

# *ET NON VENIT:* THE BLACK DEATH IN CHESHAM AS SEEN FROM THE MANOR COURT ROLLS

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*There are tantalising glimpses in the archaeological record to suggest that the Black Death had significant effects on Chesham. This article examines documentary evidence, in the shape of manor court rolls, to see what light they can throw on the way the Great Pestilence impinged on the town. The rolls concerned are for Chesham Higham and Chesham, and cover the years 1350 to 1352, those immediately after the peak of the epidemic. The rolls of these two courts with different jurisdictions give decidedly different impressions. The records of Chesham Higham provide indirect evidence for a considerable number of deaths. Much of the court's time was spent on the transfer of holdings from one tenant to another. Presumably, in most cases, the previous holder had died from the plague. There seems to have been little difficulty in finding a new tenant, yet changes to the social fabric are apparent. The lower orders appear less willing to accept old power structures, as revealed in their attitudes to court attendance and in their readiness to dispute presentments. The incidence of personal violence increases sharply, perhaps indicative of the stress of the times. The records of the Chesham court give a different picture. Here the emphasis remains on mundane matters, especially trespass. In other words, daily life continues even during this extraordinarily difficult time. The Chesham court records also suggest that it may have dealt with matters beyond the scope of the individual manor courts, even to the extent of resolving disputes over the boundaries between manors.*

## INTRODUCTION

It has been estimated that the Black Death killed between 30 and 40 per cent of the population of England in a two-year period starting in late 1348 (see, for example, Aberth 2001). Bailey gives an interesting insight into the situation in Buckinghamshire shortly before the epidemic struck (Bailey 2008) and, although scanty, there is archaeological evidence to suggest that Chesham was significantly affected by what followed. For example, excavation of the Sainsbury's site in the modern town centre uncovered apparent evidence for the abandonment of dwellings (Armour-Chelu 2000).

In Chesham's long sequence of Manor Court records, there are some from the years immediately following the peak of the Black Death. This article seeks to examine the court records to see if they can shed light on the progress and effects of the disease. In particular, it looks for indications of unusual numbers of deaths and of changes in

patterns of behaviour likely to be related to heavy mortality

The membranes all belong to the Buckinghamshire Archaeological Society and are held at the Centre for Buckinghamshire Studies. They and the courts they record are listed in Table 1.

The two membranes immediately before this group are too fragile to examine, leaving D/BASM 18/39 – dating from 1345 – as the nearest predecessor that can be examined. This is probably too early to tell us anything about the progress of the plague. The intervening membrane (D/BASM 18/43, from early 1351) is also in a fragile state.

The court recorded on D/BASM 18/42 is a court and view of the Manor of Chesham Higham, D/BASM 18/45 is for a court of Chesham Higham, and D/BASM 18/44 records courts for Chesham. At first sight it is tempting to assume that the two courts are the same, but this is not the case. The apparently small difference between a court for Chesham Higham and one for Chesham is actually highly significant. The Chesham Higham courts

TABLE 1 The details of the membranes and courts examined

<i>Bucks Arch. Soc. Code</i>	<i>Court</i>	<i>Number of courts</i>	<i>Dates of courts</i>
D/BASM 18/42	Chesham Higham	1	13 November 1350
D/BASM 18/44	Chesham	3	5 August 1351 31 October 1351 21 February 1352
D/BASM 18/45	Chesham Higham	1	14 April 1352

were the manor courts of the Earl of Oxford's manor of Chesham Higham and, as such, they dealt with its business. The Chesham courts were also held by the Earl of Oxford, but for all of Chesham. The Earl had been given formal permission to hold a View of Frankpledge for all of Chesham in 1329 (Page 1927, 207), although he had been holding courts for all of Chesham for at least the previous twenty years. Sometimes they were described as Views, but at other times they were called simply courts although, even then, their concerns were closer to those of a View than of a manor court. In either case, the manor court referred cases to the Chesham court.

