The Black Death

Death from disease was a constant fear of people living in the Middle Ages. Probably the disease that worried them most was leprosy. Although it did not always kill its victims, the consequences of leprosy were horrifying. Extremities and facial features slowly rotted away and the face eventually becoming terribly disfigured. People suffering from the disease were treated very badly. "They were forbidden all normal social contacts and became targets of shocking rites of exclusion. They could not marry, they were forced to dress distinctively and to sound a bell warning of their approach." (1)

In the early part of the 14th century there were outbreaks of typhoid fever, dysentery and diphtheria. It has been estimated that in 1316 about 10% of the population died from these three diseases. These deaths often reflected social conditions, especially poor sanitation and became an increasing problem with the growth of towns during this period. (2)

Two other diseases, smallpox and measles caused a great deal of suffering. The number of people dying from measles and smallpox gradually declined during the Middle Ages. People developed an immunity to these infections and by the 14th century, it was mainly children who died from measles and smallpox. (3)

Black Death in Europe

It was a new disease, against which people had no immunity, that led to what has been described as the "worst disaster in the history of the world." This disease, which was later to become known as the Black Death, probably first broke out in Mongolia and then was carried to the less mobile societies in China, India and the Middle East. (4)

In October, 1347, a ship, returning from China, sailed into Messina harbour in Sicily. Most of its crew were dead and the survivors talked about a mysterious disease that had killed them on the journey. The harbour master ordered the men and the ship quarantined. The rest of the crew died over the next couple of days. So did people living in Messina. "It was not men but rats that spread the disease and they had scurried ashore as the first ropes were tied to the docks." (5)

According to one eyewitness account: "The sailors brought in their bones a disease so violent that whoever spoke a word to them was infected and could in no way save himself from death... Those to whom the disease was transmitted by infection of the breath were stricken with pains all over the body and felt a terrible lassitude. There then appeared, on a thigh or an arm, a pustule like a lentil. From this the infection penetrated the body and violent bloody vomiting began. It lasted for a period of three days and there was no way of preventing its ending in death." (6)

Arrives in England

The disease quickly spread across Europe and reached England on 1st August 1348. The first case was at the port of Melcombe Regis in August, 1348. From Dorset it spread west to Devon, Cornwall and Somerset. The port of Bristol, England second largest town, was very badly hit. It has been estimated that approximately 40% of the town's population died from the disease. It then started moving east. Hampshire, Sussex, Surrey and by the end of September it was in London. (7)
The first symptoms of the Black Death included a high temperature, tiredness, shivering and pains all over the body. The next stage was the appearance of small red boils on the neck, in the armpit or groin. These lumps, called buboes, grew larger and darker in colour. Eyewitness accounts talk of these buboes growing to the size of apples. (8) The final stage of the illness was the appearance of small, red spots on the stomach and other parts of the body. This was caused by internal bleeding, and death followed soon after. (9)

When the disease hit an area there was a strong temptation for people to flee. This created hostility from people living in other towns and villages who feared that the new arrivals would bring the disease with them. Henry Knighton pointed out: "Many villages and hamlets became deserted... Sheep and cattle went wandering over fields and through crops and there was no one to go and look after them... In the following autumn no one could get a reaper for less than 8d. with his food, a mower for less than 12d. with his food. Therefore, many crops perished in the fields for want of someone to gather them." (10)

The Black Death is, in fact, not one but two related diseases. The most common form is bubonic plague. This disease is spread when infected fleas that normally live on black rats land on people and bite them. A person suffering from bubonic plague in the Middle Ages had a 60% chance of dying within two to five days of being infected.
In some cases bubonic plague becomes concentrated in the lungs and causes symptoms similar to pneumonia. This pneumonic version is even worse than bubonic plague. People with pneumonic plague usually die within a couple of hours of catching the disease. It is also highly infectious, as people can catch it by breathing in bacilli coughed out by the person suffering from the disease. (11)

