

How deadly was the Black Death?

MISSION OBJECTIVES

- Understand the symptoms and spread of the Black Death, the fear it caused and the wide variety of the explanations for its cause.

Look at the painting on this page. Study it carefully. It is a brilliantly detailed and frightening picture about a mysterious killer plague called the Black Death which swept across the world in the Middle Ages. It would kill about 75 million people in Europe!

In the painting, the disease is represented by little killer skeletons who attack people. If you look carefully, you can see them killing all sorts of different people – men, women and children, even a king! And there seems to be no defence against the fearsome killer. It is little wonder that the painting was called 'The Triumph of Death'.



↑ SOURCE A: 'The Triumph of Death'.

So what exactly was Black Death? How could you catch it? What were the symptoms? What did people at the time think caused it? How did people try to cure it? And what impact did it have on England?

How did it kill people?

The Black Death was a plague. A plague is a disease which spreads quickly. In fact, to be more accurate, the Black Death was two different plagues – **bubonic** plague and **pneumonic** plague – which attacked at the same time. This made the Black Death even deadlier and, before you ask, both plagues still exist today!

These two killer plagues both combined to make the Black Death. It was possible, however, to get one of the plagues without the other. Pneumonic was the deadliest, killing everyone it infected, but 30 per cent of people who caught just bubonic plague survived. Sadly, for millions all over the world, they got both at the same time and stood no chance!

WISE-UP Words
bubonic
pneumonic
flagellant

PNEUMONIC PLAGUE

- This is a germ that travelled around in the air. It was caught by breathing in the germs or infected air.
- It attacked the lungs causing victims to cough up blood and spread deadly germs as they coughed and sneezed.
- The victim's breath would smell as their lungs rotted inside them.
- Victims would die within a few days.

BUBONIC PLAGUE

- This is a germ (called 'pasteurella pestis') which lived in the blood of black rats and in the guts of fleas that travelled around in their fur.
- The fleas would hop off the rats onto humans and bite them ... passing on the disease.
- Victims would get a fever and get large boils (called buboes) in their armpits, groin area and behind their ears. Some boils would be as big as apples and onions. After a few more days, the victim would develop a rash of black and red spots.
- About seven out of ten victims would die within a week; the rest would mysteriously recover.

- Lumps in the armpits and the groin. From this, one died in five days.
- Fever and spitting of blood. Breathing suffers and whoever has been corrupted cannot live beyond two or three days.
- Tumours in the armpits and groin grow as large as apples. Black spots also appear on the arms and thighs.

↪ SOURCE B: Medieval descriptions of the Black Death.

The Black Death arrived in England at the port of Melcombe Regis in Dorset in 1348. A boatload of sailors brought it with them. It had travelled along trade routes from China and India, through the Middle East, then into Europe through Italy. From there, ships carrying the Plague infected people, and infected rats landed at ports all over Europe.

SOURCE C: *The spread of the Black Death in Europe. The purple areas on the map are the places affected by the plague.*

'In this year at Melcombe (near Weymouth, Dorset), a little before the feast of St John the Baptist (24 June), two ships came into the harbour. One of the sailors had brought him, from Gascony in France, the disease, and through him the people of Melcombe were the first in England to be infected.'

↑ **SOURCE E:** From the 'Grey Friars Chronicle', written by monks in 1348.

'They died by the hundreds, both day and night, and all were thrown in ... ditches and covered with earth. And as soon as those ditches were filled, more were dug. And I, Agnolo di Tura ... buried my five children with my own hands ... And so many died that all believed it was the end of the world.'

↑ **SOURCE F:** *The Plague in Siena: an Italian Chronicle* by Agnolo di Tura.

'Then the grievous plague came to the sea coasts from Southampton, and came to Bristol, and it was as if all the strength of the town had died, as if they had been hit with sudden death, for there were few who stayed in their beds more than three days, or two days, or even one half a day.'

↑ **SOURCE G:** Henry Knighton, an Augustinian Canon at the Abbey of St Mary, Leicester.

'That disease entirely stripped villages, cities, castles and towns of inhabitants of men, so that scarcely anyone would be able to live in them. The plague was so contagious that those touching the dead or even the sick were immediately infected and died, and the one confessing and the confessor were together led to the grave ... many died from carbuncles and from ulcers and pustules that could be seen on shins and under the armpits; some died, as if in a frenzy, from pain of the head, others from spitting blood ... These cities of Dublin and Drogheda were almost destroyed and wasted of inhabitants and men so that in Dublin alone, from the beginning of August right up to Christmas, fourteen thousand men died ... There was scarcely a house in which only one died but commonly man and wife with their children and family going one way, namely, crossing to death.'

↑ **SOURCE H:** *Friar John Clyn describing the effects of the plague after its spread to Ireland in August 1348.*



What did people think caused the Black Death?

Doctors didn't know that germs caused disease so looked for other reasons to explain why something so terrible was happening. Sources F to J show the different ways in which people at the time tried to explain the cause of the Plague.

'The plague carried by these cursed Italian ships was a punishment sent by God.'

↑ **SOURCE F:** By an Italian writer in the Middle Ages.

'In many German cities, Jews were thought to have caused the deaths by poisoning the water supply. Many Jewish men, women and children were burned to death for this.'

↑ **SOURCE G:** From a book written in 1349.

'You should avoid overeating and avoid having a bath. These open up the pores of the skin through which the poisonous air can enter.'

↑ **SOURCE H:** A French writer, 1365.

'The long term cause is the position of the planets. It is also caused by evil smells which mix with the air and spread on the wind. When you breathe in the corrupted air you catch the plague.'

