

London plagues 1348–1665

Many people have heard of the Black Death of 1348 and the Great Plague of 1665: both terrible outbreaks of a disease which killed thousands of Londoners. However, it is less well-known that these famous outbreaks are only two of nearly 40 that London suffered between 1348 and 1665.

A major outbreak of the disease struck roughly every 20-30 years, killing around 20% of London's population each time. There were lesser outbreaks in-between the major ones and sometimes the disease could continue for several years in a less serious form.

What is 'plague'?

There is still debate about what these 'plagues' actually were. Most experts believe that the plague that struck London from the 1300s to the late 1600s was bubonic plague. Bubonic plague is a disease of rodents, especially black rats. It is passed between them by bites from their fleas. When a rat dies from the plague, its fleas must find a new host to live on. If their new host is a person, the disease can spread to humans too. If this happens, 60–80% of those with the disease die, most within a week. Plague can spread quickly within a household, as this picture shows. In it several people are lying ill in bed while being cared for by nurses.

The disease takes many forms but the most common symptoms are:

- headaches
- fever
- vomiting
- painful swellings on the neck, armpits and groin (buboes)
- blisters and bruises
- coughing up blood.



Engraving of plague victims,
by John Dunstall, 1666

The French doctor Alexandre Yersin discovered the bacterium that causes bubonic plague in 1894. In 1908 experts realised that rat fleas spread plague.

The Black Death, 1348–1350



Photograph of one of the mass graves discovered by archaeologists near the Tower of London

In 1347 news reached England of a horrifying and incurable disease that was spreading from Asia through North Africa and Europe. The Black Death struck London in the autumn of 1348. No one knew how to stop the disease. During the next 18 months it killed half of all Londoners – perhaps 40,000 people.

There were so many dead that Londoners had to dig mass graves (large trenches for many bodies). This picture shows one of these graves, which was excavated by archaeologists at the Royal Mint site near the Tower of London. In some of the trenches, the bodies were piled on top of each other, up to five deep. Children's bodies were placed in the small spaces between adults. By 1350 the Black Death had killed millions of people, possibly half the population of the known world.

The term 'Black Death' was first used in the 1800s. Medieval people called the disease the 'Great Pestilence'.

Other London plague outbreaks

After the Black Death, plague returned to London many times until its last major outbreak in 1665. The disease usually spread from Asia or the Middle East across Europe to England. People were particularly frightened of the plague because its victims died so quickly and very few recovered. The worst bout of plague was in 1563, when 24% (nearly a quarter) of London's population died.

In 1518 the first regulations to stop plague were introduced in London. A bale of straw had to be hung on a pole outside infected houses for 40 days. People from infected homes had to carry a white stick when they went out to warn others to stay away. More rules were gradually added over the years, such as putting a cross on the door of plague-ridden houses, only burying the dead at night, and ringing a bell like this one for 45 minutes for each burial. The noise of bells ringing during burials was meant to remind people to follow the plague prevention rules.



Plague bell, 1600s

Many people believed the plague spread through bad air so they smoked tobacco to stop any bad air entering their lungs.

The Great Plague of 1665

The Great Plague of 1665 was the last major plague in England. The outbreak began in London in February. Within seven months 100,000 Londoners (20% or one-fifth of the population) were dead. Many fled the capital to escape the disease. Victims were shut in their homes and a red cross was painted on the door with the words 'Lord have mercy upon us'. The theatres and other public entertainments such as football were banned to stop the disease spreading.

Every week, each London parish recorded the number of people who had died. The numbers from all the parishes were added up and printed in lists called mortality bills. This is a bill from the week in September which had the highest total of plague dead: 7,165 people. From then on the number of people dying gradually dropped. By December the people who had fled the plague started to move back to London and life slowly returned to normal.

The Diseases and Casualties this Week,

	Impoſthume	11	
	Infants	16	
	Killed by a fall from the Bell-frey at Alhallowes the Great	1	
	Kingfevil	2	
	Lethargy	1	
	Palſie	1	
	Plague	7165	
	Rickets	17	
	Riſing of the Lights	11	
	Scowring	5	
	Scurvy	2	
	Spleen	1	
	Spotted Feaver	101	
	Stilborn	17	
	Stone	2	
	Stopping of the ſtomach	9	
	Strangury	1	
	Suddenly	1	
	Surfeit	49	
	Teeth	121	
	Thruſh	5	
	Timpany	1	
	Tiffick	11	
	Vomiting	3	
	Winde	3	
	Wormes	15	
A Bortive	5		
Aged	43		
Ague	2		
Apoplexie	1		
Bleeding	2		
Burnt in his Bed by a Candle at St. Giles Cripple-gate	1		
Canker	1		
Childbed	42		
Chriſomes	18		
Conſumption	134		
Convulſion	64		
Cough	2		
Droptic	33		
Feaver	309		
Flox and Small-pox	5		
Frighted	3		
Gowt	1		
Grief	3		
Gripping in the Guts	51		
Jaundies	5		
Chriſtined	Males 95	} Buried { Males 4095 } Plague 7165	
	Females 81		} Females 4202 } In all 8297
	In all 176		
Increased in the Burials this Week		607	
Parishes clear of the Plague		4	
Parishes Infected		126	

The Aſize of Bread ſet forth by Order of the Lord Mayor and Courts of Aldermen, A penny Wheaten Loaf to contain Nine Ounces and a half, and three half-penny White Loaves the like weight.

Mortality bill listing the number of people who had died in London from 19–26 September 1665

People thought that animals might spread the disease so strays were killed by special dog killers – around 40,000 dogs and 200,000 cats were slaughtered.

What effect did the Great Plague have on Londoners' lives?

People's lives and businesses suffered terribly because so many were shut in their homes. One eyewitness said that London became so quiet that every day was like a Sunday and grass started to grow in the streets. Many were forced to beg or steal food and money because the plague had such a bad effect on trade.

Between one and three people died in most infected homes. In extreme cases whole families died. People were terrified of the disease; some threw sick servants into the streets, others refused to help sick friends and family. Samuel Pepys wrote in his diary, 'the plague [is] making us cruel as dogs to one another.'

Once the plague was over, the population of London recovered surprisingly quickly. This picture shows people returning to the capital. New people came to London to take over jobs left vacant by those who had died. There was a sudden rise in the number of marriages and births. The plague lingered until the last reported case in 1679.



Engraving of people returning to London after the plague, by John Dunstall, 1666

The plague still exists today in countries like India and the United States.

See also

Collections Online is an online database which allows users to find out more about the Museum of London's objects, both on display and in store. Go to

www.museumoflondon.org.uk/collections

The Medieval London website for more information on the Black Death:

www.museumoflondon.org.uk/medievallondon

Visit the Museum

You can see a video on the Black Death in the Medieval London gallery at the Museum of London. Many objects relating to the Great Plague are on display in the War, Plague & Fire gallery at the Museum of London.

Further reading

Horrox, R. (ed.), *The Black Death*, (Manchester University Press, 1994)

Porter, S, *Lord Have Mercy Upon Us. London's Plague Years*, (Tempus, 2005)

Ross, C. & Clark, J. (eds.), *London. The Illustrated History*, (Penguin, 2008)

Further resources for teachers/tutors

Explore the images for this topic in the Picturebank:

www.museumoflondon.org.uk/picturebank.