. 8; M. Harris, '“Inky blots and rotten parchment bonds”: London, charity briefs and the Guildhall Library', *Historical Research*, 66 (1993), pp. 98–110, here at p. 103, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2281.1993.tb01801.x>; W.A. Bewes, *Church Briefs: or, Royal Warrants for Collections for Charitable Objects* (London, 1896), pp. 101–254.

Money was also raised by fasts and fines associated with not following the Plague Orders. The poor law might play a role in three ways: corporations could borrow from endowed funds for the relief of the poor; officials might loan money to those shut up in quarantine and expect it to be paid back later or gift the costs to those unable to repay; and there was always the possibility of poor relief from the poor rates for the sick and poverty-stricken, without repayment.¹⁹ This last aspect has been hitherto largely unexplored by historians who, because they argue this was not the normal method of raising the money required, have not examined the extent to which poor relief assisted suffering communities. Ian Archer argues that overseers' accounts 'are not necessarily accurate guides because special funds often received separate accounts'.²⁰

Plague in Cambridge

This article, therefore, considers the role of the poor law and poor relief in Cambridge during its worst outbreak of plague in 1665–1666. Indeed, this epidemic was the worst outbreak in England since the Black Death of 1348 and other outbreaks in the late fourteenth century. It is estimated that London lost approximately 15 per cent of its population and that most totals underestimate its true scale. Most of the sick in this occurrence were suffering from bubonic plague, contracted from a flea bite carried by the black rat, which carried the *yersinia pestis* bacteria. Between 30 and 60 per cent of sufferers died within two weeks.²¹ The Cambridge Bills of Mortality for 1665–1666 recorded 920 plague deaths and 384 individuals who had recovered out of a population of 7,123 which means that 13 per cent of the total population died.²² Plague mortality rose between September and early November 1665, fell thereafter, then rose again more substantially from at least June until early October 1666.²³ At least 80 per cent of all deaths recorded in the Bills were of plague.²⁴ The Cambridgeshire magistrate Thomas Sclater recorded in his notebook in 1665 to, '[g]et the pesthouse aired \&/ clean and the keepers house and a keeper discreet and resolute and a searcher for all that dye and watchmen for the pesthouse to carry provisions'.²⁵ By Trinity Term of 1666 magistrates recorded that, 'the Towne of Cambridge in the said County for divers weeks last past hath beene and yet is very much

19 Merritt, *Social World of Early Modern Westminster*, pp. 293–309; K.L.S. Newman, 'Shutt up: bubonic plague and quarantine in early modern England', *Journal of Social History*, 45 (2012), pp. 809–34, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jsh/shr114>.

20 I.W. Archer, *The Pursuit of Stability: Social Relations in Elizabethan London* (Cambridge, 1991), p. 199.

21 <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/resources/great-plague/> [accessed 9 November 2020]; <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/plague> [accessed 9 November 2020].

22 Cambridge University Library [hereafter CUL], Bills of Mortality for Cambridge, University/T.X.21; N. Evans and S. Rose, *Cambridgeshire Hearth Tax Returns Michaelmas 1664* (London, 2000), p. xlvi. See also N. Goose, 'Household size and structure in early-Stuart Cambridge', *Social History*, 5 (1980), pp. 347–85, here at p. 352; E. Lord, *The Great Plague: a People's History* (New Haven, 2014).

23 CUL, University/T.X.21.

24 CUL, University/T.X.21.

25 Bodleian Library, Notebook of Thomas Sclater, MS. Rawl. D. 1136, p. 70.

infected with the Plague.²⁶ During 1665 mortality was highest in absolute numbers in the parishes of St Clements and St Peter, while in the following year it was worst in St Andrew the Great, Holy Trinity, and All Saints, followed by St Benedict and Great St Mary.²⁷

This research presents a micro-history of one of Cambridge's twelve parishes, St Benedict, which had a population of 472 and recorded 49 plague deaths (around 10 per cent of the total population) in the burial register in 1666.²⁸ It was a middling parish in terms of wealth, ranked eighth (of twelve from poorest to richest), with 17 per cent of households exempt from the hearth tax.²⁹ The parish was in two parts: one small area in the centre of the town and a larger area to the south. Having a suburban section might have pushed up the proportion of exempt households.³⁰ Unfortunately, the overseers' accounts do not survive for the poorest Cambridge parishes, St Peter and St Giles, with 41 per cent and 31 per cent of households exempt respectively. Although it might be expected that poorer parishes suffered more from plague—since the association between poverty and plague had been established in the sixteenth century—poorer parishes would also have struggled to raise poor rates for the sick given their low rate bases.³¹ Thus a middle-ranking parish might have had more ability to raise poor rates and relieve the sick and poor.