Each court attended to its own business, and neither interfered with the other. The Earl seems to have coordinated the dates on which the courts were held, so that there was always a clear gap between one court and another and that sessions of Chesham Higham alternated with those of Chesham. One presentment will serve to illustrate the independence of the two court sequences. The record of the court of Chesham Higham, held on 14 April 1352, includes a presentment concerning John Tydy and John Hakeman, who had a day 'as appears in the preceding court' (*ut patet in Curia precedent*), but the courts of Chesham recorded on DBASM 18/44 contain no mention of this. The giving of a day is recorded as the third presentment at the court of Chesham Higham held on 13 November 1350 (*Die datum est Johanni Tidy et Johanni Hakeman*). So the preceding court referred to was the preceding court of the same kind, and not the immediately preceding court, which was of a different kind. The dates for the courts given in Table 1 provide an example of the way that the overall sequence of courts proceeded at clear if not entirely regular intervals.

The headings of the courts of Chesham recorded

on D/BASM 18/44 are unusually laconic. The first is:

*Chesham. Curia tenta ibidem v die Augusti Anno xxv*

This translates as: 'Chesham. Court held there on the fifth day of August in the 25<sup>th</sup> year (of the reigning monarch)'. Since the monarch is not identified, the actual year cannot be identified beyond all possible doubt. Indeed, in the catalogue of Chesham's Manor Court rolls at the Centre for Buckinghamshire Studies, the date, given as 5 August 1351 – on the assumption that the reigning monarch is Edward III – is, quite properly, followed by a question mark. The same is true for the other two courts on the membrane. By contrast, the courts of Chesham Higham are precisely dated. The earlier took place on the 'Saturday immediately after the feast of St Martin in the 24<sup>th</sup> year of the reign of Edward III', and the other on a specified day in the '26<sup>th</sup> year of the reign of Edward III'. However, close examination of the attendance at these courts leaves little doubt that the dates listed in Table 1 are correct. The records of the three Chesham courts contain forty personal names that can be read with reasonable certainty. Fourteen of these names appeared in the Chesham Higham court held earlier, in November 1350, while thirteen occurred in the Chesham Higham court held later, in April 1352. The common occurrence of so many names across these courts shows that they were attended to a considerable degree by the same people, and supports the idea that they were held at much the same time as each other. It also shows that people from the manor of Chesham Higham formed but one part of the attendance at the Chesham court, in fact all but half of it, so that another group from elsewhere was also in atten-

dance. Perhaps members of all the manors in Chesham were expected to go to the Chesham court. It is worth mentioning that the membranes examined by Marshall and Marshall (2009) – which included records of courts of both Chesham and Chesham Higham between 1308 and 1315 – show the same patterns of court attendance.

#### THE COURT OF 13 NOVEMBER 1350

The Court and View of the manor of Chesham Higham held on 13 November 1350 contains evidence of an unusual number of deaths. Several categories of presentment are more numerous than usual, especially those relating to the disposal of the goods of deceased persons and those concerning the reversion of holdings to the lord, presumably from deceased tenants, and their subsequent assignment to new tenants. There are also signs of changing behaviour. People have begun to dispute the decisions of the court and there has been a significant amount of personal violence. Of course, court records are unlikely to provide reasons for changing behaviour but it seems highly likely that it was caused by the extraordinary circumstances of the time.

#### Dealing with the goods of the dead

In the first presentment at this court, John Clerke is attached and required to respond to the lord for various offences including delaying the settlement of the goods of Walter Gambon (*elongavit bona Walteri Gambon*), a deceased villein of the lord. As we shall see, John disputed this decision but, as far as dealing with Walter's goods is concerned, it did not matter. The second presentment reveals that Stephen de Ashelegh and John Prat had already disposed of Walter's goods, although without licence to do so. They are required to account for them at the next court. In the third presentment John Hakeman and John Tydy are given a day to appear at the next court to account for money owed the lord as a result of their disposal of goods of Walter le Taylour. The sworn value of Walter's goods is forty shillings. They found two pledges to guarantee their appearance.

