

PLAGUE IN PERSPECTIVE: THE CASE OF MANCHESTER IN 1605

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THERE has been much work in recent years on the medical aspects of bubonic plague in England,¹ but few attempts have been made to assess the effects of heavy mortality on the social structure and economic life of the towns that experienced such mortality. These effects are not easy to determine. It is difficult to relate total deaths to total population when an estimate of the latter may involve a good deal of guess work. Even when it is reasonably clear that mortality was very heavy, it is still difficult to show how that mortality affected the social structure and economic life of a town. These difficulties can be examined, though hardly resolved, in the context of Manchester's great plague of 1605.

Records of burials in the register of the parish church suggest that Manchester suffered from plague in the 1580s and 1590s when there was heavy mortality in the summer months of 1588 and 1598,² but these outbreaks were eclipsed by the visitation of 1605. The plague of 1605 began in April, reached its peak in July and subsided in November, though sporadic cases occurred until at least February 1606. The monthly records of burials in 1605 present, as fig. 1.1 shows, a classic curve of bubonic plague.³ The total of 1053 burials was more than five times the annual average of 182 burials between 1600 and 1604.⁴ The severity of the plague is reflected not only in the number of burials, but also in the local reaction to the epidemic. In August 1605 there were 'no christenings by reason of the extremitye of the sickenes', in June July and August there were no weddings for the same reason,⁵ and in the autumn the Court Leet was not held.

The measures taken to relieve suffering also reflect the severity of the plague, though they took a conventional form. In May 1605 a local tax was levied for the relief of the infected and suspected, and in June an order was issued that people

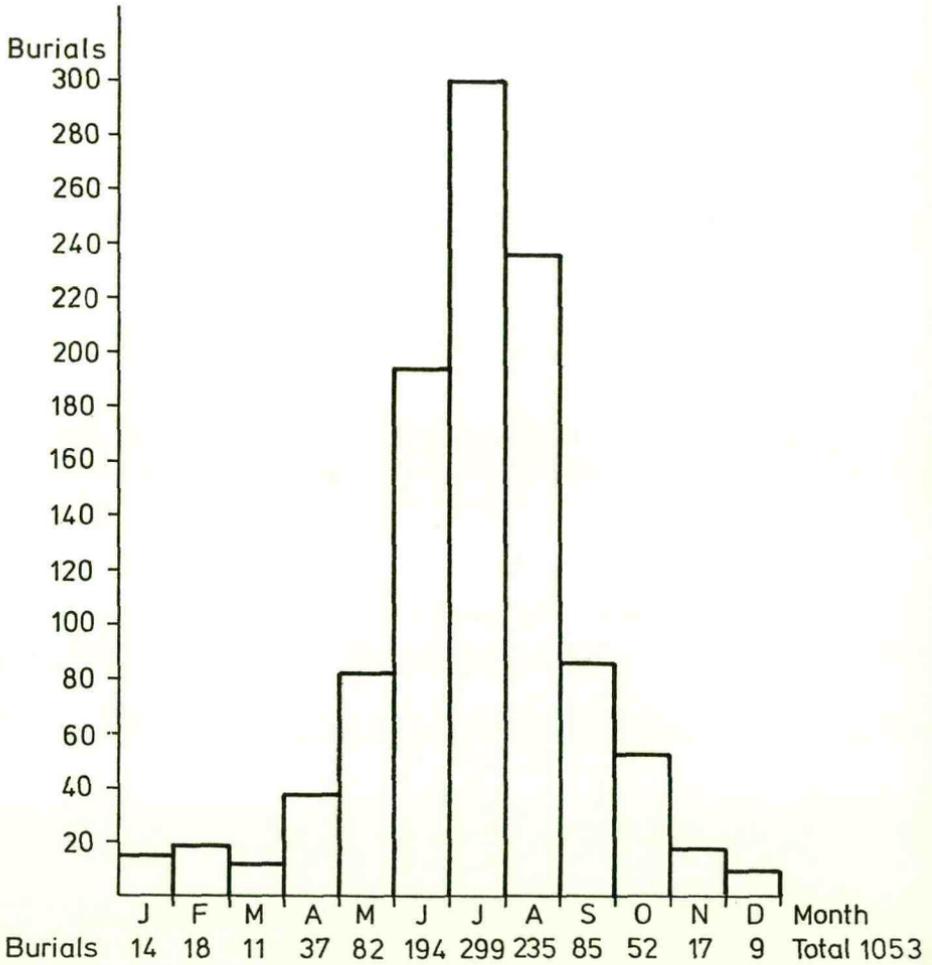


Fig. 1.1 Burials in 1605 in Manchester Parish Register.

