

# The Plague at Eyam

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Have you ever wondered what it was like to live in the days before the discovery of vaccination and modern drugs?

The disease which your ancestors feared most was the **Black Death**, known to doctors as the **bubonic plague**. You probably sang about it when you were younger, because this old nursery rhyme is about the plague.

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|--------------------------------|---|
| <b>A ring, a ring of roses</b> | A ring of swellings on the skin was one of the first signs of the plague.                         |
| <b>A pocket full of posies</b> | People used bunches of sweet smelling flowers because they thought it would keep the plague away. |
| <b>A-tishoo, a-tishoo</b>      | Sneezing was another early sign of the plague.  |
| <b>All fall down</b>           | 6000 people died from the plague in London in one week in 1665.                                   |

This play is about the true story of the plague in the village of Eyam, in Derbyshire, in 1665.

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## CAST (13 PEOPLE)

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| Narrator                                 | Mr Hadley, the tailor                 |
| Presenter (to read the stage directions) | George Vicars, the tailor's assistant |
| The Vicar, the Rev. William Mompesson    | Matthew Henderson, the blacksmith     |
| The Vicar's wife, Catherine Mompesson    | Walter Hill, villager                 |
| John, the Vicar's son, aged 12           | Henry Wright, villager                |
| Sarah, the Vicar's daughter, aged ten    | Thomas Swan, villager                 |
| Arthur, the Vicar's servant              |                                       |

## SCENE 1

- NARRATOR** The village of Eyam (pronounced EE-am) lies in a narrow valley in the Derbyshire Peak District.
- PRESENTER** In the vicar's dining room, early one morning. The vicar's family are eating breakfast. Enter the vicar.
- VICAR** Good morning my dear, good morning John, good morning Sarah. What a pleasant day for early September.
- VICAR'S WIFE** Morning dear, yes it's been a very good year for everyone – the harvest is good and the market last month was the best for years.
- Still, I am glad we don't live anywhere near London. They say the plague is terrible this year. Thousands have died.
- VICAR** Yes, I believe people in the court have fled to the country.
- JOHN** Father, what **is** the plague exactly?
- VICAR** It's a very unpleasant disease, John. A person with plague gets a high fever, sickness, swellings on the skin and very often dies within days.
- JOHN** Does everyone die who catches it?
- VICAR** Yes, nearly everyone. There are very few who can say they've had the plague and lived. It is said that the great plague of three hundred years ago killed one person in every three throughout the land.
- They called it the 'Black Death'. It would have taken one of us, for sure.
- PRESENTER** Every one looks at each other nervously.
- SARAH** That's horrible father! But how does it spread?
- VICAR** No one knows. Perhaps from the air, or the water, or from touching those who have it already. Some say it's the work of the Devil, or a sign that God is angry.
- SARAH** There's no chance of it spreading here, father, is there?
- VICAR** Well, it's not likely. None of us goes to London very often. It takes a week, even with good horses.
- VICAR'S WIFE** (*soothingly*) I'm sure we can all forget about it. No one's had the plague in Eyam for many years now. Anyway, I must go, Mr Hadley the tailor has some patterns come in from London for me.

## SCENE 2

- PRESENTER** In the tailor's shop. The tailor is watching his servant unpack a large box. Enter the vicar's wife.
- VICAR'S WIFE** Good morning Mr Hadley.
- Mr HADLEY** Good morning Mrs Mompesson. Fine morning. I've got the patterns you ordered. My lad, George, is just unpacking them now.
- GEORGE** Here are the patterns, sir. But what shall I do with these old clothes in the bottom of the box?
- PRESENTER** George holds up some tattered rags.
- MR HADLEY** Ah, yes, I'm glad they've come. Very cheap they are in the City just now with all those deaths.
- GEORGE** They seem rather damp, sir
- MR HADLEY** Well hang them up to dry, then. Now, Mrs Mompesson, about your patterns.

## SCENE 3

- PRESENTER** It is two days later, in the vicar's drawing room. The vicar is sitting in a chair. There is a knock on the front door. Enter Arthur, the vicar's servant, with Mr Hadley.
- ARTHUR** Mr Hadley to see you, sir.
- MR HADLEY** Good morning Vicar, I'm sorry to trouble you but I am worried about my assistant, George. He seems to be very ill.
- VICAR** I will come at once.
- PRESENTER** They go out across the street to the tailor's shop. George is lying on a bed, groaning.
- VICAR** Hmm, he isn't very well, is he? Let's see. He's got a high fever, he's been sick and what's this?
- Mr Hadley, a word with you. (*they move aside*)
- (*whispers*) Those swellings, I'm afraid...
- MR HADLEY** You don't mean...
- VICAR** Yes, you can't mistake it. It's the plague.

#### SCENE 4

- PRESENTER** The vicar is talking to a group of villagers in the street.
- VICAR** Well, it's fourteen days now, friends, since we buried poor George. No one else is ill, and it seems that the danger has passed.
- THOMAS SWAN** Maybe Vicar, maybe. But I do hear the plague is spreading. The people in Norfolk will not allow anyone from London to enter their villages. Men go in fear all over the land. *(a loud shouting is heard suddenly from the tailor's shop)*
- MR HADLEY** *(rushing out of his shop)* Vicar, vicar, my son! He's become quite ill, just like George.
- VICAR** May God delivery us. Only He can save us now.

