

RESEARCH NOTE

The 1727-1731 Demographic Crisis in Non-Metropolitan Surrey*

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Abstract

This research note adds to the evidence of the scale and nature of the 1727-1731 mortality crisis by describing some evidence from the parish registers of Surrey. It shows that non-metropolitan Surrey experienced waves of raised mortality over a period of several years between 1727 and 1731 and, to a lesser extent, into 1732. The raised mortality affected different parishes at different times and to different extents. The seasonality of peaks in burials and differences in the ages of those buried provides an indication of the diseases which may have been involved. There is some evidence suggesting a degree of social disruption during the crisis.

Motivated by Paul Schoon's article in *Local Population Studies* 107 on the mortality crisis in Bedfordshire in 1727-1731, this research note seeks to add to the evidence of the scale and nature of the crisis by describing some evidence from the county of Surrey.² Non-metropolitan Surrey (that is the historical county of Surrey excluding the parishes of Southwark, Lambeth, Rotherhithe, Newington and Bermondsey) experienced a mortality crisis from 1727 to 1732. While the levels of mortality in any individual year were not as high as in the major crises the area had experienced in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it was part of a national period of high mortality and the scale and duration of the raised mortalities warrants their further consideration.³

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2 P. Schoon, 'The Bedfordshire demographic crisis of 1727-1731: some evidence of differentiated socially selective mortality', *Local Population Studies* 107 (2021), pp. 40-67, <https://doi.org/10.35488/lps107.2021.40>.

3 For details of two of these earlier crises see S. Jones, '“Big data” and parish registers: a case study of mortality in early modern non-metropolitan Surrey', *Local Population Studies* 107 (2021), pp. 12-39, <https://doi.org/10.35488/lps107.2021.12>, which also provides an outline of the county's geography and economy.

For England as a whole E.A. Wrigley and R.S. Schofield calculated that deaths in the harvest year 1727-1728 were 37 per cent above trend and deaths in the following harvest year 1728-1729 were 41 per cent above trend, placing them as the fifth and sixth most severe crisis years of the parish register era.⁴ Comparing deaths in five-year periods, they identified the quinquennium 1725-1729 as second only to 1555-1559 in the severity of the national crisis.⁵ But, according to Wrigley and Schofield's study, the south-east of England was largely unaffected. They commented: 'some parts of the country escaped infection almost entirely. Throughout England south of a line running through Gloucester, Oxford, and Chelmsford, and including London, there were very few instances of local crises.'⁶ There is, though, some evidence of a crisis in the south-east: Creighton described the four years 1726-1729 as 'a great fever-period' in London and noted that burials were especially high in London in late 1729.⁷

Wrigley and Schofield identified only one of the 13 Surrey parishes they had in observation as experiencing a crisis at this time. This was Cobham, a parish towards the north of the county in 1728-1730 (Figure 1). An exploration of all non-metropolitan Surrey's parishes suggests, however, that the area did experience a period of raised mortality, with its burials at least 20 per cent above normal for several years in succession and with some individual months witnessing twice the average monthly totals of burials. The parish registers for 127 non-metropolitan Surrey parishes survive (virtually all its parishes), and they show a similar pattern to the burials in Bedfordshire and elsewhere: non-metropolitan Surrey's burials rose rapidly in the summer of 1727, dipped somewhat, then peaked again in the winter of 1729-1730. There were subsequent lesser peaks in burials in spring 1731 and in winter 1732 (Figure 2).⁸

The extended period of increased mortality seems to have affected both rural and urban areas. Non-metropolitan Surrey's towns were of modest size with populations ranging from about 500 to 3,000. A comparison of rural and urban parishes (119 rural, 8 urban) suggests that both types of parish were affected similarly (Figure 3).

It is beyond the scope of this short research note to explore the crisis in individual parishes fully, but a few examples illustrate something of their range of experiences. One rural parish which suffered a severe period of crisis was Lingfield,

4 E.A. Wrigley and R.S. Schofield, *The Population History of England, 1541-1871: a Reconstruction* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 333.

