

THE PLAGUE OF EYAM: A TRICENTENARY RE-EVALUATION

By G. R. BATHO

“IT seems exceeding strange, that Eyam, ‘a little mountain city, an insulated Zoar,’ secluded among the Peak mountains, distant from London 150 miles, should have been visited by a pestilential disease, which had scarcely ever occurred only in great and populous cities.” Thus William Wood expressed the enigma which has fired the imaginations of men in successive generations for now three centuries, in his *History of Eyam*, printed in Sheffield and published in London in 1842.¹ Wood’s little book of 160 pages was, on his own admission, a “rather hastily written work” by a man of an “inappropriate situation in life for the attaining of philological perfection”.² He was an income tax collector who acted as assistant overseer of the poor and as librarian to the Mechanics’ Institute in the village.³ His style is over-allegorical and he failed to give adequate references to such documentary sources as were available to him. But he had, as he remarked, “invariably resided amongst the impressive memorials of that awful scourge”; he hoped by his local knowledge to avoid the defects of earlier descriptions in prose and verse which had been compiled, as he saw it, “from cursory, casual, and erroneous information”.⁴ The story which he had to tell had romantic and moral overtones which appealed deeply to the Victorians, and in less than a quarter of a century, Wood’s *History* had passed through four editions.

With all its imperfections, this local official’s account remains today the major source for the narrative of the Plague of Eyam. “It is,” as Wood reflected in his preface, “to be regretted that a minute account of the occurrence was not taken nearer the time.”⁵ The rector, William Mompesson, wrote three famous letters — to his children on the death of their mother, to his patron when he believed himself to be dying, and to his uncle after the visitation had passed — which, from their formal, stilted style, have been thought to be intended for preservation as records of the event.⁶ These letters seem

¹ William Wood, *The History and Antiquities of Eyam; with a full and particular account of the Great Plague which desolated that village, A.D. 1666*, London, 1842, 42.

² Wood, vi.

³ *White’s Directory of the County of Derby*, Sheffield, 1857, 570, 581.

⁴ Wood, v-vi.

⁵ Wood, vi.

⁶ Rev. H. E. D. Blakiston, *sub* Mompesson in S. Lee, ed., *Dictionary of National Biography*, XXXVIII, London, 1894, 144.

to have been first printed in William Seward's *Anecdotes of Some Distinguished Persons* as late as 1795; Wood's renderings of them have proved to be very accurate, where it has been possible to check them, but the original of Mompesson's letter to his children is apparently lost.⁷ The main documentary source is the parish register; Eyam's register for the period, however, is not the original, but a copy reputedly transcribed by a later rector, the Rev. Joseph Hunt, who died in 1709.⁸ The generally accepted version of the coming of the plague to the village, moreover, was not set down until well after Mompesson's death. The famous doctor, Richard Mead, gave it in these words in his *A Discourse on the Plague* in 1720:

"The plague was likewise at Eham, in the Peak of Derbyshire, being brought thither by means of a box sent from London to a taylor in that village, containing some materials of his trade. A servant who opened the aforesaid box, complaining that the goods were damp, was ordered to dry them by the fire, but in so doing it was seized with the plague and died."⁹

There is, nonetheless, every reason to believe that this is the story very much as Mompesson would have told it, for Mead's authority was the rector's son, George, and in his letter to his uncle Mompesson makes it clear that he believed that there was a causal connexion between clothes and the plague. He wrote on 20 November 1666:

"I intend (God willing) to spend this week in seeing all woollen clothes fumed and purified, as well for the satisfaction as for the safety of the country. Here have been such burning of goods that the like, I think, was never known. For my part, I have scarcely apparel to shelter my body, having wasted more than I needed merely for example."¹⁰

