

Life in London's eastern suburb, c. 1550—c. 1700

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I'd like to begin with a quotation from the London chronicler John Stow, whose 1598 description of the eastern suburban ward of Portsoken noted that

Hogge lane [that is, Petticoat Lane or modern day Middlesex Street] ... within these fortie foure yeares last, had on both sides fayre hedgerowes of Elme trees, with ... pleasant fieldes, very commodious for citizens therein to ... recreate and refresh their dulled spirites in the sweete and wholesome ayre, which is now within few yeares made a continual building throughout, of garden houses, and small cottages: & the fields ... be turned into garden plottes, teynter yarges, bowling alleyes, and such like ... [T]he high way from Ealdegate had some few tenements thinly scattered here and there, with much voyd space betweene them ... but now ... is not only fully replenished with buildings ... and also pestered with divers Allies ... but also even to White chappell, and beyond.¹

Here Stow vividly captures the process of sudden and dramatic topographical change that is at the heart of my talk today – namely, the transformation of London's eastern suburb from an area largely characterised in the 1550s by its gardens and wasteland to one that was densely built up and heavily populated by the end of the seventeenth century. My particular focus will be on the actual inhabitants of the region during this period, the type of people that they were, the lives that they led, the houses in which they dwelled – and how each of these changed over time. These questions are the focus of the project 'Life in the suburbs: health, domesticity, and status in early modern London' based at the Centre for Metropolitan History at the University of London. Our research is funded, all-importantly, by the Economic and Social Research Council – who I am, quite rightly, obliged to mention whenever I give a talk – and it's the work of this project that I will be drawing upon today.

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I'd like to begin with a series of maps, not least so you can see the particular area of London's eastern suburb on which I will focus, the extra-mural parish of St Botolph Aldgate, filled in here in blue. Covering just under 80 acres running south from the parish of St Botolph Bishopsgate to the Thames,

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roughly half of the parish constituted the city ward of Portsoken – which includes the lane described by Stow – while the remaining half, the liberty of East Smithfield, was part of Middlesex.

That St Botolph Aldgate was one of the largest London parishes,

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as this map showing the city's parish boundaries makes abundantly clear, means that it allows us to examine the processes of economic and social change on a significant scale, and how they impacted upon a population that lived under two separate jurisdictions. But this latter point also leads to obvious problems as, with the exception of most of the **parish** sources, the surviving material for the area normally covers either the London or the Middlesex parts of the parish, and hardly ever both. This difficulty is more than offset, however, by the rich abundance of manuscript sources for St Botolph's on which I will be drawing today, which comprise the more standard parish registers, vestry minutes and churchwardens accounts, but also a number of property plans and, most significantly of all, a series of parish clerks' memorandum books covering the period from 1583—1625, which provide at times almost a daily account of parish life. As we will see, the clerks were remarkably well-informed about the doings of parishioners and did not stop short of passing comment upon them.²

Now, to move very briefly forward in time –

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– and here you can see the boundaries of the much smaller modern parish of St Botolph's, which no longer stretches into East Smithfield, marked first on a map and second

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on a satellite image – the parish, and London's eastern suburb more generally, are associated in more recent memory with extreme poverty, overcrowded housing, crime and high levels of immigration. The website of the modern day parish describes itself as bridging 'the poorest Borough in London and one of the world's leading financial centres';³ and Wikipedia – not always a reliable source, though in this case correct – notes that Jack the Ripper's victims were all found in or close to its vicinity and that during the 1880s the church of St Botolph Aldgate –

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which you can see here – was also known as the 'Church of Prostitutes', due to the propensity for ladies of the night to congregate there.⁴ Moreover, at the turn of the twentieth century, the incumbent vicar saw fit to describe his parish as one 'in which the forces of evil and wrong had got a firm upper hand ... There was a reign of terror, and the place had touched an unexampled depth of degradation ... A sort of moral paralysis seemed to possess the place.'⁵

These stories and comments reinforce and are the basis of more recent perceptions of the area; but one of the points I want to get across today is that such stories and perceptions were nothing new and had a long association with St Botolph's. Indeed,

we will see that the parish documents of the sixteenth and seventeenth century record a multitude of unsavoury tales, sordid incidents and malicious comments that wouldn't seem out of place in a current episode of EastEnders. As one contemporary described London's suburbs as early as 1592, they were 'no other but dark dens for adulterers, thieves, murderers and every mischief worker'.⁶

All this paints a picture of a rather depressing area, an exemplar of what modern day politicians would no doubt term a 'broken society'. But I will also show that there is evidence for a very different image of St Botolph's, one that reveals rich and poor parishioners living side-by-side; inhabitants displaying remarkable acts of kindness and charity to their less fortunate neighbours; and its local rulers expending much effort in attempting to shore up the traditional family unit in those instances where parishioners lacked the basic support mechanisms of everyday life.

