

# Black Death: The Disease

## Black Death bacteria

The bacteria which caused the Black Death moved rapidly through the towns and communities of 14th-century England. What caused it? And what afforded protection against it?

- 1. The Plague
- 2. Variations
- 3. Origins
- 4. Who was to blame?
- 5. Sin or prayer?

## The Plague

The citizens of Gloucester thought that the disease must be somehow contagious and expected that by closing their gates to refugees from Bristol, they would be able to prevent its incursion. Yet, the Black Death was rarely spread from person to person by normal viral means, and when it was, it was in such a virulent form that the carrier was usually dead before they could pass the disease on to anyone outside their immediate household.

The plague was caused by a complex series of bacterial strains called *Yersinia pestis* (*Y. pestis*), found in the digestive tract of fleas. It usually lives in the fleas of animals, *Xenopsylla cheopsis* or *Cortophylus fasciatus*, but in exceptional circumstances, it can live in the human flea *Pulex irritans*, and can even 'hibernate' for up to 6 months in favourable conditions like dung-piles or cargo bales.

'There are 3 varieties of plague: bubonic, pneumonic and septicaemic.'

In general it is benign, but occasionally, for reasons the epidemiologists still do not understand, the bacilli multiply in a flea's stomach until they cause a blockage.

The 'blocked' flea then regurgitates these into its victim's bloodstream whilst feeding, infecting them with the plague.

There are 3 varieties of plague: bubonic, pneumonic and septicaemic. Bubonic is by far the most common. About six days after suffering the infected flea bite, the victim develops a blackish pustule at the point of the bite. This is followed by a swelling of the lymph nodes in the affected limb as the body tries to cope with the infection. These are the buboes, from which bubonic plague gets its name. Finally, subcutaneous haemorrhaging occurs, causing purplish blotches. The bacilli overwhelm the nervous system, causing neurological and psychological disorders which may go to explain the danse macabre rituals associated with the Black Death, and killing 50-60% of its victims.

## Variations

Pneumonic plague is a more virulent form, caused in cold weather when the infection moves into the lungs and results in a form of pneumonia. The victim is wracked by fever and starts coughing up blood, which contains plague bacteria and makes transmission airborne. Neurological difficulties and coma follow infection, and death is 95-100% certain within three days.

'Pneumonic plague is a more virulent form.'

Though pneumonic plague is far less frequent than bubonic, it is much more virulent. Septicaemic plague is caused when vast numbers of *Y. pestis* bacilli enter the bloodstream and overwhelm the system.

A rash forms within hours and death occurs within a day, before the buboes even have time to form. This form of plague is always fatal, but very rare because it is flea-borne and the victim is usually dead before transmission can occur.

Some very particular things have to happen for an epidemic of plague to break out:

- An infectious rodent population must be present, in which an 'epizootic' outbreak has been caused by blocked *Y. pestis* carrying fleas.
- The temperature must be between 15-20°C, with 90-95% humidity, since cold and heat retard the flea's activity, whilst humidity of under 70% kills it. This limits the outbreaks to particular seasons in Europe.
- The fleas must run out of rodents, forcing them to fall-back on man.

## Origins

Rats carried the Black Death across Asia and Europe - helped by man's trading routes.

The plague bacteria is thought to have spread from the arid plains of central Asia. The plague generally left untouched the indigenous nomad population, because rat fleas do not like the smell of horses, with which the nomads lived in close proximity.

However, from the mid-thirteenth century, increased commercialisation in Europe opened up silk routes through the steppelands, and the trading posts set up to service this trade formed convenient stepping-stones for infected fleas to break out of the area.

The first known victims of plague were probably a community of Nestorian Christians at Issyk Kul, south of Lake Balkash, whose cemetery explicitly records three plague victims in 1338-9, a year in which there were unusually heavy mortalities. In 1343, it had reached the Black Sea port of Kaffa (Theodosia) in the Crimea. There, a Genoese colony was under siege from a khan of the Golden Horde named Yannibeg, when his army was decimated by an outbreak of plague. Determined to make his enemies suffer the torments of his men, he ordered that bodies of plague victims be catapulted into the city.

