

## **The Return of the Plague: a Haunted Village**

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PRESENTED AT

*Haunts #1: Haunted Places and Haunted Practices* - SHU Space and Place Research Group. This online conference – comprising eight short presentations – is the first in an irregular series which across 2020-21 will explore new ways to investigate the relationship between places and their hauntings, through provocative and productive interdisciplinary conversations and juxtapositions.

LINK - [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gY76\\_tq0zMg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gY76_tq0zMg)

ABSTRACT

For over 350 years the village of Eyam has been haunted by the visitation of the bubonic plague in 1665-66 in which the majority of villagers perished. The legend of the 'plague-stricken Derbyshire village' has been repeatedly revisited across the years, most recently by the media in relation to the Covid-19 crisis, while the sites of haunting remain key to the iconography of the village.

**Introduction**

- *Slide – Eyam Village Website*

The small village of Eyam located close to Stoney Middleton and Grindleford on the old turnpike route between Chesterfield and Manchester, is known throughout the world for a tragic event that took place 354 years ago which has become part of the village's identity, literally part of its DNA, this was the last major outbreak of bubonic plague in Britain.

- *Slide – The Plague*

Over the intervening years, and especially since the mid 19th Century this event has been repeatedly revisited, reworked and re-presented by a succession of historians, epidemiologists, folklorists, poets, playwrights, novelists, and artists.

- *Slide – Eyam and Covid-19 - Newspaper Websites*

Media reports covering the Covid-19 crisis of 2020 have made repeated reference to the Eyam Plague drawing parallels with the current pandemic and the imposition of a lockdown.

**The Landscape**

- *Slide – Map of Eyam*

Eyam itself lies on a gently sloping limestone plateau raised above the wooded Middleton Dale below and sheltered by a sandstone ridge to the north known as 'Eyam Edge' beyond which lies the open moorland leading to the Hope valley and Hathersage.

**The Plague**

- *Slide – Plague Deaths (from a display in Eyam Museum)*

The plague arrived in Eyam in early September 1665 after the town's annual wakes and as a major outbreak in London was coming to an end. It quickly spread from house to house killing 23 people in October alone before largely dying out during the winter months. It then resurfaced aggressively in the spring and the death toll rose rapidly with monthly totals of 19 deaths in June, 56 in July and 77 in August before it finally retreated with the last deaths in early November. In total it killed 260 people, a large proportion of the village's population.

**The Narrative**

The traditional narrative which has been challenged in more recent times can be summarised as follows – here I am using illustrations from a childrens guide to the village published in 1981. The story begins with....

*Slides – Illustrations from ‘Look At Eyam’ published by Bessacar Prints 1981.*

- The arrival of the plague in a box of material sent from London. in September 1665
- The infection and subsequent death of the itinerant tailor who opened the box.
- The spread of the plague from house to house wiping out whole families.
- The fleeing of those with the means to escape in the winter and spring before the plague returned.
- The isolation of the village to protect the surrounding area led by the Reverend Mompesson assisted by the former Non-conformist preacher Thomas Stanley.
- The leaving of food and goods at wells and boundary stones around the village.
- The burying of the dead in fields close by to where they lived rather than in the grave yard.
- The holding of open air Church services in nearby Cucklett Delph to maintain isolation.
- The death of the rectors wife, Catherine Mompesson
- The extremely high death toll of 260 villagers

This narrative maps out a local geography of the plague across the village and the surrounding landscape from the cottages where the plague broke out, to the delph where the services were held and the graves, boundary stones and wells surrounding the village.

### **A Haunted Geography**

*Slide – Four Guides to Eyam*

Over the last 200 years local historians, almost all of whom were also residents of the village, have published accounts of the plague which also doubled as tours and walking guides thus directly linking the memory of the plague with specific sites and inviting visitors to tour the village and this haunted landscape.

*Slide – William Wood - The History and Antiquities of Eyam - 1st and Last editions (1842 / 1903)*

These guides have had a lasting impression being reprinted in many editions across the decades. The earliest and most influential of these, William Woods “The History and Antiquities of Eyam with a Minute Account of the Great Plague” was originally published in 1842 ran to at least eight editions across 60 years.

- *Slide – The History and Antiquities of Eyam, 3rd Edition, 1859 - Plague Cottages*

From the 3rd edition onwards Wood’s guide included illustrations from photographs by J.A.Warwick which provided a visual grounding to his dramatic and evocative retelling of the plague story.