I

Having introduced the parish and the themes I wish to explore, I'd like to begin with an overview of the people who lived there in the early modern period, beginning with their actual number. Now, you'll no doubt be relieved to hear that I do not intend to show you a long and complicated series of tables and graphs of the area's demographic growth. But I do think that a few bold figures, alongside some contemporary maps of the parish, help to vividly illustrate the nature of the population explosion the area experienced at this time and how that, in turn, impacted upon its landscape.

Around 1540, the entire parish will have housed less than 2000 people

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and this map, based on a survey of the 1550s, shows just how much open space it contained at the time. This, of course, depicts the area in the time recalled with nostalgia by Stow, with its trees, fields and hedgerows, and the road running directly

north in the top right of the slide is the Hog Lane that he described. The contrast between St Botolph's and the built-up area of the city within the walls on the left of the slide is also particularly apparent at this time.

By the 1650s, the population of the parish was probably more than 10,000 people,

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and this extract from the Newcourt and Faithorne map of 1658 shows the extent to which the area had been built-up along its main streets, namely Houndsditch, running north-west from the church; the High Street, running east from the church; the Minories, running south from the same location; and Rosemary Lane, running east from the southern end of the Minories.

Finally, by 1700, the population of St Botolph Aldgate was approaching something like 20,000 people,

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and here the Ogilby and Morgan map of 1677 shows how the spaces behind the main streets have also now been filled in. It is also apparent that the built up area of London now passes seamlessly beyond its walls into St Botolph's and off further into Middlesex.

So here we have a parish of just under 80 acres which experienced more than a 10-fold increase in its population in little more than 150 years. And while we might quibble over the relative accuracy of the series of maps I have shown, they clearly capture the overall trend of the area's development.

Socially speaking, what sort of people lived in the parish at this time? Given its strong association with the poorer members of society, you might be surprised to learn that it

also housed a number of rather more affluent individuals. As the passage from Stow with which I began intimated, the wealthy were attracted to the parish on the grounds of its clean air and the subsequent health benefits – something that is, admittedly, rather difficult to imagine today. Moreover, land prices in St Botolph's were relatively low and there was an abundance of space on which to build. This combination of factors encouraged a number of substantial men to create imposing and comfortable residences for themselves in the area, and the taxation records of the sixteenth century include the names of knights and other wealthy individuals. As the parish developed over time, however, such individuals disappeared: in 1618, the parish clerk noted that 'the best Inhabitants & most antients' were 'dead & decaied' and 'very fewe'.⁷ Twenty years later, the 1638 tithes returns list only a single parishioner with any form of title, namely William Lemmon, esquire, a member of the aldermanic Lemon family.⁸ Nevertheless, by the end of the seventeenth century, a very small number of extremely rich residents – including knights, ladies, dames, and the owners of coaches – once again appear in tax records for the area, though now as an even tinier fraction of the overall population than they were in Tudor times.

Indeed, you will be rather less surprised to learn that the vast majority of individuals who swelled St Botolph's population during the early modern period were among the poorer sort. Such people had probably long been resident in the parish, but it is from the sixteenth century onwards that they become more visible in the historical record. Thus Stow, writing in 1598, could recall how in his lifetime the only residents in part of Houndsditch were once 'poore bedred people' in 'small cottages', and that on each Friday the devout people of the city

purposely [travelled] there to bestow their charitable almes, euerie poore man or woman lying in their bed within their window, which was towards the streete open so low that euerie man might see them, a clean linnen cloth lying in their window, and a payre of Beades to shew that there lay a bedred body, vnable but to pray only.⁹

Comments made during a parish survey of 1618 indicate that the numbers of the poor steadily increased, provoking concerns about their negative impact on the parish; they are also revealing about where such individuals lived and the work they undertook. Reflecting on the condition of St Botolph's, the parish clerk bemoaned the influx of:

manie verie pore ... most of them having neither trades nor meanes to live on, but by their handy labour, as porters carmen waterbearers, chymney sweepers, servants in silk mylls bruers servants lyving for ye most part in allies having wyves, & most of them many children ... wch poore are & dayly doeth soe increase ... that they are ready to eate out, or els to dryve out the better sort of the inhabitants ... who at this time are very fewe, & in short time wilbe fewer if there be not some remedye found.¹⁰

Things were no better by 1638, when the local minister claimed, no doubt with a degree of exaggeration, that 'there are eleven hundred houses, being half the parish, which receive alms'.¹¹ In 1655 the vestry lamented that they 'hath bine Continually very Much Surcharged and over burdened wth miserable pore People, and hundreds of pore distressed Children & orphanes, the number of whom is now much more than euer Increased'.¹² And the long lists of those unable to pay their taxes at the end of the seventeenth century – variously described as poor, very poor and even miserably poor¹³ – reveal that such people were an enduring feature of St Botolph's population.

