

Remembering Shakespeare - and to wash our hands: April 2020

This month, April 2020, sees the 404th anniversary of Shakespeare's death: probably the 456th anniversary of his birth. Plague and pestilence not only feature in his plays but were part of the background of his life. As an infant he lived through a huge outbreak of the plague in Stratford-upon-Avon and when at the height of his writing career the London theatres were shut for a total of 78 months in the decade from 1603 and 1613 – some 60% of the time. His landlady in London, Marie Mountjoy, fell victim to the plague in 1606.

It is interesting to reflect on the official response to plague in his time, in particular the Orders issued by King James on 30th July 1603: Some aspects resonate quite closely with our experience during the coronavirus pandemic in 2020, other aspects are a little different.

Responsibility in 1603 fell principally upon the Justices, Physicians, Ministers and Churchwardens and various individuals they were charged to appoint to different roles.

The response in 1603 had an economic aspect, but not in terms of business support, rather in terms of poor relief. In 1603 there was no voluntary sector to call upon, no food banks, so the response was through official channels – Justices were to provide relief for the poor and all those who were infected by a collection - charging the 'special persons of wealth' in their area and if need be seeking help from adjoining areas. Provision of victuals (corn, bread or other meate), fire and medicine were all specifically to be provided for the poor. Where clothing or bedding was to be destroyed because of the infection then the poor were to be allowed relief in recompense of that loss. Any wealthy who were being isolated were to be supplied but at their own charge.

Persons were to be appointed to view the bodies of all that died and certify the cause of death. This effectively extended the role of coroner to cover all deaths during the period of the plague.

1603 saw its own form of social distancing: Houses where any were sick with the plague or had died of it were to be shut up for six weeks after the sickness: in a town neighbours would be similarly isolated. In rural areas where it was necessary for folk to tend cattle or otherwise work then individuals were to maintain isolation from others and to wear a mark or carry a white rod. Watchmen were there to ensure the rules were observed. Any Inn or Alehouse where infection was present had to take down its sign and replace it with a mark denoting the presence of the sickness.

Those providing and delivering relief or undertaking watch duties were also not to associate publicly and were similarly to wear a mark, carry a white stick, so that others might avoid them.

Remedies were to be prescribed by Physicians: information about remedies was to be provided in every town by public notice. In reality there were no effective remedies available in 1603 and for the present our NHS provides care and treatment under significant pressure but without curative medicine or vaccine availability.

In 2020 we have heard concerns raised about reporting of numbers of deaths and their causes, about hospital only figures being less than a full picture: In 1603 there were to be weekly returns to the Justices: of the numbers infected, those that did not die and those that did, and probable causes of death, returns to be made by Ministers, Curates and Churchwardens. The Justices were to review this reports every third week and make their report to the Privy Council in respect of the infection and of the relief provided. Bearing in mind the means of communication then and now it is arguable that they set a higher standard of reporting than is currently evident.

Clergy thus had a wider role in 1603 but the leading of funerals remains a constant and in 2020 has been seriously distressing for families who have had to have very simple ceremonies and look to hold memorial services later in the year: In 1603 Curates present at burials, which were to be at dusk (after sunset but whilst still light), were told that they must keep distant from the corpse and those bringing the corpse to the grave.

And just as we have been warned to keep to the rules about social distancing, so in 1603 anyone publishing opinion contrary to keeping distance from the infected was to be punished – clergy by being forbidden to preach, laity by threat of imprisonment.

Shakespeare's plays have many references to plague, pestilence, and social distancing: In *Romeo and Juliet* the friar who is tasked with telling Romeo that Juliet is feigning death is frustrated in his mission for "The searchers of the town, Suspecting that we both were in a house Where the infectious pestilence did reign, Sealed up the doors and would not let us forth".

Perhaps the words of Daniel Pollack-Pelzner, Professor of English at Linfield College in the USA, writing in 'The Atlantic' about the shutdown of Broadway are as relevant as any: "I'd been planning to take my students at Linfield College, ... to a new adaptation of *Measure for Measure* at a Theater in Oregon this weekend. Instead, we're following the theater's lead: "We're continuing to wash our hands (à la *Lady Macbeth*) as frequently as we can."