



THE GREAT PLAGUE OF LONDON, 1665

TEACHERS' NOTES

We had taught the Year 2 class about Samuel Pepys and the Great Fire of London. Now we moved back a year in time to investigate the Great Plague of London.

The two lessons reported here are an amalgam of the teaching in two different schools – the teaching was more structured and literacy-based in the second school.

Year group/class

Year 2, 29 mixed gender and ability children.

Teaching time

Two lessons, approximately 3 hours in all (including follow-up work not done in the sessions).

Learning objectives

For the children to:

- learn about and understand a past situation and enter into past lives
- understand the sequence of events during the Plague (chronology)
- read and understand challenging texts
- revisit and consolidate their understanding of the diary and instruction genres.

Key question/s

- What was it like to be in London at the time of the Plague?
- What did people do?
- How do we know?

Resources

OHT of a doctor dressed to go out during the Plague (the picture, plus information, are on: www.historyonthenet.com/Stuarts/plague_doctor.htm)

OHT of enlarged flea (there are several in topic books)

OHT of contemporary print showing the course of the plague in pictorial form. See the Channel 4 website: (the copy in Resources is there as a guide to what you are looking for)

www.channel4.com/history/microsites/H/history/plague/findout.html

Copies of the print blown up to A3 size

OR

9 Concept webs, each with a different plague picture at the centre

Caption strips for the print

Copy of the Lord Mayor of London's orders concerning the Plague

Recording frame for people's roles during the Plague

Extracts from Samuel Pepys' diary, June–October 1665

Role labels for the role play

Three sheets, each with a red cross and *Lord have mercy upon us* on it

Writing frame to record learning about the Plague.

The teaching [Lesson 1]

Episode 1

Focus: Introducing the topic; connecting to the present

With the whole class on the carpet, we began with a classic 'What if ...?' question to connect the Plague to the present. I asked the children:

'What if a terrible disease spread through our town, and people started dying? And what if the doctors and scientists didn't know what caused it, and didn't know how to cure it, what would we do?'

'Take them to hospital,' said Kelly.

'Ah, but the hospitals don't know how to make them better. And if they go to hospital, everyone in the hospital catches the disease.'

The children sat nonplussed for a while, contemplating this horrible situation. Then bright spark Thomas said: *'We'll have to lock them up so they can't spread it.'*

'Excellent thinking – and that's just what people did in London in 1665 when the plague struck the city.'

Episode 2

Focus: Storytelling – providing information, a visualisation and a context

Now, in role as a London doctor, I told the story of the Plague from his perspective:

- its symptoms of fever, delirium, swollen armpits and groin (buboes), weakness, sneezing and blindness
- theories about the causes (planets in wrong position, God punishing us for wicked ways)
- how we think it spreads (through the air, by animals like pigs, cats and dogs, through touching people who are infected)
- measures people are taking to protect themselves (shopkeepers insisting on payment into a bowl of vinegar to cleanse the money; killing animals; not letting people out of plague houses; well-off people carrying sweet-smelling posies held to their noses; poor people using cloths soaked in vinegar instead of posies).

At this point I passed round a few vinegar-soaked cloths and bunches of herbs. The children all had a good sniff and agreed that the strong smells of both remedies would make them feel safer from plague-infected air.

We finished with some modelling as a first step in preparation for the class role play. I told the children:

'I've been called to a house in Fish Street to see if the mother has the plague. I don't want to catch it, so I'm going to cover myself up completely – I'm not going to let any of that bad plague air touch my skin. So, I've got some thick boots, a long coat, and this hood with a beak to cover my nose and mouth (an old balaclava with a cardboard cone stapled to it). And, just to make sure, I'll put my hat on top of the hood! Next, my big, thick gloves. Last of all, my stick. Now I'm ready to go out and see my patient.'

Fully dressed in the stifling clothing, I walked among them, telling them to keep their distance. I bent down over Sally, asking her neighbours:

'Is this the girl with a fever? Let me look at her. Hmm ... (lifting her arm) yes, she has buboes in her armpits and she's very hot and feverish. Has she been sneezing?'

The children were saucer-eyed, their imaginations fully engaged.

Episode 3

Focus: Learning from sources, pictorial and written

Back to the present. 'We know nowadays that the plague didn't travel through the air. It was carried by fleas that lived on rats. There were rats everywhere. Sometimes the fleas jumped off the rats and bit people instead, and that's what gave them the plague.' I showed them the OHT of the flea – appreciative shudders all round – and also the OHT of the doctor in his full plague outfit.

His gear impressed the children even more than mine had, particularly his glass eye covers.

