

The Quarantining of a Staffordshire Town during Seventeenth Century Plague Outbreaks

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In 1665 a flea-infested bundle of cloth arrived from plague-afflicted London for the tailor in the Derbyshire village of Eyam. Within a week people were dying from the plague. The Reverend William Mompesson, and the Puritan minister Thomas Stanley introduced a number of measures to slow the spread of the illness from May 1666 including: arranging for families to bury their own dead; relocating church services to the nearby natural amphitheatre of Cucklett Delph, allowing villagers to keep a distance between themselves thus reducing the risk of infection and quarantining the entire village to prevent further spread of the disease (Paul 2012). While the death toll is believed to be high, there is debate as to how many actually died (Coleman 1986; Wallis 2006); however, the courage of the villagers has been much lauded for enduring the quarantine and successfully preventing the spread to neighbouring parishes (Clifford 1995; Daniel 1985).

Caused by the bacteria *Yersinia pestis*, plague is transmitted by fleas which have fed on the blood of infected black rats; the fleas may be passed via skin to skin contact or on bedding and clothing. Once bitten, the victim experiences flu-like symptoms and the lymph node (in the neck, groin or armpit) nearest the bite becomes swollen, tender, and purple or black: the classic sign of Bubonic plague - the bubo. Death can come two to four days after the onset of symptoms. However, once inside the body the bacteria can multiply in the blood stream and become the *Septicæmic* strain of plague. The symptoms are more pronounced and violent than those of Bubonic: fever; chills; abdominal pain; vomiting; diarrhoea; bleeding from the nose, mouth and anus and *purpura* (bleeding underneath the skin, causing the skin to turn black), eventually the victim goes into shock and dies. It has a higher mortality rate than Bubonic. If carried via the blood stream to the lungs, Pneumonic plague results - the only form of the disease that allows human to human transmission. Symptoms develop within one to three days: severe headache; high temperature; shortness of breath; chest pain, coughing and bloody sputum. Coughing and spitting produce airborne droplets laden with the highly infectious bacteria and through inhalation others become infected. With Pneumonic plague death occurs within twenty four to seventy two hours of exposure. This is the most virulent strain, and untreated it is fatal 90-95% of the time (Sherman 2006).

Prior to the understanding of pathogens the dominant philosophy governing health and illness was Humourism, which held that the human body is filled with four basic liquids or humours: Blood, Phlegm, Black Bile and Yellow Bile. When a person was healthy, the humours were balanced, while all diseases and infirmities resulted from an excess or deficit of one of the humours. A number of variables could affect the balance of the humours: food and drink ingested; physical activity; strong emotions; the seasons of the year; weather, astrological alignments of the planets,

geographical regions and occupations. Poisoned or corrupted air known as *Miasma* (from the ancient Greek for *defiled air*) was seen as the chief cause of epidemic disease. Miasmatic theory was the foremost explanation for disease up until the mid to late nineteenth century. Miasma was produced by decomposing matter (*miasmata*). Therefore infections would affect those living near a place that gave rise to such vapours, (for example: open sewers, cesspools, graveyards, slaughter-houses, swamps and marshes), and during epidemics arising from the breath of the infected. The Miasma could enter the body by inhaling it or through the pores of the skin. The aim of medical treatment was to restore the equilibrium of the humours by removing the surfeit or deficit. Through the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries the main forms of protection aimed to drive the miasma away and included: carrying and inhaling pomanders or bunches of fragrant herbs; keeping the house clean and fumigated through burning aromatic plants and incense; eating a simple diet and keeping streets free of detritus and burning fires in the street (Arrizabalaga 1994; Singer 1916; Sudhoff 1912-13).

Another important method of preventing the transmission was the quarantining of villages and towns and restricting travel from infected areas.

Quarantine was first introduced in 1377 in Dubrovnik on Croatia's Dalmatian Coast as a means of separating people, animals and goods that may have been exposed to plague. The phrase quarantine is derived from the Italian *quaranta*, meaning forty as people and items were kept in quarantine for forty days – possibly from Jesus having isolated himself for forty days and nights. The first English quarantine regulations were drawn up in 1663, for the confinement of ships with suspected plague-infected passengers or crew in the Thames estuary. The captain had to show evidence of the health of the sailors and passengers and provide information on the origin of any merchandise on board. If there was any suspicion of disease on the ship, the captain was ordered to proceed to the quarantine area, where passengers and crew were isolated and the vessel was thoroughly fumigated and retained for the requisite period (Tognotti 2013).

As in the case of Eyam, cities, towns and villages could place themselves under quarantine and control people entering from infected areas. The restricting of movement during times of plague was a common occurrence in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to prevent the spread of plague; certificates, which permitted movement, had to be signed by dignitaries from their home town testifying that it was plague free (Benedictow 2004). The Royal College of Physicians in the *Certain necessary directions as well for the cure of the plague, as for preventing the infection* (1665) recommended that those:

...who may remove or travel from places much infected to sound; that none might travel without Certificate of health ; that persons justly suspected might not be suffered to enter such places free from infection , but speedily sent away, or kept in some house or houses set apart to receive such persons (with accommodation of necessaries) for forty or thirty days at least, until their soundness [symptoms] might appear; and that any goods coming from like places might be opened and aired before received into houses free and clear.

While the *Orders conceived and published by the Lord Major and aldermen of the city of London* (1665) observed:

Forasmuch as nothing is more complained of, then the multitude of Rogues and wandering Beggars that swarm in, being a great cause of the spreading of the Infection, and will not be avoided, notwithstanding any Order that hath been given to the contrary: It is therefore now ordered, that such Constables, and others whom this matter may any way concern, do take special care that no wandering Beggar be suffered in the Streets of this City, in any fashion or manner whatsoever upon the penalty provided by the Law to be duly and severely executed.