#### SCENE 5

- PRESENTER** Outside the church, one week later.
- MATTHEW HENDERSON** That's six buried now. What are we to do Vicar?
- THOMAS SWAN** Can't we do anything? Burn their clothes maybe? Eat no meat? Make the sign of the cross on our doors to keep out the devil?
- VICAR** I don't know, Thomas. People have tried all these things. Perhaps the winter will cure it.
- NARRATOR** But all through the winter the funerals went on. Twenty-two in October, nine in December, six in March, until by June, seventy-five villagers were dead. And worse was to come.

#### SCENE 6

- PRESENTER** It is now the 20<sup>th</sup> June 1666. The vicar is talking to his wife in their drawing room.
- VICAR** It's worse than ever now. Nineteen men and women during this month alone.
- ANNE** What are we to do, William? We can't stay. Think of the children. Let's go to my father in Yorkshire until the summer is over.

**VICAR** No, I must stay, but you go if you wish.

**ANNE** Very well dear, if you stay, so do I, but I will send John and Sarah away at once.

**PRESENTER** Meanwhile, outside in the street a worried group is arguing.

**THOMAS SWAN** We can't go on like this. I'm going. What do you say, Matthew?

**MATTHEW** I'm going with you. Are you, Walter?

**WALTER HILL** I'm not so sure. What if we carry it to other villages? Will they take us in?

**HENRY WRIGHT** Walter may be right, Thomas. We have no choice but to stay.

**THOMAS** I'm not going to sit here and wait to die. Come on Matthew, we will ask the Reverend.

**PRESENTER** They knock on the vicar's door, and he comes out to join them.

**THOMAS** (*very excited*) Vicar, we've had enough, we're going. If we don't we will all be dead by Christmas.

**WALTER** I'm not running way, Thomas. You save your own skin.

**VICAR** Friends, friends, don't let us fall out through fear. Walter is right, running away will solve nothing. And we must think of our neighbours. What might happen if one of us did run over the hills to Grindlow or Stoney Middleton? They wouldn't thank us for bringing them the black death.

No, we must stay. Until the plague is over no one is to leave, not even to go to market.

**HENRY** But how will be buy food and sell our corn?

**VICAR** I will send a letter to the Earl at Chatsworth. He will help us.

**NARRATOR** So for three months no one left the village. At the Earl's command the people from the neighbouring villages brought food and left it near Eyam. The people of Eyam paid for it with money left by a nearby stream for their neighbours to pick up.

But as time passed, life in Eyam got worse and worse for the trapped villagers, each waiting in terror for his turn to come.

## SCENE 7

**PRESENTER**

Outside the church, after the burial of Thomas Swan.

**VICAR**

Well, that's the end of poor Thomas. He got away in the end.

Matthew, we can't go on burying them in the churchyard anymore. We can't even hold funerals, no one will come to the church for fear of catching the plague from the dead. You're the strongest man left. Bury them yourself in the meadows.

**MATTHEW**

All right Vicar, I will do what I can.

## SCENE 8

**PRESENTER**

It is August the 23<sup>rd</sup>. The vicar and his wife are walking in the meadows.

**VICAR'S WIFE**

*(exhausted and horrified)* How much longer? There were fifty-seven dead in July and now sixty this month. Most of our friends are dead, Thomas and now Walter and Henry. Thank God our children got away in time.

**VICAR**

Have faith, my dear. Think of our neighbours. They are grateful to us in Grindlow and down the valley.

**VICAR'S WIFE**

I hope you are right. Ah, how sweet the air smells in these meadows.

**NARRATOR**

As she says this, the vicar looks horrified. A sweet smell in the nostrils is the first sign of the plague.

**PRESENTER**

Sure enough, within two days the vicar's wife was dead.

## SCENE 9

- PRESENTER** Two months later, in the vicar's house. The vicar is talking to his servant.
- VICAR** Well, Arthur, we've had no deaths for a fortnight. I believe it is finished.
- How's your neck? Have the swellings gone? You were a very lucky man.
- ARTHUR** Yes sir, there's not many of us who can say they've had the plague and lived.
- We were all very sorry about your wife, sir.
- VICAR** It must be as God wills. At least there are thirty-three of us left alive.
- NARRATOR** Yes, just thirty-three out of 350. Fifty-eight had fled before the vicar forbade anyone to leave and 259 of the villagers of Eyam had died from the plague in one year.
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### QUESTIONS ON 'THE PLAGUE AT EYAM'

1. How did the plague spread from London to Eyam?
2. How did the villagers believe they could protect themselves against the plague?
3. After the plague at Eyam was over, the vicar moved to another parish, but he was very unpopular there because of what he had done at Eyam. Everyone knew that many of the villagers would have lived if they had been allowed to leave.
  - a. Why did the vicar refuse to let them go?
  - b. Do you think he was right to prevent the villagers from leaving?