It is interesting that the first three cases are all concerned with the same sort of thing. Manor courts normally began with matters affecting the lord's financial interests. Hence it is reasonable to assume that the disposal of the goods of a large

number of deceased members of the manor was providing the lord with a new money-raising opportunity, perhaps rather a lucrative one. There is one other presentment of the same kind: further on, in the seventeenth presentment, John Kynnes is attached and required to reply to the lord concerning the goods of Roger Whyting, another of the lord's villeins, although John claims that Roger left no goods. An enquiry is ordered and it emerges that the capital pledges say they have found a number of items belonging to Roger, including several documents, one with an iron chain (*cum j cathen ferr'*), a shovel (*vanga*), mattock (*ligone*) and butt (*fate*). (The list of items is difficult to make out in places. It begins with the documents, and my reading of what follows is: *j fate j cunti j kembelyn j ligone j vanga et j cliul*).

Bennett (1937) explains that an unfree man might make a will declaring what he would like to happen to his goods. (Of course, he could not say what should happen to any land he held, because he held it from the lord, and on his death it would return to the lord.) According to the law, however, the goods of a villein were also the property of his lord. In Chesham, it looks as if the lord enforced the law and took the value of the goods for himself. This does not necessarily mean that the lord was being excessively grasping. When people died of plague, it was almost certain that their family, and anyone else living with them, would have died from it too. Thus, even if a will had been made, those likely to benefit were probably also dead, leaving the way open for the lord to benefit.

In any event, the court appointed two men to dispose of the goods of a dead man. Those appointed, at least in the cases described above, generally managed to take advantage of the situation. John Clerke did not get round to disposing of Walter Gambon's goods: whether he delayed from laziness or for some personal advantage we cannot know. However, Stephen de Ashelegh and John Prat took over, albeit in an unofficial capacity, and, having disposed of the goods, held onto the proceeds for as long as they could. Likewise, after John Hakeman and John Tidy had disposed of the goods of Walter le Taylour, they kept the considerable proceeds for as long as they could. John Kynnes tried to keep the documents and tools of Roger Whyting for himself. His deception was discovered and the court placed him in mercy,

fining him three pence. One feels he was lucky. Yet it is hard to believe that the lord, or his representative, was ignorant of what was happening. It would have been easy for him to prevent this small retention of wealth by members of the manor if he had really wanted to do so.

### Dealing with land held by the dead

In the court's seventh presentment, a considerable amount of land and property is ordered to be returned to the lord. Each item is recorded as 'once that of' a specific individual, the standard formula when the holding of a deceased tenant is returned to the lord, and hence we may assume that everyone named in the list has died. Table 2 lists the holdings, as itemised in the relevant presentment, and their former holders.

As none of the people named in the table appear in subsequent courts, here is compelling evidence that ten deaths have occurred since the previous court. It can be assumed that at least some were plague deaths in which case the immediate family and other contacts of the deceased are likely to have died too. Remembering that the previous section also provided evidence of deaths, it is clear that a considerable number of people have died. That this number is a good deal greater than had been the case in earlier, less fraught, times may be shown by observing that most of the courts held in the 1320s and 1330s recorded either one case of a holding being returned to the lord because its owner had died, or none at all. The remaining few courts recorded two instances. This made the average number of deaths of this kind throughout these decades less than one per court.

### Dissent and self-assertion

The court records show signs of an incipient breakdown of authority. People are disputing decisions and doing things without the lord's permission in ways that, thirty years earlier, simply would not have happened.

As mentioned above, John Clerke was attached in the court's first presentment. He was required to respond both for delaying the disposal of Walter Gambon's goods and for other matters, including taking hares from the lord's warren. Under examination, John said that he was not guilty of any of the charges. Subsequently, twelve men, all of whom are named and who presumably comprised the jury, although this is not stated, decided that he was not guilty. Two other presumed offenders also claimed to be not guilty. Matilda de Essex was attached to respond to Richard Melleward because she had assaulted and defamed him on the Monday following the festival of the Nativity of Saint John the Baptist (June 24). Matilda denied the allegations, but the court found against her and she was ordered to raise six pence for the use of Richard. Later, John Tydy was attached for unlawfully letting his horse on the lord's land. He said he had not, and the matter was deferred to the next court.