In 1637, the town of Walsall, Staffordshire, was struck with plague along with Kidderminster, Worcestershire and Birmingham (Shrewsbury 1971). However, it may have been restricted to Walsall's environs. The municipal authorities attempted to control its spread by authorizing the borough constable to appoint warders to prevent strangers entering the town without a valid certificate. He was also to report the names of any warders who refused to do their duty and to warn "Innkeepers, Alehouse keepers and Victualers" that they could not admit any strangers without a certificate (Walsall Archives):

To THE CONSTABLE OF WALLSALL BURROWE

Whereas the infection of the plague is dispersed into divers parts of this kingdom by reason whereof it is verie dangerous to permit strange passengers to stay or abide in our Towne these are therefore to require you that imedyatlie you appoint foure sufficient housekeepers to ward every day, (till you have directions to surcrease), who shall ward either in their own persons, or place some other able men in their turnes, such as you in your discretion shall approve of, who shall stand at every end of the Towne to keepe out all such strangers as shall not bring a certificate that they come from noe infected places. And that you charge the sayd warders that they shall not suffer and suche stranger to stay in the Towne, as they will answare for their remissions at their peril. And if any whome you shall appoint shalbe refractarie and refuse to ward, or shalbe negligent in their places, that you give us notice of their names and prese [express] their offence; and we have ordered their good behaviour shall be granted against them; hereof you may not faile, as you will answare for your neglect at your perill. Given under our hands at Wallsall Boroughe, the seventeenth day of June, Anno Dom. 1637.

And further that you warne all the Innkeepers, Alehousekeepers, and Victualers within your constablewick that they doe not nor shall receive any suche stranger into their houses withoute ye like certificate, as they will avoyd the penaltie of beinge bound to ther good behaviour and suppression for victuallinge or sellingue ale any longer.

*Tho. Wollaston, Maior,
Henrye Stone
William Webb*

In July 1637 a local shoemaker was prosecuted for bringing leather into Walsall from an infected part of Birmingham and a woman from Birmingham afflicted by the plague was paid to leave the town (Willmore 1887). Leather was believed, along with other materials, (such as wool and velvet), to carry the plague and its transportation was restricted.

In 1665 the plague struck again, although it was mainly confined to London and its suburbs. Johnathan Dicken of Walsall died of the plague on August 4th 1665 (Willmore 1887) and stringent precautions were once again adopted. On 26th August the following was issued (Walsall Archives):

BURROUGH AND FFORREN OF WALSALL

Whereas wee apprehend the greate danger of the carriers going to and returning from London, having found by sad experience that for their own private advantage, (having at present double and treble the pay for carriage that they had formerly), have not refused to bring down both persons and goods to their owne knowledge out of infected parishes and places, to the endangering not only of themselves and families, but of the whole towne and countrey. And also being induced hereunto by the late danger wee were in by the death of a young man (wtch is not yet over). That if it please god to prevent oure feares, it shd not only lay an obligation of thankfulness for oure utmost dilligence and endeavours for prevention of the like danger, doe hereby order in manner and forme following , that is to say,

1. That if any carrier shall for the future desperately adventure to travell to London untill it shall please God upon the removeall or good abatement of the sicknes he may goe with lesse danger and more safety; and shall presume to come home to his owne house at Walsall, that his house shall be shutt upp for the space of one month at the least.

2. That noe inhabitant presume to enterteine any such carrier or their servants into their houses or companies by the space of one month after their retorne from London, or receive any goods or wares brought downe by them before the same have been aired by the space of one month at the least, upon the payne of having their house shutt up, and to be otherwayes proceeded against as dangerous persons & contemnners of Authority.

3. That noe inhabitant within the liberties of the burrough and fforren aforesaid, shall hereafter presume to enterteyne anye passengers braught by the carriers or otherwise, only ife they make it appeare by legall testimony that they have been out of the City and subburbs of London by the space of one month at the least, and untill they may receive them with more safety, upon the like payne.

4. Lastly, that all inhabitants, householders within the liberties of the sayd burrough and fforen, doe watch and ward with either their owne persons, or others that shall be approved of by the constables, at suche times and places as the constables shall appointe. And that the warders continue in their ward untill the watch come to relieve them at night. And the watchers continue their watch untill the warders come to relieve them in the morning, upon payne of every one being found negligent in any of the premises, to be bound to their good behaviour.

Richard Blackham, Maior.

John Saunsom

William Smith

Articles 1 and 2 observe that should anyone “travell to London” during the time of plague and then return to their house in Walsall or receive “goods or wares” that have not been properly quarantined and aired their house would be “shutt up”. This involved all members of the household being locked up within the house for forty days with a watchmen remaining outside at all hours to prevent sick or exposed individuals leaving and the healthy entering; the only visitors permitted were nurses,

who were often elderly widows. The time could be extended if a member of the household began to show symptoms of the plague or died from it during confinement. In such cases the front door would be marked with a red cross and the words “*Lord has mercy upon us*” daubed upon it (*The shutting up infected houses* 1665).

Thanks to these measures, Walsall escaped the plague. According to Willmore, there were few deaths in the borough, but “*many thousands*” (p279) in London.

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The shutting up infected houses as it is practised in England soberly debated By way of address from the poor souls that are visited, to their brethren that are free. With observations on the wayes whereby the present infection hath spread. As also a certain method of diet, attendance, lodging and physick, experimented in the recovery of many sick persons (1665) London.

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