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The Black Death in Bristol

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THE BLACK DEATH IN BRISTOL

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PLAGUE, Pestilence and Famine, the familiar words of the English Litany, are so far removed from present day experience that they arouse scarcely a passing thought; but it was otherwise in medieval times.

England experienced ten large scale visitations of famine and disease in the 11th century, twelve in the 12th century and eleven in the 13th century.

The relation between these famines and epidemics was close, as shortage of food vitally lowered the bodily resistance of the people. The country was dependent for its supplies on the harvests. Storage of food on the large scale was difficult, and indeed almost impossible. Cattle had to be killed off in the late autumn and the meat salted down. The absence of fresh vegetables and fresh meat during the winter months, coupled with scarcity of grain and a consequent insufficiency of vitamins fostered attacks of deficiency diseases, which were widespread in their distribution.

Further, the primitive sanitary conditions which prevailed throughout the country encouraged and stimulated the spread of epidemic diseases. Although the numbers of the inhabitants in the towns were small, judged by modern standards, the density of their population was great. The streets were little better than open sewers. Cesspits and latrines were the accepted forms of sanitation, with a resulting contamination of the wells and the water supply. It is therefore not surprising that disease was rampant, wide-spread, and deadly.

The fourteenth century differed little from its predecessors. Food was short for the first ten years, but in

1315 and 1316 a real and calamitous famine occurred with such scarcity that people were driven to horse and dog flesh, and, as some of the chroniclers relate, even to cannibalism. This famine was followed by a severe pestilence, and a murrain among the cattle. Much the same story is repeated again and again until we reach the fateful year 1348.

For some time rumours that a deadly disease was spreading over the continent from the East had been whispered in this country, but it was not until the late summer of that year that rumour changed into bitter experience and England found itself assailed by a savage visitation of a new malady, with which it was powerless to cope.

A vivid account of the introduction of the epidemic into Europe is given in a Latin manuscript now in the University at Breslau¹ written by an Italian named Gabriel de Mussis, a native of Piacenza in Lombardy, a passenger on the ship which carried home from the East the refugee Italian merchants, who brought the plague with them. It appears that a number of these people had established themselves at the end of one of the great trade routes from China at a place called Thanna on the Don. For some reason or other they had excited the hostility of the Tartars, by whom they were fiercely attacked. To preserve their lives and property they managed to secure an armed ship and retired to a fortified town called Caffa on the Strait of Kerch. Here they had soon to withstand a siege. They defended the place against a Tartar army for three years, and at the end of the time the besiegers were attacked by the plague, which had originated in China and moved westward. The Tartars suffered severely in the outbreak; and, despairing of reducing the fortress, they collected the bodies of their

¹ Reprinted in *Geschichte der Medicin und Epidemische Krankheiten*, III. Jena, 1882.

dead and, placing them in their engines of war, threw them over the walls into the town, which soon became infected. The Tartar army dispersed, and carried with it the disease which spread through Mesopotamia, Asia Minor, Arabia, and Egypt, passing thence to Greece and southwestern Europe. The frightened Italian survivors took ship from Caffa and returned home to Genoa, where in a few days the plague appeared in its most virulent form. In picturesque language de Mussis says,

‘Alas when our relatives and neighbours came to welcome us, while we were embracing them and in the midst of our kisses, we, who carried the arrows of death were constrained to give them the poison, so that when they returned home, soon whole families were infected and in less than three days succumbed to the attacks’.

He describes at length the symptoms, the difficulty of obtaining medical attention of any kind, the hasty burials, the filling up of consecrated ground, the indiscriminate interment without religious rites or the presence of mourning friends of large numbers of people in common graves dug in the fields, and paints generally a heartrending picture of what was taking place.

The history of the Black Death on the Continent has been treated at length by several German, Russian, and other foreign writers. The vivid description by Boccaccio of its ravages in Florence is known to most people. My address deals mainly with Bristol and the surrounding district.

