

Eyam

Eyam is an English village and civil parish in the Derbyshire Dales district that lies within the Peak District National Park. The population of the civil parish at the 2001 Census was 926 increasing to 969 at the 2011 Census. The village is noted for an outbreak of bubonic plague which occurred there in 1665, in which the villagers chose to isolate themselves rather than let the infection spread. The present village was founded and named by Anglo-Saxons, although lead had been mined in the area by the Romans. Formerly industrial, its economy now relies on the tourist trade and it is promoted as 'the plague village'.

History

Lead mining seems to have had a continuous history in the Eyam district since at least the Roman era and there is evidence of habitation from earlier. Stone circles and earth barrows on the moors above the present village have largely been destroyed, although some remain and more are recorded. The most notable site is the Wet Withens stone circle on Eyam Moor. Coins bearing the names of many emperors provide evidence of Roman lead-mining locally. However, the village's name derives from Old English and is first recorded in the Domesday Book as Aium. It is a dative form of the noun *ēg* (an island) and probably refers to a patch of cultivable land amidst the moors, or else to the settlement's situation between two brooks.

The Anglo-Saxon cross

In the churchyard is an Anglo-Saxon cross in Mercian style dated to the 8th century, moved there from its original location beside a moorland cart track. Grade I listed and a Scheduled Ancient Monument, it is covered in complex carvings and is almost complete, but for a missing section of the shaft.

The present parish church **of St. Lawrence** dates from the 14th century, but evidence of an earlier church there can be found in the Saxon font, a Norman window at the west end of the north aisle, and Norman pillars that are thought to rest on Saxon foundations. There have been alterations since the Middle Ages, including a large sun dial dated 1775 mounted on a wall outside. Some of the Rectors at the church have had contentious histories, none less so than the fanatically Royalist Sherland Adams who, it was accused, "gave tythe of lead ore to the King against the Parliament", and as a consequence was removed from the living and imprisoned.

The lead mining tithe was due to the rectors by ancient custom. They received one penny for every 'dish' of ore and twopence farthing for every load of hillock-stuff. Owing to the working of a newly discovered rich vein during the 18th century, the Eyam living was a valuable one. Mining continued into the 19th century, after which better sources were discovered and a change-over was made to the working and treatment of fluorspar as a slagging agent in smelting. The last to close was the Ladywash Mine, which was operative between 1948–79. Within a 3 miles radius of the village there are 439 known mines, (some running beneath the village itself), that are drained by 49 drainage levels ('soughs').

According to the 1841 Census for Eyam, there were 954 inhabitants living in the parish, chiefly employed in agriculture, lead mining, and cotton and silk weaving. By the 1881 Census, most men either worked as lead miners or in the manufacture of boots and shoes, a trade that only ended in the 1960s. The transition from industrial village to tourist based economy is underlined by Roger Ridgeway's statement that, at the beginning of the 20th century, "a hundred horses and carts would have been seen taking fluorspar to Grindleford and Hassop stations. Today, up to a dozen coach loads of visiting children arrive each day in the village."

1665 plague outbreak

The history of the plague in the village began in 1665 when a flea-infested bundle of cloth arrived from London for the local tailor. Within a week his assistant George Vicars was dead and more began dying in the household soon after.] As the disease spread, the villagers turned for leadership to their rector, the Reverend William Mompesson, and the Puritan Minister Thomas Stanley. These introduced a number of precautions to slow the spread of the illness from May 1666. They included the arrangement that families were to bury their own dead and relocation of church services to the natural amphitheatre of Cucklett Delph, allowing villagers to separate themselves and so reducing the risk of infection. Perhaps the best-known decision was to quarantine the entire village to prevent further spread of the disease.

