



The Heroes of Eyam

The Plague and Quarantine

In 1665 the Bubonic Plague returned to England. The first pandemic outbreak had more than halved Britain's population in 1348-1350 causing societal upheaval and a fundamental shift in people's outlook on life. Actually the disease had not disappeared, merely abating, so that little outbreaks occurred in cities, much like a volcano sending out small tongues of lava while portending an oncoming great eruption. The Plague, Black Death, or, simply, The Pestilence, was known and recognized throughout Europe, one more potential disaster the poor had to deal with. The causes of the disease were unknown and theories varied from a contagious miasma, to cats, Jews poisoning the wells and, to many, a visitation of God's Wrath. Treatments were even more disparate and mainly consisted of shunning the afflicted. Doctors earned the nickname 'Quack' by wearing elaborate masks with enormous bills that made them look like a duck. Interestingly there must have been some awareness of contagion as ships with plague victims were quarantined just as houses with victims inside were often barred or boarded up (no matter that the sufferer may recover).

In 1663 there was an outbreak in Amsterdam, at that time a bustling, mercantile centre, vibrant with trade as the hub of the Dutch East India Company and the Amsterdam Exchange Bank. King Charles II of England promptly banned trade with Holland, there was a trade war at the time so this was a good excuse, but by the spring of 1665 the mortality rate was rising in the slums of London, not that anyone of consequence was concerned by this, these were only poor people dying which they did all the time, except that this was a harbinger of the terrible times to come.

By July London was sweltering in unseasonable heat while the plague carried off more than two thousand people per week. Once again the old myth that cats and dogs were the carriers became prevalent and the Lord Mayor ordered their wholesale butchery. Daniel Defoe in his *Journal of the Plague Year*, estimates that a quarter million or more animals were killed. In fact the disease was spread by fleas which were

parasites on rats. By killing the predators that kept the rat population down the authorities actually encouraged the spread of the disease. Anybody who could ran to the country, Samuel Pepys records in his diary that the rich fled in droves while clerics tended their flock from country estates. In an effort to stem this exodus, a law was passed that nobody could leave through the gates of the City without a stamped Certificate of Health. Inevitably these certificates became the most prized commodity and they became worth far more than gold or currency. Plague houses were sealed, entombing whole families, with guards posted outside. Enterprising occupants, hungry and afraid, were known to hang a noose out of an upstairs window to slip over the unwary guards head to garrotte him. Of course those that did manage to escape were largely avoided, letters from the capital went undelivered and people adopted country accents to conceal their origin.



Trade still continued, much reduced, but there were products that small towns and villages could not produce. One such village was Eyam, population 360 people, the majority of whom were farmers or miners. Nestled in a natural amphitheatre in the Derbyshire peaks of the North Midlands in England, lead had been mined from shafts dug in the hills since Roman times. Because of the ore, traded to the South or the port of Liverpool, there was money in the village, unusual in an era when most villages were self-sufficient. At the end of August 1665, when over 6000 a week were dying in plague-ravaged London, the local tailor, George Vicars, took delivery of a bolt of cloth. As usual the cloth was flea-ridden but was also damp from its journey in an open cart. The cloth was unrolled and hung before a fire to dry and on the 7th September George Vicars died. Quickly the disease spread, local people lived in rows of cottages and the pestilence leapt from house to house like an uncontrolled forest fire.

The village was served by two men of the cloth, the Anglican rector, William Mompesson, and the more Puritanical prior incumbent Thomas Stanley. Both intelligent men, they met and decided to quarantine the village to contain the contagion. Geographically well-suited to this purpose, two points of exchange were set up, the Boundary Stone, high on a ridge separating Eyam from the next village, and what has come to be known as Mompessons Well, a natural spring where it was thought the running water would purify the coins left there. The Duke of Devonshire, from his nearby mansion at Chatsworth House, agreed to send food and supplies to the Boundary Stone where it would be left to be picked up later, ensuring there was no human contact. If extra goods were needed then money was left in a hollow in the stone which was filled with vinegar.

Whole families were wiped out in the following year. As the plague took its toll, it was agreed that services should be held in the open air so that the congregation might stand apart from each other. Almost from the outset it was agreed that family members should bury their own to minimize the chance of infection. Elizabeth Hancock buried her husband and six children after carrying the disease from a neighbour she had tended.

A year after the outbreak began the young rector's wife, Catherine, died at 28. She had stayed by her husband's side bringing what little solace she could to the hard-pressed villagers. She was one of the last victims, however. By the 1st of November nearby farmers came back to Eyam to find less than a quarter of the population had survived. Those remaining were feted as heroes, for such they were, the disease had been contained and an epidemic had been avoided. Their sacrifice is commemorated every year, on the last Sunday of August, with the Plague Sunday Service. Meanwhile, on September 2nd, in the capital, London, a small fire had broken out in a bakers shop in Pudding Lane, probably started by a guttering candle. Within minutes an unstoppable conflagration had risen which, over the next four days, consumed more than 80% of the city; the Great Fire of London. The sole consolation of this disaster was that it stopped the plague; at least for the time-being.

Sources : [The London Plague 1665](#)
["Parish Headcounts: Eyam C](#)
["Living with the plague". *Local Legends*. BBC](#)

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Research suggests that people who recovered from the plague developed a gene mutation known as delta32. There is evidence that this gene may provide immunity against HIV/AIDS