2. Natural and Political Observations Mentioned in a Following Index, and Made Upon the Bills of Mortality

JOHN GRAUNT (1964 (1662))

From Journal of the Institute of Actuaries 90. Excerpts are from pages 15, 19—23, 35—38, 44—47.

In extracting from Graunt’s observations we have tried to give the reader a feel both for Graunt’s imaginativeness and tenacity and for the materials he had to work with. We include both of his estimates for London’s population: the first (460,000) he found by attributing to the city one-fourteenth of a national population estimate of 6,440,000 not well derived. The second (384,000), from his more careful knowledge about London, is probably of the correct order of magnitude, and suggests a reasonable total population figure (5 to 5.5 million) (cf. Wrigley 1967, pp. 44—45). Graunt’s life table entries and his comments on London’s doubling time are not of this quality.

We have mostly avoided Graunt’s discussion of specific diseases, and have omitted his remarks on the expansion of London beyond the old city walls, on the healthfulness of the city and countryside, and on the country bills.
CHAPTER I

OF THE BILLS OF MORTALITY, THEIR BEGINNING, AND PROGRESS

THE first of the continued weekly Bills of Mortality extant at the Parish-clerks Hall, begins the 29th of December, 1603, being the first year of King James his reign; since when, a weekly account hath been kept there of burials and christenings. It is true, there were Bills before, viz. for the years 1592,–93,–94, but so interrupted since, that I could not depend upon the sufficiency of them, rather relying upon those accounts which have been kept since, in order, as to all the uses I shall make of them.

2. I believe that the rise of keeping these accounts, was taken from the Plague: for the said Bills (for aught appears) first began in the said year 1592, being a time of great mortality; and after some disuse, were resumed again in the year 1603, after the great Plague then happening likewise. ...

10. We have hitherto described the several steps, whereby the Bills of Mortality are come up to their present state; we come next to shew how they are made and composed, which is in this manner, viz. when anyone dies, then, either by tolling or ringing of a bell, or by bespeaking of a grave of the Sexton, the same is known to the searchers, corresponding with the said Sexton.

11. The Searchers hereupon (who are ancient matrons, sworn to their Office) repair to the place where the dead corpse lies, and by view of the same, and by other enquiries, they examine by what disease or casualty the corpse died. Hereupon they make their Report to the Parish-clerk and he, every Tuesday night, carries in an account of all the burials and christenings, happening that week, to the clerk of the Hall. On Wednesday the general account is made up and printed, and on Thursdays published, and dispersed to the several families, who will pay four shillings per annum for them.

12. Memorandum. That although the general yearly Bills have been set out in the several varieties afore-mentioned, yet the original entries in the Hall-books were as exact in the very first year as to all particulars, as now; and the specifying of casualties and diseases, was probably more.

CHAPTER II

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS UPON THE CASUALTIES

IN my discourses upon these Bills I shall first speak of the casualties, then give my observations with reference to the places and parishes comprehended in the Bills; and next of the years, and seasons.