Doctors could do little to help those suffering from the Black Death. The most common form of treatment was to lance the buboes, expelling a foul-smelling, blackish liquid. Other methods involved bleeding and washing the body with vinegar. In a book published about the Black Death the following medicine was recommended: "Take an egg that is newly laid, and make a hole in either end, and blow out all that is within. And lay it to the fire and let it roast till it may be ground to powder, but do not burn it. Then take a quantity of good treacle, and mix it with chives and good ale. And then make the sick drink it for three evenings and three mornings." (12)

**Preventive Measures**

People also took preventive measures. As they believed that God was all powerful, they assumed that praying would help. They also looked very carefully at their behaviour to see if they could discover why God was so angry with them. The priests gave several reasons for the Black Death. They claimed that peasants did not show enough respect for the clergy, drank and swore too much, and did not spend enough time praying. Some priests even put the Black Death down to too much dancing and having long hair. (13)

It was believed that one way of avoiding the plague was to punish yourself for your sins before you caught the disease. People took part in what became known as "flagellant processions". This involved people whipping each other in public. "Encouraged by a papal statement, bands of men up to 500 strong, dressed in identical robes and singing hymns, would march to a town, where they would form a circle and set about beating their own backs rhythmically with iron spikes embedded in leather belts until they were covered with bleeding wounds." (14)
Robert of Avesbury recorded: "In 1349 over six hundred men came to London from Flanders... Each wore a cap marked with a red cross in front and behind. Each had in his right hand a scourge with three nails. Each tail had a knot and through the middle of it there were sometimes sharp nails fixed. They marched naked in a file one behind the other and whipped themselves with these scourges on their naked bleeding bodies." (15)

Some priests claimed that the Black Death was a sign from God that the world was coming to an end. It was therefore people's last chance to change their behaviour if they wanted to obtain a place in heaven. Other people took the opposite view. If death was likely to occur soon, why not enjoy yourself while you were still alive? The moral behaviour of people who took this view declined rather than improved during this period.

**Consequences of the Black Death**

The first outbreak of the Black Death lasted from 1348 to 1350. John Fordun, the author of *Chronicle of the Scottish Nation* (c. 1380) claims that "nearly a third of mankind died... By God's will, this evil led to a strange kind of death, insomuch that the flesh of the sick was somehow puffed out and swollen... Now this attacked everywhere, especially the common people - seldom the magnates". (16)

Historians have found it difficult to calculate the number of people who died from the disease because of a lack of documentary sources. The Church was the main institution that kept accurate records. John F. Harrison has pointed out that those studying these figures have "produced death rates of beneficed clergy for the year of the plague of
about 40 per cent; and other figures for monastic clergy are as high as 45 per cent."

John Hatcher, the author of *Plague, Population and the English Economy, 1348-1530* (1977) argues that the death-rate of the clergy was lower than that of those who had to endure bad living conditions. Hatcher studied the payment of death duties (heriots) during this period. From these records it has been calculated that two-thirds of the customary tenants on four manors in Hampshire, Wiltshire and Oxfordshire died; and between 50 and 60 per cent on seven manors in Cambridgeshire, Essex and Cornwall. (18)

Henry Knighton, a canon of St Mary's Abbey, during the 14th century, wrote: "This cruel death spread on all sides, following the course of the sun. And there died at Leicester, in the small parish of St. Leonard's more than 300 persons, in the parish of Holy Cross, 400, in the parish of St. Margaret's Leicester, 700; and so in every parish, in the great multitude. Then the bishop of Lincoln sent notice throughout his whole diocese giving general power to all priests, both regulars and seculars, to hear confessions and give absolution with full episcopal authority to all persons, except only in case of debt." Knighton calculated that over 50 per cent of the people living in Leicester died of the disease. (19)

Traditionally, historians have tended to believe that about one-third of the population died during this period. (20) However, recent research suggest that this was a low-estimate. It has been claimed that the *Domesday Survey* in 1086 shows a population of about 1.5 to 1.8 million. This was followed by a rapid growth and that by 1348 it had reached about 5 million. Yet by 1377, when returns for the *Poll-Tax* was made, the population had fallen to about 2 million. (21)