The Genoese hurriedly dumped these into the sea, but the plague spread anyway. Taking to their ships, the fleeing Genoese carried the plague far and wide.

'His army was decimated by an outbreak of plague.'

The dead bodies of plague victims were hardly likely to be infectious: they would have been abandoned by fleas in favour of living hosts, and they were in no position to cough up infectious pneumonic phlegm onto their enemies. Like Gloucester after it, the locked gates of Kaffa were undoubtedly penetrated by questing rats, carrying infectious fleas on their backs. No amount of hasty corpse-dumping was likely to save the already doomed town. The plague was now set to sweep through the whole of Europe with only a few isolated pockets escaping the disease.

### **Who was to blame?**

The Black Death was blamed on evil humours carried in the air or earthquakes releasing poisonous fumes. In Europe, the Jews were blamed for poisoning the wells (an explanation which was impossible in England thanks to Edward I's expulsion of the Jews in 1290); and of course, it was also blamed on sin.

If I am asked what is the cause of pestilence, what is its physical cause and by what means can someone save himself from it, I answer to the first question that sin is the cause. To the second question, I say that it arises from the sea, as the evangelist says: "There shall be signs in the sun and in the moon and in the stars; and upon the earth distress of nations, by reason of the confusion of the roaring of the sea and of the waves." For the devil, by the power committed to him when the seas rise up high, is voiding his poison, sending it forth to be added to the poison in the air, and that air spreads gradually from place to place and enters man through the ears, eyes, nose, mouth, pores and other orifices. Then, if the man has a strong constitution, nature can expel the poison through ulcers, and if the ulcers putrefy, are strangled and fully run their course, the patient will be saved, as can be clearly seen. But if the poison should be stronger than his nature, so that his constitution cannot prevail against it, then the poison instantly lays siege to the heart and the patient dies within a short time, without the relief that comes from the formation of ulcers. (Anon. BL Sloane MS 965, folio 144.)

This does have a perceptively accurate diagnosis of the symptoms and epidemiology of the plague; for those who contracted the bubonic form were much more likely to survive than those who never developed buboes in the pneumonic or septicaemic form, and the plague was carried to England via the sea. Yet those implicit assumptions of sin and God's wrath were often to hamper any attempt to deal with the crisis.

## Sin or prayer?

On 24th October 1348, Bishop Edendon of Winchester issued an edict throughout his diocese, known as the 'Voice in Rama' Speech because of its opening line, which once again graphically underlines this conflict in understanding:

A voice in Rama has been heard, and much lamentation and mourning has echoed throughout the world\*... We report with anguish the serious news which has come to our ears, that this cruel plague has now begun a similarly savage attack upon the coastal areas of England. we are struck by terror lest (may God avert it!) this brutal disease should rage in any part of our city or diocese. Although God often strikes us, to test our patience and justly punish our sins, it is not in the power of man to understand the divine will. But is to be feared that the most likely explanation is that human sensuality - that fire which blazed up as a result of Adam's sin - has now plumbed greater depths of evil, producing a multitude of sins which have provoked the divine anger, by a just judgement, to this revenge. Bishop Edendon

\*Rama: This is a reference to Matthew II:18: 'A voice in Rama was heard, lamentation and great mourning; Rachel bewailing her children would not be comforted, because they could not.' It is a reference to the Massacre of the Innocents. Half of Hampshire's population died.

'The local populace, anxious of the evil humours being given off by the bodies of the plague victims, mobbed a monk of St Swithun's.'

He goes on to exhort his flock into concerted prayer and confession of their sins, for which he grants a 40-day indulgence to any who take part in a procession and mass of purification. All to no avail. The plague struck all along the Hampshire coast, ravaging his diocese, which was one of the most severely hit due to its coastal nature. Half of its population died. Yet throughout, Edendon continued to berate his flock with the wages of sin: "Sickness and premature death often come from sin and by the healing of souls, this kind of sickness is known to cease." He insisted that all burials must continue to take place on consecrated ground, but by January 1349, the cemeteries of Winchester had become swamped.

