'At The Gates Of Hell':
The Seamy Side of Life in Seventeenth-Century Bath

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[Bath] ... situated – or rather buried – in deep valleys in the middle of a thick atmosphere and a sulphureous fog, is at the gates of Hell.
(A French visitor to Bath in the late seventeenth century)

The Attraction of Seventeenth-Century Bath

By the seventeenth century, Bath – a walled city of some two thousand people surrounded by fields and meadows – was already gaining a fine reputation as an attractive riverside resort.1 Visitors and residents alike lavished praise on its location and facilities. Tobias Venner, writing in 1628, called it ‘a little, well-compacted city; for goodness of air, nearness of a sweet and delectable river, and fertility of soil, it is pleasant and happy enough’; Henry Chapman, in 1673, admired its backdrop of ‘pleasant and fruitful hills full of excellent springs of water’; Thomas Dingley, in 1682, noted that ‘this city is besides, without doubt, the prettiest in the kingdom – in a double construction, as it is little and handsome’; and Samuel Pepys, in 1668, appreciated ‘the pretty good market place and many good streets and very fair stone houses’.2

In spite of a serious recession in the local cloth industry at the beginning of the century, Bath still retained something of an air of affluence. Indeed, the Corporation was exceedingly wealthy – thanks to a rich endowment, granted by Edward VI in 1552, of property previously owned by Bath Priory (dissolved in 1539). The Corporation used its assets wisely to maintain the fabric of its buildings in good repair and to offer generous support to the deserving poor through its management of four hospitals (or almshouses) and its regular doles of bread, wood and coal. Even during the harrowing years of the Civil War (1642-46), when vast sums were spent on defence, the city’s annual accounts always showed a healthy credit balance. Furthermore, the charter, granted by Elizabeth I in 1590, conferred on the Corporation wide new powers of local government, which enabled it to create a safe and secure environment for both residents and visitors alike. Its medieval walls and gates were regularly repaired and strengthened; its trained bands were always on hand to counter any threat
from outside; while its street patrols, courts and prison quickly took care of any disturbances from within. There was little crime.

Even by 1625, a visitor would find much to admire on a walk around the narrow streets of Bath – including the new Grammar School, which had been established in 1552 by Edward VI and was now housed in the nave of the disused church of St Mary by the North Gate; the fine new Abbey Church, which had finally been completed in 1617, after a nationwide appeal for funds; and the striking new Guildhall and Market, which, standing in the middle of the High Street, was opened in 1625. The star attraction, however, was undoubtedly the hot water spa, consisting of five baths – an attraction which drew visits from a succession of English monarchs, famous courtiers and distinguished generals.

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Fig.1 The central section of Joseph Gilmore’s map of Bath (1717 edition), which illustrates the compact nature of a walled city surrounded by fields and meadows. Bath Common, on which the ‘pest houses’ were situated (see the section below on plague), lies off the top right-hand (or north-western) corner of the map. (Author’s collection)
With the gradual transformation of the health resort into a leisure resort from 1660, an affluent consumer society was created which prompted the rapid expansion of inns, lodging houses, medical care and shops offering a wide range of luxury goods. A post office was opened for the first time in 1647/48; a theatre in 1705; a Pump Room in 1706; and the first Assembly Rooms in 1709. At the same time, recreational activities mushroomed to cater for the social needs of the visiting company. They included cock fighting, tennis, bowls, skittles, dice, formal walks, society balls and rides in sedan chairs. The arrival of Bath's first coffee house in about 1679 provided a rendezvous of a different kind from that already offered by the many alehouses and taverns. This frantic activity, masterminded at least in part by the Corporation, greatly increased the amount of employment available to local people and the general feeling of affluence which impressed visitors. Life, it would seem, was extremely good.

There was, however, another side to life in Stuart Bath, which visitors also noticed – for the city had long experienced a number of serious and intractable problems. The most worrying of these, especially in view of its image as a health resort, centred on beggars, sanitation and disease.

