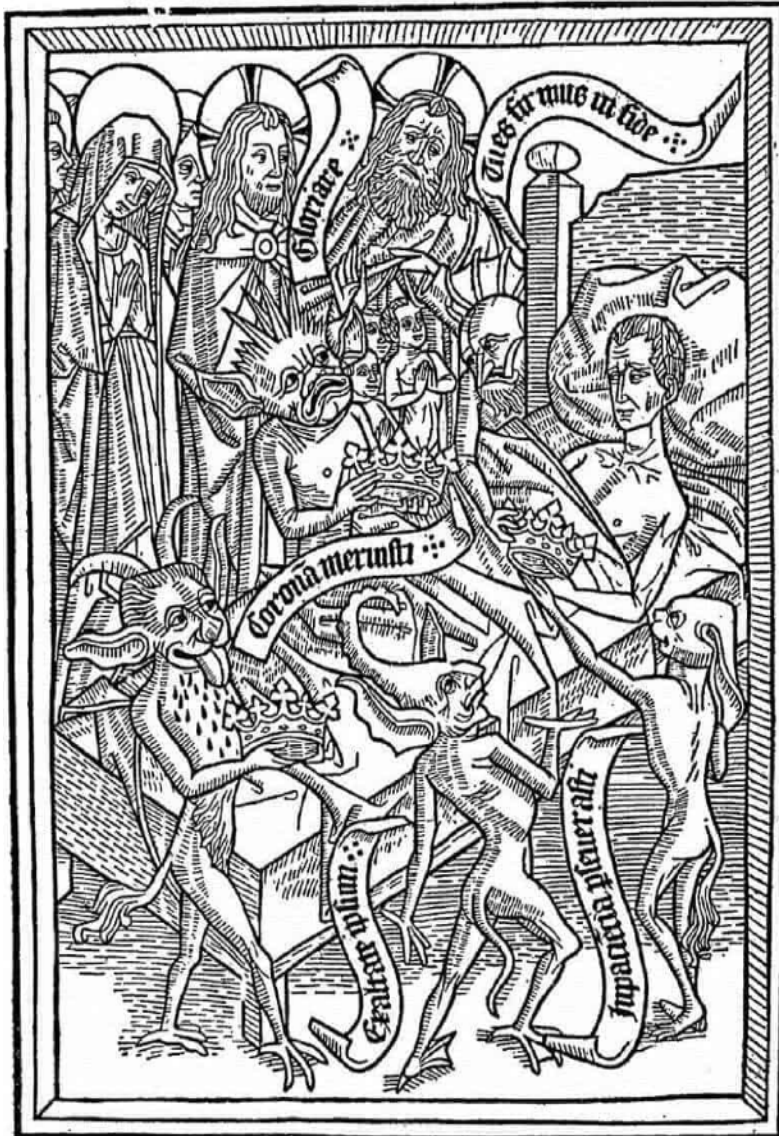


## A Good Death.

In Early Modern England\*, death was viewed indelibly through the analogue of Christianity. The deathbed was a spiritual drama, a battle for the dying individual's soul between the forces of God and the demons of Satan. If the individual died well, peacefully, with family and priest, then salvation was assumed to be theirs. A bad death, alone or in agony or without a holy man's sacrament, was to be avoided at all cost.



There were many things an individual could do to ensure a good death. If the death had a didactic message and supplied a moral lesson, then God's grace was thought to be that much closer. William Stout, a yeoman farmer who passed in 1681, on his deathbed exhorted his family to live in fear of god, in obedience to their mother, and in brotherness to each other; Francis Nicholson, noose around his neck in 1686, warned all children in the watching crowd at Tyburn to mind their duty to God and publicly lamented his sins. Even the condemned sought as good a death as possible.

A charitable action of some kind was expected of a good death, too. The will not only settled the dying's earthly affairs but also, they hoped, demonstrated a Christ-like giving to others more in need. When in late June 1670 Robert Moore of the Isle of Wight drew up his will, his brother was quick to remind him to give to the poor in some way after his death, and so the document was amended. During funerals, also, alms were expected. The receiving poor would pray then for the deceased, with such 'honest poor' prayers, in pre-Reformation times, being thought as an especially efficacious way of speeding the soul through purgatory. A charitable will supplemented the good death, acting in a sense as a 'passport to heaven.'

When the Protestant Reformation removed the sacramental weight from dying and made it more about the individual (holy water, confession, extreme unction, and absolution were all abolished in 1552), the good death was given even more attention.

In 1601, Christopher Sutton produced the best-selling book *Learn to Die*, and John Wesley's *Arminian Magazine* published many a deathbed scene, disseminating what was viewed as a good death to a national readership. Dying well became an art to be learnt – the deathbed, though still the last great trial, had gone designer.

A good death had to have a watching crowd, strengthening its already theatrical nature. This allowed women of the pre-modern era a degree of agency usually not granted in religious ceremony.

Disallowed, for the most part, to speak in church, the deathbed supplied women with the chance to express their spirituality in a very vocal fashion. One such example of this comes from the accounted death of Elizabeth Heywood, who in 1661, gave a deathbed speech so verbose and unlike her usual self that her father reasoned the Holy Spirit had been acting through her!

## Learn to Die, Christopher Sutton

Naturally, to achieve the much-coveted good death, the pitfalls of a bad death had to be avoided.

A painful, extended death by disease was not good, and only if the dying could bravely face this agony without complaint could the type of death be reversed to a good one. Delirium, too, would ruin a deathbed performance; dying loud, scared, and vocal did not square with the Last Judgement narrative of falling asleep into the next life. Delirium on the deathbed also conjured ideas of demonic possession, which was a sure sign which way the departing soul was travelling.

