

# GHOSTS OF THE PLAGUE

## GADLE BRAES AND IVES ROAD, PETERHEAD

The Plague was believed by medieval citizens to be a divine punishment, and thus the dead were dumped as far away as possible from the living to avoid spreading the disease. Georgian folklorist and author, Peter Buchan, a native of Peterhead, was quick to attribute blame to a housemaid employed by one Robert Walker. She had inherited a chest of clothes from her recently deceased aunt in Leith but did not know it was the plague that had killed her relative.

Buchan criticises the maid's vanity in wanting the clothes and "opening a Pandora's box" of contagion when she opened the chest and supposedly inhaled the germs from inside. She and her employer both perished. The Plague had free reign as people foolishly attended the funerals of the dead, despite warnings to keep away. Eventually the inhabitants in the nearby villages of Old Deer and Longside came and barricaded the town along the border of the Kirkburn, the stream which separated the original part of the town from the links and South Bay. The old wooden tolbooth, situated on the Seagate, was razed to the ground, prisoners and all, for fear it too was a source of contagion.



Ugie Hospital, Peterhead



GHOSTS OF THE PLAGUE  
GADLE BRAES AND IVES ROAD, PETERHEAD

Around 350 people died when The Plague struck in 1645 and wooden “fever huts” were constructed in the area of Ive Park, a common grazing ground near the sea. Some huts were razed with the corpses inside, others moved a distance away and interred in a mass grave liberally sprinkled with lime to speed the decomposition of the disease-ridden remains. Ive Park and Gadle Braes were a no-go area, left fallow for a century, the ruined huts demolished and covered with earth.

However, after consulting surgeons at the Royal College in Edinburgh, the town managers agreed to return Ive Park to its former use in 1774, allowing the taxpayers to get back their grazing land.

Another equally hideous disease, cholera, was raging in Europe around the 1830s, and the Peterhead authorities wished to build a fever hospital and form a new Board of Health. However, the taxpayers were in no hurry to surrender their land again, so the scheme was shelved. In 1865, the year Asiatic cholera arrived in Britain, the town managers were finally able to purchase a two-roomed house in the fishing enclave of Roanheads in which to accommodate a fever hospital.

The first permanent hospital was established in Ive Park from 1880, right on the site of the plague pits! Locals knew this as the “old” Fever Hospital, which, like the Roanheads’ site, was a traditional “but-and-ben” style cottage. By the turn of the century health authorities deemed it way below the standards for a medical facility. A replacement was completed in 1907, built near the ancient salmon house which had been founded by Earl Marischal, George Keith in 1585. There were uninterrupted views of the Ugie Estuary, perhaps the reason that the building became known as the Ugie Hospital. There were 14 beds which were pressed into service almost immediately after a severe outbreak of typhoid made its appearance that year. Historian Robert Neish comments in *Old Peterhead*: “it was entirely due to the enlarged accommodation available for patients [...] that a serious epidemic was averted.”



**GHOSTS OF THE PLAGUE**  
**GADLE BRAES AND IVES ROAD, PETERHEAD**

The old fever hospital did not officially close until 1933, and was eventually demolished to make way for social housing. Ives Road, Gadle Braes and Ware Road now stand on the site of the ancient plague pits. But the inhabitants of the new council houses soon discovered that the area's past history had not quite finished with them. Rumours of taps on sinks and baths being turned on without human intervention began to circulate. Stories of children's voices being heard around the windows at night also started to spread. Amateur "ghost hunters" speculated that this unexplained phenomenon was caused by the spirits of plague victims attempting to slake their thirst, unaware they had already died. Perhaps the poor ghosts finding the old Gadle Mineral Well had run dry, saw the living with their clean water taps and decided to help themselves?

The community around Gadle Braes today is known for its annual bonfire, which dated back to the construction of the Ugie Hospital. Bonfire organiser Marco Alexander observes that it is the largest bonfire in Peterhead, constructed of wooden pallets and huge commercial cable reels donated by local businesses. Fire would certainly keep The Plague at bay, and nothing has been heard of the ghosts in a long time.



Ugie Hospital, Peterhead