



Middseton's 1623 Population Crisis

famine or fever
in the
"Golden Cluster"?



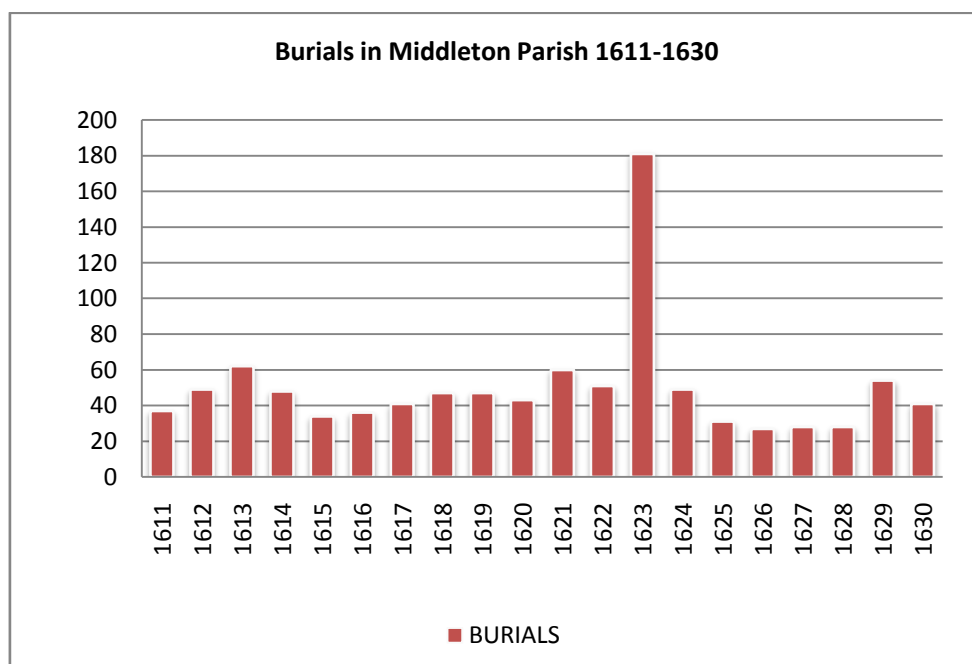
Cliff Ivers

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Whilst undertaking research into the first occupants of Middleton’s famous inn, the Boar’s Head, I noticed some exceptionally high mortality rates in the early 17th Century parish records. An early occupier of the inn was Isaack Walkeden who died in 1623 aged 36. The cause of death was not reported in his will although a clue was provided being that he was “*sicklie and infirme in bodie but of goode and perfect memorie*”. The will was signed on 11th August 1623 and he was buried less than 4 weeks later. His 7 year old son had died 3 months earlier and his mother had died in 1622. Isaack’s younger brother Israel had lived in part of the same building but had passed away aged 32 the previous year.

The first step was to consult Middleton Parish Records. St Leonard’s church was the only local place of interment at this time. The Church registers were transcribed and indexed by the Lancashire Parish Register Society in 1902, they date back to 1541 and were described as one of the very best preserved and written they had seen. The burial records do not indicate a cause of death but list the name of the deceased and the date of burial. They sometimes indicate if it was a child’s burial and will list the father’s name. The birth and marriage records can also offer clues to relatives or locations. The index of records is a great help when reconstituting families such as the Walkedens.

A high level analysis (Appendix one) of the burial registers for the period 1611-1630 highlighted that in an average year, 50 Middleton folk were buried. In 1623, there were 181 deaths, 3.6 times the normal rate.



The population of Middleton over this time is estimated at 2,150 so one in twelve people died this year. Further analysis has shown that the increase in the death rate was mostly over the winter months (The church year began on the 28th of March) and shows it was mainly the adult population who were affected. Clearly there was a crisis this year, what happened?

