

Moravian Women's Association Home & Overseas Paper - April 2020

The times we live in!

Many of us will have visited Eyam, or at least know the story of the outbreak of plague there in 1665. Its part of our folklore, except its true and documented. There have been a number of books, plays, and films about this.

In 1665 a flea-infested bundle of cloth arrived from London for the local tailor. Within a week his assistant George Vicars was dead and more began dying in the household soon after.

As the disease spread, the villagers turned for leadership to their rector, Reverend William Mompesson and their former pastor Thomas Stanley, who had been dismissed as he was a Puritan (the “wrong” kind of Christian at the time!). Mompesson and Stanley worked together to introduce precautions to slow the spread of the illness from May 1666. The measures included the arrangement that families were to bury their own dead and relocation of church services to a local outdoors natural amphitheatre, allowing villagers to separate themselves (social distancing!) and so reducing the risk of infection.

Perhaps the best-known decision was to quarantine the entire village to successfully prevent further spread of the disease.

The plague ran its course over 14 months and the church in Eyam records 273 individuals who were victims of the plague.

Survival among those affected appeared random, as many who remained alive had had close contact with those who died but never caught the disease. For example, Elizabeth Hancock was not infected despite burying six children and her husband in eight days. The graves are known as the Riley graves after the farm where they lived. The village gravedigger, Marshall Howe, also survived, despite handling many infected bodies.

Plague Sunday has been celebrated in the village since 1866, on the last Sunday in August, in the same outdoors area.

I don't need to point out the parallels with today. We are all seeing and hearing about a neighbourly caring spirit breaking out. I live in London on a very modern estate, where we keep in contact by Facebook and WhatsApp. Most younger people are working from home, and an informal get together has broken out about 4pm when everyone who has been starved of contact during the day comes outside with a travel mug of tea for a short chat and stroll round the estate. One neighbour is a yoga teacher, and she has started live streaming classes every day. Another neighbour has arranged for a local cafe to bring round food orders by a delivery van. A disabled elderly lady is well stocked with food and wants for nothing.

And the Hancocks of Eyam who suffered so terribly? Family legend has it that the Hancock side of my family is descended from the Hancocks of Eyam. The family certainly came from that area of Derbyshire, so... it might be true!

Naomi Hancock - April 2020