Fig. 2 Visitors usually arrived at their inns or lodging houses in Bath by coach, often bringing with them a large amount of luggage. This sometimes even included bed curtains, tableware, furnishings and fuel for the fire. (Drawing by Stephen Beck)
A Constant Threat: the Beggars of Bath

You cannot be without peril at Bath, whither there is a daily resort from Bristol and specially of beggars and poor folks (Letter to Lord Burleigh, 1552; Historical Manuscripts Commission, Salisbury Papers, 9/16, 1933)

Even by the middle of the sixteenth century, Bath Corporation had been facing a major social and economic crisis with the steady influx of beggars on a daily basis. ‘The Beggars of Bath’ gained such national notoriety that the very reputation of the health resort was placed in jeopardy. In desperation, the Corporation decided to petition parliament for its urgent help in tackling this menace, which cast a heavy financial burden on the city’s poor rates. The Poor Relief Act of 1572 (14 Eliz. I. c.5), therefore, gave recognition to Bath’s unique problem (namely that ‘a great number of poor and diseased people do resort to the City of Bath ... for some ease and relief of their diseases’), resulting in the inhabitants being ‘greatly overcharged’; and put forward a solution which forbade any ‘diseased or impotent’ person from visiting the city, unless he had been licensed to do so by two justices in his native county. The licence gave a guarantee that his own parish would eventually take him back and continue to support him financially. Failure to produce this licence at the city gates, however, would result in instant punishment as a vagabond – and, in 1572, this meant being branded on the chest with a ‘V’ and then handed over to a farmer for two years of slavery.

The Corporation tried hard to follow national policy on poverty throughout the seventeenth century. Nevertheless, its resources were often strained by the need to cater for its own resident poor, while at the same time dealing with the large number of beggars who flocked into the city from outside. Bath’s affluence and its spa for well-heeled visitors, made it an obvious target for those in desperate need. The Corporation reacted to the need to get unemployed people off the streets by providing them with work. The Poor Law Act of 1601 (43 Eliz. I. c.2), had enabled local authorities to establish Houses of Correction (or Bridewells), so that the fit but jobless poor could be set to work in rather harsh surroundings. However, Bath Corporation did not respond to this opportunity until 1630 – the year which saw worrying food riots on the Midford Hill, just outside Bath. Spurred into action, it immediately called for voluntary subscriptions ‘towards the building of a House of Correction’, resolving two years later ‘to set the poor of this city to work’.3
Suitable premises were found in the north-west corner of the city (in what was later known as Bridewell Lane), when Mr Chambers was paid £5 to vacate his barn, stable and backyard for conversion into a House of Correction. A committee was formed to receive and list contributions towards the vital task of transforming the existing fabric. The work was considered to be so urgent that, as contributions began to dry up towards the end of 1634, the Council resolved to charge a general rate on the whole town 'towards the finishing of the House of Correction'. Although little is known of its conditions, small clues appear in payments made for 'window bars' and 'wooden bars' (denoting its prison-like atmosphere); 'hooks and twists' (suggesting employment); and the loan of a rope by Goody Parker 'to dig the well at the House of Correction'. This centre continued in use for much of the century. Indeed, in 1664, the Council showed its determination to check any slackness which had crept into the system by passing this resolution: 'The house called the Bridewell, being built intentionally to be a place wherein to set the poor of this city to work, shall be put to that use'.

Although the House of Correction was chiefly intended to cater for Bath's own resident poor, its prison-like qualities also made it suitable for the temporary detention of rogues and vagabonds. No records have survived to indicate the extent to which it was used for this purpose, although there are occasional glimpses of the tough line taken by the authorities towards such undesirable elements. In 1613, for instance, the Council paid William Doulton, the metal smith, twelve pence 'for an iron to burn rogues with'. This indication of the sense of alarm felt by the authorities is surprising in view of the fact that the 1601 Poor Law Act had dispensed with the earlier practice of branding vagabonds. In most places they were now severely whipped, before being returned to their home parish.

Fig.3 The Poor Law Act of 1601 made provision for unemployed vagabonds to be whipped and sent back to their home parishes. (By permission of the British Library: Bagford's Ballads, vol.III, 51)
It was of course crucial to ensure that visiting beggars did not become a long-term charge on local people. They were therefore removed, if necessary, by force—such as the impoverished soldier who was manhandled out of town by two paid workers on the mayor’s orders in 1699; or the woman and two children who were carried away ‘after the regiment’ on the mayor’s instructions (her soldier husband having dumped them on the city). Nevertheless, in spite of the Corporation’s active concern, the problem of aggressive begging was never entirely solved.

A Constant Eyesore: the State of the Streets

The streets are no more than dung hills, slaughter houses and pig sties
(\textit{Dr Edward Jorden; A Discourse of Naturall Bathes and Minerall Waters, 1631})

At the beginning of the century, the condition of the streets was appalling. Foul-smelling rubbish accumulated on every footpath to rot away slowly in the still and humid air of Bath. The open channel or culvert which ran down the centre of the main streets, was often blocked by ashes, rubble and other unpleasant debris, while horses, cattle and other animals (often on their way to market) left behind them a trail of manure and urine.