The next stage of research was to read previous studies on population crisis at this time. The most recent piece of work was a paper done in 1997 by S. Scott and C.J. Duncan entitled "The Mortality Crisis of 1623 in North West England" The author's analysed church records for 25 Lancashire parishes during the years 1613 -1623. Prestwich parish was the nearest one to Middleton to be included in the report. Their conclusion was that the increase in the 1623 mortality rate was due to famine caused by a combination of high grain prices and low wool prices. Scott and Duncan also noted that across the county of Lancashire, children were more heavily affected than adults.

A second paper was consulted, "The Lancashire Population Crisis of 1623" This was written by a lecturer Mr C.D. Rogers in 1975 and consisted of analysis undertaken by his Bolton family history evening class. The students had noticed a substantial rise in mortality rates at Bolton in 1623. As a project, they took on the major task of analysing every parish record in Lancashire (80 including Middleton) for the period 1611-1630. They were also able to carry out family reconstitutions for about 150 families: this helped to evaluate the ages at death. C.D. Rogers report firstly noted that the crisis affected the entire county, and suggested that the cause was not a disease connected with overcrowded urban areas such as plague, typhus, dysentery and scarlet fever. Although he also noted that areas in the north of the county had higher death rates suggesting perhaps more than one cause.

The Bolton evening class also found that there were generally two phases of increased mortality, the first in 1622 and the main phase in the winter of 1623; the records for Middleton do not indicate an earlier phase as we will later see. The class turned their attention again to the parish registers finding that the towns experiencing the highest mortality rates had significant falls in the number of weddings and births during and immediately after the crisis. They assumed this reduced fertility and desire to marry was a side effect of starvation. Their conclusion stated that the prime cause of the 1623 mortality crisis in Lancashire was famine. The report also noted that the effects of most contagious disease would be exaggerated by the physical weakness associated with famine.

At this stage I thought it worthwhile to compare the statistics for Lancashire with those of Middleton over the same period. The analysis is shown in Appendix 1 and indicates that Middleton's mortality peak in 1623 was less significant than the Lancashire average. There was a common decline in both birth and marriage numbers at the time of the crisis but whilst Lancashire returned to normality by 1625, Middleton continued to have lower rates until the 1630's.

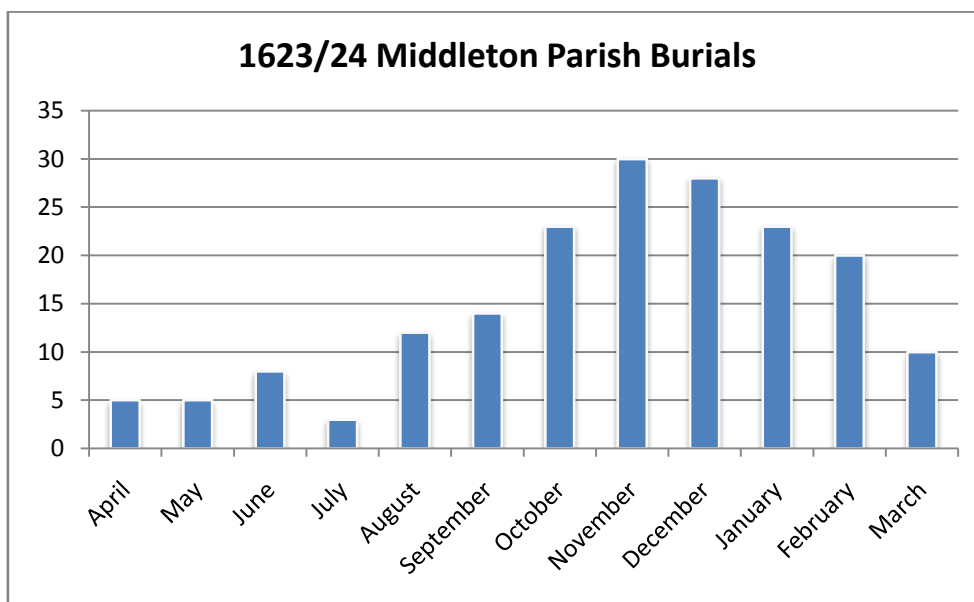
Clearly Middleton's population crisis had different characteristics to the Lancashire statistics so I could not accept the explanation of famine in Middleton without further research.

