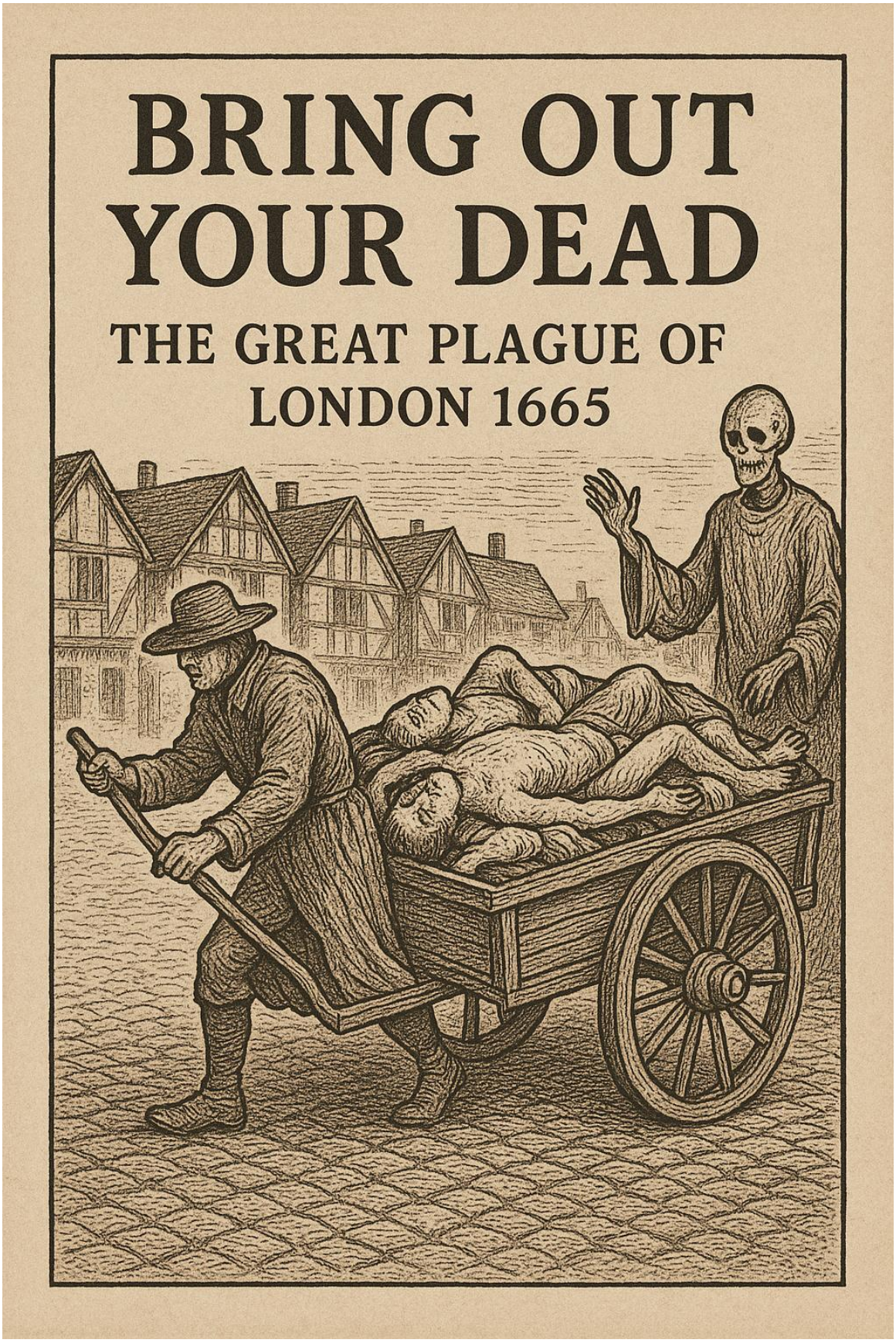
BRING OUT YOUR DEAD

THE GREAT PLAGUE OF LONDON 1665



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When Sneezing Was Deadly: The Black Death of 1348

The Comet of Doom

The Great Plague of London (1665–1666) was basically the Black Death's not-so-great sequel. It didn't hit quite as hard as the original, but it still managed to wipe out around 100,000 people—roughly a quarter of London's population—in just 18 months. Talk about a rough year and a half. Even though it wasn't as massive as the first pandemic, it still earned the title of "The Great Plague," probably because it was the grand finale of a 400-year-long plague saga. Think of it as the final, unwanted encore nobody asked for.

