

The Great Plague 1665-1666

What Was the Great Plague?



Approximately 350 years ago, a terrible disease spread across parts of Europe.



It was called the Great Plague.



There had been plague in England for centuries.



However, the worst year was 1665, when London was badly affected.

How Did the Plague Spread?

Some doctors blamed poisonous air, which they said infected people. Others blamed farm animals for carrying the plague. However, the plague was actually spread by rats.



How did Rats Spread the Plague?

Rats carried bacteria and also had fleas.

The fleas passed on the bacteria to people by biting them.

Humans infected each other by coughing and sneezing.

This caused the plague to spread extremely quickly.

There were lots and lots of rats in all towns and cities during this time, especially in London.



What Happened During the Plague?

People were terrified of the plague as there was no known cure.

Whole communities were wiped out.

The plague began in an area called St. Giles-in-the-Field, an area of London which was fairly poor and overcrowded.

The plague spread very quickly and people died within days of becoming infected.

They suffered pain, fevers and infected swellings on their bodies.



What Happened During the Plague?

The plague was horrible and could wipe out the population of a town within weeks.

By the end of 1665, 100 000 people had died in London.

When a household became infected the house was sealed which meant nobody could leave or enter the building. This meant the people would die.

Any houses where there was plague, were marked with a red cross on the front door, along with the words 'Lord have mercy on us'.



What Happened During the Plague?



King Charles II fled London as did anyone with enough money to leave.

Unfortunately, the poor and many others could not get out of London.

They were forced to stay and suffer the effects of the plague.

How Do We Know What it Was Like to Live During the Plague?

A lot of what we know about life during the Great Plague comes from the diary of a man named Samuel Pepys.

He stayed in London and wrote in his diary every day.



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Samuel Pepys

Samuel Pepys was born on 23rd February, 1633 in London.

He went to St Paul's School in London and later went to Cambridge University.

After university, he began working for the government and the navy. His cousin, the Earl of Sandwich, helped him to get a good job.

Samuel Pepys married Elizabeth, a young French girl, in 1655.

Samuel Pepys enjoyed music and liked going to the theatre, wearing fine clothes and a wig! (Many rich men did this.)

Samuel Pepys' Diary

Samuel Pepys began writing his diary on 1st January, 1660.

He wrote about everyday occurrences in his life but also about important events in Britain's history that happened while he was alive.

His diary about the Great Plague has helped us to learn about and understand the spread of the plague.



How Did People Try to Avoid the Plague?

As there was no known cure, many people tried alternative ways to avoid being infected.

Some people thought that holding a small bunch of flowers or herbs to their nose would prevent them getting the plague.

Some drank fine wines or even ate toads!

Others thought having a bath in milk would prevent them from becoming ill.



Ring a Ring o'Roses

The rhyme ring a ring o'roses is sometimes sung by children

It is actually a rhyme about the Great Plague!

Children hold hands and dance round in a circle, singing the rhyme and then all fall down at the end.

Ring o'roses – refers to the red spots which affected people who had the plague.

pocket full of posies – refers to the small bunches of flowers people thought might prevent them from being infected with the plague.

atishoo, atishoo – this refers to the sneezing which affected people, especially as the illness got worse.

we all fall down – this refers to the death of those affected.



How Did the Plague End?

The Great Plague in London lasted until the Autumn of 1666. A very cold spell of weather killed off the fleas and bacteria.

This stopped the plague spreading.

Also in 1666, the Great Fire of London destroyed many of the rat-infested buildings. This stopped the spread of the plague.



The Great Fire of London



The fire broke out at a bakery in Pudding Lane on 2nd September, 1666.

It lasted four days and burned down 13 000 homes.

It was so big that it was called the Great Fire of London.

The reason so many buildings were destroyed was that they were built very close together.

They were also mainly built of wood.