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{fig4.png}
\caption{A contemporary drawing of a typical street scene. Note the piles of refuse, which the scavenger is loading into his cart; the central drainage channel, which has become an open sewer; the child using the street as a toilet; a pig wallowing in the dirt; and the chamber pot being emptied out of a first-floor window. 
\textit{(By permission of the British Library: Roxburghe Ballads, RAX.Rox.I, pt.2.547)}}
\end{figure}
Although the city’s revised charter of 1590 had given the Corporation powers to make by-laws over such matters as street cleaning, it was not until 1646 that these were taken up. During the first half of the century, therefore, the streets were only cleaned at very irregular intervals. Payments were made occasionally by the chamberlain for ‘shovelling up the dirt in Westgate Street’, ‘cleansing the way by the Bridge’, or ‘cleansing the way by the borough walls’. As late as 1654, John Evelyn was to describe the streets as ‘narrow, uneven, and unpleasant’ – for even after the publication of the by-laws the street-cleaning operation remained totally unsystematic. The Corporation only tended to respond either to a particular crisis of accumulated filth (e.g. ‘cleansing Cox Lane and Vicarage Lane’ in 1672; and ‘shovelling at the Borough Walls’ in 1682) or to a visit by a distinguished guest (e.g. ‘cleaning Southgate when the Queen came’ in 1687).4

Earlier, in 1602, the Corporation had found itself in a state of undisguised panic when rumours swept the city of an impending visit by Queen Elizabeth. The streets were in such a deplorable state that messengers were urgently dispatched to Tetbury, Cirencester, Frome, Bristol, Sodbury, Warminster and Chippenham ‘to get paviours against the Queen’s coming’. Emergency repairs were then quickly undertaken by these skilled workmen in both High Street and Westgate Street – although the rumours eventually proved to be false! Nevertheless, as the century progressed, the streets were increasingly well cobbled and kept in reasonable repair – a fact which undoubtedly aided the cleaning process. Sometimes it was only a matter of employing workmen ‘for mending the highway at Holloway’ or for ‘pitching at Southgate’, although occasionally whole stretches of road were completely remade. In 1648, for instance, the council resurfaced 268 yards of Westgate Street and ‘under the gate’, a task which required thirty-four loads of stone. Fourteen loads of ‘rubbish stone’ were carted away by the workers who spent a week in all on the job.

As early as 1633 the Corporation had tried to impose standards of behaviour on its citizens in relation to the streets, particularly over the matter of the drainage channels. Councillors ruled that ‘everyone that doth sweep the street before their doors and put it [the dirt] into the channel shall pay 12d for each offence’. The measure met with limited success. However, the new by-laws which came into force in 1650 (having been first drafted in 1646), made a determined effort to tighten up on a number of abuses that had crept in over the course of time. The householder was henceforward strictly forbidden to throw ‘any soil, dung or filth in or
near any open street, which shall be offensive to such street'. He was also required 'to sweep and make clean the street before his house every Saturday morning' or face a one shilling fine for neglect. Fines were to be put towards the cost of repairing and cleansing the streets. Then, in order to reduce the amount of animal droppings, the city's first-ever 'parking' restriction was introduced. No-one from henceforth was 'to tie or feed, or suffer any kind of beast to stand in any of the said streets above the space of one quarter of an hour'.

The activities of the butchers were also addressed by the new by-laws. A few years earlier (in 1631), Dr Edward Jorden had observed that 'the butchers dressed their meat at their own doors, while pigs wallow in the mire'. Indeed, in the same year, after complaints about the problem of pigs, three councillors were detailed 'to view the annoyances in Mr Cox's garden next the [butchers'] shambles'. Two years later, when Cox was in the process of renewing his lease, the Corporation actually made it a condition that he was 'to remove his pigsties'. The by-laws therefore attempted to tackle the whole question of hygiene in the preparation of food, aiming to prevent butchers from adding to the filthy state of the streets and to ensure that only meat in good condition reached the market. Part of the problem was that cattle and sheep were often brought into Bath 'on the hoof' for slaughter by butchers in the spaces behind and around their shops. This practice not only contributed to the general stench, but also added to the whole question of waste disposal.

It was consequently stipulated in the new by-laws that 'no butcher should kill any calf, sheep, swine or any other cattle in any of the open streets, nor hang out any flesh newly killed so as to soil or annoy the said streets'. Furthermore, pig owners were strictly banned from allowing their animals to wander around the streets in search of discarded waste – a practice which had clearly been prevalent before. Fines for all these food offences were to be devoted to the care of the poor. Nevertheless, John Wood was to claim in 1765 that, even at the end of the seventeenth century, the streets were still the same as Jorden had described them with pigs foraging for scraps and horses being fed 'at almost every door from small racks or mangers'.