coming into Manchester were to have a certificate that they were free from infection. As the plague increased the local sources of taxation proved inadequate, and in July the hundred of Salford was ordered to contribute £56 a week for relief. This, too, proved inadequate, and early in October the taxation was extended to three more hundreds, and on 9 October to the whole county. The money was used largely to make weekly payments of 7d. to 'needers', 1s. to the infected who were isolated in their own homes, and 1s. or 1s.4d. to the infected who had been removed to the cabins on Collyhurst common. In the week ending 30 August 1605 payments were made to 724 'needers', 330 infected, 72 at the cabins and 31 unspecified though probably 'needers'. The following week 1109 people received payments.⁶ All the people receiving these payments apparently lived in the townships of Manchester and Salford, which raises the difficult question of the area covered by the deaths of 1605.

At this time there was a deanery, a manor, a parish and a township of Manchester, but only the parish and township are relevant to this question of area. The parish of Manchester covered some 60 square miles and embraced some 30 townships, of which Manchester and Salford were two. The parish was served by the parish church in Manchester township, but six of the other townships, Didsbury, Blackley, Newton, Denton, Chorlton and Stretford had chapelries, of which Stretford and Didsbury have registers which survive for this period. The Stretford register is very imperfect and seems to record no burials in or around 1605.⁷ The Didsbury register of burials shows one suspected case of plague in August 1605, 15 deaths in September, of which 12 were of plague, and five deaths in October, of which three were of plague. This suggests a limited outbreak, and indeed 11 of the victims were from a single family.⁸

It is clear that the register of the parish church recorded burials from all over the parish, and indeed the clerk sometimes gave the township and, in the case of Manchester, the actual street where the deceased had lived. This was not done systematically before 1605, and as the plague spread the clerk became too busy to record such details. After 1605 the practice was resumed and by 1607 it had become the general, though not quite invariable, rule. Thus in the five years 1607-11, out of 944 burials 895 gave the deceased's township. Of these 895 burials, 40 per cent were from Manchester and 14 per cent from Salford. If these proportions are applied to the 1053 burials of 1605, then 421 of the dead had lived in

Manchester township and 147 in Salford. The most difficult problem is to relate such deaths to the total population of the two townships. There is no satisfactory way of estimating the population of Salford at this time. A crude calculation, based on the Manchester parish register, shows that Salford burials averaged 25 per annum between 1607 and 1611; if the death rate lay within the band of 30 to 40 per thousand, then the population of Salford would be in the range of 833 to 625. Thus 147 deaths in 1605 would represent between 17.6 and 23.5 per cent of the population. Such a calculation is too crude to be of much value. For Manchester there is better evidence, including the parochial returns of householders in 1563, but it is not easy to interpret. The evidence does, however, suggest that the population of Manchester township was about 2000.⁹ If that were so, the 421 deaths of 1605 would represent a little over one fifth of the population.

There are obvious dangers in assuming that Manchester's 40 per cent and Salford's 14 per cent of burials in a normal year can be applied to the abnormal conditions of 1605. Plague might well increase the proportion of deaths in the more densely populated townships like Manchester and Salford as compared with the rest of the parish. The measures taken to relieve suffering during the plague have left evidence that rather suggests this. Thus early in August 1605 returns showed about 160 infected persons in Salford and 265 in Manchester. In addition 42 people were 'infected in cabins on Collyhurst'.¹⁰ At the end of August payments were made to 120 infected persons in Salford, 210 in Manchester and 72 in the cabins.¹¹ Not all the infected would die, but those infected early in August would presumably have died or recovered before the end of the month, when their place was taken by another batch of infected. Moreover the figures relate to August when the monthly figure of burials had begun to decline from its July peak. The number of infected seems high in relation to the recorded burials, which suggests that either the case mortality rate was lower than usual in bubonic plague or that 'infected' was given a wide meaning which covered all the members of a household even if only one or two had the disease. Even so, the evidence strongly suggests that the proportion of deaths attributable to Manchester in 1605 was higher than the proportion in 1607-11. Deaths in 1605 may well have accounted for a quarter rather than one fifth of the population. Forty years later, in the greater plague of 1645, the registers of the parish church record just over 1000 burials for the township of Manchester alone, which may have