5 Wrigley and Schofield, *Population History of England*, p. 662.

6 Wrigley and Schofield, *Population History of England*, pp. 682-3.

7 C. Creighton, *A History of Epidemics in Britain*, Vol. 2 (Cambridge, 1891), pp. 66 and 343.

8 There were only modest numbers of nonconformists in the area at this date and very few Roman Catholics.

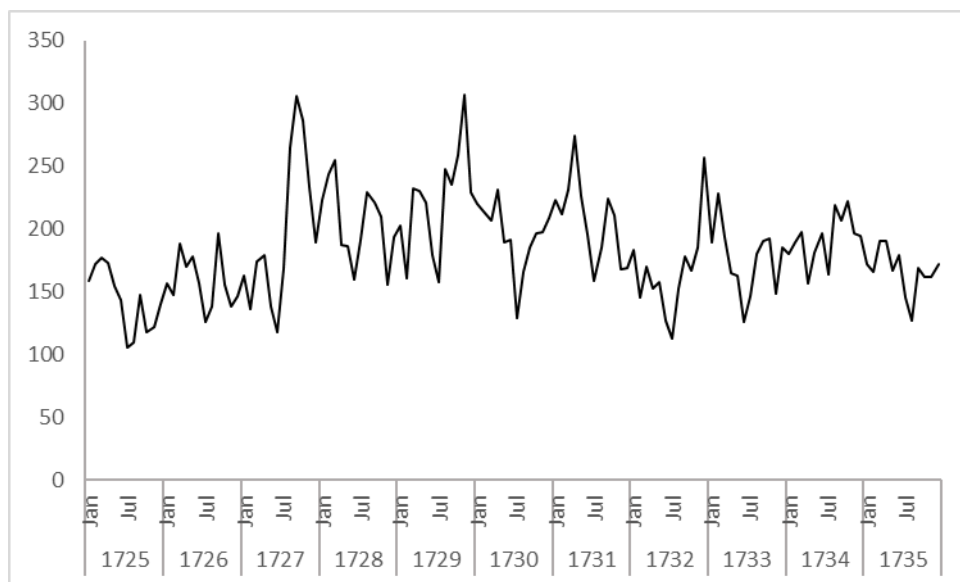
Figure 1 Monthly burials 1725-1735, Cobham, Surrey

Source: Surrey History Centre parish registers and transcripts by the West Surrey Family History Society. See Surrey History Centre, *Guide to Parish Registers Held at Surrey History Centre* [2018] <https://www.surreycc.gov.uk/culture-and-leisure/history-centre/researchers/guides/parish-registers/registers-held> [accessed 9 July 2022].

a relatively remote parish with an emphasis on pastoral agriculture in the poorer Wealden south-east of the county (Figure 4). Here, burials were somewhat raised near the start of the period but there was a severe peak in mortality in early 1731, with burials peaking at three times their usual monthly level in April and only a little less in May.

There does not seem to have been a clear pattern as to which rural parishes were affected: for example, another nearby Wealden parish, Horley, seems to have been rather less affected and to have experienced an earlier, longer lasting and less dramatic monthly increase in burials (Figure 4). There were differences too in the experiences of towns. In the well-connected town of Guildford towards the west of the county, there were two substantial peaks in burials, in September and