The existing health regulations were somewhat strengthened by a resolution of the council in 1663, which also tackled the problem of children's behaviour in the streets. Anyone in future who did 'lay or deposit any manner of coal, ashes, dirt or soil whatsoever in any of the streets, lanes or ways within the city, or let forth their child or children to do their easement or ordure [excrement] in any of the streets' would be
liable to a fine of 3s 4d (with half going to the informer and half to the poor). There is some evidence that this tougher line was implemented. In 1677, for instance, the Council ruled that Edward Taylor was to be prosecuted for establishing his own ‘mixon’ or rubbish dump ‘in the highway’; while in 1683 the borough Quarter Sessions ordered Richard Edgill ‘to carry away the soil and horse dung’ that he had dumped in the Outer Bowling Green – or face a fine of ten shillings. Air quality was also important in a health resort – hence a decision by the Council in 1698 to prosecute Thomas Rosewell ‘for the nuisance to this city’ caused by his lime kiln; or an earlier ruling in 1646 that ‘no inhabitant was to brew or dry malt by night between nine o’clock at night and four o’clock in the morning or light any fire’ on pain of a five shilling fine. Pollution, however, remained a serious problem, thanks in part to the work of the tanners, chandlers and soap-boilers – in addition to the brewers and lime-kiln operators.

Nevertheless, in spite of the efforts of the Corporation to improve cleanliness within the city, corrective action still tended to be just as irregular and spasmodic at the end of the century as it had always been. Indeed, it was not until 1707 that the Corporation, after many complaints from visitors to the spa, gained an Act of Parliament giving them authority ‘to pave, cleanse and light the streets and lanes of the town’ in a systematic manner. In particular, the Act enabled the mayor and justices to appoint ‘surveyors of the streets’ in each parish ‘to have the care of the cleansing of the said streets’. It required every householder to sweep the street in front of his house three times a week (on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday) in readiness for a collection by the scavenger. In addition, the citizen was strictly forbidden to throw any filth, rubbish or dung into the streets, but to keep it inside his house or yard until the scavenger’s visit. Of even greater significance was the stipulation that each householder would on occasions be directed ‘to pitch or pave’ the street in front of his house up to the middle of the road. Failure to comply with any of these regulations would result in a fine ranging from 3s 4d to 10s 0d.8

A Constant Stench: the Disposal of Sewage

[Bath] scarce gives the company any room to converse out of the smell of their own excrements

(Daniel Defoe; Tour of the Whole Island of Great Britain, 1927 edn., vol.2, p.168)

The sanitary arrangements were primitive in the extreme. Some of the people living in Southgate Street had privies at the bottom of their
gardens, which drained into Bum Ditch. These can clearly be seen on Joseph Gilmore’s map of Bath in 1694. Most of the people who lived in the more cramped conditions inside the city walls would have been far less fortunate, being faced by a serious problem over waste disposal. If they had no space in a back garden or yard to site an earth closet and cesspit, they would be obliged to rely on the use of chamber pots and close stools. The servants would often dispose of the contents of these receptacles by emptying them into the channel in the middle of the street, where they were churned up with other refuse by passing traffic. The more idle servants would simply throw the contents out of an upper floor window – forcing pedestrians to walk as close as possible to the walls of houses seeking cover under the overhanging storeys. Samuel Pepys describes in his diary for 1664 how two men, ‘jostling for the wall’ in a London street, killed each other in a furious brawl over this issue.

In some houses sewage was stored in a vault in the basement. However, vaults such as these – and cess pits, too – needed to be cleared periodically by digging out the contents – an unpleasant task undertaken by ‘night-soil men’. Failure to do so could often bring unfortunate consequences. Pepys, for instance, describes how the vault in his neighbour’s cellar in London had not been emptied on a regular basis, with the result that the contents overflowed into his own basement. Going there one day, he stepped ‘into a great heap of turds’, which alerted him to the fact that ‘Mr Turner’s house of office is full’. It had been usual practice in many towns for this dung or ‘night soil’ to be dumped haphazardly outside the city or flung into the river, either by individuals or by the night-soil men themselves.\(^9\)

Such behaviour was however banned by the Bath Council in 1613, when a scavenger was appointed to collect the refuse. Consequently, each citizen was ordered to ‘send his dust [sewage] to the scavenger’s cart ... in some vessel to be emptied into the said cart’. The scavenger then carried this refuse outside the city, where it was mainly deposited in mixons (or rubbish dumps) outside the South and West Gates – although there was also one outside both the East Gate in 1634 and the Ham Gate in 1615. This situation undoubtedly contributed to the stench which so upset visitors to the city in summer. In a determined effort to enforce this new order the Corporation instructed the beadle, and each tithingman within his tithing (or sector), to inspect each week ‘the common annoyance of casting of soil over the town walls’. They were to present a list of offenders to the town clerk each Monday, for punishment in court.