The fifth presentment shows that some people were taking things into their own hands in ways that, again, would have been inconceivable thirty years earlier. The unnamed occupants of the land and tenement once held by Roger Whyting were distrained and required to show how they entered into the lord's fief and to demonstrate fealty to the lord. The fact that the new occupants are un-named and also required to take fealty suggests that they

TABLE 2 The holdings returned to the lord and their former tenants.

<i> Holding </i>	<i> Former tenant </i>
Land and tenement	Ralph de Wedon
3 acres of pasture	Ralph de Merstone
A cottage and 3 acres of land	John le Tylle
A cottage and 5 acres of land	Julian Moze
A messuage and 12 acres of land	John Adam
A messuage and 30 acres of land	John le Whyte
A messuage and 14 acres of land	Allan Austyn
A messuage with curtilage and pond	Simon de Walcote
A cottage	Matilda le Lepere
12 acres of land	Richard Lowytz

were probably newcomers to the manor who had occupied a vacant holding and tenement entirely on their own initiative – virtually as ‘squatters’ – and were now, belatedly, being called to account.

The examples in this section show that people were becoming more assertive. They were more ready to challenge the decisions of the court, whether right or wrong, something they had not done in previous decades. They were also beginning to help themselves, and in ways that had been rare in earlier times. It is tempting to suppose that the extreme conditions of the time contributed to these changes in attitude and behaviour.

### Violence

At the view of Frankpledge immediately following the court there were a number of presentments concerning violence. Such violence, certainly not present thirty years earlier, is probably indicative of tensions in the community.

The presentments on violence come in pairs, and the first begins:

*It is presented that Agnes Loveridge justly raised hue and cry (levavit huteum) on Matilda de Essex.*

*It is presented that Matilda de Essex drew the blood of (traxit sanguinem) Agnes Loverynge. Therefore she is in mercy.*

Matilda was fined two pence, which seems a light punishment. Drawing blood was usually held to make an assault more serious, but the fine imposed in other cases for hitting someone, presumably without drawing blood since that is not mentioned, was three pence. Thus, Cecilia Austyn, who unjustly hit (*percussit*) Cecilia Mason, was fined three pence. The latter was deemed to have justly raised hue and cry on her aggressor. Exactly the same thing happened between the Marshall of the court and John Kynnes, and between Thomas Scot and William le Clerke. If William le Clerke was the clerk of the court (for which, it must be said, there is no evidence apart from his name) this pair of cases could indicate that some violence was directed against officials of the court. John Kynnes outdid the others in violence: after he had done something unreadable with Matilda Bat, for which he was fined two pence, he unjustly hit her and, after that, he unjustly hit Julianna Hervey. Some-

times the laconic nature of the court record can be extremely frustrating.

### THE CHESHAM COURTS OF 1351 AND 1352

The three Chesham courts recorded on membrane D/BASM 18/44 contain little to suggest the impact of a major epidemic. The only indication that someone may have died comes from the final presentment of the last court, when Ralph Pirkes takes from the lord a message formerly held by Roger Cobmer. Even so, the wording does not make it clear whether Roger was dead or still alive: even if he had died, one death in two years was hardly remarkable. Nor do the Chesham court rolls show any signs at all of unusual kinds of behaviour encountered in Chesham Higham records.

In fact, the affairs of these courts seem mostly mundane, and are concerned with trespass, debt and unfinished business from previous courts. For instance, the greater part of the first court is taken up with a list of fifty-four trespasses. The first trespasser is Reginald atte Thorne, fined ‘for his sheep in the pasture’ and the second, Reginald Blake-mere, ‘for cows’. All the rest were fined ‘for the same’. There were less than fifty-four trespassers: for example, Agnes Gardiner appears five times. The fines total nine shillings (108 pence) so everyone was fined two pence per trespass. The fact that the sum total of all the fines at this court was only nine shillings and ten pence reveals how much trespasses dominated business. The final presentment illustrates how matters could run on from court to court, suggesting a degree of ineffectiveness. It was presented that Reginald atte Thorne had ‘felled three thorn bushes (they may have been blackthorn) standing at the place of the boundary’ (*Reginaldus ate Thorne prostratio iij spinas stantes loco bundar*). At the next court Reginald was distrained to respond for the thorn bushes, and at the court after that he was again distrained for felling the thorn bushes. In other words, no progress had been made.