The local populace, anxious of the evil humours being given off by the bodies of the plague victims, mobbed a monk of St Swithun's, the Cathedral Priory, as he was conducting a burial service, wounding him and dragging the corpses out of the town. The outraged Bishop Edendon ordered the excommunication of all concerned, but in the face of public pressure bowed to the inevitable and ordered the opening of new cemeteries away from the centre of the town.

# Black Death: The Effect of the Plague

The majority of the population lived in the countryside at the time of the Black Death. Dr Mike Ibeji traces the plague's devastating impact on the rural communities.

- 1. Deserted Villages
- 2. Village of Farnham: (I)
- 3. The Village of Farnham: (II)
- 4. The Village of Farnham: (III)
- 5. The Village of Farnham: (IV)

## Deserted Villages

Ambion: The hill on which Richard III pitched his camp on the eve of the Battle of Bosworth Field was the site of the deserted medieval village of Ambion. The last recorded reference to it comes in 1346, just before the Black Death. Thereafter, the records fall silent, and it does not appear in the *Nomina Villarum* nor the subsidy rolls of 1416.

Tilgarsley: When the collectors of the lay subsidy of 1359 came to the Abbot of Eynsham's manor of Tilgarsley, they reported that they were unable to collect the tax because nobody had lived in the village since 1350.

Tusmore: On 22nd November 1357, a royal writ granted to one Roger of Cottisford permission to enclose the hamlet of: '...Tusmore which belongs to the said Roger and was, before the pestilence, entirely inhabited by Roger's serfs. Because of the death of those serfs, it has been, from time to time, empty of inhabitants, and so remains, and intends to remain so in the future.'

Next, the story of the village of Farnham shows how the plague affected life in the countryside as the vast majority of Britain's population lived in the countryside

## Village of Farnham: (I)

The manorial rolls point to the effects of the Black Death on rural England. Every manor in England was run by a reeve on behalf of the landlord. He made copious records, accounting for every penny that came in or went out of the manorial accounts, and throughout England, many of these survive.

'Frequent entry in the reeve's diary: Defectus per pestilentem ('vacant due to the plague').'

One such set of records is preserved in the Pipe Rolls of Bishop Edendon of Winchester. Included in these rolls are the reeve's accounts for the Hundred of Farnham, one of the richest and most populous estates on the bishop's lands in Surrey. In 1348, the old reeve, William Waryn, retired from office and died of the plague soon after. His position was taken over by one John Ronewyk, who had the dubious privilege of managing the estate throughout the years of the first plague. These are financial records, so they do not record every little thing that is going on within the Hundred. For instance, John Ronewyk is only interested in the heads of the households under his charge. He never records how many people are in each household, and we only know of deaths within the household if the head of the household dies and his heir has to pay death duties. Occasionally, the names of other tenants do appear on the rolls, but only for some special reason. For instance, John

Grudshate is mentioned because he was orphaned by the Black Death and had to be given to guardians; Matilda le Ffoghel was married to Robert Heningt, who took her dead husband's land; and the bondwoman Matilda Talvan defaulted to the bishop on the death of her master.

There is no exact figure of how many people actually lived on the Hundred of Farnham, but we can have a rough idea of how many died. In autumn 1348, a new entry starts to appear with disturbing frequency in the accounts of John Ronewyk: 'defectus per pestilentem' ('vacant due to the plague'). On top of this, the dutiful John Ronewyk carefully recorded a list of the 'fines terrae' ('land dues') owed by those replacing dead tenants, and the heriots (the best beast in the herd) of those heirs who took over from their dead fathers.

### **The Village of Farnham: (II)**

The Black Death hit in October 1348. Against each defectus tenement, are listed two figures: one marking the rent due on the land, and the other recording the amount of rent paid up to the point when it became vacant. For instance, the farm of Matilda Stikerre paid only 3d. of the 4s. 6½d. rent owed. Matilda had died, but it was not just Matilda: it was her and all who lived with her, leaving the tenement vacant. In the first year's accounts from autumn 1348 to summer 1349, 52 tenements fell vacant. This was 52 households wiped out by the plague. On top of that, another 133 other tenements lost the head of their household and had him replaced.

