

From the Archives

A PREVIOUS PANDEMIC

Among the numerous places which suffered in the common woe, the city of Chichester was not exempt. A traveller, it was supposed from London, came to sojourn within the walls of the town; he came in the evening, well, and in the morning he was dead, a stiffened corpse. He had slept alone, and no one had known of his malady; his jaw was awry, his eyes were starting from his head; he lay as he was seized in his mortal agony, across the pallet, and his features bore the trace of the fearful agony he had undergone. And men said that he had died of the plague, and when examiners came (for surgeons were appointed in every town to report on cases of suspicion), and the bosom and thighs of the traveller were exposed to view, the purple spots were seen at once; the examiners testified that the plague was within the walls, and in the churchyard of St Pancras, the traveller was buried by torchlight.

Rapidly did it spread; from the hostelry in which it first appeared, it travelled into the street, and those who kept shops were missing, and were said to be ill; but not of the plague, for no one was disposed to admit its existence in his own household; but it soon became apparent, beyond concealment, and then the Mayor, and the corporation met—in the council chamber, and they took council together, and they determined to enforce, within the city, those regulations which had been adopted in London, and which were believed to be calculated to mitigate the terrors of the pestilence. They warned the people of the infected streets, and when the examiners declared a death within; or an inmate of a house affected with the plague, they placed a watchman at the door by night, as well as by day, to prevent ingress, as well as egress, and to cut off, as far as possible, all communication from the infected spot. It had been so done in the visitation of 1648, but it may well be doubted whether it was wise or just to shut up the living and the dead together, and whether the mortality was not greatly thereby increased. And it was strange to see how the habits of men developed themselves in the midst of the pestilence. The rich and the fearful abandoned the city altogether; those who had friends or relatives affected were compelled to stay; those who had places of business were unwilling to leave them; those who had trust in God, stayed out the end, believing that they were bound to fulfil such duties as were cast upon them in so grievous a visitation, and that the same destroying angel, which smote in the city, could smite in the country as well; and the poor stayed in the city, because they had nowhere else to go. In the first few days of the pestilence men met and talked of it, enquiring of the affected parts, and trusting that it might soon pass from them; and when the pestilence had stalked into the various streets, they met as before, but it was with a different feeling; they looked uneasy, there was a mutual distrust, and each one felt that he might be in the presence and companionship of one who was stricken, and the salutations in the street became shorter and shorter; they ceased shaking of hands, and if obliged to converse, each seemed to take advantage of the wind, for fear the infection might travel on the tainted breeze. And after a time, no one ventured to walk upon the pavement at all, for they saw the watchmen standing at the doors of the infected houses; the doors were fastened, a padlock on the outer side, a crimson cross upon the door itself, and above the cross, the words, 'Lord have mercy upon us.' They

walked in the middle of the highway with mint, and rue, and herbs, and nostrums of every kind in their hands and on their persons. They believed them to be of use, not indeed that they were; for the inventors of them, and the people who sold them, and the people who bought and used them, died with the very charms in their hands, and testified to their utter worthlessness.

Nothing could be more mournful, nothing more desolate, than the appearance of the streets. There was not a dog, or a fowl, to be seen, for these were assumed to increase the chance of infection and they were all killed, out of the way. As many of the pigeons as were in the wont to sit cooing on the house tops, and to pick up the stray seeds that fell from the farmers' wagons, when they brought their corn into the market, were shot or destroyed; but many of them, disturbed and frightened, betook themselves to the belfry, and the tower of the Cathedral, and there, like their brethren of Saint Mark's, at Venice, they sat on the pinnacles and parapets of the walls, and looked down in fear and wonder on the apparently devoted city.

Nothing was more agonising to those who survived, than the mode of interment, for none were permitted to join in the last sad offices of the dead. No funeral service could of necessity be read over the graves of the departed, and those who died were hurried into a common pit at midnight. The churches were open, and thither the people resorted in numbers; they prayed with all that earnestness which only the expected, or the actual loss of all on earth most dear to us, can call forth; you saw them in the aisles, in the nave and in the chancels of the churches, absorbed with the intensity of their woe, a woe like Rachel's of old, which would not be comforted, and they prayed for them and those of their children, who were left to them, that God would please to remove the pestilence from their habitations. And well might they so pray; the pestilence was on all sides, and around them, and there was a rumour that the plague was not the only visitation they would have to contend with. In the regulations, which the council thought proper to adopt, ingress and egress from the city were strictly forbidden, a cordon was drawn around the wall, in the belief that they had provisions sufficient within the city to last until the plague had ceased.