George M. Trevelyan has pointed out that in the early years of the 14th century there had been a surplus of labour and this enabled the lord's bailiff's to treat the peasants more harshly. The *Black Death* dramatically changed this situation: "Obviously the survivors among the peasantry had the whip-hand of the lord and his bailiff. Instead of the recent hunger for land there was a sortage of men to till it.... The lord of the manor could no longer cultivate his demesne land with the reduced number of serfs, while many of the strip-holdings in the open fields were thrown
back on his hands, because the families that farmed them had died of plague." (22)

This dramatic fall in population led to great changes taking place in England. Fields were left unsown and unreaped. Those who had not died of the plague were in danger of dying from starvation. Food shortages also resulted in much higher prices. The peasants, needing the money to feed their families, demanded higher wages. The landowners, desperately short of labour, often agreed to these wage demands. If the landlord refused, the peasant was likely to search out another employer. (23)

John Gower, a farmer from Kent, wrote about the problems caused by the shortage of labour: "The shepherd and the cowherd demand more wages now than the master-bailiff... labourers are now such a price that, when we must use them, where we were wont to spend two shillings we must now spend five or six... They work little, dress and feed like their betters, and ruin stares us in the face." (24)

Edward III became concerned about the increase in wages and the peasants roaming the country searching for better job opportunities. In 1350 he decided to pass the Statute of Labourers’ Act. This law made it illegal for employers to pay wages above the level offered in 1346. It states: "That every man and woman of our kingdom of England... who is able bodied and below the age of sixty years, not living by trade nor carrying on a fixed craft or land of his own... shall be bound to take only the wages... that were paid in the twentieth year of our reign of King Edward III". (25)

However, both the employers and the peasants tended to ignore the law, and although Parliament increased the penalties for the offence people continued to disregard the act. (26) Villeins became bitter as they watched the wages of freemen go higher and higher. Although the punishments were severe, more and more villeins became willing to run away from their lords. In the past, landowners would have returned these villeins to their masters. However, because they needed labour so badly, they did not ask any awkward questions and instead treated them as freemen. This upset local villeins who saw "immigrants" given higher wages without "no questions asked as to whence they came". (27)

Even when villeins who ran away from their masters were caught, it was difficult to punish them too harshly. Execution, imprisonment or mutilation only made the labour shortage worse. Therefore the courts tended to punish the villeins by branding the letter ‘F’ on their forehead when they were caught. William Langland, a poor man living in England during this period wrote: "Nowadays the labourer is angry unless he gets high wages, and he curses the day that he was ever born a workman... he blames God, and murmurs against reason, and curses the king and his Council for making Statutes on purpose to plague the workman." (28)

In some areas labourers began to organise themselves into groups and there were examples of strikes for higher wages took place. For hundreds of years peasants had accepted the way they were treated by their lords as being natural and unchangeable. They now knew that if they were willing to take risks, either by running away or by joining up with others to demand better treatment, they could improve their situation. This change in consciousness meant that the lords’ power over their peasants was not as strong as it was before the outbreak of the Black Death.

Primary Sources

(1) Michele di Piazze, letter (October, 1347)

The sailors brought in their bones a disease so violent that whoever spoke a word to them was infected and could in no way save himself from death... Those to whom the disease was transmitted by infection of the breath were stricken with pains all over the body and felt a terrible lassitude. There
then appeared, on a thigh or an arm, a pustule like a lentil. From this the infection penetrated the body and violent bloody vomiting began. It lasted for a period of three days and there was no way of preventing its ending in death.

(2) Letter sent by a group of doctors from Oxford to the Lord Mayor of London (c. 1350)

If an ulcer appears... near the ear or the throat, take blood from the arm on that side, that is, from the vein between the thumb and the first finger... But if you have an ulcer in the groin, then open a vein in the foot between the big toe and its neighbour... At all events, bloodletting should be carried out when the plague first strikes.