The plague ran its course over 14 months and one account states that it killed at least 260 villagers, with only 83 surviving out of a population of 350.[14] This figure has been challenged on a number of occasions with alternative figures of 430 survivors from a population of around 800 being given.[14] The church in Eyam has a record of 273 individuals who were victims of the plague. Survival among those affected appeared random, as many who remained alive had had close contact with those who died but never caught the disease. For example, Elizabeth Hancock was uninfected despite burying six children and her husband in eight days (the graves are known as the Riley graves after the farm where they lived). The unofficial village gravedigger, Marshall Howe, also survived despite handling many infected bodies.[14]

Plague Sunday has been celebrated in the village since the plague's bicentenary in 1866 and now takes place in Cucklett Delph on the last Sunday in August. Originally it was held in mid-August but now coincides with the much older Wakes Week and the well dressing ceremonies.

Places of interest

The Boundary Stone

Today Eyam has various plague-related places of interest. One is the Coolstone in which money, usually soaked in vinegar, which was believed to kill the infection, was placed in exchange for food and medicine. It is just one of several 'plague stones' that served to make the boundary that should not be crossed by either inhabitant or outsider. Another site is the isolated enclosure of the Riley graves mentioned above, which is now under the guardianship of the National Trust.

A reminder of the village's industrial past remains in the name of its only pub, the Miner's Arms. Built in 1630, before the plague, it was originally called The Kings Arms. Opposite the church is the Mechanics' Institute, originally established in 1824, although the present building with its handsome pillared portico dates from 1859 and was enlarged in 1894. At one time it held a library paid for by subscription, which then contained 766 volumes. The premises now double as the village club. Up the main street is the Jacobean-styled Eyam Hall, built just after the plague. It was leased and managed by the National Trust for five years until December 2017 but is now run by the owners (the Wright Family). The green opposite has an ancient set of village stocks reputedly used to punish the locals for minor crimes.

Catherine Mompesson's tabletop grave is in the churchyard and has a wreath laid on it every Plague Sunday. This is in remembrance of her constancy in staying by her husband, rather than moving away with the rest of her family, and dying in the very last days of the plague. The church's burial register also records "Anna the traveller, who according to her own account, was 136 years of age" and was interred on 30 December 1663. A more recent arrival there is the cricketer Harry Bagshaw, who played for Derbyshire and then acted as a respected umpire after retiring. At the apex of his headstone is a hand with a finger pointing upwards. Underneath the lettering a set of stumps is carved, with the bails flying off and a bat which has just hit the wicket.

Respect for its heritage has not always been a priority in Eyam. In his *Peak Scenery* (1824), Ebenezer Rhodes charges that by the start of the 19th century many former gravestones of plague victims had been pulled up to floor houses and barns and that ploughing was allowed to encroach on the Riley Graves (pp. 34–5); that the lime trees planted on either side of Mrs Mompesson's grave had been cut down for timber; that the missing piece from the shaft of the Saxon Cross had been broken up for domestic use (p. 44); and that in general the profit of the living was put before respect for the dead

Cultural representations

Paintings

Eyam Museum was opened in 1994 and, besides its focus on the plague, includes exhibits on the village's local history in general. Among the art exhibits there are painted copies from different eras of a print (taken from a drawing by Francis Chantrey) in Ebenezer Rhodes' *Peak Scenery* (1818). These depict the sweep of the road by the 'plague cottages' where the first victims died, with the church tower beyond. The local amateur John Platt painted in naive style and is represented by depictions of the Riley Graves (1871) and the old windmill (1874).

Since the area is scenically beautiful, it has attracted many artists and the village appeared in the work of Sheffield artist George Cunningham (1924–1996),^[24] while the specialist in interiors from the same city, Tim Rose, has painted several watercolours inside Eyam Hall.^[25] Other watercolourists who have painted landscape views include George Hammond Steel (1900–1960)^[26] and Freida Marrion Scott (d.2012). Eyam also has a resident artist in Hazel Money, who specialises in small scale acrylic paintings and lino prints of the village and surrounding area.