In late 1664, a bright comet was seen in the sky and the people of London became fearful, because obviously, nothing screams "bad news incoming" like a glowing space rock.

At the time, London was a 448-acre medieval mashup surrounded by a city wall originally built to keep out raiders, and maybe, just maybe, some common sense. The wall had gates with charming names like Ludgate, Newgate and Cripplegate – basically a plague-themed Monopoly board.

Inside those walls? Pure chaos. The poorer neighbourhoods were packed tighter than a rush hour train, with hygiene so bad, it may as well not exist. There were no proper toilets, open drains everywhere, and streets coated in a delightful mix of animal poop, rubbish, and random household slop.

The City Corporation did hire "rakers" to clean up the mess, but their strategy was.. innovative: basically, scoop up the nastiest bits and launch them over the wall. Problem solved!

Except it wasn't really. The smell was so horrific that people wandered around clutching handkerchiefs or tiny scented flower bouquets called nosegays to their faces like 1600s air fresheners.

Some of London's essentials, like coal, showed up by barge—but most stuff came by road, which basically turned the city into one giant traffic jam. Picture carts, carriages, horses, and unlucky pedestrians all squished together, trying to

squeeze through ancient city gates that created bottlenecks worse than Monday morning rush hour. London Bridge was the worst of the lot—totally jam-packed. If you weren't fancy enough to afford a hackney carriage or get carried around in a sedan chair like royalty, you were hoofing it on foot, dodging disgusting splash attacks from wheels, rooftops, and whatever mystery slop people were chucking out of their windows.

And if that wasn't enough, the air itself was trying to kill you. Smoke was *everywhere*—pouring out of factories, breweries, and about 15,000 coal-burning homes. Breathing in London was basically a full-body workout for your lungs... and not in a good way.

So that was London in a nutshell in 1664; dirty, smelly, crowded and basically a breeding ground for any nasty diseases that may have been lurking.

Enter the Plague

The first spark of the bubonic plague in London likely hitched a ride from the Netherlands, where the disease had been popping up on and off since 1599—like the world's worst houseguest that just wouldn't leave. No one's totally sure where it landed first, but it's suspected that the plague may have snuck in aboard Dutch trading ships loaded with cotton from Amsterdam, which had just had its own nasty run-in with the disease in 1663–64. So basically, while everyone was excited for imported goods, what they *really* got was a surprise bonus plague with their fabric. Talk about bad shipping.

The plague likely made its grand entrance through the docks just outside London and the parish of St Giles—two areas so overcrowded and run-down, even the rats were probably complaining. These places were packed with poor workers living in ramshackle buildings that looked like they'd collapse if you sneezed too hard. A couple of sketchy deaths were noted in St Giles in late 1664 and another in early 1665, but since they didn't officially show up as plague cases on the Bills of Mortality (basically the 1600s version of health stats), no one hit the panic button.

Unfortunately, the plague wasn't exactly subtle. In the first few months of 1665, the death toll quietly started creeping up. By the end of April, only four plague deaths had been officially recorded—but weekly deaths overall had jumped from 290 to 398. Spoiler alert: things were about to get *a lot* worse, but the authorities were still in full "eh, it's probably fine" mode.

The Pestilence Begins

By the time the weather started heating up, so did the plague—it really started settling in like a houseguest who refuses to leave. In the first week of May, more deaths popped up: three more in St Giles, four in the nearby St Clement Danes, and a couple more in places like St Andrew Holborn and St Mary Woolchurch Haw (try saying *that* five times fast). One of those even happened inside the city walls—uh oh.

The government finally started to realise that this wasn't just a case of the sniffles. A Privy Council Committee was thrown together to figure out how to slow things down. Their grand plan? Close some alehouses (which probably didn't win them any popularity points) and limit how many people could cram into a single house.