There is a general consensus of opinion among the chroniclers that the plague was brought by sea to the south coast of England. Henry Knighton says that it entered the maritime parts of the country by Southampton, Robert of Avesbury that it began in Dorset about the feast of St. Peter ad Vincula, 1 August. The monk of Malmesbury, who wrote the ‘Eulogium’, and who incidentally antedates the plague by a year, states that it reached the south coast of England at the harbour called

Melcombe in Dorset about the time (7 July) of the feast of the translation of St. Thomas, while Geoffrey the Baker asserts that it arrived in a port in Dorset, and destroyed nearly all the inhabitants of the adjoining country, spreading thence to Devon and Somerset, and at last to Bristol. It is pretty clear that the outbreak started at Melcombe Regis, more familiar today as Weymouth, and spread from that port.

According to Geoffrey the Baker it reached Bristol on the feast of the Assumption 15 August. Knighton, who was a Canon of Leicester, says that when it came to Bristol there died as it were the whole strength (manhood) of the town, taken by sudden death, for there were few who kept their beds for more than three days or two days and a half. In the account given in the 'Eulogium' the writer says that after invading Dorset, Devon, and Somerset, it reached at last Bristol, where only just a few were left.

Samuel Seyer, in his *Memoirs*² quotes from what he designates as 'one of our Calendars':—

'In 1348 the plague raged to such a degree in Bristol that the living were scarcely able to bury the dead. The Gloucestershire men would not suffer the Bristow men to have any access to them. At last it reached Gloucester, Oxford and London; scarce the tenth person was left alive, male or female. The churchyards were not large enough to bury the dead and other places were appointed. At this period grass grew several inches high in High Street and Broad Street; it raged chiefly in the center of the City: this pestilence came from abroad and the people near the sea coast in Dorsetshire and Devonshire were first affected'.

This picturesque statement has been quoted widely. I have tried to find the Calendar among the large number

² *Memoirs Historical and Topographical of Bristol*, 1821-23, vol. II, chap. xv, p. 143.

in the Municipal Library and the City Archives but I am sorry to say without success. These civic calendars are not very trustworthy historical documents and this particular one is obviously a compilation. The writer uses the very words of Knighton and Geoffrey the Baker in some of his statements, and I think that the grass growing in the streets, and the intensity of the plague in the centre of the town owe a good deal to the writer's imagination. Seyer gives no clue to his identity.

The only contemporary official reference to the plague in Bristol is, so far as I am aware, to be found in the Patent Roll for 15 November 1349. It mentions that the Crown granted to the good men and parishioners of St. Cross of the Temple (Bristol) a pardon for acquiring from the Prior of the Hospital of St. John of Jerusalem in England, who was also parson of the church, half an acre of land contiguous to the churchyard, which had been filled up by the bodies buried in the pestilence and a licence was granted for its retention.

The mortality rates given by the chroniclers differ materially. Robert of Avesbury says that on the same day, twenty, forty, sixty and as many more dead were buried, Higden, in his *Polychronicon*, that only a tenth part of the population survived; the writer of the 'Eulogium' that in the whole of England a fifth part of the inhabitants, men, women and children, were handed over for burial, and that so great was the shortage of men that the living were scarcely sufficient to take care of the sick and bury the dead, and that owing to the insufficiency of the cemeteries, new places were dedicated by the bishops. Incidentally, he specially mentions Bristol, saying that very few people in the town were spared. Geoffrey the Baker says that scarcely a tenth part of the adult population survived, and that fields were chosen for the interment of the dead owing to the insufficiency of the churchyards. In London the bishop bought a croft called 'Nomannes lond' for this purpose. Both

Baker and Camden mention that Sir Walter Manny bought several acres of land near Smithfield in 1349, in which were buried large numbers of the victims of the plague. Sir Walter Manny was a renowned soldier, a friend of Edward III and the Black Prince, and the patron of Froissart. On this ground was built a chapel for the Carthusians. Camden makes the extraordinary statement that 50,000 victims of the plague were buried there and that a brass plate commemorating this was standing in his time. Seeing that the total population of London then did not very greatly exceed this figure, his statement like that of many other medieval computations, must be regarded as an exaggerated one. Mr Coulton has pointed out several times that medieval figures are untrustworthy. The Roman numeral system was extremely cumbrous in use, and made it a difficult matter to calculate large quantities accurately.