The most distinctive of the Sheffield artists to paint Eyam was Harry Epworth Allen, since he subordinated the picturesque so as to interpret his subject as a living community within a worked landscape. His "Road above Eyam" (1936), now in the Laing Art Gallery, shows a road travelled by working people above the village. His "Burning Limestone" in Newport Museum and Art Gallery acknowledges the two centuries and more of industrialisation by which the local inhabitants earned their living among harsh conditions. Anna Seward, a pioneer of Romanticism, could not hide from herself the fact that the wild natural rocks she admired were daily being blasted for utilitarian purposes and the "perpetual consumption of the ever burning lime kilns", while the view was hidden behind the smoke from the smelting works. She takes up the subject again as she explores her memory of the scene in a poem addressed to the future mill-owner William Newton:

Her faithful traces to my sight restore
The long, long tracts of Tideswell's naked Moor;
Stretch'd on vast hills, that far and near prevail,
Bleak, stony, bare, monotonous, and pale.
Wide o'er the waste, in noon-tide's sultry rays,
The frequent lime-kiln darts her umber'd blaze;
Her suffocating smoke incessant breathes,
And shrouds the sun in black convolving wreathes;
And here, with pallid ashes heap'd around,
Oft sinks the mine, and blots the dreary ground.

In vain warm Spring demands her robe of green,
No sheltering hedge-rows vivify the scene;
But from the Moor the rude stone walls disjoin,
With angle sharp, and long unvaried line,
The cheerless field, – where slowly-wandering feed
The lonely cow, and melancholy steed.

The ruthless realism of inhabitant and observer conjoined here is expressed not only by the 18th century poet and the 20th century painter, but by the village of Eyam in its struggle for survival.

Literature

The village green and Church Street

"The village of Eyam," its historian begins his account, "has been long characterized throughout the Peak of Derbyshire, as the birthplace of genius – the seat of the Muses – the Athens of the Peak". During the 18th century the place was notable for having no less than four poets associated with it. Reverend Peter Cunningham, curate there between 1775 – 1790, published two sermons during that time as well as several poems of a political nature. In addition, William Woods' account speaks of "numberless stones in the burial place that contain the offerings of his muse".

The Rector for whom Cunningham deputed much of the time, Thomas Seward, published infrequently, but at least one poem written during his tenure at Eyam deals with personal matters. His "Ode on a Lady's Illness after the Death of her Child", dated 14 April 1748, concerns the death in infancy of his daughter Jenny. Seward also encouraged one of his surviving daughters, Anna Seward, to write poetry, but only after she moved with her father to Lichfield. Following a visit to her birthplace in 1788, she wrote a poem about it filled with nostalgia for the past. She celebrated this lost domain of happiness once more in "Epistle to Mr. Newton, the Derbyshire Minstrel, on receiving his description in verse of an autumnal scene near Eyam, September 1791". No copy of the poem by William Newton now exists. The author was a labouring class protégé from nearby, originally discovered by Cunningham and introduced to Miss Seward in 1783.

The poet Richard Furness belongs to the early 19th century and was known as 'the Poet of Eyam' after his birthplace, but the bulk of his poetry too was written after he had left the district. Among the several references to the village there are his "Lines written in sight of the rectory", which praises both Anna Seward and her father. William Wood, the author of *The History and Antiquities of Eyam* was a village resident. At the head of his first chapter there is an excerpt from a poem that links the place with the story of the plague. Simply initialled W. W., the inference to be drawn is that it had earlier appeared in Wood's collection, *The genius of the Peak and other poems* (1837).

Later the novelist Robert Murray Gilchrist came to live in the area. The village of Milton that figures in some of his fiction is in fact based upon Eyam. His *The Peakland Faggot* (1897) consists of short stories, each focusing on a particular character in the village. This was followed by two other series, *Nicholas and Mary* and *Other Milton Folk* (1899) and *Natives of Milton* (1902). Eyam was also featured under its own name in Joseph Hatton's novel, *The Dagger and the Cross* (1897). Set in the former Bradshaw Hall in the year before the plague arrives, it includes local characters who had key roles during the spread of the disease, such as George Vicars and William and Catherine Mompesson.