

## PLAGUE LOVERS

Inspired by a recent visit to Eyam in Derbyshire, also known as the plague village, I found myself being drawn to the true story of two young lovers. Rowland Torre was the son of a flour miller and lived in Stoney Middleton. He was betrothed to Emmott Sydall, one of seven children who lived in the neighbouring village of Eyam.

My imagination took me into their lives and in particular to Rowland and the struggles and sacrifices endured during those dark days of 1665 and 1666.

***Rowland was now no longer young but he would never forget the love of his life who was taken so tragically so very many years ago. He had lived a solitary life since then and often wondered how differently things could have turned out. His beautiful girl making the ultimate sacrifice to contain the unforgiving plague that rampaged through her village, obliterating whole families in its wake.***

***I remember those days with fondness and joy  
The innocence of youth when I was a boy  
My darling girl so young and carefree  
If only we'd known what our lives would be***

In the year 1665 Rowland and Emmott had been attending Eyam Parish Church service each Sunday. They had taken to glancing across the aisle at each other when they thought that no-one was looking, sharing their own secret smiles. It had been obvious however to their families that they made a perfect match and it was no surprise when they formally announced that they were 'walking out' together. After months of courtship their marriage had been planned for the following year during the Wakes ceremony.

When long hours of work and circumstances permitted, they would meet on the moor between their two villages and Rowland could still picture his love running towards him with the wind in her hair as she threw herself into his arms. They would sit and embrace and make plans for their married life treasuring their time together.

*But little did they know that life was soon to take a serious turn for the worse.*

In late summer of that year the tailor's assistant in the village of Eyam began to develop a sweating sickness together with painful sores. The tailor had recently received a batch of cloth from London which had been drying out in front of the fire. His assistant's health deteriorated rapidly and within the week he was dead. The tailor and his family were soon to suffer the same fate as worrying rumours began circulating throughout the village.

William Mompesson, the Vicar of Eyam parish had called in his predecessor and between them they hatched a plan to isolate the village to stop the spread of this vicious contagion. They gathered the villagers together and asked them to voluntarily quarantine themselves within the confines of their village. Their sacrifice, they were told, would stop the spread of

this plague that had begun to infect them indiscriminately. Most agreed not to venture out of the village boundary where large flat stones had been placed to identify the exclusion zone.

Meat and grain were left by the villagers of Stoney Middleton in exchange for coins left by the dwindling population of Eyam. The boundary stones had chiselled holes in them and had been filled with vinegar in which the coins were placed in payment for the provisions.

But what of our two separated lovers who lived in adjacent villages? Rowland and Emmott had been discreetly meeting at a pre-arranged time after dark and well away from their respective villages. They knew this was wrong but their weekly stolen moments gave them both the strength to cope with the ravages of death which continued to rampage through Eyam.

Tragically Emmott's father, brother and four sisters were soon to succumb to this mysterious fatal illness. In much despair and after comforting her mother Emmott found the strength to honour her pledge to meet with her lover. As Rowland comforted her, she pleaded with him not to return. Rowland in part agreed to this suggestion but couldn't bear not seeing his future wife, so they continued to meet in secret, but at a safe distance from each other. Cucklett Delph, which was not far from the rear of Emmott's family home of Bagshaw House, had been chosen as their special place for their secret rendezvous. The delph formed a natural amphitheatre giving them shelter to meet undetected and their whispered conversations and messages of their continued love for each other could go unheard.

Over the course of the next six months their weekly ritual continued as the plague wiped away the villagers of Eyam one by one and family by family. Rowland would quietly sing ballads and their favourite love song, blowing a kiss to Emmott, before they departed on their separate ways home with smiles in their hearts.

Late one April evening in 1666 Rowland arrived to meet with Emmott in their usual sheltered spot. The moon shone brightly as Rowland urgently looked to see if he could see Emmott's silhouette appearing in the distance. Storm clouds were gathering which quickly obliterated the moonlight. Hour upon hour our solitary figure waited but Emmott never arrived. He was left to wonder what had become of his fiancée, before reluctantly taking the lonely journey back to Stoney Middleton. He understood that any number of reasons could have prevented Emmott from venturing out that night and he vowed to return again the following week.

At their pre-arranged time Rowland returned seven days later, but sadly with still no sign of his beloved. The same time the following week he arrived again and waited and waited. In despair he realised he was powerless to investigate further and had no alternative but to await the lifting of restrictions before visiting the contaminated village and her home.

Months went by without any further news until in the winter of 1666 news came through to Stoney Middleton that restrictions on visiting Eyam had been lifted. Rowland wasted no time and raced over the moors to ascertain the fate of his beloved. On reaching the outskirts of Eyam he was met by a young boy who broke the tragic news that Emmott had sadly fallen foul of the plague at the end of the previous April. Rowland was truly heartbroken and soon discovered that she had been buried in Cucklett Delph, from which he drew some little

comfort. There had been no marker of her grave, however Rowland pledged to visit the delph each April on the anniversary of her death and serenade his lost love with their special song.

The plague had lasted 14 months, and out of a population of 800, 260 villagers had perished. Rowland had been left a broken man and he lived out the remainder of his life with nothing but his memories and unfulfilled dreams.

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### **Postscript:**

Plague Sunday is celebrated in the village of Eyam each year on the last Sunday in August. The annual procession ends at Cucklett Delph.

In 1985 some 320 years after the outbreak of the plague, the plague stained glass window was installed in the village's St Lawrence Church. This depicts scenes from the tragedy, including, in the left hand panel, the arrival of the bundle of tainted cloth and the first death from the plague. At the bottom of the right panel are a pair of lovers, divided by a stream. They are Emmot Syddall and Rowland Torre. Our tragic heroes cruelly separated in life are at last reunited for eternity in plain sight.



Emmot's House



Boundary Stone



Plague Window