

Divine Wrath - the Black Death haunts the land

100 years after Prebendary Henry de Bracton, we meet Robert de Luffenham, Bracton's fourth successor. In 1338, he became Prebendary of Whitchurch. We know this because he sent apologies and a proxy to the Wells *General Chapter* that year. Like Bracton, he was a "pluralist" – he had more than one job or rather benefice. His preferred residence, however, was Salisbury, where he was Archdeacon.

Maybe he came to Binegar, who knows? His relevance is that he died in 1348, the year the Black Death swept through England.

On 17 August, as the great pestilence approached, our Bishop Ralph, fled to the safety of his Wiveliscombe manor. He left instructions that each parish should hold Friday processions and Stations-of-the-Cross. He promised indulgences to all who tried to avert the *Divine Wrath* by prayer and charity.

Things, however, got worse and the Black Death decimated his clergy. In January 1349, he wrote to his parishes (ladies may prefer to omit reading the final line):



The Dance of Death, Michael Wolgemut, 1434-1519

"The contagious pestilence of the present day, which is spreading far and wide, has left many parish churches without parson or priest to care for the parishioners. Since no priests can be found who are willing . . . to take pastoral care of these aforesaid places, nor to visit the sick and administer to them the sacraments of the church, we understand that many people are dying without the sacrament of penance. [Therefore] . . . persuade all men, in particular those who are now sick or should feel sick in the future, that, if they are on the point of death and cannot secure the services of a priest, then they should make confession to each other . . . or if no man is present, then even to a woman."

Sadly, it seems our priest, Rector John de Carlos, lost his life and our parish lost its priest for the rest of the century. Luffenham, on the other hand, may have regretted choosing to live in Salisbury over Whitchurch. We hill dwellers escaped the worst and left food and drink for citizens of Wells on the Slab, West Horrington, at the city's 3-mile quarantine limit.

And of Bishop Ralph's new rules? We can only wonder what blackmail befell those who confessed their sins to their neighbours only then to survive!