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## THE ‘GREAT PLAGUE OF LONDON’ IN GREENWICH AND DEPTFORD, 1665-1666

MICHAEL ZELL AND JACQUELINE DAVIES

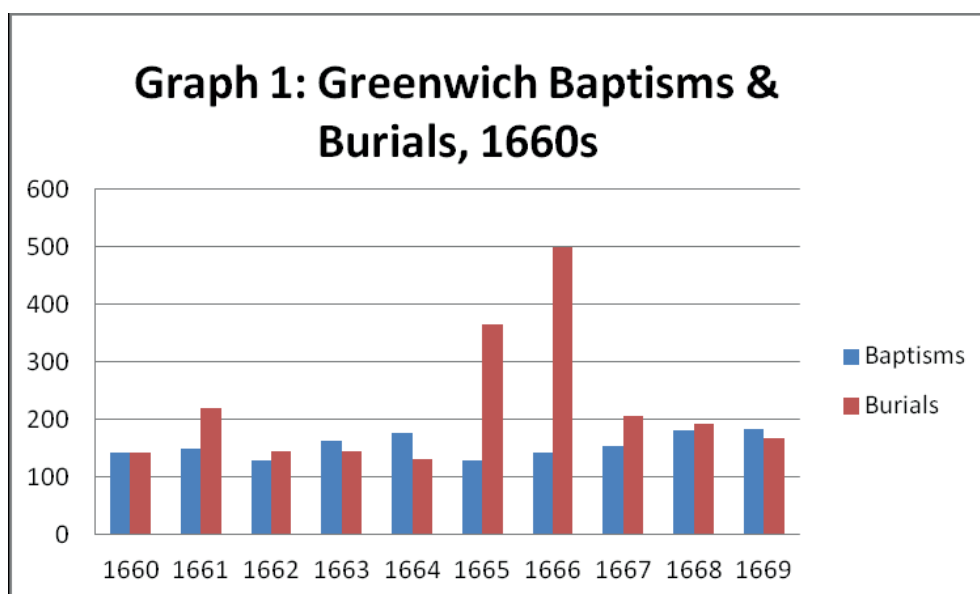
*The subject of this paper is clearly a very topical one given our current experience of the coronavirus pandemic. Readers will no doubt compare and contrast the public health policies of the authorities and people’s reactions to the threat three and a half centuries ago – and those now.*

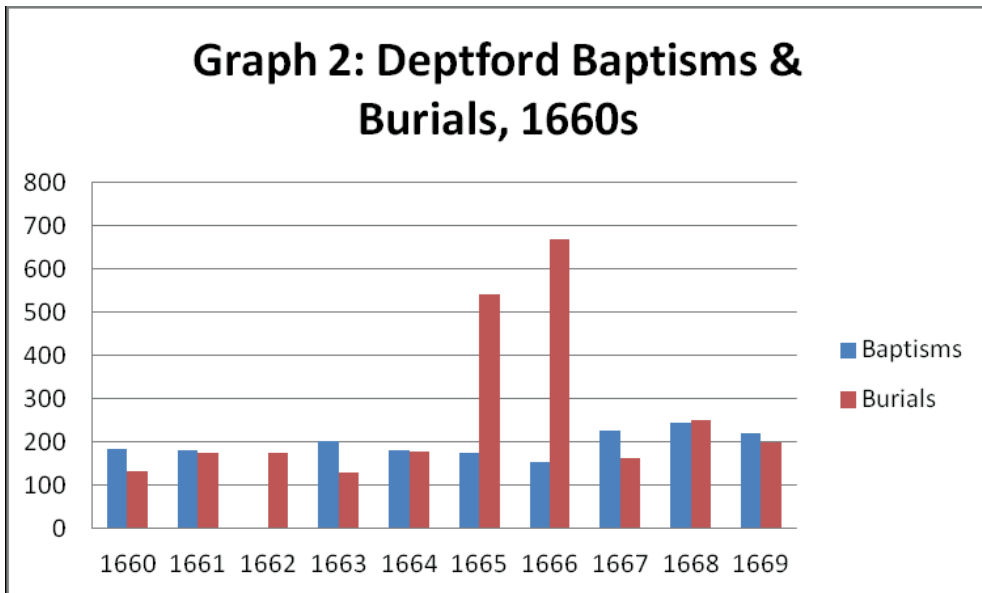
The ‘great’ – and last – outbreak of the plague in London was first noticed by the parish searchers towards the end of April 1665. A few deaths were ascribed to plague in the parish of St Giles (just west of the City wall) during the last week of the month, and nine or ten cases recorded in the first week of May, in the parishes of St Giles and two neighbouring west London parishes, as well as in St Mary Woolchurch, a parish near the centre of the City.<sup>1</sup> Many of these City parishes were small, and could be crossed in minutes. In May 1665, the plague was spreading freely in the City of London. Samuel Pepys – at the close of a long entry for 30 April 1665 – recorded ‘great fears of the sickness here in the city, it being said that two or three houses are already shut up. God preserve us all!’<sup>2</sup> On 24 May Pepys visited a coffee house, where ‘all the news is of the Dutch being gone out [of port], and of the plague growing upon us in this town’, and on the 28th Pepys wrote, ‘my poor Lady, who is afeared of the sickness, and resolved to be gone into the country, is forced to stay in town a day or two’.<sup>3</sup> The London bill of mortality for the week of 30 May to 6 June 1665 reported 43 out of 405 deaths as due to plague. Thereafter the death toll in London rose rapidly: 470 ‘plague’ deaths by the last week of June 1665, and over 2,000 ‘plague’ deaths by the last week of July. The numbers of deaths ascribed to plague by the bills of mortality – high as they are – may be under-estimates because householders sought to avoid their family members’ deaths being ascribed to plague. As the epidemic took hold, it may have become less easy to cover up plague deaths.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, the sheer numbers of deaths may have rendered the identification of causes of death unreliable, not to say impossible. In the late summer and autumn of 1665 the plague outbreak in London was more serious than any epidemic in living memory: it ‘overwhelmed’ the capital’s health services, and the chaos that it brought may well have undermined the city’s system of reporting deaths each week by the searchers.<sup>5</sup>

