

Why were people so afraid of the Black Death?

Today I will practise...

- **Explanation skills:** Identifying the relevant reasons (causes) of an event
- **Source skills:** I can use sources to find information about the past.

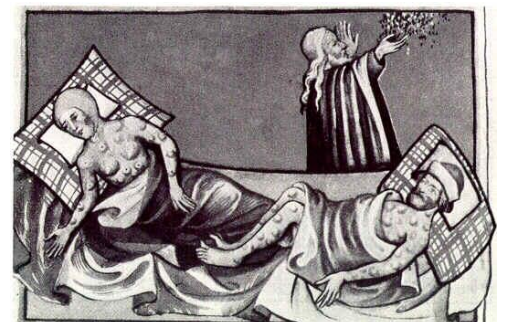
It is August 1348. In the village of Caldicot, the day's work is ending. Brian puts his scythe over his shoulder and heads for home. For the last four days, all the villeins on the manor of Caldicot have been harvesting Oliver the Priest's wheat. Brian looks at the evening sky. He is pleased. One more fine day will finish the bishop's work. Then he will bring in his own grain.

Brian walks slowly down the dusty track which leads to the village. He passes the dismal house of Mad Johanna, a lonely woman some people now say is a witch. The door is open, a fire smokes, but the house is empty.

As Brian enters the village he sees a small group of people standing in front of the church. They are listening to Will, the Caldicot bowyer. Their faces are troubled. Will is back from Winchester where he is helping to build the new cathedral. He has returned with strange and worrying news.

Winchester is full of rumours of a terrible plague which is sweeping through Europe. People say the plague started in the east when frogs, snakes and scorpions fell from the sky. They say it is spread by the wind. No one can escape. In the towns and villages of Europe, bodies lie in the streets. There is no one to bury the dead. The smell of rotting corpses is everywhere. People avoid each other. Parents run away from their children.

Brian listens but does not believe. Will is always returning from Winchester with wild stories. No wonder it is taking so long to build that cathedral. By the time Brian reaches his cottage he has forgotten the stories. It is almost dark now. Above the fire the evening meal simmers in the pot. His wife, Joan, is carding wool by the fire. His three children sleep soundly on a pile of straw in the corner. Brian sits down to eat with his wife.



Seven weeks later, Brian will be eating alone. The villagers of Caldicot never finished the harvest in 1348. By the end of September the crops lay rotting in the field. All work had stopped on Winchester Cathedral. Mad Johanna had been stoned to death. Brian's wife, Joan and three children lay in a shallow grave in Caldicot churchyard.

Questions:

1. *Why was Brian working on Oliver's land?*
2. *Why do you think Mad Johanna was stoned? What did the villagers blame her for? Why would they think this?*
3. *What happened to Brian's family?*
4. *Why did work stop on Winchester cathedral?*

Your enquiry: This story is made up. But it is based on what really happened. The Black Death killed millions. It was the most terrible thing that happened in the Middle Ages. You will find out how this horrible disease changed people's lives and write a diary as Brian.

The plague arrives

Historians think that the plague arrived in England during the summer of 1348. During the following autumn it spread quickly through the south west. Few villages escaped. The churchyards soon filled up with bodies. At night, the dead were piled on carts and taken to new burial grounds.

The plague spread quickly in the warm winter of 1348-9. The next summer, the people of the north of England and Wales watched in horror as their families and friends died around them. By 1350, nearly the whole of Britain was infected. At the end of that year, nearly two and a half million people were dead.

A terrible death

Medieval people did not know how the disease was spread. They were puzzled as they watched their loved ones die a terrible death.



Day 1: Painful swellings called 'buboes' appeared in the victim's armpits and groin. These were usually about the size of an egg, but could sometimes be as big as an apple.

Day 2: The victim vomited and developed a fever.



Day 3: Bleeding under the skin caused dark blotches all over the body.

Day 4: The disease attacked the nervous system. This caused the victim to suffer spasms. The victim was in terrible pain.



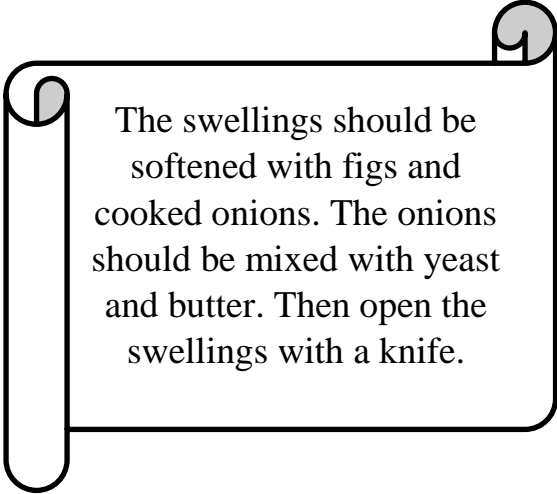
Day 5: Sometimes the buboes burst and a foul-smelling black liquid oozed from the open boils. When this happened, the victim usually lived. However, in most cases the victim suffered a painful death.

Causes and cures

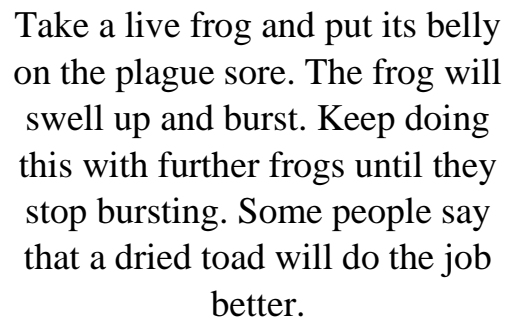
We now know that the most common form of the Black Death was bubonic plague. This disease was spread by fleas which lived on the black rat. The fleas sucked the rat's blood which contained the plague germs. When the rat died, the fleas jumped on to humans and passed on the deadly disease.

Medieval people did not know about germs causing disease. They did not understand that plague was spread by rats and fleas. They thought that people's bodies were poisoned.

If the swellings burst and the poison came out, people sometimes survived. It therefore seemed sensible to draw out the poison. Here are two cures from medieval medical books:



The swellings should be softened with figs and cooked onions. The onions should be mixed with yeast and butter. Then open the swellings with a knife.



Take a live frog and put its belly on the plague sore. The frog will swell up and burst. Keep doing this with further frogs until they stop bursting. Some people say that a dried toad will do the job better.

TASK: Start your story with what happened when the plague reached Caldicot.

- Decide who your plague victims will be. Describe how the people suffered and what cures their families tried. Try to include lots of detail about village life.
- Here are some names of the villagers living in Caldicot: *Jankin, Howell, Tanwen, Gatty, Hum, Dutton, Wat, Will, Cleg, Lankin. Merlin, Joan, Joanna, Dusty, Arthur, Sian, Serle*

Sentence Starters (1348)

Something horrible has happened...
It all started when...
I saw how bad it was when I saw...
When I visited on the first day I saw...
By the fourth day...
Luckily, on the fifth day, the buboes...
We've tried to draw out the poison by...

Success Criteria - Have you described:

- At least FIVE symptoms?
- At least TWO cures?