

A Village in Quarantine

It would be odd to write a series of articles for 2020 without some reflection of the extraordinary circumstances we have been faced with in recent months. Lockdowns and other measures have been used to check the number of infections and deaths from Covid-19 but we will be dealing for some time with the huge costs of all this at a national and personal level. Fortunately in the twenty-first century we can hope that medical science will come to our aid in the form of an effective vaccine and/or new ways of treating those who are ill. We no longer expect centuries of recurrent waves of infection, with high mortality rates, which was what happened world-wide between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries, when plague was an ever-present risk. There was a First Pandemic that lasted from the late sixth century to around 750, but in our history it is the Second Pandemic that had the greatest impact. It began in or near China and travelled along the Silk Road or by ship. We know it as the Black Death. By 1400 it had probably reduced the world population from an estimated 450 million to around 350 - 375 million, and it had an enormous effect on the economies and social structures of the medieval world. It recurred in waves, with varying geographical distribution until, in the British Isles at least, it died out in the mid-seventeenth century. The last occurrence in England was The Great Plague of London in 1665-66; it killed 70,000 - 100,000 Londoners out of a population of about 220,000 - 250,000, a really terrifying death-rate. The rich fled to the country, as they had always done when there was a new wave. Otherwise, families with infected members were boarded up in their houses.

Eyam, in Derbyshire, provides us with a striking example of social responsibility in times such as these because, when the plague arrived in 1665, the whole village decided to quarantine itself in order to stop the disease spreading to the countryside round about. The church in Eyam has a record of 273 individuals who fell victim. This represents a huge proportion of the total population. But they did not waver and the villages surrounding them were spared.

Fleas are the transmitters of this form of plague. The story goes that in 1665 a flea-infested bundle of cloth arrived from plague-ridden London for Alexander Hadfield, the local tailor. A few days later, his assistant, George Viccars, noted that it was damp and opened it up, so releasing the fleas. He very quickly died, and so did more members of his household. As the plague began to spread, the villagers turned for leadership to their rector, William Mompesson and also to their recently ejected Puritan minister, Thomas Stanley, who between them, from May 1666, introduced stringent measures to control the spread. This included special measures for disposing of the bodies, the relocation of church services to an open-air natural amphitheatre so that villagers could observe social distancing, and the quarantining of the entire village, which no one could enter or leave. Whether or not you caught the disease seemed unpredictable. Elizabeth Hancock remained uninfected despite burying six children and her husband within eight days; and Marshall Howe, the village gravedigger, survived despite handling many infected bodies. But at last it died out. It is an inspiring example of social responsibility, and the village to this day honours the memory of their sacrificial decision. A visit to Eyam is a moving experience.

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