

DOVER'S DISASTROUS VISITATION by the PLAGUE

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More than three hundred years ago, in 1665, England experienced the last of the great plague epidemics which decimated whole communities across Europe in the first two thirds of the 17th century.

Plagues brought terror to the people, many of whom thought they were an act of god, since the risk of infection to them was frequent but the cause was unknown. In any case the possibility of effective treatment was non-existent. The plague was bubonic, and people who sickened of it usually died very quickly in agony, often inside three or four days.

This bubonic plague was predominantly a disease of the ill-nourished and badly-housed poor and amongst travellers huddled together in insanitary conditions ashore and aboard the little sailing ships which wallowed across the narrow seas at the beck of wind and tide. It was principally carried by fleas on rats, and on dogs and cats who picked up and distributed the disease-ridden fleas.

London had more than a dozen serious outbreaks in the first half of the 17th century and Dover being the principal town and port of the passage through which most people passed on their way to and from the continent, could not escape. Here there were two particularly serious outbreaks, in 1634 and 1636, but by far the worst broke out in 1665 and raged through much of 1666. It was a period of exceptional dryness and without rain the streets, always filthy with horse and cattle droppings, and used as a sewer for all kinds of effluent, had not been cleansed for weeks.

Those who were able fled London and the great cities and many of them escaped to the continent through Dover, often carrying the disease with them as

they went. Many towns forbade the coming of such refugees, but Dover, as the one principal port for the continent, both for passengers and trade, could not, at least at first, though the town did insist on travellers having a plague pass to certify that the area from which they came was free of disease. The problem for the town was that if travellers came from a disease free area, why were they trying to escape?

It was a time of great anxiety for Dover people. The streets, usually thronged with people, were empty. Business was virtually at a standstill, and only the fishermen and the crews of the cross-Channel ships were at work. Inevitably, the plague did arrive, being brought, it was claimed, by a young serving girl who was working in London and who had come home to Dover to escape the plague in the house where she worked in the metropolis. Of course, it would have been a poor serving girl who had to shoulder the blame, wouldn't it?

At first the 1665 outbreak seemed quite modest, less severe than those of 1634 and 1636, but it increased greatly, and the Town Council sat frequently under the Mayor, George West, a Doverian who had a prosperous business brewing malt, though that undertaking was suspended during the emergency as men thought only for their families and themselves.

Houses visited by the plague, bolted and with very door and window tight shut and sealed, with large red crosses

34 painted on their doors, grew in number and nothing seemed to halt the increase. Priests laboured among the people and at least four of them died in the outbreak.

The town council ordered the burning of huge bonfires all over the town and the air was thick with their sulphurous fumes while at night their flickering flames cast a lurid red glow on the streets of shuttered houses. It was ordered that dog knackers should be employed to kill all dogs and cats running loose since they were suspected of carrying the plague. It seems that they so very nearly arrived at the cause because it was not the animals themselves but the fleas which were to blame. Nearby villages also suffered. Hougham and Lydden were particularly affected and almost decimated.

At first the rising number of corpses were buried in the local cemeteries but soon other sites had to be found. The council bought a piece of waste ground near the sea and on the old border between the town and the parish of Hougham. Here a large, long pit was dug and in this the plague victims, a few at first in coffins, but later wrapped only in old sailcloth and sacking, were piled in heaps. When the first pit was full a second was dug, and then a third, but the third was only half-filled, the plague by then having subsided.

The plague carts, two-wheeled vehicles each pulled by two bullocks harnessed one each side of a single central shaft, rumbled over the cobbled streets to collect their tragic loads of the dead, leaving the town by Bench Street and Snargate Street on their way to the freshly-dug plague pits just inland from Archcliffe Fort. There, more than five hundred bodies were buried in a few weeks, and altogether it is estimated that over nine hun-

dred Dovorians perished and as many more caught the disease but made at least a partial recovery.

The whole administrative machine broke down under the sheer weight of numbers. Deaths and burials ceased to be recorded and medical help was fruitless or non-existent. The one overriding concern was to separate the dead from the living as quickly as possible and the bullock-drawn burial carts worked day and night to the tolling of their mournful bells which announced their passing.

In 1666, however, there was a gradual decline in the severity of the plague and by mid-summer it had passed, never to return in epidemic form in these islands again. Whilst the severity might have been expected, bearing in mind the many smaller outbreaks which preceded it, its sudden ending is a mystery.

Dover's plague burial ground was shunned by every one for generations and it received its title of 'The Graves' by which it has always been known. Much more recently some civilian burials were made nearby and later a few soldiers were interred, but the earth over the burial pits has not been broken.

"The Graves" still exists, a small piece of land not far from the military hospital which was built many years ago. * Now, covered by trees and undergrowth, few would suspect its morbid and tragic association. One mound, the cover of one mass burial pit can still be plainly seen and some traces remain of the other two. Nearby, new factories of the scientific age have sprung up but "The Graves", their surface soil undisturbed under the memory of the past still remain today, silent, aloof and forbidding.

* The present works of the firm of Burgess Engineering are built on the site of the military hospital. ED.



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