

The Black Death: The Effects on England 1346–1381

by Garry Victor Hill



While a doctor spreads herbs a rich couple show the signs of the Black Death. This illustration dates from 1411. The buboes were the obvious sign, usually forming in the neck, the armpit or the groin. From buboes comes the term Bubonic Plague, which was not used in the Middle Ages.

Modern historians dispute the long term effects of the Black Death in England, often coming to opposite conclusions. However two of the most influential among them, Barbara Tuchman and Phillip Ziegler, both separately write about this tendency and note how scant, conflicting and usually localised evidence becomes

used to prove national points.¹ Both historians permeate their works with more cautious opinions.

The study of the Black Death has been the source of many fallacies, stereotypes and controversies. One of the leading disputes until recent years has been what the great epidemic of 1346-1353 which medieval people called the pestilence, the plague or the great mortality actually was. Many forensic scientists, experts in disease and historians have previously disputed that the epidemic now known as the black death which swept across much of Asia, North Africa and most of Europe in the middle of the fourteenth century was bubonic plague. Despite strong evidence from several detailed medieval descriptions of victim's buboes turning black and the subcutaneous black splotches and spots (hence the adjective bubonic and the term black death) they pointed out that the extraordinarily virulent nature of the fourteenth century plague, and its high and rapid way of contagion did not match the modern cases which they had studied. References to the apparent lack of dead rats (the plague's initial carriers) in both medieval descriptions and archaeological sites was also considered at the least as suspicious, going against the widespread idea that the rats carried bubonic plague in 1346-1353. However in 2011 tests from an excavated plague pit at East Smithfield near London confirmed bubonic plague.² Pottery shards in the pit dated it to around 1350. The tests were performed separately on the teeth of forty-six plague victims and fifty-three of their bones in two different facilities.³ Both tests confirmed the results, linking the plague deaths to the bacteria *Yersinia Pestis*, which was a known bubonic plague carrier. The Smithfield tests also showed that the virus was initially soil bacteria.⁴ These Smithfield results were confirmed in 2014 when another nearby plague pit at Charterhouse was found by diggers for a rail tunnel and the twenty-five skeletons there were tested and the same results were found.⁵ Similarly in 2013 two separate DNA tests described by the science magazine *Plos* on early medieval skeletons from an early medieval monastery in southern Germany both "confirmed

¹ Barbara W. Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century*. Penguin Books, 1980. pp. xv xix; Phillip Ziegler, *The Black Death*. Penguin Books, 1982. Chapter 17. 'The Effects on the Church and Man's Mind.' pp.267-288.

² Jack Trimmer, 'Scientists Sequence Black Death Bacteria DNA Admit they were Wrong'. (sic) *Ars Technica* 30/Aug/2011

³ Trimmer.

⁴ Trimmer.

⁵ James Morgan, 'Black Death Skeletons Unearthed by Crossrail Project' *BBC News* 30th March 2014. www.bbc.com/news/science_environment-26770334

unambiguously” the presence of *Y. Pestis*.⁶ This find not only confirmed the English findings: it proved what many had suspected, that the devastating epidemic ‘Plague of Justinian’ in the 540s, was an earlier spread of the bubonic plague.⁷ Like the plague of 1346-1353 this earlier epidemic devastated Christendom. In his detailed and recent study *Justinian’s Flea* William Rosen gives an estimate of at least twenty-five million dead and while discounting estimates of a hundred million, states that a third of that figure as plausible.⁸ The DNA research described by the *Plos* team disproved the often repeated belief that the plague which arrived in 1346 was the first bubonic epidemic to hit Western Europe. What was newly revealed by the 2013 investigation was that this plague had gone beyond the Alps; it was previously thought to be limited to the Middle East, southern Europe and North Africa. The 2013 German discovery also suggested that the plague originated in Asia, but some similarities between bacteria provided the possibility that it was linked it to viruses in Angola.

Wherever it originated, both the plague of Justinian and the black death spread slowly, at least in their initial stages. Justinian’s Plague was as far as is known, was much more limited in the territory it covered. Its domain spread westwards from modern day Iraq, across those countries bordering the Red Sea, the Black Sea, the Aegean and the Adriatic, the Mediterranean and then all the way to Ireland.⁹ A reoccurrence around 664 AD hit England badly, leaving more written accounts than the first wave and also a rushed burial site at Cameron in Somersetshire which contained 115 victims.¹⁰

This first bubonic attack seems to have been forgotten or was unknown at the time of the second epidemic eight hundred years later, which spread much more extensively. No lessons seemed to have been learned from this earlier attack. Starting in China, it eventually reaching northwards to Scandinavia, as far west as Iceland and ending in the east, as it reached central Russia in 1353 and then died out there soon after.

⁶ Nora J. Besansky (ed.) ‘DNA from Skeletal Remains from the 6th Century Reveals Insights into Justinian Plague.’ *Plos Pathogens* 2 May 2013 10.371 journal V.9 (5) journals.plos.org/plos pathogens article? 1d+10.1371 103349

⁷ Besansky.

⁸ William Rosen, *Justinian’s Flea: Plague Empire and the Birth of Europe*. Jonathan Cape, 2007. p3 p209.

⁹ Rosen, pp266-267

¹⁰ Rosen, pp267-268

What can be said with certainty is that the Black Death in England, particularly the outbreak which began on the English southern coast in the summer of 1348, traumatically disrupted English demographics, economics, agriculture, literacy, productivity, religious beliefs and the feudal order. While agreeing on this basic statement, historians disagree to what extent the plague caused or exacerbated changes in these assorted fields.