The Lord Mayor also got in on the action, demanding that everyone clean up the street outside their homes—because nothing fights plague like a tidy curb, right? Extra rakers and scavengers were hired to deal with the worst of the filth, but despite all the effort, things just kept spiralling. Authorities tried to slap on a quarantine, with constables checking travellers and rounding up "suspicious persons," which probably meant anyone who looked like they hadn't showered in a week—which, in plague-ridden London, was basically *everyone*.

By now, people were getting scared. An extract from the diary of Samuel Pepys on 30 April reads;

"Great fears of the sickness here in the city it being said that two or three houses are already shut up. God preserve us all!"

Spotting the Signs of Death

The symptoms of the Bubonic Plague were absolutely brutal;

Fever and chills – felt like you were being roasted from the inside out.

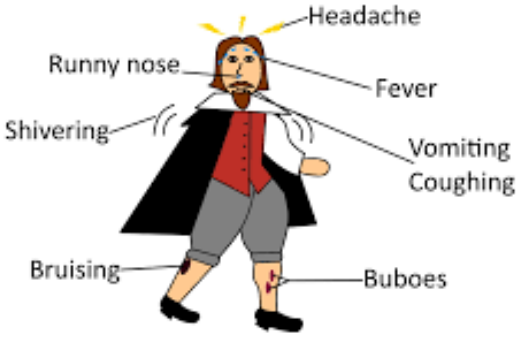
Headaches and body aches – Intense throbbing head and joint/muscle pain. Like flu, but way worse.

Swollen lymph nodes (buboes) – the most infamous symptom, these painful swellings would occur in the armpits, neck, or groin. They could turn black, ooze pus, and grow to the size of an egg or even an apple. Not a good look.

Nausea, vomiting and dizziness – stomach turned to mush, head spinning and food is just not happening.

Dark blotches and bruising on the skin – caused by internal bleeding under the skin.

Delirium and extreme fatigue – people would become confused, exhausted, and in some cases fall into a coma-like state before dying.



Once symptoms appeared, the disease progressed fast with most people dying within 3-7 days.

There were also pneumonic and septicaemic forms of the plague which were even more deadly. Pneumonic plague affected the lungs and was spread from person to person by coughing or sneezing. Septicaemic plague entered the bloodstream and caused death *within hours*.

Quarantine and Chaos

By July 1665, the plague had officially gone full chaos mode in the City of London. The rich didn't stick around to see how things played out—they bolted, fast. King Charles II, his family, and the entire royal court packed their bags and got out of there like the city was on fire. Merchants and professionals weren't far behind basically turning London into a ghost town with fleas.

As the plague tore through the summer months, only a brave (or unlucky) handful stuck around—some clergymen, physicians, and apothecaries who were left to deal with the overwhelming number of sick and dying. Basically, while everyone else was enjoying plague-free countryside retreats, these guys were stuck in a real-life horror movie with no exit.

The poor were just as freaked out as everyone else, and some tried to get out of London too—but easier said than done when you can't just abandon your tiny rented room and job to go live your best plague-free life in the countryside. To even get through the city gates, you needed a certificate of good health signed by the Lord Mayor himself, and those were starting to feel like golden tickets from *Willy Wonka*—rare, coveted, and basically impossible to get.

And things only got worse. As the number of plague cases skyrocketed, people in nearby villages were like, "Nope, keep your germs to yourself," and started turning away anyone from London, certificate or not. Refugees were blocked from towns and had to make do in the countryside, surviving off whatever they could steal, scavenge, or wrestle from nature. A lot of them tragically didn't make it—starving and dehydrated under the blazing summer sun. So, escaping the plague often just meant trading one miserable ending for another.

By the last week of July, things had taken a seriously grim turn—over 2,000 people had died from the plague, and the numbers just kept climbing. With regular burial grounds overflowing like a bad buffet, the city started digging massive plague pits to handle the ever-growing pile of bodies. Meanwhile, dead-cart drivers roamed the streets shouting the iconic (and super creepy) "Bring out your dead!" like it was some kind of medieval Uber Eats for corpses.

Naturally, the authorities started to worry that all this very visible death might freak people out (because apparently *up to this point* everything was chill?). So, they decided to have the bodies collected only at night—out of sight, out of mind, right? Except that didn't exactly work. People started stacking corpses along the walls of their houses like it was some horrifying form of curb side pickup. Eventually, daytime collection had to resume, and the plague pits turned into grotesque, stinking mounds of rotting bodies. Let's just say it was *not* London's finest hour.