We know more about how money was raised in Cambridge than how it was spent. Over the seventeenth century the town had raised funds through special compulsory plague rates (before and after they had received statutory approval in 1604), as well as through fasts and fines levied by the Vice Chancellor and Mayor's Court.³² The colleges also donated money for the poor during the plague.³³ In 1630 and 1666 charitable briefs were issued for plague in Cambridge.³⁴ Due to poor and scattered source survival, it is impossible to know how frequently these different methods were employed and the sums of money raised. In the epidemic of 1665–1666 magistrates noted 'the sudden spreading of the said infecc[i]on are now very numerous' and so 'made sev[er]all rates for the reliefe of the p[er]sons infected within the said towne & inhabiteing in houses and places infected within the said Towne'.³⁵ The justice of the peace Thomas Scalter recorded in his notebook that in Cambridge an '11 months rate was signed by the Justices' and that it also needed collecting from 'those that

26 Cambridgeshire Archives, Quarter Sessions, Q/S 01, p. 107.

27 Cambridgeshire Archives, transcription of Cambridge city burial registers.

28 Evans and Rose, *Cambridgeshire Hearth Tax*, p. xlv (number of householders (111) x 4.25); Cambridgeshire Archives, transcription of St Benedict burial register.

29 Evans and Rose, *Cambridgeshire Hearth Tax*, Table 10, p. xlv; see also T. Arkell, 'Identifying regional variations from the hearth tax', *Local Historian*, 33 (2003), pp. 148–74; and H. Falvey, 'Assessing an early modern fenland population: Whittlesey (Cambridgeshire)', *Local Population Studies*, 92 (2014), pp. 7–23, <https://doi.org/10.35488/lps92.2014.7>.

30 Evans and Rose, *Cambridgeshire Hearth Tax*, p. xliii.

31 Slack, *Impact of Plague*, pp. 166–9; Merritt, *Social World of Early Modern Westminster*, pp. 302–7.

32 CUL, CUR 54, University Registry guard books, 'Plague'.

33 CUL, CUR 54, f. 2.

34 CUL, CUR 54.2, University Registry guard books, 'Plague'; J.F.D. Shrewsbury, *A History of Bubonic Plague in the British Isles* (Cambridge, 1970), p. 515; see also Slack, *Impact of Plague*, p. 280.

35 Cambridgeshire Archives, Q/S 01.

removed out of the towne'.³⁶ It was always difficult to levy rates on those who had fled, including their recovery after the epidemic had faded.³⁷ On 5 September 1665 it was recorded for the parish of Great St Mary in their rate books that:

A two months rate made by the Churchwarden and overseers for the poor in Great St Marys parish for and Towards the rlife of the visated and those that are shut up at the Pest house by an order from Dr Dillingham: Deputi Vice chancellor and Alderman Finch maior under their hands and seals for the same. Collected by Edward Story: Church warden and payd to the maior, with a resete for the same under his hand.³⁸

These amounted to £8 12s. 4d. in August and £9 16s. 4d. in September, and a six-months' rate of £27 12s. 6d. on 20 October. Sclater and another magistrate, Roger Pepys, noted at the quarter sessions that it would not be possible to raise a rate within a radius of five miles of Cambridge 'without being over burdensome' and so ordered a rate on the whole county monthly.³⁹

It is difficult to establish how the sums were spent without detailed plague rate expenditure lists. One list does survive from 1647, when the number of plague deaths was relatively low.⁴⁰ Careful accounts of expenditure suggest two pest houses were being used and just over £66 was spent on a handful of families infected with the plague, such as the Bridges (18 per cent of expenditure), and the Calverleys, Mitts, and Redheads (around a combined 10 per cent), with cash, coals, the airing of their houses, medicine, and grave digging. Five other families required relief because they lived next to those shut up (quarantined). The only other records of the recipients of any form of relief in times of plague for Cambridge are the few remaining overseers' accounts after the mid-seventeenth century. The rest of this article considers the role of poor relief in the parish of St Benedict in 1665–1666.