What historians do agree on in broad terms is the plague's most obvious effect: the massive loss of life. Even here disagreements arise on the death toll and what was England's population when the plague hit. When examining primary source evidence problems arise. With an absence of even basic nationwide statistics, speculation based on nationwide specialised sources often forms a starting point. Because the most detailed English figures that some historians rely on concern plague fatality proportions amongst the English clergy, they then project these proportions onto the whole population. Simplistic as that method initially sounds, it becomes untenable when considering that the casualty records are incomplete, vary widely from area to area and frequently do not distinguish between those who have fled and those who have died. Even the essential base for such a method, a known number of total clergy resident in England and England's exact or nearly exact total population remain unknown. Similarly archaeologists recently claimed a fatality rate of between around 45% of the population, indicated by the way that across England pottery shards in dumps and archaeological sites suddenly declined by 45% in the time of the plague and after.¹¹ Apart from obvious other explanations such as migration, war and other epidemics, in the spring of 1348 England was hit by extraordinarily torrential and prolonged rains that would have meant that clay was not malleable and firewood for firing the clay would have probably been soaked. As with the priests, the massive numbers of people either fleeing villages or migrating to seek better employment would have reduced pottery production. Plausibility, probability and sensible behaviour are also often applied with speculative arguments in assessing the plague's effects in England, but this application also frequently emerges as a mistake.

Incredibly, against all probability, plausibility and sensibility, England had at least several months, perhaps even as long as two years to prepare and prevent plague transmission, but the government and the people did nothing. It took several years for the flea borne virus we know of as the Black Death to reach England from

¹¹ Sarah Kaplan, 'Broken Pottery Reveals the Sheer Devastation Caused by the Black Death.' *The Washington Post* May 24th 2016. <https://www.washingtonpost.com>

central Asia. Although some writers argue that the disease originated in the area between the Sea of Azov and the Caspian Sea, which was then known as Scythia, it had definitely reached that land by the spring of 1346. Scythia and the adjacent lands cannot have been its breeding ground as the first known recorded mention of plague victims was in Chinese records in 1331.¹² Despite objections by some historians that the plague could not have been carried from China to Europe because Moslem extremists had banned the overland trade, traders almost certainly carried the disease westwards along the Silk Road. One clear reliable piece of evidence backs this idea. The graves of a Nestorian Community near Issyk Kul in central Asia shows by tombstone inscription, and forensic science that the plague claimed victims there during 1338 and 1339.¹³ The Moslem ban further west in the lands controlled by the Golden Horde probably slowed the spread of trade, but can it be verified that absolutely all trade was banned? No ban works perfectly, smugglers bribe and to survive on food (assuming that nothing else was traded) the Moslems must have had their own traders in the barren desert lands of what is now much of Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq and Syria. Conterminous trading could have slowly spread the plague, taking years from a manufacturing centre city to trading post, post to port, port to port... Perhaps only one infected animal, person or product could have eventually spread the plague into Europe. Given this possibility, the banned trade argument seems extremely unlikely. Infected rats, which actually carried the virus in their blood, would have made homes in trading goods. Marmots and gerbils and other assorted rodent species have also frequently been suspected as carriers as they carry fleas. Dogs, cats camels, goats and trained bears do not seem to make the suspects list, although as all have fur and subcutaneous blood and therefore all apparently carry fleas. Also apparently likely is that their fleas would have made homes in the clothes of traders, their trading furs, skins and blankets and their beasts of burden as they travelled along the Silk Road or other travel routes. Vessels which were trading by river systems or oceans could have also carried the plague; this is the most likely way it reached India and then Ethiopia and Egypt.

Whichever route it took, by 1346 Tartar invaders in the Crimea were hurling the bodies of plague victims into a besieged Genoese trading fort. In terms of killing

¹² William H. McNeill, *Plagues and Peoples*. Penguin Books, 1985. p152. Document 1: Gabriele de Mussis, 'The Black Death Reaches Europe.' an excerpt of *Historia De Morbo* reproduced as an appendix by Don Nardo in *The Black Death*. Greenhaven Press Inc., 1999. pp127-128

¹³ McNeill, p155.

off Christians the Tartars succeeded beyond their wildest dreams as many fled in vessels to Byzantium and then on to Italian ports. By not knowing of incubation periods they were unknowingly carrying the plague with them.¹⁴ This meant that by late 1346 it was widely known in Europe that a horrific and virulent plague raged in the East.¹⁵ Even though medieval news travelled slowly, England's rulers must have known of the plague's horrific effects and transmission methods, if not the true causes long before it finally reached England. Many Europeans must have known more details about how virulent and calamitous the plague was as India's population was supposedly almost wiped out if chroniclers do not exaggerate: even allowing for exaggeration the real toll must have been massive. Byzantium was also devastated and Genoese galleys returning from the East were full of the dead and the dying. More precisely, chroniclers in China and Egypt both give fatalities as being two thirds of the population.¹⁶ Medieval numbers, dates and descriptions are at best inexact, frequently gross exaggerations and are often meant to convey urgency, mass disaster or grandiose achievement rather than factual reality.¹⁷ However massive casualty rates amongst a large population means that high figures and references to whole societies dying cannot be discounted. Pope Clement VI's investigation concluded a (then known) global death toll that came to 42,836,486.¹⁸ While this figure is suspiciously precise, and relies on Asian figures where the Pope rarely had an formal contact, Gabriele de Mussis, listed "almost all the East" as being so badly affected that areas were "stripped of their inhabitants" and "the dead were infinite" while survivors "thought that the last judgement had come."¹⁹ An Islamic chronicler, Ibn khaldun and another contemporary, Englishman Henry Knighton also wrote of the plague in the East in similarly dramatic terms.²⁰ Clement VI's church-organised census death toll for Christendom would be well over twenty million, part of the above figure. This is a probable figure as it is very unlikely that priests acting as census takers would have lied to the pope. Knighton's reference to Asian casualties shows knowledge of the

¹⁴ Zeigler, pp 13-14. Quoting de Mussis,

¹⁵ Zeigler p17.