By the end of May and during June, Londoners with access to a bolt-hole in the country were moving their families from the capital. Many Londoners may have considered Greenwich (in neighbouring Kent) – just three miles downriver from the City of London – a convenient refuge from the growing epidemic in

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the capital. During these early weeks regular commercial traffic between London and the Thameside towns probably brought infected Londoners – or infected merchandise – to places like Deptford and Greenwich quite quickly. But official recognition of local plague infection by the authorities in Deptford and Greenwich was not immediate. Deptford – also in Kent, less than two miles from the Tower of London – first recorded ‘plague’ burials in its parish register in mid-summer: five in July 1665 and 42 in August. In September Deptford had 117 ‘plague’ burials.<sup>6</sup> The burial register of its neighbour, Greenwich, does not distinguish plague burials from other burials during this last – and most damaging – plague epidemic. For Greenwich the evidence of plague must be found either in written sources, or by calculating the numbers of ‘excess’ burials in the parish – compared to burials in previous, ‘non-plague’ years. Like Deptford, burials in Greenwich first shot up in August 1665, when they totalled 36 – more than double the average of about 14 during the previous three years. In September there were 46 burials in Greenwich (compared to an average of 12 in previous years). And they jumped to 89 in October 1665 (previous average about 13). Admittedly, the numbers of Deptford and Greenwich residents who were buried during the plague years 1665 and 1666 were small – compared to the many thousands who succumbed to plague in London. But the disease struck these Thameside towns with real force; there was most definitely ‘crisis mortality’ in both Deptford and Greenwich in 1665 (see **Graphs 1 and 2**). And what set the plague outbreaks in these towns apart from that in London was the fact that it struck them for a second time in 1666. As it also did in several Essex towns, most notably at Colchester, where between August 1665 and December 1666, between four and five thousand people died of the plague; almost half the town’s population.<sup>7</sup> In the capital, recorded plague deaths fell substantially towards the end of 1665 and in the early months of 1666 (perhaps because most of the survivors had acquired immunity to the disease), and the infection did not blow





up again in the summer. In the City, plague was finally killed off by the ‘great fire of London’ in early September. But there was to be no relief in 1666 for the people of Deptford and Greenwich. The Deptford diarist John Evelyn recorded, under 29 July 1666, ‘the pestilence now fresh increasing in our parish’.<sup>8</sup> And Samuel Pepys, back in London since early 1666, noted in his diary on 6 August that ‘Greenwich is at this time much worse than ever it was, and Deptford too’. The next day, at the end of his diary entry, ‘I received fresh intelligence that Deptford and Greenwich are now afresh exceedingly afflicted with the sickness more than ever’.<sup>9</sup>

That plague spread from London to Greenwich should have been no surprise to anyone in 1665. People and business moved back and forth between the two places regularly and quickly in the seventeenth century. The Thames was the main highway between the City and Greenwich, but there was plenty of road traffic as well. Among Greenwich male residents whose occupations can be recovered – mainly from the parish register and from wills – the most common occupation was ‘waterman’, the taxi drivers of the Thames. Deptford was the site of one of the major dockyards of Stuart England, which was busy throughout the seventeenth century. Greenwich was the site of one of the most important royal palaces in Tudor and early Stuart times. During the Civil War and Commonwealth period, 1642-60, this valuable source of business for Greenwich residents temporarily disappeared. But with the Restoration the Court returned, and for a while it looked like the glory years might come back. Charles II initiated two new building projects in Greenwich in the early 1660s: first, the extension and refurbishment of Inigo Jones’ Queen’s House, just south of the old palace of Greenwich; and – by 1664 – the much grander project of taking down the Tudor palace and replacing it with a brand new one. By the time plague struck in 1665 a significant chunk of the king’s new palace – which would become the King Charles building in Wren’s plan of the 1690s for the new Royal

Naval Hospital – was nearing completion.<sup>10</sup> And sure enough, just as the plague was raging towards its peak in London, the Navy office was transferred – at Pepys’ suggestion – to a ‘place of safety’ away from the capital: to the newly-built King’s palace in Greenwich.<sup>11</sup> On 19 August Pepys received letters from the King and Lord Arlington ordering the move to Greenwich. He visited the new offices on the 21st, ‘they being in the heart of all the labourers and workmen there, which makes it as unsafe as to be, I think, as London,’ ‘which by no means please[d] me’. The previous month Pepys had sent his wife and servants to rented rooms in Woolwich (Kent) to protect them. After his job moved to Greenwich Pepys tried commuting from these hired rooms in Woolwich to Greenwich daily, but it required a good deal of late night and early morning travel. It proved onerous and time-consuming. Whereas Greenwich was full of people he already knew; they were clubbable and many had ongoing public or private dealings with Pepys. Eventually, in the third week of September, he hired rooms for himself in Greenwich – just before the plague reached its first peak there. From the frying pan into the fire, one might have thought. Yet, if we recall the plague ‘conflagration’ in London in August and September 1665, Pepys and other officials may have felt comparatively ‘safe’ in Greenwich in those months.

Indeed, the months Pepys spent in Greenwich – as the plague raged around him and his companions – were among the most satisfying and profitable that the diarist could recall.<sup>12</sup> In Greenwich he worked – and played – with his superiors and fellows from the Navy, and with other men who supplied the Navy – then in the midst of the Anglo-Dutch war – or had private dealings with Pepys and his partners who had prize goods to sell. Pepys had been a Kent magistrate (JP) since at least 1661 along with several London/Greenwich notables (including Sir Theophilus Biddulph, Alderman William Hooker and Sir William Boreman).<sup>13</sup> A number of Pepys’ professional contacts, as well as other Greenwich men – and women – shared with Pepys a varied musical life; in the Greenwich parish church and in several of Greenwich’s finest hostelries (including the *King’s Head*, which Pepys described as ‘the great music house’).<sup>14</sup> Among Pepys’ acquaintances in Greenwich were men of the court – including William Boreman (Clerk Comptroller of the Household and occupier of an 11-hearth house in Greenwich), and George Boreman (Keeper of the Wardrobe and Privy Lodgings at Greenwich Palace); a successful civil lawyer, Mark Cottle, Registrar of the Prerogative Court of Canterbury (and the occupier of a 23-hearth mansion in Crooms Hill, Greenwich, with the best view in town, according to Pepys);<sup>15</sup> and successful London merchants who also maintained substantial houses in Greenwich – including Sir Theophilus Biddulph of Westcombe manor (21 hearths) in Greenwich (a silk merchant, made a baronet in 1664), and William Hooker, Alderman of London (who occupied a house of 23 hearths in Crooms Hill, next door to Mark Cottle).<sup>16</sup> Pepys’ bosom-friends in Greenwich also included less distinguished, but still well-off, men of business, notably Captain George Cock, who Pepys had known since at least 1662. Cock makes frequent appearances in Pepys’ diary in 1665 and 1666, and occupied a 15-hearth house in Crane South, near the Greenwich riverside. Cock was a regular companion in Pepys’ busy social life, but also a partner in Pepys’ prize goods business. Even in the time of the plague, men in Greenwich could easily mix business with pleasure. There appears to have been almost no plague quarantine

