**It is important to clarify that the Black Death was ‘a bubonic plague pandemic occurring in Western Eurasia and North Africa from 1346 to 1353.’ The Great Plague (series of plagues which occurred over 400 years) that continued to torment the rest of Europe throughout the later Medieval and into the Early Modern period were also cases of the bubonic plague but on a much smaller scale (50 million people were killed during the Black Death in Europe alone!)**

**The Black Death in Colchester**

Colchester like other towns suffered severely from the Black Death. The plague probably arrived in the winter of 1348-9 and continued throughout the summer and possibly into the autumn of 1349. The abbot and probably also the prior of St. John's abbey were dead by August 1349, perhaps from plague (however this is not ascertained).

Not much else is known regarding the other religious houses or the parish clergy and whether they struck down by the Black Death.

Among the townspeople 111 wills were proved (given legality) in the borough court between September 1348 and September 1349, and 25 in the year 1349-50, compared with an average of 2-3 a year in the decades before and after.

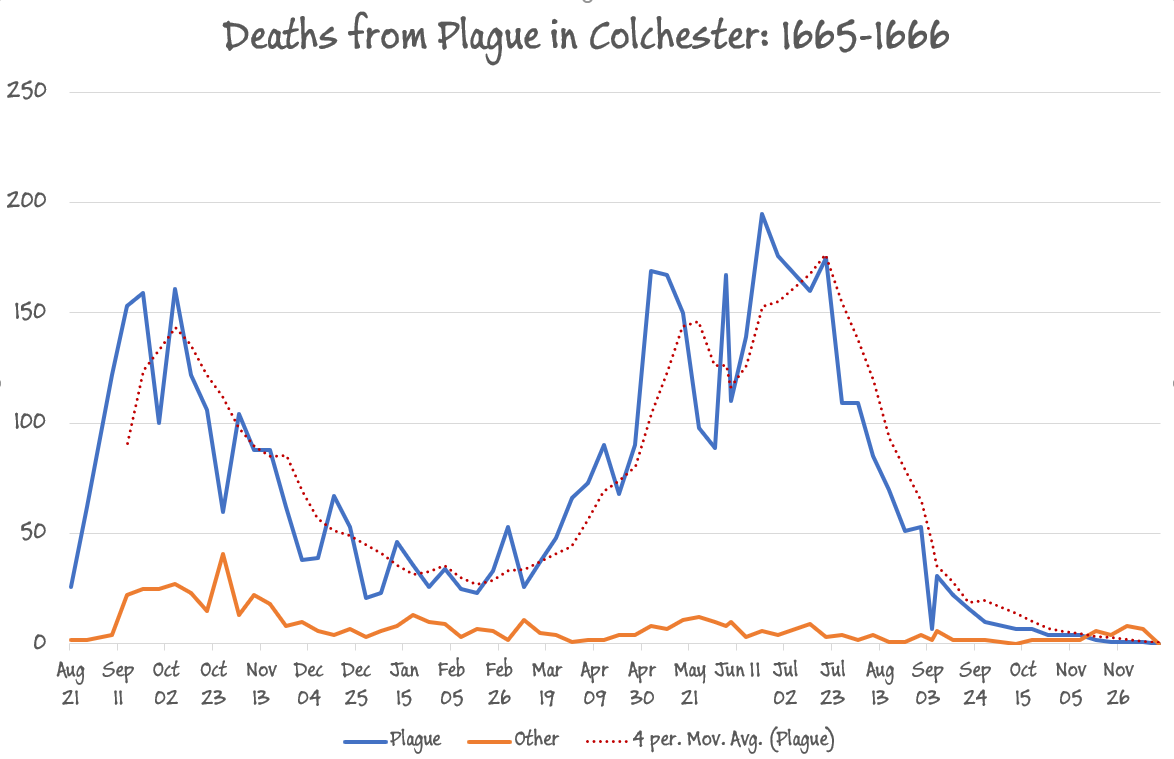
Whatever the town suffered in 1349, Colchester recovered rapidly in the 1350s. This recovery was greatly attributed to a flow of immigrants attracted by the town's growing cloth industry.

The second plague of 1360-1 does not seem to have halted Colchester's physical or economic growth, and in 1377 a total of 2,951 people paid poll tax (tax on moveable property), making Colchester the eighth largest provincial town in England, and suggesting a total population of *c*. 4,500-5,000, higher than in 1312.

**The Last Great Plague 1665-1666**

Colchester suffered its worst outbreak of the Plague from the summer of 1665 to December 1666. The town had been in the process of recovering from the siege of the town by Parliamentary forces in 1648 when it experienced what was probably the greatest of all provincial plagues since the Black Death.

The scale of death in Colchester is much easier to gauge because of the meticulous records kept of the weekly totals of deaths. Those that died in the seventeen months, 5345 in all, included 4817 plague-deaths and only 528 from other causes.



For those who were unable to flee before the plague struck. Collections were collected for those who became sick and the poorer citizens who may not be able to afford food, lodgings and this money was used carefully to help ease their suffering.

A great deal was, inevitably, spent in the hospitalisation of sufferers and for their burial. There were at least two Plague hospitals (Pest Houses) built, one in St. Marys parish, the other at Mile End. According to an entry in the Oath Book dated 16 August 1665 the 'Bearers', who buried the dead were paid 10s. a week with an additional l2s. for every corpse buried. These men were isolated entirely, even from their own families and they had to carry a white wand as a means of identification and allow others to avoid close contact. They had to carry the corpses 'to the ground', probably the 'Mount' close to the Mersea Road.

**Here is a map which locates the ‘Mount’ just in the bottom right-hand corner (and near the school!)**



Sadly, the horrendous extent of the plague in Colchester might well be the result of the generosity of the contributions. There was enough money to employ people to exterminate all the cats and dogs in the town, who were at the time considered possible carriers of the plague. By doing this, the city burghers ensured that there was nothing to control the rat population that settled happily in the deserted houses. Rats and their fleas were, we now know, the agents by which people were infected with the plague. The 'experts' aren't always to be trusted. This might also explain why the second phase of the disease was greater than the first, despite all the precautions being in place

**The population of Colchester had gone from 10,305 in 1662 to 4,114 in 1666. 4,559 actual plague deaths are recorded, and it's likely that many of the other missing people had not returned from the countryside. 279 houses were empty in March 1666 when local taxes were calculated.**