Clearly, however, not everyone in the area can be labelled either wealthy or poor, and the parish also contained many tradesmen and those of other professions. An early seventeenth-century list of inhabitants included 'carpenters bricklaiers, plaisterers coopers, smiths butchers, Chandlers keep[er]s of sylk mylls, Priests schoolmrs, victulers brokers & Diuers officers to ye Kinges Matie, & ye Cittie'.¹⁴ At the beginning of our period, Houndsditch was noted for its tallow chandlers and gunfounders, trades that eventually gave way to textile manufacture (particularly silk weaving), to tailoring, and to the brokers who dealt in old clothes and other second hand items and were to be a distinctive feature of this district into the twentieth century.¹⁵ Meanwhile, East Smithfield was dominated by the great brewhouses on the

river frontage (a feature which appears to have emerged in the fifteenth century), by mariners and to some extent by the timber trade.¹⁶

In another association with modern perceptions of the parish, St Botolph's was already home to a number of immigrant groups. There are references to a number of black individuals in the burial registers from the late sixteenth century onwards, such as 'Suzanna Pearis a blackamoore tenant to John Despinois' and 'John Come quicke a Blacke-Moore so named, servant to Thomas Love', and also to 'James (an Indian) servant to Mr James Duppa'.¹⁷ Its residents also included a number of wealthy Dutch merchants, no doubt attracted by its close proximity to both the Thames and the Dutch church at Austin Friars, though I think we can safely assume that 'Hendrick Sturman a Dutchman who dyed in the streete ... in his drunkennesse' had not recently left a church. Occasional references to Jewish residents are also found in the records, and in this respect it is again probably significant that the first synagogue in Britain opened just outside the parish boundary in St Katherine Creechurch at the beginning of the eighteenth century.

II

These, then, were the parishioners of St Botolph Aldgate during the early modern period, a mixture of rich and poor, native English and immigrants. Given this variety, we should not be surprised to find that its inhabitants lived in vastly different types of properties in dramatically contrasting conditions. In earlier centuries, the rich who chose to build their houses in the area normally did so well away from the main street frontages – and thus far from its poorer residents – and it was one such site that was occupied by William Lemon, esquire, the only titled parishioner in the 1630s. From the sixteenth and seventeenth century, however, the more substantial men of the parish were also living in large properties of two or three stories on Aldgate High Street, St Botolph's principal highway,¹⁸

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and from this early twentieth century photo you get an impression of how such buildings once looked. By the time of the Tudors, some wealthy families were able to take advantage of the transfer of land that came with the Reformation. Thus in East Smithfield, the dissolved abbey of St Mary Graces – which had dominated part of the liberty since the fourteenth century – subsequently became the residence of the youngest son of Lord Darcy; later the same site contained the navy victualling house and the homes of a number of gentlemen.¹⁹ Following the dissolution of Holy Trinity Priory, its great garden in the north of the parish came to be known as Covent Garden, and towards the end of the sixteenth century, it began to look as if the area,

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outlined here in red, which was still a spacious airy location, might become a form of aristocratic garden suburb, in spite of the proliferation of tenter yards, and the presence in nearby Houndsditch of gun foundries and tallow melting houses. By 1585, the earl of Oxford,

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a prominent courtier famed for his effeminate dress and personal extravagance, had acquired a substantial interest in Covent Garden and had a house there towards its south-east corner, near to where a local widow ran a form of hospice – one of the instances in which we find the parish's rich and poor living almost side-by-side. Another example of this is Oxford's near-neighbour Robert Dow,

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a former master of the Merchant Taylors' Company and government advisor, whose large house – which contained two vaults, a kitchen, a buttery, three chambers, 2 garrets and a counting house²⁰ – and garden backed on to the perhaps appropriately named Deaths Head Alley, as the parish rents with their widows and other poor

inhabitants were then known. At the north end of Covent Garden in the 1620s was a great brick house with gardens and orchards recently inhabited by the agent of the archduchess of Burgundy and in 1624 occupied by Robert Lord Willoughby of Eresby. John Strype, the continuator of Stow's *Survey of London*, who grew up in the yard opposite, remembered it 'as commonly called the Spanish ambassador's house'. When it was sold in 1624, it occupied a site 100 yards square containing three other mansions and fourteen tenements and gardens. The earl of Oxford's interest eventually passed to one Thomas Wood, and part of the earl's former residence appears to have become Wood's own dwelling, which he leased out for £40 a year in 1625. Some of the structure survived well into the nineteenth century,

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and this engraving from then shows what an impressive house it was, with its parlour or hall containing high quality decorative work of the late 1500s and perhaps early seventeenth century. In 1625, the grounds of this property included a garden with statues and stone seats, a banqueting house and a bowling alley. Clauses in a lease of the same year prevented the tenant from letting it to any who was chargeable to the parish, or to anyone who should practice the trade of melting tallow; the tenant was not to allow the oil or roots of horns to be laid there nor to allow it to be converted to a vinegar yard or any unsavoury thing that might cause offence to the neighbours. Such clauses make it all too clear what was going to happen, and that the age of such houses in St Botolph's was coming to an end.²¹

