Among the papers of Robert Beale, Clerk to the Privy Council during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, which form the nucleus of the Yelverton collection at the British Library, is a group of printed proclamations and orders of the Governor and other officials of Milan issued at the time of plague there in 1576–7, which are unique among the British Library’s collections. There is no obvious association between the proclamations and other papers in the volume, which relate largely to foreign affairs and trade. The last item in the collection is endorsed by Beale ‘Placartes in Milan per il Marchese di Aymonte governatore. Tempore Pestis. C’. It is likely that the documents, which can be linked to two manuscript items in the Yelverton collection, were acquired in connection with the English government’s attempts in 1577–8 to formulate and enforce regulations to contain the plague in London and the country at large.

Plague had been endemic in Western Europe since 1348 and from the first the cities of northern Italy took measures to control the disease, appointing officials from among their prominent inhabitants to formulate and attempt to enforce regulations. Eventually commissioners for public health were appointed on a regular basis, not just in plague time, and by the late sixteenth century all major Italian cities had permanent health authorities. In Milan, after reforms in 1534, the Board of Health (Tribunale della Sanità) consisted of five officials including two physicians under the presidency of a Senator, with a permanent staff even in normal times: the Milanese bills of mortality, initiated in 1452, are a regular series from 1503. Although European cities outside Italy, for instance Lille and Barcelona, took measures to control plague during the fifteenth century, in England attempts at regulation were sporadic and local until January 1518, when a royal proclamation was issued, ordering, for example, that infected houses should be marked. However, in spite of directives from the Privy Council, progress in England towards formulating a code of practice to deal with the plague was slow during the mid sixteenth century.

In 1563, a year which brought a major visitation of the plague, a direct suggestion was
made to the English government that they adopt Italian practices. On 10 August, when
the epidemic in London was approaching its height, Cesare Adelmare, an Italian
physician settled in London, wrote to Cecil from Hatfield, suggesting that the plague
might be restricted by employing orders similar to those used in Italy. However, the
example of Italian orders sent by Adelmare has apparently not survived, and the
Corporation of London incurred the Council’s displeasure in February 1564 over the
inadequate measures taken during the crisis. Subsequently Cecil, possibly influenced
by Adelmare’s suggestions, issued on 12 March 1564, as High Steward of Westminster,
the first printed English plague orders since the proclamation of 1518. As the orders
state, the plague in Westminster was of particular concern to the Queen: not only did
it interfere with the conduct of the law courts, but the constant stream of visitors to the
area, which was the centre of government, increased the risk of spreading the contagion.
The orders, addressed to the bailiffs and other officials, are short and simple: infected
houses were to be shut for forty days, and no one was to enter or leave; collections for
the poor were to be taken up on Sunday, with relief being organized by the parishes.
Most important was an attempt to forbid overcrowding and subletting of properties
because of the numbers of people ‘swarmyng in euery rome’, evidence of a long term
strategy, perhaps at Cecil’s own suggestion, rather than emergency methods to deal with
a crisis. Further, the City officers were to enforce and publish the orders, easier with
multiple copies from the printing press.

Local authorities were more active in response to the minor outbreaks of plague
occurring in the decade following 1563, often at the prompting of the central
government. During this period the government received a treatise in Italian on how
to deal with the plague in London and other problems associated with poverty. The
document, which is endorsed in an English hand ‘1570 A prouision or advise against ye
Plague in London’, advocates appointing a supreme magistrate to be supported by two
aldermen and four prominent citizens with paid assistants, to be in charge of provision
for the plague, public health and poor relief. This document has been attributed to
Cesare Adelmare but the attribution seems unlikely: the text is in the same hand as the
following item, a treatise in Italian on usury, endorsed ‘1570 A Prouision against usurie
caluacanti’. It is almost certain that this is a reference to Guido Cavalcanti, a member
of a Florentine family, and the two documents appear to be in his autograph. Originally
a merchant, Cavalcanti first came to England with his father, probably around 1546.
He may have been related to Lucrezia Cavalcanti, who came to France from Florence
with Catherine de Medici. After Elizabeth’s accession, Cavalcanti was sent into
England from France to visit friends and sound out the possibilities for peace between
the two countries. He was then employed as a negotiator for the peace of Cambrai, and
in February 1560 Elizabeth granted him a pension in recognition of his services.
Subsequently Cavalcanti worked as an agent for both Catherine de Medici and
Elizabeth: he spent part of 1561–2 in England, and in 1571 came to England to negotiate
for the Anjou marriage. If Cavalcanti was not himself the author of the two treatises,
it seems likely that the English government obtained the copies through his agency.
However, while it is possible that the government was responsive to ideas for reform from abroad, there is little evidence as early as 1570 of a concerted effort to put these ideas into practice. When it came, the effort may have been prompted by tragic events in Italy.