A sudden death, without expectation or even the chance of a deathbed performance, was also seen to have the markings of a bad death. This was, obviously, a frustrating and near impossible pitfall to avoid. Pre-Reformation at least, the sudden death was thought of poorly because it did not allow the chance for confession and any other Christian sacrament to be administered. Only with the waning of Catholic influence and the growth of secularisation did this become less of an issue.

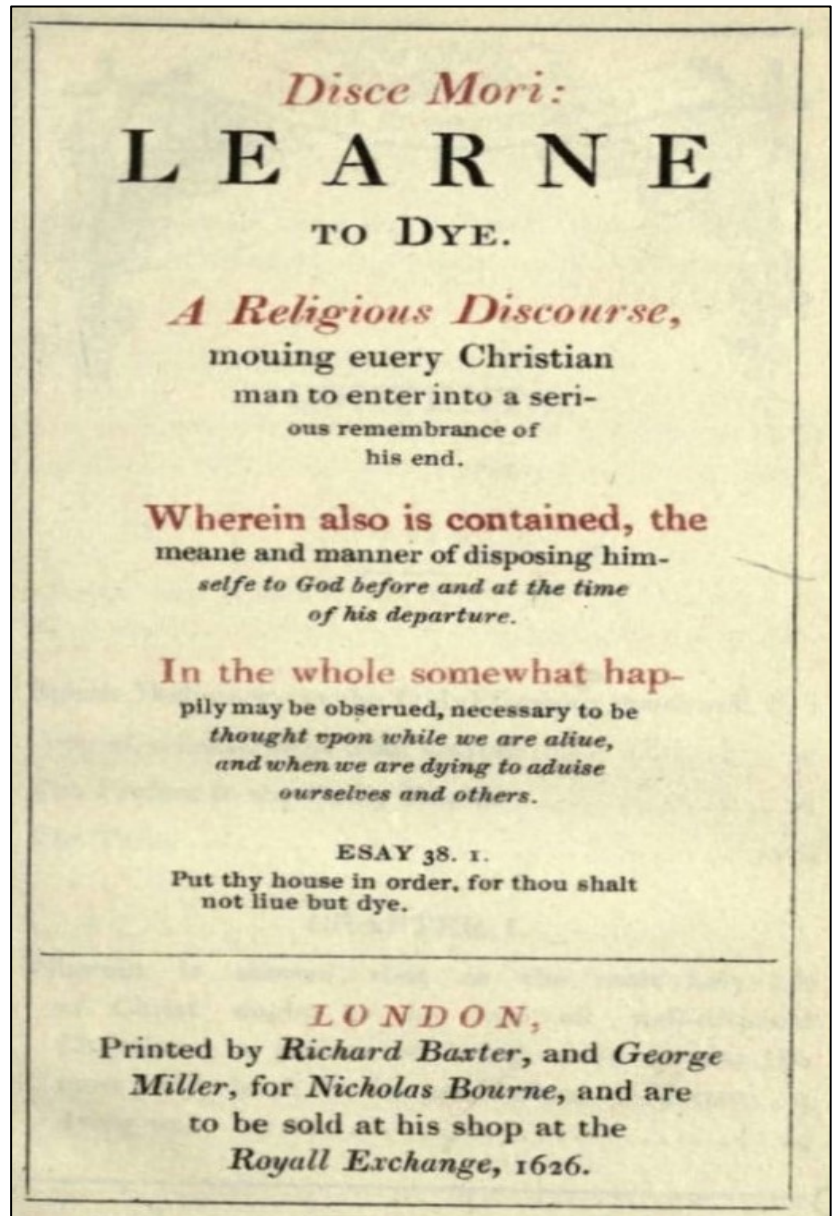
For the early-modern Christians of Britain, suicide was the ultimate bad death. Associated with devilry and a repudiation of scripture, a person found guilty of suicide was considered a felon and was buried at a crossroads (to stop the spirit returning to its place of death), face down, with a stake through the heart and without a proper funeral. This Felo de se (felon of himself, in Latin) process was ended with the 1823 Burial of Suicide Act, when public opinion on suicide began to lose its hard-line Christian edges.

Though desire for a good death continues even to this day, the Britons of early-modern England did gradually begin to lose their obsession.

A holy living – a good life – began to take precedence over dying well, with the widely popular Holy Dying and Holy Living, published in 1650, marking this volte-face. The people of the seventeenth-century began to use the life of a person, not their death, to determine whether an individual would receive God's salvation. Sudden deaths, as one Presbyterian Minister in 1720 noted, were now viewed as a gift from God, a prevention of needless suffering; and doctors, once thought as meddlers at the deathbed, were now commonplace and very much wanted.

## The Company of Undertakers, William Hogarth, 1737

Into the modern period the notion of a good death failed to keep its hold over the people of Britain. Naturally, most desired a peaceful and painless passing, but the performative aspect was lost and Christianity's role at the deathbed diminished. The Early Modern battle for a good death tells us much about the people's collective beliefs, fears, and indeed lives. And, of course, it tells us about death.







## Disease in the Middle Ages

Filth was a fact of life for all classes in the Middle Ages, with plague and infectious diseases flourishing in such conditions... 'Uneasy is the head that wears the Crown,' Shakespeare, King Henry IV, Part 2.\*

Especially when that head is teeming with head lice, as Adam of Usk reported when he attended King Henry IV's coronation on 13th October 1399! King Henry's affliction was commonplace in medieval times, and lice were certainly no respecter of social status.

Filth was a fact of life for all classes in the Middle Ages. Towns and cities were filthy, the streets open sewers; there was no running water and knowledge of hygiene was non-existent. Dung, rubbish, and animal carcasses were thrown into rivers and ditches, poisoning the water and the neighbouring areas. Fleas, rats, and mice flourished in these conditions. Indeed this was the perfect environment for the spread of infectious disease and plague: the Black Death was to kill over half of England's population between 1348 and 1350.