Indeed, by the seventeenth century, and within London as a whole, the parish had one of the lowest modal rental values of properties, one of the smallest proportions of substantial houses, and an overwhelming preponderance of small dwellings.²² Characteristic of the parish's properties, especially those in Houndsditch, were small two to three storey houses on the street frontage with small gardens behind²³ –

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and here you can see a plan of two such properties as they were surveyed in 1607 by Ralph Treswell. Both properties, which were owned by Christ's Hospital, were around 12 feet wide and twenty feet deep, with gardens about 50 feet long. Each had two rooms on the ground floor, a shop at the front of the property and kitchen behind, and two chambers on the second floor and a garret. One had a shed in the garden and both had privies. A series of later plans allow us to chart how these sites and the properties on them evolved over time. By 1667,

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the shop and kitchen of the property on the right had both been extended and a washhouse had been built at the bottom of the yard. However, it now seems that the site on the left contains two separate properties. The original 1607 property now has a buttery and washhouse, while a second dwelling, consisting of a shed and kitchen with stairs to a second floor has been built at the bottom of the former garden. All these properties were destroyed by fire in 1714 but quickly rebuilt, though as you can see

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in substantially different form. The now single property on the left seems to have been specifically redesigned as a shop, with no access to the shed at the rear and no apparent kitchen. Meanwhile, the property on the right was clearly envisaged as a dwelling, with its two parlours and kitchen and stairs that presumably led to a second story of bedchambers.²⁴

Taken together, these Houndsditch properties were probably typical of the small houses occupied by those in the middle rank of St Botolph's society in the early modern period, those who were neither wealthy nor poor, possessed craft skills and capital with which to set themselves up, and worked for themselves rather than others.²⁵

In sharp contrast, many, perhaps most, of the parish's poor inhabitants lived in single room accommodation.²⁶ The reasons for this lay partly in the fact that new building was centred in areas around the evolving alleys, closes and courts that sprang up between main thoroughfares –

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the type of in-filling that you can see here on the Ogilby and Morgan map. This meant that the space to build into was delineated by existing rows of housing and that building over interconnecting spaces became an established practice –

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something that is vividly captured by these early twentieth century photos of Saracens Head Yard in Aldgate, on the left, and Crown Court in the Minories, on the right. All this contributed to the ad hoc building of small dwellings designed around a single room per storey.²⁷ One example of this piecemeal pattern of development comes from the history of a single property in the Minories, which occupied a site about 40 feet wide and 400 feet long around 1500. Sometime after, the house was divided into two, and by 1523 there were five houses on the plot. By 1600, a further three smaller houses had been contrived in the yard immediately behind, and with a number of gardens to the rear. One of the gardens contained a still house, which by the 1660s had been converted into a two-storey dwelling. The other garden plots were then built on, and by 1700 the whole plot had been divided into a series of discrete house and yard or garden units. Clearly, for St Botolph's more wealthy residents, there was money to be made through such practices, and the record of a property surveyed in East Smithfield in 1612 reveals that Arthur Parker, the leaseholder, had just built a row of outhouses and garden houses known as Parkers Alley.²⁸ Elsewhere, Three Kings Alley seems to have been created between 1557 and 1584. It was described in 1632 as thirteen tenements built on a former garden plot, grouped around a common yard.

Twenty-two households were squeezed into these thirteen tenements in 1637 and thirty households by 1666.²⁹

The high levels of cohabitation in the parish were also determined by two other factors: those of taking in inmates and of dividing houses. At times, both practices were prohibited within London by the national government, which rightly saw them as likely to attract poorer and less desirable families and individuals to the capital.³⁰ An inmate family is one that would live alongside the existing occupants of a property, sharing a common entrance with their hosts and any other occupants of the house. Meanwhile, the practice of dividing a house involved making physical changes to the arrangement of the house itself, namely creating separate living spaces with their own doors that were entirely closed off from one another.³¹

The 1637 returns of divided and inmated houses within Portsoken ward provide a moving picture of the levels of crowding, contagion and poverty that its inhabitants experienced.³² In Houndsditch, a single house had been divided into several tenements in which five entire families now lived. Meanwhile, a divided property in Covent Garden, described as a 'most poor close house', had a single door and three rooms. In the first lived Michael Draper, his wife and three small children; in the second, Henry Dorell, his wife, their five children and a lodger; and in the third, widows Whitehouse and Nutt, and Ralph Poole. Unsurprisingly, all were listed among the poor of the ward.³³

However, perhaps even these poor wretches were sometimes better off than those who found themselves living in previously uninhabited structures. Again, with landlords ever quick to see an opportunity in a thriving housing market, some of the new building in the area was actually nothing of the sort, and involved instead the creation of new habitations from old buildings, with structures such as stables, coachhouses, sheds and even privies converted for use as cheap domestic accommodation.³⁴ We can only begin to imagine what such structures must have looked like, but this picture

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is perhaps suggestive of the type of wooden shed-like structures that were built to make use of the space in many garden and yards. Equally, given their likely ramshackle nature, we might not be surprised to learn of an incident in July 1616, when ‘A woman, and hir Child who by a fall of a House in Pond alley where shee lodged, were both slaine’.³⁵

III

Having described the residents of St Botolph Aldgate and the properties they inhabited, I now want to turn to the everyday details of parish life, namely how its inhabitants behaved, their attitudes towards one another and just how such a socially-varied community with obvious stresses managed to function. Indeed, the parish’s records – and the parish clerks’ memorandum books in particular – provide us with a unique insight into the patterns of life in early modern London.