(3) Henry Knighton, *Chronicle* (c. 1398)

The King of Tharsis, seeing so sudden and unheard of death among his subjects, set out with a large number of nobles towards the Pope... He proposed to be baptised a Christian, believing that God's vengeance had fallen upon his people by reason of their evil lack of faith. But, after twenty days' journey, hearing that the plague had created a great havoc among Christians... turned and went no farther on that way, but hastened home unto his own country.

(4) Giovanni Boccaccio, *Decameron* (c. 1360)

It first betrayed itself by the emergence of certain tumours in the groin or the armpits, some of which grew as large as a common apple, others as an egg... merely by speech or association with the sick was the disease communicated to the healthy... any that touched the clothes of the sick... seemed to catch the disease... Many died daily or nightly in the public streets. Of many others, who died at home, the departure was hardly observed by their neighbours, until the stench of the bodies carried the news.

(5) John Fordun, *Chronicle of the Scottish Nation* (c. 1380)

In the year 1350, there was, in the kingdom of Scotland, a great plague... nearly a third of mankind died... By God's will, this evil led to a strange kind of death, insomuch that the flesh of the sick was somehow puffed out and swollen... Now this attacked everywhere, especially the common people - seldom the magnates.

(6) Edward IV’s Plague Medicines (c. 1480)

A medicine for the plague... Take an egg that is newly laid, and make a hole in either end, and blow out all that is within. And lay it to the fire and let it roast till it may be ground to powder, but do not burn it. Then take a quantity of good treacle, and mix it with chives and good ale. And then make the sick drink it for three evenings and three mornings.
(7) Robert of Avesbury, Chronicle (c. 1360)

In 1349 over six hundred men came to London from Flanders... Each wore a cap marked with a red cross in front and behind. Each had in his right hand a scourge with three nails. Each tail had a knot and through the middle of it there were sometimes sharp nails fixed. They marched naked in a file one behind the other and whipped themselves with these scourges on their naked bleeding bodies.

(8) Giovanni Boccaccio, Decameron (c. 1360)

Some did not shut themselves in, but went about, some carrying flowers in their hands, some fragrant herbs... which they frequently smelled, thinking it good to comfort the brain with such odours.

(9) Ralph of Shrewsbury, the Bishop of Bath, wrote a letter about the Black Death to all the priests in his diocese in January 1349.

The plague... has left many parish churches... without parson or priest to care for their parishioners... Therefore, to provide for the salvation of souls... you should at once publicly command and persuade all men that, if they are on the point of death and cannot secure the services of a priest, then they should make confession to each other... if no man is present, then even to a woman.

(10) The Statute of Labourers (1349)

That every man and woman of our kingdom of England... who is able bodied and below the age of sixty years, not living by trade nor carrying on a fixed craft, nor having of his own the means of living, or land of his own... shall be bound to... take only the wages... (that) were paid in the twentieth year of our reign of England (1346) ...

And because many sound beggars do refuse to labour so long as they can live from begging charity, giving themselves up to idleness and sins, and, at times, to robbery and other crimes - let no one, under the pain of imprisonment... give anything to beggars as can very well labour.

(11) Henry Knighton, Chronicle (c. 1398)

Many villages and hamlets became deserted... Sheep and cattle went wandering over fields and through crops and there was no one to go and look after them... In the following autumn no one could get a reaper for less than 8d. with his food, a mower for less than 12d. with his food. Therefore, many crops perished in the fields for want of someone to gather them.

References


(8) Giovanni Boccaccio, *Decameron* (c. 1360) pages 5-6


(10) Henry Knighton, *Chronicle* (c. 1398)


(12) Edward IV’s *Plague Medicines* (c. 1480)


(15) Robert of Avesbury, *Chronicle* (c. 1360)

(16) John Fordun, *Chronicle of the Scottish Nation* (c. 1380)


(19) Henry Knighton, *Chronicle* (c. 1398)


(22) George M. Trevelyan, *English Social History* (1942) page 22

(23) Winston Churchill, *The Island Race* (1964) page 73
(24) John Gower, letter (c. 1350)

(25) The Statute of Labourers’ Act (1351)


(27) George M. Trevelyan, English Social History (1942) page 22

(28) William Langland, The Vision of Piers Plowman (c. 1365)