

The Black Death



The Black Death, which swept across Europe during the 14th century, was responsible for the death of more than one third of Britain's population. Entering England in 1348, it had a devastating effect on the demographic and psychological shape of the British Isles.

Referred to by contemporaries as the 'pestilence' or 'plague', it is generally accepted that the Black Death arrived in Europe from central Asia in 1347. It spread rapidly across the continent from the Mediterranean ports, crossing the English Channel in the summer of the following year. Within months it had ravaged communities across the British Isles, transforming the their social and economic fabric for good.

Historians still debate what made the disease such a consummate killer, and influenza, smallpox, typhus and even anthrax are all offered as possible culprits. However, the conventional theory is one of a virulent outbreak of bubonic plague, most likely combined with a strain of pneumonic plague. The bubonic plague, a disease still present in some areas of the world, is now known to have spread via fleas living on rats, and was identified by the appearance of black swellings in the armpit and groin, the size of which could vary from that of a small egg to an apple. Once buboes appeared on the body, the victim would probably have had around three days left to live – as few as three in ten sufferers are thought to have survived the disease.

The pneumonic plague was even more deadly, with virtually everyone contracting it succumbing in a matter of days. Unlike the bubonic form of the disease, the pneumonic variant was spread through direct contact with the afflicted.

Understandably, the arrival of the plague terrified a population that lived in constant fear of God's wrath and the end of the world. As entire communities were wiped out,

the populace was thrown into psychological crisis, viewing the plague as a mark of God's displeasure. On the continent in particular, people made attempts to purge society of sin and many bore witness to dramatic penitential performances such as self-flagellation.

However, while some retreated to religion as their only hope against the disease, there were other groups who adopted a more hedonistic attitude, taking advantage of the general disruption to make merry and enjoy their final days. Of great anxiety to all, though, was the suddenness of death, which left little time for a person to be absolved of sin and guaranteed their soul's safe delivery to heaven.

Spooked by a disease that steadfastly refused to distinguish between rich and poor, the upper classes – including King Edward III – retreated to the country, fleeing the unhygienic living conditions they believed to be the source of the malady. As dead bodies piled up in the streets of the cities the wealthy left behind, some civic and church authorities attempted to dispose of the dead to minimise the risk of contagion. This led to the opening of plague pits in some urban areas.

Yet despite the shocking death toll and growing panic, there is evidence, says Mark Ormrod, co-editor of *The Black Death in England*, that medieval society was more resilient to natural disasters like the plague than would be the case today. "Famine and starvation were regular occurrences, as were diseases related to malnutrition," he says. "In fact, the country had already suffered a famine during the early 14th century that had reduced the population by between 10 and 15 per cent. Medieval society was arguably far more conditioned than us to the fact that natural disasters and diseases could have a profound impact on the population."

Yet, there was one consequence of the Black Death that medieval England couldn't possibly be prepared for, and that was its catastrophic impact on trade and the economy. With thousands dying and many more fleeing their lands, there was, in many cases, no one left to tend the land and crops. As a result, in 1348 and 1349, international trade plummeted.

This presented the wealthy with a nightmare scenario: fewer luxury goods and fewer workers alive to produce them. Meanwhile, the poor who had survived the plague suddenly found themselves in a position of power: they could, and would, demand higher wages and better working conditions in return for their labour.

In response, during the summer of 1349, the ruling classes attempted to turn the clock back to the eve of the Black Death by making it illegal for employers to pay wages above the level offered in 1346. Harsh penalties were issued to those who refused to work. Further legislation in the 1350s and 1360s reinforced this new form of social control, yet it also contributed to the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 when a later

generation of workers became aware that they could command more for their labour and enjoy a better standard of living if only the economy was allowed to develop naturally.

One of the greatest tragedies of the Black Death was that once it had arrived in the British Isles, it was here to stay, aided by climatic conditions. After lying dormant during the early 1350s following several wet summers and harsh winters, the disease reared its head once more between 1360 and 1361.

Although the death rate for this second outbreak was significantly less than the first – mainly due to a degree of immunity in the generation that had lived through the first epidemic – a significant proportion of the new population, which had tentatively blossomed in the 1350s, succumbed to the disease. The fact that contemporary chroniclers named this second outbreak the 'Children's Plague' gives an indication of who it hit hardest. As a result, there was virtually no rise in the country's population for a century after the Black Death – a fact that had enormous long-term consequences for an already struggling island.

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