



# The Great Plague of 1665-6

How did London respond to it?

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## Introduction

This was the worst outbreak of plague in England since the black death of 1348. London lost roughly 15% of its population. While 68,596 deaths were recorded in the city, the true number was probably over 100,000. Other parts of the country also suffered.

The earliest cases of disease occurred in the spring of 1665 in a parish outside the city walls called St Giles-in-the-Fields. The death rate began to rise during the hot summer months and peaked in September when 7,165 Londoners died in one week.

Rats carried the fleas that caused the plague. They were attracted by city streets filled with rubbish and waste, especially in the poorest areas.

Those who could, including most doctors, lawyers and merchants, fled the city. Charles II and his courtiers left in July for Hampton Court and then Oxford. Parliament was postponed and had to sit in October at Oxford, the increase of the plague being so dreadful. Court cases were also moved from Westminster to Oxford.

The Lord Mayor and aldermen (town councillors) remained to enforce the king's orders to try and stop the spread of the disease. The poorest people remained in London with the rats and those people who had got the plague. Watchmen locked and kept guard over infected houses. Parish officials provided food. Searchers looked for dead bodies and took them at night to plague pits for burial.

All trade with London and other plague towns was stopped. The Council of Scotland declared that the border with England would be closed. There were to be no fairs or trade with other countries. This meant many people lost their jobs - from servants to shoemakers to those who worked on the River Thames. How did Londoners react to this plague that devastated their lives?

## Tasks

Look at Source 1

1. This letter was written by Henry Muddiman, a journalist who published newsletters and also wrote for the newly founded 'London Gazette'.
  - a) Can you work out how many people died from plague in the previous week?
  - b) What is the total for other causes of death for this week?
  - c) Can we rely on the figures given in this source? Give reasons for your answer.
  - d) What did the job of a searcher involve?

Look at Source 2

2. These are the Orders for the prevention of the plague, made by the King in 1666.
  - a) How do orders 6, 7 and 8 aim to prevent the plague?
  - b) How long were infected houses shut up for?

- c) What plague symptoms are described in these orders?
- d) Which order suggests that plague was not a new problem in the 17th century?
- e) Do you think any of these orders would have helped to prevent plague? Give reasons for your answer.
- f) Which officials concerned with the plague are named in this source? Make a list.
- g) In what ways does the source suggest that people at the time saw the plague as a punishment from God?
- h) These orders are very strict, yet most people followed them. Can you suggest why?

Look at Source 3 a and b

- 3. What do these sources reveal about peoples attitudes to the authorities during the plague?

## Background

There are three types of plague. Most of the sick in 1665-6 had bubonic plague. This created swellings (buboes) in the lymph nodes found in the armpits, groin and neck. Plague sufferers experienced headaches, vomiting and fever. They had a 30% chance of dying within two weeks. This type of plague spread from a bite caused by a black rat flea that carried the *Yersinia pestis* bacteria.

Worse still was pneumonic plague, which attacked the lungs and spread to other people through coughing and sneezing, and septicæmic plague, which occurred when the bacteria entered the blood. In these cases, there was little hope of survival.

Treatments and prevention at the time did not help. Sometimes, patients were bled with leeches. People thought impure air caused the disease and could be cleansed by smoke and heat. Children were encouraged to smoke to ward off bad air. Sniffing a sponge soaked in vinegar was also an option.

As the colder weather set in, the number of plague victims started to fall. This was not due to any remedies used. Nor was it due to the fire of London that had destroyed many of the houses within the walls of the city and by the River Thames. (Many plague deaths had occurred in the poorest parishes outside the city walls.)

Some scientists suggest that the black rat had started to develop a greater resistance to the disease. If the rats did not die, their fleas would not need to find a human host and fewer people would be infected. Probably, people started to develop a stronger immunity to the disease. Also, in plague scares after 1666, more effective quarantine methods were used for ships coming into the country. There was never an outbreak of plague in Britain on this scale again.

