

A Plague on all your Houses

History records many years that have been described as memorable, sometimes for a positive reason such as the end of a war, and sometimes for a negative reason such as, well, the start of a war. The year 2020 will enter the Annals as a particularly bad year – one in which the nation and most of western Europe were brought to a standstill by a Coronavirus given the name Covid-19.

Pandemics/epidemics/outbreaks are not a new phenomenon. Probably the best known of the pestilential incidents was “*The Black Death*”.

The Black Death- also known as “*The Pestilence, The Great Mortality, or “The Plague”*” arrived in what today is Weymouth in Dorset in 1348. It was brought in by a sailor from Genoa but it originated in Asia where it was carried by fleas living on black rats. In England it killed between 30-40% of the population, estimated at about 2 million. The plague continued to, ahem, plague England on and off for the next 300 years but with reduced severity until the last outbreak known as “*The Great Plague of London*” in 1665.

Some other silent killers

There have been other virus outbreaks in more recent times. In New York 53 people were infected, and 3 of them died, of typhoid at the end of the 19th century. This was the infamous case of “*Typhoid Mary*” whose real name was Mary Mallon. She was born in Ireland in 1869 and emigrated to the US where she worked as a domestic servant, and then cook, in several large houses in New York. She was a carrier of the virus but was asymptomatic. She was eventually incarcerated in solitary confinement where she died in 1936.

At the end of World War I the world was in the grip of what became known as “*The Spanish Flu*”. The label “Spanish” is misleading as the first cases were recorded in the US, but because of wartime censorship the epidemic went unreported amongst the combatant nations for fear of the effect on morale. Spain was a neutral country and so when they announced that King Alfonso XIII was gravely ill with the flu it was assumed that Spain was the country of origin. It had different names in different countries and these included “*Brazilian Flu, German Flu and Bolshevik Flu*”. It is estimated that the pandemic killed 50 million across the globe.

In the 1980's a virus appeared that seems to have been introduced by a couple known as Sam and Ella. The then junior health minister, Edwina Currie, made the announcement that “most of the egg production in this country is affected with Salmonella”. The subsequent furore ended her political career although in 2001 she was proved to be partially correct – it was the chickens rather than the eggs that were infected. So what came first, the chicken with the virus or the egg with the virus? We “shell” never know. It certainly reinforced the comment made by Major Bloodnok in the *Goon Shows* of the 1950's – “no more curried eggs for me!”

The Great Plague of London – lasted from 1665 into early 1666. It was another epidemic of the bubonic plague that had occurred intermittently since the Black Death. In late 1664 a bright comet was seen in the sky over London causing fear and trepidation as to what evil it portended. Halley's Comet had put in an appearance at Hastings in 1066, but whether good or evil was portended depended on whether you were a Norman or a Saxon. It was certainly one in the eye for King Harold!

The city of London was more or less an open sewer in the 17th century. Overcrowded tenements made it impossible to maintain anything like standards of hygiene. Rubbish, animal dung and slops were just thrown from the houses into the streets. Some attempt was made to remove the worst of the filth but as this only involved transporting it to mounds outside the city walls, it remained a hazard to health. Shanty towns sprung up outside the city walls and they soon became rat-infested slums.

Bubonic plague was very much the big fear but even those of a more credulous nature failed to understand its origins. They blamed “emanations from the earth” such as pestilential effluvia, unusual weather, sickness in livestock or even an increase in the numbers of moles, frogs, mice or flies. Nobody seems to have twigged that perhaps many thousands of people living in cramped conditions on top of a gigantic dung heap might not have been the healthiest of environments.

There was no legal requirement to report a death so parishes appointed a number of “Searchers of the dead”. They inspected the corpse to ascertain cause of death and the relatives of the deceased paid a fee. The Searchers were typically someone living on aid from the parish rate, often illiterate old women with no medical knowledge. Dishonesty was inherent.

A Searcher would usually be informed of the death by the local sexton, who was tasked with digging the grave, or by the chiming of the bells of the parish church. This meant that if the dead person was not a member of that church, e.g. a Quaker, the death did not appear in the official records.

During times of plague the Searchers had to live apart from the community. They also had to stay indoors to prevent spreading disease, the only exception being when they were performing their duties. When they went outside they carried a white stick as a warning to others. Clearly the lockdown of 2020 has a precedent.