Plague and poor relief in Cambridge, St Benedict parish

The findings for St Benedict parish reveal that poor relief given to those impacted by the plague was not insubstantial. Eleven families, accounting for 31 plague burials (63 per cent of plague deaths in the parish), were relieved by the overseers over the five months between June and October 1666 when plague mortality was recorded.⁴¹ Plague deaths clustered in

36 Bodleian Library, MS. Rawl. D. 1136, p. 72.

37 Merritt, *Social World of Early Modern Westminster*, pp. 295–6.

38 Cambridgeshire Archives, P30/11/1, Great St Mary, Overseers Accounts and rates, 1648–1672, 5 September 1665.

39 Cambridgeshire Archives, Q/S 01.

40 CUL X18 'Plague', 1647. In Cambridge city parishes (excluding St Andrews the Less due to poor recording) there were 297 deaths from all causes, compared to a low point of 176 in 1645, and, later, 132 in 1655; recognised plague years were 1625 with 508 burials, 1630 with 699, and 1666 with 835. See Cambridgeshire Archives, transcription of Cambridge city burial registers, 1624–1666.

41 Cambridgeshire Archives, Overseers Poor Rates: Volume of rates and accounts: rates being levied monthly, P25/11/1-2, 1653–1679; Composite Register, P25/1/12, 1539–1702.

families: the burial register for St Benedict records 26 surname groupings; thus the families in receipt of poor relief accounted for 42 per cent of the families recording at least one plague death. Plague killed people of all ages in St Benedict—poor couples, couples with children, and the aged poor. Evelyn Lord found for Cambridge in 1665–1666 that 70 per cent of all plague victims were adults and 30 per cent were children.⁴² In June 1666 St Benedict's overseers paid Daniel Morley 2s. 'for kepinge strangers out of the Church in the time of Visitation 2 Sundays'.⁴³ The parish authorities responded to the outbreak in a variety of ways, over and above whatever was raised and spent from the special plague rates, fasts, fines, and charity. There were the 'already poor', who were in receipt of poor relief when they became infected. And then there were the 'occasionally poor', who were just given occasional cash sums in the months before they were sick. Rent was sometimes paid. There were also the 'funeral poor'—a few of the 11 families had been independent of poor relief but, nevertheless, could not afford the costs of the burial of their relatives and they had to be buried at the parish's expense. Somewhat surprisingly, there was no evidence in St Benedict of individuals who became sick and/or died of plague and whose relatives then came on to longer-term relief.

The Coward, Royse, and Lumpkin families were 'already poor': they were already parish pensioners at the start of the accounting year of 1665 (Lady Day, 25 March). They appear to have received poor relief tailored to their needs and local prices. The Cowards collected a regular monthly sum of 2s. 8d. at the start of 1665, rising to 4s. in June and 6s. the following March when everyone's pensions were higher, falling again to 4s., then 3s. George Coward was listed in the hearth tax as living in a divided tenement shared with two others, Mary Painter and Ann Sayers, and they were all described as 'poore'.⁴⁴ The Cowards' name was crossed out in July 1666, suggesting that they had been moved to the pest house, and their outstanding rent of 2s. 1d. was paid. Indeed, the Cambridge magistrate Thomas Sclater recorded, '[t]hat if any house be infected the Sicke persone or persons be forthwith [*vis*] removed to the said pesthouse Sheds or hutts for the preservac[i]on of the rest of the family'.⁴⁵ The care of the Cowards at the pest house would have been paid for out of the special plague rates. Sclater indicated that they would have been moved from their homes on a cart, along with any belongings, 'at two of the clocke in the night'.⁴⁶ George Coward was buried in early August 1666 and Thomasin 11 days later. The plague regulations meant:

[t]hat none dying of the plague be buried in Churches or Church yards (unlesse they bee large and then to have a place assigned for that use) where other bodies are not usually buried (Boarded or pailed in tenn foot Highe but in some other Convenient places and that a good quantity of unslackt Lyme be put into the

42 Lord, *Great Plague*, p. 129.

43 Cambridgeshire Archives, Overseers Poor Rates: Volume of rates and accounts: rates being levied monthly, P25/11/2, 1666-1679, 24 June 1666.

