

Elizabethan Floods and Plagues

This year the news was first dominated by floods and now it is the progress of that virus. Looking back, some aspects of all this have happened before!

The Elizabethan chronicler of Shrewsbury reported the following in 1576:

"This year uppo' St Matthews daye being the xxiiij th day of Februarie was a grate fludd in Shrewsberie which dyd greate harm especially in Frankwell...

...the height of the same water ys to be seen in dyu's placis in Frankwell upon the which water dyu's people were karieed in one Byshopps bardge from the toll shop at the northe end of the Walshe brdge through Frankvill as hyghe as the good man Tylstones house...which water dyd ryse in the lowe countreys as Brydnorthe Tewkesbery and Bewdley in the nyght and dyd greate hurt fummynge soodenley upon them.

This yeare the plague was in Shrewburey in the begyninge of which there died one Mr Hawecksworth curat of St Chads and one Roger Burns curate of St Aldemoonds in Salop".

The chronicler had already recorded another flood in 1545 and went on to record others later in the century, including two in 1579 and 1586 which prevented the September horse fair from being held in its usual riverside place in Frankwell. There, in 1587, the inhabitants of Frankwell were forced to spend Christmas in their upper chambers, following heavy rain and melting snow in Wales. In between, in 1585, another flood was remembered for carrying a whole 'mixel' (dungheap) through the town, complete with a pig and chicken.

That outbreak of plague in 1576 was also but one of several during that century, both locally and in London. Although the famous 'Black Death' had swept Europe some two hundred years before, pockets of infection remained, especially in some towns which were notoriously insanitary places.

In Shrewsbury, steps were being taken to provide a clean water supply via a pipe from springs beyond Radbrook. (The so-called 'conduit head' still survives from this period and is now being conserved with the help of Shropshire Bee Keepers, and made open to visitors). However, poor drains and congested housing kept the town unhealthy.

The 1580s seem to have been a particularly hard time here. While 'national' headlines may have been dominated by Drake's safe return from sailing around the World, or the various Catholic plots against the Queen, leading to the execution of Mary, Queen of Scots, or the Spanish Armada, the locals faced health problems! (As well as those floods)

In 1583, Sir Andrew Corbet of Moreton Corbet visited London where he caught the plague and had to be brought home for burial. The plague also came to Oswestry in 1585, forcing the regular cloth market to take place in Knockin instead. Meanwhile, a 'strange sickness' afflicted Shrewsbury, like the plague but with different symptoms, which led to many deaths.

Sheep flocks also suffered their own 'plague' in the following year, causing distress to the farming community. Shrewsbury then experienced the 'burning Agewe', along with many other parts of the country, striking rich and poor alike and leaving many orphans. It was probably a form of malaria, which could have been associated with all that wet weather. Possible 'omens' in the sky were noted as warnings of such difficult times - comets, stars, rings around the moon etc. The chronicler summed it all up with some blank verse:

*'He which had no mischance in '85
and in '86 dothe remayne alive
he being in '87 unhurt and unslayne
and lyving until the year '89
he may then specke of a joyfulle tyme'*

