

**Written by Chris Trueman BA(Hons), MA - a historian who
writes for the History Learning Website**

1665 had experienced a very hot summer. London's population had continued to grow and many lived in squalor and poverty. The only way people had to get rid of rubbish was to throw it out into the streets. This would include normal household waste as well as human waste. As a result, London was filthy. But this was a perfect breeding place for rats. A popular belief during the plague was that the disease was caused by dogs and cats. This was not so. The plague was caused by disease-carrying fleas carried on the bodies of rats. A pair of rats in the perfect environment could breed many off-spring. The filth found in the streets of London provided the perfect environment for rats.

Once the disease took a hold it spread with frightening speed. Those who could, the wealthy, left London for the comparative safety of the countryside. No such option existed for those who lived in the slums. In fact, militiamen were paid by the city's council to guard the parish boundaries of the area they lived in and to let no one out unless they had a certificate to leave from their local parish leader. Very few of these certificates were issued.

The poor were very badly hit by the plague. The authorities in London decided on drastic action to ensure that the plague did not spread.

Any family that had one member infected by the plague was locked in their home for forty days and nights. A red cross was painted on the door to warn others of the plight of those in the house. No one was allowed in except 'nurses'.