From Mead's time on, the Plague of Eyam has prompted the production of a plethora of fiction, drama, poetry and antiquarian writing, much of it of an indifferent quality by any criterion and all of it little read these days. Anna Seward, the 18th-century authoress who became known as "the Swan of Lichfield" but who was born in Eyam rectory, kept the traditions alive in verse and in her letters. Ebenzer Rhodes included the first really full account of the outbreak in his popular guide-book, *Peak Scenery*, which first appeared in 1818, and Samuel Roberts elevated his readers with his pamphlet, *Eyam: its trials and triumph*, published eight years before Wood's *History*. William and Mary Howitt produced one of the better poems on the subject in 1827, *The Desolation of Eyam*, while Richard Furness, a native of Eyam who was schoolmaster of Dore from 1821 to 1857, wrote several of the less pleasing poems of the period. The Plague of Eyam figured in Charlotte Yonge's *Book of Golden Deeds* in 1864, and in 1881 Edward Hoare developed the traditional stories into what is perhaps the best, as it is certainly one of the most restrained, of the many Victorian novels on the theme, *The Brave Men of*

⁷ W. Seward, *Anecdotes of Some Distinguished Persons*, London, 1795, II, 27-44; Wood, 71-3, 74, 81-2.

⁸ C. Daniel, *A Guide to Eyam*, privately printed, n.d., c. 1958, 49.

⁹ R. Mead, *A Discourse on the Plague*, London, 1720, I, 290.

¹⁰ MS. in the possession of Mr. J. Tregenza, Sheffield.

Eyam. The main thread of Hoare's novel is the romance of Emmot Siddal and Roland Torre of Stoney Middleton. More recently, Marjorie Bowen centred her novel, *God and the Wedding Dress*, on contemporary opinion that it was not so much Mompesson who was the hero of the time as his nonconformist predecessor, the Rev. Thomas Stanley. A similar characterization occurred in Monica Thorne's play, "The Sweet Air", one of the many dramatic productions on the amateur stage and the radio which have been inspired by the story.¹¹

A local resident, Mr. Clarence Daniel, has over the past thirty years provided useful and careful popularizations of the events in Eyam in 1665-6. The truth about the Plague of Eyam, however, has inevitably become encrusted by a rare mixture of fact and fiction as the mass of secondary works of all kinds has steadily increased over the years. No serious attempt at a scholarly re-appraisal has been made to displace Wood's honest but inadequate efforts of 1842, though Charles Creighton discussed the outbreak in the context of other records of the plague in his *History of Epidemics in Britain* in 1891 and called it "the most famous of all English plagues".¹²

Since Creighton wrote, modern medical research has given us a new understanding of plague as a disease or, rather, group of diseases, which does much to explain the history of this most deadly of all human epidemics. Plague is now known to originate in certain limited regions of the world, of which Uganda, Western Arabia, Kurdistan, Northern India and the Gobi Desert are the foci.¹³ Its movement from these areas takes the form of periodic pandemics which begin with a severe outbreak involving extensive spread and great mortality, followed by centuries of endemic plague in which the intensity of the disease lessens and the intervals between the outbreaks lengthen. No more than three pandemics are known to recorded history. The first began with the plague which struck Constantinople in the time of Justinian, spreading from Egypt in 542 and reaching England about 664. The second hit Europe in the form of the Black Death and lingered on until past the middle of the 18th century, affecting England severely in 1348-9 and persisting in its endemic stage until 1666. The third manifested itself in Hong Kong in 1894, spreading through Asia and to several other continents, but affecting Europe relatively little.¹⁴

The clinical study of cases of plague in this third pandemic has clarified for us the nature of plague. Plague is primarily a rodent infection in which man participates. The link between plague and rodents is mentioned in the first Book of Samuel, ch. VI, v. 5, but was not confirmed by modern science

¹¹ For some of the many accounts of the Plague of Eyam see J. Howard, *Lazarettos in Europe*, Warrington, 1789; A. Seward's *Letters*, 6 vols., Edinburgh, 1811; E. Rhodes, *Peak Scenery*, London, 1818; J. Holland, *The Village of Eyam*, Macclesfield, 1821; W. and M. Howitt, *The Desolation of Eyam*, London, 1827; S. Roberts, *Eyam: its trials and triumph*, Sheffield, 1834; G. C. Holland, *The poet Furness and his works*, London, 1858; C. M. Yonge, *A Book of Golden Deeds*, London, 1864; E. N. Hoare, *The Brave Men of Eyam*, London, 1881; J. Hatton, *The Dagger and the Cross*, London, 1897; M. Bowen, *God and the Wedding Dress*, London, 1938.

