Sickness in the City:
London’s Black Plague

In any place where large groups of people congregate, illness can spread quickly. That’s why, hundreds of years ago, the wealthy people of London would flee to the country whenever the bubonic plague struck the city. This dreaded plague, also called the “Black Death,” wiped out tens of thousands of civilians in London—possibly even half the population of the city! It especially devastated the poor, who lived in slums in crowded and often filthy conditions. Unlike the rich, poor people could not afford to escape the city, so they stayed . . . and they died.

At the time, doctors didn’t understand what caused this horrific epidemic. People knew that it was contagious, meaning it could spread from person to person, but they weren’t sure how that happened. Some people thought you could get the disease simply from touching an infected person or their possessions. Infected people were segregated from healthy people, locked into their homes for forty days, and their clothes and bedding were burned if they died.

We now know that the plague was spread by the bites of infected fleas that lived on rats. It was also spread from person to person; when an infected person coughed, the bacteria that caused the plague was passed on in the cough’s water drops. The plague epidemic finally waned around 1670, after the Great Fire of 1666 burned down large sections of the metropolis. But even today, the plague is remembered as one of the worst diseases ever to ravage humankind.