The records do give some hints as to the nature of the Chesham court. In the second presentment of the first court, the tenants of the Abbott of Leicester are distrained for fealty, and so is the Abbott. When members of the the Sifrewast family were lords of the manor later known as Chesham Bury they had given their rights to collect tithes



and to nominate a priest to the Abbey of St Mary de Pré at Leicester. So the Abbott of Leicester had longstanding interests in Chesham, particularly in Chesham Bury. It appears therefore that the purview of the Chesham court includes Chesham Bury. Incidentally, three hands have contributed to the record of this presentment as it now stands. After the court scribe had written his account, another hand added above it that John Vaus and John Tydy were pledges. Similarly, after the court scribe had written a laconic 'dis' (for distraint) in the margin, a third, and much more primitive, hand has added *abbate de leyces*. The consequence of the first addition was that at the following court John Vaus and John Tydy were placed in mercy and fined three pence for not producing the Abbott in the court. After that, however, the court returned to distraining the Abbott and his tenants without pledges.

One of the presentments at the second court can be rendered as:

It is ordered to distraint Henry Hatter for fealty.  
And to lord Oxon (*domino Oxon*) for homage.

The second part is interesting because *dominus Oxon* must be the Earl of Oxford, and the court of Chesham was making it clear that Henry Hatter's homage had to be paid through the Chesham court and not through the lesser court of Chesham Higham. In so doing it was insisting on its superiority over the latter. A presentment recorded in the third court, in which the ale tasters were attached for three shillings and three pence (it is not stated but one assumes that, as usual, they had not been carrying out their duties), sheds a little more light on the relationship between the two courts. The involvement of the ale tasters is only revealed in a note in the margin, but the body of the presentment makes clear that they were attached, and also includes the phrase that can be taken to mean 'as many times in the court of Chesham Higham' (*ut pluries in Oxon Curiam*) which, if nothing else, shows that the court of Chesham had knowledge of the records of the court of Chesham Higham.

It is striking that the records of the Chesham courts reveal little or nothing about the impact of the Plague. It may be that this is because this Court did not deal with matters directly affected by the deaths of members of the community. Its role may be suggested by the obvious importance attached to

the allegation that Reginald atte Thorne had destroyed a thorn hedge. Thus it could well have been responsible for resolving boundary disputes between the various manors in Chesham, particularly necessary because of the scattered nature of the principal manors (Hunt 1997, 69). The emphasis on trespass suggests that the Chesham court controlled the central common land: this would explain why people from all over the district appeared before this court. The fact that the court also disciplined ale tasters, who seem to have served the town and all its hamlets, suggests that it may have supervised the provision of services for general consumption. In the sense that it dealt with issues beyond the scope of individual manors and hamlets, and with matters of common interest to Chesham as a whole, the Chesham court would have been superior to the courts of all the other manors in the immediate vicinity.

#### THE COURT OF 14 APRIL 1352

On one side of membrane D/BASM 18/45 is the complete record of the court of the manor of Chesham Higham held on 14 April 1352. On the other side is a list of presentments, all following the formula:

[this person] *takes from the lord* [this land and/or property], *once that of* [this other person], *for* [this financial arrangement]

The list has no heading or preamble. It occupies only a part of the available space, as may be seen in Figure 1.

The record begins with a standard heading:

*Heyham. Curia tenta ibidem xij die mensis April Anno regni Regis Edwardi tercij post conquestum vintesimo sexto [(Chesham) Higham. Court held there on the 14<sup>th</sup> day of the month of April in the twenty-sixth year of the reign of Edward the third after the Conquest.]*

It is worth noting that the form of heading has changed slightly from the one used for the previous Chesham Higham court. The day and month are given directly, rather than with reference to the nearest saint's day, although the regnal year is still employed. An unusual amount of blank space has been left both before and after the heading. Unusu-

ally, again, there are no *essoins*, or excuses for absence. Rather, the record moves at once to the accounts of the presentments, of which there are thirty-one. It ends with the names of the assessors (*afferatores*) and the sum total of fines. In the records of previous courts of Chesham Higham it is unusual for the names of the assessors to be

included. Of course, omission of the concluding sum total would be extremely unusual. Thus, while this record broadly complies with the form used for earlier courts, it does display some differences of detail.

