Curriculum subject: **History**  
Key Stage: **3**

**Theme:** **The Middle Ages**  
**Topic:** **The Black Death**

**Rationale**  
In this activity, students will explore a rare, first-hand account of the Black Death in Britain. The class will explore the spread of the disease and its impact using the words and images of people who lived through it. This activity might be most usefully attempted after an activity on medieval medicine.

**Content**  
**Historical sources:**  
- A firsthand account of the Black Death written at the Cathedral of Rochester

**Recommended reading (short articles):**  
- *Peasants and their role in rural life* by Alixe Bovey  
- *Inside the walls: exploring towns in the Middle Ages* by Alixe Bovey  
- *Medicine, diagnosis and treatment in the Middle Ages* by Alixe Bovey

**Key questions**  
- What was the Black Death?  
- Why was it so devastating?  
- What consequences did it have?  
- How much can we rely upon contemporary evidence?

**Activities**  
1.) Read aloud the account of the Black Death without giving any context or clues as to what students will be studying. What is it about? Gather ideas.  
2.) Introduce the Black Death to students, giving context and explaining the symptoms. You can do this in a variety of ways, including role play.  
3.) Allow students to explore the town life section of The Middle Ages resource. Looking at each source in turn, ask them to note down anything from the images of town life that might have contributed to the spread of disease. Feedback and share ideas. The images
contain evidence of trade with other countries, overcrowding, animals, people bathing in the river etc. Who is likely to be infected? Consider, job, social standing, class.

4.) If students have already completed the activity on medieval medicine, recap this and ask students to look back again at the sources on The Middle Ages resource on medicine. How likely were medieval doctors to be able to treat you if you were infected?

5.) Ask students, in pairs, to interrogate the account of the Black Death written at Rochester Cathedral. Ask students to make a list of the problems that the author of the source describes as a result of the Black Death. These could be things such as the death of one third of the population; lack of servants, craftsmen or labourers; no-one to bury the dead; overcrowded churchyards; stench and possible disease from mass graves; the rich being left unattended and having to plough their own fields; demand for higher wages from those left; increase in idleness and crime.

6.) Ask students to categorise these issues into what they believe to be the most and least important. Ask them to feedback their ideas and discuss differences of opinion in the class.

7.) What does the author of the source clearly highlight as the most important problem? What can this tell us about the author? What can this tell us about medieval social structure? How different is the author’s opinion compared to what students picked out as the most important problem(s)? What can this tell us about then and now?

8.) How useful and reliable is this source for learning about the Black Death? Allow students to explore further and think about the following: a) It is anonymous, but the author is likely to have been a churchman or coming from a more wealthy social standing b) It was written at some point between 1314 and 1350. This provides an interesting date comparator between the content of the source, the dates when the Black Death is meant to have arrived in England and the later Peasants’ Revolt. The document looks to have been written with hindsight, after the event.

9.) The text of the source appears to switch between describing the effect on one place and then more general views – given that it is in Rochester – is this the sole basis? Was the same effect felt elsewhere? The text does not describe the disease itself or the spread, or how people tried to prevent and cure it.

10.) How might students re-write the source according to the point of view of the workers?

Extension activities

- What was the Peasants’ Revolt?
- How did the Black Death contribute to it?
- How well does the account of the Black Death explain the causes of the Peasants’ Revolt?