

'TISHOO, 'TISHOO

Pepys' concern for the integrity of his navy in the 17th century, reflected by many similar concerns today with regard to our present naval forces, is not the only "then-and-now" event in Restoration Britain finding a counterpart in more recent times. One such was the catastrophic outbreak of plague in 1665, described so vividly and with such a sense of foreboding in the Diaries. (Pepys seems more astonished than relieved that he and his wife escaped unscathed when so many friends, servants and acquaintances perished.)

The plague had visited this country several times before, most notably in the 14th century when it was dubbed the Black Death because of the discolouration caused to the bodies of the victims. But the 1665 outbreak was by far the worst resulting in at least 100 000 deaths in and around the City of London. (It is thought that the Bills of Mortality, regularly published to try to keep a tally of just how many victims, grossly underestimated the true scale of the disaster.) By the standards of the day many doctors in London reacted with a praiseworthy professionalism and objectivity, putting their own lives at risk trying to find the cause and a possible cure. Generally they were confronted by a tidal wave of superstition, most of it religion-led. The plague, it was shouted from the pulpits, was a demonstration of God's wrath against sinful mankind. People flocked to the churches in large numbers to repent, the already sick mixing with the well, thus increasing the spread of the disease and the number of victims.

Indeed, most of the measures introduced to try to reduce the spread of the disease had the opposite effect, not least the order to slaughter thousands of dogs and cats in the City, thereby removing the very instruments which would have reduced the number of rats with their fleas that carried the disease. (It would not be until the eve of the 20th century that the link between rat, flea and plague was made.) Another measure which increased victims was the order to lock a plague sufferer in his house, thereby ensuring that his other family members would also most likely succumb.

Disposal of the dead soon became a major logistical problem. Individual burial services were soon abandoned to be replaced by mass graves to which at night cart loads of bodies were brought and tipped unceremoniously into pits. Those tasked with this ghastly job



probably brought the disease on themselves also, as they searched the corpses for anything of value. Many of these pits have recently been uncovered through excavation carried out as part of the preparations for the London Crossrail scheme.

Probably the nearest equivalent to the Black Death in (almost) modern times was the Influenza pandemic of 1918. In just a few months it killed more in Europe than had been killed in the whole of the First World War. It rapidly spread to every corner of the globe resulting in some 50 million victims. Soldiers returning from France and making their way home on crowded troop trains quickly carried the virus to every part of Britain. As with the plague in 1665, doctors in 1918 were unable to determine how, why and where the disease had originated, nor could they offer any kind of remedy. Only dedicated and skilled nursing helped some to survive. And although two very different kinds of illness the suffering of victims of both had another similarity, - people who were fit and well at breakfast time were often dead before supper, such was the virulence of the infections.

Although there was no reappearance of the plague in this country since 1665, the flu remains an ever present and potent danger, not least because of its ability to change its genetic make-up very rapidly. The annual flu vaccine attempts to foresee this genetic change and adapt as necessary, but it is not always successful and does not always offer the hoped-for protection. The 1918 experience could easily return with equally catastrophic results, whilst on the fringes of Europe lurk even deadlier viruses, such as Ebola, biding their time.

But it was the plague year of 1665 which succinctly summed up in a nursery rhyme man's vulnerability and eventual fate, as accurately as a million weighty words from a dozen philosophers. The roses refer to the red rash of the plague, whilst the scented poesies were thought to fend off the deadly germs. They wished!

**Ring a-ring a-Roses
A pocketful of poesies,
'Tishoo, 'tishoo,
We all fall down!**

Recommended reading: **"The Plague and the Fire" by James Leasor**