¹⁶ McNeill, p152 pp.175-180.; Gabriele de Mussis, pp.128-129.

¹⁷ Tuchman, p.xviii; Ziegler, p.124.

¹⁸ Johannes Nohl, 'The Black Death's Grim Death Toll.' In Nardo, p.48.

¹⁹ de Mussis, p.128

²⁰ Document 5: Henry Knighton, 'The Black Death Spreads to England.' Reproduced as an appendix by Don Nardo, pp.144-145. Document 7: Ibn Khaldun, 'The Islamic World Engulfed by Plague.' Nardo p149

disaster in the east was known of in England, but when was this knowledge known and what was known of the causes and preventative methods?

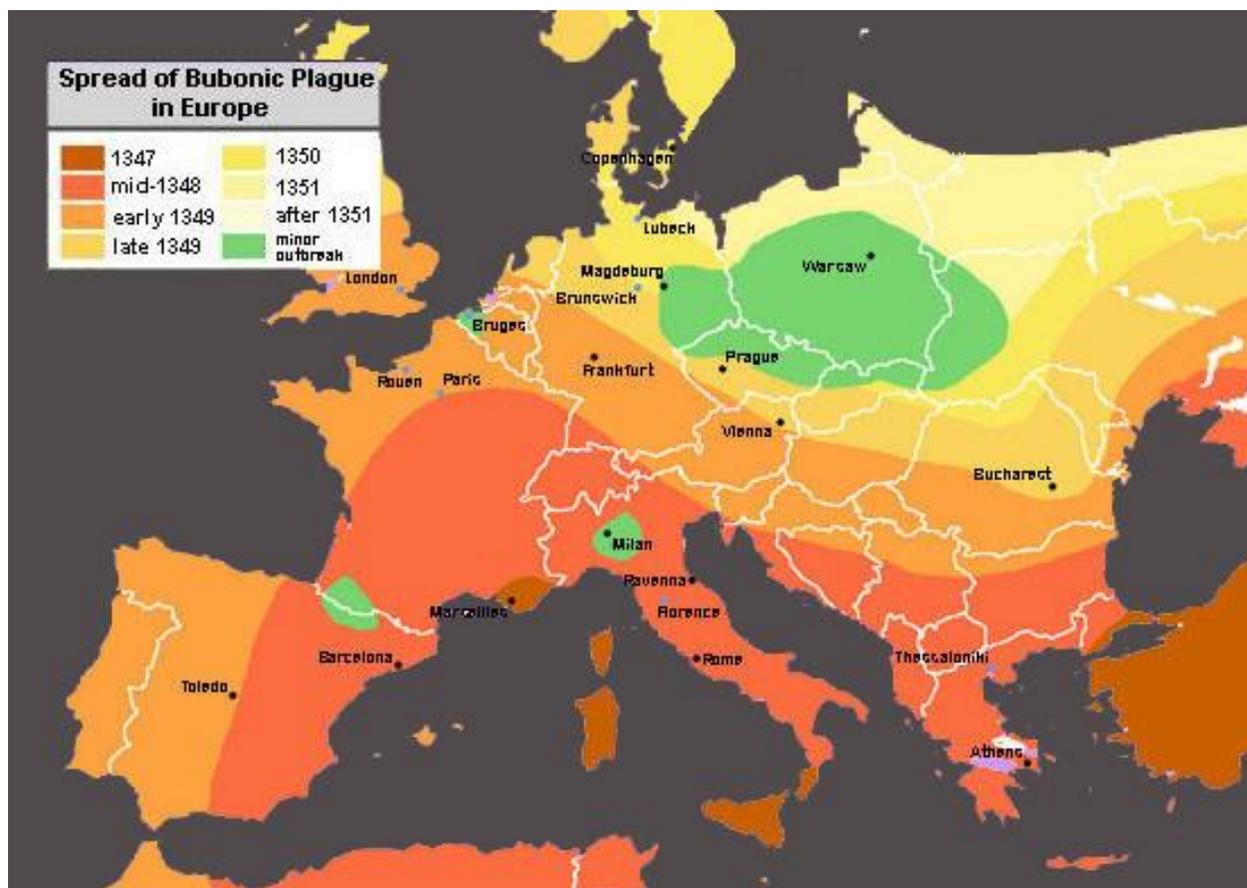
Only one Medieval medical expert, an Egyptian Moslem, is known to have realised the true origin was connected to rats. Renowned Medieval European men of medicine would blame astrological alignments, miasmas, eruptions, earthquakes that released vapours and that perennial favourite, God's will. This was always a punishment for a very sinful generation. These supposed causes would serve as scientific explanations for centuries. It would only be during another long pandemic starting in 1894 before the plague's real causes as originating in the blood of infected fleas who lived on rats and in more rare cases in rat bites were known. This would rapidly lead in the next few years to successful quarantine measures in Karachi and Hong Kong where investigations where the successful investigations had been conducted. Other cities soon followed. Minor and contained plague outbreaks would continue in unlikely places; Sydney in 1900-1901, Rockhampton Australia in 1906, Suffolk in 1910, Manchuria in that same year and even California in the 1920s. It would be 1931 before the first successful mass vaccination.²¹ Plague was still prevalent in Africa and the East in the 1940s. As late as 1994 a major outbreak affecting thousands occurred in the city of Surat India, but modern methods contained it. Even in the twenty-first century with antibiotics, quarantines and pest control around two thousand people a year in the developing world become plague fatalities.