W.G. Howson wrote a paper in 1961 entitled "Plague, poverty and population in parts of NW England 1580-1720" He felt that the NW epidemic of 1623 had all the characteristics of plague although considered it quite likely that typhus was prevalent in congested areas, particularly the towns. He also noted that very few children die of typhus and that its presence may be noted in burial records. Analyses of the Middleton parish burials show a marked reduction in child burials in 1622 and 1623, however, the parish clerk would have been very busy at this time and may have omitted to declare the burial was a son or daughter or list the father. Further research will be needed to confirm these data.

Going further back in time for our research, in 1938 R. Sharpe France wrote a paper entitled "A history of the plague in Lancashire" He based his report on both contemporary accounts and a study of parish records. He states" *From 1622 to 1624 was the time of a very virulent and widespread epidemic of a malignant spotted fever. There is little doubt that this pestilence was not plague but typhus, a disease due to insanitary conditions and spread to human beings by head- and body- lice.*"

Mr. Sharpe France also collated the start and end dates of the epidemic in some local parishes which we can compare to Middleton. The numbers in brackets show the deaths during the epidemic year followed by the normal annual death rate. The rate of increase is also shown.

<i>Parish</i>	<i>Duration of Epidemic</i>	<i>Deaths: Normal</i>	<i>Increase</i>
Manchester	December 1622 to April 1624	(776:340)	2.3 times
Rochdale	December 1622 to April 1624	(633:250)	2.5 times
Eccles	June 1623 to March 1624	(157:60)	2.61 times
Prestwich	July 1623 to January 1624	(80:28)	2.8 times
Middleton	August 1623 to March 1624	(181:50)	3.6 times
Bury	September 1623 to May 1624	(239:99)	2.4 times
Radcliffe	October 1623 to February 1624	(27:8)	3.4 times