## Teachers Notes

This lesson can be used at key stage 3 for the national curriculum programme of study into how the lives, beliefs, ideas and attitudes of people in Britain have changed over time.

The lesson considers the measures taken by King Charles II in response to the plague and the reactions of some of the people to these restrictions, as well as providing contemporary comment on the situation.

### Sources

The questions encourage pupils to investigate the sources and make their own judgements on the evidence where possible.

Source 1 provides some figures on plague deaths and evidence on the role of the searchers. (SP 29/132 f.28)

Source 2 shows evidence of how contemporaries tried to prevent the spread of the disease. (SP 29/155 f.102) It might also encourage pupils to think about law and order in a wider historical context. For example, after the experience of English Civil War, people were probably more accepting of authority.

Sources 3a and 3b reveal some contemporary attitudes to the restrictions. (SP 29/134 f.31 and PC 2/58)

## More activities

Pupils could attempt a piece of extended writing on the great plague of London using evidence from the snapshot, plus this extract and others from the Diary of Samuel Pepys.

*16 October 1665*

*But Lord, how empty the streets are, and melancholy, so many poor sick people in the streets, full of sores, and so many sad stories overheard as I walk, everybody talking of this dead, and that man sick, and so many in this place, and so many in that. And they tell me that in Westminster there is never a physitian, and but one apothecary left, all being dead - but that there are great hopes of a great decrease this week. God send it.*

Pupils could create their own role play or drama set at the time using these sources. Pupils could read extracts from Daniel Defoes 'A Journal of the Plague Year', 1722, which is available online.

## Source 1 : Part of a letter from a Journalist 1665 (SP 29/132 f.28)

The totall of the burials this weeke 8252 plague 6970  
 on wape 756 painthes infected 110 This Bill had numbered  
 one more but for a remarkable providence, w<sup>ch</sup> was thus.  
 A Butcher in Newgate market being by the searchers given

out to be dead of the Plague & by the neglect of the  
 Boarders not carried away the same night was laid out in  
 an upper room w<sup>ch</sup> his daughter going next day  
 the father bestowed to her & bad her bring him out  
 for he was red. The daughter called up her mother was  
 giving him clothe, the man took a pipe of tobacco  
 out a rabbit & on Sunday went to Church to give God  
 thanks for his preservation.

## Source 1 : Transcript of part of a letter from a Journalist 1665 (SP 29/132 f.28)

The totall of the burialls this week 8252 plague 6978 increase 756 parishes infected 118. This Bill had numbered one more but for a remarkable providence which was thus. A Butcher in Newgate Market being by the Searchers given out to be dead of the Plague and by the neglect of the Boarders not carried away the same night was laid out in an upper room wither his daughter going next day the father beckoned to her and bade her bring him ale for he was cold. The daughter called up her mother who giving him clothes, the man took a pipe of tabacco eat a rabbit and on Sunday went to Church to give God thanks for his preservation.

### Glossary

Bill - the weekly mortality bill which was a printed list of the number buried in each parish who died of the plague and of other causes