Professor Hamilton Thompson has applied scientific methods to the estimation of the number of clergy who died in two important dioceses in the country, and has published his findings in two valuable contributions to *Archaeologia*.³

He deals with the two largest dioceses in medieval England—Lincoln and York. In Lincoln, counting 62 uncertain vacancies as deaths, he obtained a proportion of the losses from the plague as 44.37 per cent. and in York 44.2 per cent.

Let us look at Bristol for a moment. The number of benefices in the town at the time was eighteen, and in the plague year there were ten institutions, of which two were to St. Ewens and two to St. Philip and St. Jacob. This gives the high figure of 55 per cent., but discounting it by death from natural causes or removals it may be reasonably put down at about 50 per cent. I have not taken

³ Volume 38.

into account the deaths of chantry priests or incumbents of hospitals, or members of religious orders.

If therefore 50 per cent. of the beneficed clergy of Bristol died at their posts they were clearly not neglectful of their duty. The statement of Seyer's calendarer that the plague was most severe in the centre of the city receives no support from the returns of institutions, as the parsons of the churches in this area, All Saints, St. John, Christchurch, St. Werburgh, St. Leonard and St. Lawrence survived, and south of the Avon the vicars of Redcliff and St. Thomas.

In the 'Little Red Book'⁴ belonging to the Corporation, there is a list of the members of the 'Forty Eight' for the year 1349. The 'Forty Eight' was the council which administered the affairs of the town.

In this list there are 52 names, and what is interesting is that in the original document fifteen of them are scratched through. If we assume that they died of the plague, the mortality of these influential and wealthier citizens amounted to 35 per cent. The next page of the book gives another list which Mr Bickley assigned to the following year 1350. This list also comprises 52 names but of them only three are erased.

It is evident from the Institutions and the Council figures that the mortality in Bristol was high. It is to be expected that the deaths of the clergy would be higher than those of the citizens generally, as their calling exposed them to special risks of infection. I think, therefore, we may put down the losses of the town from the plague as roughly something from 35 to 40 per cent. of the population. This figure is staggering, and well explains the consensus of opinion of the chroniclers that Bristol suffered very severely in the outbreak. The plague lasted for nearly twelve months, increasing in intensity until

⁴ *Little Red Book of Bristol*, edited by F. B. Bickley, 1900, vol. 1, pp. 20-21.

the end of the spring of 1349, then slowly decreasing until it died out in July.

The visitation of the Black Death was accompanied, as was natural, with outbreaks of religious emotionalism. Robert of Avesbury records the coming of that strange sect, the Flagellants, to London on Michaelmas Day 1349. He says they came from Holland and Zealand and describes how twice a day, stripped to the waist, they scourged one another as a penance for the sins of the people. While the scourgings were taking place a long invocation was sung, the text of which is given in full by Hecker.⁵ The sect never took root in England, but it had an enormous following on the Continent, where its entry into the towns was followed by massacres of the Jews. These massacres were appalling. To cite one instance alone, that of Mayence, no fewer than 12,000 of them were there cruelly put to death. The reason was that the Jews were popularly credited with poisoning the water supply and deliberately spreading the seeds of the plague. This figure, too, is scarcely credible in view of the population of the town at that time.

A second visitation took place in 1361. The chroniclers say little about it. It differed from the outbreak of 1348-9 in that it attacked the children and the well-to-do classes, both of whom had largely escaped the earlier epidemic. The monk of St. Albans in his Chronicle says that it attacked men chiefly, and mentions among the important personages who died from it the bishops of Worcester, London and Ely, Henry Duke of Lancaster, Reginald Lord Cobham, William Fitzwarreyn and John Lord Mowbray.