44 Evans and Rose, *Cambridgeshire Hearth Tax*, p. 31, 1662.

45 Bodleian Library, MS. Rawl. D. 1136, p. 67

46 Bodleian Library, MS. Rawl. D. 1136, p. 71.

Graves with such bodies and that such Graves be not after opend with in the space of a yeare or more lest they infect others.⁴⁷

Moreover, ‘funeralls ... be prohibited where their is any suspicion of the plague’.⁴⁸ The parish does not appear to have paid for their burials, but their funeral might have been recorded on some pages of the accounts for October 1666 which are missing.

The Royses were also already in receipt of a monthly pension from St Benedict, slightly higher than that for the Cowards, until Thomas Royse was buried in September 1666. Henry Royce also lived in a divided tenement with Edward Newline and Elizabeth Brand, and they were described as ‘poore’.⁴⁹ Before Thomas’s death the Royses had received between 3s. and 6s. If Thomas had also been moved to the pest house then his wife would have been shut up at home. Thomas Sclater recorded that if a person suffering from the plague had been removed to the pest house then, ‘such house (though none be dead therein) be shut up for fortie days and have a Red Cross and Lord have mercy upon us, in capital letters affixed on the dore’ and to, ‘[s]hut all windows opening towards infected houses’.⁵⁰ While shut up, households would have required ‘warders appointed to find them necessarys as to keepe them from conversing with the sound’.⁵¹ There were supposed to be two watchmen per household, who, earlier in the seventeenth century, had been paid 8d. each per day, and another 8d. per day was allocated for victuals, fuel, and medicine for those shut up.⁵² There is no evidence that these costs were met by the parish. After Thomas died, Goodwife Royse continued on a reduced pension, which halved to 2s. and then again to 1s.

Like the Cowards and the Royses, the Lumpkins received poor relief from October 1665 of 2s., rising to 4s. for the following four months, to a high of 6s. in March 1666, falling to 4s. thereafter, with additional payments for rent of between 1s. 7d. and 2s. 6d. paid from May 1666. Between 9 and 22 August a staggering six members of the Lumpkin family died. Again, there is no record of the burials being paid for by the parish, but it is likely that these are in the missing accounts. After such a terrible loss of family, Good[wif]e Lum[p]kin remained on poor relief, now much reduced to 1s. 8d., and having her rent of 2s. 1d. paid.

There were also two solitary pensioners, Wibrowe Weighte and Susan Yaxley, who were receiving regular monthly pensions before their deaths from the plague. Weighte was in receipt of regular relief from September 1665 until his death in July 1666 when the parish paid 1s. for his burial, while Yaxley was given similar sums from November 1665 with the last recorded entry in the overseers’ accounts of 1s. ‘[f]or Good Yaxlys burial & bell ringing’ in June 1666. It seems likely that all the regular pensioners would have required parish assistance for the expense of their burials and that these costs were in the missing overseers’ accounts.

47 Bodleian Library, MS. Rawl. D. 1136, pp. 67–8.

48 Bodleian Library, MS. Rawl. D. 1136, pp. 67–8.

49 Evans and Rose, *Cambridgeshire Hearth Tax*, p. 31.

50 Bodleian Library, MS. Rawl. D. 1136, p. 66.

51 Bodleian Library, MS. Rawl. D. 1136, p. 66.

52 Lord, *Great Plague*, pp. 130–1.

The families considered so far were regular collectioners of parish relief when plague devastated Cambridge. Others, such as Roger Page and Cornelius Barnes, had received only occasional relief before plague struck their families. Roger was recorded with two hearths and Cornelius with one.⁵³ Roger was given large sums of 8s. twice, 4s., and 10s. in the 16 months before two of his family members died, while Cornelius had only collected 1s. in November 1665 before his wife and daughter perished and the overseers paid 2s. 4d. for their burials in August 1666.