As there was no knowledge of germs or how diseases spread in the Middle Ages, the Church explained away illness as 'divine retribution' for leading a sinful life.

Common diseases in the Middle Ages included dysentery ('the flux'), Tuberculosis, arthritis and 'sweating sickness' (probably influenza). Infant mortality was high, and childbirth was risky for both mother and child.

Rushes and grasses used as floor coverings presented a very real hygiene problem. Whilst the top layer might be replaced, the base level was often left to fester.

A lack of hygiene amongst medieval people led to horrific skin complaints. Poor people washed in cold water, without soap, so this did little to prevent infection. The more disfiguring skin diseases were generally classed as leprosy and indeed leprosy, caused by the bacterium *Mycobacterium leprae*, can arise from dirty conditions. It attacks and destroys the extremities of the body, particularly the toes and fingers, and sometimes the nose.



(Pictured right: Richard of Wallingford, Abbot of St Albans; his face is disfigured by leprosy.)

Leprosy was not the only disease that could affect someone in this way: the affliction known as St Anthony's Fire could also lead to gangrene and convulsions. This condition was caused by a fungus, ergot, which grows on rye. When the grain was ground to make bread, people who ate the bread became poisoned.

Sexually transmitted diseases such as syphilis were common among all social classes. Symptoms included unsightly skin rashes, recurring bouts of fever, blindness, mental illness and ultimately, death.

Whilst the poor had to make do with traditional herbal remedies and superstition to cure their ailments, the rich could afford to pay physicians.

Employing a physician did not however ensure that the patient would recover. The success of any treatment was largely down to luck; indeed, many of the 'cures' appear quite bizarre to us today.

It was quite widely believed that the body had four 'humours' and if these became unbalanced, you became ill. A patient's urine was used to determine whether there was indeed an unbalance. Bleeding (with or without leeches), sweating and induced vomiting were the remedies of choice to re-balance the humours.

Even the princely sport of jousting was not without its dangers – and not just broken limbs. For example, King Henry IV is believed to have suffered from seizures, perhaps as a consequence of repeated blows to the head received whilst jousting in his youth.

Crusading could also be bad for your health: wounds, infections, disease, and broken bones were just some of the hazards to be faced in the Holy Land.

Should an unfortunate patient require an operation or amputation, this would be carried out by a 'surgeon,' often a butcher or barber by trade, and would be performed without anaesthetic. As the instruments were not sterilized, post-operative infections were often fatal.

A reminder of the horrors of medieval surgery survives to this day: the red and white barber's pole traditionally found outside a barber's shop dates back to the Middle Ages. Its red stripe represents the blood spilled and the white stripe, the bandages used during an operation.

\*At this point in Shakespeare's play Henry IV, unwell, facing rebellion and with all the responsibilities of kingship, is feeling the insecurities of his crown.



## The Black Death

The brutality of the Black Death was matched only by the speed of its rampage across medieval Europe...

### Was the Black Death really such a disaster?

The brutality of the Black Death was matched only by the speed of its rampage across medieval Europe. One third of the English population was wiped out. The feudal system – brought into existence nearly 300 years earlier under William I – was damaged, and the unquestioned belief in the supremacy of the Catholic Church was destroyed. But for those peasants who survived, there was a new positivity about life. Taxes went down, wages went up and they felt significant for the first time in history. So was the Black Death really such a disaster?





There were many theories at the time as to the origins of the Black Death. Some people proposed that the germs of this virulent disease hovered above pools of stagnant water in the swampy marshlands of Asia. Some suggested it started with the Jews polluting drinking water in the growing cities of Europe. Some put forward the theory that the Black Death was a punishment from God for man's failure to meet biblical expectations.

Whatever the truth, the average peasant cared not. What they did care about was that when the disease, carried in the bowels of trading ships from Europe, made port at Dorset in 1348, it ripped through England with terrifying ferocity.

Early symptoms of the disease included sweats and vomiting, but this soon gave way to uncontrollable spasms as the body lost its ability to control muscle function. Black bruising under the skin and black pus-filled buboes (large swellings) developed in the groin or under the arms. These black markings gave the disease its dramatic name.

At the time, it was thought that should the buboes burst on the fourth day, you may have a slim chance of survival, but historians now believe that 70% of victims died within five days. As the disease developed into another strain called pneumatic plague and became airborne, the survival rate evaporated: now 100% of those contracting the pneumatic plague died. In total 30-40% of the English population perished and in some villages, the death toll reached 80-90%. It is estimated that London's population reduced from 100,000 to 20,000 in a single generation.



The feudal system, created after the Conquest in 1066 by William I as a method of consolidating his power, resulted in the subordination of the peasants and the solidification of the position of the nobility in England.

At the head of the system, the king owned vast amounts of land. What he needed however was money, food, and a standing army. By sharing out land to his barons who in turn passed it on to their knights and peasants, William made sure that he was paid taxes and provided with an army bound to serve him each year. The reward of land to the richer nobles also assured their loyalty.

The feudal system served the needs of the rich perfectly. The peasants however were tied to the land, forced to work in order to pay their lord for their land through their servitude.

They were effectively slaves and were treated as such. Peasants had to ask the permission of their lord to leave the village, to ground their corn in the lord's mill or even for their daughters to marry.

The huge loss of life after the Black Death altered this. Peasants had died in their thousands. Some villages never recovered, and with no workers to plough and gather in the harvest, they fell into disrepair and disappeared.

However not all was lost for the peasants who survived. The Black Death had tested their faith in the feudal system: God had struck down people of all classes with the pestilence. This prompted new ideas about equality and a newfound self-respect.



