

# The plague stone that kept the merchants in business when the Black Death ravaged a community

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The Butter Stone, on the road between Cotherstone and Bowes, where goods were exchanged in times of plague. Picture: Hugh Mortimer

**FOUR** hundred years ago, epidemics regularly raged across the country, ravaging even the remotest corners, but in those darkest of days, people, just as today, still had to somehow make a living, and up on the Teesdale moors there is a stone that tells how they traded.

Last week, we told how the Bubonic Plague rolled round and round in the first half of the 17th Century. Most notably, it visited Hurworth in 1645 where up to 1,500 bodies are said to be buried in plague pits beneath the village green.

Wendy Acres came across a similar outbreak in 1636 at Winston, between Gainford and Barnard Castle, when she was researching her family tree. She noted that the vicar wrote in the parish registers that on July 16, 1636, “the plague began” and that he also wrote on August 25, “this was the last that dyed of the plague”.



Winston on an Edwardian postcard. The Teesdale village was badly hit by the Black Death in 1336. What, incidentally, was “Cleveland 1/3” that the sign in the centre of the picture is promoting?

Wendy found that five of the 17 members the Farrow family of her ancestors died in the course of 17 days that summer, so the death toll in the village must have been pretty high.

So high that it, understandably, scared the rest of the dale, and at Barnard Castle the Magdalene fair was “cried down” – or called off. There were more plague deaths in Barney, as well as at villages like Whorlton and Stainton – it may even be this plague that caused the village of Barforth, on the opposite bank of the Tees to Gainford, to be abandoned completely.

People didn’t understand how the Black Death, or Bubonic Plague, was transmitted – by rats’ fleas – but they knew that it began with a red ring of roses, or buboes, breaking out on the skin. These turned black as a horrible fever set in, accompanied by atishoos, and within six days everyone had fallen down.





The Butter Stone near Cotherstone. Picture: Hugh Mortimer

But they understood the potential of human-to-human transmission, and they knew that fetid town air was unhealthy compared to the cold but clean embrace of the moors.

So, with the market cancelled, a temporary market was held up on Cotherstone moor around what is marked on the Ordnance Survey map as “the Butter Stone”.

It is beside the road that connects Cotherstone with Bowes, and although it only just pokes its head above the straw-coloured moorland sedge that surrounds it, it is notably the only stone in the area.

Most importantly, it has a dish-shaped feature on its top. On market days, the dish would be filled with a mix of water and vinegar.

A butter maker, say, would approach the stone, leave their goods on top of it, and then back off. A butter purchaser from another town or village would then approach, collect the goods and leave their coins in the disinfectant dish. Once the purchaser had departed, the manufacturer would re-approach and claim the payment.

We are finding similar solutions today to ensure we can buy essentials, although it is unlikely that in years to come the locations of any of the transparent virus shields currently hung in front of supermarket check-out will be marked on a map.