measures in Greenwich in 1665; no ‘social distancing’. On 29 August 1665 Pepys (and other local magistrates):

called at Sir Theophilus Biddulph’s, a sober, discreet man, to discourse of the preventing of the plague in Greenwich and Woolwich and Deptford, where in every place it begins to grow very great. We appointed another meeting, and so walked together to Greenwich and there parted, and Pett and I to the office.

The plague in Greenwich continued to figure in Pepys’ diary. On Sunday 3 September:

Church being done, my Lord Bruncker, Sir J. Minnes, and I up to the vestry at the desire of the Justices of the Peace, Sir Theo. Biddulph, Sir W. Boreman and Alderman Hooker, in order to the doing something for the keeping of the plague from growing; but Lord! to consider the madness of the people of the town, who will (because they are forbid) come in crowds along with the dead corpses to see them buried; but we agreed on some orders for the prevention thereof ... Thence with my Lord Bruncker to Captain Cock’s, where we [were] mighty merry and supped, and very late I by water to Woolwich.

By September the residents of Greenwich had drawn the obvious conclusion about the origin of the infection that was spreading unchecked amongst them. Pepys reported (also 3 September) that ‘I by water to Greenwich, where much ado to be suffered to come into the town because of the sickness, for fear I should come from London, till I told them who I was’. But of course, it was next to useless to try to cut Greenwich off from London. In this situation, your normal means of conveyance between Greenwich and London could be the source of contagion that might kill you: on Sunday, 10 September, Pepys

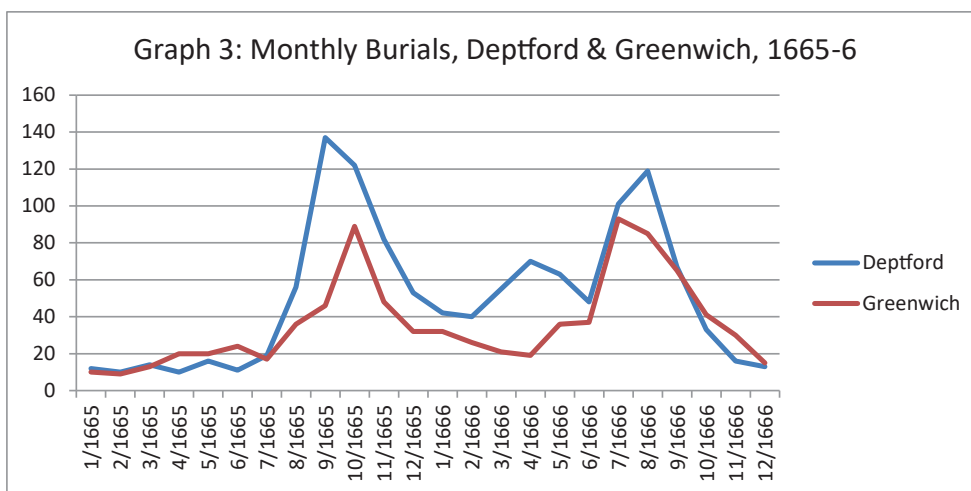
walked home; being forced thereto by one of my watermen falling sick yesterday, and it was God’s great mercy I did not go by water with them yesterday, for he fell sick on Saturday night, and it is to be feared of the plague.<sup>17</sup>

A few days earlier, on 4 September, Pepys referred to plague at the Greenwich hamlet of Coombe Farm, where he says that 21 people had died. Coombe Farm was on the route Pepys took when he walked between Woolwich and Greenwich town centre.<sup>18</sup> Finally, in late September Pepys moved into the ‘three rooms and a dining room’ that he hired from a Mrs Clerke, where he would lodge during the remaining months of 1665. His landlady was probably the widow of Richard Clerke (‘Mr Clark’, a mason, was buried in 1664). She held an 8-hearth house in Crane South in 1664, and was, of course, a neighbour of Pepys’ regular companion in Greenwich, Capt George Cock. Yet it wasn’t all smooth sailing and musical evenings for Pepys in Greenwich; occasionally the frightening reality of the plague intruded. In early November 1665 ‘I hear that one of the little boys at my lodging is not well; and they suspect, by their sending for plaister and fume, that it may be the plague’. As a precaution, Pepys spent a number of nights with the London merchant, Benjamin Glanvill, who occupied a large house in Dock and Tavern Row. However, he soon returned to his rooms at Mrs Clerk’s.<sup>19</sup> Pepys finally left Greenwich for his London home in January 1666, as the numbers of plague deaths in London declined steeply. He could not know that the epidemic in Greenwich was not similarly abating.