¹² C. Creighton, *A History of Epidemics in Britain*, 2 vols., Cambridge, 1891, I, 682-7.

¹³ Sir H. Harold Scott, *A History of Tropical Medicine*, 2 vols., London, 1939, II, 724.

¹⁴ L. F. Hirst, *The Conquest of Plague*, Oxford, 1953, 10, 12, 333.

until the early years of the 20th century. The causative organism is *Pasteurella pestis*, the plague bacillus, which is normally transferred from animal to animal by flea bites. Plague occurs in humans in a number of different but related forms, of which the principal are primary pneumonic plague and bubonic plague; a third type, septicaemic plague, is also of interest to the historian.

It is, of course, bubonic plague which is generally thought of as constituting plague. This type of plague is characterized by the swollen mass of inflamed lymphatic glands known as the *bubo* which occurs on the second or third day of the disease. The *bubo* may vary in size from that of an almond to that of an orange and is most commonly situated in or near the groin, but in about one-fifth of known cases it has been located in the arm-pit. The initial symptoms are like those of a febrile infection — hence the “Atishoo! Atishoo!” of the nursery rhyme which describes the plague, “Ring a ring o’ roses”. Bubonic plague varies in severity in different epidemics and at different stages of the same epidemic; recovery is not uncommon. Pneumonic plague, on the other hand, is nearly always fatal. This form involves a massive infection of the lungs; each time the victim coughs the plague bacilli are sprayed into the air. The result is, as the leading modern medical authority tells us, “primary pneumonic plague is probably the most infectious, and ordinary bubonic plague one of the least infectious, of all epidemic diseases”. Bubonic plague may, however, be complicated into pneumonia and become infectious. In septicaemic plague, it is the blood-stream itself which bears the brunt of the infection and sudden death occurs generally within a few hours of the onset of the disease.¹⁵

It has also been established that outbreaks of human bubonic plague occur only under certain conditions. First, there must be a large number of infected rats in close proximity to human beings. Secondly, the infected rats must act as hosts to a type of flea which will feed readily on human blood. Bubonic plague spreads most actively among man and rat in those places and at those times where, or when, the density of a species of flea known as *Xenopsylla cheopis* is high. This species of flea prefers the black rat, *Rattus rattus*, to the brown, *Rattus norvegicus*, as its host and can survive on it in a warm place, such as the black rat likes for its nest. Thirdly, the climatic conditions must exist which favour the maximum density of *Xenopsylla cheopis*. These have been found to be a temperature of about 65 to 70 degrees Fahrenheit accompanied by a relatively dry atmosphere.¹⁶

All the evidence points to bubonic plague as the type of plague which affected Eyam in 1665-6. Septicaemic plague occurs only during serious outbreaks and would account for any contemporary records of people falling dead without any apparent symptoms; no such record exists for the Plague of Eyam. Pneumonic plague was rare in England after the Black Death; this is the conclusion reached from the interpretation, in the light of modern medical knowledge, of the contemporary references to the epidemics of plague

¹⁵ Hirst, 28-30.

¹⁶ Hirst, 263, 303, 340-2.

in Britain in the second pandemic which Creighton collated. Recent further work on the records of plague in the 15th century has emphasized the increasingly urban nature of plague in this country from the middle of that century, a trend which equally suggests the absence of any appreciable incidence of pneumonic plague. Since pneumonic plague is so very infectious, it could not have been confined to any one locality if it had been present to any serious degree. Moreover, pneumonia cases among bubonic plague victims would be far more frequent in winter than in summer. In point of fact, a seasonal periodicity of plague with a climax in late summer or early autumn and a marked decline with the onset of winter is a characteristic of the Plague of Eyam as it is of all the London plagues of the 17th century and of modern outbreaks in the third pandemic.¹⁷

