

The Black Death in Ipsen



famines. English chroniclers stressed that horsemeat, normally scorned even by peasants, was too expensive for all but the aristocracy. The rest of the populace was reduced to eating dogs, cats, and "unclean things."²³ All livestock prices save those of draft animals rose so high that in February 1316 a royal proclamation was issued which attempted to fix alimentary prices. But the proclamation failed because it "ordained that the ordinance regarding livestock, fowl and eggs should not stand because few were found on account of the dearth and lack of victuals." People paid any price for food.

Adding to the general misery was a series of related enteric diseases, probably typhoid fever, dysentery, and diphtheria, which increased the already inflated mortality. In all, heriots (the death duties paid by tenants' heirs to their lords) from estates in England increased 10%–12% in 1316. All classes were afflicted and, in 1317, normal, everyday social operations throughout Europe began to grind to a halt. Alms collections stopped and the number of vagabonds and thefts increased markedly. In Kent, a third of all thefts in 1316–17 involved foodstuffs; in a Midlands session of peace, 15% of all crimes brought before the court involved thefts of food.²⁴

In 1317 and 1318, harvests throughout Europe improved, and conditions gradually got better. But a new catastrophe, animal murrains, began. From 1316 to 1322, a series of livestock epidemics devastated what remained of Europe's cattle population. The next two years, 1322 and 1323, proved to be a period of respite, but they were followed by a succession of sheep murrains in 1324 and 1325. Coupled with additional grain harvest failures in 1321 and 1322, the murrains extended Europe's problems for another eight years.

The agrarian crisis of 1309–25 had profound effects on European society and economy. From 1316 to 1322, human population was reduced rather markedly, as higher mortality caused demographic decline, ranging from 10% to 25%. Every grain crop except oats, which often thrive in conditions of heavy rainfall and high humidity, produced yields far below average. But crop yields would eventually come back; more crucial and damaging was the depletion of European livestock. For example, on Inkpen Manor in Berkshire, England, there were 468 sheep in 1313. By 1317, there were only 137. On the three Huntingdonshire estates of Ramsey Abbey, also in England, the number of cattle in the same time span fell from 54 to 6, 47 to 2, and 65 to 9.²⁵ Recovery, especially in the crucial sheep's-wool market, was a long time in coming since many landlords lacked the capital to invest in new breeding stock. In many cases, it took generations before herds reached their thirteenth-century levels.

Devastating as they were in the short term, however, the famines of the 1310s and 1320s produced little long-term demographic change. Postfamine marriage and fertility levels remained high, and population began to rise almost immediately.²⁶ By the mid-1330s, Europe's subsistence crisis had been renewed. In northern France, famine occurred in the following years: 1330–34, 1344, 1349–51, 1358–60, 1371, 1373–74, and 1390, with Paris experiencing additional shortages in 1323 and 1325. In southern France, 1329, 1335, 1337, and 1343 were famine years. All over the kingdom, conditions were made worse by the Hundred Years' War with England, fought largely in French territory. In England, famine struck in 1335 and 1344; Germany and eastern Europe were affected in 1336 and from 1346–48, at which time a series of enteric diseases also ravaged the population. Southern Europe suffered as well. Both Iberia and the north Italian cities had major famines in the mid 1330s and the early and late

lease was usually taken much earlier. Few, perhaps, moved as fast as the monks of Selby, whose abandonment of demesne cultivation on at least some of their manors followed within six years of the Black Death.¹⁵ And there is some evidence elsewhere, in restocking and building on the Titchfield estates, and in the programme of works carried out during 1360–3 at the Surrey manor of Oxted, of a determination, not yet shaken, to continue direct exploitation of the demesne.¹⁶ But the secular trend of declining profitability, the product of low prices and high wages, was against it. Following the example of many identically situated landowners, the canons of Titchfield, who had still been investing as late as the 1380s in new stock and buildings at Inkpen, leased this manor before 1425.¹⁷ Their conversion to leasing in just these years fell in with the national pattern.

Reversing the experience of the pre-plague years, this pattern owed nothing to the exhaustion of the soil and very little to a failure in techniques. Indeed, at precisely the time that the monks of Battle were abandoning their demesnes, the crop yields on those

default to P's grave damage etc."

A9gg. M1377: Simon son of Thomas Marcham (Marchaunt) by Robert de Thornam (Thorndoun) v. Robert Aldewyk, CP40/468, m. 139d; CP40/469, m. 68, Suff: "why, whereas P had bailed (at Rattlesden) his 300 sheep to D to be guarded duly [*oves . . . liberasset debite custodiendas*], D, custody of the absd sheep having been undertaken from P, so negligently and unduly guarded those sheep that of the absd sheep 200 sheep of a price of £40 died by D's default to P's grave damage etc."

A9hh. H1378: John Persones v. John son of Walter Uphulle de Hamme, KB27/476, m. 3d, Berks: "why, whereas P bailed his 200 sheep to D at Inkpen to be guarded duly [*oves . . . debite custodiendas liberasset*], D, custody of the absd sheep having been undertaken from P, so negligently and unduly guarded those sheep that of the absd sheep 40 sheep of a price of 100s died by D's default to P's grave damage."

A9ii. H1378: John de Chitterne cc v. Edward Kembere of Chitterne shepherd, CP40/469, m. 330d, Wilts: "why, whereas D had undertaken at Chitterne P's 40 sheep to be guarded well and faithfully [*oves . . . bene et fideliter custodiendas . . . assumpsisset*], D so negligently and less duly guarded those sheep that the absd sheep were damaged in many ways and P lost the profit of the absd sheep for a great time, and inflicted other enormities on him to P's damage of 100s etc."

