

The Plague of 1592-3, which killed Jane and Edmund, children of Reasonable Blackman the Southwark silkweaver, from *Black Tudors: The Untold Story* by Miranda Kaufmann (Oneworld, 2017), pp. 126-132.

In the summer of 1592 the plague swept through London, reaching St Olave's [Southwark] parish in July. The parish register departs from its usual brief listings of names and notes in large writing that 'the 14th day of this month the plague did begin, Margaret the wife of Hugh Jones, the first buried of the same'.¹ By the end of the month 26 people had died. In August the figure was 180, in September 248, in October 158, and in November 96.¹ The burials column of the register, usually contained in one column on a single page, was now half-a-dozen columns over several pages. On 10 September, the Privy Council wrote to the Lord Mayor and Aldermen of London that 'by the weekly certificates, it doth appear that the present infection within the city of London doth greatly increase, growing as well by the carelessness of the people as by the want of good order to see the sound severed from the sick'.²

As the contagion spread, various measures were put in place to combat it. Bonfires were lit in the streets 'to purge and cleanse the air'.³ Dogs, thought to be carriers of infection, were culled by parish authorities.⁴ Clothes belonging to the deceased were also suspect. In Kent, in 1610, a man sold a coat belonging to his lodger, who had recently died of the plague. Unfortunately, the man who bought it died soon afterwards, as the coat was 'not well aired or purified'.⁵ Great efforts were made to stop crowds from gathering. Theatres, many of which were located in Southwark, were closed on 23 June, and did not open again until

¹ The plague died down over the winter and spring but came back to the parish with a vengeance the following summer: 146 died in July 1593, 269 in August, 300 in September, 163 in October.

August 1594.⁶ The Westminster law courts were prevented from beginning their new term in October, and by the end of the month it was decided to hold them in Hertford instead. The High Court of Admiralty, which usually met in Southwark, was relocated to Woolwich. On 11 October, the usual ceremonies held to inaugurate the new Lord Mayor of London were cancelled, and the Queen suggested the money was spent on relieving 'those persons whose houses are infected' instead.⁷

The Blackman household was amongst those contaminated. Both the silk weaver's daughter Jane and his son Edmund fell ill. Southwark, crowded and poverty-stricken, was amongst the capital's most vulnerable areas. James Balmford, the curate of St Olave's, Tooley Street, observed that some sufferers lost their minds, leaping out of windows or running into the Thames. He put much of the blame for the spread of disease on the 'bloody error' that many people made, in thinking that the 'Pestilence' was not contagious. He dedicated his *A Short Dialogue concerning the Plagues Infection* of 1603 to his parishioners: a publication in which he 'set down all that I have publicly taught' and tried to disabuse them of this fatal misconception that led 'men, women and children with running sores' to 'go commonly abroad and thrust themselves into company'.⁸

Once their children's illness was discovered by the parish searchers, the Blackman's house was shut up and marked with a red cross to warn others away. Shakespeare describes the way plague victims were quarantined in *Romeo and Juliet*:

the searchers of the town,
Suspecting that we both were in a house
Where the infectious pestilence did reign,
Seal'd up the doors, and would not let us forth.'⁹

This added to their misery. As Balmford put it, those who were isolated in this way ‘think it an hell to be so long shut up from company and their business: the neglecting whereof is the decay of their state.’ The loss of business was a very real concern for those of modest means like the silk weaver. Balmford callously dismissed such concerns, remarking that those infected should be ‘content to forbear a while, since in the Plague they usually mend or end in short time.’¹⁰

The plague could attack the lymphatic system, or spread into the lungs or blood. The first type, bubonic plague, manifested itself in red, grossly inflamed and swollen lymph nodes, called buboes (hence the name), high fever, delirium and convulsions. If it got into the lungs (pneumonic plague), the victim would begin coughing up blood, and if it got into the bloodstream (septicemic plague), there would be bleeding under the skin, from the mouth, nose and rectum, and gangrene would cause the fingers, toes and nose to turn black.¹¹