providence - intervention from God

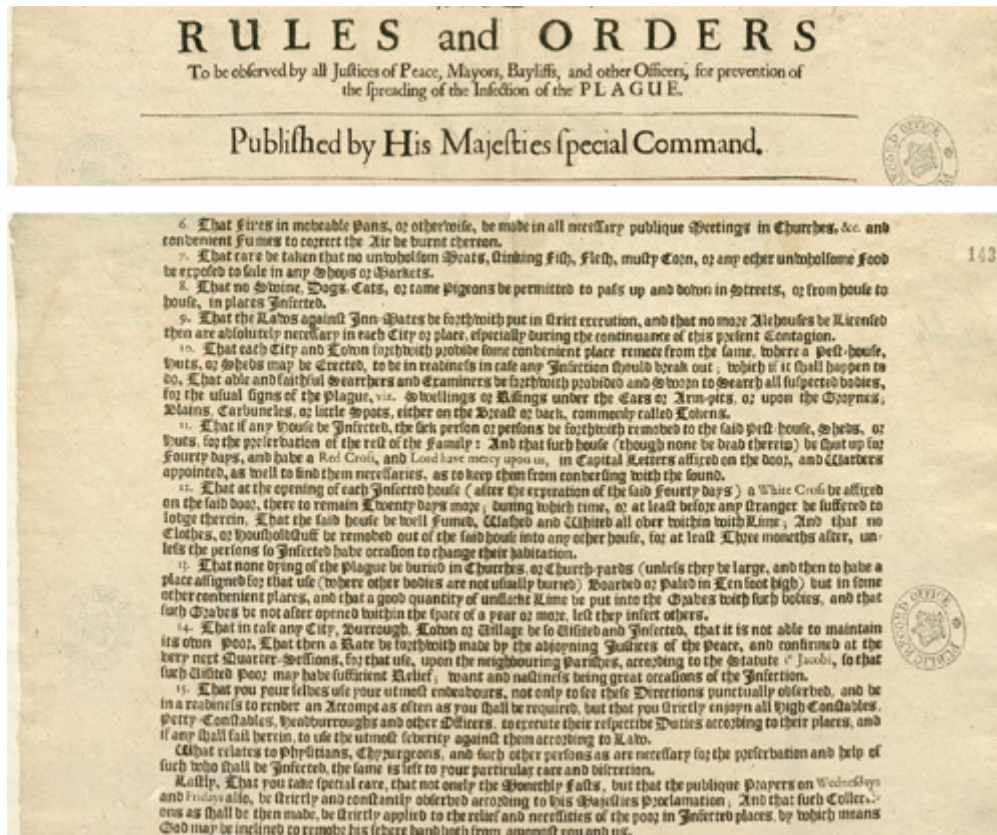
Searchers - officials appointed to view dead bodies and to make reports on the cause of death

wither - where

tabacco - tobacco

preservation - safety or protection

## Source 2 : Orders for the prevention of the plague 1666 (SP29/155 f.102)



## Source 2 : Transcript of orders for the prevention of the plague 1666 (SP29/155 f.102)

### RULES AND ORDERS

To be observed by all Justices of Peace, Mayors, Bayliffs, and other Officers, for prevention of the spreading of the Infection of the PLAGUE.

Published by His Majesties Special Command. . .

[Orders 1-5 say that no stranger was allowed to enter a town unless they had a certificate of health. No furniture was to be removed from an infected house. There were to be no public gatherings such as funerals and all houses were to be kept clean.]

... ..

That Fires in moveable Pans, or otherwise, be made in all necessary publique [public] Meetings in Churches, &c. and convenient Fumes to correct the Air be burnt thereon. That care be taken that no unwholsom Meats, stinking Fish, Flesh, musty Corn, or any other unwholesome Food be exposed to sale in any Shops or Markets. That no Swine, Dogs, Cats or tame Pigeons be permitted to pass up and down in Streets, or from house to house, in places Infected.

That the Laws against Inn-Mates be forthwith put in strict execution, and that no more Alehouses be Licensed then are absolutely necessary in each City or place, especially during the continuance of this present Contagion.

That each City and Town forthwith provide some convenient place remote from the same, where a pest-house, huts, or sheds may be erected, to be in readiness in case any Infection should break out; which if it shall happen to do, That able and faithful Searchers and Examiners be forthwith provided and Sworn to Search all suspected bodies, for the usual signs of the plague, viz. Swellings or Risings under the Ears or Arm-pits, or upon the Groynes [groin]; Blains, Carbuncles, or little Spots, either on the Breast or back, commonly called Tokens.

That if any House be Infected, the sick person or persons be forthwith removed to the said pest-house, sheds, or huts, for the preservation of the rest of the Family: And that such house (though none be dead therein) be shut up for forty days, and have a Red Cross, and Lord have mercy upon us, in Capital Letters affixed on the door, and Warders appointed, as well to find them necessaries, as to keep them from conversing with the sound.

