

The Yellow flag Bible.



All - well most - of us remember the days when, prior to entering the confines of a port the yellow "Q" flag was hoisted to tell the Port Authorities that the vessel was "healthy" and thus requested "free pratique". Today's speedy communications appear to have made the flag redundant for that purpose.

Many years ago, before the introduction of the International Code of Signals, it was all very different and in the days when plague raged globally there was an official "ceremony" that had to be undertaken by Masters of ships arriving from suspect ports before the vessel could berth. A Customs official would row out to meet the ship with a metal box holding the "Quarantine Book for the use of Surveyors", part of which contained the New Testament, hence the name "Plague Bible". The box would be hauled aboard and the Master would swear "on the book" an oath that the vessel was clear of any disease -and sign a declaration that that effect. The box and book were then returned to the waiting official and the vessel was free to dock. To ensure that the box and book had not been contaminated by contact with the ship the watertight box was dipped into the sea for a few minutes before being taken ashore.

The term "quarantine" has various origins but the old French word "quarantaine" ("period of forty days") would appear to be the first with the current word derived from the Italian "quarantina" ("forty days").

Quarantine was first introduced at Venice as a measure of protection against plague and leprosy by a Council of Health held in the maritime city in 1374. The port was the principal trading centre for the Mediterranean and was at risk from infection by vessels arriving from Eastern ports. In 1377, Ragusa (Dubrovnik) followed suit (followed by Marseille some six years later) but it was many years later (the 18th-century) that England enacted any quarantine regulations. The most feared disease was the plague spread to humans by the bite of a rat-flea that had been living on an infected rat ...and, as rats were carried by ships trading worldwide the disease was easily distributed. After the disastrous epidemics of earlier times the 18th and 19th centuries saw a decline in global infection (with the exception of China) and just as it was thought that it had been controlled, 1894 saw a fresh outbreak in Hong Kong, spreading to Japan, Australia, The Americas, Egypt, Africa, The West Indies and a few European ports.

I well recall seeing huge rats running up and down the after mooring ropes of a Victory ship in Durban (operated by a well-established American company.) The rat guards has fallen off and were dangling from the taut ropes - and the vermin were having a ball!!

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