In order to address the shortage of labour, many nobles started offering better working conditions and higher wages, and peasants could – for the first time – negotiate their conditions and be paid more fairly for the work they did.

Furthermore, because of the severe shortage of labour, taxes went down, and wages went up. The drastic decrease in population also meant there was also an oversupply of goods, and so the price of consumables dropped. Those who had survived the plague began to enjoy higher standards of living as a result.

While there was a significant improvement for many peasants, some sections of society did not benefit at all from the impact of the Black Death. The Jewish community was often blamed in the hysteria that accompanied the spread of the disease. Accused of poisoning the wells in many villages, Jews were tortured and expelled across Europe. The Catholic Church also suffered: depopulation and the ‘deregulation’ of society meant smaller congregations. Parish priests and bishops lost their hallowed status in many areas: if God was punishing all people with the pestilence, then maybe the clergy were not so superior after all. The loosening of the Catholic Church’s hold on society can therefore be traced back to the time of the Black Death.

So was the Black Death really such a disaster? With an estimated death toll of 75-200 million people, it’s hard to argue otherwise.

However, it could be argued that for those peasants who survived, life improved quite significantly. They had more money in the post-plague world, and their expertise and labour was needed more than ever to keep the fragile systems of Europe running. In some instances they could even negotiate their own working conditions...

... that is, until King Richard II attempted to stop all of that.

## The Great Plague 1665.

In two successive years of the 17th century London suffered two terrible disasters. In the spring and summer of 1665 an outbreak of Bubonic Plague spread from parish to parish until thousands had died and the huge pits dug to receive the bodies were full. In 1666 the Great Fire of London destroyed much of the centre of London, but also helped to kill off some of the black rats and fleas that carried the plague bacillus.

Bubonic Plague was known as the Black Death and had been known in England for centuries. It was a ghastly disease. The victim’s skin turned black in patches and inflamed glands or ‘buboes’ in the groin, combined with compulsive vomiting, swollen tongue and splitting headaches made it a horrible, agonizing killer. The plague started in the East, possibly China, and quickly spread through Europe. Whole communities were wiped out and corpses littered the streets as there was no one left to bury them.



**Buboes in a victim of plague**

It began in London in the poor, overcrowded parish of St. Giles-in-the-Field. It started slowly at first but by May of 1665, 43 had died. In June 6137 people died, in July 17036 people and at its peak in August 31159 people died. In all, 15% of the population perished during that terrible summer.

Incubation took a mere four to six days and when the plague appeared in a household, the house was sealed, thus condemning the whole family to death! These houses were distinguished by a painted red cross on the door and the words, ‘Lord have mercy on us.’ At night, the corpses were brought out in answer to the cry, ‘Bring out your dead,’ put in a cart and taken away to the plague pits. One called the Great Pit was at Aldgate in London and another at Finsbury Fields.



The King, Charles II and his Court left London and fled to Oxford. Those people who could sent their families away from London during these months, but the poor had no recourse but to stay. In his diary, Samuel Pepys gives a vivid account of the empty streets in London, as all who could had left in an attempt to flee the pestilence.

It was believed that holding a posy of flowers to the nose kept away the plague and to this day judges are still given a nose-gay to carry on ceremonial occasions as a protection against the plague! A song about the plague is still sung by children. 'Ring-a-ring of roses' describes in great detail the symptoms of the plague and ends with 'All fall down.' The last word, 'dead,' is omitted today.

The plague spread to many parts of England. York was one city badly affected. The plague victims were buried outside the city walls, and it is said that they have never been disturbed since then, as a precaution against a resurgence of the dreaded plague. The grassy embankments below the city walls are the sites of these plague pits.



### **The Plague Window, Eyam Church**

A small village in Derbyshire called Eyam, six miles north of Bakewell, has a story of tragedy and courage that will always be remembered.

In 1665 a box of laundry was brought to Eyam by a traveller. The laundry was found to be infested with fleas, and the epidemic started. Some 80% of the people died here and there could have been a terrible outbreak in Derbyshire had the village not had a courageous rector called William Mompesson.

He persuaded the villagers not to flee the village and so spread the infection,

but to stay until the plague had run its course. His wife was one of the many victims and her tomb can be seen in Eyam churchyard.



Mompesson preached in the open air during the time of the plague, on a rock in a dell now called Cucklett Church. Every year a Commemorative Service is held here on the last Sunday in August. During their 'siege' the villagers dropped money for provisions into a well so as not to spread the infection on the coins.

### **Mompesson's Well**

In some towns and villages in England there are still the old market crosses which have a depression at the foot of the stone cross. This was filled with vinegar during times of plague as it was believed that vinegar would kill any germs on the coins and so contain the disease.

The plague lasted in London until the late autumn when the colder weather helped kill off the fleas.

Over the centuries Bubonic Plague has broken out in Europe and the Far East. In 1900 there were outbreaks of plague in places as far apart as Portugal and Australia. Influenza seems to be the modern form of plague. At the end of World War One an influenza outbreak circled the world during 1918 – 1919. Within a year 20 million people had died world-wide.

## **The Reputed Plague Pits of London**

Overcrowded, dirty and awash with sewage... it's hardly surprising that the bubonic plague flourished in the crowded streets of London. Over 15% of London's population was wiped out between 1665 and 1666 alone, or some 100,000 people in the space of two years. But where did all these bodies go?

The answer: in tens, if not hundreds of plague pits scattered across the city and the surrounding countryside. The majority of these sites were originally in the grounds of churches, but as the body count grew and the graveyards became overcharged with dead, then dedicated pits were hastily constructed around the fields surrounding London.