Conditions would have been ideal for bubonic plague in Eyam in 1665. The type of rat which was most common in Britain in the 17th century was the black rat, *Rattus rattus*. This species becomes sexually mature in a few months, has a gestation period of three weeks, and produces several litters of up to nine young each in the course of a year. Unlike the brown rat, which is a heavier, less sociable creature, the black rat is an agile climber, can squeeze through an aperture of half an inch and likes to live near man. It is easy to understand the attraction of most 17th-century dwellings for the black rat; its favourite food, grain, was commonly stored in the house at the time and it would have been able to breed undisturbed in the timber-framed walls, the thatched roofs, the layers of rush-mats on the floors, or the accumulations of dirt and refuse out of doors.¹⁸ *Xenopsylla cheopis* would not only have found plenty of its favourite hosts, it would also have found good climatic conditions. For Richard Baxter has recorded for us that the seasons preceding the outbreak of the Great Plague in London in the summer of 1665 were "the driest winter, spring and summer that ever man alive knew, or our forefathers ever heard of".¹⁹

Nor was an outbreak of bubonic plague outside a great and populous city as rare in the period as the 19th century imagined. Derbyshire was no stranger to plague before 1665. Chesterfield suffered in 1586-7 what the parish register called "The Great Plague of Chesterfield" and 54 people died of plague in the month of June 1587 alone. There were 53 plague victims in Belper in 1603 and 62 in Ashbourne in 1605; in the county town itself, serious outbreaks had occurred in 1586, 1592, 1605, and 1636. Eyam was not unique in suffering a visitation as an isolated place; a farm known as Grislowfields, near Curbar, was depopulated by plague in 1632, as we are reminded by surviving grave-stones.²⁰

The plague returned to Derby in 1665 with a special virulence. Tradesmen chewed tobacco which was held to be a prophylactic against infection, prospective purchasers could only handle goods which they intended to buy,

¹⁷ Hirst, 260; J. M. W. Bean, "Plague, Population and Economic Decline in England in the Later Middle Ages", *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, 2nd ser., XV (1963), 423-37.

¹⁸ Hirst, 424-6.

¹⁹ Creighton, I, 653.

²⁰ W. Page, ed., *V.C.H., Derbyshire*, II, 1907, 113; Daniel, 28-30.

and at last a stone was erected a little way out of the town for the purpose of exchange, where money was washed in a vinegar-filled hollow. "The town was forsaken; the farmers declined the market-place; and the grass grew upon the spot which had furnished the supports of life."²¹

It is just conceivable that the Plague of Eyam had its origin in Derby. The village wakes, held on the first Sunday after the festival of St. Helen to whom Eyam Church was dedicated (18 August), are said by the oral tradition to have been visited by a larger number than usual in 1665. The Victorians speculated that it was premonition of impending doom for the village which brought the crowds; a more likely explanation is that it was the unusually fine weather which Baxter mentions. One of these visitors might have been a friend or relative from Derby, unwittingly transporting a flea bearing the fatal bacillus.

The traditional explanation of the coming of the plague to Eyam is, however, the more probable. Commercial intercourse has been suspected as a major agency in the spread of plague for centuries, though the beliefs on the mode of transfer have varied. For example, cornships from Egypt were blamed by contemporaries for the outbreak of plague in Constantinople in 542, the Venetians took stringent precautions for the disinfection of overseas goods at the time of the Black Death, and Nathaniel Hodges in his *Loimologia* (1672) traced the source of the Great Plague of London to cotton or silk imported from the Levant via Holland. Today, it is generally accepted that the plague bacillus is almost always transported in the living body of a flea; humans may carry plague fleas on their persons or effects from one place to another, and so initiate new outbreaks, but merchandise, especially woollen and cotton fabrics and grain, is the more common carrier.²²

