

REGULATIONS INTRODUCED IN SCOTTISH CITIES DURING THE FOURTEENTH TO THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURIES TO PREVENT THE SPREAD OF THE PLAGUE.

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The early out breaks of the plague in Europe in 550 to 560 and again in 664 do not seem to have reached or had a great effect on Scotland. During the first part of the 14th Century, the plague, then referred to as the Black Death or Bubonic Plague, started in the East and slowly moved westwards. Exactly how the infection made the journey into Europe is not known. Probably there were a number of routes and it is likely that infection was carried by the galleys bringing spices from the East to the ports of Genoa, Venice and Messina.(1)

It is thought that the first time the plague arrived in England was in 1348, brought by an infected sailor from Gascony, who was crew on a ship which arrived at the port of Melcombe Regis, part of Weymouth, Dorset.(2) Other Chronicles support this, although, as there were many ships from the Continent of Europe calling at English ports on an almost daily basis, there would have been more than one port through which the plague entered the country.

By the end of 1349 the plague had worked its way up to the North of England. This was devastating for the population of the border area around Durham, which had been destroyed by fighting during the invasion of the Scottish army in 1346. One suggestion on how the plague spread is that the Scottish army was waiting to make further incursions into England. It is possible that knowing that there was infection in the English army they were waiting until it was further weakened by disease.(14) However, the Scottish army then caught the disease and dispersed throughout the country carrying the infection with them.(4) The infection subsided during the winter of 1349, but during 1350 it spread again, more severely, covering the whole country. Skene wrote that "in the year 1350 there was in the Kingdom of Scotland so great a pestilence and plague among men as from the beginning of the world until modern times had never been heard of by man". He relates that it was the common people that were most affected by the disease, and more than 30% of the population died. This is a conservative estimate and the numbers were probably much greater. (5)

Delay in introducing regulations.

Following the 1350 outbreak further outbreaks of plague occurred in Scotland in 1361, 1380, 1431, and a local outbreak in 1432 in the Burgh of Haddington.(13) It is surprising that no apparent action was taken to try to prevent the spread of infection.

Leprosy was known in Scotland from an early date and although it was believed to be a punishment inflicted by God, it was recognised as an infectious disease. Hospitals were

founded to look after lepers and the Scottish Parliament passed legislation to control the movement of lepers. A well known directive was passed in the 12th century. (7). This directed that if any that dwell in the Burghs of Berwick, Roxburgh, Edinburgh and Stirling contract leprosy they shall be put in the hospital. Provision was made to make a collection for those who did not have the means to feed and clothe themselves.

Lepers were segregated from the rest of the population and regulations were in force which although they could sit at the entrance to the town to collect alms, prevented them from going from door to door. No one could allow a leper to enter his house on pain of "full forfeit". By contrast episodes of the plague occurred over a period of at least one hundred years before any action was taken to prevent its spread. One reason given for this is because there was a real confusion about what caused the infection. It was accepted by many as a heavenly punishment which had to be borne; it was also thought to be connected with the seasons and that it was borne on a mist or miasma. These and other reasons could have prevented early action being taken.

Early regulations.

The first mention of regulations to combat the plague, appear to be the action taken in the town of Peebles in October 1468. Instructions were issued that the four "ports" or gates of the city were to be closed; no one was allowed to visit Edinburgh, or to bring anything into the town. The walls had fallen into disrepair and they were to be built up and no one could enter the town without permission from the "Quartermaster".

