

The heroes of Eyam

by Marc Alexander

'How sweet the air smells.'

So said Catherine Mompesson as she walked in the peaceful village churchyard. Simple words, yet they filled her husband with dismay. It was a curious symptom of the plague that at its onset victims had the sensation of a pleasant scent in the nostrils. Within a matter of days William Mompesson, the young rector of the Derbyshire village of Eyam, conducted his wife's funeral service. Today flowers are still laid on her tomb.

The story goes back to one August day in 1665 when George Viccars, the village tailor, was delighted by the arrival of a special bolt of material which he had ordered from London to make a wedding dress. But the bride never received her dress because within six days the tailor was dead, the first victim of the contagion that had arrived in the cloth from the capital where the Great Plague was to claim one in five of its citizens. Towards the end of the following month six of Viccars' neighbours had exhibited the feared plague mark and died.

'Greater love has no-one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.'
John 15:13

As the plague had not appeared anywhere else in Derbyshire some superstitious folk feared that the visitation was the result of divine displeasure. It was recalled how some youths had allowed cows to wander in the church, fouling the house of God. Others claimed to have heard the howling of the legendary Gabriel hounds while white crickets appeared on cottage hearths, both occurrences being portents of calamity. Meanwhile the death rate continued to mount. In October four members of a single family died, but this was merely a foretaste of what was to come. By the end of April the following year the Reverend Mompesson had recorded seventy-three deaths, and the terrified inhabitants of Eyam prepared to abandon their stricken village.

At this point the young rector called a village meeting. In the eyes of the parishioners he was still regarded as a newcomer, having moved from Scalby in Yorkshire in 1664 with his wife Catherine. But now Thomas Stanley, a previous incumbent, supported him when he declared that in the whole of the country it was only Eyam that had the plague. Therefore if anyone was to leave the village he or she might carry the infection to neighbouring towns and cause thousands to perish. If the outside world was to be spared an epidemic it was their Christian duty to remain in the village, barricade its approaches and face the future together.

Amazingly his words had a greater effect on his listeners than the fear of contamina-



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tion. All agreed to stay in voluntary isolation until the pestilence should come to an end.

Although in those days there was little medical knowledge, it was recognised that in some way the pestilence passed from person to person and it was agreed that to prevent its spread the church should remain locked. In order to continue Sunday worship Mompesson chose a natural amphitheatre outside the village known as Cucklett Delph. Here family groups found places on the grassy slopes at safe distances from each other while the rector conducted a service and preached from a rock he chose as a natural pulpit.

Arrangements were made for food to be delivered to Eyam. The Earl of Devonshire had supplies taken to the Boundary Stone at the southern end of the village and, when his carters were safely clear, the villagers would come out and collect it. Other provisions were deposited at a well, now known as Mompesson's Well, in which coins were left as payment in the belief that running water would cleanse them of contamination. Vinegar was also used, being poured into holes drilled in a stone – still to be seen – so that money placed in them was disinfected.

While not a single plague death occurred outside Eyam, the disease continued to decimate the village. Weeds flourished in the streets where un milked cows wandered, and families endeavoured to bury their dead in fields close to their homes. Later some headstones were erected at these spots and they remain today.

One incident illustrates the horror of those days. On 3 August 1666 a Mrs Hancock was seen to carry one of her children out of her cottage and dig the child's grave close by. The next day she brought out another dead child until by the tenth of the month she had buried six of her children and her husband. Despite such episodes villagers remained loyal to their promise not to leave.

During this time the rector's wife, Catherine Mompesson, worked as hard as he did, nursing the sick and comforting the dying. One evening after an exhausting day she walked with him in the deserted churchyard and made that fatal remark on the sweetness of the air.

After fourteen months the plague ended and, as life slowly returned to Eyam where 260 people had died, folk from other parts came to gaze at the desolate village with awestruck eyes and gratitude in their hearts.

The self-sacrifice of those long-ago inhabitants of Eyam, still known as the 'plague village', is commemorated annually on the last Sunday in August. On this day – Plague Sunday – the bells of the parish church peal out bravely and the first part of the commemorative service begins in the church at 2.30 in the afternoon. After this a procession forms behind a band and the local choir and proceeds through Eyam. It then follows a country track to Cucklett Delph where the congregation of villagers and visitors find places on the slopes just as Eyam folk did at the height of the plague. During the service that follows, the special Plague Hymn is sung and for a while the past and present merge as the group relives one of England's most heartening episodes.

