

New details about 17th-century plague hospital in Bristol

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James Millerd's 1673 map of Bristol marks the city's pesthouse on the very edge of his map of the city. He seems to have brought the house in by about 150 metres so that he could include it on his plan. This image of the house is taken from an updated version of the map printed in 1728. Credit: Society of Merchant Venturers/Bristol Record Society

An undergraduate history student from the University of Bristol has uncovered previously unknown details about one of the worst-named, but possibly most successful, quarantine hospitals in English history: Bristol's "Forlorn Hope Pesthouse."

Working from original source material from Bristol Archives, Alex Beard was able to discover information about the hospital that led to the discovery of its exact location, who worked there, how it operated and how it was financed.

In 1665–66, London was devastated by The Great Plague. A hundred thousand people died in just a few months. In absolute terms, this was the worst loss of life in any English city since the arrival of the "Black Death" in 1348. Between 60 and 80 percent of those who contracted Bubonic Plague died horribly within ten days and about half were children.

Plague had visited Bristol many times before 1665, frequently killing 10–20 percent of the city's population. But 1666 was different. During an outbreak lasting from April to September, only a hundred or so people died, about 0.6 percent of the population. This fact prompted Alex Beard to find out why.

Working from photographs taken at Bristol Archives during the summer of 2020, he employed two main sources. These were the Common Council Proceedings and the Mayor's Audit Books, which record the council's decisions and expenses.

In an effort to prevent Plague spreading from London, Bristol imposed a strict quarantine on goods and people coming to the city from June 1665. After that, fairs were canceled, public gatherings stopped and infected houses 'locked up' and placed under armed guard.

All this was in line with national government guidelines. But on 5 December the Council went further, resolving 'to agree and contract for the House called the Forelorne Hope belonging to Mr Butcher and the barne thareunto adjoyning' to be used as a pesthouse.

Bristol and other cities had established pesthouses during earlier Plague outbreaks. But these were often just flimsy sheds built for [plague](#) victims who had nowhere else to go. The Forlorn Hope Pesthouse would be different.

Later expenses from the Mayor's Audit Books include payments for food and medicines. And when patient numbers grew during the summer of 1666, temporary huts with sailcloth roofs were constructed.

Most importantly, the pesthouse was run by a doctor, the surgeon John Dunbarr, assisted by physicians. These included Dr. William Sermon, a London physician who was later to receive a Doctorate of Medicine from Cambridge University at the urging of King Charles II.

After the Plague outbreak was over, Bristol expressed its gratitude to its chief health worker. "For his late faithfull service at the Pesthouse in the time of Infection to the greate hazard of his life' the surgeon John Dunbarr was awarded £44. That was equivalent to four years earnings for an ordinary laborer.

Alex said: "To be honest the treatments offered at the pesthouse probably didn't help much. But the pesthouse took people away from their crowded households in the center of the city. That limited the spread of the infection.

"It would also have reduced the chance of the disease spreading to the local rat population. The role played by rats in transmitting Bubonic Plague was not understood until the early twentieth century. But, as

every modern schoolchild knows, black rats carried Plague."

Dr. Evan Jones, Alex's supervisor from the University's Department of History, added: "This was not COVID—it was a hundred times worse and it was when the rats became infected that things got really bad.

"Major Plague epidemics seem to have happened when Bubonic Plague jumped back from human travelers and their goods to local rat populations. That allowed the disease to spread widely. When fleas from infected rats then bit humans the fleas transmitted the bacteria, *Yersinia Pestis*."

Turning the Forlorn Hope into a proper hospital, would have encouraged people to send family members there. It was only in June 1666 that the King mandated the use of a "pest-house, sheds or huts, for the preservation of the rest of the family." Charles II ordered that these pesthouses were to be guarded by wardens to stop the [plague victims](#) "from conversing with the sound." However, he left it to local authorities to decide how much, if any, medical assistance should be provided.

People were unlikely to send their children or spouses away to a pesthouse unless they knew that they would get proper care and, even in the seventeenth century, health care cost a lot of money. One of the other documents Alex uncovered revealed that, at the height of the outbreak, in the summer of 1666, Bristol was spending £400 per month on relief, prevention and treatment—doubling its expenditure on public services.

But all this left one final mystery: where was the Forlorn Hope Pesthouse? James Millerd's 1673 map of Bristol depicts a large stone "Pest House" off Newfoundland Lane, right on the edge of his map. This lies in what was to become the St Paul's area of the city. But was this pesthouse the Forlorn Hope?

Alex was unable to find out because Bristol Archives remained closed because of COVID throughout the winter and spring. In the summer, Dr. Jones was able to visit the archive. His work, assisted by others, has enabled the house's location to be pinpointed.

It soon became apparent that the pesthouse was likely to have been located on a 13-acre farm, in the most isolated part of the County of Bristol, later known as the Forlorn Hope Estate. Jones was able to identify the limits of this from 19th century plans, which also indicated the probable core of the estate.

Yet it was a 1743 map of Bristol that confirmed the location of the house on the estate. The map also provides a clue to both why the Forlorn Hope House was chosen and why it got its name. The house being the most isolated dwelling house within Bristol's county boundaries: the ideal site for a quarantine hospital.

Any remains of the hospital probably lie under what was 20–25 St Nicholas Road. This area was developed as Victorian terrace housing in the 1870s, as Bristol grew. Much of the site was redeveloped for flats in the late twentieth century.

The documents Alex transcribed for his dissertation, along with extra material identified by Jones and others, has now been published online by the Bristol Record Society. The aim is to provide a resource for students, scholars and the public.

After the plague outbreak was over, Bristol rewarded John Dunbarr, its chief medic. Apart from getting a hefty financial reward, he was granted freedom of the city, allowing the surgeon to practice in Bristol for many years, training a string of young apprentices.

Dr. Jones added: "In 1666, Bristol was saved from the Great Plague. For

that, it had good reason to thank a brave doctor and a Forlorn Hope."

Alex said: "It was great to make such a discovery after so much work went into the research. It was fascinating to see how plague was combated in the 17th Century, especially after the last two years we have had, in and out of lockdowns.

"I must credit all those at the University who aided my research especially Dr. Evan Jones, who was an amazing help. I hope it inspires those studying History to go out and conduct their own primary research, it's extremely fulfilling."

More information: Documents relating to the Great Plague 1665-1666 in Bristol: archive.org/details/beardplague

Provided by University of Bristol

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