amounted to a quarter or even one third of the population.¹²

The effects of high mortality are difficult to determine and perhaps easy to exaggerate. Did the deaths of perhaps a quarter of the population of a town in a single year produce any substantial and lasting change in the group that had hitherto administered the place? Manchester had such a group of well-to-do clothiers, merchants and shopkeepers, but it operated within a manorial framework, for Manchester was not an incorporated borough. The town was governed by the lord of the manor of Manchester, at this time Sir Nicholas Mosley, through his steward and Court Leet. The Court Leet administered through a jury and about 100 officials, ranging from the boroughreeve and constables to marketlookers, bylawmen, scavengers and so on. The Court normally met twice a year, at Easter and Michaelmas; jurors were sworn at each Court, but the officials were appointed at the Michaelmas meeting.¹³ Thus on 2 October 1604 the Court Leet appointed 96 men and one woman as jurors or officials (or in some cases as both). The Court met in April 1605, but not in October because of the plague. The jurors and officials of 2 October 1604 seem to have remained in office until 24 April 1606 when the Court Leet made new appointments (including re-appointments). Finally on 1 October 1606 the Court reverted to the customary procedure of Michaelmas appointments by recording a new list of jurors and officials.¹⁴

The plague obviously caused some temporary disruption of the normal administrative processes in Manchester, but did it have more permanent effects? What in fact happened to the ninety-seven jurors and officials appointed on 2 October 1604? Did they perish or did they live to serve another day? There is always a possible margin of error in assessing survival because it may not be absolutely certain that two men of the same name were in fact one and the same man, but in practice, and with care, this risk seems slight. Of the ninety-seven jurors and officials of October 1604, forty re-appear in the list of 24 April 1606, and a further fourteen in the list of 1 October 1606. Of the remaining forty-three, twenty survived to die in or after 1606. The fate of eight cannot be traced, but there is no evidence that they died in 1605. Finally, the remaining fifteen died in 1605, one in April, one in October and thirteen in June, July and August. It is reasonable to assume that most, if not all, of them died of plague. These deaths were not numerous enough to produce any substantial or lasting change in the group that administered Manchester. Though plague was no great respecter of persons, it was possible for

the well-to-do and the mobile to take evasive action. Those who left the town to escape infection had to contribute to the relief of those who remained. 'The weeklie taxacion of the Manchester men gone out of the town' shows that thirty-three men had left by the middle of July 1605. They included three of the Mosley family, Dr Thomas Cogan, once High Master of the Grammar School, and a number of wealthy linen drapers and clothiers.¹⁵ Eleven of the evacuees were jurors or officials in 1604 who deserted their posts and lived to serve another day. This exodus caused some comment. In June, when there was said to be 'great disorder' in Manchester, it was claimed 'that there were mane of those that shoulde have taken theare parte wheare goon out of the towne so that the rest which wheare left wyere bout koovertly roskales and slaves that dorst do nothing'.¹⁶ It would be easy for the historian to be cynical about such desertions, but he might well have done the same when faced with life and death in the Manchester of 1605.

The effect of plague on the administration of a town may be fairly easy to assess, but the economic effects of plague either on families or on towns as a whole are more difficult to estimate. In a narrow sense plague destroys life but not property. The houses of plague victims were not demolished nor apparently were their clothes destroyed. In August 1605 Philip Fitton, a labourer of Moston within the parish of Manchester, had behaved 'leaudly and dangerously in goinge to the places and persons infected with the plaige, and from thence bringinge apparrell, and wearinge the same dayly'. He had been 'chayned within his cabynne', but had 'broken the chayne', and was now ordered to be imprisoned in 'the doungeon or prisson of Manchester and Salford'.¹⁷ Plague did not destroy property, but it might cause some re-distribution of ownership. In Manchester much, but not all, property was held of the manor of Manchester. Burgages were so held, subject to the payment of 1s. per annum to the lord of the manor. Such property normally descended from father to eldest son or, in the absence of a son, to a daughter or daughters as co-heiresses, but it could in practice be freely alienated. Such changes of ownership were recorded in the manorial rentals, and it is interesting to compare the rental of 1599-1600, the last surviving one before the plague, with the rental of 1608-9, the first surviving one after the plague.¹⁸

In 1599-1600 some 125 men and women owned manorial property within the township of Manchester. They ranged from Elizabeth I, who owned former chantry lands, to Robert