Perhaps not surprisingly, those records are at their most revealing on how St Botolph’s as a society attempted to deal with the problem of its poor. As you might imagine, the parish was badly in need of charity above and beyond what it collected locally each year from its residents for poor relief, and indeed it relied heavily on aid from other London parishes.³⁶ Moreover, some of those assessed locally for the poor rate took clearly took exception to the financial burden the burgeoning numbers of poor imposed upon them personally. In 1618, it was reported that such people ‘either cannot or els challendg & will not paie such duties as are imposed vpon them towards ye maintenance of ye pore’. In stark contrast, however, other inhabitants of St Botolph’s left bequests that were specifically aimed at relieving the parish poor. Many pre- and post-mortem gifts were one off cash payments to the poor as a whole or to specific individuals, but some went as far as settling properties on the parish, which were either employed to generate rents for the benefit of the poor, or were used directly for housing those unable to pay rent. These houses were often in the wealthier

areas, such as the widow Mary Bristow's house on the High Street³⁷ or the lawyer and vestryman Toby Wood's extensive tenement next to Aldgate.³⁸ Thus in these affluent areas, substantial inhabitants could find themselves the immediate neighbours of pensioners, orphans or the sick.³⁹

St Botolph's most celebrated donor by far was the merchant taylor Robert Dow,

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whom we have already met, and whose personal charity was perhaps inspired by the levels of poverty he no doubt experienced on a daily basis, living, as he did, in the vicinity of Deaths Head Alley. During his lifetime, Dow set up a fund which provided for 64 pensioners as well as a room in the Merchant Taylors' almshouses in the parish

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– which you can see here – for two poor parish widows, one of whom was chosen by Dow himself.⁴⁰ The details of his gift also give us an important insight into his attitude towards the poor, whom he bemoaned 'in these days are given untoo too much idleness and little labour ... and much seeking after alms how little soever it be'. Those in receipt of Dow's pension were also treated to a self-penned homily laden with moral superiority. Beginning with a reminder that the recipient is fortunate to have been **chosen** when so many are in need, they are then told to 'live in all charitable and christian sort with your neighbours and be peace and love makers to your power considering with yourselves that you be aged and therefore most meet for you to give good example'.⁴¹ Nevertheless, some of those who benefited from Dow's charity clearly had been anything but model citizens earlier in their lives. We have discovered, for example, later Dow pensioners who were excommunicated from the Church of England and presented at a local court for abusing St Botolph's minister. Moreover, at least two female pensioners had much earlier given birth to illegitimate

children, one of whom was born in the local lockup or cage as it was known by contemporaries. Quite what Dow thought of such individuals, and how their earlier actions were reconciled with the requirements of his charity, would be extremely interesting to know, but the sources are silent on those issues.

What is certain is that Dow was well respected and honoured in his own time, and there is a memorial to him in St Botolph's church,

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which you can see here, and apparently local parishioners still commemorate him to this day. But at least some of his contemporaries held an alternate view: in 1598, widow Tomkins, her maid and mistress Linkes were questioned by the alderman and several wealthy parishioners, and Tomkin's maid subsequently found guilty and imprisoned in Bridewell, for the offence of 'casting certen Fowle bowles of beastlynes agaynst Mr Robert Dow his backe doore'.⁴²

While donors such as Dow clearly played a vital financial role in St Botolph's efforts to deal with its poor, the parish records also reveal much about the actual workings of its local system of relief. Abandoned children were often taken in by its residents, as with 'Marie a chyld that was founde in the streete ... neare a Dunghill ... nursed by henrie Mawkenewes wyfe'.⁴³ Such children were sometimes named after where they were found, as in the case of both Edward and Dowsabella Portsoken, Buttolph the elder and even 'Ellen Street, a child so named because it was found in the street'.⁴⁴ Payments made to a female parishioner indicate they were made on the basis that she took in John Parrye 'a poore childe for her own'.⁴⁵ That there was some type of formal mechanism for the arrangement of care is indicated in the case of

a single woman delivered of ... child in the streete ... [who] was conducted by dyvers women unto the house of Robert Acton ... [with] whome she did lately dwell and the

said Robert Acton at the apoyntment of the constable ... Assigned her with her chlyd [to] lye at the house of William Cooke.⁴⁶