As the century progressed, other locations were also used for the disposal of night soil. In 1632, for instance, the new ‘scavenger of the
common’ (to give him his full title) was instructed ‘to collect soil in the city and suburbs and to spread it on the common according to the overseers’ orders’. Even so, no consistent policy seems to have prevailed. In 1689, for instance, the Council paid workmen for ‘cleansing the soil abroad in the town’; and in 1685 for ‘throwing soil over the borough walls’. At least they no longer threw it into the Avon, where water-borne diseases such as typhoid could thrive amid the pollution. It should also be remembered that the spread of germs from sewage was largely responsible for the high mortality rate in infancy, with possibly one in five babies dying in the first few months – many from diarrhoea.

In order to limit the scale of this problem, the Corporation had built ‘a common privy’ or public convenience in 1575, paying a labourer for ‘digging a dyke [ditch]’, constructing a timber frame and tiling the roof. In 1623, ‘a house of office’ (or public convenience) was built near the Ham Gate, situated over the stream which eventually ran into Bum Ditch.

![Fig.5 A section of Joseph Gilmore’s map of 1694, which shows thirteen individual privies (two have been circled) situated at the bottom of gardens belonging to the houses in Southgate Street. These drained into Bum Ditch, which itself drained into the river. (Author’s collection)](image)

Payments were occasionally made thereafter for ‘cleansing the Ham privy’ – but whether this was abused by vandals or merely over-used by visitors, the chamberlain sealed its fate in 1636 by paying money for ‘walling up the privy door and 2 sacks of lime’. However, other such conveniences were established from time to time – such as ‘a house of ease’ (also called ‘the house of office’) at the bowling green in 1681. Examples of these public privies found elsewhere suggest that they usually consisted of an oak bench with a row of holes (but with no partitions between) and a pit below. A great step forward was made in 1707 when a more elegant-
sounding convenience - a ‘pass house for the use of ladies frequenting this city’ - was erected near the Abbey.10

The reality, however, was that Bath - like all other cities - suffered from a persistent and highly unpleasant stench, made worse by its high level of humidity and its location in a hollow. As noted earlier, one French visitor put it like this: ‘Bath, situated - or rather buried - in deep valleys in the middle of a thick atmosphere and a sulphureous fog, is at the gates of Hell’. Even as late as 1716, the Duchess of Marlborough complained: ‘I never saw any place abroad that had more stinks and dirt in it than Bath’. Daniel Defoe was much more specific after a visit to the city in 1722. Bath, he said, ‘was more like a prison than a place of diversion ... where the city itself may be said to stink like a general common-shore’.11 As a result, the Corporation - ever conscious of the city’s reputation as a health resort - always did its best to ensure that a good stock of sweet-smelling herbs was available for the personal use of royal visitors (e.g. James II in 1686; his queen, Mary of Modena, in 1687; and Princess Anne in 1692).

A Constant Fear: the Terror of the Plague

The contagious sickness did so much affright the inhabitant of Widcombe that they were fearful to come into other people’s company (Local eyewitness, 1625)

There is no doubt that Bath Corporation adopted a most responsible policy towards maintaining the health of the local community. It gradually set tight controls over the cleanliness of the city, the disposal of night soil and the purity of its water supply. With its public drinking fountains (and, indeed, many of its private houses) supplied with clear spring water from the neighbouring hills, Bath was spared many of the anxieties and problems over health which affected most cities at this time. Health hazards in Worcester, for instance, were alarming, with the river constantly polluted from the dyers’ vats as well as refuse of all kinds. Outbreaks of bubonic plague - the scourge of most towns - were also frequent. Norwich suffered six epidemics between 1579 and 1665; Bristol lost a sixth of its population on three occasions between 1565 and 1603; Newcastle witnessed a mortality rate of a third during the epidemic of 1636-7; and over two thousand died in Chester during the attack of 1647.