The fourteenth century saw a changing England. The teaching of the Friars had been slowly disintegrating the accepted outlook of the poorer classes towards life ; the Feudal System was ageing, the use of money in commerce

⁵ Hecker's *Epidemics of the Middle Ages*, Sydenham Society, 1844.

increasing, and the foreign policy and commitments of the Crown were widening the interest of numbers of the population. The appalling catastrophe of the Black Death acted as a solvent of accepted standards. It raised new issues in the spheres of religion, of politics and of economics.

The rules of ecclesiastical discipline owing to the great shortage of clergy had to be relaxed. In an ordinance Ralph of Shrewsbury, bishop of Bath and Wells, directed that in the absence of a priest a person sick unto death should make his confession to a layman, even a woman. Any disclosure of the confession entailed the penalty of severe ecclesiastical censure, and where a priest was not available the Sacrament of the Eucharist might be administered to the sick by a Deacon.

The shortage of clergy had other unfortunate results. Knighton writes that a multitude of men, who had lost their wives, flocked into Holy Orders. Of these many were illiterate, except in so far as they could read, but, as he goes on to say, could not understand. Before the pestilence it was possible for a man to have a chaplain for 4 or 5 marcs but after it scarcely any one would accept a vicarage at 20 marcs. While very many clergy worked manfully at their posts, a number deserted them. Baker says that a very large number of clerks, known only to Almighty God, went away to other places.

In the political and economic spheres the effects of the plague on the national life were far reaching and it is not surprising that many people saw, in the difficult times which accompanied and followed it, an opportunity for bringing about alterations in the body politic. All this has been treated at length by the historians and writers of the past seventy-five years. I do not propose to deal with it here, but will confine myself to the narrower limits of the town of Bristol and its neighbourhood.

The outstanding factor was the great shortage of labour, both rural and urban. The profitable tillage of

land depended on a plentiful supply of inexpensive workers. Now the lords of the manors, owing to the destruction brought about by the plague, had no longer serfs and villeins in adequate numbers, and were in consequence forced to employ hired help. The law of supply and demand began to operate, and for this help exorbitant rates of pay were asked, with the result that cultivation dwindled and pasturage increased. The old conditions of farming and land holding began to be profoundly modified; and how serious things became is seen by a cursory glance through the Patent Rolls. Entry after entry shows the Crown was forced to allow a remission of taxation to individual landowners up and down the country owing to their falling profits. To cite one example only, on 20 Nov. 1349, Guy de Briane obtained a remission of £30 from the ferm of £120 reserved to the King, in consideration, so the record runs, of the great diminution in the issues of profits of the castle of St. Briavels and the Forest of Dean on account of the 'present pestilence'. It would be wearisome to quote further but it is evident that agriculture and rural life were deeply affected, and that a spirit of unrest and discontent was springing up. Agriculture was unable to carry the increased charges, and in 1350 a proclamation was issued requiring hired labourers to accept the rates of pay obtaining in 1346. This injunction was disregarded so widely that in 1351 Parliament passed a 'Statute of Labourers', imposing penalties on master and man for any evasion of the rates laid down.

The towns, which were suffering from a similar shortage of labour, began to draw men from the country by offering more attractive conditions. Many rural workers also were anxious to escape from the serious restrictions of villeinage, with the result that there was continual friction between landowners and the town authorities; and this friction lasted for some two hundred years.

The men who flocked into the towns had behind them

none of the traditions of urban life. They formed a new class of unskilled workers, who had not been trained in the trades they tried to follow. They had no feeling of loyalty to the gilds. They formed a new class which did not fit into the ordered life of an organized civic community; and being undisciplined and impatient of restraint they became a focus of discontent. In the Patent Rolls of 1349 there is an entry which speaks of the great concourse of aliens and denizens in the City of London, and its suburbs, and the disturbance to the peace which they caused. These strangers were not willing to accept conditions, as they found them. For example, the Patent Roll of 1361 mentions the grievous debates and dissensions which had broken out in Shrewsbury consequent on the strangers who had newly settled in the town after the late pestilence.

