

Black death

The plague



In the summer of 1348, a ship arrived at the busy port of Weymouth in Dorset. The crew were unaware that along with their goods the ship was carrying a deadly cargo: the Black Death. Within a few days, hundreds of men, women and children would be infected. Within a few months, around one-third of the population of England would be dead!



- Four Humours - A theory about the causes of illness first developed by the Greek doctor Hippocrates (460-375 BC). He proposed that the body was composed of four 'humours' (phlegm, yellow bile, black bile and blood). The theory argued that people in good health had a balance of all four humours, while ill health was caused by one or more of the humours becoming out of balance.
- Physician – Another term for a doctor.

The disease then seems to have spread by ship into central Europe, arriving in Italy in around 1347 before spreading overland into France and Germany, and eventually by ship to England. Once the Black Death arrived in Weymouth in May 1348, it spread quickly through England. The disease seemed to spread randomly, jumping from place to place and appearing in new locations without warning. This is probably because it was being spread across the land by the movement of rats and also by ships visiting trading ports along the coast. England was in a state of panic. All of the combined medical knowledge and wisdom of medieval doctors and the Church seemed to have no effect at all on the disease. Many people must have felt that the end of the world had come.

What was the Black Death? Most historians now think that the Black Death was a highly infectious disease known as bubonic plague, caused by bacteria you will find out more about this in lesson.

Where did the Black Death come from? The first recorded outbreak of the Black Death was in central Asia in 1321-39. From there, the disease seems to have travelled along the trade route known as the Silk Road, reaching Kaffa in the Crimea on the Black Sea in 1343.

Medieval people were extremely religious. The Church was very powerful and controlled who was educated and what they were taught. It enforced its teachings strictly and people could be horribly punished for criticising the teachings of the Church. Medieval people believed that their time on Earth was only the blink of an eye, and that after death they could be punished if they had not confessed their sins. Therefore, it is no surprise that most of the explanations offered for the Black Death were religious ones. Medical and scientific knowledge was very limited at this time. It would be hundreds of years before scientists understood that bacteria cause many diseases. Medical students were taught that the Four Humours* explained illness. Unfortunately, as this theory argued that a disease was caused by internal factors, it couldn't explain why thousands of people were dying of the same disease with the same symptoms. Therefore, medieval people turned to religion and superstition to explain the illness. Some argued that the disease was caused by an unusual alignment of the planets, others that it was caused by foul air. However, the most widespread explanation was that it was a punishment from God.



Was the Black Death a disaster?

Few historians considered the impact of the Black Death until F A Gasquet, a Catholic monk. In 1893, he described it as a catastrophe which destroyed the Church and caused the Reformation.

In 1966, one historian claimed that it was one of the three greatest catastrophes in the history of the world. Other historians suggested that the Black Death destroyed the feudal system and caused the Peasants' Revolt.

Other historians questioned this. The social historian G G Coulton (1929) suggested that the Black Death made people wealthier, because it reduced the number of people sharing the wealth.

The Marxist historians claimed that the social changes of the 14th century were caused by general climate and economic factors, and that the Black Death speeded the changes up, but did not cause them.

However, the Black Death did lead to the Statute of Labourers which did the following: Anyone who breaks this law will be sent to prison. Everyone under the age of 60 must work for the same wages as before the plague. Anyone refusing to work for these wages will be sent to gaol. Peasants are not allowed to move away to find better work. It is forbidden to give charity to those who could work but choose not to do so. It is forbidden for anyone to leave their place of employment without permission. This was to ensure the Feudal System could still function for the benefit of the knights, barons and King

Tudors and Stuarts

The Wars of the Roses (1455–1487) were a series of civil wars, fought over the throne of England, between supporters of the House of Lancaster (the Lancastrians) and supporters of the House of York (the Yorkists). Both houses were branches of the Plantagenet royal house, and were related through King Edward III. The wars began for several reasons. Historians have different ideas over which was the most important. King Henry VI was seen as a poor ruler by many of his people, due to his lack of interest in politics and his mental illness (his French queen Margaret of Anjou often made key decisions instead). It was also caused by to England's defeat in the Hundred Years' War in France, money problems afterwards and problems with the feudal system of government. The name of the Wars of the Roses comes from the white rose symbol for the House of York and the red rose symbol for the House of Lancaster. However, the red rose symbol was not used until after the wars ended, and most soldiers fought under the symbol of their local nobleman. The name was not used until the 19th century. In earlier years they were known as the "Civil Wars". The houses were named after the cities of Lancaster and York, but these cities played little role in the war. The two houses owned land all over England and Wales. They ended when Richard III (York) was defeated at the Battle of Bosworth by Henry Tudor (Lancaster) who then started the Tudor Dynasty. Much that is written about Richard III shows him in a negative light. But it was written during the time of the Tudors so there will always be a question over its validity.

