

The Black Plague London

BY Mike Joyce



- The First Outbreak
- The Black Death
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- London The Novel

The First Outbreak

In is often in the darkest periods in human history that people's ability to adapt in order to survive is most apparent. In the ancient world, it would be difficult to find any time darker than periods in which London suffer not from foreign invaders or civil war, but a disease so virulent that nearly a 1/3 the population of all of Europe was wiped out before it subsided. England, and in particularly the heavily populated London, had the extreme misfortune of suffering from two mass breakouts of the disease that earned the dark moniker, the Black Death.

The story goes, as stories of terrible disease often start, with a ship from a far off and less civilized region; this one in particular was said to be from Caffa landed in Italy in 1347, with the majority of the crew dead from some unknown illness. No doubt frantic at the plight of there fellow crew members, they sought immediately refuge in the port of Messina Sicily. Though they refused to harbor the poor dying crew, the plague managed to get to the main land Sicily. Once there, the plague rapidly moved northward throughout Italy into northern Europe. It is believed that by the summer of 1348, the plague had made it way into England, presumably through a port in Bristol. By fall of that year, only a year from its first landing in Sicily, the plague had made its way into London, setting off mass panic.

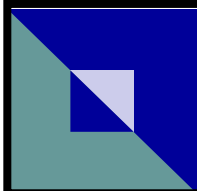


This is Roughly what the Boat carrying the Plague to England looked like. Notice the lack of living space and how easy it would be for rats to hide among the cargo.

From <http://www.bbc.co.uk/history>

London in 1348, with a population of roughly 700,000 people had had a particularly wet summer and many believed that there were to be food shortages due to farmers being unable to harvest there crops with the constant rainfall. With this being on the people's minds it was easy to overlook the goings on with there southern European neighbors who were dying in the millions. Communication between the European nations was limited at best, none of them could have predicted how quickly and widespread the disease was becoming and by the time it reached their homes there was little they could do to stop it. Two years after the plague ravished through London it finally began to subside, most likely due to the severe decrease in population limiting its ability too spread further. Over 300,000 of London's 700,000 citizens had perished; the shortage of food was no longer an issue among the people.

Outside of London the Situation was little different, with historians predicting as many as 2 million dead from the first outbreak of plague. Perhaps most striking is the impact that religion had on the rapidly spreading plague. With widespread panic and people desire to die without there sins on their conscience, the healthy and the infected both flocked to cramped churches further spreading the disease among the masses and the clergy. Estimations should that by the end of the first year almost 2/3 of all the clergy in England had died of the plague, further spreading panic among the common people, who upon seeing there own clergy perish being believing that this Black Death may in fact be the apocalypse. In Westminster Abbey, there lies a large Black slab under which is believed to be the remains of the Abbot of Westminster as well almost 30 of his monks, the black slab symbolizes why they perished.



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The Black Death

The Black Death is a bacterial disease, born of what is known as *Yersinia Pestis*. It is commonly found in the blood of black rats that are a fairly common sight in most medieval ports, frequently making their way onto ships. The rats, however, cannot transfer the disease to humans directly; instead the disease was most likely given to humans thru fleas that lived on the rats. This situation on the ship from Caffa was fleas that were living on a rat when the rat died, needing a substitute they chose a human host, once the host was infected with the disease it was quickly spread to other crew members. It is a rather scary thought that something as mundane as black rats and fleas could spread a bacterial virus that killed an estimated 75 million people world wide.

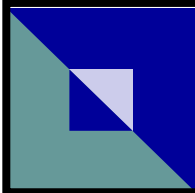
Perhaps what made the plague so virulent and deadly was the fact that it was actually made up of 3 different illnesses. The Bubonic version is the most common and most frequently referred to due to its rather repulsive nature. Bites from the infected flea cause large swellings called buboes, which appear first as a rash but then turn to a purplish- black, giving the plague its name, the Black Death.

The disease also causes a short-circuiting of the nervous system which leads to bizarre and paranoid behavior by the infected; the mortality rate of this disease is roughly 50-60% with 2 to 5 days of infection. The Pneumonic version is passed through coughing or breathing on a victim, causing fever and the coughing up of blood which makes it airborne transitional. The mortality rate of this particular strand is a shocking 95-100% within 3 days. The last and perhaps least known is the Septicaemic strand of the plague, its is spread similar to Bubonic but due to a particular deficiency in the flea that bit the victim it is much more deadly, killing them within a day of infection.



A Catholic Priest blessing already infected monks. Notice that the priest had two selves cutoffs, showing that he is probably wearing gloves of some kind.