The findings of modern medical science, therefore, tend to confirm the oral and written traditions of how the plague came to Eyam. The oral tradition, as given to Mead by Mompesson's son, tells of the coming of a box of patterns and clothes from London to a tailor in the village. Wood suggests that it came about 2-3 September 1665 to a tailor named Thrope or Cooper. "The common belief is, that it was a man-servant, or journeyman tailor, who first opened the box, and not one of the family of the tailor, as is often stated." The first victim recorded in the parish register is George Vicars, who died on 6 September, and Wood names him as the person who opened the box.²³ The cottage which is known as "The Plague Cottage" stands a few yards west of the church. It belonged in 1665 to Jonathan and Edward, the sons of Edward Cooper, a miner, who had purchased it in 1662; at his death in 1664, Edward Cooper left the property to his sons but reserved a life interest to his wife. Neither of the brothers appears to have been a tailor; the likelihood is that George Vicars was not a servant, but a journeyman tailor who was lodging with the Coopers and no doubt thereby giving Widow Cooper a welcome supplementary income.²⁴

²¹ W. Hutton, *The History of Derby*, London, 1791, 233; *V.C.H.*, II, 183.

²² Hirst, 55, 307-31.

²³ Wood, 49.

²⁴ Daniel, 34.

When Vicars opened the box, plague fleas were released. Hirst refers to the conveyance of plague on board ship from Bombay to London in a box of clothes in the early days of the third pandemic and comments: "As usual in cases of this kind, infection followed the opening of the box on arrival at destination, and must have been due to the release of live infective fleas".²⁵ Wood's account of what happened after the box was opened, if perhaps somewhat over-dramatized and probably inaccurate in some of its details, is equally basically in accord with modern medical experience of bubonic plague. "In removing the patterns and clothes," Woods tells us, Vicars "observed in a sort of exclamation, how damp they were; and he therefore hung them to the fire to dry. While Vicars was superintending them he was suddenly seized with violent sickness and other symptoms of a disease, which greatly alarmed the family of the house, and the neighbourhood. On the second day he grew horribly worse: at intervals he was delirious, and large swellings began to rise about his neck and groin. What medical aid the village afforded was procured, but to no avail. On the third day of his illness the fatal token — the plague spot — appeared on his breast, and he died in horrible agonies the following night."²⁶ Fever and delirium are known symptoms of bubonic plague; usually there is only one bubo, but buboes may be multiple; they generally occur in or near the groin, but in about one-tenth of cases they are located in the neck.²⁷

An epidemic of bubonic plague is usually confined to the rat population for ten to fourteen days before the first sign of the disease spreading to humans appears.²⁸ It was 22 September before the second victim of the Plague of Eyam, Edward Cooper, died. The plague fleas released by Vicars, we must presume, transferred their attentions in the interval to their favourite hosts, the black rats, and only returned to the human population after a plague epidemic among the rodents had been well established.

The extent and timing of the mortality from plague in Eyam in the following thirteen months are well documented. In his letter to his uncle, John Beilby, of 20 November 1666, Mompesson gives the total number of plague deaths as 259 — "There have been 76 families visited within my parish, out of which 259 persons died" — and dates the last plague death as occurring on 11 October — "none have died of the plague since the eleventh of October". The parish register lists 267 deaths between Vicars' and 15 October 1666, but gives no date between 5 and 15 October; it is, therefore, impossible to identify the last victim of the plague precisely and, on Mompesson's evidence, it must be presumed that eight of those named by the register died from other causes in the period. What the register does show is that the course of the plague followed the pattern which one would expect from all that is known of other outbreaks of bubonic plague. Six persons died in Eyam in September 1665, and 23 in October, but with the coming of winter — and, according to the

²⁵ Hirst, 311.

²⁶ Wood, 49-50.

²⁷ Hirst, 29.

²⁸ R. Pollitzer, *Plague*, Geneva, 1954, 485.

oral tradition the winter was particularly severe this year, with a heavy fall of snow in December — the mortality was reduced. Seven deaths occurred in November, nine in December, five in January, eight in February, six in March, nine in April, and four in May. It was only with the summer that the plague returned in force to Eyam; in June the number of deaths rose to 19, in July to 56, and in August the peak death-rate was reached with 78 deaths. *Xenopsylla cheopis* was at its maximum density. In September there were 24 deaths and in the first two weeks of October fourteen.