The Searchers reported their figures to the parish clerk, each of whom then compiled a weekly return that was forwarded to the Company of Parish Clerks who prepared the figures for the Lord Mayor. Bills of Mortality were used to list the total deaths for each parish, and the causes of death. The use of Searchers was only discontinued in 1836. A Bill of Mortality from 1665 is attached and although some of it is difficult to read, it is possible to get the general drift. Imagine a latter-day Boris Johnson, flanked by two socially distanced SAGE advisers, presenting the data to a frightened and bewildered population. Not much has changed in that regard then. In those days there was no such thing as an “R” number although some deeply rustic regions are believed to have had an “Oo Arr” number.

As the plague spread it was considered necessary to introduce quarantine. Any house where someone had died of the plague was to be sealed up and its inhabitants forbidden to leave for 40 days – it is this figure of 40 that gave rise to the term “quarantine” and to be pedantic, it is incorrect to refer to a quarantine period of any duration other than 40 days. In 1664 there had been 30 days of isolation and this was known as “trentine”. This sealing up of houses resulted in many incarcerated inhabitants dying of neglect rather than plague and so there was a clear incentive not to report plague deaths. The Bill of Mortality for 1665 shows a total count of deaths due to plague as 68,596 but it is believed that this figure may be 30,000 lower than the real total. Any house infected with the plague was marked with a red cross on its door and the words “Lord have mercy upon us”. A watchman stood guard outside.

There was much opposition to the introduction of sealing up houses. In the parish of St Giles rioters broke down the door of the first house to be sealed, and the inhabitants were released. Any such rioters who were caught were severely punished.

A number of “pest-houses” were built – effectively isolation hospitals located away from populated areas, and places where the sick could be cared for until they got better-or they died! The introduction of pest-houses indicated that although there were still relatively few confirmed plague cases, the authorities were aware that this was a serious outbreak.

A Privy Council committee was formed to come up with methods to prevent the spread of plague. One of the measures introduced was to close some of the alehouse (sound familiar?) There was also a limit placed on the number of lodgers permitted in each household. As cases in St Giles rose the area was placed in quarantine and constables checked everyone who wished to travel. Vagrants and anyone not providing sufficiently valid reasons to be out and about were confined. Samuel Pepys remained in London throughout the plague period and his diary contains a contemporary account. On 30 April 1665 he wrote “Great fears of the sickness here in the City it being said that two or three houses are already sealed up. God preserve us all!”

By July 1665 the plague was rampant. The wealthy deserted London. King Charles II, his family and court decamped to Salisbury and then, when some plague cases occurred there, they moved on to Oxford. There is no evidence of anyone in government high-tailing it northwards to test their eyesight but as there is no record of their Cummings and goings we cannot be sure.

The Lord Mayor and most of the authorities remained in the city but most merchants and professionals fled. With an increasingly large number of victims, there were fewer clergyman, physicians and apothecaries remaining to deal with the needs of people. In his book *“London’s Dreadful Visitation”*, Edward Cotes wrote of his hope that “Neither Physicians of our Souls or Bodies may hereafter in such great numbers forsake us”.

As conditions worsened the poorer people began to leave the city, although it was difficult for them to abandon their existing, albeit grim, lifestyle for an uncertain future. Before they could leave the city gates they were required to be in possession of a certificate of good health signed by the Lord Mayor. These were not easy to obtain. Progressively people in the villages outside of London resented this migration and were no longer prepared to accept the people from London, even if they had a certificate. Many refugees were turned back and were forced to live rough in the countryside. In the hot summer of 1665 many died of thirst and starvation.

As the number of victims increased the City burial grounds became full to capacity and so pits were dug. Drivers of “dead-carts” travelled the streets calling out “Bring out your dead” and thus they carted away piles of corpses. The authorities became concerned that the sight of so many citizens been collected up in this manner would spread alarm and panic amongst the public and so orders were given that body collections and burials should only be done at night. Eventually, the ratio of the number of victims to the number of drivers meant that bodies began to be stacked against house walls. Daytime collections resumed.

In the parish of Aldgate a huge pit was dug near the churchyard. It measured 50’ x 20’ and it was still being dug at one end while the dead carts were depositing their loads at the other end. When no further extension was possible it was dug deeper until it reached

ground water level at a depth of 20 feet. When it was finally covered it contained 1114 bodies.