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It had been a devastating year in Greenwich. Before the plague visitation of 1665-6, Greenwich was a parish of about 800-825 households (based on the 1662 Hearth Tax listing for Greenwich),<sup>20</sup> the majority of which lay in its urban core. Using the widely-accepted multiplier of 4.25 persons per household, we can estimate Greenwich had a total population of about 3,500 persons in 1665.<sup>21</sup> The numbers of baptisms and burials in the years before 1665 suggest a relatively-stable population, without much ‘natural’ population growth (Graph 1). But population may have been rising modestly through in-migration. The arrival of plague from London in the summer of 1665 set off the most significant mortality crisis of the century. Burials during August to December 1665 ran at two or three times the average of the three previous (non-plague) years. In October 1665 there were over six times the usual number of burials. Even over the winter of 1665-6, burials in Greenwich were never fewer than double the ‘normal’ numbers. Only in April 1666 did the burials count return to ‘normal’. But – unlike in London – plague deaths shot up again in May 1666, reaching a new peak in the summer of 1666 (the July peak recorded roughly ten times as many burials as had occurred in July in the years 1662-4). Burials continued at ‘crisis’ levels through to November 1666 (**Graph 3**). During the whole 16-month plague outbreak in Greenwich (August 1665 to November 1666) roughly 740 people were buried. During the analogous period, between August 1663 and November 1664, there were just 180 burials in Greenwich; about 560 extra deaths during the plague period. Although the numbers who died in Greenwich were small – compared even to the *monthly* totals in London in the summer and autumn of 1665 – those deaths had a serious impact on Greenwich’s population. The 560 ‘extra deaths’ in Greenwich amounted to over one in six of the town’s pre-plague population.

The ‘Great Plague of London’ had an equally negative impact on Deptford in 1665 and 1666. Deptford was closer to London than Greenwich, and its population was probably more urban and, on average, less well-off. A comparison of the 1664 Hearth Tax listings of Deptford and Greenwich show that Deptford was larger than



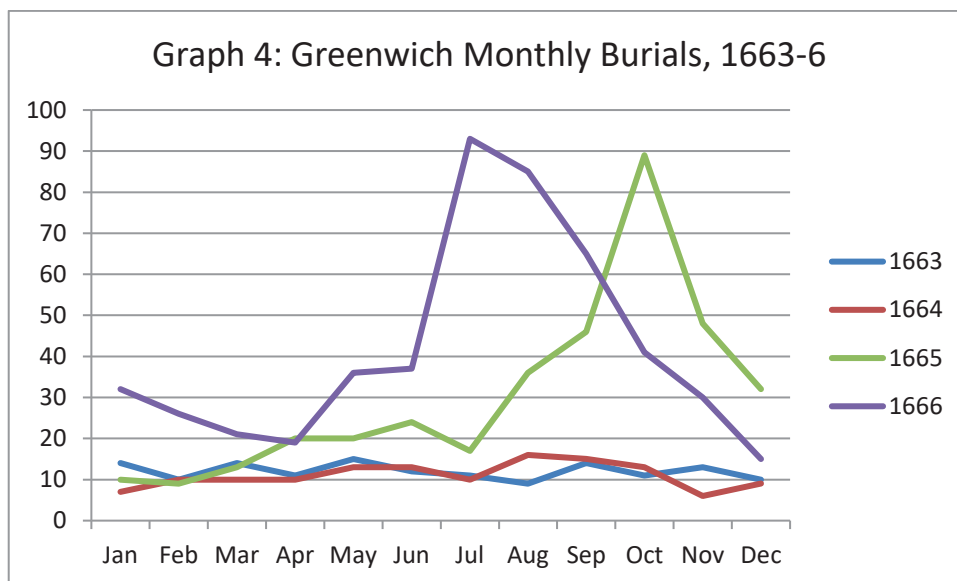
Greenwich, but with significantly more small (?poor) households and fewer large (?wealthier) households than Greenwich. Deptford tax collectors designated 337 households as exempt (25%) in 1664, compared to the 96 exempt households in Greenwich (13%). At the other end of the scale, 27 per cent of Greenwich's taxed households were rated on 5 or more hearths; in Deptford only 17 per cent were of 5 or more hearths.<sup>22</sup> The average annual numbers of baptisms held in the two parishes suggests the rough difference in population: Deptford with about 195 p.a. in the 1660s, Greenwich with 155 p.a. – about 20 per cent fewer in Greenwich. Deptford had between 900 and 1,000 households in the 1660s; compared to roughly 800 in Greenwich. The record of baptisms and burials in the years before 1665 in Deptford suggest that it too – like Greenwich – did not have much net 'natural' population growth, although gaps in its baptism register make even that summary uncertain (Graph 2). Assuming the larger number, and a household multiplier of 4.25 persons per household, Deptford had about 4,250 people (roughly 20 per cent greater than Greenwich's estimated 3,400).

The 'great plague of London' struck Deptford – like Greenwich – in late July/August 1665, but burials reached a peak earlier than in Greenwich, in September. Unlike Greenwich, the 1665 peak in burials in Deptford was higher than the second peak in July and August 1666 (Graph 3). Looking at all burials, there were about 870 'extra' burials in Deptford during the 15-months between August 1665 and October 1666; compared to about 560 'extra' burials during the plague period in Greenwich (this a difference of about 35 per cent.) Finally, the Deptford parish register – unlike that in Greenwich – noted those burials which the officials took to be of plague victims with the code 'pl' added by the name of the deceased. Between August 1665 and October 1666 the register recorded a total of 874 'plague' burials; almost the exact number of 'extra' burials compared to the analogous 15-month period, August 1663 to October 1664. The plague was responsible for an 'extra' 870 deaths in Deptford, or over 20 per cent of the total population before the epidemic.<sup>23</sup>

Estimates of the impact of the 1665 plague in London range from a fifth to a quarter of the capital's population. The London Bills of Mortality show total plague deaths as just 69,000. But an unknown number of plague deaths went uncounted or unrecognised. Some historians argue that total plague deaths were at least 100,000; others suggest only a much smaller addition to the Bills' total, say 80 or 85,000. Then there is the issue of London's population in 1665: estimates vary from under 400,000 to over 450,000. And also, how many better-off Londoners managed to get out of town in 1665? It's unlikely to have been as many as 20,000. A rough and ready suggestion is that the plague killed about 20 per cent of the London population in 1665. Judged against that estimate, the 'Great Plague of London' had an equally deadly impact on Deptford. To begin with, the 1665-6 plague was more devastating in Deptford than in Greenwich, just a mile further away! In part, the higher mortality in Deptford reflects the impact of an additional (although less severe) plague peak in Deptford during the spring of 1666. In part it is probably a reflection of Deptford's more densely populated community. And related to the density of population, Deptford was somewhat poorer than Greenwich.