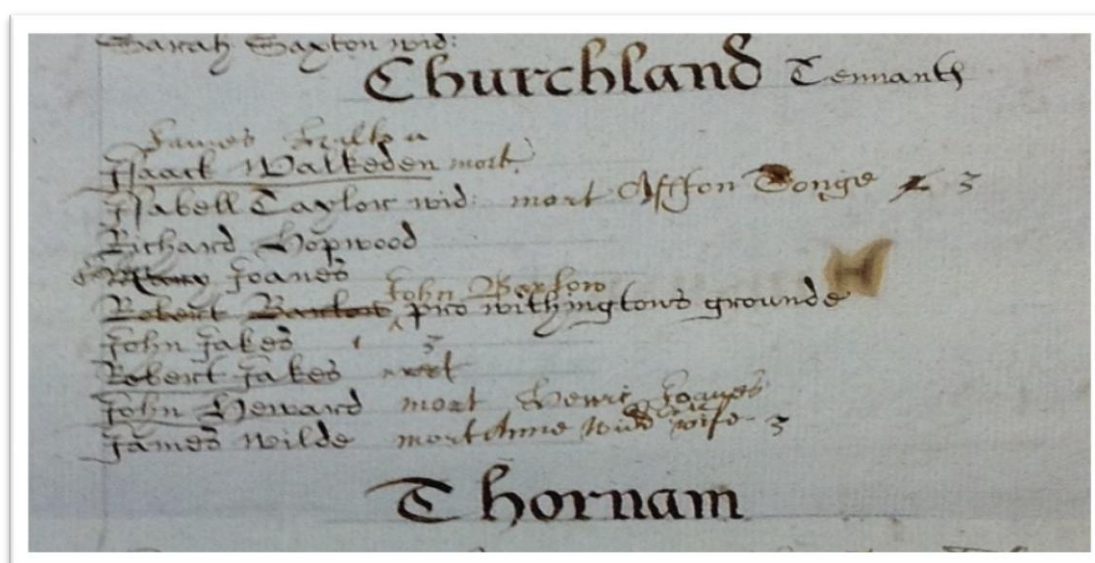


If the Middleton crisis was caused by famine, why was the duration so short and why did it end so abruptly in March? The typical season for typhus is winter and spring; it affects mostly adults and has a fatality rate of 10-12% of the population. The case for a typhus epidemic against famine becomes even stronger when you look deeper into the social standing of some of the fatalities. Researchers collating all the papers discussed above were unable to identify social class from their statistics. Paupers and beggars would no doubt be the first to die of starvation?

Let us consider the information available on Middleton's Isaack Walkeden who died in September 1623 aged 35, three months after his 7 year old son. He was the son of the school master at Middleton school, Robert Walkeden. Robert was also a cleric at Middleton parish church. At this time, he had the onerous duty of completing the church register and probably presiding over the burials of his wife, 2 sons and a grandson all within a short period of time. Robert owned 22 acres of farmland in Rochdale, so would have access to food crops and his 2 jobs would have made him a comparatively wealthy man; would he have let his family starve?

Isaack left a will and an inventory of his possessions which were valued at £118, a significant amount in the 17th century. The inventory includes a horse, pigs and 9 beds. He lived in the northern half of the current Olde Boar's Head pub, the timber frame of which has recently been dated as 1622. Judging by the number of beds and other contents of the inventory, it was operating as a newly built inn during the time of the crisis. Again it seems unlikely that such a well to do businessman and his son would die from famine.

Further confirmation that the epidemic was virulent to all comes in the records of the Middleton Court Baron. The Court met several times a year and listed the local landowners and tenants who were obliged to appear at each session of the court. There is an extract of the list of Churchland tenants from April 1624 (below). The Churchland or Glebe tenants' would be some of the most prominent families in the town. From a list of ten copied from the previous session, five are post marked as mort (Latin for dead). Isaack is top of the list.



Middleton Court Baron and Leet (13-04-1624); The Assheton collection E7.2.10.4

Despite the lack of any documentary evidence to support the case, I feel that his research suggest Middleton's 1623 crisis was primarily due to a typhus epidemic. It was fever not famine that killed over 150 Middletonians in 1623.

As previously discussed, typhus is carried by human lice and was particularly common in overcrowded areas. The microorganism causing its spread to humans is present in the dust like faeces of the louse and is active for two to three weeks on clothes and bedding. Scratching a bite from a louse leads to the faeces entering the human bloodstream. The disease has an incubation period of 5 to 14 days. It first appears with rapid onset as fever and severe headache. Extreme fatigue, nausea, vomiting, and chills frequently appear. After about 4 days, a rash appears. Toxaemia appears, circulation becomes sluggish, and gangrene may appear in the extremities. The crisis occurs after 9 to 12 days, and about 1/3 of those infected slip into a coma and die, usually of cardiac failure, frequently with pneumonia as a complication.

As an innkeeper, Isaack would be continuously exposed to human lice particularly those from visitors to the town. The period from the declaration of his will until his burial was five weeks. This period is typical for a young man dying of typhus.

The prosperous Walkeden family whose day to day lives were inextricably linked to crowded places such as the Boar's Head Inn, Middleton Parish Church and Middleton School were unable to avoid the contagion.