Janny who owned 'the hovell anendest his smythie'. By 1608-9 the property of forty-three of these owners had changed hands. It is possible to discover the reason for these transfers in thirty-one cases. In eight cases the property had been sold; four of the sales had taken place before 1605 and four between 1606 and 1608, but these seem to have had no connection with any deaths in 1605. In twenty-three cases the property was transferred on the death of the owner, and here it would be natural to expect some concentration of transfers as a result of the mortality of 1605, but there is little evidence of that. Indeed only six of these twenty-three transfers resulted from deaths in 1605. To these should be added three owners who acquired their property after 1600 and who died in 1605. There were more transfers of property as a result of deaths in 1605 than in a normal year, but even so the mortality of 1605 seems to have had surprisingly little effect on the ownership of manorial property within the township. It must, however, be remembered that some property owners (including the Queen) lived outside the township and even outside the parish, and they would not be affected by a localized outbreak of plague. As much property was tenanted by tenants living within the township, it is probable that high mortality had a greater effect on occupation than on ownership, but the rentals do not give the information necessary for a comparison of changing tenancy.

Much tenanted property was held by lease, and the value of such leases was part of a man's personal estate along with the contents of the house, the stock in trade, farming stock and money lent. As Manchester lay within the Northern Province such personal estate was subject to the custom of partible inheritance. A married man had to leave one third of his personal estate to his wife and one third to his children; if he were a widower the children got half, and if he were childless the widow got half. Clearly heavy mortality could affect this distribution provided there were any survivors of the family. In August 1605 Randle Arrowsmith, his wife and their four children all died within the space of three weeks;¹⁹ no Arrowsmith appears in the parish registers for the next thirty-five years. This was exceptional, though not unique. The belief that families were regularly wiped out by plague seems to rest on an examination of the trunk rather than the branches of the family tree. The survivors of a plague epidemic might find their share of the personal estate much altered. A child of a large family might emerge as the sole heir or heiress; a widow might find herself entitled to a half instead of a third of the

personal estate. Such gains might have to be weighed against the loss of the breadwinner. These shifts in personal property cannot now be traced, at least in Manchester. In the case of children they were really an intensification of the normal effects of child mortality. Even without plague, some of the children would not have survived to adulthood. Survival during a plague epidemic may not have provided a common road to riches, but it may sometimes have helped.

The effect of heavy mortality in 1605 on Manchester's economy is difficult to assess. It seems clear that the fall in population was temporary, but how quickly and for what reasons population increased again is much less clear. By the early 1640s the population seems to have risen to at least 3000 and may have been higher.²⁰ Some of the increase came from an excess of births over deaths; in the five years 1607-11 Manchester's baptisms averaged 114 per annum compared with burials of 70 per annum (for the parish baptisms were 274 per annum compared with burials of 188 per annum.) Such a favourable balance was not maintained. Within the township baptisms exceeded burials in the second and fourth decades of the century, but in the third decade the position was reversed, largely because of the heavy mortality of 1623. Over the three decades (1610-39) baptisms exceeded burials by only an average of 12 per annum. Even allowing for some slight margin of error in this figure, it seems clear that the increase of population, which other sources imply, could not have come solely from an excess of births over deaths within the township. That excess must have been supplemented by migration into the township. Some of that migration could have come from within the parish where, between 1610 and 1639, baptisms exceeded burials by some fifty per annum.²¹ Unfortunately any migration that occurred has left very little evidence. On 8 April 1613 the Court Leet ordered that 'all suche persons beinge straungers which have come to Manchester to dwell since the laste sickenes' should 'avoide into their owne cuntrye within one moneth' or else 'put in pledges for their good behavior'.²² Though the order could be interpreted as a conventional measure against wandering rogues and vagabonds, it does seem to reflect an influx of more permanent settlers. On the number and origin of such settlers the sources are silent.

It was obviously important that a plague-ridden town should recoup its lost population if its economy were not to be permanently affected. Manchester recovered its lost population after 1605, even if the means by which this was done