Figure 2 Monthly burials 1725-1735: non-metropolitan Surrey

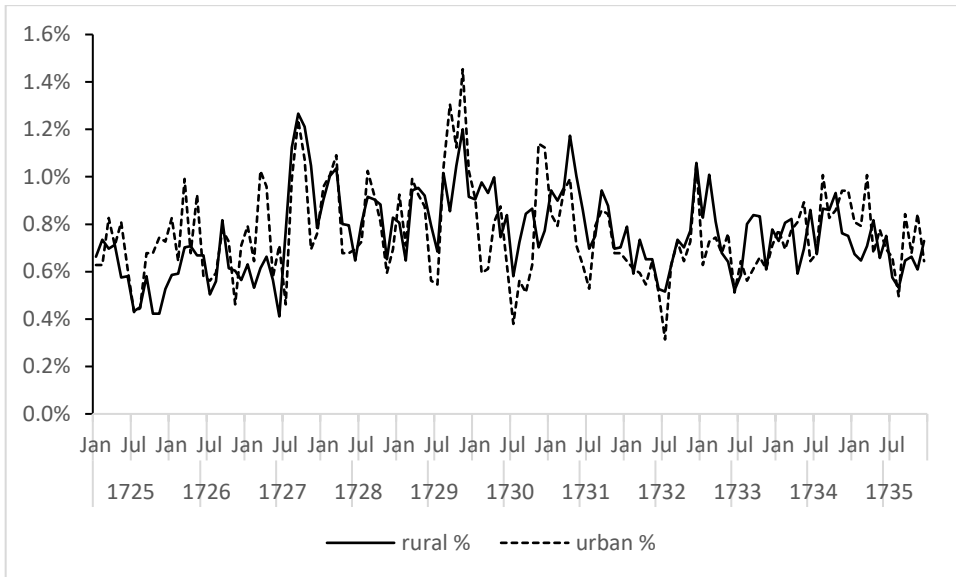


Source: Surrey History Centre parish registers and transcripts by the West Surrey Family History Society. See Surrey History Centre, *Guide to Parish Registers Held at Surrey History Centre* [2018] <https://www.surreycc.gov.uk/culture-and-leisure/history-centre/researchers/guides/parish-registers/registers-held> [accessed 9 July 2022].

October 1729 and in November and December 1730 (Figure 5).⁹ The crisis was more modest in most towns. In Croydon towards the north-east of the county and quite close to London, for example, there are signs of a more limited and earlier increase in burials (Figure 5).

9 The figures for Guildford are the total of three parishes: St Mary, Holy Trinity and St Nicholas. The dip in burials in 1730 is curious. There is limited evidence that it may in part reflect a brief failure in recording as, unusually for the parish, no baptisms, marriages or burials were recorded in Guildford Holy Trinity in either August or September 1730. Possibly the cause was the illness or death of the parish clerk. And, again unusually, in March 1730 no burials were recorded in any of the three parishes

Figure 3 Monthly burials by parish type as percentage of all burials in that category in the decade 1725-1735: non-metropolitan Surrey

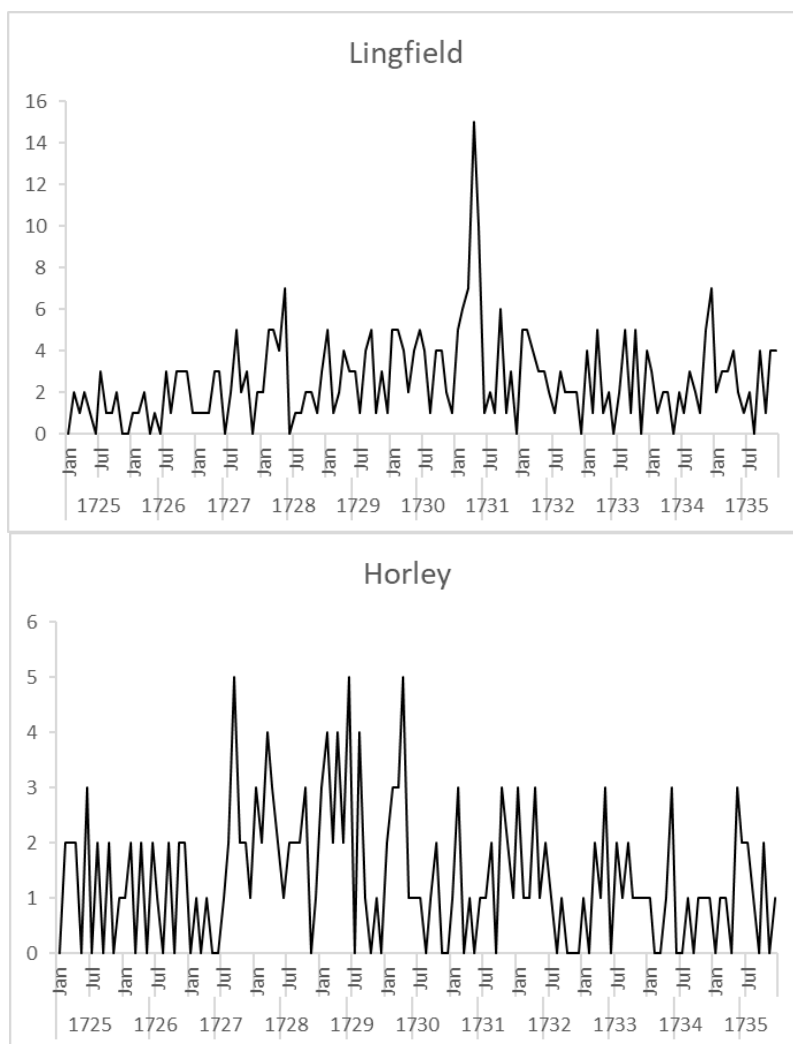


Note: This graph plots the percentage of all burials in the period 1725-1735 that took place in each month. During the whole period there were 132 months, so we should expect 0.76 per cent of the burials to take place in each month if burials were evenly spread over time.

