

The Black Death Quick Revision Notes

The Black Death of 1348 was an epidemic as it brought death to huge numbers of people. It killed about a third of England's population. Up to 25 million people died in Europe.

HOW WAS THE BLACK DEATH SPREAD

1. THE MEDICAL CAUSES - (How it was caught.)

- It was caused by a bacteria or bacillus that lived in the blood of black rats. When the fleas that lived on these rats bit into the rat's blood, the bacteria entered the flea's gut, blocking it up and making it very hungry. If the flea got onto another animal or person, it would bite into it and pass on the bacteria, so infecting it with the bubonic plague.
- spread by contact with an infected person either by the flea bite or, in the case of pneumonic plague, by mucus or phlegm droplets (like flu is). Inhaling flea faeces also caused pneumonic!!

2. HOW IT REACHED EUROPE AND ENGLAND

- Started in China in mid 1330s.
- Spread along sea and land routes, reaching Europe in early 1347. Also brought into Sicily in 1347 by infected traders (and the black rats on board) fleeing the Black Sea port of Caffa after the besieging Mongol army had spread the disease by flinging the bodies of plague victims into the city.
- It reached England in late June 1348 brought by sailors on trading ships landing at Melcombe Regis, Dorset.
- By 1349 all of England was affected.

WHY DID IT SPREAD SO EASILY?

- Lack of medical knowledge and people's ignorance led to action that spread the disease.
- In towns houses were very close together, doors and windows were poor fitting. Rats could move around freely. Rats were commonplace and therefore nobody saw the connection.
- Dirty living conditions. There were open drains and no sewage system. No clean running water.
- Humidity and temperature conditions were ideal in 1348
- Trade had to continue in England and diseases spread along trade roads in cargo..

WHAT THE DISEASE WAS LIKE

- **bubonic plague** - called after the BUBOES or swellings that would appear on the victim's body (armpit, neck and groin). This killed about 70% of all those who caught it. Also caused headache, fever, nausea and dark rashes on the skin. It would take about a week to die. 75% mortality. Most common form of plague
- **pneumonic plague** - this was similar to the bubonic (headache, fever etc.) but was deadlier and quicker as the disease got into the victim's lungs, leading to the coughing up of blood. It was always deadly and killed within two days. 95% mortality
- **septicaemic plague** - here the disease caused severe blood poisoning and coma, and killed within a few hours. 99% mortality

WHAT PEOPLE THEN THOUGHT

People's understanding of science and medicine was very limited in those days, and so they really had little understanding of what caused the disease. Therefore, a lot of different ideas about what caused it and how it could be avoided or cured came about.

I. WHAT THEY THOUGHT CAUSED IT THEN

a) **scientific thinking**

All soon realised that it could be passed on by contact with an infected person.

- carried by bad air cloud from the East (Miasma)
- carried by certain foods and spices - especially from the East
- infected people had their own bad air
- it started because of the position of the planets (especially Saturn)

b) **ideas caused by panic and desperation**

- caused by Jews poisoning wells

c) **religious ideas**

- sent by God to punish people for their sins

2. HOW TO AVOID GETTING IT

scientific thinking

- Avoid any contact with a plague victim; either shut yourself up at home or close your village / town to strangers.
- Get rid of the bad air by purifying it using fire, sweet smelling herbs. Leave crowded, smelly towns for clean air and space of countryside.
- Change diet.

Ideas caused by panic and desperation

- Kill the Jews as some people thought they were causing it.
- Spells and charms to keep the plague away.

religious ideas

- Become religious; special services, processions etc. This way God would forgive you your sins and protect you from the disease, and God controlled life and death.
- Some became very religious e.g. Flagellants (marching for 33 days)

3. THE CURES

Logical ideas based on scientific thinking then

a) Medical - medicine still based on Ancient Greek thinking!

- Balance out the Four Humours by bleeding out poisoned blood
- Clean out the buboes by lancing or using a heated glass.
- Some did survive the bubonic plague; partly due to their own strength and partly due to the treatment they received which aimed to control the infection in the buboes and boils and to keep the fever down. (BUT pneumonic and septicaemic were always fatal)

b) Herbal - herbs had always been used in medicine, but now new potions were made. The richer the patient, the more expensive the potion.

- Herbs with clay, dead animals etc.
- Herbs with precious metals like gold and unicorn horns!

c) Religious - used by a lot of people as God controlled life and death. And may have sent the plague to punish the wicked.

- Prayers and special services by priests.
- Swallowing special prayers written on pieces of paper.

d) Superstitious cures - people were so scared, they would believe I try anything

- Dead toads on buboes.
- Magic spells like abracadabra.
- Amulet charms

4. THE REACTIONS

- Those who could afford to fled
- Some towns and villages shut their gates to keep people out
- Law and order collapsed
- Many became very religious

THE PLAGUE DIES DOWN

- 1350 number of deaths in England (which had probably been about 200 a day at its peak) slowed down.
- It broke out again every 10 years.
- 1665 - last big outbreak in England.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE BLACK DEATH

I. SHORT TERM (these were immediately obvious)

- About 30-50% of England's population were dead.
- Many villages abandoned. (3000)
- Crops rotted in the fields and animals died as there were not enough people to tend them.
- Law and order broke down.
- Hundred Years War stopped. England on a winning streak
- The economy suffered, as trade had collapsed. The survivors tried to make a living as best they could.
- Prices dropped as people didn't care about money and, as so many had died, there was at first more than enough to go around.

2) LONG TERM CONSEQUENCES (RESULTS)

- It took 200 years for the population to get back up to its 1348 level.
- Wages went up as each lord tried to persuade surviving free peasants to work for him.
- Serfs and villeins demanded to become free peasants - some lords agree.
- 1351 - Parliament passed Statute of Labourers to put wages back to 1347 level (before Black Death).
- All peasants and lower classes felt that they deserved more rights.
- Dislike of the Church as it hadn't been able to help and most Church lords would not free their peasants.
- So Black Death was a long term cause of The Peasants' Revolt.
- English became more accepted as a written language as less educated people replaced the many French and Latin writing (literate) priests who had died

The effects of the Black Death on farming / agriculture / the countryside / peasants.

Farming / agriculture / farms changed

As not enough workers in some areas to keep going with old ways.

So less crop farming and more sheep farmer (needed less people)

Lords had to drop rents to keep their lands being used.

Effect on lords and peasants, due to great fall in number of peasants.

So lords desperate for workers.

So free peasants wages up, lots of movement to find higher pay.

So surviving free peasants did well from higher pay and inheriting land and renting land cheaper Serfs and villains demanded to be free - a lot freed by lords, but others ran away.

1351 government law to stop higher wages, moving for jobs etc (Statute of Labourers) - peasant anger at this, but wages still higher than before.

Therefore Black Death = long term cause of 1381 Peasants' Revolt, and helped to end Feudal System.