Bristol records are largely silent about the plague and its effects on the life of the town, but reading between the lines, it is evident that it also was faced with problems which were difficult of settlement and adjustment. As elsewhere, with increasing prosperity, the craft gilds had for a long time been taking over the responsibilities and position of the old Gild Merchant. There were in Bristol some twenty craft gilds. In their turn they had to face changes in trade methods, due to the losses sustained from the pestilence. Previously, after a man had served his apprenticeship, he generally worked for a short time with his master as a journeyman and then set up in business for himself. The Black Death had, however, so seriously lessened the numbers of the masters, that those who were left found themselves in a position almost of monopoly, with a great temptation to increase their profits and capital, by raising prices and reducing the quality of the goods they produced. There is also evidence that quite a number resorted to the reprehensible practice of giving short weight and short measure, as

well as of covering up faults in the products they manufactured. Then the many intruders into trade, who had not been apprenticed, made the gild rules difficult of enforcement, with the consequence that it was necessary to invoke intervention by the Municipal Authority. The result was that ordinances regulating the practices of no less than fifteen of the gilds were promulgated, and aldermen were appointed for their governance and supervision. These ordinances dealt largely with the quality of the goods, which were made, with the giving of proper weights and measures, with the rules for the admission of newcomers to the trades, and with the remuneration of labour. It is clear that difficulties with labour obtained. On 6 January 1364 an ordinance was made before the mayor for the relief of the estates of the masters of the craft of the Cobblers. The record speaks of them 'as well nigh impoverished by the excessive price of their servants, who are loath to be attendant to the said craft, unless they have too outrageous and excessive salary, contrary to the Statute of our Lord, the King (23 Ed. III, ch. 5) and to the usages of the said town'. The ordinance goes on to fix the rate of wages for the different operations, and to impose a system of fines on any master who paid more. It also laid down that no more than one covenant-man should be employed by a master, although piece-workers were allowed. Two inspectors were appointed to see that the rules were carried out, and to examine the quality of the goods produced.

Again and again regulations were issued fixing the maximum prices at which goods were to be sold.

The internal difficulties in the trade in Bristol are shown by a reference to employees not refunding to their masters the whole sum that goods fetched; and to misappropriations of goods and chattels, which were sold secretly to receivers.

In spite of everything Bristol seems to have recovered fairly quickly from the destruction brought about by the

plague, though the rent⁶ of the town to the Crown in 1371 was only £158 11s as compared with £245 some 150 years before.

Compared with some other towns, notably Norwich, Bristol developed its resources and strengthened its position. This is shown by the fact that the king's quota for arms in 1350, rated London at 100, Norwich at 60, and Bristol at 20, but the situation was modified profoundly some 27 years later. In 1377 Parliament granted the king a subsidy⁷ of fourpence from every adult inhabitant in the country of the age of 14 and over, as well male as female. This subsidy produced £22,607 paid by 1,376,442 persons, and gives a good basis for estimating the population of the country. Assuming the evasions⁸ amounted to one-fifth of the number of contributors, and estimating that children under the age of 14 were one half of the persons older, we get the figure for the population at that time, in round numbers, as two and a half millions. The amount raised in London was £388 11s 4d from 22,314 persons, corresponding to a population of 41,376.

Bristol raised £105 15s from 6,345 persons, pointing to a population of 11,422. Norwich on the other hand was only able to raise £65 17s 5d from 3,952 persons out of a population of 7,113. York produced a little more than Bristol and had about 1,000 more inhabitants.

How these figures compare with those of the pre-plague years is not now ascertainable, but they are significant, especially in view of the surprising statement in the 'Eulogium' that the women who survived remained barren for many years.

The recovery of Bristol was probably due to its geographical position as a great maritime port; and also to the fact that a number of citizens of outstanding capacity were left alive. They began to develop the trade of the

⁶ Seyer, *Memoirs of Bristol*.

⁷ *Archæologia*, vol. VII, Subsidy Roll 51 Edward III.

⁸ Creighton, *Epidemics in Britain*.

town on capitalist lines, and were very successful in extending it both at home and abroad.

