

Regency Manor

Sickness, Treatment & Death

Illnesses and Disease

Many of these diseases are now known by other names or have been eradicated throughout the past couple of centuries.



Ague - Another term for Malaria. Whilst we think of this as a tropical disease, in actual fact, malaria thrived up until the middle of 19th century in England and it was caused much by the same factors as the modern-day version does (ie, bad sewage/drainage, close proximity to the very dirty Thames river, etc).

Apoplexy - A stroke, with all the trimmings as a regular modern-day stroke victim may endure.

Cholera - Again, like the modern-day version of this disease that pops up everywhere there is open sewage drains and contaminated water supply. The disease is caused by a bacillus that lives in the intestine and is excreted in human waste. As all of the drainage ran into Thames river, the same river that was London's supply of drinking water, understandably there were several epidemics that hit London. Symptoms included nausea, dizziness, vomiting, diarrhea and cramps, and a horrible burning sensation in the stomach with an overwhelming feeling of thirst - followed by death. Usually deaths occurred within 24 hours of the first symptoms appearing.

Consumption - A tuberculosis of the lungs, spread through the air, or by spitting or by broken skin. It could incubate for long periods of time and then erupt into a wasting, weak, fatigue. The illness killed 60,000 people in Britain between 1838-43 alone and wiped out more of the population than smallpox, measles, typhus, whooping cough and scarlet fever combined.

Croup - This disease mainly hit children and lead to trouble breathing and hoarseness when speaking. In severe cases there could be convulsions or death. In such severe cases where a patient might recover, he or she may be rendered permanently hoarse.

Diphtheria - Not diagnose properly until 1820, it was often confused with the croup and again, affected children the worst, inflaming the mucous membranes to the point where breathing became especially difficult. Transmitted by sneezing and coughing.

Dropsy - A symptom of something wrong and not a disease in itself though generally thought of as swelling in some part of the body due to poor circulation, hardening of the arteries or kidney problems.

Dyspepsia - Indigestion.

Gout - A disease that's often hereditary which is basically a swelling of the joints, especially in the foot caused by a build-up of uric acid. This often affected the older upper-class due to the obscene amount of meat they would consume. Considerably painful.

Palsy - Paralysis, much like the modern-day kind.

Pleurisy - An inflammation of the pleura, which are two sacs in the chest. Dry pleurisy just caused coughing whereas the other kind could often be deadly and painful. If chronic, the sufferer could end up hunched over with a spinal curvature caused by the compression of the lungs or other internal organs.

Quinsy - The old word for tonsillitis.

Scarlet fever - Quite an infamous fever that still exists in modern times. It is simply an extreme fever that raises the temperature of the blood so that the sufferer appears quite flushed. Often caused brain damage and subsequent death as the sufferer sometimes literally boiled in his or her own skin.

Typhoid fever - Often confused with typhus due to similar symptoms. Again, caused by contaminated food and drinking water. Extremely contagious passed on by flies or a human carrier. The disease killed one in four if left untreated and could cause delirium and a rash like that caused by typhus.

Typhus - A disease spread by body lice and consequently developed in dirty conditions. The poor man's disease. Symptoms included delirium, headaches, a rash and high fever which usually cleared up unless, after two weeks, it proved fatal.

Yellow fever - A disease of tropical climes that is spread by mosquitoes and generally occurred in



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confined areas such as a port city, ship or jail. The name was derived from the yellow jaundice that accompanied severe cases. We now know this was caused by kidney and liver failure and then death. Mild cases of this can be likened to a severe flu. The disease is often called "yellow Jack" by shippies because of the yellow flag that was required to be flown by ships with infected patients aboard.



"Send for the doctor!"

There were generally three sorts of medical people available when people fell ill.

Physicians - For the rich, they were able to call on the small handful of men known as the physicians - the elite doctors. They were called Physicians because they only administered drugs or "physic" (visual examinations). They did not deal with the external injuries or perform surgery (this was left to the surgeons who were in the next tier down in the status scale). They took detailed histories of the patients and then prescribed medications which were to be filled by the apothecary. Physicians were yet another form of nobility and were allowed to present their wives at court (something a surgeon could not do) and as with the regular ton, the very idea of manual labour was abhorrent and frowned upon. Physicians were extremely slow to take up use of the stethoscope - because to do so would mean you were actually doing something manually rather than using your intellect.

Surgeons - The ones who did all the manual work. Bandaging, opening people up on the operating table, dealing with diseases of the skin, V.D - basically anything that a physician would not treat or leave a prescription for. From a social point of view, this work was considered manual labour as you did, after all, have to use your hands.

The major conundrum with physicians and surgeons is that, firstly, the physician was addressed as "Dr." whilst the surgeon made do with "Mr.", but also, there was not nearly as much training to be surgeons and you certainly did not need a licence to practice as one did with being a physician. It wasn't until the end of the century when the barriers between the two started to blur and even the physicians had to learn to get their hands dirty - thus the birth of the modern-day GP.

Apothecary - The poor man's doctor. The lowest in social status. he was originally only supposed to fill prescriptions made out by the physicians, but because the poorer people (such as servants, for instance) could not afford the fees set by the physicians (or there were no physicians to be had anyway), the apothecary began giving advice. Like surgeons, he learned his trade by apprenticeship though he could not charge for his advice, only the drugs he sold. And because he was selling things and hence, "in trade", he was hopelessly lacking in social stance.



Death and Dying

As you may be familiar from seeing various funerals in period films or even documentary reenactments, the colour for funerals was black - unless it was a child or an unmarried girl in which case the mourning colour was white.

The departed were always to be mourned for specific periods of time, which in practice, mostly affected what the surviving members of the family wore and whether they could have fun or not. Naturally men had it very easy, only having to wear black armbands. Women, on the otherhand, were required to dress completely in black for at least a year. This meant an all-black wardrobe ("widow's weeds") that were often made of a material called bombazine which did not gleam in the light. Ladies were also not permitted to wear jewellery save that made of jet which is a kind of hard coal. A widow is expected to mourn her husband for two years, however she could modify her clothing to "half-mourning" after a while to a black pin-stripe pattern.

Parents and children were mourned a year; brothers, sisters and grandparents for six months; aunt's and uncles for three months; first cousins for six weeks.

Often, women did not emerge from their mourning clothes but lived the rest of their lives in sombre black.

Funerals were a very sombre occasion but also had it's own fanfair, for if you were rich, you were taken to your grave in a horse-drawn carriage (all black, of course) and you got the "death nell" which was the ringing of a church bell to announce your finally being laid to rest to the rest of the parish. If you were poor, well, you were buried with what could be afforded at the time - generally an unmarked grave with a brief service spoken over your body by an impatient priest if you were poor, though if you could afford it, you could have a wooden cross to stake out your location.

Suicides were considered a definite evil in the early 1800s with suicide cases actually being required to be buried at cross-roads with a stake through their hearts. This was to ensure that the evilness that surrounded their souls was somehow dispersed evenly in four directions and the stake prevented the ghost of the person from rising (possibly where the "vampire staking" came into being in Bram Stoker's "Dracula"). After 1832, suicides could be buried in a church graveyard, but could only be buried at night, and no service was allowed to be spoken over the body. Until 1870, a suicide's property was forfeit to the Crown coffers.