Seventeenth century London

Part 5

Mansion House

Until the mid-18th century, Lord Mayors used their own houses or livery halls for their work as head of the City's governmental, judicial and civic functions.

The idea of creating a permanent residence came after the Great Fire of 1666 to provide a house for Lord Mayors who did not have their own livery hall.

Church of St Stephen of Walbrook

A magnificent Wren interior…

In the second century A.D. a temple of Mithras stood on the bank of the Walbrook, a stream running across London from the City Wall near Moorfields to the Thames. However, there were no foundations of the Christian church which stood on the site and was a going concern in 1090 A.D. when it was given to the monastery of St. John by Eudo, Dapifer to Henry I.

By 1428 this church and its graveyard were too small for the parish, and licences were obtained to build a larger church on higher ground 20m to the east, the ground having risen about 6m. Walbrook, no longer a stream, was now a street. The land was given by Robert Chicheley, a member of The Worshipful Company of Grocers.

The building, of flint and rubble with stone dressings, had a tower at the west and a cloister on the north. It was one of some 100 churches in the square mile of the City of London.

The Great Plague of 1665

The first death in the Square Mile occurred in Mansion House Place (Barebinder Lane, which it was then was called). It was never going to be long before it found its way to the City.

In his book, History of the plague in London, Defoe blamed the French for this new outbreak, saying that they fled St Giles to the City.

This was just around the corner from the Royal Exchange, where the elite came to do business.

In his diary, Samuel Pepys describes going to a coffee house in the area “where everyone is talking about the plague”.

By mid-July 1665, the official number of weekly deaths in London, in the Bills of Mortality, surpassed 1,000. By then, 54 of the capital's parishes were affected.

King Charles II handed responsibility for dealing with the epidemic to Sir John Lawrence, the Mayor of London (at the Great Guild Hall).

One of Sir John's jobs was to issue Certificates of Health to people wanting to leave London – this is similar in concept to what we implemented with Covid passes. In his book, History of the Plague in London, Defoe notes that there was "no getting the Lord Mayor's office without extreme difficulty". Also, due to the crowds queueing there, people could have caught it from others.

We are told that the Mayor had a special gallery built to keep himself removed and to only be seen at a safe distance. He had learnt through experience that social distancing worked. He did not catch the plague and survived the epidemic.

How did people try to prevent the plague from spreading in 1665?

The Mayor ordered the shutting up of all infected houses in the capital as the situation worsened. It's the ancestor of the measures we have used to combat COVID-19, but a lot harsher!

1. Watchmen
2. Searchers
3. Shutting up of Houses

The Lord Mayor issued the following instructions to deal with all the infected houses:

- An infected house had to be uninhabited for 40 days
- Plus, each infected house was infumed, whitewashed with lime (James Angier introduced this fumigation, claiming it had worked in Paris)
    - Limewash experiments show that it seems to work (like anti-bacterial wash today)
    - Fumigation of houses: brimstone (sulphur, called it because it comes from the brim of volcanoes) + saltpeter (potassium nitrate) – they burn well together and produce sulphur dioxide
        - Experiments show that it does work

Searchers were employed to visit the houses where sickness was reported. They carried a white stick to identify themselves, so everyone else in the street knew to avoid them.

Detail from a woodcut of 1665 showing plague victims wheelbarrowed out of houses. Image courtesy of the Wellcome Library, London.

How did people try to prevent the plague from spreading in 1665?

With the lack of employment in the city, these roles were quite easily filled.

If a plague house was found by a Searcher, families were locked up and a red cross was painted on the door. The prayer Lord Have mercy upon us was nailed to the door also.

Watchers guarded the houses day and night to ensure nobody escaped from these houses. Watchers could be neighbours, typically paid by the church parish.