Even allowing for this slow development in both medical knowledge and preventative methods, contemporary accounts by Gui de Chauliac the papal court physician, de Mussis and Michele Da Piazza make it clear that as early as 1347 many Europeans knew of how plague was conveyed on ships and spread by person to person and could also spread by contact with their possessions or their breath. Boccaccio's description in *The Decameron* and the quarantine measures taken in Milan makes this clear. English eyewitness chroniclers Geoffrey le Baker and the Archbishop of York both separately wrote of how breath could infect and how the virus was in the air.²² Like their statements, preventative measures taken in England by the common people and some authorities show that the image of a people being hit by a disaster for which they only had ridiculous or at best

²¹ Edward Marriott, *The Plague Race: A Tale of Fear, Science and Heroism*. Picador, 2002. p.203 pp.220-222 pp.227-236.

²² Cowie Leonard W.. *The Black Death and the Peasants' Revolt*. Wayland Publishers, 1972. p42 p56

erroneous explanations is a simplistic fallacy. Although they did not really know how the plague originated and while some of their supposed cures were bizarre, they did correctly know several ways the plague was conveyed. Equipped with this knowledge they developed several correct avoidance tactics. Some of their explanations for the origins of the plague remain as possibilities. *Something* caused the rodents to come into contact with humans. Volcanic eruptions, earthquakes and storms, linked by medieval chroniclers to the outbreak of plague, may well have caused rodents to move out of their accustomed area into areas where humans habituated. It is known that such disasters cause rodents to move distances. Human refugees from those disasters on the other hand, may have fled to rodent infested forests or steppes. It may be that fur trappers caught and spread the disease. This did happen in Manchuria in 1910 when sixty thousand trappers were infected with plague originating in marmot skins.²³



The Spread of the Black Death in Europe 1346-1350

²³ Rosen, n p185, quoting the 2004 work of Wendy Orent.

The ways that spread the plague worked against city dwellers and the poor. This was known then as were the three ways of contagion, if not the details of their methods. Pneumatic plague was spread by breath, coughing and sneezing.²⁴ Bubonic plague, by touching either the infected individual, what they had touched or contact with rodents or fleas. Rarer was septicaemic plague, caused by flea or rodent bites.²⁵ All three forms had incubation periods, this was understood in simple terms, at least by several chroniclers. The timing for incubation seems to have varied from the extremely rapid to several days.



The rushed, cramped and massive forms of burials are shown here in Tournai, but both archaeology and chronicler's descriptions reveal English cities would have been similar,

²⁴ McNeill, p.156 p.158.

²⁵ Robert S. Gottfried, 'A Natural History of the Plague and Other Early European Diseases.' Nardo, pp.36-38.; McNeill, pp.119-120 p156 p158.

While vectors and incubation were not clearly understood, the need for avoidance was. In parts of England people organised a de-facto preventative measure when payment for goods was made by having bowls for money. Presumably this involved delayed touching or touching with gloves. One manor lord burned down a nearby infected village. Touching or moving the dead or their possessions with ten foot poles was a similar method. Hence the phrase “wouldn’t go near him with a ten foot pole.” This memorable phrase which still lasts remains a folk memory of the plague in England. These basic preventative measures came from the people, not their government. In contrast to Edward III, most other secular rulers in Christendom and many of his own underlings during the plague, Pope Clement VI did what he could to stop the scourge and prevent many of the repulsive reactions in the Catholic world.

Amazingly although Edward III and his court had essential even detailed knowledge concerning the plague for at the least over six months, and for perhaps even nearly two years, but they apparently did nothing to stop ships reaching England. Although English sources agree that ships carried the plague to southern English ports, they give different dates and locales, sometime between June and October 1348.²⁶ The result was that at least a fifth of England’s population died in the epidemic there of 1348-1351.²⁷ Without an annual census or anything like an updated version of the Domesday Book, English population numbers in 1348 are speculative and at best uncertain, being based primarily on manor rolls, parish registers, taxation records, the 1377 poll tax and plague death writings. Modern population estimates for just before the plague range from two to nearly five million.²⁸ Applying even this lowest percentage of deaths to the lowest population estimate means that at least four hundred thousand people died. One frequently given death toll estimate by several modern historians is about a third of the total population died, although they disagree to some extent with what that total English population was.²⁹ Amongst these writers one of the most frequently used and

²⁶ Ziegler, pp.124-125.

²⁷Ziegler, quoting and disagreeing with Professor Russel’s 1940s estimate of twenty percent.

²⁸ Ziegler, pp232-235; McNeill p136.