'In the first year of the plague, Farnham lost 740 people.'

Assume that each of those households was a nuclear family: a father, a mother and two children. For every household wiped out, that would mean four deaths. In fact, we know that medieval families were larger than that. They often contained five or more children, the grandparents could live with the family, possibly even a maiden aunt or two, and the more prosperous peasant households could even have a servant (like Matilda Talvan). So if we made a conservative guesstimate that for every head of a household, there were three other deaths. This would mean that, in the first year of the plague, Farnham lost 740 people. For the landlord, the death of so many tenants paradoxically meant a massive increase in his income. In 1348/9, John Ronewyk collected a massive £101 14s .4d. in duties on properties reallocated to new tenants (compared to just £8-£20 in previous years). He also collected so many 'best beasts' in heriots that it caused a glut on the market and the value of cattle fell through the floor. It was cheaper to build a new barn to house all the stock than to drive it to market and sell it.

The important thing is that the labour was there to do this. For 10d. two men and a boy built a makeshift extension to the stables in two days, allowing Ronewyk to house his extra stock. At the same time, the dairymaid produced her usual six cloves of butter, repairs were made to the castle, the harvest was brought in and the grain was milled. True, reaping the harvest cost 12d. this year instead of the usual 6d., 'Because of the plague and the scarcity of labour'. However, Ronewyk dealt with the labour problem by imposing the old feudal labour dues which had been allowed to lapse in return for money in previous years. From 1348 onwards, the column marked 'relaxatio operum' ('remission of labour') stands conspicuously empty.

### **The Village of Farnham: (III)**

All in all, John Ronewyk made a profit of over £262 in the first year of the Black Death and was able to fill 36 of the 52 vacant tenements with new householders. However, the potter and brickmaker had obviously died, because they ceased producing anything in that year, and the manor whilst running, was obviously running at its limit.

'After September 1350, the Black Death took fewer and fewer victims.'

In 1349/50, another 83 heads of households died and 15 more tenements went defunct. In addition, three people ceased to pay recognition money, 'because they are dead.' The strain put on the manor now began to show. Ronewyk found it more and more difficult to fill the vacancies. Forty times this year, he says that relatives did not pay inheritance dues 'because there were none left'. So many farms became derelict that Ronewyk started forcing his tenants to take on extra land they did not want. John Coupe of Wrecclesham was 'elected and made to find the fine' of his neighbour's land. Money was also not so plentiful this year. The fines raised a little over £36 and there were only four heriots. Not the Ronewyk minded - he had so much superfluous livestock that he was forced to slaughter 101 cattle for which he had no space. Everything cost more this year, due to the shortage of labour, though the cost of animals was down. John Ronewyk started paying piece rates for occasional work, which was a convenient way of spreading the burden. Still, the harvest was down on the year before, and the miller was obviously in some difficulties, because he was remitted almost half his rent 'by the kindness of the bishop'. Yet despite this dislocation, all effort was made to continue manorial life as before.

After September 1350, the Black Death took fewer and fewer victims. In 1350/51, 58 head tenants died, of which 16 were defunct. Of these tenants, 26 had no blood relations to pay the fines. Interestingly, the land of one Margaret le Hegh accounted for four separate fines - does this mean she had four successors who died in quick succession?

### **The Village of Farnham: (IV)**

Wages were artificially reduced by the Statute of Labourers in 1351, and the cost of livestock re-stabilised itself; but skilled labour remained at a premium and there are signs that the recovery was slow. The arrears for 1350 rose to over £132 in 1351, and then rocketed to almost £230 in 1352. It is at this point that John Ronewyk disappears from the rolls.

'Something over 1,300 people probably died in Farnham. A third of it's population.' He is replaced by John Holme. Whether he died of the plague is not clear. His name does not appear on the list of dead tenants.