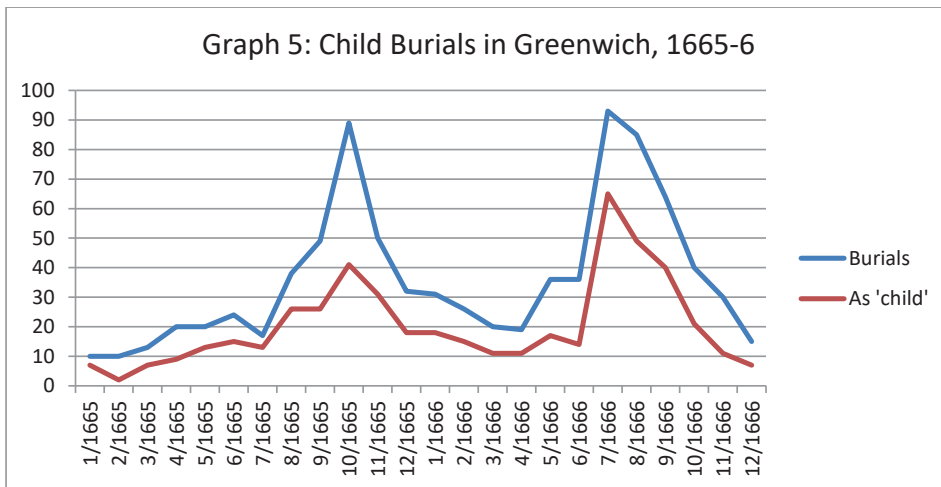
The 1665-1666 plague period can be shown in detail, for both Greenwich and Deptford (Graph 3 and **Graph 4**). The graph shows the well-known seasonal pattern of plague in both parishes. The peak of plague deaths occurred in 1665

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in Deptford, but in 1666 in Greenwich. It also reveals an additional – somewhat lower – peak of plague deaths in Deptford in spring 1666, but not in Greenwich. This tallies with the finding that plague in Deptford killed a slightly higher share of the pre-plague population than in Greenwich.

Greenwich – unlike Deptford, and London – did not identify plague burials, so we cannot be as definitive about the role of plague in Greenwich during 1665 and 1666. However, there is plenty of evidence that Greenwich was struck by London’s plague in the summer of 1665, including the committee of magistrates meeting to discuss responses to the plague, referred to above. The Greenwich authorities made use of a ‘pest house’ (built in 1635), located near London Street, in the Deptford (eastern) side of the parish,<sup>24</sup> although we don’t know when it began to receive sick residents during this epidemic. The parish register refers to just three burials ‘from the pest house’, and those not until 1666. There is no written record of what measures the Greenwich magistrates or churchwardens took to mitigate the impact of the plague in Greenwich. They may have tried to limit travellers from London landing in Greenwich – as Pepys reported on 3 September 1665 – but there would have been little chance of stopping all personal and commercial traffic from the capital. And, according to Pepys, the Greenwich magistrates prohibited large groups of mourners from taking part in public funerals. The authorities tried to prohibit such large, public gatherings, but there was no effort to enforce what we call ‘social distancing’ in private or public. There is no evidence that local quarantine measures – like those imposed on households with plague in contemporary London – were applied in Greenwich in 1665/6. Severe quarantine measures had been enforced in Greenwich in 1635 by the churchwardens, and perhaps also in 1625/6 – when the parish register counted about 150 ‘plague’ burials.<sup>25</sup> But the evidence of Pepys’ intense social life during his stay in Greenwich surely suggests that despite the dangers of contagion, Greenwich was open for business (and pleasure) in 1665.



Early modern plague tended to have a disproportionately severe impact on children – the opposite of coronavirus in Britain in 2020/21. **Graph 5** shows the numbers of child burials in Greenwich in 1665 and 1666, along with total burials. During the four months of peak burials in 1665 – August to November – children accounted for 56 per cent of burials. In 1666, the period of peak burials was July to October, during which time ‘child’ burials came to 62 per cent of all burials. The 1666 plague peak was higher than that in 1665 – 282 burials compared to 226 in 1665, which suggests that the more severe the plague outbreak, the higher the proportion of children affected.

Because the Greenwich hearth tax listing of 1664 assigned hearth-tax payers to roads, it is possible to link many burials during the plague outbreak to specific roads – and thus to discover if some parts of the town were more affected than others (see **Fig. 1**). Admittedly, we can’t be certain which burials were ‘plague burials’, and which were not. Early-modern urban plague deaths tended to cluster in households, and we can see many families in 1665-6 with multiple burials; and many of these can be assigned to roads (**Table 1**). The wife and two children of Nicholas Couch of East Lane were buried in August/September 1665. And Pepys’ musical barber, Reuben Golding, who lived in Dock and Tavern Row, lost his wife, a child and a ‘youth’ in 1666. From the Hearth Tax return we can see which roads had larger share of houses with many hearths, and which were dominated by one or two-hearth houses. Since the numbers of hearths are a rough guide to the wealth of households, it is possible to ask if plague struck more heavily in the ‘poorer’ roads, or was more randomly distributed across the whole town/parish. However, more than half of burials in this plague period cannot be traced to tax-paying households in 1664 or assigned to roads.<sup>26</sup> And, there are evidential problems which make an examination of the social/geographical dimensions of the outbreak less straightforward than at first sight: about 90 poorer households were exempted from payment of the hearth tax, and not assigned to a ‘road’ in the hearth tax list. Several of the ‘roads’ in the hearth tax list extend beyond the

