

Chapter Sixteen

THE BLACK DEATH

NOTHING quite so terrible as the Black Death had ever been experienced in England before. William of Dene, a monk of Rochester, records what happened in his part of Kent:

'To our great grief the plague carried off so vast a multitude of people of both sexes that nobody could be found who would bear the corpses to the grave. Men and women carried their own children on their shoulders to the church and threw them into a common pit. From these pits such an appalling stench was given off that scarcely anyone dared even walk beside the cemeteries.'

So many people died in the household of the Bishop of Rochester, which was a small one, that 'nobody was left to serve him in any capacity'; in all four priests, five esquires, ten attendants, seven young clerics and six pages died. All over the country the story was more or less the same, as the plague claimed between a quarter and a third of the entire population.

To people at the time this could only be the judgement of God on their sinfulness. Supernatural warnings of the coming disaster had been sighted all over Europe. Astrologers scanned the heavens for portents of doom and were rewarded by a really evil conjunction of the stars which took place on 20 March 1345: the planets Saturn, Jupiter and Mars were in the house of the zodiacal sign Aquarius, the water bearer. Saturn and Jupiter spelt death and destruction. Mars and Jupiter with Aquarius signalled a pestilence which would be spread through the air. And it was believed that such diseases travelled through the atmosphere, drifting like mists or clouds across the sky out of the east, and then mysteriously descending to engulf a city or a whole region.

When the plague arrived in 1348 no one knew what it was. Everyone was stunned both by the speed with which it travelled and by that with which it killed. Men were said to fall down and die with only a glance from a victim. In no time the symptoms were familiar, boils which could be the size of an apple in the groin, armpits or neck, then the rapid spread of the disease through the rest of the body, producing black spots on the skin. Those who spat blood died in three days, the rest in five. It came to

be known in Latin as *pestis atra* or *atra mors* which translated into English meant the 'dread', 'terrible' or 'black' pestilence or death.

Today we know that this was almost without doubt bubonic plague, a contagious disease usually found in remote areas of the world, like West Arabia or North India, which could and did from time to time escape and travel west. The middle of the fourteenth century was the occasion for just such an escape, one which, in the case of England, was not finally to leave its shore until after the Great Plague of London in 1665. And it was not carried by mysterious mists and clouds but by black rats, who carried the fleas with the germ as they migrated along the trade routes from the east through Baghdad, Armenia and the Crimea and then on by boat across the Mediterranean into the ports and from thence across country. And it was not just bubonic plague but two other ghastly forms as well, one in which the lungs were attacked resulting in bloodspitting, and a second which fatally infected the bloodstream within hours. All three were lethal. All were unpleasant diseases, filthy, unsightly, odious, evoking fear and panic in everyone who came in contact with a victim. In the countries of mainland Europe the plague produced outbreaks of mass hysteria as people implored heaven to bring these horrors to an end.

Nothing quite so dramatic happened in England but the results were as devastating. It seems the plague arrived first by way of the port of Melcombe Regis in Dorset towards the end of June 1348. At first it spread only slowly but by late July and August it was moving fast across the West Country, striking the two cities of Exeter and Bristol. It then moved on towards the Thames Valley which it reached by March. By July it was heading northwards, although by then it had been gaining entry through other ports. Those cities and towns which believed that they could remain immune by closing their gates were wrong, for the black rats got in through the ditches and sewers.

Nowhere was its impact more catastrophic than on the capital, London. In one of the two huge new cemeteries created outside the walls to receive the dead an inscription read:

'A great plague raging in the year of our Lord 1349, this churchyard was consecrated; wherein . . . were buried more than fifty thousand bodies of the dead . . . whose souls God have mercy upon. Amen.'

The more likely figure was half that amount but no one can blame them for the exaggeration, stunned as they were by the daily sight of the long procession of carts piled high with corpses. London was ripe for the plague. It was crowded. Everyone ate and slept together. The narrow lanes were deep in mud and filth and sanitation was primitive, in the main tipping or draining everything which had to be disposed of into the Thames.



An illumination to a text of the mass to be said in times of pestilence.

The plague spared no one, rich or poor, clergy or laity. Indeed the clergy suffered badly for, as they ministered to the sick and dying, they had a much greater chance of being infected. But that was not how it was seen at the time. The poor thought that the rich got off lightly, seeing them close their houses and leave for what they thought was the safety of the country. The clergy who were remembered were not those who bravely stayed behind, but those who abandoned their flock. As one monk wrote: 'In this plague many chaplains and hired parish priests would not serve without excessive pay.' But all over the country the impact of the plague was different. Some areas fared well, others very badly.

1349 was not the only year the plague ravaged. The Black Death haunted the late fourteenth century. It was to come back time and again to claim its victims. Over ten years later, in 1361, it returned, this time being called the 'mortality of infants', for mostly children and babies died. It was to come back yet again in 1369 and 1375.



William of Wykeham founded New College, Oxford, in 1379 to train clergy to fill the places left by the Black Death. By tradition the college was built on the site of the city's plague pit.

Every time this happened the population shrank and so did the amount of land under cultivation. At the same time those few who were left untouched could charge more for their work so wages went up. So scarce was labour that at times livestock wandered in the fields untended, and at harvest-time the crops perished, for there was no one to bring them in. Henry Knighton's chronicle, the most complete contemporary account of the epidemic, vividly paints a picture of England in the aftermath:

'After the pestilence many buildings both great and small in all cities, towns

and boroughs fell into total ruin for lack of inhabitants; similarly many small villages and hamlets became desolate and no houses were left in them, for all those who dwelt in them were dead, and it seemed likely that many such little villages would never again be inhabited.'

The greatest loss, however, was probably sustained by the church. Not only did the behaviour of many of the clergy lose them respect but death wiped out virtually half of those in orders. The result was that many of those ordained in haste to fill the gaps lacked a sense of true vocation and brought the church into disrepute. As a consequence colleges were founded both in Oxford and Cambridge to train clergy to meet the dramatic need for men of real quality. William of Wykeham, Bishop of Winchester, founded New College in Oxford in 1380 with a garden on the site of what had been the city's largest plague pit.

The Black Death left men with a sense of spiritual crisis to which the church in its existing form failed adequately to respond. It gave rise to a sense of deep unease and overwhelming gloom as all through the decades down to 1400 danced the figure of Death, claiming his victims, bishop and abbot, parish priest and monk, noble and knight, merchant and craftsman, freeman or villein, rich and poor, young and old. Over all of them his menacing scythe hovered, waiting to strike.

Even in an age accustomed to infant mortality and death by the age of forty as the norm, the suddenness of the plague brought judgement day almost into the present. This was the era when around the chancel arches of the parish churches what was called a Doom was painted, the terrible Last Judgement when men would be called to account. Those who had led the good life would be gathered up by the angels and led to paradise but those who had sinned would be seized by the talons of devils to be cast into everlasting torment. The Black Death signalled that the day of reckoning was indeed at hand.



A fifteenth century jewel depicting the Trinity and with the word 'Anazapta', a charm against the plague.