The filthy streets and densely-packed houses of the large cities provided an ideal environment for the black rats on which the infection-bearing fleas bred. Although bubonic plague was in itself a disease of rats, when the host rat died the infected fleas attacked humans if another
rat could not be found. As Roger Rolls has pointed out, the disease – indicated by swollen lymph glands (buboes) in the neck, groin and armpits, a high fever, delirium and red blotches all over the skin – was highly infectious.\textsuperscript{12} Bath remained largely immune from threats of this kind within the community – its main problem being to ensure that a city, which actively encouraged visitors to flock in numbers to sample its healing waters, did not at the same time encourage the importation of plague. Precautions, however, did not always work. Sir Thomas Seymour, for instance, admitted in 1605 that, as the plague had struck down two people in his house in London, he had forsaken the capital and was living in Bath. In an attempt to counter this unwelcome form of intrusion, the Corporation had (as early as 1583) paid two watchmen, Oliver and Green, ‘for seeing that none should come into the city from Paulton and other places which were infected with the plague’.

A much more serious crisis, however, arose in 1604 when the plague actually struck inside the city.\textsuperscript{13} The extent of this is graphically described in a number of letters to Robert Cecil, James I’s Secretary of State, who was planning a visit to the baths to gain relief from his chronic ailments. Dr John Sherwood, a leading and reputable physician at the spa, advised Cecil to delay his visit until the plague had passed its peak. By 21st July, he said, twenty-six people had died and seven or eight houses in various parts of the city had become infected. Revised figures were given in August by Captain John Winter of Dyrham in a further letter to Cecil. He reported that, although fifty people had died between 6th May (when the epidemic began) and 18th August, the disease was by then confined to four houses, including the \textit{White Swan} in Westgate Street (where two people lay sick and a further six had already died). Winter, however, was forced to admit in September that a further three houses had become infected, although much of the city was by then completely clear.

Cecil decided to postpone his visit. Although Sherwood had given the Secretary of State an honest assessment of the situation at the end of August (seventy-two dead and twenty-four houses infected), many local people were furious with him for discouraging the visit of such an eminent person – someone who could have used his influence ‘to renew their old charter with more immunities’. Sherwood was disgusted at such selfish attitudes, which failed to heed ‘the health and safety of others’ – especially when it later transpired that one of Cecil’s own cooks, who would have been preparing his food in Bath, had been staying in one of the newly-infected houses. The prospect of this, commented Sherwood to Cecil later, was ‘a thing of terror to those that truly love you’. On
occasions, therefore, commercial interest could cloud the judgment of a city, even one so committed to the health of its community.

In human terms, the impact of this outbreak is vividly illustrated by a Bill of Mortality for the city dated 20th September. This revealed that no fewer than eighty-eight people had died within the city during the four months from the middle of May – including seventy-two ‘of the plague’, eleven ‘by the ordinary visitation of God’ and five whose deaths were ‘uncertain’. These deaths were in stark contrast to the average annual death rate for Bath of just fifty-four during the period 1603-1620. The plague victims (who mostly lived in the parishes of the Abbey and St James) included eight people each from the houses of Goodwife Moore and John Adye; eight from the Swan Inn; five from the home of Dr Richard Bayly; and four from Walter Missam’s house. In addition eight people, who had been ‘carried from the town’ in a sick condition, eventually died of the plague in the specially built ‘pest house’ on the common. Nevertheless, although Bath seems to have escaped quite lightly (unlike Bristol which lost over 2,000 victims during the same epidemic), such was the anxiety within the city that even many of the doctors had moved away in fear. Lord Zouche, in a letter to the Secretary of State (Lord Celic) at the end of July, commented that he had been informed that ‘the sickness is at the Bath dispersed so much as the physicians be fled from thence’. A week earlier, Dr John Sherwood had admitted in a letter that he was actually writing from Tockington ‘where, for preventing the worst, I have for a time reposed my poor family’.

Disturbing stories often reached the ears of the Corporation and terrified many local people as rumours abounded. In 1625 and 1626, plague once more threatened the area. It was at a time when cities throughout the country were again being devastated by the disease – thousands died in Exeter, while twenty per cent of the population were swept away in both Norwich and London. It was hardly surprising, therefore, that alarming news quickly spread from Frome of a man called Phillips, who had returned from London with his wife and child, having been exposed to the ‘infection of the plague’. The authorities in Frome ordered them to be locked up in a house outside the town and placed under strong guard at the door. This remained in position until the family eventually died.

Bath did not escape completely from this outbreak, although the numbers affected never reached major epidemic proportions. Under the circumstances, the Corporation felt impelled to take decisive action by again isolating those who were ill, building three special houses ‘for the sick folks’ on the common – but also showing a little more compassion than
was shown in Frome by ensuring that they were kept well supplied with food (at a cost of £13 1s 8d). When the crisis was over, workmen were paid for dismantling the temporary buildings and, in the words of the council minute, ‘bringing the pest-houses home’ (presumably for use on a future occasion). The burial registers show that, whereas the parish of St James remained largely unaffected, the parish of St Michael’s took the brunt of the distress. In just four months (February to May, 1626) there were thirty-one burials (almost twice the annual average for that decade) – including those of Walter Robence and four of his children; and four sons of John Fowler. The Abbey parish (with thirty-three burials in 1625 as opposed to a normal average of twenty-three) also suffered greatly when Edmund Tucker lost his wife, his two sons and two daughters; and James Smith lost his five daughters and two sons. In all probability, the four families mentioned above were among those billeted in the ‘pest-houses’ on the common.

