

PANNEBAKKER FAMILY NEWS



NEWSLETTER OF THE PANNEBAKKER FAMILY ASSOCIATION

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London's Dreadful Visitation: A Year of Weekly Death Statistics during the Great Plague (1665)

Epidemics are on all our minds right now. Probably many of us could use a break from the relentless stream of statistics, percentages, and predictions related to Covid-19. Still, we thought a look at some statistics from an era when modern medicine had not yet been born might provide a little perspective. It was a need for historical perspective that, in fact, pushed Ellen Cotes to publish *London's Dreadful Visitation*, which collected all the “bills of mortality” printed in London during the Great Plague of 1665 (in which 100,000 people, or a quarter of the city’s population, perished). Lamenting the disappearance of the bills from the earlier “Great Plague” of forty years before (“the sight of them hath been much desired these times”), Cotes “resolved to communicate unto the Nation, these subsequent leaves” so that “Posterity may not anymore be at such a loss”.

But what were these “bills of mortality”, and how did they come about? As early as 1592, London parish officials had instituted a system for keeping track of deaths in the city, trying to curb the spread of the plague by tracking it and quarantining victims and those who lived with them. Since it was not then legally required to report deaths to a central authority, the officials hired “searchers of the dead”, whose job it was to locate corpses, examine them, and determine cause of death. These “searchers” were not trained in any kind of medicine. Typically, they were poor, illiterate, older women whose contact with the infected isolated them socially and often brought their lives to an early end. They were also, in one of the more gruesome examples of gig work offered by history, paid per body.

The causes of death reported by searchers were recorded by sextons and clerks on weekly bills of mortality — sheets sold like broadsides for a penny, meant to let citizens know where the disease had spread.

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The Diseases and Casualties this Week.



A Bortive ————— 5
 Aged ————— 43
 Ague ————— 2
 Apoplexie ————— 1
 Bleeding ————— 2
 Burnt in his Bed by a Candle
 at St. Giles Cripplegate — 1
 Canker ————— 1
 Childbed ————— 42
 Chisomes ————— 18
 Consumption ————— 134
 Convulsion ————— 64
 Cough ————— 2
 Dropfic ————— 33
 Feaver ————— 309
 Flox and Small-pox ————— 5
 Frighted ————— 3
 Gowt ————— 1
 Grief ————— 3
 Griping in the Guts ————— 51
 Jaundies ————— 5

Imposthume ————— 11
 Infants ————— 16
 Killed by a fall from the Bel-
 frey at Alhallows the Great — 1
 Kingevil ————— 2
 Lethargy ————— 1
 Palfie ————— 1
 Plague ————— 7165
 Rickets ————— 17
 Rising of the Lights ————— 11
 Scowring ————— 5
 Scurvy ————— 2
 Spleen ————— 1
 Spotted Feaver ————— 101
 Stillborn ————— 17
 Stone ————— 2
 Stopping of the stomach ————— 9
 Strangury ————— 1
 Suddenly ————— 1
 Surfeit ————— 49
 Teeth ————— 121
 Thrush ————— 5
 Timpany ————— 1
 Tiffick ————— 11
 Vomiting ————— 3
 Winde ————— 3
 Wormes ————— 15

Christned { Males — 95 }
 { Females — 81 }
 { In all — 176 }

Buried { Males — 4095 }
 { Females — 4202 }
 { In all — 8297 }

Plague — 7165

Increased in the Burials this Week ————— 607

Parishes clear of the Plague — 4 Parishes Infected — 126

*The Assize of Bread set forth by Order of the Lord Maior and Court of Aldermen,
 A penny Wheaten Loaf to contain Nine Ounces and a half, and three
 half-penny White Loaves the like weight.*

Bill of mortality for the week of 19th–26th September 1665, which saw the highest death toll from plague.

The bill of mortality featured above comes from a week in September 1665, when the epidemic was at its height. As you can see toward the bottom right-hand corner, a total of 7,165 people in 126 parishes were proclaimed to have died of “Plague” — a number most historians believe to be low, considering how many people (Quakers, Anabaptists, Jews, and the very poor, among others) were not taken into account by the recording Anglicans.

In addition to the alarming number of plague deaths, Londoners, of course, continued to die by other means, both familiar and strange.

Many familiar maladies hide behind the enigmatic naming. “Rising of the Lights”, dreamy though it sounds, was a seventeenth-century term for any death associated with respiratory trouble (“lights” being a word for lungs). “Griping in the guts” and “Stopping of the stomach” were similarly used for deaths accompanied by gastrointestinal complaints. “Spotted fever” was most likely typhus or meningitis.

