

Everyone

The Black Death arrived in Europe by sea in October 1347 when 12 Genoese trading ships docked at the Sicilian port of Messina after a long journey through the Black Sea. The people who gathered on the docks to greet the ships were met with a horrifying surprise: Most of the sailors aboard the ships were dead, and those who were still alive were gravely ill. They were overcome with fever, unable to keep food down and delirious from pain. Strangest of all, they were covered in mysterious black boils that oozed blood and pus and gave their illness its name: the "Black Death." The Sicilian authorities hastily ordered the fleet of "death ships" out of the harbor, but it was too late: Over the next five years, the mysterious Black Death would kill more than 20 million people in Europe—almost one-third of the continent's population.

The Black Death of 1348 to 1350

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In Medieval England, the Black Death was to kill 1.5 million people out of an estimated total of 4 million people between **1348** and **1350**. No medical knowledge existed in Medieval England to cope with the disease. After 1350, it was to strike England another six times by the end of the century. Understandably, peasants were terrified at the news that the Black Death might be approaching their village or town.

Team 1

The Black Death is the name given to a deadly plague (often called bubonic plague, but is more likely to be pneumonic plague) which was rampant during the Fourteenth Century. It was believed to have arrived from Asia in late 1348 and caused more than one epidemic in that century – though its impact on English society from 1348 to 1350 was terrible. No amount of medical knowledge could help England when the plague struck. It was also to have a major impact on England's social structure which led to the Peasants Revolt of 1381.

Up until recently the Black Death was thought to have been caused by fleas carried by rats that were very common in towns and cities. When the fleas bit into their victims, it was thought they were literally injecting them with the disease.

However evidence produced by forensic scientists and archaeologists in 2014 from human remains in the north of the City of London suggests that fleas could not actually have been responsible for an infection that spread so fast – it had to be airborne. Once the disease reached the lungs of the malnourished, it was then spread to the wider population through sneezes and coughs.

Whatever the cause of the infection, death was often very quick for the weaker victims. By Spring 1349 the Black Death had killed six out of every ten Londoners.

Its symptoms were described in 1348 by a man called Boccaccio who lived in Florence, Italy:

“The first signs of [the plague](#) were lumps in the groin or armpits. After this, livid black spots appeared on the arms and thighs and other parts of the body. Few recovered. Almost all died within three days, usually without any fever.”

Written evidence from the time indicates that nearly all the victims died within three days though a small number did last for four days.

Team 2

Why did [the plague](#) spread so quickly?

In towns and cities people lived very close together and they knew nothing about contagious diseases. If they did, they would have avoided close contact with others (staying at least a meter apart) if they themselves were ill or if others around them were ill. They would also have been careful to cover their mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing.

Additionally, the disposal of bodies was very crude and helped to spread the disease still further as those who handled the dead bodies did not protect themselves in any way.

Lack of medical knowledge meant that people tried anything to help them escape the disease. One of the more extreme was the flagellants. These people wanted to show their love of God by whipping themselves, hoping that God would forgive them their sins and that they would be spared the Black Death.



Flagellants hoping to escape the Black Death

Team 3

What impact did the Black Death have on Society?

The Black Death had a huge impact on society. Fields went unploughed as the men who usually did this were victims of the disease. Harvests would not have been brought in as the manpower did not exist. Animals would have been lost as the people in a village would not have been around to tend them.

Therefore whole villages would have faced starvation. Towns and cities would have faced food shortages as the villages that surrounded them could not provide them with enough food. Those

lords who lost their manpower to the disease, turned to sheep farming as this required less people to work on the land. Grain farming became less popular – this, again, kept towns and cities short of such basics as bread. One consequence of the Black Death was inflation – the price of food went up creating more hardship for the poor. In some parts of England, food prices went up by four times.

Team 4

How did peasants that survived respond to those in power?

Those who survived the Black Death believed that there was something special about them – almost as if God had protected them. Therefore, they took the opportunity offered by the disease to improve their lifestyle.

Feudal law stated that peasants could only leave their village if they had their lord's permission. Now many lords were short of desperately needed labour for the land that they owned. After the Black Death, lords actively encouraged peasants to leave the village where they lived to come to work for them. When peasants did this, the lord refused to return them to their original village.

Peasants could demand higher wages as they knew that a lord was desperate to get in his harvest. So the government faced the prospect of peasants leaving their villages to find a better 'deal' from a lord thus upsetting the whole idea of the Feudal System which had been introduced to tie peasants to the land. Ironically, this movement by the peasants was encouraged by the lords who were meant to benefit from the Feudal System.

To curb peasants roaming around the countryside looking for better pay, the government introduced the **Statute of Labourers** in **1351** that stated:

No peasants could be paid more than the wages paid in 1346. No lord or master should offer more wages than paid in 1346. No peasants could leave the village they belonged to.

Though some peasants decided to ignore the statute, many knew that disobedience would lead to serious punishment. This created great anger amongst the peasants which was to boil over in 1381 with the Peasants Revolt. Hence, it can be argued that the Black Death was to lead to the Peasants Revolt