

Plague, Pestilence and Famine in the Cartmel Peninsula

The 14th century Black Death Plague appears to be the first recorded plague in England (1) and during this period thousands of sheep died and there were so few servants and labourers that standing crops were left to rot in the fields (2) thus demonstrating the devastating effect of the plague. Following the plague in the middle of the 14th century, it is told that the manor lands of Carlisle lain waste for 18 months for lack of labourers. We have no records of burials for our area at this date.

Life was particularly tough in the 17th and 18th century in the Cartmel Peninsula. The climate was poor and has been described as the *Little Ice Age* with particularly cold periods about 1650 and 1770 (3). People lived in small farming communities practising basic subsistence farming that remained backward until the beginning of the 19th century (4). Plagues were common throughout England resulting in periods of increased mortality.

The transcription of the Cartmel Parish Registers (5) (in the document archive and available to members of the Cartmel Peninsula Local History Society) contains a table summarising the number of christenings, burials and marriages in the Parish of Cartmel. The 219 burials in 1623 is anomalous and indicates there were a very high number of deaths in that year. On examination of the records further, there was also a high number of burials in 1597 (5). The Bishops Transcriptions of later years reveal a high number of burials in 1729 (6). Stockdale also notes an unusually high number of burials in 1670 (4). This account investigates whether the cause of greater mortality in these years was due to plague, pestilence or famine.

The four years with higher number of burials are illustrated in Fig.1. In both years of 1597 and 1623, the number of deaths are particularly high and represent four to five times the average number of expected deaths. In the years of 1670 and 1729, the numbers of deaths was approximately twice the expected number. During the 18th century, the graph (Fig. 1) also shows a gradual increase in annual death rates from around 1780, presumably as the population increased in the community.

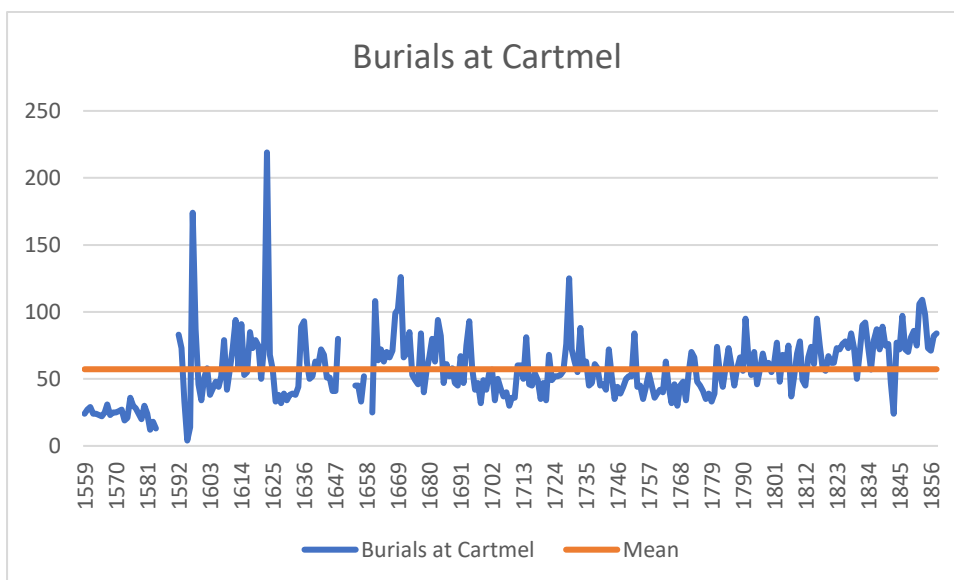


Fig. 1. The number of burials recorded for Cartmel from 1559 to 1850.

High Death Rate in the Cartmel Peninsula in 1597

Table 1. Burials from 1592 to 1600

Year	Burials
1592	78
1593	73
1594	33
1595	4
1596	12
1597	174
1598	87
1599	46
1600	34