Many labels — such as “suddenly”, “frighted”, and “grief” — speak of the, often approximate nature of assigning a cause (not carried out by medical professionals but rather the “searchers”). “Planet” referred to any illness thought to have been caused by the negative influence/position of one of the planets at the time (a similar astrological source lies behind the name Influenza, literally *influence*).

Other causes of death endemic to seventeenth-century England practically litter the bills. Tuberculosis, both in the form of “Consumption” and of “Kingsevil” (a tubercular swelling of the lymph glands which was thought to be curable by the touch of royalty), killed hundreds of people every month. “Surfeit”, meaning overindulgence in food or drink, could sometimes be interchangeable with “Gowt” (gout) or “Dropsie” (edema). And the toll childbearing took on both mother and infant is also painfully evident on the bill, with its entries for “Childbed”, “Infants”, “Stillborn”, “Abortive”, “Teeth” (babies who died while teething), and “Chrisomes” (a catch-all for children who died before they could talk).

Probably the entries that strike us most, because they set us telling a story in our minds, are those that read like captions in an Edward Gorey book: “Killed by a fall from Belfrey at Alhallowes the Great”, “Burnt in his Bed by a Candle at St. Giles Cripplegate”, or “Drowned in a Tub of Wash in a Brewhouse at St. Giles in the Fields”.

This Isolation and Social Distancing Isn’t So Bad!

The ninth plague of Egypt was complete darkness that lasted for three days. But in 536 A.D., much of the world went dark for a full 18 months, as a mysterious fog rolled over Europe, the Middle East and parts of Asia. The fog blocked the sun during the day, causing temperatures to drop, crops to fail and people to die. It was, you might say, the literal Dark Age.

Now, researchers have discovered one of the main sources of that fog. It has been reported that a volcanic eruption in Iceland in early 536 helped spread ash across the Northern Hemisphere, creating the fog. Like the 1815 Mount Tambora eruption—the deadliest volcanic eruption on record—this eruption was big enough to alter global climate patterns, causing years of famine.

What exactly did the first 18 months of darkness look like? The Byzantine historian Procopius wrote that “the sun gave forth its light without brightness, like the moon, during this whole year.” He also wrote that it seemed like the sun was constantly in eclipse; and that during this time, “men were free neither from war nor pestilence nor any other thing leading to death.”

Accounts like these weren't taken very seriously until the 1990s. That decade, researchers examined tree rings in Ireland and found that something weird did happen around 536. Summers in Europe and Asia became 35°F to 37°F colder, with China even reporting summer snow. This Late Antique Little Ice Age, as it's known, came about when volcanic ash blocked out the sun.

It was a pretty drastic change; it happened overnight. The ancient witnesses really were onto something. They were not being hysterical or imagining the end of the world.

With this realization, accounts of 536 become newly horrifying. “We marvel to see no shadows of our bodies at noon,” wrote Cassiodorus, a Roman politician. He also wrote that the sun had a “bluish” color, the moon had lost its luster and the “seasons seem to be all jumbled up together.”

The effects of the 536 eruption were compounded by eruptions in 540 and 547, and it took a long time for the Northern Hemisphere to recover. The Late Antique Little Ice Age that began in the spring of 536 lasted in western Europe until about 660, and it lasted until about 680 in Central Asia.

It was the beginning of one of the worst periods to be alive, if not the worst year.

This period of cold and starvation caused economic stagnation in Europe that intensified in 541 when the first bubonic plague broke out. The plague killed between one-third and one-half of the population in the Byzantine Empire, or Eastern Roman Empire.

There might still be other, undiscovered volcanic eruptions that contributed to the 536 fog. However, we now know at least one of the reasons people in 536 couldn't see their own shadows—even at noon.

2019 Reunion Booklet

Work has begun on the 2019 Reunion Booklet, which in the future will probably be considered a collector's item and sold at the 2049 reunion. Putting together a list of the events is the easy part. I would like to include comments and reactions from those who attended, but I need those attendees to send me their comments and reactions. If this booklet ends up being in digital form, I would like to include pictures from the 3 days. Please send your pictures. Many thanks to those who have already sent pictures. I will include the names of those who attended and hopefully remember the names of those who attended as last-minute sign-ups.

I especially would like to have the comments of the members of the planning committee.

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Pannebakker Family Association



The Pannebakker Family Association is an outgrowth of the family reunion held at Pennypacker Mills, Montgomery County, Pennsylvania on July 2-4, 1999. The reunion celebrated the 300th year wedding anniversary of Hendrick Pannebecker and Eve Umstat, in Germantown, Pennsylvania in the year 1699. In the words of the Steering Committee of the reunion, "We hope that the 1999 Pfannebecker-Umstat Reunion will lead to the growth of a family association, which will provide a forum for conversation, collection and preservation of information, and a sense of lasting community among the heirs of this rich cultural heritage."