A terrible outbreak of plague occurred in Milan in 1576–7, which may have killed 18% of the population, and it is to this period that the documents which are the subject of this article belong. There are thirty-one different texts issued chiefly by the Spanish Governor, Don Antonio de Guzmán, Marqués de Ayamonte, and by the Tribunale della Sanità and its subsidiary officials between 13 March 1576 and 1 February 1577. Approximately two-thirds of the proclamations were issued during the months of August, September and October 1576. The various regulations published include rules to restrict movement and for guarding the gates, while export of certain foodstuffs was forbidden. ‘Cabanne’, wooden cabins, are to be built where the sick could be isolated and cared for, and in October a period of general quarantine was declared. Two documents are of particular interest. One (7) lists men for each parish who could issue licences for those wishing to leave the city. The other (2) gives separate lists for each parish for those responsible during the quarantine for distributing alms and for inspecting houses and visiting the sick; other officials named are three general overseers for each district ‘Porta’, district provisioners, physicians and those responsible for the ‘cabins’.

Fear of a similar major outbreak in England may have motivated the government’s efforts in 1577–8 to formulate plague orders, and it is possible that the Milanese proclamations were acquired as models at this time. Particular consideration was given to the problems of London: on 30 September 1577 the Council enquired why previous instructions for restraining the infection had been neglected, enclosing articles for an enquiry to be carried out in every parish of the City and liberties. Almost certainly these are articles which have survived in a single printed copy. Besides enquiring into measures to restrain the infection and breaches and abuses of the measures, these printed articles ask for details of all deaths since 1 August to be set out in weekly bills of mortality, together with names of the dead and their dwelling place.

In the following year, a series of Council instructions in September–October 1578 culminated in the banning of Lord Mayor’s day, and on 13 November, because of the increase of sickness and lack of care over the bills of mortality, the Mayor was ordered to send the Recorder and ‘two of the Aldermen as dwell furthest from the infection’ to confer with the Council for orders to control plague in the City. At or soon after this meeting the Privy Council sent the Mayor twenty-two articles for consideration. A copy of these articles is the first of two documents among the Yelverton manuscripts concerned with these events. The articles show the probable influence of Italian models: they advocate a general weekly taxation, the appointment of general overseers to be in charge, with paid physicians, clergy and apothecaries to care for the sick. Further, lists of all inhabitants, with names, were to be made and checked each week to avoid secret burials, and a register was to be composed of houses recently changed to
multiple occupancy. The response of the Common Council on 27 November was to set up a committee to reply to the articles in writing. Another copy of the twenty-two articles with the City's reply to each and marginal comments by Burghley is among the State Papers. The City produced numerous arguments in favour of the status quo and, presumably, economy: a tax would need consent of Common Council and would not raise as much as voluntary contributions; a few paid officials would not be sufficient and it was better to use the present structure of aldermen and parish officials; only the poor should receive free medical attention; checking of inhabitants and multiple occupancy was important but difficult. These views are reflected in the second Yelverton document, which was presumably the result of these consultations: the document consists of twenty-eight articles which bear copies of comments made by Burghley when the articles were read at Council. In the title they are described as 'orders to be observed...until a hospital can be founded'. The articles represent a triumph for the status quo: the first article, replacing provision for a general tax, calls for a weekly day of prayer and fasting; aldermen, ward and parish officials are to be responsible, assisted by general overseers in each ward appointed by the alderman on a monthly basis; funds are to be raised by a weekly parish collection, while physicians and apothecaries will be paid for attention to the poor but will receive no stipend. The document ends with a complaint of the number of 'strangers' who live in overcrowded, insanitary conditions, cause a housing shortage, drive the native inhabitants into poverty by 'use of mannaul artes' and receive 'infected stuffe out of the lowe countries', and a plea for the expulsion or repatriation of as many immigrants as possible. Finally, the City asks that these orders may stand until a hospital can be built 'where maye be certen officers and orders as in other countries' and requests help to this end.

