

Plagues Ancient and Modern

Our current pandemic continues to dominate the news, while climate change agreements keep popping up at every opportunity. Looking back in history, there was often a connection between the two, as climate-induced famines lowered a population's resistance to disease while also disturbing wildlife ready to provide a new one.

Significant factors in the spread of disease then and now are the 'degree of connectivity' in the world and concentration of so many people in cities.

As we approach the annual season of 'remembrance' it is appropriate to reflect upon the famous 'Spanish Influenza' pandemic of 1918-19, as it killed more people worldwide than the fighting on the 'Western Front'. Thousands of British and 'Empire' troops passed through the military depot of Étapes near Boulogne, helping to spread the virus to their far flung homelands. Precautionary measures were not put in place since the main war effort remained top priority.

It earned the name 'Spanish Flu' because Spain, as a neutral country, could discuss it, while military censorship operated elsewhere. Thus its origin is not fully understood. Chinese labourers were employed at Étapes and one wonders if they had accidentally introduced yet another mutation of the familiar 'Asian Flu'. It seemed to strike down young more than old, suggesting the latter had acquired some immunity after an earlier outbreak in 1889. In 1898 H G Wells wrote 'War of the Worlds', in which the Martian invaders were finally beaten by our 'bugs' rather than bullets!

Otherwise, the most famous pandemic to strike Britain was the 'Black Death' in the mid fourteenth century, which contributed to changes in our local settlement pattern. The reduction in population undermined the management of commercial agriculture and eventually led to the system of larger units we see today. We have already illustrated this with the story of Woodcote on the southern end of Bicton Parish.

The early years of that century had seen spells of poor weather, bringing the first hints of the 'Little Ice Age'. Failed harvests thus weakened the population. At Shrawardine, for instance, the community pleaded poverty to the taxman because the river had flooded their crops.

Meanwhile, out in the central Asian Steppes the pastoralists had to move westward in search of better grass. Changeable weather had also upset the normal behaviour of desert rodents allowing their fleas to switch to rats nearer human settlements. As rats died, the fleas hopped next on to the people in search of blood. Unfortunately, in return, they passed on the bacteria 'Yersinia pestis' causing 'bubonic plague'.

Over the centuries the local population may have acquired some resistance to such infection, but when they attacked a Genoese trading post on the Black Sea, the fleas could hop off to more vulnerable people. By the time a boatload of refugees reached back home in Italy, they were already dying and disease then just kept on spreading via the trade routes.

Looking back even further, historians now realise that all this also happened before in the Roman Empire. The climatic shock which triggered it came suddenly in 536 and continued for a few years, having been caused by volcanic dust and sulphur in the atmosphere. The 'smoking gun' volcanoes have not been identified and an asteroid dropping in the ocean has even been suggested. With widespread famine, restless barbarians attacked the eastern frontier and introduced plague into the extended network of trade routes.

By this time the western half of the Empire had already been taken over by 'Barbarian' kings, thanks to the state being weakened by earlier infections. Further incursion by Germanic peoples could now lead to more permanent settlement in almost depopulated lands. Cities in particular, including Rome itself suffered dramatic loss of population.

By now, climatic belts were shifting, causing droughts in the valuable North African corn lands, although Germanic Kingdoms in the north actually benefitted from more rain. As the south dried out, even more desert peoples now following the new religion of Islam, took over.

Looking back even further into prehistory, there is a possibility that the important cultural changes in Europe, which marked the early Bronze Age may have had a similar cause. The 'Beaker' people spread from the east, bringing not only metalworking, but also bubonic plague, to which they had some resistance, but the Neolithic farmers had not! They rebuilt Stonehenge and introduced a different style of burial mound amongst other things.

As the Romans reached towards the tropics and proudly brought elephants, lions, tigers and camels into their arenas, some nasty bugs came along too!

In this way Smallpox virus spread in AD. 165-180 and was added to the collection of diseases already endemic in the crowded cities. Possibly Ebola virus wrought havoc in AD. 249-242, weakening the once great army. No wonder rich Romans were investing in grand villas safely in the healthier countryside.

All this stirred up religious debate in the Empire, in which many felt let down by their traditional gods and turned to Christianity. Traditionalists then blamed the Christians for displeasing the gods which provoked persecution. Anyway Christians were gaining a reputation for compassion and care of the sick which may have helped more of them to survive in such a brutal age.

Eventually, Constantine adopted Christianity as the state religion so that its network of bishops and clergy were able to fill the void when the civil administration of the western half of the Empire collapsed. The invading 'Barbarian' leaders actually adopted Christianity as a way of becoming 'new Romans'! They were also seeking refuge from those Steppe-dwelling Huns.

So much for history – what is its relevance today? Firstly you may notice many parallels and also changes which are still with us today. Pressure to build houses in 'safe' countryside like Bicton will surely increase, while the loss of the Four Crosses Inn after 200 years of service may be a lasting monument to these troubled times.