**Unfortunately, there is very little evidence about the exact location of these plague pits.**

#### **St Paul's Church, Shadwell.**

Confirmed use as one of the five plague pits located in Stepney, used between 1664 - 1666.

#### **Christchurch Gardens, Westminster.**

Established in 1640 to provide additional burial space for nearby St Margaret's, part of the site was designated as a plague pit in 1665 and is now a public garden. Also buried here is the Crown jewels thief, Colonel Thomas Blood, although he died somewhat later in 1680.

#### **Stepney Mount.**

Although the specific location of the Stepney Mount pest fields are unsure, it is thought that they were in the area surrounding St Philip's church. If true, this would have been one of the largest plague pits in London and would have covered acres of grounds.

#### **Vincent Square, Westminster**

Owned by Westminster School, at least some of these playing fields are located above a former plague pit called Tothill Fields. The rest of the pits are situated underneath nearby government buildings.

#### **Pesthouse Close / Marshall Street Leisure Centre, Soho.**

As its name suggests, this area was once home to a pest-house where infected or sick people would have been taken to be quarantined and studied. Although first built in 1593, the pest-house played a vital role in attempting to quarantine the outbreak in 1665. Bodies were then buried at an adjoining common cemetery between Poland Street and Marshall Street.

A burial ground for centuries, Holywell Mount was used heavily during the 1664 - 1666 outbreak of the Great Plague. There is still an open area which can be seen from 38 Scrutton Street, the rest of the site has now been built over.

#### **St Dunstan's, Stepney.**

During the Great Plague, the church of St Dunstan's donated a large amount of its lands for interring those who succumbed to the outbreak. These plague pits are now beneath the dog walking area around the church.

#### **Seward Street / Mount Mills, between Shoreditch and Finsbury.**

Once the site of St. Bartholomew's Hospital Ground, the area was used as a large plague pit between 1664 - 1666. Reputedly a rather shallow grave, residential buildings on top of the site have only recently been constructed. From Daniel Defoe's A Journal of the Plague Year:

'A piece of ground beyond Goswell Street, near Mount Mill... abundance were buried promiscuously from the parishes of Aldersgate, Clerkenwell and even out of the city.' Thousands of bodies are thought to lie here.'

#### **St John's Church, Scandrett Street**

Although the majority of St John's church was destroyed by WW2 bombs, the site of the original 1665 plague pit can still be seen directly opposite from the church's remains.

#### **Knightsbridge Green, Knightsbridge.**

A small plague pit dating from around 1664, thought to have been used as a burial ground for those who died at the nearby Knightsbridge lazaretto (leper colony), (once part of the Westminster Abbey estate).

#### **Gower's Walk Pest Field, near Aldgate East.**

The burial site for thousands of plague victims, now occupied by warehouse apartment conversions.

#### **Aldgate Underground Station.**

As described by Daniel Defoe in his book, A Journal of the Plague Year.

'A terrible pit it was, and I could not resist my curiosity to go and see it. As near as I may judge, it was about forty feet in length, and about fifteen or sixteen feet broad, and at the time I first looked at it, about nine feet deep; but it was said they dug it near twenty feet deep afterwards in one part of it, till they could go no deeper for the water; for they had, it seems, dug several large pits before this. For though the plague was long a-coming to our parish, yet, when it did come, there was no parish in or about London where it raged with such violence as in the two parishes of Aldgate and Whitechappel.'



**Sainsbury's, Whitechapel.**

The purported location of a 17th century plague pit containing human burials.

**St-Giles-in-the-Fields**

The church's own website states that over a thousand people were buried in pits in St Giles graveyard.

**Golden Square, Soho.**

This delightful little square is situated in the centre of Soho and has a secret history as a 17th century plague pit. As Lord Macaulay wrote in 1685:

'it was a field not to be passed without a shudder by any Londoner of that age. There, as in a place far from the haunts of men, had been dug, twenty years before, when the great plague was raging, a pit into which the dead carts had nightly shot corpses by scores. It was popularly believed that the earth was deeply tainted with infection and could not be disturbed without imminent risk to human life.'

**Charterhouse Square, Farringdon.**

The largest mass grave in London during the Black Death. It is thought that around 50,000 bodies are buried here. The pit was unearthed during Crossrail building work in March 2013 when the Museum of London were brought in to excavate and study the remains.

**All Saints Churchyard, Isleworth.**

It is reported that 149 victims of the Great Plague were buried here in 1665.

**37-39 Artillery Lane, Bishopsgate, City of London.**

The site of a 14th and 15th century plague pit, although excavations in the 1970's also uncovered a large Roman cemetery which was backfilled in the mid-second century.

**Vinegar Alley, Walthamstow.**

Named after the huge amounts of vinegar that were used around the plague pit in an attempt to contain the spread of the disease in 1665.

**Cross Bones Graveyard, Southwark.**

Better known as an unconsecrated memorial to the thousands of prostitutes who lived, worked, and died in Southwark, there is also evidence to suggest that Cross Bones was used as a plague pit. Specifically, the lease for Cross Bones passed to the churchwardens of St Saviour's parish in 1665 during the height of the Great Plague.

**Upper Street, Angel.**

A small triangular piece of land (now known as Islington Green) used as a plague pit in the 17th century.

**Blackheath.**

Contrary to popular legend, the name 'Blackheath' is in no way related to the Black Death! However, it is thought that this area was used to the disposal of plague victims during both the Black Death in the 14th century and the Great Plague in the 17th century.

**Clay Ponds, Brentford.**

A massive and ancient burial site which was partially excavated in the 1830's. It is likely that at least some of this site was used as a plague pit certainly in the 17th century and possibly in the 14th century.

**Green Park.**

Discovered in the 1960s during the construction of the Victoria Line. Excavated bones dated back to the 17th century, suggesting that this was a plague pit.