All manner of theories began to be offered into the source of the plague. Thinking that perhaps animals could be the means of transmission a cull of dogs and cats was ordered! This probably had the effect of prolonging the pandemic as cats in particular were the main predator of the rats on which the infected fleas lived. It was also thought that bad air was to blame and so giant bonfires burned in the streets. Tobacco was also considered to provide protection and it was claimed that no tobacconist died during the outbreak!. There is no truth in the story that a Spanish friar by the name of Dom Estos advocated the use of household bleach as a means of protection.

All business in the city ceased and the only people on the streets were the dead carts and dying victims. Pepys recorded, "Lord! How empty the streets are and how melancholy, so many poor sick people in the streets, full of sores... Westminster, there is never a physician and but one apothecary left all being dead".

In similar fashion to the way in which today's Chancellor of the Exchequer has issued largesse to the population, the Corporation of London made similar provisions. A commission of one farthing was paid above the normal price for every quarter of corn landed in the Port of London.

The villages around London, deprived of their usual sales in the capital, left their produce in specified market areas then negotiated the sale by shouting. Payment was collected after the money had been left in a bucket of vinegar to disinfect the coins (no contactless transactions in those days).

Records show that the death rate increased during the summer from about 2000 a week to over 7000 in September, but these figures are thought to be very much lower than reality. Many of the sextons and parish clerks who had kept the records died and the Quakers refused to cooperate. Many of the poor people were simply dumped in mass graves and so went unrecorded. There is no accurate figure of those who caught the plague and recovered and many records were destroyed in the Great Fire of London in 1666.

There are clearly some parallels between the plague of 1665 and the pandemic of 2020. What is interesting to note is although we like to think of Homo Sapiens as the ultimate beings on earth, it is the creatures of the wild who really hold (dare I say it) the trump card. The Great Plague of London was caused by tiny little fleas on rats; the Covid-19 by, possibly bats, in a live animal market. In both cases the virus emanated from Asia so the next time you order a Chinese takeaway meal be careful of anything served up with a portion of "fled lice".

Gerry Law



A general Bill for this present year,
ending the 19 of December 1665. according to
the Report made to the KINGS most Excellent Majesty.



By the Company of Parish Clerks of London, &c.

Parish	Buried	Parish	Buried	Parish	Buried	Parish	Buried
St Albans Woodstreet	200	St Clements Eastcheap	28	St Margaret Mofes	25	St Michael Cornhill	104
St Alhallowes Easting	114	St Dunm's Backchurch	78	St Margaret Newfish	114	St Michael Crookedla	179
St Alhallowes Great	15	St Dunm's East	265	St Margaret Pastons	29	St Michael Queenhit	203
St Alhallowes Honia	10	St Edwards Lombard	70	St Mary Abchurch	99	St Michael Que ne	44
St Alhallowes Lette	119	St Ethelborough	195	St Mary Aldermanbury	151	St Michael Royall	453
St Alhallowes the Wall	100	St Faiths	104	St Mary Abetany	105	St Michael Woodstreet	123
St Alphage	271	St Gabriel Fen church	69	St Mary le Bow	64	St Mildred Breadstreet	59
St Andrew Hubbard	71	St George Woolphlane	41	St Mary Botham	55	St Mildred Poultry	58
St Andrew Wardrobe	476	St Gregories by Pauls	375	St Mary Coltechurch	17	St Nicholas Acon	46
St Anne Aldersgate	153	St Helens	108	St Mary Hill	94	St Nicholas Coleabby	125
St Anne Blacke-Friers	652	St James Duke place	261	St Mary Mountshaw	16	St Nicholas Olaves	205
St Antholms Parish	43	St James Garlickhithe	189	St Mary Summerfet	342	St Olaves Hardstreet	337
St Austins Parish	41	St John Baptist	138	St Mary Staynings	27	St Olaves Jewry	34
St Barthol Exchange	72	St John Evangelist	9	St Mary Woolchurch	65	St Olaves Silverstreet	50
St Bennet Fynch	47	St John Zacharie	85	St Mary Woodthorpe	75	St Pancras Supperlane	10
St Bennet Grace-church	17	St Katherine Coleman	199	St Martins lemonger	21	St Peters Cheap	61
St Bennet Pauls Wharf	55	St Katherine Cleerchu	135	St Martins Ludgate	196	St Peters Cornhill	136
St Bennet Sherehog	11	St Lawrence Jewry	94	St Martins Orgate	110	St Peters Pauls Wharfe	114
St Botolph Billingsgate	51	St Lawrence Pountney	114	St Martins Outwich	60	St Peters Powe	79
St Christophers	17	St Leonard Eastcheap	41	St Martins Vintry	417	St Stevens Colman	160
		St Leonard Fosse lane	135	St Matthew Fridayth	24	St Stevens Wallbrooke	34
		St Magnus Parish	101	St Maudlins Milkstreet	44	St Swithuns	93
		St Margaret Lothbury	100	St Maudlins Oldfishla	176	St Thomas Apostle	163
				St Michael Basilshaw	153	Trinicie Parsh	115

