

## CHAPTER XL

### THE BLACK DEATH

MENTION being made in the last chapter of the Black Death, the disastrous effects of which were so visible in the tower of Gedney, it will be not inappropriate to give some short account of it here.

Edward the Third had been twenty years on the throne when a great change came over the country. The introduction of leases of lands and houses by the lord of the manor had created a class of "farmers"—the word was a new one—by which the old feudal system of land-tenure was disturbed, the old tie of personal dependence of the serf on his lord being broken, and the lord of the manor reduced to the position of a modern landlord. And not only was an independent class of tenants coming into existence who were able to rise to a position of apparent equality with their former masters, but among the labourers, too, a greater freedom was growing, which was gradually loosing them from their local bondage to the soil, and giving them power to choose what place of employment and what master they pleased. This rise of the free labourer following naturally on the enfranchisement of the serf had made it necessary for the landlord to rely on hired labour, and just when it was most essential for them to have an abundant supply of hands seeking employment, all at once the supply absolutely and entirely failed.

The cause of this was the Black Death, which, starting in Asia, swept over the whole of Europe and speedily reached these shores in the autumn of 1348. No such swift and universally devastating plague had ever been known. One half of the population of every European country perished, and in England more than half. In one London burying-place above 50,000 corpses were interred.



In Norwich, then the chief east-coast port north of the Thames, we hear of 60,000 deaths. We hear, too, of whole villages being wiped out, and nowhere were sufficient hands left to cultivate the soil.

Crops were ungathered, cattle roamed at will. The pestilence lasted through the whole of 1349, after which, though occasionally recurring, it died away.

In Lincolnshire it was very bad, and some knowledge of it can be gathered from the memoranda of the Bishop of Lincoln, John Gynewell, who held office from September 23, 1347, to August 5, 1362; the appalling frequency of the institutions to the various benefices in his diocese give some measure of the severity of this dreadful visitation.

It began at Melcombe Regis in Dorset in the month of July, 1348, but did not reach Lincoln until May, 1349. It got to London in January of that year, and was at its height there in March, April, and May. In May, in the town of Newark, we read that "it waxes day by day more and more, insomuch that the Churchyard will not suffice for the men that die in that place."

From his palace at Liddington, in Rutland, Bishop Gynewell went in May to consecrate a burial ground at Great Easton, which, being only a chapelry to the parish of Bringhurst, had no burial ground of its own. The licence was granted only during the duration of the pestilence. The bishop in his preamble says: "There increases among you, as in other places of our Diocese, a mortality of men such as has not been seen or heard aforetime from the beginning of the world, so that the old grave-yard of your church [Bringhurst] is not sufficient to receive the bodies of the dead."

The enormous number of clergy who died in the Diocese of Lincoln is attested by the fact that in July alone 250 institutions were made and all but fifteen owing to deaths, a number which is considerably more than the whole for the first eighteen months of Bishop Gynewell's episcopate. The average is over eight a day.

The most singular thing which the statistics point to, is that, on the high ground round Lincoln and in the parts of Lindsey the mortality among the clergy was far higher than in other parts of the diocese, whilst in the low lands and fens round Peterborough, and in the parts of Holland, the percentage of deaths was almost invariably low, twenty-seven and twenty-



four per cent. as compared with fifty-seven for Stamford and sixty for Lincoln. The worst months in Lincolnshire were July and August, yet even then, in spite of the severity of the plague and the disorganisation which it occasioned in all the social and religious life of the age, ordinary business, we are told, went on, and the bishop never ceased his constant journeys and visitations to all parts of his enormous diocese, reaching as it did from Henley on the Thames to the Humber, and including besides Lincoln, the counties of Northampton, Rutland, Leicester, Huntingdon, Bedford, Hertford, Buckingham, and Oxford.

That the nation was not more depressed by this state of things was doubtless due to the feeling of national exaltation occasioned by the battle of Cressy in 1346, and the capture of Calais in the next year and the subsequent truce with France.

One of the results of this plague was the absolute cessation of work for want of hands, which threw land out of cultivation and suspended all building operations. At Gedney, as the architect who restored the church in 1898, Mr. W. D. Caröe, pointed out to me, the history of the Black Death is distinctly written on the tower, and you may plainly see where the fourteenth-century builders ceased and how, above the present clock, the work was recommenced by different hands, with altered design and quite other materials.



*Gedney, from Fleet.*