Something over 1,300 people probably died in Farnham. This was probably something in the region of one third of the Hundred's population. The survivors obviously struggled to keep things going, and if the arrears recorded are anything to go by, they did not necessarily succeed, at least in the short term. Yet the manor kept itself going, and most of the vacant tenements were filled in one way or another.

# Black Death: Political and Social Changes

The Black Death had a devastating impact on local communities, and the class of survivors created a country of higher wages and peasants with a determined sense of their own worth. Dr Mike Ibeji explores its legacy.

- 1. Social change
- 2. Age of the yeomen?
- 3. Questioning the elites?
- 4. Yeomen Revolt
- 5. Taxation without Power
- 6. King and Government: Conclusion

## Social change

Life in Britain in the fourteenth century was 'nasty, brutish and short', and it had been that way for the peasantry since long before the Black Death. Britain in the early fourteenth century was horrendously overpopulated. This was very good for the land-owning classes, since it meant that they had a vast reserve of inexpensive manpower upon which they could draw. In fact, there was such a surplus on manpower, that most landlords found it convenient to relax the old feudal labour dues owed to them on the grounds that men could always be found to perform them.

'Life in Britain in the Fourteenth Century was 'nasty, brutish and short.'

This changed after 1348.

We can see in the example of Farnham the immediate consequence of the plague: a slash in the cost of livestock and inflation in the cost of labour. This pattern was repeated up and down the country. The immediate reaction of the elite was to legislate against this. The Ordinance of Labourers was published on 18th June 1349, limiting the freedom of peasants to move around in search of the most lucrative work. This was promulgated through Parliament as the Statute of Labourers in 1351:

It was lately ordained by our lord king, with the assent of the prelates, nobles and others of his council against the malice of employees, who were idle and were not willing to take employment after the pestilence unless for outrageous wages, that such employees, both men and women, should be obliged to take employment for the salary and wages accustomed to be paid in the place where they were working in the 20th year of the king's reign [1346], or five or six years earlier; and that if the same employees refused to accept employment in such a manner they should be punished by imprisonment, as is more clearly contained in the said ordinance.

Statute of Labourers, 1351.

## **Age of the yeomen?**

It failed. Skilled manpower was so short that no landlord could afford to ignore the strictures of the market. In Farnham, a carpenter who had been paid 3d. in 1346 was being paid 5d. by 1367, his mate had shot up from 1½d. to 4d., and most other workmen had added at least a penny to their wages.

In fact, to those with the opportunity and ability to seize it, the Black Death presented a golden opportunity for advancement. John Ronewyk might have had to force several of his tenants to take over neighbouring land, but others like Robert Heningt were only too willing to step into dead men's shoes. Ronewyk himself took over the 5 acres of his neighbour, Richard atte fforde of Runwick, for the knock-down bargain price of 18d. Other peasants, like Walter Dolle and his fellow survivor at archbishop Edendon's manor of Upton, were able to renegotiate favourable labour dues.

'The yeomen and the gentry were the movers and shakers of their locality.'

With the de facto (if not de jure) freedom to move around and sell their labour, and the horrendously deflated prices of goods and land, those with the enterprise to do so were able to lift themselves out of the bonds of villeinage and make something of themselves. It is at this point that we see the emergence of the yeoman farmer: a peasant smallholder with up to 100 acres of land.

These yeoman farmers were always a tiny minority. They were outnumbered hugely both by the gentry classes above them, and by the general peasantry below. Yet the weakening of lordship and the cheapness of land had provided conditions which the 'yeomen' and gentry were best positioned to exploit. They were the movers and shakers of their locality, enclosing land for sheep, establishing weaving mills and spending their new-found wealth on architectural memorials, both for this life and the next.

## **Questioning the elites?**

In 1371, an academic Oxford cleric called John Wycliffe was promoted into the government service of King Edward III. Desperate for cash to pursue the never-ending war with France, Edward's chief advisor, John of Gaunt, hoped to use Wycliffe's radical preaching as a means of coercing the clergy into paying higher taxes to the state.