That at the opening of each Infected house (after the expiration of the said Forty Days) a White Cross be affixed on the said door, there to remain Twenty days more; during which time, or at least before any stranger be suffered to lodge therein, That the said house be well Fumed, Washed and Whited all over within with Lime; And that no Clothes, or Householdstuff be removed out of the said house into any other house, for at least Three months after, unless the persons so Infected have occasion to change their habitation.

That none dying of the Plague be buried in Churches, or Church-yards (unless they be large, and then to have a place assigned for that use (where other bodies are not usually buried) Boarded or Paled in Ten foot high) but in some other convenient places, and that a good quantity of unslakt Lime be put into the Graves with such bodies, and that such Graves be not after opened within the space of a year or more, lest they infect others.

That in case any City, Burrough, Town or Village be so visited and Infected, that it is not able to maintain its own poor, That then a Rate be forthwith made by the adjoining Justices of the Peace, and confirmed at the very next Quarter Sessions, for that use, upon the neighbouring Parishes, according to the Statute 1 Jacobi [James 1], so that such visited poor may have sufficient Relief; want and nastiness being great occasions of the Infection.

That you your selves use your utmost endeavours, not only to see these Directions punctually observed, and be in a readiness to render an Accomt [Account] as often as you shall be required, but that you strictly enjoyn all high Constables, petty Constables, Headburroughs and other Officers, to execute their respective Duties according to their places; and if any shall fail herein, to use the utmost severity against them according to Law.

What relates to Physitians, Chysurgeons, and such other persons as are necessary for the preservation and help of such who shall be Infected, the same is left to your particular care and direction.

Lastly, That you take special care, that not onely [only] the Monethly Fasts, but that the publique prayers on Wednesdays and Fridays also, be strictly and constantly observed according to his Majesties Proclamation; And that such Collections as shall be then made, be strictly applied to the relief and necessities of the poor in Infected places, by which means God may be inclined to remove his severe hand both from amongst you and us.



Glossary

affixed - attached

Alehouses - places where ale (beer) was sold

Bayliffs - bailiffs, officials who could enforce written orders issued by a court and carry out arrests

Blains - sores, blisters

Boarded or Paled - fenced

Burrough - any place larger than a village

Carbuncles - harmful tumours, caused by inflammation of the skin

Chysurgeons - surgeons

Contagion - epidemic

enjoyn - direct, order

expiration - end of the time limit

forthwith - immediately

habitation - place where people live

Headburroughs - officers with the same role as petty constables

herein - in this

high Constable - officer with duties and powers to keep the peace

Fumed - treated with fumes

Justice of the Peace - magistrate with the power to deal with lesser crimes, perform marriages and administer oaths

large - wealthy, important

pest-house - a plague hospital, there were five in London holding about 600 people

petty Constable - officer whose task was to keep the peace

Physitians - physicians, doctors

Proclamation - public announcement

Quarter Sessions - a local court of limited powers that sat every three months

Relief - public assistance, aid

render - give

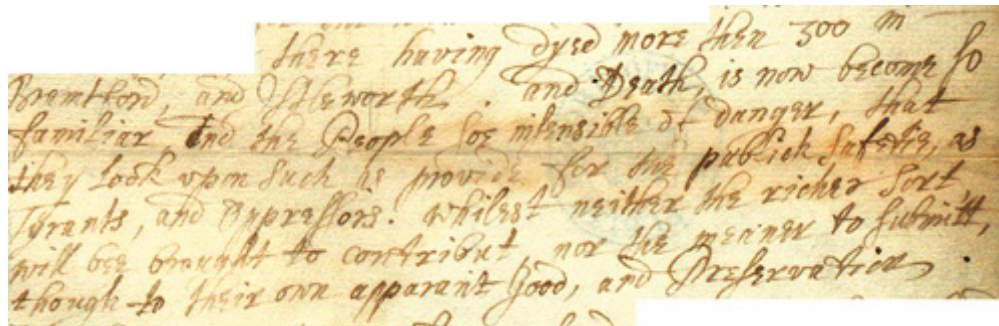
Searchers - officials appointed to view dead bodies and report on the cause of death

