

Bubonic Plague in London: Poor vs. the Rich

London was a country of growth and prosperity during the beginning of the 1600s going to the mid-1600s. In 1664, during economic and political growth tragedy struck not in the ways of war or poverty, but in the ways of sickness. The bubonic plague struck London in early 1664 and almost instantly made an impact on all facets of life. The plague was described as a certain death, the side effects that the plague would do on a human body were horrible.¹ Because of the plague we saw our first couple of examples of a bigger country trying quarantine for trying to slow down the spread. London saw major problems in there economy and instability on the political side of the country. A big implication on the instability and unfairness of the government is looking at the difference between how the wealthy and the poor were treated. On the surface it looks like the wealthy and the poor were both treated the same but taking a deeper look at it the poor were very much mistreated. The poor during the great plague seemed to be pushed to the side while the rest of society were handled with proper care. This is seen in all things like doctors, financial, and population density where it is seen as unfair for the poor during the whole duration of the great plague.

Samual Pepys is examined in "The Great Plague: The Story of London's Deadliest Year," one of my key sources. This man kept journals in which he recorded a wide range of events during his tenure as a naval administrator with the Royal Navy. He was a well-known person at the period who gave access to his home and other forms of assistance. A further primary source I examined was his diaries, where he provided a high-level contextual description of the great disease in the journal entries about it. He would explain the physical effects of the devastating

¹ Gadbury, John. London's deliverance predicted: Printed by J.C. for E. Calvert, 1665. Countway Library of Medicine, Harvard University, 25 March 2024

disease on those who contracted it. They would also discuss the economic effects of the massive pandemic. In these journals he would also describe the effects the plague had on the human body saying, “a bubo on his right groin, and two on his thigh, which is the plague.”² Samuel Pepys was an educated man and was around the hard parts of the plague and because of this he has seen the horrors that the plague has done. He described how it was hard to limit the rise of poverty in these locations since the poor had to live in cramped spaces where they were constantly surrounded by people. He described how, despite his affluence, he was concerned about the impoverished since it was unjust that they had to live in cramped quarters, particularly when it came to rearing children in such regions during the pandemic. This shows even some of the wealthy associated with the government were concerned about the mistreatment of the poor, even though they were poor they made up a big amount of London’s population at the time.

In these journal Pepys also talked more about the lack of medical attention that the poor was receiving.³ It said, "that whereas death now began not, as we may say, to hover over every one's head only, but to look into their houses and chambers and stare in their faces," in addition to describing them as having "little to no relief." This indicates that they didn't think they would survive at all. During the plague, doctors who had to care for the impoverished were compelled to produce far cheaper treatment for them since the drug was manufactured at a lower cost. This is another example of how the least fortunate were treated very unfairly. The more costly drug that the wealthy would receive would not work the same way as this one. The journal's author shared firsthand accounts of how these various individuals were handled, and he wrote about the

² “The History of the Great Plague in London, in the Year 1665.” 1822. *Museum of Foreign Literature & Science* 1 (4): 325–39.

³ Pepys, Samuel, Mynors Bright, and Henry B. Wheatley. *The diary of samuel pepys*. New York: Random House, 1946.

experience to share his ideas and concerns over the subject. It didn't seem like the government shared the same perspective on the epidemic, even though they would send the doctors and from the outside it appeared like they were trying to help the poor. Rich people viewed it as a condition that could be cured, while the impoverished saw it as a protracted, agonizing death.

The next person that had a long-lasting primary source goes by the name of Daniel Defoe who also had a journal called "A Journal of the Plague year".⁴ Defoe was the opposite of Pepys in the way that he was not wealthy. Defoe speaks on the favoritism that the rich got while he along with the other poor folk watched and suffered. First, they described the gradual panic that began to spread in 1663 as word spread that the plague was spreading from Holland and Italy to London, as well as the public's response to this news. The author also discussed how the plague primarily afflicted the poor, who relied on labor to support their families, be paid, and survive. Since they were unable to work during the quarantine, this contributed significantly to the near freezing of the economy during this period. Defoe also explained that the poor had ideas of making the poor servants to the wealthy as an idea for labor, but that idea never came about because the wealthy did not want to be near the poor because of the higher levels of spread. Poor people were by far the most pushed aside group because they had their shops closed due to the plague. They also were unable to trade and make money in general. It does not make any sense that the wealthy could make these people stay in their crowded sectors of London but when it came to the economy, they had to pause all of that. This made the poor hopeless during this time of a deadly plague and a failing economy, especially when the rich were not just doing as good but some describe it as better than before the plague.

⁴ Wilkinson, Greg. 2021. "Epidemics: A Journal of the Plague Year , London, 1665 - by Daniel Defoe - Psychiatry in Literature." *The British Journal of Psychiatry : The Journal of Mental Science* 219 (2): 459. doi:10.1192/bjp.2021.34.

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