From the comments of the parish clerks, however, we learn that such children sometimes befell an ugly fate. Thus ‘Paludia Foord a Base-borne Child nursed in the house of Thomas Overlin ... was baselie used and starved’ to death. In the case of ‘Marie Sedway the Reputed Daughter of ... John Sedway ... yt was Nursed in the house of ... Edith Jones a poore widow of east smithefield, where it died’ the clerk commented that ‘There are verie few Children prosper Long in our Parish, that are Nursed in such Places’. Another girl did not survive long in a collier’s home, prompting the clerk to savagely remark that ‘hee that loveth his dogg would not put it in such a place to be brought upp’.⁴⁷ Luckily, other parish children were brought up in more hospitable climes well away from St Botolph’s, with the parish paying for their upkeep and so they could learn a trade, and even having such children brought to London so that they could check on their condition.⁴⁸

It was not simply poor children that the parish had to care for, of course, and I’ve already referred to the pensions and almshouses on which poor adults formally relied for their relief. But there is also evidence suggestive of more informal types of care, as in the case of Anthony Duffield, a large-scale beer brewer. Duffield was another of St Botolph’s wealthy patrons, a man who regularly made donations to the poor during his lifetime, and left a substantial gift in his will. We learn that in February every year ‘acordinge to his accostomed maner’ he gave 6 shillings 8 pence to be spent on bread for the poor, and that in 1583 this fed ‘120 poore persones’.⁴⁹ But it also seems that Duffield’s charity extended to the provision of household accommodation, as suggested by an entry of 1586, when an 18-year-old man whose ‘name Was not knowne He Was one that Went a goodinge as I was informed by serten other masterles men he had bene a cooper... This yonge fellow being sicke was taken into the oven pitt at the howse of Mt Anthony Douffeild’. Similarly, an unnamed vagrant was allowed to take shelter in Duffield’s storehouse in 1587.⁵⁰

The reasons why such individuals found themselves relying on the charity of others are often impossible to recover, but in some instances we know and contemporaries' reactions to the specific causes of poverty are often revealing of their larger belief system. For example, Emma Bayart received poor relief from St Botolph's for a number of years up until the time of her death in 1618, when the parish clerk's burial note reveals the reason for her poverty: 'Hir late husband [identified as a carman of Rosemary Lane] was a base unthrift which wasted away hir goodes and like a varlett Ranne away from hir, and left hir desolate'.⁵¹

Here the breakdown of a marriage is opposed both because it has left the parish open to expense and on moral grounds. Indeed, numerous comments made by the parish clerks suggest that they were firmly among those contemporaries who linked disorder or instability within families and households with many of the social ills of the period. The nature of some of the local marriages was, for instance, a notable source of concern. Commenting on the union of William Ley and Jane Arrooes, 'a Notorius Scould', in 1617, the clerk added caustically that 'this is hir 4th husband'.⁵² Then there were those who were all too ready to remarry, such as the perhaps appropriately named Marie Scarlett who 'continewed a widow ten weekes' and Thomas Grove, who 'continued a widower almost vj weekes'.⁵³ The worst example, however, was that of 'John Collier ... who had Continewed a heavie widower the space of three whole weekes; did cheare uppe his spirite again, and was Married to Agnes Swayne ... he would have bene married soonener, but that he was loth to be at the charg of a license'.⁵⁴ Some of the parish's unions were entirely inappropriate in the eyes of the clerks, such as the marriage of a boy of seventeen and girl of fourteen; 'A worthie Ancient Couple of young Fooles' wrote the clerk. Others were clearly not the marrying kind; the marriage of Joane Wellar to William Dennis in 1619 prompted the remark that 'The Bride was a peece of Crackt Stuff'.⁵⁵ Neither did the early modern equivalent of the shot-gun wedding escape the clerks' attention in recording St Botolph's baptisms. Having noted on one occasion that 'The Couple were married 7 weeks & 3 days before this Christning', another carries the comment 'were married about xxij Dayes before'.⁵⁶ And then there were simply those who weren't married at

all, such as the long sick sailor the widow Joan Blonnstone ‘kept at her howse and said he was her husband, but I have heard sence, it was not trewe’.⁵⁷

The birth of illegitimate children was another pressing issue for the clerks and the parish’s governors more generally: in 1599, Anges Payne was excommunicated from the church for failing to present herself for questioning about a single woman that gave birth in her house⁵⁸ – a measure of just how seriously such incidents were taken. Again, this was a moral offence that could also lead to a financial burden on St Botolph’s. Illegitimate children were often born to servants within the parish – clear evidence for the existence of disorderly households – like the ‘woman chyld the reputed daughter to Abraham Duke servant to Thomas Norton ... being begotten of the boddie of Jeane Tunkins a single woman late servant to Thomas Anvell’.⁵⁹ ‘There are to manie of such Servant now a dayes. more is the pittie’, lamented the clerk.⁶⁰ Those who attempted to escape their obligations, either by abandoning or even, in some instances, attempting to kill illegitimate children, were damned with far more aggressive language, such as the ‘Base Strumpet [that] kame away and left hir child behinde hir ... and the father of this Child also, who hath an honest wife of his owne, is runne away from hir, like a base varlet’; a marginal note adds ‘God send the Child more grace, then the wicked Parents’.⁶¹ Meanwhile, ‘Joane Tagge, Servant to Thomas Newton’ was branded ‘a Murderous Strumpet’ for casting ‘hir ... Child into a Privie, but by Gods good grace it was heard to Cry by the Neighboures and saved a live’. We learn, however, that the child died a fortnight later, and that the mother managed to escape death.⁶²