1635 witnessed another distressing outbreak of disease in Bath – which particularly affected children living in the parishes of St Michael’s and the Abbey. A clue to the nature of this illness is given in Sir William Brereton’s account of his visit to the city in July of that year where, he said, ‘the smallpox had raged exceedingly’. The problem was most acute in St Michael’s where twenty-four children died in nine months from July 1635 to March 1636 – against an annual average for children and adults of just eighteen for that particular decade. The Allins lost three children, while the Sherstons, the Englands and the Lockwoods each lost two. Families living in the Abbey parish lost twenty-five children during a sixth-month peak period between June and November 1635 – a total which would normally have represented the number of all deaths (including adults) for a whole year.

As a result of this experience, the Corporation decided in October 1636 to look at the possibility of ‘building of houses in the common for persons infected with the plague and for appointing of persons to attend them and for maintenance of them during their sickness’. The implication is that these would be held in readiness for future attacks. It has to be said, however, that most people – living, as they did, at a time when religion dominated every aspect of life – viewed sudden epidemics such as these as God’s punishment upon a sinful community. For instance, John Taylor, writing in 1625, spoke of ‘our heinous sins’ which had provoked ‘God’s just indignation’ and brought about ‘this heavy visitation and mortality’. Furthermore, these outbreaks had become such regular events that they were generally accepted as part of the normal hazards of life, along with bad harvests, unemployment and inflation.
A much more alarming crisis hit the city in 1643 – quite apart from the Battle of Lansdown which was fought on its doorstep. The burial registers all recorded by far their largest total of deaths for any one year in the first half of the century – seventy-two for St James (compared with an annual average of twenty-two for the previous ten years), one hundred and nine for the Abbey (compared with an average of thirty-five) and about ninety-two for St Michael’s (compared with an average of twenty-one). Families again suffered terribly with at least seven of those living in St Michael’s parish losing two or more of their members. It is highly unlikely that any of the people who died were casualties of the battle. Civil War soldiers killed in action were almost always buried speedily in great pits on the battlefield by local villagers in an attempt to prevent the spread of disease. Indeed, contemporary accounts refer to the royalist dead being loaded into carts and buried on Tog Hill and the wounded being carried away with the army in wagons as it retreated to Devizes. Commanders always tried hard to transport their sick and wounded to one of the war hospitals, which had been set up in various cities such as Bristol and Oxford.

Nevertheless, the soldiers were – in all probability – largely responsible for this outbreak. In 1643 the armies of both king and parliament were ravaged with what was known at the time as ‘camp fever’, ‘gaol fever’ or typhus – an illness which had already killed one-fifth of the population in the garrisoned city of Oxford. This virulent disease (the symptoms of which were a purple rash and a high fever) was transmitted by lice, which found a breeding ground in the bedding and clothing of soldiers crowded into insanitary billets. It was inevitable that large numbers of these troops were accommodated in the homes of local citizens whenever an army captured and garrisoned a city. Typhus speedily took root, therefore, among the civilian population. One eyewitness in Bristol, following the fall of the city to royalist forces in 1643, noted that twenty or thirty men were packed into quite ordinary houses, ‘causing men, women and children to lay upon the boards, while the cavaliers possess their beds, which they fill with lice’. The disease rapidly spread throughout the entire place, a parliamentarian agent noting that ‘there die a hundred a week of the new disease at Bristol’.

Bath had also suffered from a heavy military presence during the summer of 1643 in the weeks prior to the Battle of Lansdown, as parliamentarian forces waited to intercept the march of the royalist army from Cornwall. Many were billeted inside the city. Once Bath had been captured for the king in mid-July, a royalist garrison was installed – with
soldiers from the Bristol garrison! It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that the typhus outbreak in Bath was at its peak between August and November that year. It is also not surprising that when, two years later, the plague was again ravaging Bristol, the citizens of Bath objected strongly to a decision by Prince Rupert (the royalist governor of Bristol) to send a detachment of Welsh troops from that city to strengthen the Bath garrison. Local people turned out of their houses en masse to stage a noisy street demonstration, calling out to a man, ‘No Welsh! No Welsh’ – a cry which was really directed not against the Welsh, but against any potential carrier from plague-ridden Bristol.17

