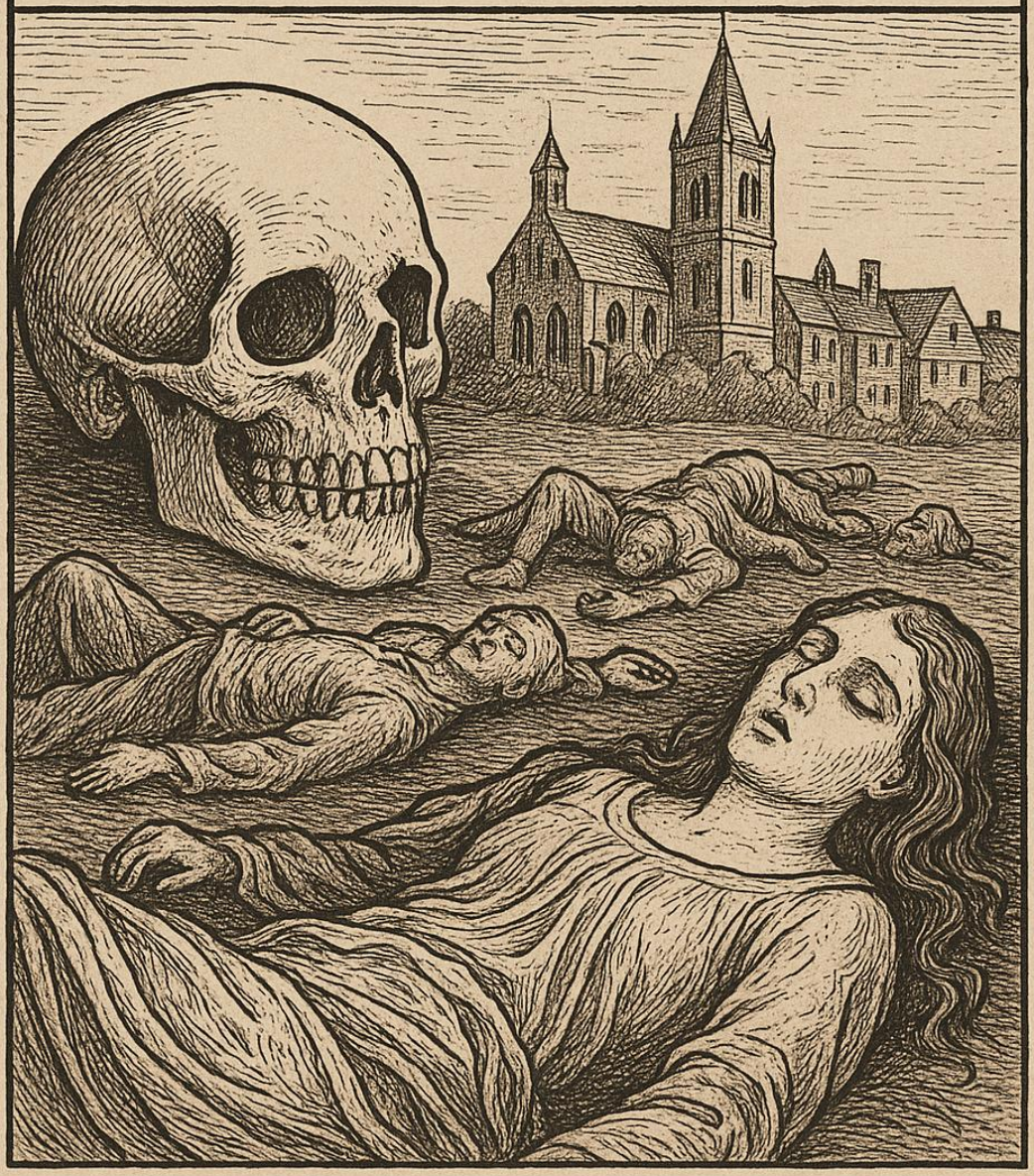
WHEN SNEEZING WAS DEADLY

THE BLACK DEATH OF 1348



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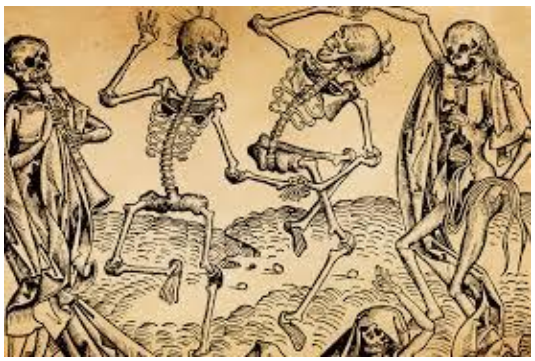
The Black Death was history's most infamous overachiever in the field of "Things You Don't Want to Catch."



