

The pesky Plague!

Children love all things gruesome. So why avoid the Plague when studying the Great Fire of London? The grisly events of 1665 are just what the doctor ordered, argues David Tomlinson

History of the plague

The Great Plague of London was a horrific time in history. Although bubonic plague raged across Europe in the 14th century (receiving the chilling nickname 'The Black Death'), the 1665–1666 epidemic is remembered as the 'Great Plague' because it was one of the last widespread outbreaks in Europe.

The disease spread quickly – and London was the perfect breeding ground. The city was filthy, with open sewers and overcrowding. And the hot summer of 1665 made matters much worse. The Mayor of London gave strict instructions that anyone exhibiting symptoms of the plague was to stay in their home. Front doors were nailed shut and crosses were painted on them, with the words 'Lord Have Mercy On Us' added in desperate prayer. Doctors covered up in grotesque beak-like masks stuffed with herbs, as they believed

infection was airborne. The rich fled for the relative safety of the countryside.

The plague is estimated to have killed almost 100,000 Londoners at this time; at its peak in September 1665, nearly 8,000 died in a single week. They were buried in mass graves with lime added to stop the spread of infection. Blackheath, in south London, is one of the most famous mass burial grounds, and archaeologists believe there may be as many as 9,000 corpses buried there.

It was only the harsh winter of 1665–1666 and the Great Fire of London in September 1666, that stopped any further outbreak. The latter event contributed to the destruction of London rats and their plague-carrying fleas, which had been at home in the unsanitary conditions of the capital. Following the Great Fire, London was rebuilt with wider streets, reduced congestion and sewage systems.

Teaching the topic

The project has been divided into three parts: Setting the scene, The Great Plague, and The heroes of Eyam. The parts can be taught as either one large topic, or divided into three sections to form an ongoing project spread over a half term.

'Setting the scene' shows children how unsanitary life was like in London in 1665 and how easily disease could spread. 'The Great Plague' focuses on the impact the plague had on London life and how people reacted to the news. 'The heroes of Eyam' recalls the true events of one village that isolated themselves to stop the plague from spreading.

Within each section, there are lots of small activities; the majority of these can be adapted to suit the children's abilities. While history is the main subject, there are also cross-curricular links to drama, D&T, citizenship and literacy. ➤

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