²⁹ Ziegler, p236 p238; Maurice Keen, *English Society in the Later Middle Ages 1348-1500*. Penguin Books, 1990. p.6 p.32. Phillip Lindsay & Reg Groves, *The Peasant Revolt 1381*. Hutchinson &Co., p.30; Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages*. Paladin, 1970. p131; R.B. Dobson,

precise estimates is William H. McNeill's in *Plagues and Peoples* (1976). He states that England's population fell from 3.7 million in 1348 to perhaps 2.2 million in 1377 after the plague hit again in 1361 and several times after that, particularly in the second half of the fourteenth century.³⁰ Accepting these figures gives a higher death toll of perhaps two million or more for the several outbreaks, if some allowance is made for natural increase over twenty-nine years. Two of England's largest cities, Bristol and London, lost perhaps nine out of ten residents if medieval accounts are accurate. However some of these losses are likely to have been people fleeing, another small proportion of the casualties would have been recovering victims. Even so, the accounts of mass burials and the archaeological work on some of the plague pits support a massive death toll. Many of these plague pits remain undiscovered. This is probably because many are under cities and suburbs. Even while this work is being written another plague pit from the outbreak of 1665 has been found by tunnel diggers. What those medieval pit excavations do not support is the common image of piles of bodies being randomly and somewhat callously hurled into pits which soon overflow with corpses. This image comes from the description of William of Dene in a town in Kent.³¹ This may be an isolated example. The previously mentioned plague pits at Smithfield and Charterhouse show that the bodies were buried systematically in rows, following standard custom.

As the plague travelled north from its first landing places on England's southern coasts the plague did not spread fatalities evenly. In the countryside some villages were wiped out and what was once farmland would often revert to forest.³² Other locales were almost untouched. A factor which makes assessing the effects of the first great outbreak difficult is the way that in England the plague from 1361 onwards frequently reoccurred after about a decade. This pattern would last through the first third of the fifteenth century and then lessen. The last great English outbreak hit London as late as 1665.

Apart from the great plague of 1348-1351 reoccurrences meant that it would be over two hundred years before England's overall population recovered. In a few areas it never did: ruined huts and derelict land stayed that way.

The Peasants' Revolt of 1381. MacMillan, 1983. p59; Barbara Emerson, *The Black Prince*. Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1976, p68. McNeill p136

³⁰ McNeill, p136 p.158;

³¹ Cowie, p49. The description is quoted.

³² Knighton, p148.

This was the worst disaster to hit England before or since and so a strict co-ordinated effort nationwide effort was needed – and did not happen. Even Edward III's admiring biographer Ian Mortimer in *The Perfect King: The Life of Edward III Father of the English Nation* (2007) states bluntly that by the summer of 1347 Edward probably knew of the stories coming out of Asia and then Eastern Europe, but that his reactions were ignoring what he heard and that his priorities in 1348 were concerned with celebrating his military successes and curbing his troublesome parliament.³³ Although he spent his time that summer at tournaments and festivities and devising new taxes, he does not share sole blame.



Edward III, King of England between 1327 and 1377

³³ Ian Mortimer, *The Perfect King: The Life of Edward III Father of the English Nation*. Pimlico, 2007. p257.

As Mortimer states many English people must have understood that, unless all ports were closed, England would be the next to be struck by the plague.³⁴ Mortimer goes on to speculate (almost certainly correctly) that because they would have been financially ruined if the ports had been closed parliament and the merchants would have raised an outcry – and been unable to pay the taxes Edward needed for his luxuries and wars, let alone maintaining the kingdom.³⁵ Instead of internal quarantines once the plague was in England Edward III ordered prayers for the nation from the Archbishop of Canterbury - who died from the plague before he could give Edward's requested prayers.³⁶ As the plague spread slowly northwards it may have been stopped by severe quarantine measures as Milan had done, but it was not blocked: it took until the end of 1349 for it to cover England and then to advance on Scotland. The plague was not stopped, it died out, perhaps because it killed off so many potential carries and the survivors were out of its path.

On the positive side Edward III did prorogue parliament to stop the plague spreading, but this may have really been because parliament was being troublesome.³⁷ He may also have had something to do with ensuring that three of the most repulsive side effects of the plague prevalent in Europe did not take hold in England. His first achievement was the absence in England of the pogroms of Jews as they were supposedly spreading the plague. Few Jews lived in England at this time due to persecution and exile several decades before, but for those resident, there was no systematic persecution.³⁸ In central Europe hundreds, sometimes thousands were systematically killed, often by being burned alive; even a papal bull of September 1348 warning against the pogroms and their fallacious justifications, but the Pope's document had little effect.³⁹ The Pope reasonably pointed out that the Jews could not have caused the plague; they also suffered from it and the plague existed where there were no Jews.⁴⁰ The timing of this bull, coming just a few months after the plague reached England, may have been a cause for the lack of pogroms there: central Europe had the plague earlier and its anti-

³⁴ Mortimer, p259.

³⁵ Mortimer, pp259-260.

³⁶ Appendice Document 14: The Metropolitan of Canterbury 'Prayers to Save the Realm.' 1349 Nardo. p.157.

³⁷ Mortimer, p. 264; Ziegler, p162. Royal instructions are quoted.

³⁸ Ziegler, p110.

³⁹ Tuchman, pp109-116; Ziegler, pp 98-111.

⁴⁰ Tuchman, p115.

