

The Great Fire of London, 1666

The Great Fire was the worst fire ever seen in the history of London. In just a few days, London lost 13,200 houses, 87 parish churches, The Royal Exchange, The Guildhall, the original St. Paul's Cathedral and many other buildings. The death toll from the fire was only six people, but many others died from indirect causes of the fire.



Print from a German newspaper depicting the area of London affected by the Great Fire of London.

The Great Fire of London started on 2 September 1666 and burnt down four-fifths of the city in four days. The fire started in the baker Thomas Farynor's shop. Farynor was baker to the king.

Farynor later claimed that he had put the fire out, but three hours later at 1am, his house was an inferno. Luckily, Farynor and his wife and daughter and one of their servants escaped through a window and along the roof. The maid would not climb through the window with the rest of the family and became the first victim of the fire.

Farynor's bakery was situated in Pudding Lane, the fire spread down Pudding Lane and carried on down Fish Street Hill and towards the Thames. In Fish Street Hill it engulfed the Star Inn and spread to the nearby church of St Margaret's.

When it reached the Thames, it hit the warehouses, which at this time mainly held combustible goods, such as oil and tallow. By the morning, the fire had spread across London Bridge, but owing to a previous fire in 1633, the bridge was left half standing, so the fire could not spread to Southwark, leaving the south relatively

unharmd. The previous fire had also destroyed a water wheel, which would have pumped water into the city through the wooden trunk mains. This would have provided further water supplies to help extinguish the fire.

WHY DID THE FIRE SPREAD?

The buildings at this time were timber, covered in pitch, and were packed tightly together. The upper floors often projected above the lower. The upper floors would often reach their neighbours' houses, so the flames could easily spread from building to building.



Above: An image showing the equipment used at this time, taken from the print 'The Burning of Tiverton' in the Bodleian Library. **Below:** A painting of the early hours of 2 September. (Image owned by the London Fire Brigade Museum)



The houses at the time were mainly made of wood and thatch, and over the long summer had dried out to tinder boxes. The summer had also brought drought to the city, increasing the likelihood of fire and of fires spreading quickly.

FIREFIGHTING TECHNIQUES

Firefighting at this time was very basic, and there was little skill or knowledge involved. The basic equipment was leather or wooden buckets, which would be passed down a human chain. Fire hooks were used to remove burning thatch, along with basic ladders. Usually, if a fire got out of hand, the surrounding buildings in the path of the fire would be demolished, in order to prevent fuel being added to the fire.

The other equipment in use were fire squirts and axes. Fire squirts would supply a jet of water to extinguish the fire. These usually had little effect.

SAMUEL PEPYS

Samuel Pepys was a diarist of this period and the Clerk to the Royal Navy. He wrote vivid accounts of the fire. On the night of the fire, Pepys' servants were working late preparing for some guests to the house. As they went to bed they spotted a fire; Pepys' maid came rushing to his room to warn him: "Jane called us up about three in the morning, to tell us of a great fire they saw in the city."

But when he looked out of the window it seemed to be a long way off, so he told them not to worry and to go back to bed. Being used to fires which regularly occurred in London, Pepys did not worry about this one as it seemed so far away. By the morning over 300 houses had burned down, and the fire was spreading down towards the Thames, and burning London Bridge. The next day: "By and by Jane comes and tells me that she hears that above 300 houses have been burned down tonight by the fire we saw, and that it is now burning down all Fish Street, by London Bridge."

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'The Great Fire' by Thomas Wyck. A painting of the fire in the early hours of 3 September, showing people trying to escape on boats.



People escaping the fire moving to the south. (Image owned by the London Fire Brigade Museum)

On hearing this, Pepys went to see if the King's property was damaged. He reported first to the Tower of London. He then went with the Lieutenant of the Tower to get a good view of the city to see how quickly the city was burning. While at the tower, he heard that the fire started in Farynor's house. (By this time people were already suggesting it was the work of Catholics or French or Dutch spies, as England was then at war with them.) On hearing this, he left and went down to the waterfront, and got a boat in order to see the scene better. There he saw people rushing about frantically trying to save their property. From here Pepys went to Whitehall to see the King and the Duke of York.

