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U3AM at Home

The Story of Eyam

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Like most Melburnians I have found the recent weeks of severe lockdown difficult. Normally at this time of year I would be returning from my Northern Hemisphere summer interlude in London with my son and his family, usually sharing my visit to England and Europe with that of my daughter from New York. On top of that all, Melburnians have been enduring the isolation of Victoria from the rest of Australia and of metropolitan Melbourne from the rest of the state. The temptation to lurch into bouts of self-pity has never been stronger! It is at such times that I find myself thinking about what happened in the tiny village of Eyam (pronounced *eeme*, rhyming with *dream*), deep in the heart of the beautiful Peak District National Park in the county of Derbyshire, England, in the 12 months 1665-1666. This was the plague year, of course, when London especially was ravaged by bubonic plague. In fact it is often referred to as 'The Great Plague of London' which killed an estimated 100,000 people - almost a quarter of London's population - in 18 months. The village of Eyam lies around 260 kilometres from London, so how does it fit into this apocalyptic picture?

In August 1665 Alexander Hadfield, the local tailor in Eyam, ordered a bale of cloth from London to make into clothes for the villagers, thus triggering a chain of events that led to the death of some 260 villagers and the destruction of some 76 families, more than a quarter of the total population. The cloth arrived in Eyam at the beginning of September. Finding the cloth "*damp and smelling foul*", Hadfield's assistant, George Viccars, spread it in front of the fire to air, thus awakening and activating the rat fleas that had travelled with it. By 7th September he was dead. The plague had arrived in Eyam.

His death was soon followed by that of his two stepsons, an immediate neighbour and then the tailor himself. By the end of September five people from the village had died. In October 23 more perished. It soon became clear that the plague had established itself in the village. Many of the villagers immediately thought about fleeing to Sheffield, the nearest big city, but they were persuaded to unite behind their rector, the young and newly arrived Rev William

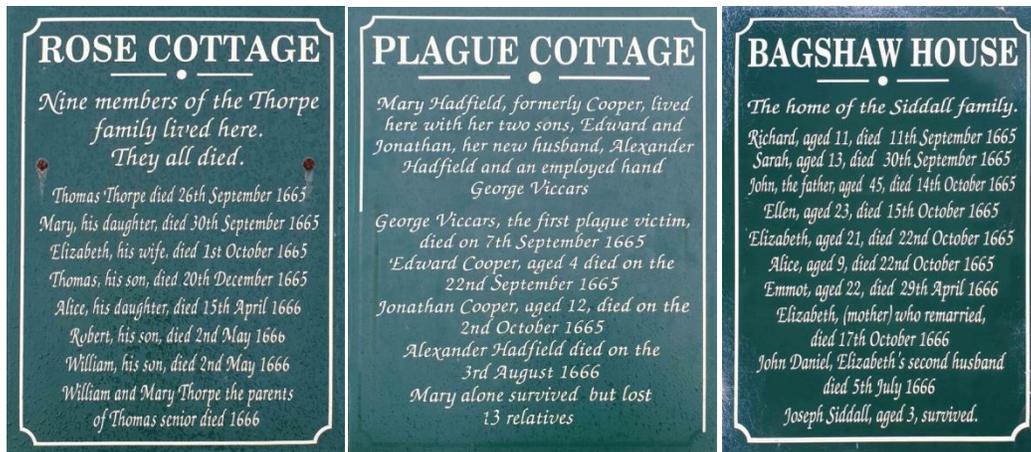
Mompesson. He argued that their arrival in Sheffield would risk countless more lives when the north had not suffered as much as London had. Instead they should quarantine themselves, allowing nobody to enter or leave the village – fully knowing that they could all die.

Mompesson was an intelligent, educated man having graduated from Cambridge University 10 years earlier and showed a remarkable understanding of how to deal with their situation. He established a four point plan and persuaded the villagers to agree to it: a Cordon Sanitaire or quarantine was established. This line went around the outskirts of the village and no Eyam resident was allowed to pass it. Signs were erected along the line to warn travellers not to enter and during the time of the quarantine there were almost no attempts to cross the line, even at the peak of the disease in the summer of 1666; families were ordered to bury their dead in their own plots, not the church burial ground; he also suspended church services, to avoid parishioners being crammed into church pews, allowing only open-air gatherings where social distancing could be observed; because the village was not self-sufficient they relied on donations of food supplied by those who lived outside Eyam. Arrangements were therefore made for food to be left at the parish stone that marked the entrance to the village where the villagers, in turn, would leave money in a water trough that Mompesson ordered to be filled with vinegar to sterilise the coins.

The Boundary Stone and trough can still be seen.



Each year, on the last Sunday of August, a ceremony is held in Eyam to remember the victims of the plague. The cottages where whole families perished are still there, many with heart-wrenching plaques documenting the domestic tragedies which took place within their walls:



For some families there is not even a plaque. Such is the case with Elizabeth Hancock - an Eyam plague survivor – who afterwards told the story of how she buried six of her children and her husband one after another in a period of just 8 days. She had to drag their bodies across the fields and bury them while people from the nearby villages stood on the hills and just watched, being too scared to help.

The story of Eyam resonates with the whole world today in a way that I never imagined possible when I last visited Eyam. I also remember first going there as a schoolboy, on a school visit over half a century ago. The events of that terrible plague year seemed to me then as remote as 1066 or the murderous Viking invasions of earlier centuries. Never could I have foreseen that one day I would witness the same epidemiological measures in operation that the far-sighted and visionary William Mompesson had initiated nearly 400 hundred years ago.

The story of Eyam therefore is one of astonishing courage, sacrifice and selflessness. The villagers sacrificed their lives because they understood what had to be done in order to stop the spread of the disease and to protect as many of their fellow human beings as possible. Our own current pandemic is not asking us to make the ultimate sacrifice, although there have been plenty of examples of that amongst front-line health workers in Melbourne, but reflecting on the events that took place in this picturesque village all those years ago helps me to put into a sober perspective the essentially petty sacrifices that we, in our turn, are being asked to make.

Australian author, Geraldine Brooks' book *Year of Wonders* gives a fictionalized account of the story of Eyam.