From Herbs to Horror: Attempts to Stop the Plague

Like the Black Death pandemic in 1348, there was still no real understanding of how disease spread or how to treat it.

Plague doctors were hired to treat plague victims and keep records of the dead. These were a mix of inexperienced, newly qualified, or even just volunteers looking for work. Desperate times and all that.

The most famous thing about the plague doctors was their *super creepy* costume;

- Beaked masks stuffed with herbs, flowers and spices (like lavender, mint, or rose petals). The idea was that the pleasant smell would block the "bad air" which people believed caused the plague – it didn't work.
- Long coat and gloves made of waxed leather or heavy fabric, designed to cover the entire body and protect the wearer from contact.
- Glass eye openings, because nothing says "trust me, I'm a doctor" like staring at you through bug-eyed goggles.
- Wooden cane, used for poking patients from a distance.

Did they help? Well, they tried, but with no real understanding of bacteria, viruses, or how the plague was transmitted (they hadn't figured out the whole fleas on rats thing), their impact was pretty limited. Still, they were among the few who stuck around when others fled, so credit where it's due.

In a classic case of blaming the wrong guys, the City Corporation decided it must be the cats and dogs spreading the plague and ordered a mass cull. Unfortunately, that may have backfired spectacularly, since those furry little street patrols were probably the only ones keeping the rat population in check—and the rats (and their flea sidekicks) were the real villains in this whole disaster movie.

Meanwhile, people were convinced that “bad air” and nasty smells were spreading the disease. So, naturally, the solution was to light a *ton* of fires. The authorities ordered bonfires in the streets and told people to keep their hearths blazing 24/7, basically turning the city into a giant smoke machine. The hope was that the smoke would purify the air. Instead, they just added “can’t breathe” to the growing list of daily plagues.

From Ruin to Recovery

By late autumn, the plague finally started to chill out, and by February 1666, things had calmed down enough for King Charles II and his royal squad to make their grand return to London—probably after giving it a cautious sniff first. With the King back in town, everyone else figured it was safe to come out of hiding too. Shops reopened, trade picked up, and London slowly started acting like a city again instead of a haunted house.

The plague didn't totally disappear right away—it hung around in the background like that awkward guest who doesn't know when to leave—but by mid-1666, it had mostly fizzled out. Then, just to top off an already wild couple of years, *bam*—the Great Fire of London hit in September, torching a huge chunk of the city. Weirdly enough, many people believed the fire actually finished off the plague for good. So, in a strange twist, the city basically got a fiery reset button. Plague's out, flames are in.

The Village That Shut Itself In

It wasn't only London affected by the plague. The disease spread countrywide and one village in particular – Eyam in the Peak District National Park in Derbyshire – made history books due to its selfless decision to isolate an *entire* village in an attempt to contain the plague.

In the summer of 1665, the bubonic plague made its way to Eyam, possibly hidden in a bale of cloth delivered from the city. Not the kind of package anyone wants. The people in the house it arrived at got sick fast, and unfortunately, they didn't last long. The illness spread like wildfire—quick, brutal, and terrifying.

But instead of panicking and fleeing, the villagers did something incredibly brave (and let's be honest, kind of unheard of at the time). Under the leadership of their local rector, Rev. William Mompesson, and his predecessor, they decided to *quarantine themselves*. Yep, they stayed put—on purpose—to stop the disease from spreading to nearby towns.

People from surrounding villages dropped off supplies at a spot called the **Boundary Stone**, which is still there today. The villagers would leave coins in little holes filled with vinegar (to disinfect them—smart move), and in return, they'd get food and medicine. Thanks to their sacrifice, the plague didn't spread beyond Eyam—but sadly, nearly a third of the village died.

Here's the twist: not everyone who came into contact with the plague got sick. Some villagers had a rare chromosome mutation that gave them natural immunity. Even cooler? That same genetic quirk still exists in some of their descendants who live in Eyam today.

Their story is so powerful, it's believed to have inspired the nursery rhyme **"Ring-a-ring o' roses"**—with the "ring" referring to the telltale rash, and "Atishoo, Atishoo, we all fall down" symbolising how quickly the disease struck.

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