Oral tradition has given us a figure for the stationary population of the village at this time — 350 — and rough proportions for the mortality brought about by the plague — four-fifths or five-sixths — which have been generally accepted.²⁹ Reliable evidence on population in the mid-17th century is hard to come by, but it is difficult to accept these figures. The return made to an ecclesiastical enquiry into the number of adult conformists, papists, and non-conformists in 1676 gave a total for the township of Eyam of 532; allowing for the addition of 40% for children under the age of sixteen who were not included in the return, this suggests a total population within ten years of the Plague of about 750.³⁰ The wealthier inhabitants at the west end of the village are known to have largely fled in the spring of 1666; no doubt a proportion of Eyam's population consisted of seasonal workers in the lead-mines; and severe death-rates in modern epidemics have been followed by markedly increased birth-rates, though this last consideration could not affect the figures of 1676.³¹ On any reckoning, it seems improbable that the village could have been depopulated to the degree which has been commonly suggested.

The oral tradition is probably a more reliable guide on the measures which were taken to deal with the situation when it became serious in the spring of 1666. At the time, men were greatly influenced by the 15th-century idea that plague was not only infectious directly, as we have seen that pneumonic plague such as was present in the earliest outbreaks of the second pandemic in Britain was, but that all those who had breathed the same air as the sick, or been exposed to their emanations, were carriers of the infection, domestic animals as well as men, and that inanimate objects of all kinds from an infected area could be sources of the disease. It was decided in June 1666 to immolate the village behind the famous cordon sanitaire, about half a mile in circuit, with its stones in which news and details of requirements were left and to which provisions were brought, in accordance with an arrangement which was reached with the earl of Devonshire, then at Chatsworth. The church was closed and services were held in the "Cucklet Church", a natural formation in the Delf below the village. Burials no longer took place in the churchyard but in a variety of places around the village; an exception was made when Catherine Mompesson, the rector's young wife, died on 25 August. The Mompesson children, George and Elizabeth, aged three and four, had

²⁹ Wood, 41.

³⁰ J. C. Cox, *Three Centuries of Derbyshire Annals*, 1890, I, 292.

³¹ Bean, 432.

Hon^d & dear s^r

This is the saddest letter that ever my pen did write, The destroying Angel
 having taken up his Quarters within my habitation. My dearest Dear is gone
 to her eternal rest, and is interred at the Crown of righteousness, having
 made a most happy end. And had she loved her selfe as well as mee she had
 fled from the lift of destruction with her sweet Infants, & might have plunged
 her days. But she was resolved to dye a martyr for my interest. My
 drooping spirits are much refreshed wth her joy, which I assure my selfe
 are unutterable. So this paper is to bid you a hearty farewell for ever
 & to comy you my humble thanks for all yo^r noble favours, And I hope
 you will believe a dying man that I have as much love as none for you,
 And I will bid my feeble Ours to the God of hea^vn, that you, my Dear
 Lady, & yo^r children may be rich with external, internal, & eternal
 happiness, & that the same blessings may fall upon my Lady Susan
 & her relations. Dear s^r let yo^r dying Chaplain recommend this truth to
 this vale of teares, like living a pious life. And pray obtain the w^ld
 of God upon the success thereof. So I have made w^od to name you in
 my will for an Exerute, & I hope you will not take it ill. I have joynd
 others with you that will take from you the trouble yo^r favourable aspect
 I know, will be a great comfort to my distressed Orphans. I am not
 desirous they may be y^ettal, but good. And my great request is, that
 they may be brought up in the nurture & admonition of the Lord.
 I thank God I am content to shair hands with all the World, & have
 many comfortable assurances that God will accept mee upon the detoural
 of his Son; And I find God more good than ever I thought or imagin'd
 I shd from my soul I wish, that his goodnes were not for much abused
 & contemned. So I desire you would or please to make nois of a humble
 pious man to have met in this personage. And would I set yo^r face
 before my departure hence, I could inform you which way I think he
 may live comfortably among these people, which would be some satisfaction
 to mee before I dye. Dear s^r I beg yo^r pray^r, & desire you to present the pray^r
 of those about you, that I may not be daunted by all yo^r w^od of World.
 And that I may have dying graces, that when I come to dye, I may be found
 in a right dying posture. And w^h I hear I beg that when you are
 praying for Fatherless Infants, that you would remember my two pretty
 babies. So pardon the rudeness of this paper, & if my heart be discompos'd
 you canel wonder at mee, howe'er be pleas'd to believe that I am

Dear s^r

Yo^r most oblig'd, most affectionate,
 gratefull servant

with M^ompesson.