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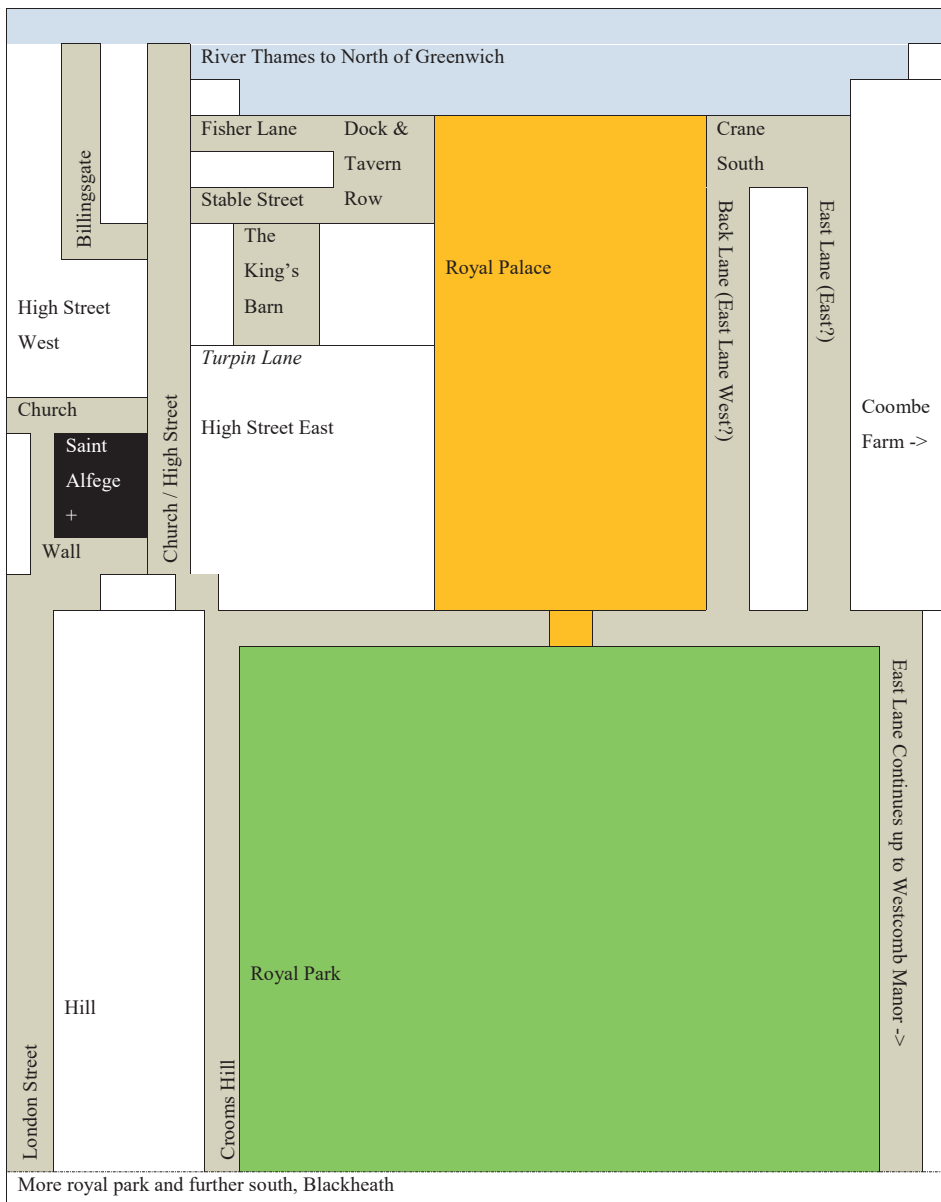


Fig. 1 Schematic Map of 17th-century Greenwich

central core and include houses in the rural parts of the parish. Households in the hamlet of Coombe Farm were assigned to East Lane, for example. Several other roads are neither 'wealthy' or 'poor' (e.g. High Street East and West, and London Street). Nevertheless, some hearth tax 'roads' are noticeably well-off (e.g. Crooms Hill and East Lane) and several others are very clearly 'poor' (e.g. Fisher Lane

TABLE 1. GREENWICH BURIALS IDENTIFIED BY 'ROAD'  
JUNE 1665-DEC 1666

Greenwich 'roads'	Number of houses	Mean number of hearths	Households with deaths	Individual deaths [av. no. per house along 'road']
Dock & Tavern Row	35	5.2	15 (43%)	38 [1.09]
Fisher Lane	32	2.4	14 (44%)	31 [0.97]
Billingsgate	34	2.9	14 (41%)	31 [0.91]
High Street West	57	3.3	17 (30%)	32 [0.56]
East Lane West	42	5.1	11 (26%)	23 [0.55]
Church Wall	33	3.7	11 (33%)	26 [0.79]
High Street East	69	3.8	13 (19%)	26 [0.38]
East Lane East	58	5.6	20 (34%)	20 [0.34]
London Street	29	4.5	11 (38%)	21 [0.72]
Crane South	43	4.2	11 (26%)	20 [0.47]
Crooms Hill	34	7.7	9 (26%)	15 [0.44]
Stable Street	19	3.1	3 (16%)	8 [0.42]
The Kings Barn	8	4.1	3 (38%)	3 [0.38]
<i>'Not Chargeable'</i>	92	1.8	38 (41%)	75 [0.82]

and Billingsgate). By and large, the 'poorer' roads are also close to the Greenwich riverside, and on the London side of Greenwich (west of Greenwich Palace). Slightly anomalous is Dock and Tavern Row: not remarkably 'poor' (as measured by the average size of houses), but it was on the Greenwich riverside, and a centre of business and social life. And it appears to have been one of the roads most affected by the plague, along with Fisher Lane and Billingsgate. Crooms Hill, full of large households, and mainly located up the hill and away from the Thames, was less seriously hit by deaths during the plague period (mid-1665 to late 1666); as was High Street East and West.

The crude numbers of burials by road during the plague period can be revealing. Just 20 burials from East Lane East have been identified by the authors (which had 58 medium-sized and large houses in 1664); only 26 burials from High Street East (with 69 – mainly medium-sized – houses); and only 15 burials from Crooms Hill (with 34 – mainly large – houses). In contrast, the authors identified 37 burials from Dock and Tavern Row (with 35 households); 29 burials from Fisher Lane (32 houses); and 31 burials from Billingsgate (34 houses). The main factor here seems to be location, not wealth: although Dock and Tavern Row was a comparatively well-off road, all three were *riverside* roads.<sup>27</sup> The other two were on the riverside *and* quite poor. That wealth was nevertheless an independent and significant variable is also suggested by the comparatively high number of burials among exempt households that we cannot assign to a Greenwich 'road': at least 75 burials from the roughly 90 exempt households. The concentration of plague burials in

the poorer parishes of London in 1665 was noticed by contemporaries and later historians alike. Here's Roger L'Estrange in his own newssheet, *The Intelligencer*, on 14 August 1665:

In the City (that is to say in the close and filthy alleys and corners about it) the Plague is very much increased, but in the broad and open streets, there is but little appearance of it. The last Bill reckons 2,817 of the Plague where of 208 within the walls of the City. The main part of the rest in half a score of the Out Parishes; and those too, in the sluttish parts of those parishes where the poor are crowded up together and in multitudes Infect one another.<sup>28</sup>

The pattern was repeated but with less deadly results in Greenwich in 1665 and 1666. Poorer parts of Greenwich suffered more deaths; households on the wealthier roads suffered fewer. Nevertheless, Greenwich had no significant, densely-populated slums similar to the 'out-parishes' of London in the seventeenth century. It is possible, that parts of Deptford, were smaller versions of London's slum parishes. But the sources that might help produce a geographical analysis of death in Deptford in 1665 and 1666 are absent.