Thomas Dekker likened the advent of plague to Death pitching his tents in the ‘sinfully polluted suburbs’, from where he commanded his army of ‘Burning Fevers, Boils, Blaines, and Carbuncles’. These generals led his rank and file: ‘a mingle-mangle’ of ‘dumpish Mourners, merry Sextons, hungry Coffin-sellers, scrubbing Bearers, and nastie Grave-makers’.¹²

There was little Reasonable Blackman and his wife could have done to save their children from Death’s onslaught. Various remedies against the plague were proscribed in the twenty-three books published on the subject between 1486 and 1604.¹³ Some of these came with royal authorisation, others most definitely did not. It was popularly thought that beer and ale had medicinal qualities, and alehouses were notably busier at times of plague.¹⁴ The official government advice, first issued in 1578, suggested a whole host of preventative measures and cures, such as potions and lotions made up of ingredients like

vinegar or various herbs and spices, or what to burn to purge the air. If you could not afford the ingredients, this was no obstacle: 'The poor which can not get vinegar nor buy Cinnamon, may eat bread and Butter alone, for Butter is not only a preservative against the plague, but against all manner of poisons.'¹⁵ Simon Kellwaye's 1593 tract, *A defensive against the plague*, suggested applying live plucked chickens to the plague sores to draw out the disease. A later pamphlet gave more detailed advice as to how this would work:

Take a cock chicken & pull all the feathers of his tail very bare, then hold the bared part of the pullet close upon the sore & the chicken will gape and labour for life & will die; then do so with another pullet till it die, & so with another: till you find the last chicken will not die cannot be killed by the infection being altogether extracted, for when all the venom is drawn out the last chicken will not be hurt by it & the patient will mend speedily: one Mr Whatts hath tried this on a child of his, & 8 chickens one after another died & the ninth lived, & the sore being hard & hot was made soft by the first chicken as papp, the 2nd drew it clean away.¹⁶

This method was used in St. Olave's parish, but Balmford referred to the use of pigeons instead – the poor had to make do with what they had.¹⁷

The Blackman children finally succumbed to Death's advances in mid-October 1592, in a week when the plague took 198 lives in London.¹⁸ Other silk weavers' children were buried at St Olave's as the epidemic raged on.¹⁹ Other Africans died across the city. At St. Botolph's Aldgate, three 'blackamoors' in their twenties: Simon Valencia (the needle maker's servant), Cassango, and Robert were buried in the late summer and autumn of 1593, their entries in the register marked with the word 'plague'.²⁰ The historian John Stow recorded that this outbreak claimed 10,675 Londoners between December 1592 and December 1593.²¹ When it was over, the capital had lost 8.5% of its population. So many

had died that rumour-mongers whispered England would no longer be able successfully to resist a Spanish invasion. Some thought the plague was the result of divine judgement, ‘the will of God rightfully punishing wicked men’. To their way of thinking, taking action to prevent the plague was to rebel against God, and no human efforts could stop people from dying at their appointed time. The Privy Council threatened to imprison anyone who shared ‘such dangerous opinions’.²²

Others blamed immigrants for bringing the plague to London. The ‘filthy keeping’ of foreigners’ houses was identified by the city authorities as ‘one of the greatest occasions of the plague’.²³ This might have helped to trigger the anti-immigrant feeling expressed by London apprentices in the spring of 1593. The trouble began in April when they set up ‘a lewd and vile ticket or placard’ on a post in London threatening violence against ‘the strangers’. A series of ‘divers lewd and malicious libels...published by some disordered and factious persons’ appeared in the following weeks. One castigated the ‘beastly brutes, the Belgians, or rather drunken drones, and fainthearted Flemings: and you, fraudulent father, Frenchmen’ and threatened that if they did not ‘depart out of the realm’ by 9 July, over 2,000 apprentices would rise up against them. The verse set upon the wall of the Dutch church at Austin Friars in the City of London in early May did ‘exceed the rest in lewdness’: ‘Strangers that inhabit in this land!...Egypt’s plagues, vexed not the Egyptians more/Than you do us; then death shall be your lot’.²⁴ The threatened violence never actually erupted. Some of the culprits were rounded up and ‘put into the stocks, carted and whipped, for a terror to other apprentices and servants’. The Privy Council encouraged the Lord Mayor to use torture if necessary to prevent these ‘lewd persons’ from their ‘wicked purpose to attempt anything against strangers’. For ‘out of such lewd beginnings, further mischief doth ensue’.²⁵ These rumblings of discontent were directed at a wide array of foreigners, prompted by a broad-brush xenophobia. Those named by nationality were