Hon^d s^r

M^ompesson did not write this, but dictated it to mee yesterday
 upon Exam Moore, & desires you would be pleas'd to consider in tonight
 the having a very hard bargain of the 10th of Sept by reason of yo^r inferon, &
 says he would have bin pleas'd in it, had he not notic'd it wright to it.
 A boy came from him this day, & told mee an inglorious story that he
 desired in garden to find him some ducal spirits. He said he god the
 way is good health. See next
 at other page. Septemb. 2. 1666

Yo^r w^lth humble servant
 John Walker Sen.

been sent to relatives in Yorkshire in June, and we have the rector's own testimony, in his letter to his uncle of 20 November, that he himself was unharmed: "During this dreadful visitation, I have not had the least symptom of disease, nor had I better health." This same letter testifies to the erection of pest-houses in the village and to the use of chemicals on the sick, sometimes with efficacy. "My man had the distemper and, upon the appearance of a tumour, I gave him some chemical antidotes which operated and after the rising broke, he was very well." Letters were not sent directly from the village for fear of contamination. "I have got these lines transcribed by a friend, being loth to affright you with a letter from my hands", Mompesson comments to his uncle. The original of the famous letter to his patron, Sir George Saville, dating from 1 September 1666, also bears out this point in its illuminating postscript which has hitherto been overlooked (Plate XVII):

"Honoured Sir,

Mr Mompesson did not write this but dictated it to mee yesterday upon Eyam Moore, & desires you would be pleased to consider Mr Wright, he having a very hard bargain of the Lott & Cope by reason of the infecion, & sayes he would have bin silent in it, had he not mocioned Mr Wright to it. A boy came from him this day, & told mee an imperfect story that he desired Mr Gardner to send him some Cordiall spirits. (Blessed be God) He is yet in good health. Soe rests

Your worship's humble servant

John Walker vic.

Hathersage. September 2 1666."³²

In short, it is clear that all the usual precautions against the spread of the plague in the light of the knowledge and practice of the time were taken, and taken with an energy which contemporary authorities did not always display. After June, indeed, as Creighton pointed out in 1891, the villagers would have found it difficult to leave anyway "owing to the terror which the very name of their village caused in all the country round".³³ The oral tradition tells how the people of Tideswell drove a woman from Orchard Bank in Eyam out of their village at this time and the Sheffield constables' accounts include charges "about keeping people from Fulwood", a local spring, at the time of the Plague of Eyam.³⁴ Heroism does not seem to have been the motivation of the villagers in immolating themselves and such tributes as this, by William Wood, are out of place:

"The immortal victors of Thermopylae and Marathon, who fought so bravely in liberty's holy cause, have no greater, no stronger, claim to the admiration of succeeding generations, than the humble villagers of Eyam in the year 1666. Their magnanimous self-sacrifice, in confining themselves within a proscribed boundary during the terrible pestilence, is unequalled in the annals of the world."³⁵

The sacrifice, if sacrifice it were, was in vain and, as modern medicine

³² Chatsworth MSS. I am indebted to Professor K. H. D. Haley for drawing my attention to this document.

³³ Creighton, I, 684.

³⁴ Daniel, 37-8; Sheffield Constables' Accounts, 1666, Jackson Collection, Sheffield City Library.