**Bakerloo Line, London Depot, near Elephant & Castle.**

At the south end of the depot lie two tunnels; one leads to Elephant and Castle whilst the other is a dead end and acts as a runaway lane for trains that are unable to stop. Behind the walls of the tunnel lies a plague pit.

**National Maritime Museum, Greenwich.**

Frommer's 2012 guide to London reports that a giant pit lies below Greenwich's National Maritime Museum, although this is unconfirmed.

**Hand Alley (now New Street), Bishopsgate.**

As confirmed by Defoe's History of Plague, where he wrote:

'The upper end of Hand Alley in Bishopsgate Street was then a green field, and was taken in particularly for Bishopsgate parish, though many of the carts out of the City also brought their dead thither also...'

#### **Pitfield Street, Hoxton.**

As its name suggests, Pitfield Street in Hoxton was once the home to a large plague pit dating from 1665 - 1666. This has been confirmed by Hackney Council, and today local residents are warned to 'keep off the grass'! Many thanks to Cory Doctorow for helping us identify the exact location of the pit, as well as an unidentified submitter who tipped us off to the site.

#### **Houndsditch (unconfirmed), City of London.**

According to many sources, including Wikipedia, many of the office blocks towards the northwestern corner of Houndsditch do not occupy full plots due to a littering of plague pits in the area. What is certain is that Houndsditch was once used to dispose of dead dogs during Roman times, hence its name.

#### **Pardon Plague Pits, The City.**

One of three plague pits arranged by Edward III, Pardon burial ground (also used for criminals and the poor) was to the North of Old Street between St John's Street and Goswell Road. This one was huge - and used for burials for many centuries.

#### **The Royal Mint, East Smithfield.**

Another one of the Black Death plague pits arranged by Edward III. This one at East Smithfield was probably the largest and has been excavated by Museum of London Archaeology service. The report shows that burials were very systematic, and not at all like the plague pits associated with the Great Plague.

#### **Queen's Wood, Highgate (unconfirmed).**

It is reputed that a mass of bones from a plague pit were found here during the 19th century, although this has never been confirmed. On an unrelated note, Queen's Wood is one of the last remnants of the once massive 'Great Forest of Middlesex'.

#### **Armour House Pit, The City (unconfirmed).**

"In the 1980s Armour House which was at the junction of St Martins LeGrand and Gresham St. Was explored into the sub-basement and found a soil area that appeared to be bridged by the building. Sometime later an inspection of the floor plan of the sub-basement showed the soil area as a Plague Pit!"

#### **Shepherd's Bush Green (unconfirmed).**

It is said that planning applications for new build properties on Shepherd's Bush Common are repeatedly turned down for risk of disturbing the plague pit beneath.

#### **Gipsy Hill Plague Pit.**

Located just south of the roundabout connecting Dulwich Wood Park and South Croxted Road lies a reputed plague pit. No hard evidence has been found to support this claim, although local history forums seemed relatively confident of its existence.

#### **Broad Street Station**

Broad Street was a major rail terminal in the City of London, adjacent to Liverpool Street station. It served as the main terminus of the North London Railway (NLR) network, running from 1865 to 1986.

The burial ground documented as the 'New Churchyard', (also known as variously as the Old Bedlam or Bethlem burial/burying ground/place) was in use 1569–1739. The archaeological investigations involved the excavation of c3750 skeletons, as well as boundary walls and burial structures associated with the burial ground. The sites became increasingly developed from the mid-18th century following the closure of the burial ground.

In the 1770s, the lands of the burial ground were converted into gardens or yards for the use of Broad Street Buildings (built in 1737) and No.1 Brokers Row. Greater changes occurred in the 19th century, including the construction of a new road called 'Liverpool Street' in 1823–24, then the near complete redevelopment of the sites in the 1860s and 70s, which followed the construction of Broad Street Station and Liverpool Street Stations.

#### **Stratford Langthorne Abbey.**

St Mary Stratford Langthorne, Essex, which was founded as a Savigniac house in 1135 and incorporated into the Cistercian Order in 1147; it was suppressed in 1538. Excavations on the site took place between 1973 and 1994. Little evidence was found for the monastery's origins, apart from a few very early burials, but it appears that it



was established within a pre-existing field system. The archaeological excavations for the London Underground Limited Jubilee Line Extension Project revealed a total burial population of 647 individuals.

## **Weird and Wonderful Medicine in 17th and 18th Century England.**

However little you know about the history of medicine, you're probably aware that doctors used to prescribe some pretty strange courses of treatment. For centuries they were famously reliant on bleeding, a remedy based on the ancient idea that some illnesses were caused by an excess of blood. Leeches, widely used for hundreds of years, removed only a teaspoonful of blood per application, but physicians sometimes took more drastic measures. By opening a vein (usually in the arm) they could remove several pints at a time if they thought it necessary.



If you were lucky enough to escape a thorough bleeding, taking medicine often wasn't much fun either. Commonly prescribed drugs included highly toxic compounds of mercury and arsenic, while naturally occurring poisons such as hemlock and deadly nightshade were also staples of the medicine cabinet. And a volume first published in 1618, the *Pharmacopoeia Londinensis*, offers a fascinating and detailed insight into what used to be considered 'medicinal' in seventeenth-century England. It's a comprehensive list of remedies commonly prescribed by doctors, all of which London apothecaries were therefore required to stock. These ranged from herbs and fruits to minerals and numerous animal products.