These illustrations reveal the plague houses where the tailor lived,

- *Slide – Mompesson’s Well*

the well, named after the rector where food was left,

- *Slide – Cucklett Church*

Cucklett Church, where the outdoor services were held

- *Slide – The Riley Graves*

the Riley graves in a field on the edge of town

- *Slide Churchyard and Catherine Mompesson’s Tomb*

along with the churchyard and Catherine Mompesson's tomb.

- *Slide – The History and Antiquities of Eyam, 3rd Edition, 1859 - Plague Cottages*

The view of the 'plague houses' on Church Street has become the dominant representation of Eyam and the repeated reworking of this view across the last 200 years seems to haunt retellings of the event.

- *Slide – The Village of Eyam, Francis Chantrey RA, 1815.*

The earliest known version of this view is a pen and ink sketch made by Sir Francis Chantrey, R.A. on October 20th, 1815 which may well have been the basis for the engraving included in the 3rd edition of Wood's guide in 1859.

- *Slide – View of the Village of Eyam, engraved by W.B & G. Cooke 1886.*

Chantrey's sketch was later published as an engraving by W.B & George Cooke in a popular collection of Peak District views entitled 'Chantrey's Peak Scenery' in 1886 produced for the growing tourist trade of the late 19th century.

- *Slide – Postcards views of the plague cottages.*

The popularity of the picture postcard and growing tourism led to numerous versions of this view spanning over a century most of which were made from almost the same view point.

- *Slide – Alternative postcards views of the plague cottages.*

Only a few deviate and provide a different view of the cottages. Postcards also picture other key sites including:

- *Slide – Postcard views of Cucklett Church*
- *Slide – Postcard views of The Annual 'Plague Sunday' service in the Delph*
- *Slide – Postcard views of Mompesson's Well*
- *Slide – Postcard views of The Riley Graves*
- *Slide – Postcards of Mompesson's Chair*

Multiview postcards of Eyam also include a number of these sites

- *Slide – Multiview Postcards of Eyam*

The same sites are often located within the geography of the village on maps and sketches.

- *Slide – Map from 'The Story of Eyam Plague' Clarence Daniel, 1966.*

Here we see a map of the village including the plague sites from Clarence Daniel's 'The Story of Eyam Plague' published on the tri-centenary of the plague in 1966.

- *Slide – Inside cover of 'The Story of Eyam Plague' Clarence Daniel, 1966.*

Here we see illustrations from the inside covers of this publication again repeating the same sites as Wood's publication.

There many more examples of similar representations of these locations across different publications.

- *Slide – DC Comics - “Destiny: A Chronical of Deaths Foretold” 1997.*

A particularly relevant one given the focus of our talks today is the last in a three-part series of graphic novels published by DC Comics in 1997 which used Eyam as a backdrop for its ghostly narrative incorporating many aspects of the plague story.

- *Slide – Destiny: A Chronical of Deaths Foretold – Plague Doctor*

The series entitled “Destiny: A Chronical of Deaths Foretold” weaves a story of a ghostly stranger revealing a series of haunted tales from three different visitations of the plague at different points in history.

- *Slide – Destiny: A Chronical of Deaths Foretold – George Viccars*

The third story, set in Eyam includes the death of George Viccars, the Rector and his predecessor Thomas Stanley along with other elements of the plague story and recognisable locations such as the Church and Cucklett Delph.

- *Slide – Destiny: A Chronical of Deaths Foretold – Cucklett Delph*

In conclusion, these representations of key plague sites, endlessly repeated across numerous versions of the plague story continue to haunt the landscape of the contemporary village, not least through their physical manifestation in the town’s museum and a series of interpretation boards which provide a walking tour of the key sites today.

- *Slide – Green Plaques outside houses in Eyam*
- *Slide – Keep Out Notice posted outside the Church, Eyam, June 2020.*

Signage in the village during the current pandemic might suggest that they would welcome isolation from the outside world once more.

Before closing I’d like to share with you a short video clip which I was shown on a recent visit to the village. It was captured on a mobile phone by some teenagers larking about in the Delf who got spooked by something. I was only able to film it off someone’s phone as they were not willing to provide me with a copy.

I should point out that I cannot in anyway vouch for its authenticity however you may find it interesting.....!

- *Video – Cucklett Delph*