Taken from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Plague_victims_blessed_by_priest.jpg



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The Repercussions

The Black Death had very different repercussions socially throughout England. Given religions failure to accurately explain the disease and the large death rate of clergy members making them difficult to contact, many citizens sought out alternative means of avoiding the plague. Law took a backseat in these years of outbreak as many of those charged with upholding the laws were terrified to leave the safety of their homes and risk becoming infected by the common folk. As such people were allowed to do essentially as they please; some took advantage of this by drinking heavily and merrymaking around the town, often entering other people's homes uninvited. This was hardly a difficult task as many had long since fled their homes at the beginning of the outbreak, while many other entire families had succumbed to it.

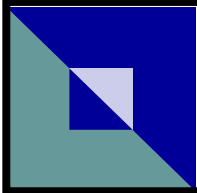


The dancing dead became a symbol of the Plague after it ravaged Europe. It can be seen in many painting such as the one above.

Taken from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Holbein-death.png>

Still others took the outbreak as a sign that it was a punishment for humanities superfluous merrymaking and chose instead to live a life of strict moderation. These people frequently formed small communities of like minded people and vehemently excluding all signs or talk of the plague occurring outside their small villages. These people were often from wealthy families and drank and eat fine foods but avoided doing so excessively. They passed the times with community social gatherings and festivals with music, dancing, and intellectual conversation. Stories of such communities can be seen in the works of Geoffrey Chaucer's, Canterbury Tails, as well as Edgar Allen Poe's, Mask of the Red Death.

Giovanni Boccaccio, writer of the Decameron, wrote of the solemn fate of the common people which held true for London as well as Italy. "The plight of the lower and most of the middle classes was even more pitiful to behold. Most of them remained in their houses, either through poverty or in hopes of safety, and fell sick by thousands. Since they received no care and attention, almost all of them died. Many ended their lives in the streets both at night and during the day; and many others who died in their houses were only known to be dead because the neighbors smelled their decaying bodies. Dead bodies filled every corner. Most of them were treated in the same manner by the survivors, who were more concerned to get rid of their rotting bodies than moved by charity towards the dead. With the aid of porters, if they could get them, they carried the bodies out of the houses and laid them at the door; where every morning quantities of the dead might be seen." It is hard for a person to imagine the site of ones own neighbors being dragged out dead onto the street and left there until they were picked up and buried often in mass graves.



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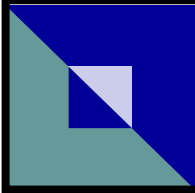


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One of the peculiarly effects of the first outbreak of plague was that it had such a profound impact on the number of laborers that there was a tremendous labor shortage in the years following. The legislation was passed in an attempt to keep wages of laborers low, though many landowners desperate for additional labor offered additional benefits. Many were forced to lease out their lands to lower class peasants. For a time there was a dramatic rise in the standard of living among the lower class.

It has also been speculated that the Black Death had very serious religious repercussions that would lead to problems down the road with the English Catholic Church. Many people having witnessed the deaths of many of their local priests to a plague that was often associated with sin, and later having watched as their church leaders locked themselves away from their own people, grew increasingly disenfranchised with the church. The replacement of over 40% of Catholic priests that perished with rapidly trained replacements, with which the citizens of the congregations where not fully familiar, only served to increase discontent among the Catholic people. In the following years there was to but much religious unrest in England that lead to civil war.

I found it immensely strange that the first outbreak of plague earned no mention what-so-ever in Edward Rutherford's book, London the Novel. With statistics showing that over 2 million of the 5-6 million English populations perished its shocking to find that Rutherford choose to skip over the first outbreak completely, especially given the profound impact that the plague had on English culture and societal norms. However, the second serious outbreak in 1665 is covered in London the Novel, under the chapter labeled London's Fire.



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The 1665 Outbreak

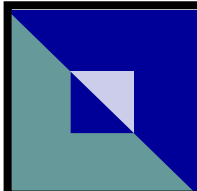
Since the 1348 outbreak there had been small outbreaks of Black Death throughout England. However it wasn't until the spring of 1665 that London saw a second large outbreak of the plague. A few years earlier there had been a large outbreak in Holland and because of that as well as certain political reasons trade with the Dutch was forbidden by the English crown. Nevertheless a rapidly rising death rate among London's poor brought the terrible news that the Black Death had returned. The people of London began to panic as the death toll began rising, Doctors fled the city knowing full well how contagious the infected were, and how likely they were to contract it with frequent contact with the dying. The cities elite were quick to follow retreating to estates outside the city, with everyone attempting to flee the city the mayor issued an edict stating that none were allowed to pass through the gates without a certificate of health in an attempt to contain the plague. By the summer people were dying at an amazing rate of over six thousand a week in London alone, though some claim that the figure was likely much higher as not all the poor could be accounted for. While the official record of the death toll is inconclusive, experts put the total dead in London alone at over one hundred thousand dead from the Black Death.