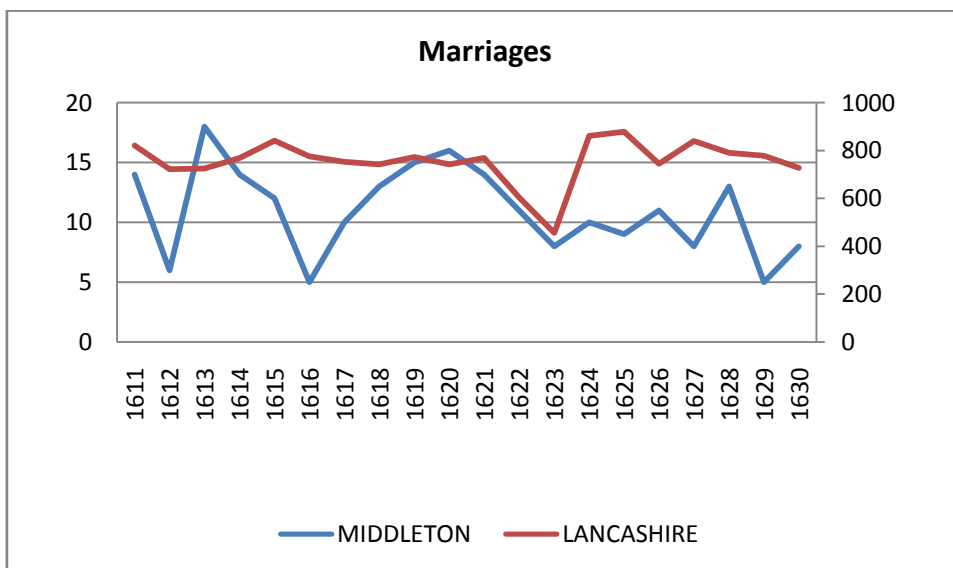
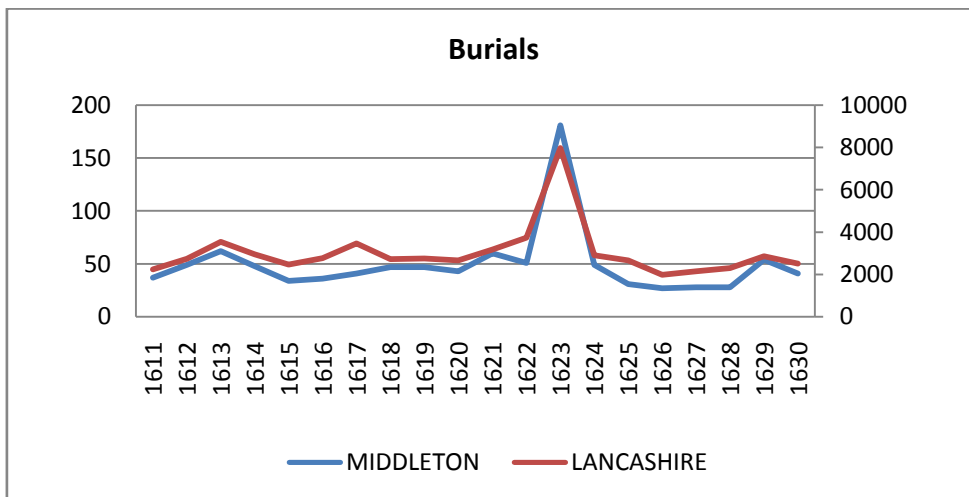
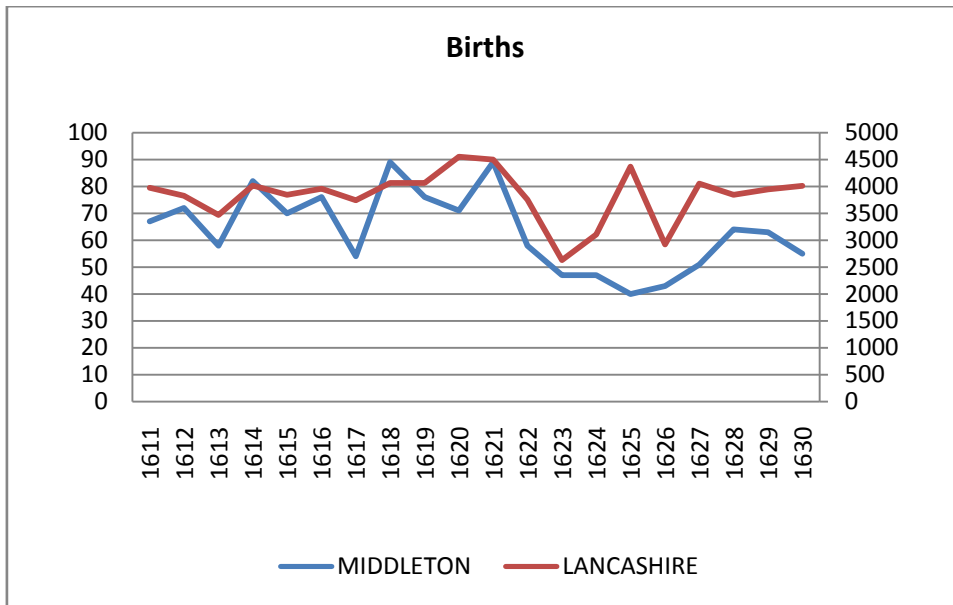
These three outstanding buildings still survive in Middleton's "Golden Cluster" of buildings. Please spare a thought for the poor victims of the 1623 typhus epidemic when you visit them.