remain obscure, and there is no convincing evidence that its economy was seriously affected by the mortality of 1605. Manchester was essentially a 'cloth town' whose economy rested primarily on the manufacture and marketing of linen and woollen cloth. It is impossible to show statistically that this manufacture and marketing of cloth were largely unaffected by the mortality of 1605, but the general impression is that this was so. In the early seventeenth century the linen industry was diversified by the development of the mixed cloth called fustian, which had a linen warp and a cotton weft. By the 1620s the great fustian dealers of Manchester and Salford, the Chethams, the Booths and the Wrigleys, had emerged.²³ The traditional woollen cloths continued to be made and marketed in large numbers. Between December 1614 and September 1616 some 28,000 woollen cloths were sealed by the deputy aulnager for Manchester. There are no comparable figures for the years before 1605, and therefore it is possible that the woollen cloth trade was greater then, but this seems very unlikely. By 1614-16 the trade was concentrated in a few hands, for about 84 per cent of the aulnage was paid by eight men. None of these men was a newcomer; they had all survived the plague, about half of them by going 'out of town' in the summer of 1605.²⁴ It is possible that the trade was concentrated in fewer hands in 1614-16 than it had been before 1605, but this is by no means certain. If this were so, it is also possible that the concentration had been helped by the mortality of 1605 which may have removed some of the competitors in the woollen cloth trade. This would represent an acceleration of the normal process by which family businesses died out for lack of an heir. However there is no convincing evidence that the deaths of 1605 helped to foster the concentration of trade that the aulnage accounts reveal.

Any assessment of the effect of plague on the economic life of a town would be helped by an analysis of the sex and age distribution of those who were buried in the plague year. Such an analysis is difficult for Manchester, partly because the parish register does not usually distinguish between the parish and the township and partly because the register was written under such pressure that it often omits christian names, especially of children. Of the 1053 burials recorded in the register for 1605, 298 (28.3 per cent) were described as infant or child, and 580 were clearly considered as adults, of whom 285 (27 per cent) were men and 295 (28 per cent) were women. The remaining 175 (16.7 per cent) were described, often without a christian name, as 'son of' or 'daughter of'.

This is an ambiguous category for it could include unmarried adults as well as minors. Indeed a comparison with the register of baptisms suggests that four of the sons and two of the daughters were adults in 1605, but this is not certain. Before and after 1605 when 'child of' was rarely used, it is clear that 'son of' or 'daughter of' was the normal entry for a minor though it may have been used for some adults. It seems reasonable to assume that most of the 83 sons and 92 daughters of 1605 were minors.²⁵ If that is so then the men who died in 1605 numbered 285 or a little more. Again if it is assumed that 40 per cent of all burials related to the township, then the township lost at least 114 men. However, the proportion of deaths in the townships may have been higher than 40 per cent of the deaths in the parish, and the number of men should perhaps be increased by the addition of some of the 83 sons. The registers, which begin in 1573, could not be used for family re-constitution and are unsatisfactory even for aggregative analysis as applied to the township. Thus it is impossible to be certain how many men of the township died in 1605; it can hardly have been less than 114 and may have been as high as 130 or 140. Deaths of that magnitude should have had some effect on the town's economy, at least in the short term, but if that were so it has left very little trace.

The purpose of this tentative investigation was to examine whether heavy plague mortality seriously disrupted the social structure and the economic life of an unincorporated town. In the case of Manchester the sources for such an examination are very imperfect, and it would be unwise either to be dogmatic about the results or to assume that such results applied elsewhere. The evidence, for what it is worth, suggests that the heavy mortality of 1605 had little or no effect on the social and administrative structure of the town. There were two reasons for this. Firstly, the town was governed manorially, and the Mosley family, which held the lordship of the manor, was unaffected by the plague. Secondly, the leading families which supplied the administrative officials from the boroughreeve downwards, while not unaffected by the plague, seem to have escaped lightly, partly at least by taking avoiding action in the summer of 1605. The survival of leading families of clothiers, merchants and shopkeepers lessened the economic effects of the plague by maintaining continuity in entrepreneurship. This was especially important in the cloth trade where it was helped by the fact that Manchester was a centre for the finishing and marketing of cloth and could still draw supplies of cloth from areas relatively unaffected by a

localized outbreak of plague. On the other hand the deaths in 1605 must have affected the retail trade, through loss of customers, and the cloth finishing industry, through loss of workmen, but such effects seem to have been transitory. The only reasonable explanation of this is that such losses were quickly made good by migration into Manchester where job opportunities existed and where there were no guilds to impose restrictions on entry into such jobs. It could be objected that this is mere speculation as direct evidence of such migration is largely lacking. That is true. Evidence of migration to unincorporated towns is necessarily difficult to obtain, but that need not imply that migration did not take place. In normal times towns seem to have grown through inward migration and it is logical to assume that this continued, and was even accelerated, after heavy urban mortality. That seems to have been true of Manchester after 1605 when the undoubted increase of population, though difficult to measure precisely, seems inexplicable on any other grounds.