³⁵ Wood, 40.

has demonstrated, misguided. Flight would have been the better part of valour in the spring of 1666. As it was, though for different reasons than Creighton believed, "shut up in their narrow valley, the villagers perished helplessly like a stricken flock of sheep".³⁶

What is clear is that the decision to immolate the village demanded the co-operation of the local aristocracy and clergy outside Eyam as well as leadership from within the parish. It is impossible to judge at this distance of time between Mompesson and his nonconformist predecessor, the Rev. Thomas Stanley, as the leading spirit behind the measures of 1666. Stanley had displaced the royalist incumbent in 1644 and held the living until 1662, when the Rev. Shoreland Adams regained the rectorship; Mompesson had come to Eyam as a young man of 27 only in 1664. Despite the successive provisions of the Clarendon Code against nonconforming clergy, Stanley stayed in the neighbourhood. His sympathizer, William Bagshaw, wrote this of him in 1702:

"When he could not serve his people publicly, he was helpful to them in private. Some persons yet alive will testify how helpful he was to his people when the pestilence prevailed in Eyam . . . When some who might have been better employed moved the then noble Earl of Devonshire, Lord Lieutenant, to remove him out of the town, I am told by the creditable that he said, 'It was more reasonable that the whole country should in more than words testify their thankfulness to him, who, together with the care of the town, had taken such care as no one else did, to prevent the infection of the towns adjacent'."³⁷

On the other hand, Mompesson's patron, Sir George Saville, paid this tribute to the rector in a letter to him from London, dated 21 December 1666:

"I am very glad to hear the sickness is leaving you at Eyam, which is not to be attributed to anything more than your care, excepting God Almighty's mercy to a place that hath been so long afflicted: you have been as much a Martyr all this while, as if you had died for your flock, having, besides your hazard, sacrificed the pleasure of your life to your duty, for which you ought to have the reward of an eternal esteem from all good people."³⁸

It seems very likely that the older man helped the young rector in the decision which was made and that praise or blame should be apportioned between them. "No word of detraction," as Creighton put it, "should be spoken of anyone who does manfully what he conceives to be his duty to his neighbours."³⁹

Thomas Stanley died in Eyam in August 1670, and was buried there. By this time, Mompesson had moved to another Saville benefice; he was presented to Eakring in Nottinghamshire in 1669, and subsequently became a prebendary of Southwell. He married a widow, a Mrs. Charles Newby, by whom he had two daughters and two sons; the sons, William and Henry, died in infancy.⁴⁰ Oral tradition would have us believe that Mompesson was dogged

³⁶ Creighton, I, 684.

³⁷ Wood, 108.

³⁸ Borthwick Institute of Historical Research, VII. H 4549.

³⁹ Creighton, I, 687.

⁴⁰ Wood, 110; Eakring parish register.

for some years by superstition about the plague, that "he humoured the apprehensive people by living in a hut in Rufford Park until they were satisfied that he was immune from infection. He was also refused the pulpit of the church and preached beneath an ash tree until the fears of his new parishioners were dispelled".⁴¹ The tree, known as the "Pulpit Ash", is to this day commemorated by a stone erected on the site in 1893 after it had fallen in a gale. A letter from Mompesson to his patron, who became Viscount Halifax in 1668, offers a more convincing explanation of the reason for his preaching in the open air at Eakring, as he had done at Eyam. He writes on 11 May 1672:

"My Lord

I am desired by my parishioners of Eakring to request your charitable assistance towards the rebuilding of their Church, which must be pulled downe to the very foundacion, & the timber is soe miserably ruinous that nothing thereof will serve in its place agayne; to make all good is the desire but above the capacity of the people. If something be not speedily done, all our lyves will be exposed to danger & it's impossible for soe small & poore a parish to create such a structure, & your lordship's charity herein will buy an eternal bond from us all. My Lord Dorchester has given twenty pounds & if we could raise 40 li. more in contribution, I question not but we could complete the worke."⁴²

An inspection of Eakring Church reveals that a major reconstruction occurred in the 1670s and that, when Mompesson died on 7 March 1708/9, a memorial brass was placed in the chancel in his memory.

Oral tradition is a capricious recorder.

⁴¹ Daniel, 52. The story was mentioned in a note to Howitt, *The Desolation of Eyam*, 1827.

⁴² Chatsworth MSS.