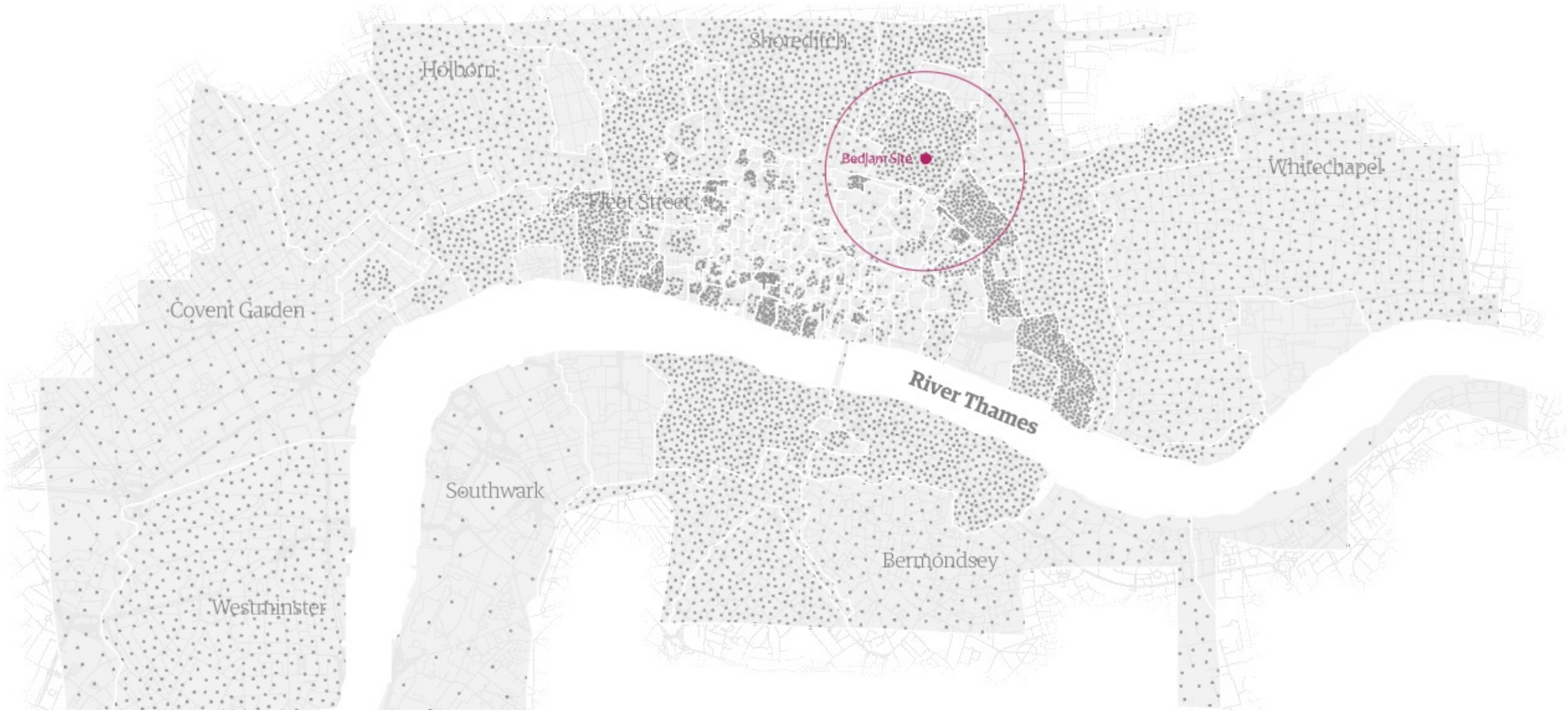
No infected stuff was to be “uttered” (no clothes or bedding or garments were to be taken outside).

If you bought clothes from infected houses, your own houses would be locked up. In this sense, there was a conviction that clothes were somehow linked with the plague.


Lord, haue mercy
on London.
I follow.
We fly.
Wee dye.
Keepe our.

Plague burials in week commencing 12 September 1665

7,195



St Bartholomew's Hospital in Smithfields played its part, admitting patients in the words of the time "visited with the plague", and not without tragic effect on the staff. Three successive hospital Beadles died between June and November 1665. The surgeon to the hospital also succumbed.

It was typically the less paid healthcare workers that stayed rather than wealthier doctors – who fled.

A flame was used for bleeding, and for opening up a vein. A doctor would perforate the bubo, which was extremely painful. They would heat up a cup, place it on the bubo and as it cooled, the vacuum would suck up the puss!

Cauterising irons were placed into the middle of the bubo to burn it. The pain would have been agonising!

None of these methods actually helped the infected patients. They actually increased the risk of infection, and germ-infested puss being released actually increased the risk of infection for others, including the doctors.

In short, being treated for the plague in 1665 and 1666 might have been even worse than actually having it!