Now to look at the story of the Plague through the eyes of contemporary Londoners. We gave out A3 copies of the print, one between three children (27 children present today, nine pictures on the print).

We assigned each trio one picture to examine closely, and a magnifying glass. We gave them 5 minutes to become mini-experts on their picture – to ‘read’ it for information about the Plague, and report back to the whole class.

[In the second class, each set of children were given their picture in the middle of a concept web (see example of one in the resources). They wrote their perceptions along the lines emanating from the picture.]

The groups pored over their pictures, vying to be the most eagle-eyed ‘experts’. Then I put up an OHT of the print, and in turn each trio came up to the projector and told the class what their particular picture depicted, pointing out details (many new to me!).

Episode 4

Focus: Shared reading – the Lord Mayor’s instructions

We told the children that the Lord Mayor of London wrote instructions for the citizens to try to stop the plague from spreading. We’ll read the Mayor’s orders to see what people had to do.

We put the instructions on the OHP, and also distributed paper copies, one per pair of children. We read the page aloud, with the children following on their copies. We discussed the meaning of each order and explained the unfamiliar vocabulary.

Next, the children clarified their understanding of the different roles, filling in the recording frame. This took us to the end of the lesson.

Before my next visit the children cut out the individual pictures from the print, stuck them into their books and glued the appropriate caption beneath each picture.

They also, in the literacy hour, wrote their own plague instructions.

The teaching [Lesson 2]

Episode 1

Focus: Preparing for the role play – Samuel Pepys’ diary

We asked: ‘Do you all remember Samuel Pepys and his diary, and how we read what he wrote about the Great Fire of London?’ They did, of course. We reminded them that the Plague happened the year before the fire, and told them that Samuel Pepys had also recorded the Plague in his diary. In it he wrote what it felt like to be living in London during the months the plague was raging.

We gave out the Pepys diary extracts, one between two, and read them to the class. On a flip chart we drew a table with three headings: *See, Hear, Happen*. We asked the children to text-mark their diary extracts, underlining anything that would fit under one of the headings. We circulated, helping where needed.

After five minutes we pooled ideas, asking each pair for a contribution to the flip chart lists. Two perceptive children noticed that in the last entry Pepys saw sick people in the streets – why weren't they shut up in their houses as they were at the beginning? This provided a perfect prompt for looking at the growing numbers of dead and sick over five months.

We asked the children to close their eyes and imagine they were walking down a London street. Could they see and hear the things Pepys described? His account took us nicely into the role play.

Episode 2

Focus: Role-playing the plague

We now looked again at the role sheets the children had filled in in the first lesson. We were going to pretend we were in Pepys' London, taking roles as specified in the Mayor's orders.

We assigned roles, asking for volunteers for each one. The role of doctor attracted five eager applicants – we chose Larry and the other four got roles as corpse-bearers as compensation.

We gave each child a sticker to wear with the name of her/his role printed on it: *Watcher, Hunter, Examiner, Searcher, Doctor, Corpse Bearer, Bellman, Shopkeeper, Father, Mother, Child* (at least three families are needed, for all to have roles). Next we collected the props: the school bell, a trolley for a body cart, PE benches for beds, a desk for a shop counter, a bowl of vinegar, copper coins for shopping, bottles for plague water.

Now we moved into the hall for the role play – the children very excited.

Along one wall we posted the Mayor's plague orders (the children's versions).

Along another we stuck three LORD HAVE MERCY UPON US red crosses, one per house.

The families occupied their 'houses' and started acting out the finding of buboes.

The doctor, searchers and examiner came in and examined sick and dead people, prodding the patients and questioning their families.

The shopkeeper set up his counter with large bowl of vinegar. Watchers and other citizens came to buy food and plague-water.

Watchers positioned themselves outside affected houses, passing in food through the windows.

The hunters ran around attacking imaginary dogs and cats.

The corpse-bearers lifted bodies onto the trolley and wheeled them out for burial.

The bellman rang the bell, bawling '*Bring out your dead!*'

The children loved every minute, and we had to be *very* firm when it was time to stop.

Episode 3

Focus: Resolution work – recording the learning.

We sat the class down and talked to them quietly for a few minutes, drawing together what we know, how we know it and discussing how people must have felt.

The next day the children used the writing frame to record what they had learned about the Plague.

Learning outcomes

The children:

- learnt about and understood a past situation and entered into past lives through examining sources and through role play
- understood the sequence of events during the Plague
- read and understood challenging texts (including pictorial texts)
- revisited and consolidated their understanding of the diary and instruction genres.

Nuffield Primary History project

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