Later that day, 3 September 1666, Pepys, on being received by the King, started to tell of what he had seen. He recommended to the King that buildings should be pulled down, as this may be the only way to stop the fire.

The King then told Pepys to order the Lord Mayor to pull down houses in the path of the fire.

"I did tell the King and the Duke of York what I saw; and that unless His Majesty did command houses to be pulled down, no thing could stop the fire. They seemed much troubled, and the King commanded me to go to my Lord Mayor from him, and command him to spare no houses...."

Pepys went looking for the Lord Mayor (Thomas Bludworth) and eventually found him in Canning Street, where he informed him of the King's orders. The Mayor replied: "Lord, what can I do? I am spent: people will not obey me. I have been pulling down houses, but the fire overtakes us faster than we can do it."

The Mayor gave the order to pull down the houses and Pepys went home for breakfast. Pepys later had guests for dinner, but during the meal was distracted

by thoughts of the fire. He and one of his guests left after dinner in search of news. They found people in great distress. On seeing all of this Pepys went back home, and started to pack up his own things and send them away.

He then spoke to the Admiral of the Navy (Admiral Penn) and they agreed that houses in the path of the fire should be blown up, this time by the Navy, as they were more used to using gunpowder. This would create a firebreak to stop the fire spreading to any more houses.

Later that evening the fire was still approaching their house at Seething Street and Pepys' wife woke him to tell him the fire had reached the bottom of their lane. They decided to escape down the river to a friend's house at Woolwich. When the morning came they returned to their house to find it unharmed. The exploded houses had finally stopped the fire.



Above: St Paul's Cathedral, designed by Sir Christopher Wren, 1675.

Left: The Monument, designed by Sir Christopher Wren and Robert Hooke, 1671.

THE AFTERMATH

After the fire, the government needed someone to blame for the event. A French man called Robert Hurbert claimed that he was responsible for the fire, but was thought to be insane as he had not been in the country at the time. This did not stop him being executed. It was then blamed on Catholics, or the French or Dutch. The Monument when it was originally erected as a memorial to the fire, stated this on one of its panels. Later under a Parliamentary Committee investigating the fire in 1667 it was stated that a cause had not be found. "Yet nothing hath been found to argue it to have been other than the hand of God upon us, a great wind, and the season so dry."

As a result of the fire, London had to be almost totally reconstructed and rebuilt. Initially this meant temporary buildings, which were makeshift and ill equipped and spread disease: many died from this

and the harsh winter that followed. Lots of people were financially ruined and debtor's prisons became overcrowded. The cost of the fire was 10 million pounds at a time when London's annual income was only 12 thousand pounds.

The fire however did have its advantages. Firstly the plague, the Black Death, which had in the previous year killed many, was eliminated by the burning down of diseased rat-infested properties.

The new city was rebuilt beautifully. Christopher Wren, the King's architect, wanted and planned a very Italian city with large squares and boulevards, but later settled for brick and stone to be used in all newly built buildings. Such wonderful buildings as St. Paul's and the Monument were created to remind the city of the disaster and to celebrate the new city. In total it took 30 years to rebuild London.

LIST OF DAMAGED BUILDINGS

- 13,200 houses were destroyed
- 87 parish churches
- Six consecrated chapels
- The Customs House
- The Royal Exchange
- The Guildhall
- Three city gates
- 52 halls of companies
- Gaols of Newgate and Bridewell
- St Paul's church
- Sessions House
- Four stone bridges

SUMMARY

- The Great Fire of London began in 1666 in a baker's shop in Pudding Lane.
- It spread quickly through the city because houses were made from wood.
- Four fifths of the city was destroyed by the fire.
- To stop the Great Fire of London a firebreak was created using gunpowder to blow up houses in the path of the fire.
- London was rebuilt using stone and brick, taking 30 years to complete.

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