

Comprehension 9

The 'Great Plague of London', often known as the 'Black Death', occurred between 1665 and 1666. During this period approximately 100,000 Londoners were infected and killed by an epidemic of a disease called the Bubonic Plague. 15% of the population of London died. Can you imagine what it would be like if more than one in ten of your friends were to die of the same illness? This is an interview with a boy called Harry Turner, a fifteen-year-old boy who lived in London in 1665:

'I was born in London in 1650 to a family of shoemakers. We were a big family of seven brothers and sisters and I was the oldest. My favourite sibling was my youngest sister, Elsie. She was ten years younger than me and was the kindest, most beautiful little girl in the world. She was always looking after all of us and making up stories to tell us in the evenings. We were a happy family. We always had enough to eat and every week father gave us a treat of a penny to spend on anything that we wanted!

When the Black Death came to London everything changed. Many people left London and I was no longer allowed to play with my friends in the street because of the danger of infection. We had to stay inside all day long while father went out to work. Life was very boring but at least we were all healthy. That is until one day when my father came back from his shop and fainted. He landed on the stone floor with a thump and we all screamed. I carried him upstairs to his bed and a fever began to take hold of him. He complained of cramp in his muscles, he vomited blood and his feet turned black. He had caught the plague and there was no medicine that could cure him. Three days later he died. We were quarantined in our house by the authorities, who painted a red cross on our door. None of us were allowed to leave and no one was allowed to visit. The sickness spread to four of my other brothers and sisters. All of them died, including little Elsie.

Many people say that I was lucky to survive, but I am not so sure. I often feel very lonely and cry about the terrible things that happened. I try to hope for the future but it is difficult without the ones that you love.'

Answer the following questions in complete sentences.

1. Which words in the passage mean the following:

happened _____(Paragraph 1)

infection _____(Paragraph 1)

sickness _____(Paragraph 1)

Brothers and sisters _____(Paragraph 2)

illness _____(Paragraph 3)

2. Would you say that the plague of 1665-6 was serious? What evidence is there in the text to support this?

3. Who is the 'We' that is referred to in paragraph 2?

4. Why was Elsie Harry's favourite sister?

5. Why do you think that so many people chose to leave London in 1656?

6. What are the symptoms of the plague?

7. Why were the family quarantined?

8. Why was Harry not sure that he was lucky to survive?
