Case study: The Black Death

In 1348, the people of England were gripped by fear. A mysterious killer plague was spreading across Europe and nothing could stop it. It would kill about 75 million people in total – 25 million of them in Europe. And as it crossed the continent, it killed one person in every three. No wonder people called it the ‘Black Death’!

So what exactly was the Black Death? How could you catch it? What were the symptoms? What did people at the time think caused it? And how did people try to cure it?

How did it kill people?
The Black Death was a plague. The word ‘plague’ was first used by Galen, the famous Greek doctor, in the second century AD. He used it to describe ‘a fast spreading fatal disease’. The Black Death was two different types of plague attacking at the same time. Both still exist today.

**BUBONIC PLAGUE**
- Came from the germ called Pasteurella pestis.
- The germ lived in the blood of black rats and in the guts of their fleas.
- The fleas would hop off the rats onto humans and bite them, passing on the disease.
- Victims would get a fever and find large boils (called buboes) in their armpits, groin area and behind their ears. They would develop a rash of black and red spots.
- About seven out of ten victims died within a week.

**PNEUMONIC PLAGUE**
- Caught by breathing in germs or infected air.
- Attacked the lungs. Victims would cough up blood and spray deadly germs as they coughed.
- The victim’s breath would smell as their lungs rotted inside them.
- Most victims would be dead within a few days.

Where did it come from?

**Source A**
The spread of the Black Death. Its origins are unknown, but most historians think the outbreak of the 1300s started in China.

**Source B**
Medieval descriptions of the Black Death.

**Source C**
Written by Boccaccio, a famous writer, who was in Genoa, Italy, when the Plague arrived.

**Source D**
From the Grey Friars Chronicle, written by monks in 1348.

**Case study:**

In this year at Melcombe [near Weymouth, Dorset], a little before the feast of St John the Baptist [24 June], two ships came into the harbour. One of the sailors had brought with him, from Genascony in France, the disease. And through him the people of Melcombe were the first in England to be infected.”
What did people think caused the Black Death?

Doctors didn’t know that germs caused disease so looked for other reasons why something so terrible could have happened. Sources F to J show the different ways in which people at the time tried to explain the cause of the Plague.

Source F = By an unknown Italian writer.

“The Plague carried by these cursed Italian galleys was a punishment sent by God. He did this because these galleys helped the unbelievers [Muslims] capture a Christian town.”

Source G = From the Neuberg Chronicle, 1349. In total, about 12,000 Jewish men, women and children were burnt to death in Germany.

“...the disease was spread because of contagion. If a healthy man visited a Plague victim, he usually died himself.”

How did people try to cure the Plague?

Doctors didn’t know what caused the Plague so were unable to find a way of curing it and stopping its spread. Some recommended herbal cures to fight the disease, others suggested that you beg God for help. And as the Plague got worse, the ‘cures’ seemed to get crazier (see Source K).

Source K = Some of the cures suggested at the time.

Source H = Written by John of Burgundy in 1365. Do you think he had read books by Galen?

“Many people have been killed for the cause of the Plague is not only the corruption of the air, but the corrupt humours within those who die. You should avoid over-indulgence of food; also avoid baths. These open the pores through which poisonous air can enter. Above all avoid sexual intercourse. In cold or rainy weather you should light fires in your chamber. On going to bed, burn juniper branches so that the smoke and scent fills the room.

“If the infected blood is in the armpits, blood should be let from the cardiac vein.”