Buried in the 97 Parishes within the walls — 15107 Wherof, of the Plague — 9887

St Andrew Holborn	1958	3103	Bridewell Precinct	130	179	St Dunm's Well	998	665	St Saviours Southwark	4216	1446
St Bartholomew Great	491	144	St Botolph Aldersgate	997	755	St George Southwark	1613	1200	St Sepulchres Parsh	4509	3746
St Bartholomew Lette	93	119	St Botolph Algate	4926	4051	St Giles Cripplegate	3069	4828	St Thomas Southwark	475	371
St Botolph	3111	1417	St Botolph Bishopsgate	3464	3500	St Olaves Southwark	4793	2785	Trinicie Minories	108	123
									At the Pesthouse	159	156

Buried in the 16 Parishes without the walls — 41351 Wherof, of the Plague — 28888

St Giles in the Fields	1457	1165	St Katherine's Tower	956	601	St Magdalen Becon	1941	1165	St Mary Whitechappel	4766	555
Hackney Parsh	113	131	Lambeth Parsh	798	537	St Mary Newington	1271	1004	St Bedlles Parsh	304	310
St James Clerkewich	863	1377	St Leonard Shoreditch	2669	1949	St Mary Illingdon	695	593	St Pursey Parsh	6598	583

Buried in the 16 new Parishes in Middlesex and Surrey — 78554 Wherof, of the Plague — 21420

St Clement Danes	1969	1165	St Mary Saury	303	198	The Total of all the Christnings — 9967	
St Paul Covent Garden	408	161	St Margaret Westminster	4710	1749	The Total of all the Burials this year — 77306	
St Martins in the Fields	4804	268	Wherof, of the Plague	1156		Wherof, of the Plague — 68596	
Buried in the 4 Parishes in the City and Liberties of Westminster	12194						
Wherof, of the Plague	8403						

The Diseases and Casualties this year.

Abortive and Stillborne	617	Executed	21	Pallie	30
Aged	1545	Flux and Small Pox	655	Plague	68596
Ague and Feaver	5257	Found dead in streets, fields, &c.	20	Planner	6
Appoplex and Suddenly	116	French Pox	86	Plurisie	15
Bedrid	10	Frighted	23	Poysoned	1
Blasted	5	Gout and Sciatica	27	Quintie	35
Bleeding	16	Grief	46	Rickets	557
Bloody Flux, Scowring & Flux	185	Griping in the Guts	1288	Rising of the Lighes	397
Burnt and Scalded	8	Hangd & made away themselves	7	Rupture	34
Calenture	3	Headmouldshot & Mouldfallen	14	Scurvy	105
Cancer, Gangrene and Fistula	56	Jaundies	110	Shingles and Swine pox	2
Canker, and Thrush	111	Impostume	227	Sores, Ulcers, broken and bruised	82
Childbed	625	Kild by severall accidents	46	Limbs	14
Chrisomes and Infants	1258	Kings Evill	86	Spleen	29
Cold and Cough	68	Leprosie	2	Spotted Feaver and Purples	1929
Collick and Winde	134	Lethargy	19	Stopping of the stomack	332
Consumption and Tiffick	4808	Livergrown	26	Stone and Strangury	98
Convulsion and Mocher	2036	Meagrom and Headach	12	Surtee	1252
Distracted	5	Mealles	7	Teeth and Worms	2614
Dropfie and Timpany	1478	Murthered and Shod	9	Vomiting	51
Drowned	50	Overlaid & Starved	45	VVenh	2

Christned	Males — 5114	Buried	Males — 48569	Of the Plague — 68596
	Females — 4853		Females — 48737	
	In all — 9967		In all — 97306	

Increased in the Burials in the 130 Parishes and at the Pest-house this year — 79009
Increased of the Plague in the 130 Parishes and at the Pest-house this year — 68596