Turning to the presentments, twenty-four of the thirty-one are concerned with trespass. This would make the substance of the court business mundane in any circumstances, but to find it amid the death and uncertainty of the plague seems extraordinary. Looking more closely, we find that six of the first eleven presentments contain the phrase *et non venit*, indicating that the offender has not come to the court. In earlier years it is not unusual for the odd offender to be absent (without *essoin*) from the court, but absence on this scale is unprecedented. It is tempting to attribute it to the Plague, and to assume that those who have not appeared are dead, but this turns out to be too simplistic. On further investigation it emerges that two of the absentees, Thomas Skot and Walter Skot, appeared later in the court proceedings. Indeed, of those who did not come to the beginning of the court, only William Bysshop did not come at all and he was never heard of again.

It is thus dangerous to conclude that a particular person must have died, even against the background of heavy overall mortality. But the frequent occurrence of *et non venit* must indicate something, perhaps a diminution in respect for the court. After all, the continued operation of the court itself is a striking example of the phenomenon noted by several historians of the Black Death: the continuation of normal life in extraordinary circumstances (see, for example, Dyer 2002, 271–273). It is easy to understand why both those running the court and those summoned to attend it should have been reluctant to come to court, where they would encounter a considerable number of people, any one of whom might be carrying the plague.

The mundane nature of the presentments at the court may be illustrated by the following translated presentment, typical of many:

*William Pratt submits himself [to justice] for 2 cows in the lord's pasture. Pledge the Hayward.*

William was fined two pence, as were most of his fellow trespassers, although occasionally the fine was a penny or so more.