Illegitimate children were also the result of unions with local prostitutes, and there are numerous references to the presence in St Botolph’s throughout our period of miss women, mistresses, strumpets⁶³ and bawdy houses. Indeed, the burial of ‘Goodlesse Scraggs wife to James Scraggs’ in 1621 prompted the clerk into verse, adding that ‘She was a woman of Antiquitie: and kept a house of Iniquitie’.⁶⁴

Various crimes are also recorded in detail in the parish records, no doubt another cause of concern for the parish authorities. These included burglaries and thefts, such as the female lodger convicted for stealing a silver tankard and pewter dishes from her landlady. Notably, the prisoner claimed that the landlady ‘had several Lodgers in her House besides her who might take the Plate’⁶⁵ – a reflection on the levels of cohabitation within St Botolph’s. Among the most heinous crimes reported by the clerks were the murder of a little girl of 6 and another of 13.⁶⁶ There were also instances in which local servants were killed by their masters and, in some cases, even by their mistresses⁶⁷ – perhaps the most extreme examples of the disorderly household. Of the recorded murders, however, sailors figure disproportionately, both as victims and assailants,⁶⁸ a factor we can presumably attribute to the parish’s Thameside frontage at its most southerly quarter. This was certainly the case in regard to the burial of those men hanged for piracy at Execution Dock in nearby Wapping. Stow remarks that this was ‘the usual place of execution for hanging of pirates and sea rovers, at the low-water mark, and there to remain, till three tides had overflowed them’. No doubt it was believed that sailors passing on the Thames and seeing the busy gibbet would be deterred from a life of crime.⁶⁹

All this presents an image of St Botolph’s as a fractured, unruly and morally-bankrupt society, but as I have shown this needs to be weighed against the genuine efforts of the local authorities to relieve the plight of its poor and the presence of great donors like Robert Dow. The parish certainly held such patrons in great esteem, and this too is powerfully reflected in the records. For example, the brewer John Franke left in his will of 1557 a £5 dole to the parish poor on the day of his funeral, and 20 shillings to be distributed to the poor on the anniversary of his burial; a specially commissioned commemoration book records the continued collection and disbursement of this sum well over a century later.⁷⁰ Similarly, donors were customarily remembered with a guest sermon on the anniversary of their burial, which helped to remind parishioners of the role of charity in their lives and encourage subsequent giving.⁷¹ Those generous to the poor during their lifetime also received praise. Thus in recording the death of Ezechias le Roy in 1620, at whose burial ‘there was xxxtie dozen of Bread distributed

amongst the poore, the same day', the parish clerk noted 'That the poore lost a good friend and the parish a good Neighbour'.⁷² The clerks were sometimes moved to indicate the death of a particularly generous parishioner by drawing a picture by the record of their burial. It was quite common for early modern scribes to draw pointing figures to highlight significant passages of text, but the type of picture you can see here

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was more rare. The entry records the burial of William Allin, at whose funeral, we read, 'There was three pound in mony geven to ye poore of the whole parish and 40 dozen of bread'.

Here, as elsewhere, the level of detail the clerks recorded and the pride they clearly took in compiling the parish records is reflected in the physical nature of the sources. Again, the type of pictures with which they ornamented standard parish records

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is uncommon by this period, and reflective of how importantly they took their role in St Botolph's and perhaps also of the level of their attachment to the community in which they lived.

IV

To conclude, the parish of St Botolph Aldgate underwent a period of radical transformation during the early modern period. As the area's population and housing stock grew in size, so did the number of problems with which its governors had to deal. The changing nature of everyday life in the parish occurred against the background of monumental national events, such as the Reformation, the civil wars and the Glorious Revolution. Although the area escaped the Great Fire of London in 1666, it was less fortunate during the plague epidemics of the period. Many hundreds

of people died during the outbreaks of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, but during the Great Plague of 1665 the parish lost over 4000 of its inhabitants.⁷³ On any evaluation, life in London's eastern suburb undoubtedly was hard. Nevertheless, if the records are to be believed, it is reassuring to learn that a small number of hardy souls managed to live to a ripe old age, having survived everything the period could throw at them. Thus Joane Blackborne was 'reported to be above an hundred years' in 1622, while the registers for 1575 record the burial of 'Agnis Sadler widow of the age of 126 yeares'.⁷⁴

By the end of the seventeenth century, the parish recalled by John Stow with its trees, fields and hedgerows was long gone, but life in the suburbs, with all its good and bad elements, carried on.