European strangers. The Blackman family were not beastly Belgians or fraudulent Frenchmen. Their dark skin would of course make them immediately identifiable as strangers in the street, but Africans were not the primary target of the apprentices' vitriol.

The plague that struck the Blackman family so tragically in 1592 may have arrived in a Devon port from Portugal, which had suffered an epidemic in 1589. This outbreak was merely a skirmish in the long campaign Death waged on the capital under the command of this most devastating of his Generals, ever poised to snatch lives away in an instant.

Between 1540 and 1666, there were nine serious outbreaks of plague in London. The most famous of these, the so-called 'Great Plague' of 1665, killed 12% of the population. Yet, in percentage terms, the plagues of 1563 and 1603 were almost twice as devastating.²⁶ The Black Death of 1348 had been another matter entirely – it wiped out almost a third of the European population, which had a seismic impact on every aspect of society from the feudal system to religious faith.

Plague burials took place at dusk when there were fewer people around to minimise the chance of the disease spreading. Not all took heed, however, and Balmford grieved to see how 'the poorer sort, yea women with young children, will flocke to burials, and (which is worse) stand (of purpose) over open graves, where sundry are buried together, that (forsooth) all the world may see that they feare not the Plague.'²⁷

At the peaks of these plague epidemics, the usual burial rituals had to be set aside as parishes struggled to cope with the numbers of corpses. Two centuries earlier, a Florentine chronicler recorded that his city's plague pits were:

as wide and deep as the parish was populous; and therein,
whosoever was not very rich, having died during the night, would

be shouldered by those whose duty it was, and would either be thrown into this pit, or they would pay big money for somebody else to do it for them. The next morning there would be very many in the pit. Earth would be taken and thrown down on them; and then others would come on top of them, and then earth on top again, in layers, with very little earth, like garnishing lasagne with cheese.²⁸

However, such pits were only resorted to in extremity. At St Bride's, Fleet Street, the parish officials dug a plague pit in August 1665 when they often had over 30 bodies to bury each day.²⁹ The week Jane and Edmund died, St. Olave's parish had about forty bodies to dispose of and mass graves would not have been necessary. Six other people were buried alongside Jane on 13 October and there were four others beside Edmund who died on 16 October.

¹ LMA, P71/OLA/009 (St. Olave's Tooley Street, 14 July 1592). See also Habib and Salkeld, 'The Resonables of Boroughside, Southwark', p. 19.

² APC, 1592, pp.118, 183.

³ Ibid., p. 221.

⁴ 'Accounts: December 1591 - December 1593', in *St Martin-in-The-Fields: the Accounts of the Churchwardens, 1525-1603*, ed. J V Kitto ([s.l.], 1901), pp. 435-456. *British History Online* <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/no-series/churchwardens-st-martin-fields/1525-1603/pp435-456> [accessed 1 April 2017].

⁵ Slack, *The Impact of Plague in Tudor and Stuart England*, p.11. Balmford, *A Short Dialogue Concerning the Plagues Infection*, pp. 13-15 has a section on 'how the plague may be in a garment'.

⁶ Sager, *The Aesthetics of Spectacle in Early Modern Drama and Modern Cinema*, p. 129.

⁷ APC, 1592, p. 221, 230, 273.