Further panic hit Bath in 1665, when the notorious Great Plague of London – carried over from Amsterdam – threatened to spread nationwide. It is estimated that, at one stage in the epidemic, a thousand people were dying each day in the capital – with the death toll eventually reaching 100,000. News was quickly circulated by travellers and merchants: of plague-stricken homes with red crosses daubed on doors as a sign of the plague within; of homes guarded by watchmen with halberds to prevent the escape of the family; of handcarts being wheeled through the streets to the cry of *Bring out your dead*; of corpses being thrown into great pits – some fifty at a time – and buried in haste.
The words of the Reverend Thomas Vincent also reverberated: ‘Now death rides triumphant on his pale horse through our streets and breaks into every house where any inhabitants are to be found’.\textsuperscript{18}

There was inevitably a great stampede out of London by citizens desperate to escape this threat to their lives – a stampede which brought terror to other places. During the earlier outbreak in 1625, John Taylor had described a similar situation in The Fearful Summer:

The name of London now both far and near
Strikes all the towns and villages with fear
And to be thought a Londoner is worse
Than one that breaks a house or takes a purse.\textsuperscript{19}

The Council in Bath urgently debated the crisis and the worrying information that many people from London were daily attempting to reach Bath ‘to the great danger of our city’. It was resolved that no citizen was to receive into his house any people from the plague-ridden areas on pain of a £10 fine. Furthermore, the night watchmen were instructed to prevent any strangers from entering the city between ten o’clock in the evening and five o’clock in the morning – or risk being fined £5 for each offence.\textsuperscript{20} On this occasion at least – judging by the low number of burials – the city survived unscathed. The 1665 outbreak of plague turned out to be the last – partly because this disease (which was normally imported by black rats on board ships) was gradually contained through stricter

\textbf{Fig.6} A contemporary wood-cut to illustrate the attempted flight from London by many fearful citizens during the Great Plague of 1665. Notice how Death waits to ambush them at every turn, indicating with his hourglass that, for them, the sands of time are running out. (*Author’s collection*)
controls at the ports. As the black rats disappeared, they were replaced by brown rats, which may have been immune to the plague bacterium carried by fleas.

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Despite the many attractions of Stuart Bath, the problems posed by the presence of beggars, insanitary conditions and disease, were not easily resolved. However, the seventeenth century marked an important but often neglected period of transition from the medieval town locked within its walls, to the eighteenth-century city of space and elegance still admired by visitors today.

Notes

BRO = Bath Record Office


3 For references to the House of Correction see the Bath Chamberlain’s Accounts (1613-1699) passim and the Bath Council Minute Books I (1630-34) and II (1644), BRO.

4 The source of all payments and resolutions by the Corporation throughout this article will be found in BRO – the Bath Chamberlain’s Accounts (1646-1700) passim and the Bath Council Minute Books I (1631-49), II (1649-84) and III (1684-1715).

5 BRO – Bath Council Minute Books I (1646) and II (1650).

6 Edward Jorden, A Discourse of Natural Bathes and Minerall Waters (1631).


8 Act for the Repair, Amending and Cleaning of the Highways, 1707, 6 Anne c.42, BRO.

9 Robert Latham (ed.), The Shorter Pepys (Unwin Hyman, 1990), 20th October 1660.

10 For all payments and resolutions by the Council see the Bath Chamberlain’s Accounts and Council Minute Books for the relevant dates, BRO.


12 This information was provided by Roger Rolls from his unpublished lecture notes on the subject.

14 For the Cecil correspondence in the preceding paragraphs and the Bill of Mortality see Historical Manuscripts Commission: Salisbury Papers (9 Salisbury, 16-17).

15 William Brereton, Travels in Holland etc. (Chatham Society, 1844).

16 Transcripts of the burial registers for the three Bath parishes can be found in the BRO. An allowance has been made in the figures relating to St Michael’s parish to compensate for a missing page of additional entries, which has been torn out of the register. See also John Taylor, The Fearful Summer: or London’s Calamity (1625) for a contemporary reaction to the plague.

17 For these and further details of events in 1643 and 1645 see John Wroughton, An Unhappy Civil War: the Experiences of Ordinary People in Gloucestershire, Somerset and Wiltshire, 1642-1646 (Lansdown Press, Bath, 1999).

18 Roger Hart, English Life in the Seventeenth Century (Wayland, 1970), pp.103-111; Thomas Vincent, God’s Terrible Voice to the City (1665).


20 Bath Council Minute Book II (1665).