The *Pharmacopoeia* makes fairly extraordinary reading today, since many of the 'medicines' it lists are far from pleasant. They include five varieties of urine and fourteen of blood, as well as the saliva, sweat and fat of sundry animals – oh yes, and the 'turds of a goose, of a dog, of a goat, of pigeons, of a stone horse, of a hen, of swallows, of men, of women, of mice, of a peacock, of a hog, and of a heifer.' Can you imagine what the average apothecary's shop must have smelt like?

Other items you might have found on the premises included the penises of stags and bulls, frogs' lungs, castrated cats, ants, and millipedes. Perhaps the most bizarre items were discarded nail-clippings (used to provoke vomiting), the skulls of those who had died a violent death (a treatment for epilepsy), and powdered mummy.

And yes, that means Egyptian mummy, which was prescribed for a variety of conditions including asthma, tuberculosis, and bruising. The London apothecary John Quincy, for example, recommended treating bruises with a powder whose ingredients included Armenian clay, rhubarb, and mummy – rather more trouble to get hold of than a tube of ibuprofen gel would be today.

Some of these items must have been fearsomely difficult to get hold of. Hen's eggs and ox legs presented few difficulties, but where on earth was an apothecary in seventeenth-century London expected to source regular supplies of lion fat, rhinoceros horn or swallows' brains? Surprisingly, mummy was readily available if you knew the people to ask: the really good stuff was regularly imported from Egypt – although a cheap imitation could be

prepared at home by dipping a joint of meat in alcohol and smoking it like a ham. Every bit as effective as the real thing, and a rather tastier sandwich filling.

So much for the early modern pharmacy, but what about emergency care? Some of the treatments on offer for critically ill patients were, if anything, even more unusual. One summer evening in 1702 the Earl of Kent was enjoying a game of bowls in Tunbridge Wells when he fell down unconscious. Luckily, a prominent London physician, Charles Goodall, was nearby and arrived on the scene within a few minutes.

He found the earl lying on the ground, apparently dead, 'having neither pulse nor breath, but only one or two small rattlings in the throat, his eyes being closed.' The signs were ominous, but the doctor left nothing to chance in his efforts to save his patient.

First he bled the earl, removing slightly more than half a pint of blood from his arm. Then snuff was poked up his nostrils and antimonial wine, a toxic brew intended to provoke vomiting, was poured down his throat. The doctor's plan, orthodox for the time, was to shock the earl back to life by provoking an extreme reaction: sneezing, coughing, or vomiting.

These measures were unsuccessful, so the unfortunate patient was carried indoors, and yet more blood taken from him. Next his head was shaved and a blister – a plaster smeared with a harsh caustic substance – placed on top of it. The idea was that this would provoke blistering and so force any toxins out of the duke's body. Next the resourceful medic administered several spoonfuls of buckthorn syrup, intended to empty the bowels. By this point word had got around, and a number of other doctors appeared in the room. One of them suggested that it was time to try something more extreme, so a frying pan was sent for, heated in the fire, and then applied red hot to the earl's head. This did not provoke the slightest reaction, leading several of those present to conclude that their patient was already dead – and they were probably right.

But Dr Goodall was still not ready to give up. At the request of the earl's daughter his unconscious body was taken to his own chamber and tucked up in a warm bed. The doctors then ordered that tobacco smoke should be blown into his anus. This may sound an eccentric thing to do, but the technique – known as Dutch fumigation – was generally regarded as the most effective means of emergency resuscitation. This time, however, it was no use. The doctors, realising their task was probably hopeless, tried one last thing. The bowels of a freshly-killed sheep were wrapped around the earl's abdomen – a desperate and thoroughly unpleasant attempt to warm him up.

All proved unavailing, and the doctors finally admitted defeat. 'Thus fell this great and noble peer, much lamented by all who knew his Lordship,' wrote Dr Goodall in a letter to a friend. It's likely that the earl had died within a few minutes of collapsing, possibly from a heart attack or stroke. But in 1702, a century before the invention of the stethoscope, it was virtually impossible to be sure that a patient's heart had stopped – so resuscitation attempts often continued until there was no conceivable doubt that they really were dead.

It's interesting to note how much medicine changed during the eighteenth century: by 1800, virtually all the strange remedies I've mentioned had fallen out of use. Doctors were starting to prescribe substances we'd recognise as medicinal rather than badger fat or rabbit's paw – and the idea of blowing smoke up a patient's bottom had certainly had its day.

## Victorian Poisoners.





Poison was the first choice for many murderers in the Victorian era – and was particularly popular with women! Poison seemed to be the first choice for many murderers in the Victorian era – mainly by women. One of the most celebrated cases was that of Adelaide Bartlett.

Adelaide Bartlett's husband Edwin was one who succumbed to poison. In his case, chloroform. Adelaide's trial has gone down in history as one of the most baffling. Although poor Edwin's post-mortem revealed a large amount of liquid chloroform in his stomach, there was no trace in the mouth or throat.

#### **Adelaide Bartlett PD-US.**

The central part of Adelaide's defence at her trial was the mystery of how the chloroform got into the stomach, as it is almost impossible to swallow as the unpleasant taste causes vomiting and if it had been poured down his throat while unconscious, some would have gone into the lungs and there was none found.

Adelaide was acquitted at the trial, and afterwards Sir James Paget of St. Bartholomew's Hospital remarked, "Now that it is all over, she should tell us, in the interest of science, how she did it."

Arsenic was easily obtained in Victorian times in the form of flypapers. These could be soaked, and the arsenic obtained. Ladies of fashion used arsenic for cosmetic purposes as well as killing husbands!

Madeline Smith, a beautiful 21-year-old girl, lived in Glasgow in 1897. She had been having a torrid affair with a clerk called Emile L'Angelier, and she had written him some very passionate letters during the course of the affair. Madeline's father pressured Madeline to become engaged to a friend of his, and she therefore tried to get the letters back from L'Angelier. He refused to give them to her and threatened to show them to her fiancé. She then decided to poison him with arsenic in a cup of cocoa! He drank it and died. At her trial Madeline made a very good impression on all present, and the final verdict was Not Proven, a verdict only possible in Scotland.