Appendix One

Middleton Parish Record Analysis

YEAR	<i>BIRTHS</i>			<i>ADULT BURIALS</i>			<i>CHILD BURIALS</i>			TOTAL BURIALS	WEDDINGS
	M	F	Total	M	F	Total	M	F	T		
1611			67							37	14
1612			72							49	6
1613			58							62	18
1614			82							48	14
1615			70							34	12
1616			76							36	5
1617			54							41	10
1618			89							47	13
1619			76							47	15
1620	36	35	71	22	11	33	6	4	10	43	16
1621	48	41	89	23	28	51	5	4	9	60	14
1622	32	26	58	28	23	51			0	51	11
1623	17	30	47	84	92	176	3	2	5	181	8
1624	23	24	47	17	18	35	8	6	14	49	10
1625	23	17	40	7	10	17	12	2	14	31	9
1626	24	19	43	7	8	15	7	5	12	27	11
1627	21	30	51	9	7	16	12		12	28	8
1628	37	27	64	8	9	17	9	2	11	28	13
1629	37	26	63	15	8	23	14	17	31	54	5
1630	25	30	55	13	17	30	4	7	11	41	8
Mean			64							43	11
Average Pop 2149											

Comparison of Middleton statistics and Lancashire 1611-1630



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1623	1624	1625	1626
<p>July 1623</p> <p>August 1623</p> <p>September 1623</p> <p>October 1623</p> <p>November 1623</p> <p>December 1623</p>	<p>January 1624</p> <p>February 1624</p> <p>March 1624</p> <p>April 1624</p> <p>May 1624</p> <p>June 1624</p> <p>July 1624</p> <p>August 1624</p> <p>September 1624</p> <p>October 1624</p> <p>November 1624</p> <p>December 1624</p>	<p>January 1625</p> <p>February 1625</p> <p>March 1625</p> <p>April 1625</p> <p>May 1625</p> <p>June 1625</p> <p>July 1625</p> <p>August 1625</p> <p>September 1625</p> <p>October 1625</p> <p>November 1625</p> <p>December 1625</p>	<p>January 1626</p> <p>February 1626</p> <p>March 1626</p> <p>April 1626</p> <p>May 1626</p> <p>June 1626</p> <p>July 1626</p> <p>August 1626</p> <p>September 1626</p> <p>October 1626</p> <p>November 1626</p> <p>December 1626</p>

Middleton Parish Register 1623-24 showing 181 burials in 12 months

My thanks are offered to Geoff Wellens and Anne Falloon for their support and encouragement in this research.

The cover picture was kindly drawn by local Middleton artist, Steve Whitworth
www.facebook.com/stevewhitworthartwork

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Middleton Archaeological Society actively supports archaeology and research into local history. Donations to support the society are most welcome.