Wycliffe was a reformist clergyman who had evolved a theory that the bible was the only truly religious authority, rejecting the teachings of the Pope and the Catholic Church. He believed that it was impossible to know whose souls would ultimately be saved, and that it was entirely possible for those of the clergy and the Pope not to be among them. His teachings were vilified by the Church, and he was tried for heresy in 1377. However, John of Gaunt literally stood by him in court, causing the trial to break up in confusion.

'Thanks to the new social freedoms released by the Black Death, the Commoners had become more confident in demanding their rights.'

Yet Wycliffe's teachings had struck a dangerous chord amongst the populace. During the chaotic end to the trial of 1377, the London congregation had rioted (albeit in defence of their bishop against Gaunt). Thanks to the new social freedoms released by

the Black Death, the Commoners had become more confident in demanding their rights.

The followers of Wycliffe's ideas, known as Lollards, were vociferous in support of such demands. Among these was an itinerant preacher called John Ball, whose sermons to the men of Kent verged on the revolutionary socialist:

'Ah, ye good people, the matter goes not well to pass in England, nor shall not do so till everything be common, and that we be all united together and that the lords be no greater masters than we. What have we deserved or why should we be thus kept in serfdom? We be all come from one father and one mother, Adam and Eve. How can they claim to prove that they be lords more than us, save by making us produce and grow the wealth that they do spend?'

Froissart, Chronicles.

### **Yeomen Revolt**

Such words struck a deep chord among the men of Kent; more so than in other places like Durham, where feudal lordship still held strong sway. This was because the Kentish peasantry had been able to improve their lot considerably in the wake of the Black Death. Fired up by John Ball's strong words, and outraged by the demands of the new boy-king Richard II's government for a poll tax of 1 shilling from every man in the land. Kent rose up under the leadership of Wat Tyler and marched on London in 1381.

This was the outcome of simmering resentments and the surprising social shifts, in part caused in part by the Black Death. The Peasants Revolt is the only truly popular uprising in English medieval history. For, even the most fundamental attempts at social change, like the rebellion of Simon de Montfort in 1265, had previously been initiated and led by the English barony. The Peasants' Revolt was the first ever mass uprising of the common man in England. However, it was not led by the peasantry either. The Peasants' Revolt was, in fact, a revolt of the yeoman gentry. If their interests had not been threatened, it would never have occurred.

'The Peasants' Revolt was in fact a revolt of the yeoman gentry.'

Of the three named ringleaders, Wat Tyler, John Ball and Jack Straw, little to nothing is known. It is more than likely that 'Jack Straw' was a nickname for Wat Tyler himself. Rebels and outlaws often took on such sobriquets in the wake of the popularisation of the Robin Hood legend. It is significant that this popularisation occurs at precisely this time, the first literary reference to Robin Hood actually occurs in *Piers Plowman*. Wat Tyler was probably a yeoman craftsman, as his name implies. John Ball, on the other hand, was probably the most lowly of the ringleaders; but as an itinerant heretic preacher, he can hardly be classed as a typical peasant.

A brief look at the escheator's inquisitions in the wake of the revolt add substance to this assessment. Out of c.180 inquiries, only 65 of the named people had goods valued at less than 20 shillings. 15 of them had goods valued at over £5, and the most well-to-do yeoman named in the rolls was the Suffolk rebel, Thomas Sampson whose assets were valued at some £65, without taking into account the price of his land.

It was people such as this who led the Peasants' Revolt. Sampson had co-ordinated the disparate rebel bands across several counties. To find the cause we must go back to the reign of Edward III and the Hundred Years War. In his desperate quest for money to fund this ruinously expensive war, John of Gaunt had turned to John Wycliffe and given the yeoman gentry the lever with which to mobilise the peasantry. Yet it was also this quest for money, and the taxation it induced which had so outraged them in the first place.

