

The great plague



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The Great Plague which befell the City of London from 1665 was one of the most deadly epidemics ever to hit London. It was the last of the long list of Bubonic plagues that had caused much devastation to much of Europe for the previous three centuries. It was part of the Bubonic plagues that had been occurring in Holland since the beginning of the 17th century. After devastating a good portion of the city of Amsterdam it had been spread south to London through Dutch merchants' ships. After reaching England it hit London so hard that by the time of its end it had killed nearly a fifth of the city's population.

Samuel Peppys, a well known government official (a naval administrator) of that time kept a diary in which he recorded a good number of the events that took place in his late twenties and thirties when for health reasons he stopped putting records to his diary. The Great Plague is one of those events recorded. From this diary we get a clear and detailed description of not only the devastating impact of the plague itself but also of how the people of London handled this traumatic and deadly epidemic of monumental proportions.

On reading this diary, the picture one gets is that of a city overwhelmed by the scale and the emotional turmoil caused by the epidemic. It also reveals the tenacity and the resilience of the people of London in facing this unfortunate calamity which even though not unprecedented was nonetheless monumental in its scale and effects. At times when Londoners are faced with death on a minute by minute they reveal, as noted by Peppys in this diary, an admirable strength of character and courage as shown by the following examples.

The diary begins with the confusion within government circles of how to deal with the plague that was coming from Netherlands. Peppys writes, ' To the coffee-house, where all the news is of the Dutch being gone out, and of the plague growing upon us in this town; and of remedies against it: some saying one thing, and some another' (Pepsy, 2012). The above lines show that the government was indecisive on what to do when the plague broke out. Its leadership during these crucial stages of the epidemic must therefore have been ineffective. In spite of this confusion, a majority of the people did not choose fleeing en masse to safer places as Peppys notes. Apart from the King and his wife, most other top government officials remained as given by the example of Peppyys himself.

An example of the Londoners resilience is also given by Peppys himself who instead of following his self preservation instincts by running away from the town instead chooses to remain and prepare for death courageously by writing his will. He notes "... clearing all matters in packing up my papers and books, and giving instructions in writing to my executors, thereby perfecting the whole business Of my Will, to my very great joy; so that I shall be in much better state of soul, I hope, if it should please the Lord to call me away this sickly time ."

Another example of this resilience is revealed in the hosting of dinner by Sir G. Smith. This illustrates the fact that despite the palpable fear that the people of London were forced into by this plague they were still able to maintain certain aspects of their social life.

The fact the government still runs and is in fact still able to provide the crucial services like health and burial is also evidence of the Londoners ability to withstand great unfortunate disasters. From the diary we are told that even in spite of the deaths a good number of physicians are still available and providing the much needed services.