**General facts on the plagues**

**Infection**

The infection is believed to have come from the fleas on Black Rats, often referred to as 'Ships' Rats'. The Black Rat is a species that is now not common in this country, but still found in some dockyard areas. The bacterium called Yersinia Pestis was carried by these rats and, in turn, their fleas. When its host died, the flea would hop onto the nearest living thing and transfer the bacterium by its bite. In the overcrowded homes and streets of towns and cities like Colchester and London this meant people became their hosts.

In recent times, doubt has been cast on the role of the rat fleas in the spread of the plague. So rapid was the spread, it is now thought there was also human to human transmission, either air-borne or by human lice and fleas.

Whether we can blame rats or human transmission the towns and cities of the seventeenth century were dirty, overcrowded, rat-infested and smelled bad. They had crude narrow streets with no pavements and very little drainage, there were open sewers, potholes full of water and heaps of ashes. Rubbish was thrown out into the street where it lay rotting.

**Lockdown**

If infected, you were locked in your home and a big red cross marked the house with the prayer *Lord Have Mercy On Us*. There was little chance to isolate in a separate room within a home, many families lived in one room and the building was shared with other families. Needless to say, it was the poor who suffered most. Following lockdown, the red cross was kept on the door for 40 days, then a white cross for another 20 days following which the house *be well fumed, Washed and Whited all over within with Lime* and for at least three months after, no clothes, household stuff or furniture was to be removed.

A round-the-clock watchman was placed outside the door to prevent anyone leaving or entering and he passed on food that was delivered, often, by the parish. If you were already on parish relief this was paid for but if not, you had to pay or sell belongings to cover the cost.

**Plague ships, the Hythe**

The plague was also rife in the rest of Europe, most particularly Holland, and, at Colchester's Hythe and in London's docks, restrictions were placed on ships coming from known areas of plague. These vessels were placed in quarantine for 30 days, then 40 days as the epidemic worsened. As early as November 1663, ships coming into English ports from Amsterdam and Hamburg were being subject to quarantine.

In London 'pest-ships' were also used to isolate and nurse infected sailors. With the country at war, protection of sailors was of paramount importance to the war effort.

Colchester Hythe, at that time, was a major port and as well as being engaged in coastal trade in this country, exported and imported goods overseas. The town enjoyed a substantial trade with Rotterdam where the plague had been rife. Nicholas Corsellis, a wealthy merchant, who in fact fled his home at Wivenhoe Hall in September 1665, reported suspending his trade with Ostend.