The remaining presentments include the usual

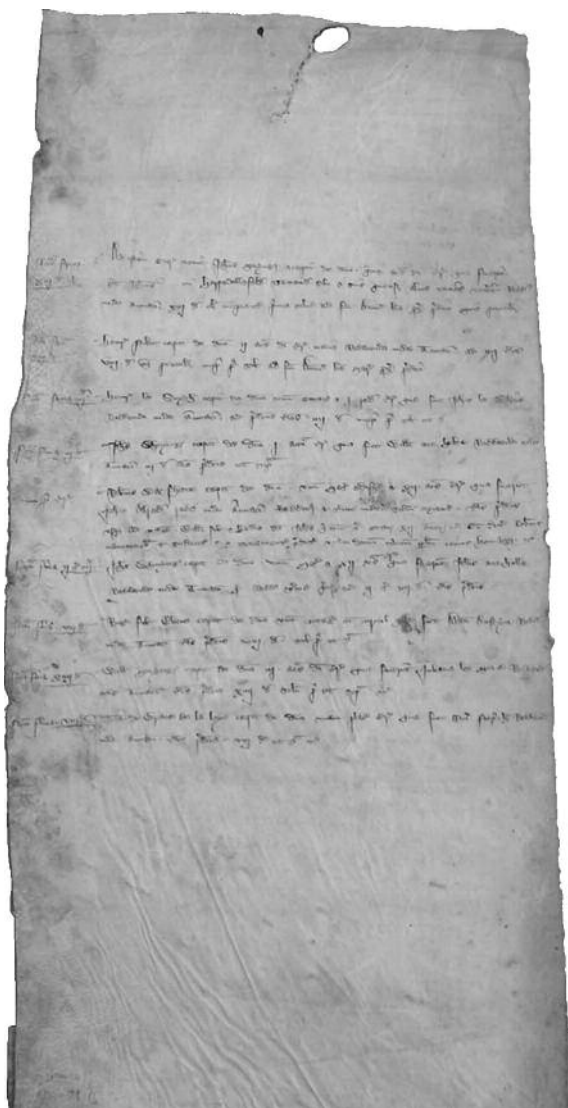


FIGURE 1 The presentments on D/BASM 18/45 verso

tidying up needed on outstanding matters such as arrears of rent and unpaid debts. The final presentment is that involving John Tydy and John Hakeman, referred to earlier. The court notes that for some time the two have had the goods and chattels of Walter le Taillour (note the different spelling of the second name), but still allows matters to run on 'until the next court'. Incidentally, Walter is described as having fled (*Walter(i) Taillour fugatta*). Without this information, the fact that Walter's goods are being disposed of might suggest that he has died. This is clearly not the case, although his flight may be an indication of the chaos of the time.

The transactions recorded on the other side of the membrane are summarised in Table 3.

So, while a good deal of land and property had been returned to the lord at the previous court, he had little difficulty in finding new tenants and generating income from their entry fees. For example, new tenants had been found for the holdings of the late John Whyte and Allan Austyn.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The records of the courts of Chesham Higham held in 1350 and 1352 contain abundant evidence of a much larger than usual number of deaths and of the consequences of those deaths, mainly in the form of transfers of the tenancies of holdings. The Lord of the Manor seems to have had little difficulty in finding new tenants and, although there is a little evidence for incomers to the manor (who may have been seeking a safer or a better life), the new tenants were most often existing members of the manor. There are indications that at least one of the

latter was deliberately attempting to build up a holding of significant size for himself.

The records of these courts also contain evidence that members of the manor were beginning to assert themselves, and to pit themselves against the lord's authority in a way that was simply unheard of a generation earlier. In particular, they were prepared to dispute the authority of the manor court. By 1350, there were instances in which they could not only dispute a presentment, but could resist it. There was also a flare up of inter-personal violence, a small part of which seems to have been inflicted on court officials, which, again, was unheard of in previous years.

Small but significant changes to the way the court's proceedings were recorded took place between 1350 and 1352, which suggest that the officials of the court may have been among the casualties of the Plague. This would not be entirely surprising, as their work would inevitably bring them into contact with a good number of people.

It is simply not clear whether the plain and unvarnished accounts of transfers of holdings on the verso of the membrane recording the court of 1352 were presentments to a court. They would seem to reflect the desire of the participants to have the transactions recorded, but there is no sign whatever that this was done as part of the court's official business. In Chesham's Manor Court records, it is not unknown for items to be added later. Indeed, sometimes it is done in such a clumsy way as to be perfectly obvious. But in this case, there has been no attempt whatever to do anything other than to record the transfers. Such an unusual procedure is surely a response to the unusual circumstances of the time.

TABLE 3 The transactions and those involved

<i>New tenant</i>	<i>Holding</i>	<i>Former tenant</i>
John Morynge	4.5 acres of land	John Morynge
Henry Pikot	2.5 acres of land	—
Henry le Smyth	A cottage and one rod of land	John le Whyte
John Whyting	One acre of land	William atte Holt
Robert Bakshete	A messuage and 12 acres of land	John Alred
John Whyting	A messuage and 12 acres of land	John ate Hulle
Roger son of Alicia	A messuage with curtillage	Allan Austyn
William Morynge	3.5 acres of land	Julian le Mene
Johanna de Grace	One piece of land	Richard Partrych



The records of the courts of Chesham are quite different from those of Chesham Higham, in that they contain practically no evidence of death and disturbance. They are, in fact, dominated by mundane matters such as trespass and the lack of competence of the ale tasters. While this is interesting in that it shows everyday life continuing in circumstances that are far from ordinary, it is disappointing in that it sheds no light on the disrupting effects of the Black Death. It does, however, make clear that the courts of Chesham served a quite different purpose from those of Chesham Higham and, in all probability, from those of the other Manor Courts in the district. The main concerns of the Chesham court would seem to have been essentially those of a View of Frankpledge, making them matters outside the remit of the Manor Courts such as the resolution of disputes over manorial boundaries and the provision of officials, including ale tasters, who served all the manors.

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