The plague of 1605 has been described as a 'disaster'.²⁶ In a sense plague is always a disaster for those who die of it and for some who survive it, but whether it is necessarily disastrous for the economic growth of a town is much more questionable. It could be argued that the slow decline of an industry or the silting of a harbour might do more lasting harm to a town's economy than did any plague. If the evidence of plague in Manchester provides any guide, it suggests that a town could show remarkable resilience in recovering from the effects of high mortality. This is clearly an aspect of plague that merits more investigation before the whole subject becomes, if not fly-blown, at least flea-ridden.

NOTES

- 1 The standard work is J.F.D. Shrewsbury, *A History of Bubonic Plague in the British Isles* (Cambridge, 1970). For a critical review of Shrewsbury see Christopher Morris, 'The Plague in Britain', *The Historical Journal*, XIV (1971) pp. 205-224, reprinted in *The Plague Reconsidered: a new look at its origins and effects in 16th and 17th century England* (Local Population Studies Supplement, 1977).
- 2 *The Registers of the Cathedral Church of Manchester, 1573-1616*, ed. E. Axon (L.P.R.S., XXXI, 1908), pp. 261-270, 315-25.
- 3 *Ibid.*, pp. 348-69.
- 4 *Ibid.*, pp. 328-44.
- 5 *Ibid.*, pp. 140, 439.
- 6 R. Sharpe France, 'A History of Plague in Lancashire', *T.H.S.L.C.*, XC (1938), pp. 42-6, 145-8.

- 7 There is a microfilm of the Stretford register in the M.C.L. (Local History Library).
- 8 *The Registers of the Church of St James, Didsbury*, eds. H.T. Crofton and E.A. Tindall (L.P.R.S., VIII, 1900), pp. 197–8.
- 9 T.S. Willan, *Elizabethan Manchester* (C.S. 3rd series, XXVII, 1980) pp. 38–9.
- 10 Sharpe France, 'A History of Plague', pp. 149–57.
- 11 *Ibid.*, pp. 145–6.
- 12 *Registers of the Cathedral Church of Manchester, Burials 1616–1653*, ed. H. Brierley (L.P.R.S., LVI, 1919), pp. 552–8.
- 13 A. Redford and I.S. Russell, *The History of Local Government in Manchester* (1939), I, pp. 26–78.
- 14 *The Court Leet Records of the Manor of Manchester*, ed. J.P. Earwaker (Manchester, 1895), II, pp. 200–3, 208–9, 211–14, 218–21.
- 15 Sharpe France, 'A History of Plague,' pp. 138–9.
- 16 W.E.A. Axon, 'Documents relating to the Plague in Manchester in 1605', *Chetham Miscellanies*, n.s. III, (C.S., n.s., LXXIII, 1915), p. 4.
- 17 Sharpe France, 'A History of Plague', pp. 43–4.
- 18 The rentals are in the M.C.L. Archives Department, MS. f. 333 M45.
- 19 Axon, *Registers of the Cathedral Church*, 361–4.
- 20 A taxation list of 1648 gives 684 names (*The Constables' Accounts of the Manor of Manchester*, ed. J.P. Earwaker (Manchester 1892, II, pp. 181–201). The list is not easy to interpret, but it suggests a population of about 3000. If that were so, and allowing for the 1000 deaths of 1645, the population in the early 1640s may have been as high as 4000.
- 21 The figure is approximate because of the absence of registers for most of the chapeltries. The marriage register does not give the townships of partners; it shows if one or both partners came from outside the parish. Although a few Manchester men took brides from outside the parish, it is not clear whether the bridegrooms lived in Manchester township or elsewhere in the parish.
- 22 Earwaker, *Court Leet Records*, II, p. 280.
- 23 A.P. Wadsworth and J. de L. Mann, *The Cotton Trade and Industrial Lancashire, 1600–1780* (Manchester, 1931), pp. 29–36.
- 24 T.S. Willan, 'Manchester Clothiers in the early Seventeenth Century', *Textile History*, X (1979), pp. 175–83.
- 25 For some discussion of this problem of sons and daughters see Roger Schofield and E.A. Wrigley, 'Infant and child mortality in England in the late Tudor and early Stuart period', in Charles Webster, ed., *Health, medicine and mortality in the sixteenth century* (1979), p. 86.
- 26 By Dr. D.M. Palliser in a review of Willan, *Elizabethan Manchester* (*Economic History Review*, 2nd series, XXXIII (1980), pp. 624–5).