There was a sever outbreak in Edinburgh in 1498. This caused the Edinburgh Council to bring in a series of regulations to prevent the spread of the disease. Anyone who took in a traveller had to obtain a licence, visitors had to come in through the town gates, a 10pm curfew was introduced, anyone bringing in food or merchandise required Council permission and any English cloth brought into the town had to be burned. Punishments for non compliance were severe and included the confiscation of all goods and banishment. (8)

From this time onwards regulations to prevent infection were issued by many of the Burghs and they became more stringent with increasingly severe punishments. In 1499 plague was prevalent in Haddington and Peebles near Edinburgh. Regulations were introduced which commanded that dogs and pigs were to be kept in the house and if found on the street to be slaughtered. Children if found in the street were put in the stocks and whipped. All trading booths were to be closed on pain of their goods being confiscated, but as Leith was free of plague at that time, food and grain could be bought from there.(9)

It was at this time that cleaners were appointed whose task was to wash and smoke infected houses. This was followed by additional regulations introduced in 1500. Goods from an infected house should be taken out and washed with water at the Water of Leith and smoked. Otherwise the goods would be destroyed. Servants could not buy clothing without their master's permission on pain of branding and banishment. Anyone bringing goods into the town without permission would have his hand cut off, if a man or branded on the cheek if a woman. Members of a household with the plague had to avoid contact with others for 12 days. Further regulations introduced in 1505 required all cases of plague to be reported within 24 hours. (10)

Regulations introduced in all burghs

In 1512 the various rules and regulations were reinforced in Edinburgh. This was followed in January by a letter under the Great Seal, sent out by King James IV to all the burghs asking them to enforce regulations to prevent the spread of plague. This contained virtually the same regulations as were imposed in the city, although the quarantine periods were increased to forty days. From this time onwards rules and regulations along similar lines, continued to be introduced or amended in Edinburgh and the other Burghs in Scotland. Some punishments were increased; from 1519 it was ordained that persons coming from suspected places or entering the burgh already infected, did so on pain of death.

In October 1574 the plague was prevalent in Kirkcaldy and Leith and many of the regulations were reissued. The inhabitants of Edinburgh were forbidden to have any kind of "traffic" with these places and their inhabitants were forbidden to visit Edinburgh. Additionally, goods could not be sent from Kirkcaldy to Leith while the plague lasted.(11)

Anyone in Edinburgh who fell sick "whatever sickness that ever it be" must remain in their houses in accordance with the instructions of the Baillie's, on pain of death. All the cities ports were closed except the Netherbow and the Westport. They were to, be open from 6.00am until 6.00pm and the gates were to be guarded by a watch of six men. All vagabonds and idyll persons had to leave the town within 24 hours. (12) John Forrest was put in charge of a team responsible for the cleansing of the goods of citizens who recovered from the plague. He was to be paid the sum of £6 monthly for this work, but if any infection occurred due to insufficient cleansing he was "to suffer the deith theirfor" a strong incentive to succeed.(12)

By 1600 plague continued to be found in places throughout Scotland but there was no serious epidemic. A last outbreak in Glasgow lasting from 1645 to 1648 was the last outbreak to be recorded in Scotland, although additional regulations to prevent its spread from England were introduced in 1665 and 1666.(8)

Conclusion.

These regulations were in force from 1468 to the end of the 17th century. The punishments were severe and were carried out, the most frequent punishment being branding. The records show four adults were branded for failing to report a sick child. Patrick Gowanlock had half his goods forfeit and banished for failing to report a woman in his house who was sick and admitting strangers. His servant Janet Cowan was branded on both cheeks and banished. There are also a number of hangings and other punishments recorded. However violent these punishments appear to us today they had the effect of controlling the spread of plague in the City. (9)

Although the Baillie's of the city did not understand how the disease was being transmitted, the action they took was effective. Confining the sick to their houses was important. Information on outbreaks of plague in the surrounding district was used to stop the exchange of goods and the population was stopped from visiting towns where the plague was raging. The closing of schools and colleges helped to prevent the spread of infection and the action taken to appoint cleaners to fumigate and wash infected goods and premises was a sensible act.

The measures introduced by the Council of Edinburgh helped to curtail the spread of infection into and within the city. It enabled the life of the city to continue, even during the more severe outbreaks of the disease and its example was followed by other burghs to limit the spread of infection to other parts of the country..

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