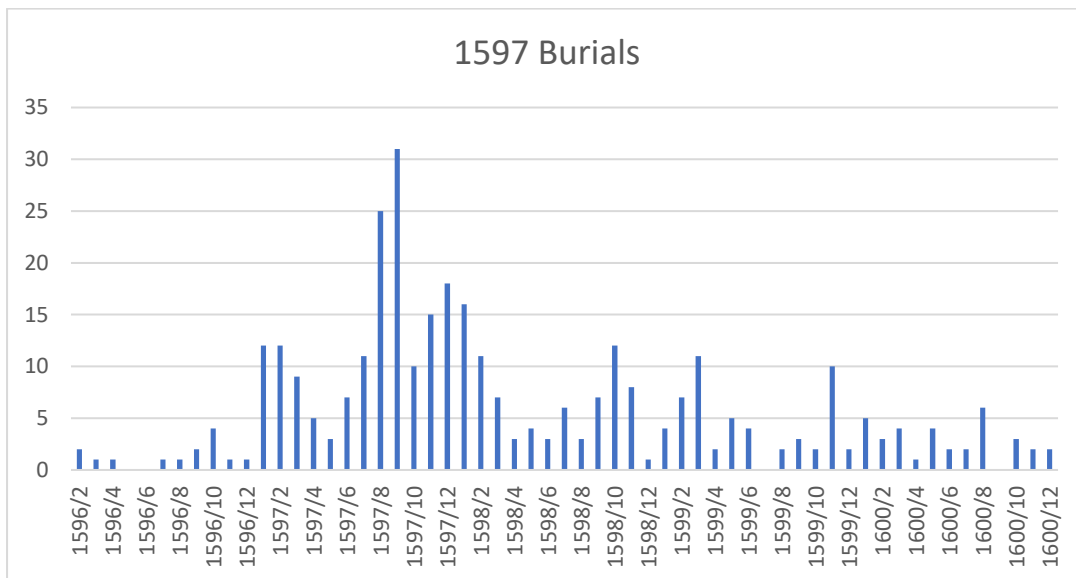


Fig.2. Monthly number of burials 1596:1600 (Julian Calendar month 1 = April)

The number of burials between 1559 and 1581 average 25 / annum. After a gap of a few years, there are a greater number of deaths recorded for 1592-3 (Table 1) coinciding with a reported outbreak of plague in London (7). The increase in mortality begins in April 1597 and continues for approximately 12 months with a peak in October and November. The previous year of 1596 is regarded as one of the ten worst years in British history, after consecutive harvests left thousands of people starving and vulnerable to disease (8). At the height of the high mortality, the burials proportionately were 46% men, 39% women and only relatively few children at 15%.

The plague in the North of England struck the Cartmel Peninsula in November 1597 and continued until the following April (Fig. 2). There is evidence of a plague in the north of England (7) . Plague in Cumberland is believed to have spread from Newcastle at Michaelmas

and continued over a year, with records for Penrith and Carlisle (9). The evidence suggests that the Cumberland Plague affected the Cartmel Peninsula too resulting in over 100 deaths.

The Plague or Famine of 1623

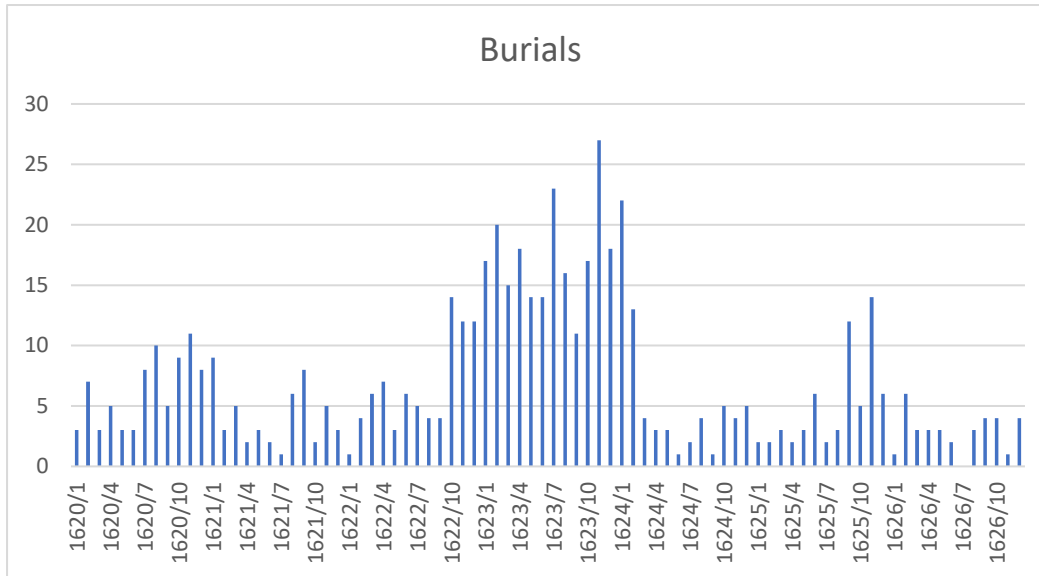


Fig.3. Monthly number of burials 1620:1626 (Julian Calendar month 1 = April)

In the early 1620's there were on average 5 burials / month. From January 1622 (the 10th month according to the Julian calendar) and until April 1624 (a period of 17 months) there were on average 16 burials / month. In the period from Jan 1622 and May 1624, 36% of those who died were men, 42% women and 22% children, i.e., relatively fewer men than in the 1597 period.

Stockdale (4) noticed a short note attached to the registers drawing attention to the unusual number of burials in the years 1597 (156), 1623 (219) and 1670 (126) (4).

