

MEMBERS MEETING 2nd SEPTEMBER 2008

“Pestilence, Intrigue and Murder” talk by Ian Morgan illustrated with slides

Before his talk Ian introduced himself as a professor of history who has worked for the BBC, ITV, Independent TV and English Heritage. The principal part of Ian’s talk was about the plague, a deadly epidemic or pestilence that was feared by all. It was feared because there was no cure. People knew that if they got the plague they would die and that no one would be able to help them. If a neighbour had the plague people wouldn’t help them for fear of getting the illness themselves. Anyone who had the plague was therefore isolated and merely waiting for the “grim reaper”.

Evidence of the “Black Death” in Derbyshire was uncovered in 1960 in Blackwell when the road was being widened. The excavations revealed 500 bodies. The unusual feature of this discovery was the fact that the bodies had been buried vertically. This was because there was a shortage of consecrated ground to bury a large number of plague victims. Burying the bodies vertically was an answer to the problem.

In the 1580’s in Brimington near Chesterfield one-fifth of the population died of the plague in a two- week period. No one could help them as there was no cure.

In Charles 11’s reign there was plague in London and in Elizabeth 1’s time she left London and went to Windsor to avoid it. Any refugees trying to escape the plague were hanged because there was no cure and no hope for them.

In 1665 the plague spread from the docks in London and Bristol to the suburbs of the cities and then on to the north. The plague was spread by rats that were infested with fleas.

Eyam was particularly badly hit by the plague but purely by chance. In 1665 it was an isolated dormitory town. It is now a pretty village and a popular tourist spot. People now flock to the village to see the cottages where the plague started. They want to see how many people died and are interested in the biggest number of people who died in one place.

Old pictures of the cottages show that they originally had thatch roofs whereas they now have tiled roofs. This may have contributed to the plague problem as thatch roofs are warm and provide an ideal home for fleas carrying the disease.

The plague started in Eyam in August/September 1665 when Mary Hadfield received a package for George Vicars who was a tailor servant. The package was from London and Canterbury and contained either cloth or clothing. It may

not have been clean as people often sold clothing after someone's death. As the cloth was damp Vicars put it in front of the fire to dry. He sustained a nip on the skin, a flea-bite, which must have been quite common in those days. In 14 to 21 days he started to have symptoms of the plague. Firstly he had a cold or chill then he developed a fever and took to his bed. The next day he had lesions of the skin, sores, growths in his groin and then he developed pneumonia. He would have died in agony.

By September there were 6 dead and people began to panic and leave the village. In all 74 families were visited by the plague. Various theories were given for the plague occurring in Eyam. These varied from "God giving retribution", a local sighting of a comet and the fact that in 1580 two Roman Catholic priests passing through Eyam to Sheffield were ridiculed and they put a curse on the village.

By October there were 23 dead in the village and those that could afford to move left. Those that couldn't remained and tried to save lives. The Old Hall was demolished and the owners, the local squire, went to live in their farm 5 miles away. They even took the ducks from the village pond. John Bradshaw of Bradshaw Hall, the local manor house, who was a trial judge for King Charles 1, left the village and never came back.

Winter came to Eyam and the locals hoped that the cold weather would kill the germs of the plague which they believed were carried on people's breath. Sadly this was not the case as the bacillus lives in the gut of the flea.

In the village of Eyam lived Humphrey Merrill, the local herbalist. He came up with various cures for the plague. One method was to mix various herbs and spices with human body waste. Another method was to lay a mastiff puppy on the chest "for as long as it could be borne" a third way was to put a chicken's mouth next to the bubo. Needless to say none of these cures worked.

All the victims of the plague had to be buried and one man who volunteered for the job was Marshall Howe a local lead miner. He had encountered gruesome deaths in his job and miraculously although he handled the bodies he survived the plague.

Winter came and the plague should have died out within 21 days, it would have then been safe but there was no cure. One woman tried to leave the village. Nearby villages employed guards to prevent anyone from Eyam entering their villages. The guards in Tideswell recognised the woman but they let her in. She was, however, not accepted by the locals who threw fruit at her until she left in a terrified state. .

The plague continued. In April there were 73 dead and in June 78. The local vicar William Mompesson and Thomas Stanley the previous incumbent decided they had got to do something. They closed the church, no more burials were permitted here and services were held outside in Cucklet Delph. People built shacks there and during services stood no closer than 12 feet to each other. Catherine Mompesson tended the sick and dying and people were buried in their own gardens instead of the churchyard.

The village was now isolated but the inhabitants still required feeding and clothing. . Mompesson wrote to the Earl of Devonshire saying that the villagers would not leave Eyam if he would feed and clothe them. This was achieved by the villagers leaving money, sterilised in vinegar, at the wells on Eyam Moor and Mompesson Well in return for food and clothes.

In December Mompesson remarked to his wife that the air had a sweet smell. This sadly was a sign of the presence of the plague and within 3 days Catherine Mompesson had died. The Reverend Mompesson obtained special permission to bury his wife in the churchyard and her impressive grave can still be seen there. The local herbalist also died but he is not buried in the churchyard.

In October only 23 people died of the plague and in November just one and then it was gone.

There are various graves of some of the plague victims in and around Eyam. The most well known grave is the one that commemorates the Riley family. Perhaps the most poignant is that of the Hancock family. Mrs Hancock buried 8 out of her family of nine. She ran away from the village with her surviving baby. Jane Hawksworth lost 25 members of her family. The Reverend Mompesson re-married a Mrs Catherine Newby. She inherited a house on the Rufford estate and they had 2 more children.

In total 259 people died of the plague in Eyam. It is now believed that those who survived had immunity to the disease through a mutant gene.

The next subject of Ian's talk was of "Intrigue". The Revolution Plot occurred in 1685. The new King James 11 was a catholic and he introduced pro-catholic measures which incensed the protestants. . In 1688 four protestant aristocrats, the Duke of Devonshire, the Earl of Danby, John D'Arcy and Lord Delamere were out riding in Derbyshire. Legend has it that there was a storm and they sought shelter in a local hostelry, the Cock and Pynot (Magpie) in Whittington near Chesterfield now known as the Revolution House. Here the four sat and plotted the downfall of the king. They had limited resources so they wrote to William King of Orange suggesting that he should overthrow king James and take the throne for himself. In 1688 William landed at Torbay and James found

he could not rely on his army so he fled the country. William of Orange took his place and the rest is history.

The final part of Ian's talk concerned the subject of murder. In 1815 there was a murder at the Devonshire Arms in the Wardlow area. This was a toll road and when the gates were locked an argument ensued. Hannah Oliver found the body of a woman but her red shoes were missing. Ann Lingard, who was pregnant and destitute was offered the shoes by her husband Antony Lingard who said they were from a travelling salesman. She said she didn't want them. Her husband hid them but the local constable found them and arrested him for murder. He was put in jail at Derby and tried at the assizes in March and found guilty. He was hanged and his body dissected, gibbeted and displayed at Wardlow Mires. William Newton the local poet subsequently wrote a poem urging the abolition of such punishment.

Ian concluded his talk by saying that he hoped that all the subjects of his talk who had suffered were now at peace.

A vote of thanks was given by Marion Yeldham.