It swept through Europe in the mid-14th century like the worst houseguest ever, arriving uninvited (by flea covered rats), making everyone sick, and refusing to leave without taking a third of the population with it.

It was caused by a bacteria called Yersinia pestis (named for Alexandre Yersin who was to discover the bacteria in 1894) and brought with it some great features like swollen lumps, fever and general doom. It resulted in a massive population decline which in turn lead to labour shortages, disruptions to trade, food shortages and price fluctuations.

On the bright side, it gave us historians something to talk (and make awkward handouts) about!

It all kicked off in the 1340s when the aforementioned bacterium, *Yersinia pestis*, decided to hitch a ride on fleas, who were catching lifts on rats, who in turn were stowing away on merchant ships. Basically, it was a rodent-powered plague Uber.

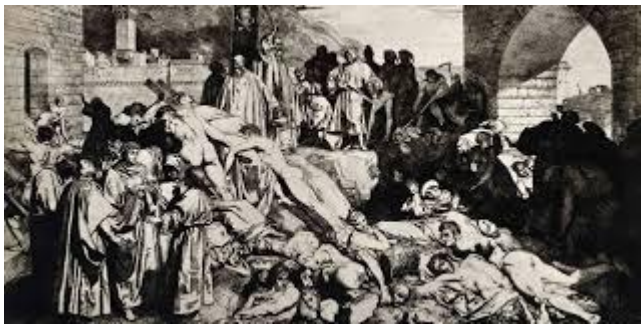
It is believed to have started somewhere in Central Asia and travelled along the Silk Road and other trade routes, eventually arriving at the port city of Kaffa (modern day Crimea). From there, it spread to Europe via ships – because nothing says "welcome to port" like an outbreak of bubonic plague.

So, in short: start with some bacteria, add some fleas, mix in rats, sprinkle in some medieval travel and voilà! Pandemic party, 14th century style.

Plague on Arrival: England's First Date with the Black Death

The Black Death rolled into England like the worst surprise guest ever in June 1348, docking first in the port of Melcombe Regis (modern-day Weymouth, Dorset).

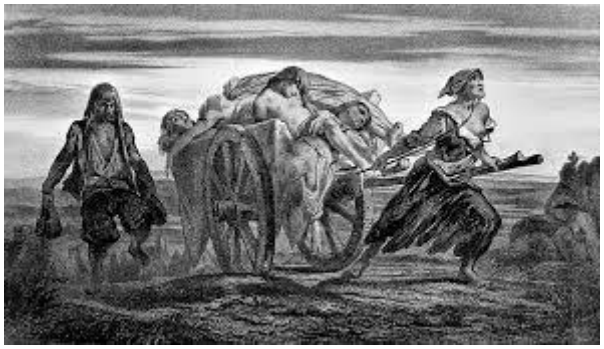
You can just imagine the scene: a nice sleepy coastal town expecting a ship full of goods – instead they get a deadly plague stowaway. Classic medieval plot twist.



The first known cases were the sailors who had likely picked up the disease in France, where it had already been doing the rounds. Within weeks, the plague was spreading inland faster than gossip in a village pub.

What followed was just a *light sprinkling* of medieval chaos. After its landing in Melcome Regis, the Black Death wasted no time becoming England's worst import since, well, ever. It spread like wildfire – if wildfire also came with sneezing, swelling and a deeply unfortunate mortality rate.

Towns and villages fell one by one as the plague made its grim tour of the country, helped along by trade routes, close living quarters and a complete lack of personal hygiene.



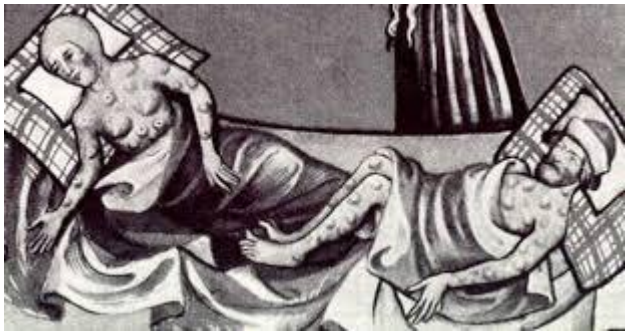
By 1349, it had hit London hard. The city was so overwhelmed that bodies were buried in mass graves, located in designated burial grounds like East Smithfield and West Smithfield which were outside of the city walls and less densely populated. Priests were reportedly too busy saying last rites to do anything else (and then usually caught the plague themselves). Entire villages were abandoned, some never resettled.