Stockdale also received information from Newton Regny, near Penrith, and Greystoke indicating a similar great mortality in the years 1597 and 1623, and for St Bees in 1623. Unfortunately, the registers failed to record the nature of the disease and it was attributed to “some dreadful visitation” (4). Stockdale presents a letter from the Rev. Thomas Lees, Vicar of Wreay, who examined the records at Greystoke. He concluded that the deaths were caused by a bad harvest in 1622, or a very inclement season in 1623 or perhaps both. It is now recognised that the higher mortality extended from SW Scotland, NW England and as far south as N Cheshire (10) and attributable to famine combined with typhus.

At the end of the 16th century and early in the 17th century, neither 1597 nor 1623 are listed as years where there is a record of a major plague although there were plagues in 1593 and 1625. Parts of England were struck by a major famine with the north-west of England worst affected. In Lancashire 5% of the population died and in parts of Cumberland the poor starved to death in the streets (11). According to Sam Taylor, a plague struck the north west in 1622-23 and at the time 219 burials were recorded in the Priory register, much higher than the average number of between 65 and 70 (12). However it now appears that famine was the fundamental problem in 1623.

The Plague of 1670

Table 2. Burials at Cartmel (4)

Year	Burials
Average	70
1665	75
1668	96
1669	104
1670	126

In the years shortly after the 1665 Great Plague of London a similar excess of burials were noted in Westmorland and Cumberland suggesting that the plague extended to the North of England until 1670 and the number of burials recorded at Cartmel were also greater than expected reaching a maximum approximately four years after the outbreak of the plague in 1665.

The high number of deaths in 1728//9

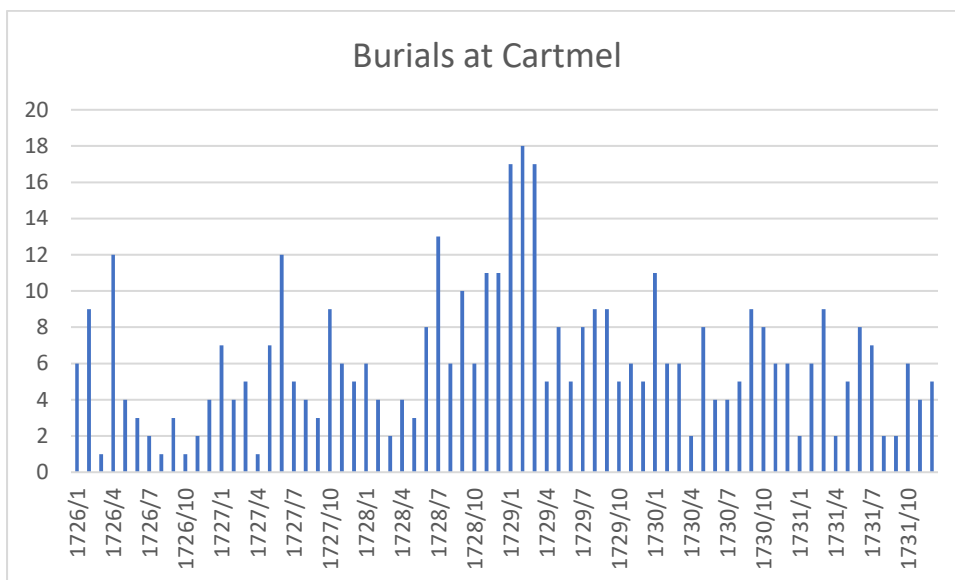


Fig.4. Monthly number of burials 1726-1731 (Julian Calendar month 1 = April)

The number of deaths was greater in 1729 (Fig. 4), the period extending from October 1728 to the following March. Over the period between Oct 1728 and Dec 1729, 47% of the deaths were men, 29% women and 24% children. 1665 is thought to be the last recorded plague (the Great

Plague) (1) so this spike suggests the high number of deaths in 1728/9 are unlikely to be due to plague. Around this time in the North of England, Scarlatina and Diphtheria epidemics took their toll e.g. in Ripon (N. Yorkshire) (13). Scarlatina in particular was regarded as a mild childhood infection in contrast to diphtheria which was regarded as a killing fever (14). In Worcestershire, the harvest in 1727 and 1728 was classified a bad (14), leaving the poor people starving and vulnerable to infection. The first influenza pandemic of the 18th century occurred in 1729, and spread across Europe in a 6-month period (15). It is probable that the greater than expected number of deaths will have been due to both famine and infections.

Only occasionally was the cause of death recorded. One example of an outbreak was noted in 1752 when the recorder noted 36 deaths from smallpox, all children, the deaths continuing throughout the year.

In conclusion, the literature today suggests that although plague and pandemics were a factor in the high mortality rates in 1597, 1623, 1670 and 1729, the main problem appears to be the poor climate, bad harvest yields and famine. In 1597 and 1729 approximately 50% of the deaths were men, in contrast to 1623 where only 36% of the deaths were men, and 42% of the deaths were women.

Phil Rowland, Feb 2020 v2

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