When The Plaugue Hit Dover

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With the coronavirus in East Kent, memories were revived about the time when the Great Plague killed off hundreds in Dover and thousands elsewhere.

It was in the 14th century, around 1348, when the Black Death killed off an estimated 30-45% of the population. Experts still do not agree what caused the Black Death but the most accepted opinion is that it came from the fleas that thrived on the back of rats.

The dreaded disease swept England, Scotland and Wales in three waves. Historians believe it arrived, via a sailor from a ship that had arrived from Gascony, at Melcombe Regis, part of present-day Weymouth, Dorset in June 1348 and lasted two years. The second outbreak came in 1361-1365 with a third wave in 1368-1369.

It was back again in the mid-seventeenth century, when Dover was so badly affected that mass graves for the victims were provided on the lower slopes of the Western Heights, roughly where P&O Ferries' headquarters are now situated. It is reported that more than 500 Dovorians and visitors were buried there.
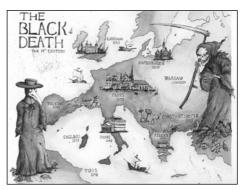
Some blamed foreigners arriving at Dover and at other Kent ports but others blamed English men and women who had fled from London to Dover in the hope of escaping from the slaughter.

Many towns in the country refused entry to those fleeing from the cities but Dover, being such an important port, could not do that. A group of Dover's leading citizens were demanding a certificate to show that those arriving in Dover were free from the disease.

In Dover, as in the rest of the country, the homes of families infected were bolted and windows sealed in a bid to prevent the disease spreading. A large red cross was painted on front doors to give a warning.

Dover Town Council ordered the burning of bonfires in the town in the hope the smoke would wipe out the dreaded infection while dogs and cats were rounded up and killed.

Having originated in China and Inner Asia, the Black Death decimated the army of the Kipchak khan Janibeg while he was besieging the Genoese port of Kaffa (now Feodosiya) in Crimea (1347). With his forces disintegrating, Janibeg catapulted plague-infested corpses into the town in an effort to infect his enemies. From Kaffa, Genoese ships carried the epidemic to Mediterranean ports. It spread inland, to Sicily (1347); North Africa, Italy, Spain, and France (1348); and Austria, Hungary, Switzerland, Germany, and the Low Countries (1349). Editor

The Black Death in 14th Century