Unlike these families, the Campion, Joyse, and (Robert) Page families had received no relief in the year before the plague, but the overseers recorded paying 3s. for each of the Campion and Joyce family's burials (1s. per burial). Thomas Campion was exempt from the hearth tax.⁵⁴ Like the Lumpkin family, plague totally ravaged the Page family, six of whom died, but only five of the burials were recorded as having been paid for by the parish. In the case of the Thompsons, four of whom were buried in August, September, and October, the only entry in the overseers' accounts (for 1s.) was, 'John Thomas for Rininge [the bell for burial] and [burial] Register of Goode Thomson and his wife'. It must also be remembered that these arrangements only applied to the settled and deserving poor. In July 1665 the magistrates sitting in the quarter sessions at the Castle on Castle Hill in Cambridge had ordered that constables were to apprehend rogues, vagabonds and sturdy beggars, correct them and convey them out of Cambridge since vagrants were supposed to spread disease.⁵⁵

It is difficult to assess the efficacy of poor relief during plague epidemics because it was only one of many ways money was raised and expended upon those suffering from the disease. Sclater recorded in 1665 that, '[t]hose families that were suspected to be infected and would not remove to the pesthouses mentained themselves' (i.e. paid for their own relief) while, 'those at the pesthouses were mentand at the publique charge.'⁵⁶ The public charge would have been the special plague rates, fasts and fines, and income from charitable briefs, and possibly including poor relief. Where poor relief might have been most effective, however, was amongst the very poorest, who could not be loaned the cost of their confinement since they could not afford to pay it back and they could also not afford their own burials.

The overseers of St Benedict actually made some savings on parish pensions during plague, while also having new outgoings for the sharp spike in burials. As has been shown in the case of the Cowards and Wibrowe Weighte, their deaths actually saved the parish their monthly pension (in June 1666 a total of 5s. per month), and, with Thomas Royce's and John Lumpkin's deaths, the overseers could pay far less in monthly collection to their widows (a fall from 8s. per month in June to 5s. in November 1666). It is surprising that there is no record of the parish paying for the funerals of the Cowards, Royse, and the

53 Evans and Rose, *Cambridgeshire Hearth Tax*, p. 31.

54 Evans and Rose, *Cambridgeshire Hearth Tax*, p. 30.

55 Cambridgeshire Archives, Q/S 01, p. 92.

56 Bodleian Library, MS. Rawl. D. 1136, p. 72.

Lumpkins, which, given their poverty, seems unlikely. The burial expenses of Yaxley, the Joyces, the Campions, the Barns, Weighte, the (Robert) Pages, and the Thomsons came to an additional 17s. 4d. If the other pensioners for whom there is no record of a burial payment are included in this calculation (that is, if it is assumed that their burials were paid for in the missing accounts), this would rise to £1 6s. 4d. One way to establish the value of such spending is to compare it to the overseers' regular monthly expenditure (on pensions and rent) which was between £1 3s. 6d. (August 1666) and £1 11s. 6d. (June 1666). Thus, plague cost the overseers of St Benedict around one additional month's expenditure.

It has been possible to use the overseers' accounts in order to estimate the proportion of families assisted by the parish and the economic impact upon the poor rates. Yet 18 plague deaths (37 per cent) and 15 surname groupings (58 per cent) were not linked to the overseers' accounts: these people may well have received food, fuel and medicines, either as gifts or loans, from the special plague rates, without recourse to the overseers' accounts. Twelve individuals whose funerals were recorded as plague in the burial register were solitary names, which might suggest that a lone individual's illness and death was easier to bear financially. The others were three family surname groupings, each with two family members dying: Edward Gardner and his son Edward, John and Thomas Halfknights, and Chrysogonum and Henry Norfolk. These individuals and families were not in any of the categories of 'already poor', 'occasional poor', or 'funeral poor'.

Conclusion

The huge costs associated with a plague epidemic were not usually met from poor relief. Instead, magistrates raised special plague rates, the Vice Chancellor and Mayor imposed fasts and fines, and town officials and clergymen raised money through charitable briefs. It is possible (although unrecorded) that Cambridge Corporation borrowed from endowed funds for relief of the poor and that some of the costs of shutting up households were recovered from householders once the epidemic had faded. Nevertheless, this article has shown that parochial poor relief played an important role for some of the poorest in Cambridge society. Poor relief was a significant part of the mixed economy of plague welfare, and, moreover, plague rates were based upon the rate-base established by the poor law. A noteworthy number of those sick or dying from the plague were the 'already poor' or the 'occasional poor', while others were the 'funeral poor' whose burial fees had to be paid for by the parish. The costs met by overseers represented around one month's additional parish spending. If this were to be scaled up proportionately to all fourteen parishes this would represent a substantial sum of money.