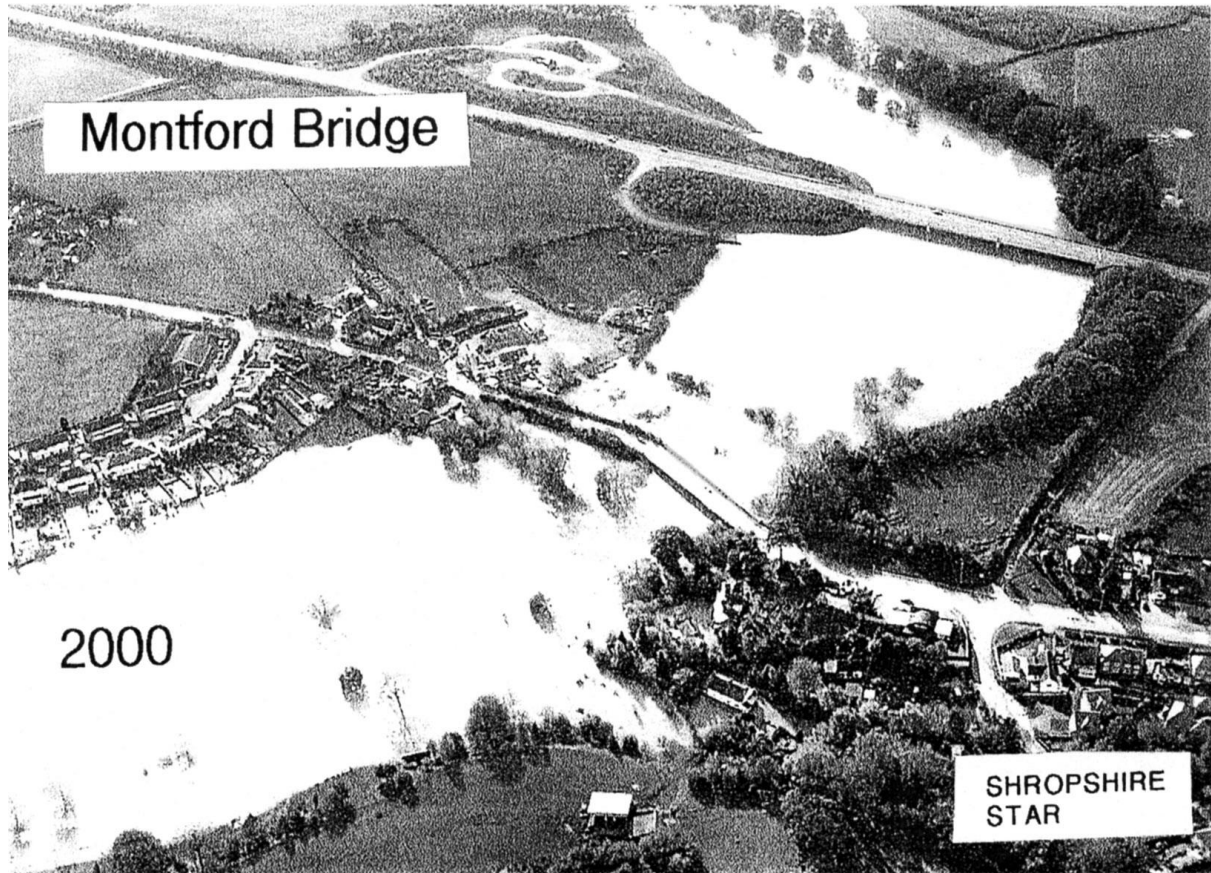
Indeed, the remainder of the century proved to be a little quieter, although the plague returned early in the next and may have caused the death of the chronicler. It also prompted Shrewsbury School to build an 'outpost' at Grinshill to avoid outbreaks in the town. Others reported the last episode in 1649-51 and one wonders how much this was mixed up with Civil War and commonwealth politics. Finally, the disease was to strike London in 1665, after which the 'Great Fire' may have helped prevent further infection.

The Severn, meanwhile, has continued to behave as before, with memorable floods, often triggered by that combination of heavy rain and melting snow. That in 1795 was one of the worst, well documented in the records while the 1947 flood may have been similar.

In living memory, the 'millennium' floods of 2000 and now the latest, show how the new 'Elizabethan' Age was little different from the first. However, the complexities of modern life now make it more vulnerable to damage and disruption (electricity, fitted carpets etc.).

The same is true of plagues. While 'old time' diseases are now more under control, new ones can spread far and wide thanks to modern national and international traffic in goods and people. Plagues, which spread throughout the Roman Empire in a similar way, permanently weakened it.

We keep our fingers crossed.



Last month we told the story of Dorothy Lewis as a celebration of her one hundredth birthday. This now serves as her obituary, since she passed away on the 17th of March. Funeral arrangements are being disrupted by our modern 'plague'.