↑ **SOURCE I:** Based on a report written by doctors at Paris University in 1348.

'The disease was spread by contagion. If a healthy man visited a plague victim, he usually died himself.'

↑ **SOURCE J:** Written by Jean de Venette in 1348.

SOURCE K: Some of the cures suggested at the time. It's easy to laugh at some of them, but try to appreciate that people were scared – not stupid – and were prepared to try anything. ↗

How did people try to cure the plague?

Doctors didn't know what caused the Plague so were unable to find a way of curing it and stopping it spread. Some recommended herbal potions to fight the disease, others suggested begging God for help or eating (yes, eating) prayers that had been written down for you. And as the Plague got worse, the 'cures' seemed to get crazier. Just look at those suggested in Source K below.

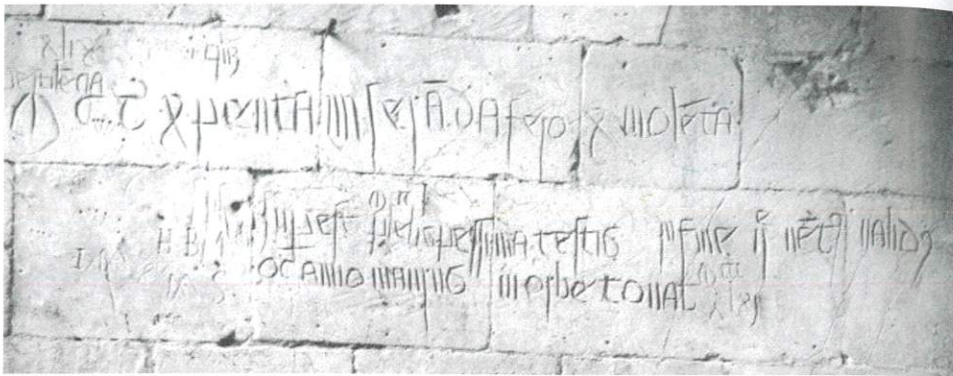
So many people died that church graveyards filled up. Soon people were left to rot where they fell. However, by 1353, after spreading up into northern Europe (Denmark, Sweden and Norway), the Black Death eventually died out... for a while. There were five more outbreaks of plague before 1400, although none was as bad. It continued to haunt Europe for the next 250 years. As people said at the time, 'the smell of death hangs over this land.'



↑ **SOURCE L:** Some people believed that the Plague was a punishment sent from God for their sins. They thought that the best way to get rid of your wickedness was to beat it out of you. In Europe, large groups of people called **flagellants** went around whipping themselves, hoping that God would take pity on them and stop the Plague!



SOURCE M: These words were scratched on a church wall in Ashwell, Hertfordshire. They read: '1349 the pestilence. 1350, pitless, wild, violent, the dregs of the people live to tell the tale.'



SOURCE N: A photograph of a flea carrying the plague. Scientists know it has the plague because of the dark line on the right-hand side of its blood-filled stomach!



SOURCE O: An illustration from a manuscript showing victims covered in buboes. What might the figure in the background be doing?

The impact of the Plague

The Black Death had killed about a third of the people in England. The population was about four million before the Plague came – afterwards, there were probably only about two and a half million people left.

This dramatic drop in population meant that life couldn't go on in the same way. There were fewer people to plough the fields and harvest the crops for a start, so tons of wheat, oats and barley just rotted in the fields!

But for the peasants who survived the Plague, the future looked better than ever. The local lords still needed men to work on their land – but there were fewer men. As a result, the workers could ask for higher wages... and they usually got them! Sources P to T look at the effects of the Black Death.



SOURCE Q: This map shows the number of deserted medieval villages after the Plague had killed their inhabitants.

'The King sent an order to all the counties that labourers should not be paid more than before the plague. But the labourers were so proud and stubborn that they would not listen to the king's command. If anyone wanted to employ then he had to pay them what they wanted or lose his fruit and crops. Then the king ordered many labourers to be arrested and put in prison.'

SOURCE R: From 'Knighton's Chronicle 1337-1396' by Henry Knighton

'It is sad but the whole world was changed for the worse. People were meaner and more greedy than before, even though they had more things. They were jealous of each other and there was an increase in the number of fights, arguments and law cases.'

SOURCE S: Jean de Venette, 1349.

'As soon as masters accuse their workers of bad work or try to pay them less they leave and quickly find jobs in new places at higher wages. Masters dare not upset their workers and have to give them whatever they ask for.'

SOURCE T: Introduction to a law, 1376.

“ Sheep and oxen wandered free through the fields and among the crops, and there was nobody to drive them off. When harvest time came, higher wages were not enough to get people to gather in the crops which rotted in the fields. ”

SOURCE P: From 'Knighton's Chronicle 1337-1396' by Henry Knighton.

Work

1 Copy and complete the following table:

	Bubonic plague	Pneumonic plague
How was it caught?		
What were the symptoms?		
How long did it take to die?		

Why do you think it was called the 'Black Death'?

- 2 Look at Source A. What do you think the artist is saying about the Black Death?
- 3 Look at Sources C, D and E. How did the Black Death spread across Europe?
- 4 Look at Sources F to J.
 - a Make a list of all the different causes of plague you can find in these sources.
 - b Why do you think there were so many different explanations of the causes of the Black Death?
 - c Which explanation came closest to the real cause the of Black Death?
- 5 Look at Source L. Why do you think the flagellants behaved as they did?

MISSION ACCOMPLISHED?

- Do you know the difference between bubonic and pneumonic plague?
- Can you identify three things that people in 1348 thought caused the Black Death?