

Plague and Pestilence

The March History talk by Paul Harding from Discover History was about Plague and Pestilence in Worcester and over 75 people enjoyed a highly entertaining talk again, if not a bit gruesome at times! Whilst most people consider the plague to be the Black Death in 1349 there were a number of other occasions when plague or pestilence struck the country, notably in the 17th Century. I have already discovered a number of increased deaths in the St John's parish during the early part of the 17th Century and details were included in last month's newsletter. One of the spikes was during the Civil War in 1646 when remnants of the Royalist Army fled the battle of Stow-on-the-Wold and came to Worcester doubling the size of the population and disease quickly spread.



Going back to 1347/48 though, the plague started to spread as this the era when communities started to trade so traders were moving



goods around and taking the plague with them. It was originally called the New Pestilence, so obviously they had experienced previous pestilences, but came to be known as the Black Death because the body went black after people were infected. The people who were infected initially got a fever and felt they were burning up, but the body was cold to touch. The body then started to decompose while the person was still alive, and people died very quickly.

The plague was initially spread by fleas that had bitten rats infected with the plague and then they bit humans passing on to them. Once the infection took hold it became an airborne bacterium and then that is when it rapidly spread.

Worcester was one of the first places in the country to get the Plague as it was a major inland port and much trading took place through it. The parishioners of St Cuthbert's at Lower Wick are believed to have died out and that is when St John's became the main church for the parish. People did not understand the disease and thought it was because they had done something wrong, so they prayed more and, of course, by gathering together they helped the Plague to spread. St Oswald's Hospital in Foregate Street is believed to be one of the main Plague Burial pits.



People thought they could ward off the Plague by doing pilgrimages and wearing talisman, such as relic bones, wood and nails from the Cross at Calvary. Healthcare in the 14th Century was based around Apothecaries, Physicians (Doctors) and Surgeons. The people also went to the local 'Wise Woman', who was often the midwife, but they were often accused of being witches and hanged! There were lots of weird and wacky ways of avoiding the Plague and Paul told us about:



- Wearing of frogs around the neck, not if these were dead or alive frogs!
- Covering yourself with raw sewage, told you it was gruesome!
- Wearing of talisman.
- Allowing snails to slide over your body and the sores and then putting them in a bag and leaving on the road so someone else would pick it up and then your Plague would be transferred to them and you were cured!



Unsurprisingly none of these worked! Physicians would recommend bloodletting to get rid of the Plague and Paul's demonstration of this explained why many people died using this method. Apothecaries believed that it could be overcome by smelling sweet air instead of the vile smells associated with the Plague. They wore the Plague masks with the long noses and stuffed the nose with sweet smelling herbs. The surgeons in cutting in to the sores to let the pus out and then

cauterized the wounds with a red-hot blade, another highly successful way leading to more deaths.

All of them were only able to treat the symptoms as they did not know the causes or how to fight it. A very interesting talk with lots of props and artefacts. Next on the 12th April Paul will be enlightening us on the Commercialisation of Easter.