unwholsom - unhealthy

viz.- that is

Warders - guards or watchers of the locked up houses

## Source 3a : Part of a letter from a civil servant, 8 October 1665 (SP 29/134 f.31)



There having dyed more than 500 in  
Dyce more than 500 in  
and Death, is now become so  
familiar to the People for miserable of danger, that  
they look upon such as provide for the publick safety, as  
Tyrants, and Oppressors. whilst neither the richer sort  
will bee brought to contribute, nor the poorer to submit,  
though to their own apparent good, and Preservation.

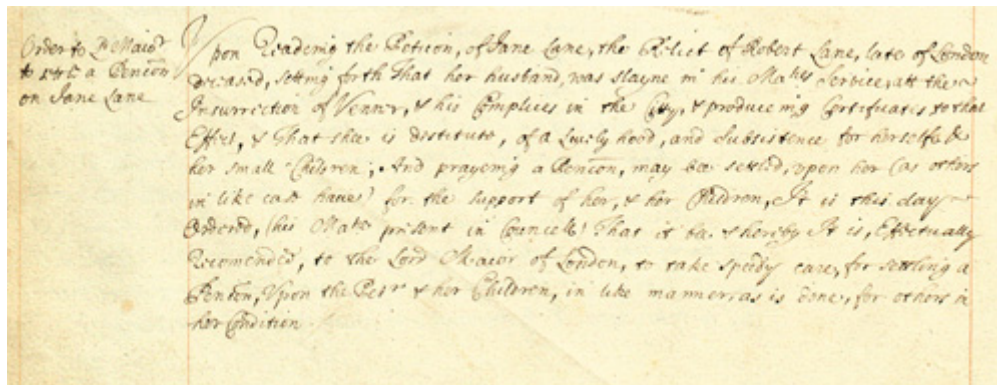
## Source 3a : Transcript of part of a letter from a civil servant, 8 October 1665 (SP 29/134 f.31)

... there having dyed more than 300 in Brentford and Isleworth, and Death is now become so familiar, and the People soe insensible of danger, that they look upon such as provide for the publick safety, as Tyrants and Oppressors, whilst neither the richer sort, will be brought to contribut, nor the meaner to submitt, though to their own apparant good, and preservation.

### Glossary

insensible - not caring about, having no regard for  
Tyrants - people who exercise power in a cruel way  
meaner - low in social status, poor  
preservation - safety, protection

## Source 3b : Case discussed at court at Whitehall in the presence of Charles II, 28 April 1665 (PC 2/58)



## Source 3b : Transcript of a case discussed at court at Whitehall in the presence of Charles II, 28 April 1665 (PC 2/58)

Order to Lord Chiefe Justice to enquire after the Ryott about the houses infected

Upon Information given unto this Board, that the house, the Signe of the ship in the New buildings in St.Giles in the fields, was shutt up as suspected to bee infected with the Plague, & a Cross and paper fixed, on the doore; And that the said Cross & paper were taken off, & the door opened, in a riotious manner, & the people of the house permitted, to goe abroad into the street promiscuously, with others; It is this day ordered (his Majesty present in Councell) that the Lord Chiefe Justice, of his Majesty's Bench, & other his Majesty's Justices of the peace, for the County of Middlesex, bee and are hereby desired, to make dilligent & strict enquiry, after the offenders in the said Ryott; And inflict upon them, for such of them as they shall find, the severest punishments, the

Right of the Law, will allow, against offenders in [?], of soe dangerous a consequence;  
And soe much to the contempt of his Majesty's orders as theirs;

#### Glossary

Ryott - riot

riotious - disorderly

goe abroad - go about

promiscuously - freely

dilligent - diligent, a thorough effort