But the plague lasted longer than they had calculated upon; as was the case in London, and other towns, the butchers and those who sold poultry and provisions, being dead, and with no means of communicating or purchasing food being left, famine stared them in the face. The corporation met to receive a report on the state of the city and to consider what was best to be done in the exigency. They resolved to proclaim their pitiable condition on the several gates of the city, and to appeal to the charity of the surrounding country for assistance to bury the dead and for the necessary supplies of food. Without delay, the proclamation was made by notice affixed on the several gates and the keepers of the gates watched earnestly for the result of the appeal.

A man of Bosham, whose business brought him to the meadows near the city, was attracted by those who stood on the western walls, and curiosity led him to approach sufficiently near to learn the cause of the assemblage. The people pointed to the proclamation, the stranger read it, held converse with those on the walls, promised such assistance as could be given, and bade them goodnight, in terms of sympathy and kindness. He hastened back to Bosham. He told his neighbours of the proclamation

which he had read, of the misery of the citizens and of their appeal for food and assistance and before the sun went down, the elders of the village met together round the walls of the Saxon tower, and there, beneath the shadow of the ancient yews, they promised at once to lend the help within their power to lessen the famine, and to provide such food as might be wanting in the grievous strait. On the following morning a little cavalcade left the village with the best wishes of the inhabitants. The carts were laden with fish, meat and grain, with poultry and vegetables and, long before they reached the city gates, the people were seen on the distant walls awaiting their approach with the greatest anxiety. The men of Bosham made a halt in the road, to the west of the gate, and signalled to the citizens that they had brought provisions. But now there was a difficulty in dealing for the articles of which they stood in need. The way in which they managed it was this: the men of Bosham brought a quantity of fish and other foods and laid it on a large flat stone by the side of a water trough, placed there for the use of cattle. Then they left the provisions, with the price upon it and withdrew a bow shot to allow the buyers to inspect the food; and the buyers came and inspected the offerings and placed the price of the foods in the water trough and, after they had retired to the walls, the sellers came and took the money out of the water trough, and in this manner they dealt for all they wanted. And some of the men of Bosham assisted the citizens to bury their dead.

And day by day until the plague had ceased, the men of Bosham were seen with their welcome supplies, in the early morning, at the western gate of the city. And still the plague continued, and still the weather was hot and oppressive but after a time, there was a change in the atmosphere; the clouds began to gather in heavy masses, the wind rose fast, the forked lightning seemed to cleave the distant hills, the thunder shook the very foundations of the city; and soon the big warm drops of rain came dancing to the earth, and a torrent swept down the streets until the eventide. And, after the storm had passed away, there was a freshness in the air, and it pleased God to lessen the sickness; and very shortly afterwards, the plague ceased in the city and the people came out of their saddened houses. They wandered through the streets, they passed the city gates, they sat down beneath the walls of the bishop's palace, and under the trees in the adjacent meadows and they spoke of all they had suffered, of all that they had lost in that terrible ordeal; and they thanked God that they had been spared from the plague and from the famine. And the memory of the plague still lives in the houses of Bosham, of Itchenor and of Thorney; and the fisherman, as he drifts down the harbour to his nightly toil, looks back upon the town and spire of the grand old Cathedral, standing out against the eastern horizon and he tells to his listening boys how the men of Bosham gave help and succour to their brethren of Chichester in the hour of their trial and distress.

From "Bosham in the county of Sussex"

Charles John Longcroft, 1867

Editor's Comment: *It is often said that the title of 'Man of Bosham' was conferred on those who provided this plague relief, but the title is probably much older than this, and unrelated to it. It is interesting to note that the payment for the food was placed in a water trough, suggesting a fear, long before bacteria were known and understood, that coins might be able to transmit the plague.*