⁸ Balmford, *A Short Dialogue Concerning the Plagues Infection*, pp. 33, 43-4. It is not clear when he started work at St. Olave's. He may have been working in Newcastle at the time of the 1592 plague, as in 1594 he dedicated *A Short and Plaine Dialogue Concerning the Unlawfulness of Playing at Cards* to his patrons, the mayor, aldermen, and burgesses of Newcastle upon Tyne: Jenkins, 'Balmford, James (b. c.1556, d. after 1623)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

⁹ Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, Act 5, Scene 2; Mabillard, 'Worst Diseases in Shakespeare's London', *Shakespeare Online*. The plague is also mentioned in his other plays: including *The Tempest*, Act 1, Scene 2; *Timon of Athens*, Act 4, Scene 3; and *King Lear*, Act 2, Scene 4.

¹⁰ Balmford, *A Short Dialogue Concerning the Plagues Infection*, p. 10.

¹¹ Mabillard, 'Worst Diseases in Shakespeare's London', *Shakespeare Online*.

¹² Dekker, *The Wonderfull Yeare*, sig. D1r.

¹³ Slack, *The Impact of Plague in Tudor and Stuart England*, p. 23.

¹⁴ Browner, 'Wrong Side of the River', *Essays in History*.

¹⁵ APC, 1592, p. 204. Slack, *The Impact of Plague in Tudor and Stuart England*, p.209. *Orders, thought Meete by her Maiestie, and her Priuie Councill*, sig C2v.

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- ¹⁶ Kohn, *Encyclopaedia of plague and pestilence*, p. 231; Floyd–Wilson, *Occult Knowledge, Science, and Gender on the Shakespearean Stage*, p.31–2.
- ¹⁷ Balmford, *A Short Dialogue Concerning the Plagues Infection*, pp. 39–40.
- ¹⁸ Harrison, G. B., *The Elizabethan Journals*, p. 175.
- ¹⁹ For example silk weaver Simon Brinkard lost his daughter Rachel on 14th July 1592, Hugh Van Aker's daughter Elizabeth was buried on 26th July and William, son of William Powler, was interred on 24th October. LMA, P71/OLA/009 (St. Olave's Tooley Street Parish Register).
- ²⁰ LMA, MS 09221; MS 09222/1; MS 09223; MS 09234/4 (St. Botolph Aldgate, 20 August, 8 October and 29 November 1593).
- ²¹ Stow, *A Summary of the Chronicles of England*, p. 438–439.
- ²² Kohn, *Encyclopaedia of plague and pestilence*, p. 231; Slack, *The Impact of Plague in Tudor and Stuart England*, pp. 19, 26, 151, 228–235, 438– 439; *Orders, thought Meete by her Maiestie, and her Priiue Councill*, sig. B2v.
- ²³ Slack, *The Impact of Plague in Tudor and Stuart England*, p.292.
- ²⁴ I. Archer, *The Pursuit of Stability*, p. 7; Strype, *Annals*, IV, 234–6; For the full text of the Austin Friars verse see: Freeman, 'Marlowe, Kyd, and the Dutch Church Libel', pp. 44–52.
- ²⁵ *APC*, 1592–1593, pp.187, 200–201, 222.
- ²⁶ An estimated 658,000 died of plague in England 1570–1670 (433,000 in London). Outbreaks occurred on average every 14 years. The so-called 'Great Plague' of 1665 resulted in 68,596 deaths (12% of the population), while the plagues of 1563 killed 20% of London's population, and that of 1603 killed 18%. In comparison, the plague that killed the Blackman children in 1592 was, with its 8.5% mortality rate, a relatively minor outbreak. Kohn, *Encyclopaedia of plague and pestilence*, p. 231; Slack, *The Impact of Plague in Tudor and Stuart England*, pp. 62, 85, 151, 174.
- ²⁷ Slack, *The Impact of Plague in Tudor and Stuart England*, p.210, 297; Balmford, *A Short Dialogue Concerning the Plagues Infection*, p. 32.
- ²⁸ *Florentine Chronicle of Marchionne di Coppo di Stefano Buonaiuti*, tr. Usher, *Rubric 634a*.
- ²⁹ Harding, 'Burial of the plague dead in early modern London', pp. 53–64.

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