A9jj. E1378: Prior of Butley by William Rous v. William Frer of Freston, CP40/470, m. 70; CP40/471, m. 66; CP40/472, m. 397; CP40/473, m. 4d (exigent), Suff: "why, whereas P had bailed 300 sheep to D at Knodishall to be guarded duly [*oves . . . liberasset debite custodiendum*], D, custody of the absd sheep having been undertaken from P, so negligently and unduly guarded those sheep that 80 sheep of the absd sheep of a price of 10m died by D's default to P's grave damage etc."

A9kk. E1378: William Gregory of Basingstoke by John Sutton v. John atte Chert of Netley, CP40/470, m. 115, Hants: "why, whereas P had bailed his 500 sheep to D at Basingstoke to be guarded well and faithfully [*oves . . . bene et fideliter custodiendas . . . tradidisset*], D, custody of those sheep having been accepted, so negligently and less duly guarded the said sheep that the absd sheep were damaged in many ways to P's damage of 10m etc."

to be ground to the mills of other lords when he had a mill of his own at Wicor. The tenants of Inkpen had to go to Andover and other towns within some 12 miles of the village, and those of Wallsworth carried corn a similar distance to Titchfield. The Titchfield tenants had to carry food to Winchester. The market attracted men to Titchfield from all the neighbouring villages; selling meat there in 1398 were John Boucher of Wickham, Thomas Boucher of Chilling, Thomas Neel of Rowner and William Martin of Portchester. There were at least two smiths from other villages working there, Henry Faber of Fareham had a

One of the most common myths in European economic history, and indeed in Economics itself, is that the Black Death of 1347-48, followed by other waves of bubonic plague, led to an abrupt rise in real wages, for both agricultural labourers and urban artisans – one that led to the so-called ‘Golden Age of the English Labourer’, lasting until the early 16th century. While there is no doubt that real-wages in mid- to late-15th century England did reach a peak far higher than that ever achieved in past centuries, real wages in England did not, in fact, rise in the immediate aftermath of the Black Death.

In southern England, real wages of building craftsmen (rural and urban), having plummeted with the natural disaster of the Great Famine (1315-21), thereafter rose to a new peak in 1336-40. But then their real wages fell during the 1340s, and continued their decline after the onslaught of the Black Death, indeed into the 1360s. Not until the later 1370s – almost thirty years after the Black Death – did real wages finally recover and then rapidly surpass the peak achieved in the late 1330s. Thereafter, the rise in real wages was more or less continuous, though at generally slower rates, during the 15th century, reaching a peak in 1476-80 – at a level not thereafter surpassed until 1886-90, by the usual methods of calculating real wages with index numbers: i.e., by $NWI/CPI = RWI$ [nominal wage index divided by the consumer price index equals the real wage index]. Most of the textbooks that still perpetuate the myth about the role of the Black Death in raising real wages, as an almost immediate consequence, employ a demographic model based on Ricardian economics, which predicts (*ceteris paribus*) that depopulation will result in falling grain prices and thus in falling rents on grain-producing lands (on land in general) and in rising real wages. The fall in population – perhaps as much as 50 percent by the late 15th century (from the 1310 peak) – presumably altered the land:labour ratio sufficiently to increase the marginal productivity of labour and thus its real wage (though in economic theory the real wage is determined by the marginal revenue product of labour). The rise in real wages would also have been a product of the fall in the cost of living, chiefly determined by bread-grain prices, whose decline would have been the inevitable result of both the abandonment of high-cost marginal lands and the rise in the marginal productivity of agricultural labour.

But the evidence produced in this study demonstrates that the Black Death was followed, in England, by almost thirty years of high grain prices – high in both nominal and real terms; and that was a principal reason for the post-Plague behaviour of real wages. This study differs from all traditional models by examining the role of monetary forces in producing deflation in the second and final quarters of the fourteenth century, but severe inflation in between those quarters (i.e., from the early 1340s to the mid 1370s). The analysis of the evidence on money, prices, and wages in this study concludes that monetary forces and the consequent behaviour of the price level – in terms of those deflations and intervening inflation – were the most powerful determinant of the level of real wages (i.e., in terms of the formula: $NWI/CPI = RWI$).

Thus the undisputed rise in nominal or money wages following the Black Death was literally ‘swamped’ by the post-Plague inflation, so that real wages fell. Conversely, the rise of real wages in the second quarter of the fourteenth century was principally due to a deflation in which consumer prices fell much more than did nominal wages. In the final quarter of the century, the even stronger rise in real wages was principally due to another deflation in which consumer prices fell sharply, but one in which, for the first time in recorded English history, nominal wages did not fall: an era that inaugurated the predominance of wage-stickiness in English labour markets for the next six centuries. But that perplexing phenomenon of downward wage-stickiness must be left to other studies. The 14th century is the most violent one before the 20th; and violent disruptions from plague, war, and civil unrest undoubtedly produced severe supply shocks and high (relative) prices. Europe also experienced more severe oscillations in monetary changes and consequently in price levels – i.e., the aforesaid deflations and intervening inflation – during the 14th century than in any other before the 20th.

Black death comes again to a Berkshire in 1603

Starting in the mid 14th century, the Black Death had been responsible for the deaths of about a third of the population of Europe, and it kept returning during the 16th and 17th centuries to claim more lives.