

## **The Black Death**

The Black Death, this international disaster, must have affected the population of Bramfield although we do not have any direct documentary evidence for it. The programmes on television show the pestilence appearing in well-documented places or towns, but we do have a graphic account of the black death on our own doorstep in the annals of Sibton Abbey. In 1355/6 the abbey had fallen on such hard times because of the ravages of the plague that the Abbot was requesting of the Bishop of Norwich that the advowson of Westleton church be appropriated to the abbey. An inquisition of jurors from the Dunwich Deanery including John Hervy of Bramfield was held to verify that the plea for help was legitimate and this is what they said on oath *“that the annual rents of the convent through no fault of the abbot and convent have decreased from the time of the pestilence to £18 and less, their woods and groves have been felled to the full, their lands and property because of the shortage of labourers are so sterile that the convent because of the shortage of corn and other necessaries owes £45 and more to various creditors and they have lost livestock because of a shortage of herdsmen over the past seven years to the value of £60 and more as well as by sudden death, and for these reasons the abbot and convent need help quickly;”*

The income of the abbey came from gifts of rents and services donated to them by supporters from the time of the foundation through the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. With these monies and from the sale of timber they were able to buy corn to feed the stock, food for the monks and visitors and any good works that they were accustomed to do. At the turn of the 12<sup>th</sup> century the de Bramfield family switched their patronage from Blythburgh to Sibton and Stephen de Bramfield and other members of the family donated land in Bramfield, Walpole, Sibton and Chediston to the abbey. Locally, other landlords had granted land in Peasenhall, Yoxford Hevingham, Cookley, Middleton, Darsham, Huntingfield, Linstead, Dunwich, Wenhaston, Thorington, Bulcamp and Wissett. Although Sibton Abbey had widely spread holdings elsewhere, this does show us that a good deal of its income had come from local farms and so I think we can safely conclude that the pestilence had been calamitous here with herdsmen and labourers dying, and those left in short supply and demanding higher wages.

What would this mean for the villagers of Bramfield? Sir John de Norwich was by now the tenant-in-chief with the descendants of the four daughters of the de Bramfield family and their husbands as under tenants of the manor. From this time on the small land holdings and the demesne holdings were gradually gathered together to form the larger units that are listed in the 1478/9 rental. For some, this was their great breakthrough to become a yeoman farmer and for others who did not have land to demand higher pay and better conditions.

This brought about the final end of the power that the Lord of the Manor held over the everyday lives of the peasantry.