Source: Surrey History Centre parish registers and transcripts by the West Surrey Family History Society. See Surrey History Centre, *Guide to Parish Registers Held at Surrey History Centre* [2018] <https://www.surreycc.gov.uk/culture-and-leisure/history-centre/researchers/guides/parish-registers/registers-held> [accessed 9 July 2022].

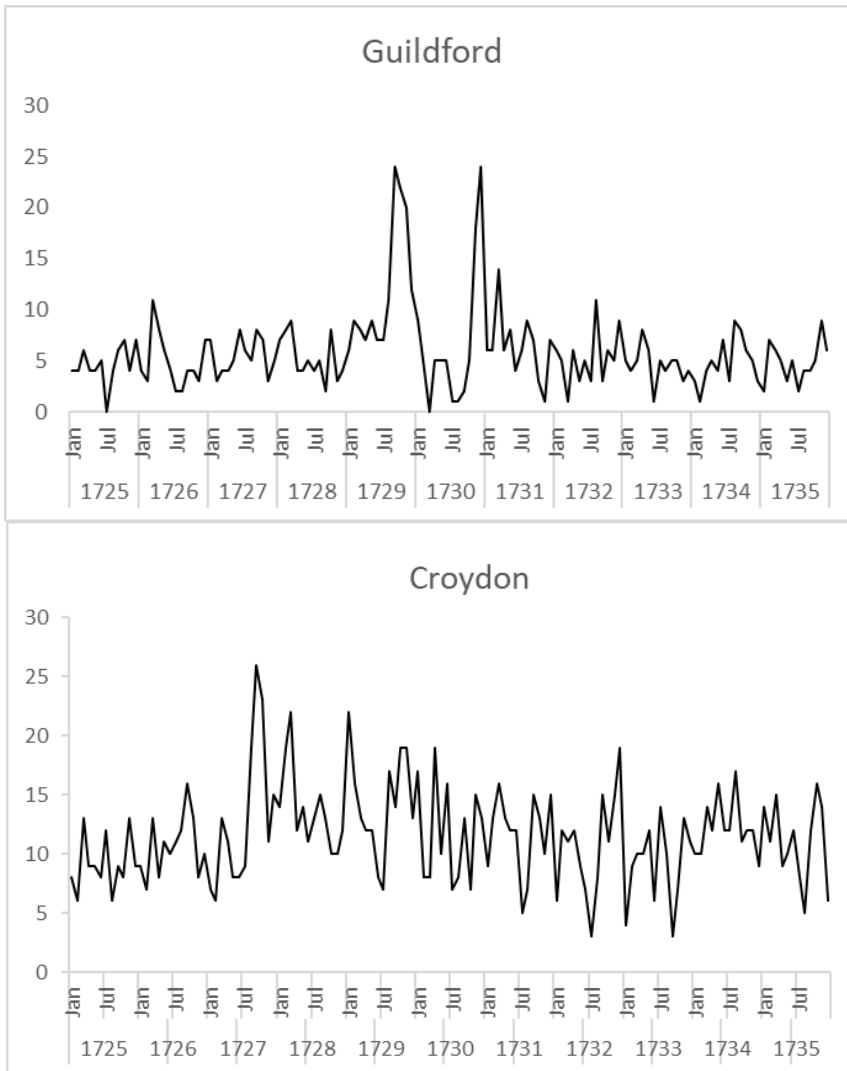
The overall impression from this consideration of a few of Surrey’s parishes is that, as in Bedfordshire, there were several waves of infection which spread over the county, affecting different areas with different severity at different dates.

Figure 4 Monthly burials 1725-1735: comparison of two Wealden parishes, Lingfield and Horley



Source: Surrey History Centre parish registers and transcripts by the West Surrey Family History Society. See Surrey History Centre, *Guide to Parish Registers Held at Surrey History Centre* [2018] <https://www.surreycc.gov.uk/culture-and-leisure/history-centre/researchers/guides/parish-registers/registers-held> [accessed 9 July 2022].

Figure 5 Monthly burials 1725-1735: comparison of two towns: Guildford and Croydon



Source: Surrey History Centre parish registers and transcripts by the West Surrey Family History Society. See Surrey History Centre, *Guide to Parish Registers Held at Surrey History Centre* [2018] <https://www.surreycc.gov.uk/culture-and-leisure/history-centre/researchers/guides/parish-registers/registers-held> [accessed 9 July 2022].