Florence Maybrick also decided arsenic would be just the thing for her husband.

In 1889 after a short illness, James Maybrick died. The Maybrick family were suspicious, and after locking Florence in her room, they searched the house. They found a packet labelled 'Arsenic. Poison for rats.' The autopsy on Maybrick revealed traces of arsenic in his stomach and Florence was accused of his murder. She was sentenced to death, commuted to life imprisonment. She served 15 years and was released in 1904.

**Mary Ann Cotton** can be called Britain's Mass Murderess. She poisoned four husbands and twice as many children, with arsenic. She was 20 when she married William Mowbray, a miner, and they had four children. William went to sea as a stoker and died suddenly while at home, as did the four children.

Mary, now a grieving widow, got a job as a nurse in Sunderland Infirmary where she met George Wood. He married her but did not live long. Mary collected the insurance money and met James Robinson, a man with four children. They were married in 1867, and all of his four children died, as well as the new baby that Mary had. Once more Mary collected the insurance and married Frank Cotton. He had two children by his first wife and a new baby by Mary. Frederick died suddenly as did all his children. Mary now had a new lover, a man called Natrass, but he died too of Gastric Fever, according to Mary. The local doctor, Dr. Kilburn, became suspicious and in 1873 Mary was brought to Durham Assizes. She was found guilty and hanged at Durham Jail.

Christiana Edmunds was an ill-tempered, waspish spinster who fell madly in love with her doctor. She was convinced that Doctor Beard was in love with her and began to send him emotional, passionate letters. Doctor Beard was embarrassed but powerless. In 1871 Christiana decided that Mrs. Beard would have to go and sent her a



box of chocolates. They were full of strychnine. Christiana was eventually caught after the small boy she had deputed to buy the chocolates from the shop identified her. She pleaded insanity at her trial but was sentenced to death. This was later commuted to detention in Broadmoor for life.

Dr. Pritchard in 1864 purchased some antimony as his wife was standing in his way – he wanted to marry one of his servant-girls. He had a problem as this servant was pregnant. His wife suddenly became very ill, and his mother-in-law came to look after her. Quite suddenly his mother-in-law died in his house, and her daughter, his wife, a few weeks later. They were both found to have been poisoned with antimony. Pritchard was hanged in 1865, the last man to be executed in public in Scotland. A crowd of 100,000 watched the execution.

## **Dying for a Humbug, the Bradford Sweets Poisoning 1858.**

The 1858 Bradford sweets poisoning involved the accidental arsenic poisoning by humbug of more than 200 people in Bradford...

The 1858 Bradford humbug poisoning involved the accidental arsenic poisoning of more than 200 people. Twenty people died and over 200 became seriously ill when sweets accidentally made with arsenic were sold from a market stall in Bradford, Yorkshire. But how did sweets sweetened with arsenic ever come to be sold to the public?

### **The reason was the high price of sugar.**

Sugar cane could not grow in the British climate, so sugar had to be brought into the country. Whilst it is thought that Henry III's court was using sugar as early as 1264, it was not until the 14th century that sugar was in general use in Britain. A luxury affordable only by the super-rich, it was sold at two shillings a pound (or approximately £50 in today's money). Sugar was so valuable it was kept in locked caddies.

In the 17th and 18th century sugar plantations in the West Indies supplied Britain with sugar, and trading ports such as Bristol grew rich on the trade.

By 1750, there were 120 sugar refineries operating in Britain, but these could only produce 30,000 tons of sugar per year, so prices were very high. Vast profits were made in the sugar trade, to the extent that sugar was called "white gold." The government recognised this and taxed it highly. In 1815 the tax raised from sugar in Britain was a staggering £3,000,000.

As the price of sugar was so prohibitive, it was often mixed with cheaper substances or 'daft' and then this inferior sugar would be sold on to the working classes. 'Daft' was a mixture of substances such as powdered limestone and plaster of Paris, not tasty but perfectly safe. And so to Bradford in October 1858.

William Hardaker, known to locals as "Humbug Billy," sold sweets from a stall in the Green Market in central Bradford. As was common practise at the time, his supplier and maker of the sweets – in this case peppermint humbugs – used 'daft' in his sweet production, supplied by a druggist in Shipley. Tragically on this occasion, due to a mistake at the pharmacy, 12 pounds of arsenic trioxide were purchased instead of the harmless 'daft'. Both 'daft' and arsenic trioxide are white powders; the arsenic trioxide was not properly labelled and stored alongside the 'daft,' and so the confusion arose.

The mistake was not discovered during the manufacture of the sweets, even though the finished product did look a little unusual. The sweets (lozenges) were made by James Appleton, who combined forty pounds of sugar, twelve pounds of arsenic trioxide, four pounds of gum, and peppermint oil, to create at least forty pounds of peppermint humbugs. The sweets reportedly contained enough arsenic to kill two people per humbug.

Hardaker went on to sell the sweets from his market stall that night. Of those who purchased and ate the sweets, around 20 people died, with a further 200 or so becoming severely ill with arsenic poisoning within a day or so.

All involved were subsequently charged with manslaughter but none were convicted.

The Bradford poison scandal led to new legislation in order to protect the public from any similar tragedy. The 1860 Adulteration of Food and Drink Bill changed the manner by which ingredients could be used, mixed, and







combined. The UK Pharmacy Act of 1868 introduced more stringent regulations regarding the handling and selling of named poisons and medicines by druggists and pharmacists. The abolition of the sugar tax in 1874 meant sugar became affordable to all.

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