These must have been the orders, considered by Common Council and approved by the Privy Council, that the Court of Aldermen directed their officers to seek out in November 1580, following a request by the Queen when the Lord Mayor took his oath that provision of hospitals and other measures should not be neglected until the time of sickness. In May 1583 plague orders for London were finally printed and distributed to be set up in churches and public places. These orders, which set the responsibility for enforcing regulations on the established structure of aldermen and deputy aldermen, beadles, constables and churchwardens, remained with minor changes and additions the London orders until 1665.

THE PRINTED PROCLAMATIONS

The collection consists of thirty-five items (thirty-three different, no. 31 being a duplicate of no. 17, and no. 26 an imperfect duplicate of no. 2). There are thirty-one texts: nos. 18 and 24 are different imprints of the same text; nos. 6 and 15 are the same text issued on different days. All except no. 2 are single sheets, while no. 2 has four leaves. The dates of the proclamations are as follows:
M. D. LXXVI. die xij. Septembris.

VM maximè expedire uideatur ad auertendum imminens epidemicæ periculum operam dare, ut minor quàm fieri poñsit carceratoruì numeros reddatur: Senatus, auditis Indicibus, ad quos ea res pertinet, ac habita omnium matura consideratione, consuet omnes debitores ex causa merè privata (exceptis tamen causis cambij veri et realis, et ficti simplicis, ac pecuniarum penes mercatores, ac captores publicos uerè ac realiter depoßitum) dimittendos esse è carcere, nec esse molestandos ob causas predictas hinc ad menses duos proximè futuros: nec intra dictum tempus alios carceri mancipandos exceptis tamen dictis causis.

Annib. Crucius.

Mediolani, apud Io. Baptiûam Pontium.

Fig. 1. Decree of the Senate of Milan, 12 Sept. 1576, printed by G. B. Pontio, Milan. Add. MS. 48126, f. 223
Many of the pieces are embellished with one or two coats of arms, and there is a variety of woodcut capital letters at the beginning of most of the texts. Numbers 5, 6, 15, 19, 22, 24, 28, 30, 33 and 34 have no imprint. All the rest except one have the imprint: In Milano, per Gio. Battista Pontio Stampatore della Corte di Sua Eccell. alla Doana (or very similar wording). Only no. 8 has the imprint: In Milano, appresso Pacifico Pontio, 1575; but despite the date '1575', this piece was issued on 17 April 1576, so cannot be earlier than that date. It seems clear that all these proclamations, whether signed by the printer or not, came from the press of the Pontio family, official printers to His Excellency the Governor, although it was apparently not obligatory for them to add their imprint. Their address was 'alla Doana [Dogana]', or next to the Customs House.