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- ¹ STC 357:01, p. 92; for the modern identification see, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Petticoat_Lane_Market, accessed 5 May 2010.
- ² Forbes, p. xviii.
- ³ <http://www.stbotolphs.org.uk/web/Welcome.html>, accessed 5 May 2010.
- ⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St_Botolph's_Aldgate, accessed 5 May 2010.
- ⁵ Atkinson, pp. 216 and 210.
- ⁶ Pearl, *London*, p. 38.
- ⁷ Bod, MS Rawlinson D796B, fol. 85.
- ⁸ Dale.
- ⁹ Stow (2000), I. 128.
- ¹⁰ Bod, MS Rawlinson D796B, fol. 85.
- ¹¹ *The Inhabitants of London in 1638*, ed. T. C. Dale (2 vols., 1931), i. x.
- ¹² GLMS 9237, fol. 2v.
- ¹³ MDA collectors' returns, I think!
- ¹⁴ Bod, MS Rawlinson D796B, fol. 85.
- ¹⁵ Keane, 'Poor and their neighbours', typescript, p. 2.
- ¹⁶ Keane, 'Poor and their neighbours', typescript, p. 2.
- ¹⁷ Forbes, p. 4.
- ¹⁸ Keane, 'Poor and their neighbours', typescript, p. 1.
- ¹⁹ Keane, 'Poor and their neighbours', typescript, pp. 9, 2.
- ²⁰ GLMS 9965/Box 1.
- ²¹ Keane, 'Poor and their neighbours', typescript, pp. 9-10, 5; ODNB, 'de Vere', 'Dow'.
- ²² Keane, 'Poor and their neighbours', typescript, p. 2.
- ²³ Keane, 'Poor and their neighbours', typescript, p. 6.
- ²⁴ Property history.
- ²⁵ Keane, 'Poor and their neighbours', typescript, pp. 7, 3-4.
- ²⁶ Keane, 'Poor and their neighbours', typescript, p. 7.
- ²⁷ LJ article, pp. 211, 212.
- ²⁸ Keane, 'Poor and their neighbours', typescript, p. 8.
- ²⁹ VH, *Parergon*, pp. 131, 132.
- ³⁰ Baer, pp. 71, 76.
- ³¹ Keane, 'Poor and their neighbours', typescript, p. 6.
- ³² Baer, p. 79.
- ³³ Keane, 'Poor and their neighbours', typescript, pp. 8-9.
- ³⁴ Keane, 'Poor and their neighbours', typescript, p. 6; Baer, p. 62.
- ³⁵ GLMS 9223, fol. 254v.
- ³⁶ AA paper, delivered version, p. 3.
- ³⁷ PCMs Feb 1624
- ³⁸ Will
- ³⁹ AA paper, delivered version, p. 4.
- ⁴⁰ AA paper, delivered version, p. 7.
- ⁴¹ AA paper, delivered version, p. 8.
- ⁴² PCM Aug 1598.
- ⁴³ Forbes, p. 192.
- ⁴⁴ Forbes, p. 192 n. 19; CMH@20final, p. 6; Atkinson, p. 129.
- ⁴⁵ CMH@20final, p. 5.
- ⁴⁶ Forbes, pp. 198-9.
- ⁴⁷ Forbes, p. 199.
- ⁴⁸ Forbes, pp. 195-7.
- ⁴⁹ PCMs Feb 1583
- ⁵⁰ AA paper, delivered version, p. 10.
- ⁵¹ HEH@20 paper
- ⁵² Forbes, p. 36.
- ⁵³ Forbes, pp. 38, 37.
- ⁵⁴ Forbes, p. 36.
- ⁵⁵ Forbes, pp. 37-8.
- ⁵⁶ Forbes, p. 38.

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- ⁵⁷ Forbes, p. 32.
⁵⁸ Forbes
⁵⁹ Forbes, pp. 32-3.
⁶⁰ Forbes, p. 69.
⁶¹ Forbes, p. 33.
⁶² Forbes, p. 150-1.
⁶³ Forbes, pp. 32-3.
⁶⁴ Forbes, p. 38.
⁶⁵ VH, *Parergon*, p. 135, and actually probably from just outside parish.
⁶⁶ Forbes, p. 159.
⁶⁷ Forbes, pp. 157-9.
⁶⁸ Forbes, p. 156.
⁶⁹ Forbes, p. 161.
⁷⁰ Will TNA [PROB 11/42B](#) . CW a/cs PLEB 1691 and 1692.
⁷¹ AA paper, delivered version, pp. 4, 5.
⁷² Forbes, p. 39.
⁷³ VH, *Parergon*, p. 133.
⁷⁴ Forbes, p. 108.