The causes of most deaths are unclear as contemporaries did not have the diagnostic tools to identify diseases. However, there are features of some crises which give clues as to the diseases present. The seasonality of diseases differed: for example respiratory infections were usually worst in winter, fly-borne and gastro-intestinal diseases worst in late summer, and droplet infections like smallpox spread more readily in dry conditions.¹⁰ The timing of Surrey's crisis is similar to that of the crisis further north in England, suggesting similar causes. In Lancashire and in Bedfordshire, the causes are thought to have been fevers of various sorts, including typhus and influenza and it seems plausible, given the similarities of the timing of the crises, that these were present in Surrey.¹¹ However, the timing of the peaks in the outbreaks in Surrey supports the suggestion of the presence of one or more other diseases too: the peaks in mortality in September and October 1727 in Croydon or in April and May 1729 in Cobham, for example, seem unlikely to have been caused wholly by typhus or influenza.

Another means of identifying possible diseases present is that sometimes different categories of people were more vulnerable to different diseases: children, for example, were disproportionately vulnerable to smallpox or gastro-intestinal diseases but less vulnerable than adults to typhus.¹² In non-metropolitan Surrey, adults and children seem to have been similarly affected during the crisis (Figure 6), though the modestly higher adult burials compared to child burials suggests the possible presence of typhus. The pattern also suggests that neither smallpox nor gastro-intestinal diseases were major factors. An alternative interpretation—that all these diseases were present, but the imbalance of adult and child deaths from some causes cancelled out the reverse imbalance from others—is also a possibility. The peak in child burials in September 1726 is suggestive of an outbreak of smallpox (Mary Dobson noted the presence of smallpox elsewhere in the south-east in that year, though it was present in surrounding years too) or perhaps a gastro-intestinal disease such as dysentery. Note also the absence of such a peak, and by implication of a major outbreak of such a disease in the later, more widespread, crisis.¹³

Finally, it is possible to gauge something of the scale of the social disruption the crisis caused by considering the patterns of baptisms. In the 1590s dearth crisis

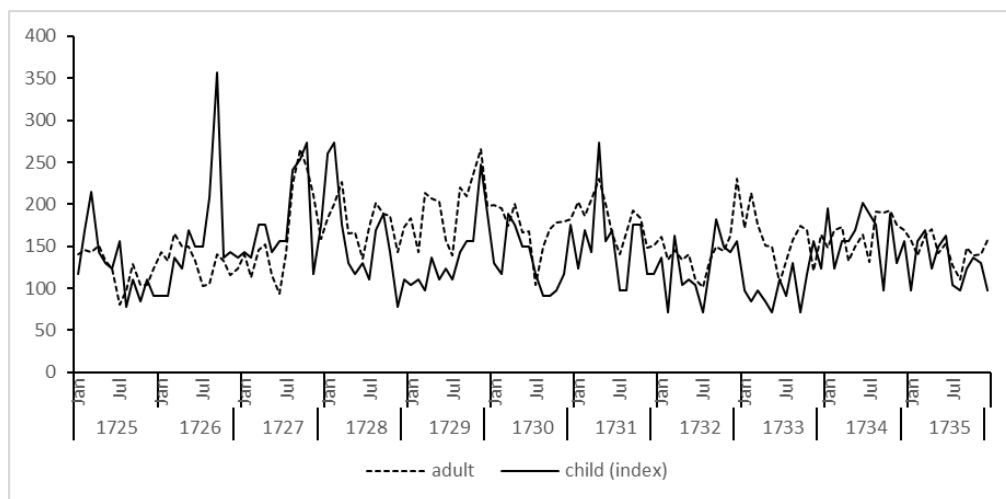
10 J. Landers, *The Field and the Forge: Population, Production, and Power in the Pre-Industrial West* (Oxford, 2003), pp. 29-30.

11 J. Healey, 'Socially selective mortality during the population crisis of 1727-30: evidence from Lancashire', *Local Population Studies* 81 (2008), pp. 58-74, here at pp. 61-2.

12 A.B. Appleby, 'Disease or famine? Mortality in Cumberland and Westmorland 1580-1640', *Economic History Review* 26 (1973), pp. 403-32, here at p. 408, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0289.1973.tb01944.x>; Wrigley and Schofield, *Population History of England*, p. 295.