The authors' tentative conclusion must be that no part of Greenwich escaped the plague in these years, but that its impact was more severe among households near the river (especially the riverside roads west of Greenwich Palace) and among the poor. On the other hand, there were many burials of adults or children from households of the 'middling sort' during the extended plague period: mariners, merchants and sea captains, along with plenty of skilled tradesmen, watermen and labourers. Rose Bedbury, widow, for example, headed a four-hearth household in High Street West in 1664. Her late husband, Henry Bedbury, chandler, had died in 1661, but they were not poor. She had been taxed on six hearths in 1662, and her 1665 will left £5 to a servant. Most of her goods were to be sold (except certain goods left to her daughter Anne), and the money was to be spent on the upkeep of her two younger children, including £20 to her younger son Henry 'to put him forth an apprentice'.<sup>29</sup> Her will doesn't refer to the plague, but the fact that she was only about 45 years old when she made her will – and was buried soon after – suggests at least that she feared she had the disease. The Greenwich burial register in November 1665 records first the burials of Rose and of her son Henry. Some days later followed the burial of 'Ann Bedbury, a child'. Her elder son Charles – who was not living with his mother in 1665 – survived the first wave of the plague, but died soon after. Charles Bedbury, 'batchelor', left a nuncupative will before he was buried in February 1666. He left £5 to his 'loving master, John Rowles of Greenwich, painter-stainer' as well as a box of linen 'lately given Charles by his mother, 'Rose Bedbury, dec'.<sup>30</sup> He was the last of his family.

As in contemporary London, the poor and the transient were likely to succumb to the plague: the Greenwich burial register for these plague months listed four unidentified seamen, seven nameless 'poor' people, two 'strangers' and a man who 'died in the fields'. The fact that the estimated proportion of 'plague' deaths was higher in Deptford than in Greenwich can be explained both by Deptford's greater closeness to London, and by the higher proportion of poor households in Deptford than in Greenwich. Deptford may well have lost an equal, or nearly

equal, proportion of its existing population during 1665-6 as London did in 1665. Historians have estimated that nearly a quarter of London's residents died in the 1665 plague. Uncertainty remains, however, because no one knows what proportion of the capital's residents left their city in the summer and autumn that year. The number of people 'at risk' of the plague in those months can only be guessed at.

The largest single category of burials in Greenwich was of children from settled households. Indeed, the most striking feature of the plague in Greenwich and Deptford in 1665 and 1666 was the terrible toll of children who died, rather than any over-representation among the poor. It is possible that children were more likely to catch the plague in 1665 because many adults – certainly most of the elderly – benefited from some degree of immunity to the plague, acquired during earlier outbreaks in the 1620s and 1630s. No section of the population in twenty-first century Britain has benefitted from any acquired immunity from coronavirus.

There are other points of comparison between the plague outbreak of 1665 and 1666 in the Thameside towns, and the coronavirus epidemic that we have been living with recently. In the seventeenth century, the experience of plague in London was different from that of Deptford and Greenwich. Unlike in London, Deptford and Greenwich suffered a second and equally-devastating wave of the plague in 1666 because the authorities there – unlike in London – failed to suppress the infection in its initial wave; and, less importantly, because London had its 'great fire'. The community leaders of Greenwich (and Deptford) had neither the personnel and institutions, nor the political will to control the spread of infection in 1665; it naturally reared up again in the following spring and summer. The Greenwich magistrates and churchwardens imposed no curfew in their towns; the taverns remained open and busy. They made no attempt to isolate households with plague sufferers. And there were no attempts to impose any form of lockdown. Scores of labourers and craftsmen, for example, continued to come and go to the palace building site in Greenwich in 1665,<sup>31</sup> and the Thames watermen continued to ply their trade (and transmit infection) between the capital and Greenwich throughout the period. Neither Deptford or Greenwich were boroughs and so had little in the way of a municipal apparatus which might have taken more active measures to contain the infection, something that the Corporation of London did attempt in 1665. But, containing the spread of an easily-transmissible disease is never easy, even with the resources and powers of a modern bureaucratic state.

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> *John Bell, London's Remembrancer ... a true accompt of every particular weeks christenings and mortality in all the years of pestilence ... bills of mortality being XVIII years (1665).*

<sup>2</sup> [www.pepysdiary.com/diary/1665/04/30/](http://www.pepysdiary.com/diary/1665/04/30/).

<sup>3</sup> [www.pepysdiary.com/diary/1665/05/24/](http://www.pepysdiary.com/diary/1665/05/24/) and [/05/28](http://www.pepysdiary.com/diary/1665/05/28/).

<sup>4</sup> Pepys felt that the bills missed out many deaths: his diary entry for 31/08/1665 records the latest bill of mortality total [for 22-29 August] of 7,496 (of which 6,102 were from plague), 'but it is feared that the true number of the dead this week is near 10,000; partly from the poor that cannot be taken notice of, through the greatness of the number, and partly from the Quakers and others that will not have any bell ring for them'. [www.pepysdiary.com/diary/1665/08/31/](http://www.pepysdiary.com/diary/1665/08/31/).

<sup>5</sup> For the plague in London there are several modern accounts: James Leasor, *The Plague and the Fire* (1962); A.L. Moote and D.C. Moote, *The Great Plague* (2008); Stephen Porter, *The Great Plague of London* (2009).

