

The London Plague of 1665

By David Ross

The Black Death

In the year 1665 death came calling on the city of London. Death in the form of plague. People called it the Black Death, black for the colour of the tell-tale lumps that foretold its presence in a victim's body, and death for the inevitable result. The plague germs were carried by fleas which lived as parasites on rats. Although it had first appeared in Britain in 1348, the islands were never totally free of plague, but it was like an unpleasant possibility that people just learned to live with while they got on with their business. This time it was different.

In 1663 plague ravaged Holland. Charles II forbade any trade with the Dutch, partly out of wise concern, and partly because his realm was engaged in a fierce trade war with Holland which eventually erupted into armed conflict. Despite the precautions, the early spring of 1665 brought a sudden rise in the death rate in the poorer sections of London. The authorities ignored it. As spring turned into one of the hottest summers in memory, the number of deaths escalated and panic set in.

The rich flee

The nobility left the city for their estates in the country. They were followed by the merchants and the lawyers. The Inns of Court were deserted. Most of the clergy suddenly decided they could best minister to their flocks from far, far away. The College of Surgeons fled to the country, which did not stop several of its members from writing learned papers about the disease they had been at such pains to avoid. The court moved to Hampton Court Palace.

The gates are closed

By June the roads were clogged with people desperate to escape London. The Lord Mayor responded by closing the gates to anyone who did not have a certificate of health. These certificates became a currency more valuable than gold, and a thriving market in forged certificates grew up.

Desperate measures

By mid-July over 1,000 deaths per week were reported in the city. It was rumored that dogs and cats spread the disease, so the Lord Mayor ordered all the dogs and cats destroyed. Author Daniel Defoe in his *Journal of the Plague Years* estimated that 40,000 dogs and 200,000 cats were killed. The real effect

of this was that there were fewer natural enemies of the rats who carried the plague fleas, so the germs spread more rapidly.

Anyone in constant contact with plague victims, such as doctors, nurses, inspectors, were compelled to carry coloured staffs outdoors so that they could be easily seen and avoided. When one person in a house caught the plague the house was sealed until 40 days after the victim either recovered or died (usually the latter).

Guards were posted at the door to see that no one got out. The guard had to be bribed to allow any food to be passed to the inmates. It was not unknown for families to break through the walls of the house to escape, and in several cases, they carefully lowered a noose over the guard's head from an attic window and hung him so they could get away.

Lethal letters?

Londoners were shunned when they managed to escape the city. Even letters from the capital were treated as if they were poisonous. Letters were variously scraped, heated, soaked, aired, and pressed flat to eliminate "pestilential matter".

The Plague peaks

Throughout the summer the death rate escalated, reaching a high of over 6,000 per week in August. From there the disease slowly, oh so painfully slowly, receded until winter, though it was not until February of 1666 that King Charles thought it safe to return to the city. How many died? It is hard to say, for the official records of that time were patchy at best. The best guess is that over 100,000 people perished in and around London, though the figure may have been much higher.

Heroism in the midst of horror

One footnote to this tale of horror. The plague broke out in the village of Eyam in Derbyshire, brought on a shipment of old clothes sent from London. The villagers, led by their courageous clergyman, realized that the only way to stop the spread of the plague to surrounding villages was to voluntarily quarantine the village, refusing to leave until the plague had run its course. This they did, though the cost was 259 dead out of a total of 292 inhabitants. Each year this heroic event is commemorated by the Plague Sunday Service in Eyam.

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