

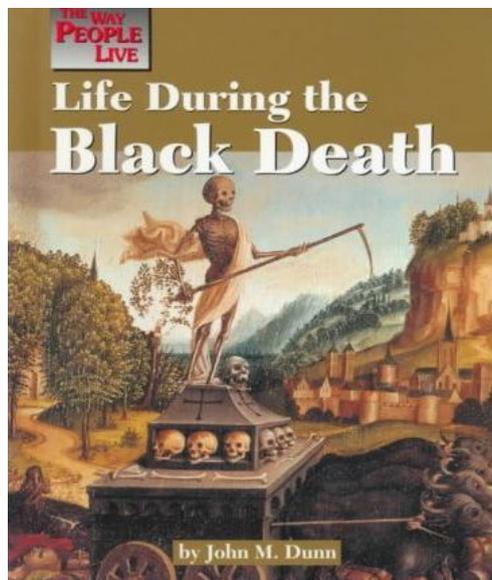
COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA
Copyright Regulations 1969
WARNING

This material has been reproduced and communicated to you by or on behalf of Methodist Ladies' College pursuant to Part VB of the Copyright Act 1968 (the Act).

The material in this communication may be subject to copyright under the Act. Any further reproduction or communication of this material by you may be the subject of copyright protection under the Act.

Do not remove this notice.

Dunn, J. M. (2000). *Life during the Black Death*. San Diego, California: Lucent.



Keeping the Poor in Their Place

Swayed by the concerns of the nobility, European rulers issued special “sumptuary laws” to control the economy and to keep peasants in their place. England passed its first Statute of Labourers in 1351 to fix wages of workers at rates that existed before the Black Death. Other laws followed. These rules told employers how much they could pay for labor, and they told workers how much they could charge. They also prescribed what types of clothes the people of the lower classes could wear and forbid them—no matter how much wealth they possessed—from purchasing certain items, including silk or embroidered clothing, that were set aside for the ruling classes only. The new legislation also limited what foods could be served at the weddings of the lower classes and how many mourners could attend a funeral.

One English sumptuary law, decreed in 1363, required,

that esquires and all gentlemen below the rank of knight, who do not have land or rent worth more than . . . [100 pounds] shall not receive or wear cloth for their garments or stockings worth more than 4¹/₂ marks for a whole cloth. . . . Nor wear any cloth of gold, silver or silk; any embroidered garment; any ring, clasp, brooch, ribbon, belt, or any garment or harness [belts, buckles, and straps] of gold or silver; jewels or any kind of fur.¹¹⁹

Though the sumptuary laws pleased the nobles, they proved to be unpopular with the poor and were difficult to enforce. English chronicler Henry Knighton observed of his time that workers were “so above themselves and so bloody-minded that they took no notice of the king’s command”¹²⁰ not to take wages higher than those to which they were accustomed.

In response, the king imposed fines on any employers who paid workers inflated wages. According to Knighton, the monarch also ordered

numerous workers arrested and sent to prison, and many of these escaped and

took to the woods and if they were captured they were heavily fined. And most took oaths that they would not take more than their old daily wages, and thereby secured their release from prison.¹²¹

This crackdown only made peasants angrier. Their growing resentment over having their wages set and their opportunities limited may have been at least partly responsible for a series of peasant revolts that shook European life in the late fourteenth century. Many of the alienated poor agreed with Englishman John Ball, who spent twenty years in the mid-fourteenth century sermonizing against social inequality. In one sermon the angry priest declared, “Good people, things will never go well in England so long as goods be not in common, and so long as there be villeins [peasants] and gentlemen. By what right are they whom we call lords greater folk than we?”¹²²