## SPREAD OF THE GREAT PLAGUE FROM LONDON TO DEPTFORD AND GREENWICH

<sup>6</sup> The source for all references to burials in both Deptford and Greenwich are the parishes' burial registers, now held in the London Metropolitan Archives, 40 Northampton Road, London EC1R 0HB, and accessed through Ancestry.com, available in many local libraries.

<sup>7</sup> 'Tudor and Stuart Colchester: Introduction', in *A History of the County of Essex: Volume 9, the Borough of Colchester*, ed. Janet Cooper and C.R. Elrington (London, 1994), pp. 67-76. *British History Online* <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/essex/vol9/pp67-76> [accessed 6 April 2021].

<sup>8</sup> *The Diary of John Evelyn, FRS*, ed. William Bray (Everyman Library, 1907), ii, p. 8.

<sup>9</sup> [www.pepysdiary.com/diary/1666/08/06/](http://www.pepysdiary.com/diary/1666/08/06/) and [www.pepysdiary.com/diary/1666/08/07/](http://www.pepysdiary.com/diary/1666/08/07/).

<sup>10</sup> On Charles II's building projects at Greenwich, see H.M. Colvin (ed.), *History of the King's Works*, v, 1660-1780 (1963). Building accounts for the Greenwich palace work are in The National Archives [TNA] WORK 5/1-8.

<sup>11</sup> Clare Tomalin, *Samuel Pepys: The Unequalled Self* (Penguin, London (2003), p. 174, and for Pepys and the plague more generally, ch. 4 of Tomalin's book.

<sup>12</sup> [www.pepysdiary.com/diary/1665/12/31/](http://www.pepysdiary.com/diary/1665/12/31/) 'I have never lived so merrily (besides that I never got so much) as I have done this plague time, by my Lord Bruncker's and Capt Cock's good company, and the acquaintance of Mrs Knipp, Coleman and her husband, and Mr Lanier, and great store of dancings we have had at my cost (which I was willing to indulge myself and wife) at my lodgings'.

<sup>13</sup> *Calendar of Assize Records: Kent Indictments, Charles II, 1660-75*, ed. J.S. Cockburn (1995), items 19, 73.

<sup>14</sup> [www.pepysdiary.com/diary/1665/09/27/](http://www.pepysdiary.com/diary/1665/09/27/).

<sup>15</sup> [www.pepysdiary.com/diary/1665/12/26/](http://www.pepysdiary.com/diary/1665/12/26/).

<sup>16</sup> The source for all references to the households of Greenwich residents is Duncan Harrington (ed.), *Kent Hearth Tax Assessment, Lady Day, 1664* (British Record Society and the KAS, 2000): Deptford at pp. 2-14; Greenwich at pp. 24-33. As well as the introductions in the printed Kent hearth tax volume, essential background about the Restoration hearth taxes starts with Nick Alldrige (ed.), *The Hearth Tax: problems and possibilities* (1984), especially arts by Arkell and Husbands; Kevin Schurer and Tom Arkell (eds), *Surveying the People* (1992); and Nigel Goose, 'How accurately do hearth tax returns reflect wealth?', *Local Population Studies*, 67 (Autumn 2001).

<sup>17</sup> [www.pepysdiary.com/diary/1665/09/10/](http://www.pepysdiary.com/diary/1665/09/10/).

<sup>18</sup> [www.pepysdiary.com/diary/1665/09/04/](http://www.pepysdiary.com/diary/1665/09/04/). The burial register doesn't usually identify burials from a named hamlet or road. But there were five burials from the household of Robert Walker 'at Coombe Farm' in August-September 1665, and a number of 'poor' people from Coombe Farm were also buried in August 1665.

<sup>19</sup> See diary entries for 4 and 8 November 1665.

<sup>20</sup> TNA E179/249/25/1.

<sup>21</sup> Tom Arkell, 'Multiplying factors for estimating population totals from the hearth tax', *Local Population Studies*, 28 (1982).

<sup>22</sup> *Kent Hearth Tax*, pp. 2-14, 24-33.

<sup>23</sup> A note of caution should be registered here: in the core plague periods (Aug-Nov 1665 and July-September 1666) the burial register identifies the vast majority of burials as 'plague' burials: 337 out of 397 burials (85%) in Aug-Nov 1665, and 249 out of 287 burials (87%) in July-Sept 1666. Is it possible that the parish clerk was over-recording plague as the cause of death in the face of such unprecedented mortality?

<sup>24</sup> Local jurors said a pest house had been built in Charles I's time, in their reply to a survey of the Lordship of Greenwich made by Samuel Travers in 1694/5, which is recorded in John Kimbell, *An Account of the Legacies ... appertaining to ... Greenwich* (1816), p. 224 and on map (an appendix), located south of London Street.

<sup>25</sup> Frances Ward, 'Plague in the Hundred of Blackheath', *Greenwich and Lewisham Antiquarian Society* (1981-2), pp. 179-199, gives a detailed account of the elaborate local efforts to fight the plague in 1635 – based on surviving churchwardens' accounts. That outbreak affected only about 20 people, but spurred measures similar to those implemented in London – including boarding off plague sufferers in their houses. There's no evidence that such measures were enforced in 1625, the only serious plague outbreak to effect Greenwich before 1665.

<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, many of the households with burials in 1665-6 can be traced in other sources besides the 1664 hearth tax list: some were rated for the 1662 hearth tax (which was more inclusive than that of 1664) and some can also be traced in the parish register as settled Greenwich households. Probably only a small minority of the burials were of transients and poor lodgers.

<sup>27</sup> Stable Street, which was located in Greenwich town centre, just back from Fisher Lane, is – for the moment – an unexplained anomaly: by its location alone, it should have been a much more deadly place. But it wasn't.

<sup>28</sup> Quoted in D.R. Belhouse, 'London Plague Statistics in 1665', *J. of Official Statistics*, xiv, no. 2 (1998), p. 233.

<sup>29</sup> 1662 Greenwich hearth tax: TNA E179/249/25/1 mem 5, col. 1. Rose's will in Kent History and Library Centre (KHLC), Maidstone, DRb/Pw34.

<sup>30</sup> KHLC, DRb/Pw34, made February 1665.

<sup>31</sup> For the names of just some of the workmen engaged on the new Greenwich Palace in August, September and October 1665, see TNA, WORK 5/8 fos. 275-282v, 283-9 and 291-296v.