

When The Great Plague Stalked Dover

Terry Sutton

There's an area on the lower slopes of the Western Heights which, for generations, Dover people avoided. It was known as The Graves and here many are buried of those who died when The Great Plague hit Dover.

The spot, once a covered over large pit, is not far from P&O Ferries' headquarters at Channel House. Also not far away is the place where the now demolished military hospital once stood. It is believed this site for The Graves was selected because it was attached to the Chapel of Our Lady of Pity which stood at Archcliffe Point.

In the 17th century there were still folklore memories of the time when the Black Death arrived in the British Isles, around 1348. It killed 30-45 per cent of the population.

Experts still do not agree on the cause of the Black Death but the most accepted opinion is that it came from the fleas that lived on the back of rats. Historians say the dreaded disease swept England, Scotland and Wales in three waves. It arrived at Weymouth in June 1348 and lasted two years, the second outbreak came 1361-1365 with the third 1368-1369.

It was back again in the mid-seventeenth century when bodies were buried at The Graves.

No city, town or hamlet escaped the bubonic plague and Dover, being one of the principal ports in the country, was no exception. The plague raged on the Continent and it was from there that many of the passengers arrived by ship at Dover. The same disease hit other Kent ports including Deal, Sandwich and Chatham, all of which had links with the Continent.

First reports of the Great Plague reaching London was in April 1665. By the end of May enough people had been infected to cause alarm. It became so serious the king and his court left London for Salisbury. Many of the clergy and the rich went too. But the poor, believed by the rich and powerful, to be the carriers of the plague, were stopped at the boundaries of towns and ordered to go home.

There had been two outbreaks of the plague in Dover in the 1630s but by far the worst broke out in 1665 and is said to have raged for the next two years. Locals blamed the outbreaks on those who fled from London, where the disease was rampant, including those off to seek refuge on the Continent (where the disease was just as bad if not worse). Many towns refused entry to those fleeing from the cities but Dover, being such an important port, could not (or did not) do so. There were those leading citizens of the town who demanded a certificate to show that those arriving in Dover were free from the disease.

As in the rest of the country it was a time of great anxiety in Dover. For weeks the once busy streets remained empty as Dover folk were scared to leave the apparent safety of their homes. Business came to a standstill.

Despite the precautions the plague arrived in Dover. One unfair theory was that it was introduced to the town by a young serving girl working in London and who had returned home to the escape the disease that had broken out in the house where she was employed.

Throughout the country, and in Dover, the homes of those families infected were bolted with doors and windows sealed. A large red

cross was painted on the front door as a warning. Guards were set up outside the houses bearing the cross to prevent anyone escaping while, in some parts of the country, nurses were hired to take food to the infected and their families. Those who were infected usually died in agony two or three days later. The town council ordered the burning of bonfires in parts of the town in the hope that the smoke would wipe out the infection. Dogs and cats were rounded up and killed.

Historians say that the villages of Lydden and Hougham had their populations decimated.

Carts, sometimes hauled by bullocks, carried the bodies to the graves that, at first, were dug in the town's cemeteries. But as the death toll grew the bodies, covered in sackings, were taken to the mass grave on the Western Heights near where Channel View Road is now.

It is reported that more than five hundred bodies were buried in a succession of pits there in a few weeks. One estimate suggests that nearly one thousand Dover people died from the plague during this terrible time. Not surprisingly the names of those who perished were not recorded as the authorities were overwhelmed.

The plague was in Dover in 1638 when Thomas Day was mayor of Dover. It was he who in 1649 had to tell the town's inhabitants that their king, Charles I, had been executed.

In many parts of the country town councils followed the example of the Privy Council and ordered closure of all inns and lodging houses.

The order to kill cats and dogs made matters worse because the rat population, probably the cause of the problem, grew and so did the number of fleas they carried.

Up On The Downs

We will be running a Get Up On The Downs Festival from 25th July to 9th August. It will include a variety of events from walks to art workshops to nature safaris and much more! To make sure you don't miss out sign up to our newsletter www.uponthedowns.org.uk or contact - Up on the Downs. c/o Dover District Council, Council Offices. White Cliffs Business Park. Dover CT16 3PJ. Tel: 01304 872138 E-mail: uponthedowns@dover.gov.uk

Coming soon to a venue near you!

Are you interested in meeting rockpool rock stars, sending drones into space, night-time walks in search of bats, cycling through rolling hills, or practicing yoga on the Downs? These are just a few of the ways you can get involved this summer during

our Up on the Downs Big Summer festival to enjoy our countryside and heritage!

Green Project Grants

These available for certain projects. Main grants for over £1,000. Small grants for less than £1000. Be sure to read the guidance notes before you apply. An introduction and guidance document has been produced to provide more detailed information about Landscape Heritage Grants. All successful grant applications will help us to achieve the scheme aims and objectives and, where applicable, will contribute to positive actions towards the scheme Landscape Character Areas.

It is recommended that you talk to the Landscape Heritage Grants Officer at Up on the Downs before making an application on 01304 872158.