Semites had much more time to establish themselves, to spread their rumours, to organise and to kill. Amongst the Jews worst enemies were the flagellants.⁴¹

Catholic lay people, the flagellant movement had its origins in mid thirteenth century Western Europe and then seemed to have died out fairly quickly. With the advent of the plague they suddenly reappeared in their old areas and attracted large numbers, enthusiasm and public support. They wandered in processions across much of Europe. They believed that by whipping and beating themselves in organised public processions performed in town or village squares and before churches (often the same place) they were showing repentance for the sins that had caused the plague. Therefore God would show mercy to them and to Christendom and lift the curse of the plague. The probable reality is that just by wandering from place to place and then forming large groups consisting of participants and audience, flagellants spread the plague, as Pope Clement VI suspected.⁴²



A contemporary depiction of flagellants in procession

⁴¹ Tuchman, p116; Zeigler, p98; Cohn, p139-140. All three writers use a statement by Clement VI.

⁴² Ziegler, p67.

Another probable if unsuspected reality is that shedding their blood before assembled multitudes meant that flecks of infected blood were spread amongst the watchers. Blood would have also been spread on city square cobblestones, in an age when many went barefoot. Another practice likely to spread contagion was that some treated rags stained with flagellant blood as holy relics.⁴³ This must have meant touching them. Initially welcomed, the flagellants began to infringe on the church's power, frequently spouted heretical ideas and denounced many churchmen. They not only made enemies of the church, but with their verbal and physical assaults on the rich made enemies there as well. Like many of today's cults they had a way of attracting criminals and bandits wanting food, shelter and camouflage. These hangers on were probably involved in the way that the flagellants were frequently involved in assaults and robberies. Before Clement VI issued his bull against them in October 1349 the public mood had changed, and flagellants were frequently being persecuted by both religious and secular leaders.⁴⁴ It was against this background that one such group tried to set up in England in the autumn of 1349 and were deported back to Holland after performing one ritual in London.⁴⁵ The flagellants were another stereotypical image of the black death which does not apply to England.

The third negative amongst the Black Death's effects on continental Europe was that while much of Europe would produce morbid, often hideously repulsive art about or inspired by the Black Death, little of it was produced in England. Graphic, even nightmarish images of prancing skeletons, decayed corpses and terrified people were used to decorate tombs, churches and manuscripts across much of Europe, but whatever the reason England provided few examples. While Edward III might have had a role in protecting Jews and ridding England of flagellants, this cultural development seems to show the restraint and good taste of the English people rather than just their ruler. As with the great influenza pandemic of 1918-1920 which left well over two million dead in Europe, very few cultural aspects of the Black Death emerged in the epidemic's aftermath. One indirect possibility are the Robin Hood stories. Like the Wat Tyler rebellion, they reveal hostility to both royal and religious authority. Some of these cultural manifestations seem to have emerged just before the Black Death, but their widespread and immense popularity came decades after.

⁴³ Zeigler, p94; Cohn, p135.

⁴⁴ Two accounts of the flagellants are by Cohn pp131-141 and Zeigler, pp66-67 pp87-98.

⁴⁵ Ziegler p96; Mortimer, p270.

By the time the Black Death reached England Edward III had recently increased his already established popularity and respect for from his contemporaries due to his military victories in France and Scotland, adding Calais to his realm and by his lucrative ransoming of the French king. He had previously increased England's level of prosperity and stability after his father's disastrous reign, so he was not inept, ineffectual nor foolish. However in relation to the plague he showed a lack of desperately needed foresight, effectuality and providence. These faults went beyond his lack of action and by doing so, contributing to the plague's spread. He also reacted with an astounding callousness. Edward's court made this blatantly clear with their lavish festivities which he organised and attended during the worst months for plague fatalities.⁴⁶ One of Edward III's few measures was to ban animal slaughtering in London, and that the disposal of blood and offal be made more hygienic and remote as he thought slaughtered animal's rotting flesh contributed to the plague.⁴⁷ Considering what rats eat he may have been right, without understanding why. This effect of the plague was this rudimentary beginning of English health regulations concerning meat.

Amazingly one effect that did not happen was a rebellion against his rule or widespread disaffection – or is this just that we do not have accounts of what people scared of their king did, said or thought? Leonard W. Cowie does state that England experienced a breakdown of law and order at this time, but the medieval document he reproduces does not mention precise details and reads so imprecisely that it could refer such minor matters as name calling or a refusal to show the usual deference to supposed betters as much as a rebellion.⁴⁸ He also refers to a plundered manor in Wales.⁴⁹ There was also a riot against a local church concerning an inadequate burial ground, but these few examples are hardly strong examples of social breakdown, although that remains possible.

The poor and the lower classes had cause for resentment as the plague apparently hit the poor worse than the rich, who could often afford to flee and often had other more remote abodes.⁵⁰ The rich also had other advantages not appreciated at the time. The Charterhouse skeletons reveal chronic malnutrition and spinal injuries,

⁴⁶ Mortimer, pp258-259

⁴⁷ Zeigler, p.159 quoting royal instructions.

⁴⁸ Cowie, p60.

⁴⁹ Cowie,, p61.

⁵⁰ Mortimer, p. 264 ; Emerson, p68.; Lindsay & Groves, p.31

suggesting that the poor would have had a lower resistance to bubonic plague.⁵¹ Other advantages were in their habitations. Their rooves and ceilings were sometimes of stone, tile, prepared timber or slate, which preclude rat habitations, while the poor usually had thatch, straw or bracken roofing and wattle and mud walls.⁵² Rats loved thatch and straw. The wealthier had more space in their abodes their own beds and warmth from fireplaces. The poorer classes, by huddling together for body warmth while fully clothed to sleep (often with animals in the same room) unintentionally became plague vectors due to their proximity to biting fleas and rats, to touching and coughing. The overcrowded unsanitary English cities were particularly badly hit by the plague; London recorded over two hundred deaths a day between 2nd February and 12th April 1349 with large numbers outside this period.⁵³

Evidence for the epidemic's effects on England's economy are contradictory, suggesting very localised responses. Some write of prices dropping due to a lack of purchasers. Others write of high prices for manufactured goods because of scarcity. This happened because tradesmen died off or moved off for higher wages. Trade would have been severely disrupted where it did exist. Seaborne trade was probably non-existent and so England's lucrative wool market would have collapsed during the plague years. Even this assumes that enough of the wool would have been shorn and stored to have been traded, but medieval accounts do continually describe abandoned farms and straying animals. The price of most farm animals did seem to drop dramatically. This sounds probable. Why pay for animals when large numbers were now unowned and straying?