### **Taxation without Power**

Taxation was levied through Parliament. As the cost of wars increased during the Middle Ages, the king increasingly needed to draw the money to fight them from the general populace, and Parliament was the mechanism through which this was done. In principle, the King agreed to hear the Commons' grievances in return for which they ratified his request for money. By 1376, serious cracks were showing in this system. Parliament was being used by the king and the richer landed gentry as a means of keeping the common people under control.

In 1334, it had slashed the property qualifications exempting the poorer gentry (and yeomen) from taxation; and after the Black Death, it had enforced reactionary labour laws designed to keep the cost of lordship down. Measures such as these alienated poor gentleman, yeoman and peasant alike: those whose livelihoods relied on hiring out their labour and who had no margins with which to cushion the increased tax burden.

'Parliament was being used by the king and the richer landed gentry as a means of keeping the common people under control.'

By 1376, the Commons had had enough. In the famous 'Good Parliament' of that year, they elected Sir Peter de la Mere as the first ever Speaker of the House of Commons, and through him presented their grievances to the Lords. They refused to ratify any further taxation until the king's Inner Council was replaced and their economic grievances were heard. John of Gaunt had no choice but to give in.

Yet, for the lesser gentry in the Commons, this was not the victory that it seemed. In the very next year, John of Gaunt used the last Parliament of Edward III's reign to institute the most regressive tax ever witnessed in later medieval England. In response to a threatened French/Spanish armada menacing the realm, Parliament levied a one-off poll tax of 4 pence on every adult over the age of 14. This was followed up in 1379 by another poll tax, and then in 1380, a third poll tax was levied which sparked the Peasants' Revolt.

In fact, the third poll tax, despite being one shilling on every adult over the age of 15, was actually less burdensome than the 1377 tax, because of the way in which it was levied. Instead of extracting a shilling from every man in the land, the total assessment was calculated in every village by multiplying the number of eligible persons by 12d. and apportioning that total to individuals based on their ability to pay. The calculation was made by a group of commissioners appointed from among the county gentry and court officials; but it was precisely for this reason that it aroused such anger amongst those who instigated the revolt.

## **King and Government: Conclusion**

The yeomen and lesser gentry, who formed the local village élites, found themselves both excluded from the administrative process which they saw to be their right, and hit with a graduated tax bill based on their relative wealth compared with the general peasantry; and their resentment boiled into open revolt. They were joined by a peasantry made militant by the collapse of villeinage and the rousing rhetoric of Lollard preachers such as John Ball.

Yet the Peasants' Revolt failed. In the end, it was just a flash in the pan; a brief conflagration which threw stark light on the shifting social attitudes of the general populace in the years following the Black Death. These changes had been occurring throughout the fourteenth century: Ambion was not the first medieval village to be deserted, nor was it the last, and like many others its abandonment had begun long before the Black Death, due to high rents, enclosure, lack of work and bad land.

'The Black Death was never a cause, it was always a catalyst.'

The Black Death was never a cause, it was always a catalyst. All the things we have been talking about - labour problems, architectural change, the rise of the gentry and the growth of the English language - all had been developing throughout the century. What the Black Death did was throw them together into an unstable brew to which the king and his wars added the last spark of resentment.

Ironically, it was precisely the traditional lordship against which they had rebelled that ended the Peasants' Revolt. Wat Tyler was murdered whilst speaking to the young king at Blackheath, and his rag-tag army dispersed on that young king's promise to address their grievances. The ultimate result of the Peasants' Revolt was to elevate the personal importance of kingship to new heights, raising huge expectations which the new king, Richard II, was temperamentally incapable of fulfilling.

## **Vernacular Literature**

In 1362, Parliament passed a statute decreeing that all pleas should hereafter be heard in English. This was undoubtedly an attempt to maintain some semblance of order in a system which had been severely dislocated by the death of so many of its educated clerks. From this time on, English replaced French as the official language of the country and many works were translated from Latin and French into the vernacular. At the same time, two great poets were writing in the vernacular: Geoffrey Chaucer and William Langland.

Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* were written during the 1380s. William Langland, a priest from London, produced the first version of his great, alliterative poem *The Vision of Piers Plowman*, at the same time as the English declaration of Parliament in 1362.