

New research maps in unique detail the devastation of the Black Death on medieval England

May 23 2016



Credit: University of Lincoln

An innovative new archaeological study has revealed in detail for the first time how individual towns, villages and hamlets across swathes of medieval England were decimated by the Black Death.

The research, led by Professor Carenza Lewis from the University of Lincoln, UK, drew together data on finds from thousands of test pits excavated in rural locations across the East of England over the past decade.

Using pottery sherds as a proxy for the presence of human populations, Professor Lewis calculated the drop-off in finds after England was

struck by the [plague epidemic](#) which killed millions of people across Europe and Asia between 1346 and 1351.

The stark results, published in the journal *Antiquity*, indicate 'eye-watering' falls in population within rural communities which are still inhabited today and generally regarded as 'survivors' of the Black Death. The new data reveal which places were most severely hit by plague, from the level of individual plots and parishes up to whole towns and counties.

In some locations, such as Binham in Norfolk, Cottenham in Cambridgeshire, Shillington in Bedfordshire, and Great Amwell in Hertfordshire, catastrophic declines exceed 70 per cent.

Data was gathered from more than 2,000 one-metre square test-pits excavated by members of the public under professional archaeological supervision between 2005 and 2014 across the six counties of eastern England. These spanned 55 different rural settlements which are inhabited today (deserted medieval villages were deliberately excluded from the study). Of those 55 locations, 90 per cent recorded a decline in the number of test pits yielding two or more sherds.

Overall there was a decline of 45 per cent in pottery finds between the high medieval (early twelfth to early fourteenth centuries) and the late medieval period (late fourteenth to late sixteenth centuries) across the area studied.

Professor Carenza Lewis, an archaeologist and Professor for the Public Understanding of Research in the School of History & Heritage at the University of Lincoln, said: "The true scale of devastation wrought by the Black Death in England during the 'calamitous' fourteenth century has been a topic of much debate among historians and archaeologists. Recent studies have led to mortality estimates being revised upwards but the discussion remains hampered by a lack of consistent, reliable and

scalable population data for the period.

"This new research offers a novel solution to that evidential challenge, using finds of pottery – a highly durable indicator of human presence - as a proxy for population change in a manner that is both scalable and replicable. It shows that pottery use fell by almost a half in eastern England in the centuries immediately after the Black Death. This supports the emerging consensus that the population of England remained somewhere between 35 and 55 per cent below its pre-Black Death level well into the sixteenth century.

"Just as significantly, this new research suggests there is an almost unlimited reservoir of new evidence capable of revealing change in settlement and demography still surviving beneath today's rural parishes, towns and villages – anyone could excavate, anywhere in the UK, Europe or even beyond, and discover how their community fared in the aftermath of the Black Death."

More information: Carenza Lewis. Disaster recovery: new archaeological evidence for the long-term impact of the 'calamitous' fourteenth century, *Antiquity* (2016). [DOI: 10.15184/aqy.2016.69](https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2016.69)

Provided by University of Lincoln

Citation: New research maps in unique detail the devastation of the Black Death on medieval England (2016, May 23) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2016-05-unique-devastation-black-death-medieval.html>

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