13 M.J. Dobson, *Contours of Death and Disease in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 1997), p. 427.

Figure 6 Adult and indexed child monthly burials, 1725-1735: non-metropolitan Surrey



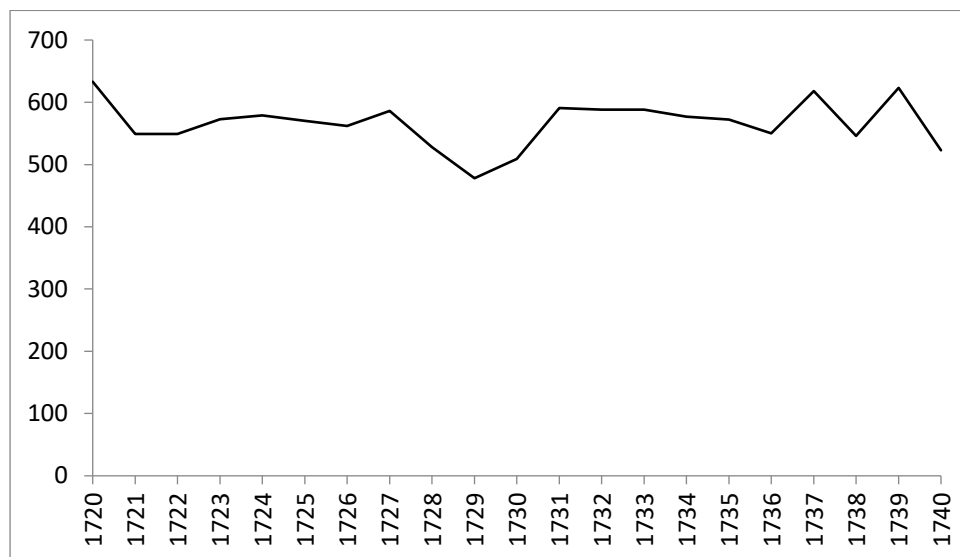
Note: The indexing process multiplied the number of child deaths by the ratio of adult to child deaths across the decade 1725-1735.

Source: Surrey History Centre parish registers and transcripts by the West Surrey Family History Society. See Surrey History Centre, *Guide to Parish Registers Held at Surrey History Centre* [2018] <https://www.surreycc.gov.uk/culture-and-leisure/history-centre/researchers/guides/parish-registers/registers-held> [accessed 9 July 2022].

in non-metropolitan Surrey, for example, there is evidence of a decline in baptisms in badly-affected parishes, while in the more deadly but much briefer major plague outbreaks there is no evidence of such a fall in baptisms.¹⁴ It is interesting that in the period of the 1727-1732 crisis in non-metropolitan Surrey there does seem to have been a modest fall in baptisms (Figure 7). This suggests a degree of social disruption, though the specific causes are unclear: possibilities include a reduction in female fertility due to illness. This could have been due to amenorrhoea brought

¹⁴ See S. Jones, ‘“Big data” and parish registers’. See also S.R Jones, ‘Taking the measure: a demographic-based study of non-metropolitan Surrey, c. 1550-1750’ (unpublished DPhil thesis, Oxford University, 2020).

Figure 7 Annual baptisms 1720-1740: non-metropolitan Surrey



Source: Surrey History Centre parish registers and transcripts by the West Surrey Family History Society. See Surrey History Centre, *Guide to Parish Registers Held at Surrey History Centre* [2018] <https://www.surreycc.gov.uk/culture-and-leisure/history-centre/researchers/guides/parish-registers/registers-held> [accessed 9 July 2022].

on by illness, the additional susceptibility of pregnant women to a range of diseases and the possibility of increased foetal mortality, or a reduction in sexual activity because of illness or increased population mobility associated with attempts to deal with the economic or social consequences of the crisis.

In conclusion, this description of some of the evidence of the presence, scale and nature of a mortality crisis in non-metropolitan Surrey in 1727-1732 provides the first study in any detail of the crisis in a south-eastern county. The crisis, while less severe than in some parts of the country, had a pattern similar to that experienced elsewhere in England. Within non-metropolitan Surrey, different parishes experienced different timings and severities of mortality. Initial findings do not indicate consistent differences between urban and rural areas. It seems likely that a mix of diseases was present. These may have included influenza and (possibly) typhus but it seems less likely that smallpox or enteric diseases contributed to the crisis to any great extent. Although the mortality crisis of 1727-

1731 was not as severe as others the area had suffered, there is some evidence to suggest that its scale was nevertheless sufficient to cause a degree of social disruption.

Acknowledgements

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