Bad as it was, England had fortuitously conquered and plundered much of Eastern France and taken the French king's ransom just before the pestilence reached them. This extra wealth, not only flowed down from the nobility but also came from the ordinary soldiers, it would have added more purchasing power and so served as a cushion for the plague's effects.

The manor based economy that supported much of the aristocracy, while not as badly hit by the plague as the cities, also suffered.⁵⁴ Medieval records show several estates suffering devastation as so many peasants died or fled the plague that crops

⁵¹ Morgan,

⁵² Lindsay & Groves, p14; MacNeill, p162.

⁵³ Document 6: Robert of Avesbury, 'A New Cemetery in London.' in Nardo, p149.; Ziegler, pp157-161.

⁵⁴ Ziegler, p237; Knighton, p146 p148

could not be harvested, farm animals wandered off and taxes or debts could not be collected or had to be reduced.⁵⁵ Those workers who stayed frequently demanded and got much higher wages.⁵⁶ Many purchased their freedom or moved away.⁵⁷ In an attempt to curb these tendencies and to restore traditional feudalism Edward III issued the first Statute of Labourers in 1349 which became a preamble to the second in 1351.⁵⁸ The first words clearly show that the King was not the overlord and protector of all the English people but the leader of the rich and privileged and the enemy of the lower orders:

Against the malice of servants who were idle and unwilling to serve after the pestilence without taking outrageous wages it was recently ordained by our lord the king, with the assent of the prelates, nobles and others of his council, that such servants, both men and women, should be obliged to serve in return for the salaries and wages which were customary (in those places where they ought to serve) during the twentieth year of the present of the present king's reign (1346-1347) or five or six years previously.

‘The Statute of Labourers, 1351.’ R.B. Dobson, *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381*. p. 64

In that same document the king then goes on to specify pay rates and punishments for refusing to accept these low pay rates, trying to leave areas, answering back to his magistrates who were enforcing these laws and speaking against the laws. However like so many attempts by some form of government to override the iron law of supply and demand, this policy was essentially a failure. The demand for labour was highly in demand due to the dislocation and scarcity caused by the plague. Labour could therefore demand higher wages and better conditions. The king's solution of jailing rebellious labour only exacerbated the situation as it made the the potential supply of labour scarcer. Despite their unpopularity and general ineffectuality these laws remained, perpetuating resentment and so were a long term cause of the 1381 Wat Tyler rebellion.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Knighton, p148.

⁵⁶ Knighton, p148.

⁵⁷ Phillip Lindsay & Reg Groves, p.30

⁵⁸ Dobson, pp.63-64.

⁵⁹ Keen, p.43; Tuchman, p.121; Dobson, p51.

One other very different effect of the plague that would ultimately and strongly benefit conservative politics in England (and still does) was the rise of the yeomanry in the years after the plague faded from England in 1350. Self-employed farmers who owned their own land which was usually worked by family members and perhaps a few servants or seasonal labourers, they seem to have been a small minority in the decades before the first plague hit, but a growing proportion of the population in subsequent decades. From an almost negligible factor in English politics before the fourteenth century they would become a powerful political force before that century's end and still are. By 1374 with merchants and others who were part of the emerging middle class they had formed a block in parliament that was large enough and powerful enough to challenge what was known of as the court faction. Their power was strong enough to gain the support of the dying Prince of Wales, desperate to have their support for his son's primogeniture.⁶⁰ The yeomanry's change in social position is not hard to fathom. Higher wages caused by the labour scarcity meant savings that could be used to buy land which they could then farm. The deaths of so many tenants and farmers meant that there was an abundance of untenanted, even untilled land not producing any income, so land became cheap, therefore affordable and the owners, the Manor lords and nobles had taxes, tithes and wages to pay, with little means of generating income. They would have been glad for any cash. Others may have traded their labourer for land; the former being scarce and the latter being abundant. It is quite possible that runaway serfs or villagers found abandoned farms or fields, took them over, herded up straying animals and did well for themselves. If local authorities still existed were they likely to remove someone who could pay taxes and tithes, provide food and trade products in a devastated land or perhaps defend the land from brigands? Medieval records of such people would have been rarer than their being found out. Would new authorities replacing the dead know who was a freed man or a runaway? Their descendants would be law-abiding rural dwellers, their farms an inheritance for each generation to come. It would take the Industrial Revolution, starting nearly four hundred years after the plague ended, before another event would have such a massive effect on England's population and demographics and create a larger class than the yeomanry, the urban proletariat.

Usually radicals against the manor lord's bailiff's and those authority figures who threatened their newly found upward social mobility, the same people were fiercely conservative towards anything perceived as a threat from those below

⁶⁰ Barbara Emerson, *The Black Prince*. London, 1976. pp252-255

them or outside their peer group. For them their farms and their class were the real England. The word yeomanry became synonymous with dependably conservative patriotism – and for good reasons.