The importance for the bibliographer of this group of printed proclamations, preserved among the Manuscript Collections of the British Library, is that they add considerably to the known output of the Milanese presses in question. The Pontio, or da Ponte, family of printers were active and successful for the incredibly long period from 1506 to 1636. The founder of the firm, Gottardo da Ponte, seems to have come from Bruges in Belgium (Brugge = Bridge = Ponte), and printed in Milan from 1506 to 1548. His heir was his nephew Pietro Paolo, who had four sons, all printers: Giovanni Battista (died 1591), Paolo Gottardo, Pacifico (died 1594) and Giacomo Paolo. Giovanni Battista was officially 'stampatore camerale', and so was commissioned to print the decrees and proclamations of the Dukes of Milan and of the Senate. He was also official printer to the Archbishop, as was his brother Pacifico. Two members of the Pontio family are listed in the proclamations as having local responsibility for issuing licences to travel and distributing alms (nos. 2, 7). Paolo Antonio Pontio (da Ponte) is not
recorded in the reference books among the printers and publishers of Milan, but was undoubtedly a member of the same family, probably another son of Pietro Paolo. Giovanni Battista is listed for the Porta Romana area, while Paolo Antonio is responsible in the Porta Ticinese (i.e. the Pavia Gate, leading out of the city on the road to Pavia) district.

It is interesting to note that of this same year, 1576, the only book hitherto recorded in the British Library as printed by G. B. Pontio is an edition of 'Erectio magistratus sanitatis', which had been promulgated as long ago as December 1534 by Duke Francesco Sforza II. There is a preface by G. B. Pontio himself to the Senate and the people of Milan dated 12 October 1576, in which he refers the reader's attention back to the great plague which raged in Milan in 1524. No doubt he felt that in the crisis of 1576 a reprint of that old text would be beneficial. The proclamations, which have now come to light among the Manuscript Collections, are a welcome complement to this official document.

1 Add. MSS. 48000-48196, acquired in 1953 from Brigadier R. H. Anstruther-Gough-Calthorpe.
2 Add. MS. 48126, ff. 208–246v. Although this manuscript is almost entirely composed of papers owned by Beale, it was very likely bound after his death. See The British Library, Catalogue of Additions to the Manuscripts. The Yelverton Manuscripts (London, 1994), p. xxiii.
3 F. 246v. ‘C’ is probably a contemporary reference number for the documents.
5 Ibid., pp. 21–2, 31.
9 Lansdowne MS. 157, f. 344. Cesare Adelmare was father of the lawyer, Sir Julius Caesar.
10 It does not seem likely that P. R. O., SP12/75/52 is Adelmare’s work: see p. 61 below.
11 Slack, p. 205.
12 STC 16704–9.
13 In 1574 the Lord Mayor of London ordered that printed papers with the words ‘Lord have mercy upon us’ be fixed to the posts of infected houses. London Corporation Record Office [L. C. R. O.], Journal, xx, pt. 1, f. 184.
14 Slack, p. 206.
15 P. R. O., SP12/75/52.
16 P. R. O., SP12/75/53.
17 Compare to Lansdowne MS. 17, f. 6 and Cotton MS. Caligula E. V, ff. 179–181.
21 CSPF 1559–1560, no. 739.
22 There are numerous references in CSPF for the period, for example, 1560–1561, no. 984; 1561–1562, no. 880; 1563, no. 1254; 1569–1571, no. 1661.
23 Biraben, vol. i, p. 186; Cipolla, p. 59.
24 See pp. 63–6 below.
26 STC 16707.1. Undated, but marked ‘Ao 1577’ in a contemporary hand.
28 Ibid., p. 387. Orders for the country at large were considered at the same time: on the same
day, 13 November, advice was solicited from the College of Physicians to the end that general orders might be established throughout the country for the control of plague. In late November–early December 1578, seventeen orders to be enforced throughout the country by Justices of the Peace were printed, together with advice from the College of Physicians (ibid., pp. 387–8; STC 9187.9, BL, C.142.dd.30). On 2 December the Council ordered letters to be sent to fifteen shires ‘for the stayenge of the infection of the Plague’ (APC 1577–1578, p. 413): the draft of this letter is probably Cotton MS. Vespasian F. XII, ff. 207–208v, where printing of the orders and the physicians’ advice is mentioned.

31 P. R. O., SP12/98/38.
32 Add. MS. 48019, ff. 170v–177.
33 Cecil’s marginal comment advocates a particular survey of immigrant families. Add. 48019, f. 176v.
34 The London pesthouse was not begun until 1594. Wilson, pp. 78–9.
37 Wilson, p. 16.