

## Abstracts of articles

*Richard Britnell*

### **The Black Death in English towns**

English towns experienced differing fortunes in the decades before 1348 and by that year some had already contracted, for a variety of both local and more general reasons. The impact of the Black Death, where it can be gauged, was catastrophic, and presented both urban governments and ecclesiastical authorities with a number of common problems. There were often rapid changes in the distribution of property and the level of rents. Economic circumstances affecting towns before 1348 conditioned in part their capacities for recovery. Those benefiting from growing cloth exports were particularly fortunate both immediately before and immediately after the epidemic.

*Margot Finn*

### **Debt and credit in Bath's court of requests, 1829-39**

This article examines the small-scale credit transactions that underpinned English consumer activity in the industrial revolution. Focusing on small-claims litigation in Bath in the 1820s and 1830s, it details efforts by producers and retailers to enforce consumers' credit obligations through the city's 'court of requests'. Dominated in the 1820s by farmer and yeoman creditors, the court by 1840 was increasingly ruled by linen drapers. The same period saw a diminution in the role of farmers and yeomen as defendants in the court, and a rise in suits against labourers. The court records also testify to distinct patterns of consumption by Bath's various occupational and social groups. Six groups of defendants — gentlemen, farmers and yeomen, widows, spinsters, masons and labourers — are selected for a detailed analysis, which underscores both the wide variation in consumer behaviour among Bath's inhabitants and the limited scope of consumer activity among the population's least affluent members.

*Michael Sigsworth and Michael Worboys*

### **The public's view of public health in mid-Victorian Britain**

What did the public think about public health reform in mid-Victorian Britain? Historians have had a lot to say about the sanitary mentality and actions of the middle class, yet have been strangely silent about the ideas and behaviour of the working class, who were the great majority of the public and the group whose health was mainly in question. In this paper we explore ways in which the public's views on health and sanitation can be retrieved and make some tentative suggestions as to what these views were. We argue that working-class reactions to sanitary reform were not characterized by apathy, ignorance or hostility, but rather were varied and patterned, guided by a specific, usually local, understanding or urban disease of ecology and of the economic determinants of health and disease.

*Philippa Mein Smith and Lionel Frost*

### **Suburbia and infant death in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Adelaide**

Anglo-Celtic cities were characterized by the spread of suburbia, and slum reformers assumed that public health advantages were one benefit of low density living. This paper seeks to test suburban myths by analysing child health, using infant mortality as a measure. The case study is of Adelaide, an Australian city that was typical of the New Urban Frontier. But this city of suburbs was not uniformly healthy and explanations for infant mortality were more complex than were assumed. The paper links municipal rate-book data from 1881 to 1911 and infant deaths and births data, in three municipalities. It finds that infant mortality patterns by 1911 were determined by socio-economic class and conditions inside, rather than outside houses. Low density living was a costly way to achieve health advantages.

*Nigel Goose*

### **Urban demography in pre-industrial England: what is to be done?**

English urban demography in the pre-industrial period is severely under-researched, and general surveys tend to focus upon the larger towns. Fluid urban populations pose problems for the demographer, conventionally used sources often prove particularly intractable and family reconstitution might not be viable. Nevertheless ample scope remains for the application of basic aggregative techniques to parish register data, more rigorous analysis of tax returns and for the employment of less conventional sources such as wills. Such research may well explode some current misconceptions and provide an essential quantitative foundation to the debate over the fortunes of English towns in early modern England.