The return of the Plague horrified Londoners and caused many of the wealthy including many doctors to flee to the countryside. The poor who were without Certificates of Health were quarantined in with the sick.

Taken from
<http://www.jamd.com/search?asstype=g&assetid=76003117&text=the+great+plague+of+London>

Ironically it was likely a second disaster in the Great fire of London that rid the city of plague as it likely wiped out a great portion of the rat population in the city as well as a great portion of the city itself. The Fire burned a large portion of the city and in particular the poor working areas that were largely infested with infected as well as rats that would serve to further spread the infection. It was almost 2 centuries later when it was finally discovered that the cause of the Plague had in fact been infected black rats and particularly the fleas that accompanied them.



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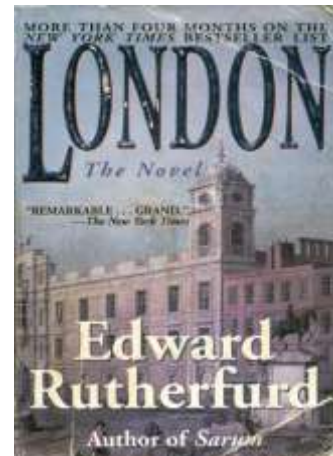


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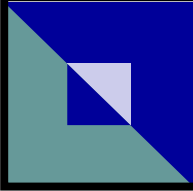
The story told of the second great outbreak of plague is told from the multiple perspectives the first of which is family dog of a newly educated physician named Richard Meredith. The dog was beloved by his master who often bragged that since owning the dog there had not been a single rat in his home, a bit of foreshadowing as rats were later determined to be a major factor in the spread of the plague. A friend of the owner shoots the dog and disposes it in the river claiming, "Sir Julius had no doubt of the rightness of his action, sorry though he was to do it. After all, didn't most sensible people know that dogs and cats carried contagion?" [pg 775] it shows the type of things people were doing in attempts to ward off the plague, even killing beloved pets. It is worth noting that Sir Julius, despite claiming to know what is the cause of the plague is, chooses to flee the city anyways too be sure.

Another prime example of the perspectives of certain people adding to the hysteria is a religious perspective that only the sinner are subject to the plague as God's punishment. One such person is an older woman named Martha whom, during a conversation with a man named Dagget, "You think it's just us sinners that are going to die." And though she disapproved of his tone, Martha did not deny the charge. It was exactly what she thought. For Martha knew what caused the plague: Wickness." [pg 778] Once again we have another person with a different opinion onto what causes the plague to choose its victim. Here it is a spiritual one, in which only those who have sinned in the eyes of God will receive this plague. "Where did the plague begin? In Drury Lane. Why Drury Lane? Every Puritan knew the answer to that. The new theater, patronized by the king and his women, and his lewd, extravagant court. Hadn't London been warned half a century ago when Shakespeare's Globe had burned down?" [pg 778]



The Picture above demonstrates how the classes of dead were treated quite differently with the Wealthy having normal burials and the poor being unloaded from pull-carts into large burial ditches.

Taken from <http://www.bl.uk/learning/histcitizen/uk/plague/plague1665.html>



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Clearly it is apparent that this woman believes the reemergence of the plague is directly related to the opening of a theater on Drury lane, just as God had warned Londoners before by the burning down of Shakespeare's Globe Theater. Once again worth noting that despite Martha's opinion that since she is a Godly protestant woman and therefore not subject to the plagues effects, she also decides to flee the city streets and take refuge on a manmade island of skiffs and rafts lashed together in the middle of the Thames River. Ironically the place that she seeks refuge was constructed Dogget, the sinner, with which she has the earlier conversation.

The story focuses mainly on Meredith's frustration at his complete inability to find any sort of cause for the plague never mind even begin to think up a cure. "But if it was carried in the air, then why did he find plague in one city parish, and yet not in the parish a street away? Nor could he discover anything in common between the worst affected areas – one marshy, another dry and airy. It can't be the air, he decided. Some other agent carries the plague. But what?" His visits to see patients suffering from plague are more about trying to discover the plagues cause rather than attempting to help the person suffering, there is little he can do to help those already infected. In one case he makes a visit to an older women suffering from bubonic plague, she is clearly dying and asks him to write out her will rather than a type of prescription. He expresses horror at the treatment of the dying and particularly the deceased, the graveyards are overflowing with corpses and people are being put in mass graves dug shallow. "But still, Meredith observed, sextons were continuing to pile the bodies into the graveyards until the top ones were covered by only a few inches of earth. In one yard, he had actually seen feet and arms sticking out of the ground." Mass burials during this time period were a common necessity and in places like the Hythe Ossuary can be seen piles of bones of plague victim piled feet off the ground from one wall to the other