Before the plague other factors had also weakened England's feudal bonds. Knighthood, the basis of nobility and a cornerstone of the feudal order, was also coming under pressure from technological changes. What would English archers at Crecy in 1346 have fought of the superiority of French aristocrats, as filled with arrows, they piled up in the mud without coming close? Longbows, cannons and crossbows (three sources for the sure destruction for armoured cavalry) were used in England decades before the Black Death hit.⁶¹ What would those seeing bombardments of castles, the embodiment and outstanding example of noble power, think of that power upon seeing its material evidence demolished? Would the English commoners have applied their contempt only to foreign aristocrats or would they also apply these feelings to their own supposed betters? By 1381 Wat Tyler's massive peasant rebellion was also openly contemptuous of all hierarches as their chants and slogans demonstrate.⁶² The most memorable came from a sermon by John Bull. In the plethora of dull English sermons that have accumulated over the centuries and had no social effect, Bull's was a standout, attracting thousands during the 1381 rebellion who chanted it as they plundered churches and murdered the Archbishop of Canterbury. It mixed defiance, contempt and a rejection of the feudal order:

When Adam delved and Eve span

Who was then the gentleman?

Their plundering of parts of London and murder of the Archbishop of Canterbury also shows the level of hostility.⁶³ While immediate causes for that rebellion were obvious, these attitudes also suggest a changing attitude to nobility and a developing self-confidence amongst the lower orders. The way they could demand and get higher pay due to the labour shortage caused by the plague would have contributed to that self-confidence. Knighthood and nobility would survive, albeit transformed and with less absolute power, but their best days seem to be before the

⁶¹ Tuchman, pp70-71.

⁶² Tuchman, pp. 374-375.

⁶³ Tuchman, pp. 376.

Black Death. The same idea applies to feudal system, that other mainstay of the Catholic Church.

Two obvious reasons emerge for this. Believers frequently attributed the plague's cause as being the will of God, his punishments for sinfulness.⁶⁴ In 1348 the Prior of Canterbury succinctly expressed this concept:

He often allows plagues, miserable famines, conflicts, wars and other forms of suffering to arise, and uses them to terrify and torment and so drive out their sins. 'Prayers to Save the Realm' p.157

Words like this would have been little if any comfort to the survivors living in fear: people quite reasonably asked why the plague attacked good and bad alike.⁶⁵ The way requested repentant prayers had no effect on stopping the plague would surely have also lowered the church's credibility. This alienation also happened at the local level as many priests fled to save themselves, while others had to be paid massive amounts to stay or to act as replacements.⁶⁶ However this cannot be the full story. An extremely large number of England's priesthood died during the epidemic. From the brief records it remains unclear what proportion of these replacements were self-sacrificing martyrs and what proportion were mercenaries. Other major factors at work to weaken the church's appeal were the papal schism of 1378 and the increasing veniality of the church. Which of these were the most important and how they interacted still causes speculation rather than certainty. To what extent (if any) disillusionment from the church's reaction to the plague influenced England's later fourteenth century religious rebels and critics, the Lollards and also John Wycliff and his followers remains unknown.

Similarly the plague, by killing off many Latin writing scholars, probably hastened the development of common English as England's national language.⁶⁷ English began taking over from French very soon after the plague waned.⁶⁸ By 1362 an act of Parliament made English the language of the law courts.⁶⁹ In architecture some claim that by killing off so many artisans a new style, the simpler to develop perpendicular which needed less skill from artisans emerged: others state that

⁶⁴ Marriot, p.11; The Metropolitan of Canterbury, p157.; de Mussis, pp.128-129; Ziegler p268.

⁶⁵ De Mussis pp128-129.

⁶⁶ Ralph of Shewsbury, a Letter of January 1349. Reproduced by Ziegler, p128.

⁶⁷ Ziegler, pp.260-261.

⁶⁸ Cowie, p62. Quoting the medieval educationist John Cornwall.

⁶⁹ Cowie, p64.

examples prove that this was developing decades before.⁷⁰ Even so the plague may have accelerated the process, making an emerging tendency the dominant fashion. Recent work on skeletons suggests that the plague greatly reduced or purged England of those with a simple genetic code that made for a low resistance to disease, leaving those with a more diverse code and therefore a stronger resistance to survive and give the population more resistance to other diseases. However this is a theory needing more evidence. The prevalence of smallpox, cholera, typhus, measles, mumps and other contagious diseases within England's population long after the black death faded goes against this idea. Although Edward II issued an ordinance in 1309 to cleanse London of its filth and excrement it was his son during the plague years who also reinforced this and included butchery products.⁷¹ Ideas about food regulations and quarantine seem to have started after the arrival of the plague. Like so many things that seem an effect of the plague this had a prototype in the years before, but was developed during the plague years and became part of life in subsequent decades.

The long term effects of the plague on England's economy, architecture, language, agriculture, religion, demographics, hierarchy, nobility and social cohesion are sources for controversy and conjecture. The fact that so many different fields are studied for the effects of the Black Death shows that however deep its effects, it was also pervasive.

Many claim that in the long term the plague's effects were beneficial, contributing to the waning of feudalism and therefore a better world. What can only be certain is that in the short term it was a traumatic nightmare for most of England.

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⁷⁰ Ziegler pp.265-266.

⁷¹ Cowie, pp45-46. Quoting from the 1309 ordinance, See also Source Note 47

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