The current ecclesiastical teaching, as is evident from the pastorals issued by the bishops at the time, was that Plague and Famine were sent by the Almighty as a punishment for sin and impenitence. This doctrine was accepted implicitly by nearly everyone, but after the plague there was a glimmering of an idea, that sanitation was both desirable and necessary.

In Bristol, as in other towns, the authorities issued a number of regulations requiring the abatement of nuisances, and throwing on the individual citizen the responsibility for carrying them out. In 1349 the Council ordained that all who occupied the common streets and lanes in Bristol and the suburbs with ordure and rubble, were to remove it within three days, under a penalty of 40 pence, and it was forbidden under a like penalty for the ordure to be thrown over the Quay. A few years later, among a number of official regulations, it was ordained that no one, whatsoever his condition, was to throw urine or stinking or fouled water out of the windows or doors into the streets under the same penalty. Householders had to clean the ways in front of their dwellings under a penalty of 12 pence.

It is clear that the disposal of refuse in medieval towns must have been very difficult for the individual citizen; and judging from the accounts of the conditions prevailing all over the country, the problem seems to have been looked on as almost insoluble. The evil was, however, recognized, and in 1388 Parliament passed the first Urban Health Act, which laid the foundation of all our modern sanitary legislation. The Act vividly described the conditions which led to its enforcement, as follows:—

‘For that so much Dung and Filth of the Garbage and Entrails, as well of Beasts killed as of other corruptions, be cast and put into Ditches, Rivers, and other Waters, and also within many other places within

about and nigh unto divers Cities, Boroughs, Towns of the Realm, and the Suburbs of them, and that the air is quickly corrupt and infect and many maladies and other intolerable Diseases do daily happen.....'

The penalty for non-removal under the Act was a fine to the Crown of £20. It has, however, taken the best part of 500 years to solve the problem of the disposal of refuse.

While Bristol was dealing with health matters, the citizens did not overlook the question of the water supply. Much of the water used for domestic purposes was drawn from wells, of which there were many in the town. Their close proximity to the streets and the gouts and cesspits must have led to the water being seriously contaminated. The public spirit of the monastic bodies and the parochial authorities, however, had brought in a plentiful supply of water from springs in the outlying country, which was carried by wooden pipes to cisterns and conduits. The town council, at the instance of Walter Derbe, mayor in 1376, appointed an official at a regular stipend to look after three of the most important of these conduits, and in 1381 John Stokes bequeathed a sum of money to bring water to St. Thomas's church by leaden pipes, a new departure from the practice hitherto obtaining.

The view that Bristol recovered fairly quickly from the effects of the plague is supported by the evidence of the great wave of church building which took place in the closing years of the 14th century, and the early part of the 15th century. The list is remarkable. St. Peter's, St. John's, St. Nicholas, All Saints, Maryleport, St. Thomas, St. Stephen, St. Augustine, the Temple, St. Mary Redcliff and St. Werburgh's were all either rebuilt or enlarged and altered extensively. The work at St. Peter's is interesting. It appears to have been begun just before the pestilence, as the piers of the nave arcade are earlier than the arches above them. They were built up to the capitals, and the work was left for about forty

years, when the arches were added, probably in or about the year 1380. These piers have all the appearance of having been exposed to outside conditions, the stone of which they are built also being different from that of the arches above. As time went on and the resources of the citizens increased, we find that this reconstruction of the churches was done in a more costly and elaborate way, of which the splendid structures of Temple church, and particularly St. Mary Redcliff and the tower of St. Stephen's are examples.

It is of course impossible within the limits of an address of this kind to deal adequately with a catastrophe like the Black Death, which affected the whole of Europe and was the cause of changes deep and far reaching in the life and development of our own country. I have dealt with its effects on an important commercial town like Bristol, effects which can be paralleled in many of the other urban communities in the country. I have tried to show how the solid and enterprising qualities of our race were able to face a desperate situation, and out of the evil to create new channels for development and progress.