What It Was Like to Catch the Worst Cold Ever (Spoiler: You Didn't Make It)

Catching the Black Death was, to put it mildly, a medieval nightmare with zero bedside manner. There were actually two types of plague;

Bubonic plague – spread by rats, which due to poor hygiene conditions, were commonly found in homes, villages and towns. If a flea that had bitten an infected rat jumped onto a person and bit them, it would transmit bubonic plague.

First, you'd start feeling a bit off – feverish, chills, and maybe some aches. Then



things would escalate quickly: huge, painful swellings called buboes would pop up (usually in your armpits or groin), followed by vomiting and blackened skin. As horrific as it sounds, out of the two, this was the one you wanted to catch as chances of survival were about 50/50 instead of zero.

Pneumonic plague – this was transmitted from one person to another through coughing and sneezing. It affected the lungs and had a near 100% mortality rate.

Symptoms included a cough, fever, headaches and breathlessness, followed swiftly by a one-way ticket to the afterlife.

There were no known treatments or preventive methods in place. Medieval folk *tried*. But you have to remember that their understanding of disease was about as accurate as a drunken dart throw. The discovery that germs spread illness wasn't to be made until the 1800s so in the meantime there were a wide range of beliefs about what was actually *causing* the plague.

Back in the day, doctors thought getting sick—yes, even with the Black Death—was all about your body throwing a temper tantrum because its four "humours" weren't playing nice. These humours weren't jokes (unfortunately), but rather blood, phlegm, black bile, and yellow bile. If a poor soul had too much blood, the go-to fix was bloodletting—basically, poking a hole in you to drain some out, like letting air out of an overinflated balloon. Because nothing says "cutting-edge medicine" like literally cutting you open to cheer up your bodily fluids.

Some folks back then thought the plague wasn't about germs at all—it was all divine drama. They figured God was seriously ticked off and sent the Black Death as a giant cosmic timeout for humanity's bad behaviour. Enter the Flagellants: a group of extremely intense believers who thought the best way to say sorry to God was by whipping themselves in public. Yep, while some people were busy praying, these guys were out there giving themselves a medieval beatdown, hoping it might make the plague pack up and leave.

Then you have your astrologers who were convinced the plague was written in the stars—literally. They blamed a sketchy planetary alignment for all the death and doom. Others thought evil spirits were crashing the party, and their solution? Trepanning—aka drilling a hole in your skull to let the bad vibes escape, essentially turning your head into a chimney. Meanwhile, some doctors went full pimple-popper mode and just burst the buboes—those nasty swellings from the plague. Strangely enough, that gross method might've actually helped people survive. So, basically, plague treatment was a wild mix of star signs, skull holes, and popping boils.

So, was there *any* way to avoid it? Occasionally, yes – and clearly some people did or I wouldn't be here now writing this handout. If you were fortunate enough to live far away from trade routes and remained isolated you may have got lucky. But for most people, avoiding the Black Death was like trying not to get wet in a rainstorm while standing in a puddle without an umbrella.

When the Plague Packed Its Bags: The End of the Black Death

The Black Death didn't so much as *end* as it eventually got tired of ruining everyone's lives for a bit.

There were also attempts to stop the spread by introducing fines for people caught dumping waste in the streets as there was still a strong belief that illness was caused by 'bad smells. Despite the misguided reasoning, this method definitely would have helped as less waste in the streets meant less rats.

The idea of quarantine also came about, with a 40-day isolation period for incoming ships implemented and infected households being locked down and marked with a red cross on the door.

By 1351, the worst of the outbreak in England had burned itself out – not because people figured out a cure (they didn't), but because the disease had finished off so many people, there weren't many left to infect. Grim but true.

But was it gone? No, not really. The plague was just taking a breather. It kept popping back up in smaller outbreaks every few decades for centuries, basically like the unwanted party guest who never leaves – just steps outside for a smoke before reappearing at awkward times.

Still, by the late 14th century, things stabilised a bit, and life – albeit a very changed one – started to creep back to normal.

In the end, it's estimated that **somewhere between a third and a half** of England's population died. The survivors were left traumatised, land was suddenly plentiful, wages went up, and peasants started getting a bit cheeky with their demands—setting the stage for big social changes in the years ahead.

So, in summary: the Black Death came, sneezed, conquered, and accidentally rewrote the future of England. Quite the guest.