

What happened in the Great Fire of London?

The Great Fire of London is one of the most well-known disasters in London's history. It began on 2 September 1666 and lasted just under five days. One-third of London was destroyed and about 100,000 people were made homeless.

The fire had a devastating effect on the lives of Londoners from all parts of society. It took about 50 years to rebuild the ruined city. We can still see the evidence of the fire today through archaeological discoveries and the remains of ruined churches.

The Museum of London has many objects relating to the Great Fire that help us to answer questions about this terrible event.

What caused the Great Fire?

The fire started at 1am on Sunday morning on 2 September in Thomas Farriner's bakery on Pudding Lane. It may have been caused by a spark from his oven falling onto a pile of fuel nearby. The fire spread easily because London was very dry after a long, hot summer. The area around Pudding Lane was full of warehouses containing highly flammable things like timber, rope and oil. A very strong easterly wind blew the fire from house to house in the narrow streets.

In 1979 archaeologists excavated the remains of a burnt-out shop on Pudding Lane which was very close to the bakery where the fire started. In the cellar they found the charred remnants of 20 barrels of pitch (tar). Pitch burns very easily and would have helped to spread the fire. Among the burnt objects from the shop, the archaeologists found these melted pieces of pottery which show that the temperature of the fire was as high as 1700 degrees Celsius!



Melted pottery, 1666

A Frenchman, Robert Hubert, confessed to starting the Great Fire and was hanged. However, he wasn't actually in London when the fire started!

How did Londoners escape the fire?



Painting showing the Great Fire from Tower Wharf, 1666

As the fire was spreading so quickly most Londoners concentrated on escaping, rather than fighting the fire. They rescued as many of their belongings as they could carry and fled. Thomas Farriner and his family had to climb out of an upstairs window and onto their neighbour's roof to escape the fire in their bakery.

As this painting shows, many Londoners fled to the river and tried to load their goods onto boats to get away to safety. Other people rushed through the City gates and went to the fields outside London. They stayed there for many days, sheltering in tents and shacks. Some people were forced to live in this way for months and even years.

How was the fire put out?

There was no fire brigade in London in 1666 so Londoners themselves had to fight the fire, helped by local soldiers. They used buckets of water, water squirts and fire hooks like this one. Equipment was stored in local churches. The best way to stop the fire was to pull down houses with hooks to make gaps or 'fire breaks'. This was difficult because the wind forced the fire across any gaps created. The mayor, Thomas Bludworth, complained, '*the fire overtakes us faster than we can do it.*'

A quicker way of demolishing houses was to blow them up with gunpowder, but this technique wasn't used until the third day of the fire (Tuesday 4 September). Fire Posts, each staffed by 130 men, were set up around the City to fight the blaze. On Tuesday night the wind dropped and the fire-fighters finally gained control. By dawn on Thursday the fire was out.



Fire hook, 1600s

The Great Fire *did not* stop the Great Plague of 1665. The plague affected a much larger area than the part destroyed in the fire.

How much of London was destroyed?

As you can see from this map showing the burnt area of London, the damage caused by the Great Fire was immense. The burnt area is shown in white. 436 acres of London were destroyed, including 13,200 houses and 87 out of 109 churches.

Some places still smouldered for months afterwards. Only 51 churches and about 9000 houses were rebuilt. St Paul's Cathedral was ruined, as was the Guildhall (the offices of the Lord Mayor) and 52 livery company halls (livery companies were organisations that looked after the different trades in London).



Map of the area destroyed by the Great Fire, by Wenceslaus Hollar, 1666

Fewer than 10 people are recorded as dying in the Great Fire.

How was London rebuilt?

It took nearly 50 years to rebuild the burnt area of London. St Paul's Cathedral was not completed until 1711. The city and the cathedral looked very different afterwards as this view of London in the 1700s shows.

Throughout 1667 people cleared rubble and surveyed the burnt area. Much time was spent planning new street layouts and drawing up new building regulations. By the end of the year, only 150 new houses had been built. Public buildings, like churches, were paid for with money from a new coal tax.

The new regulations were designed to prevent such a disaster happening again. Houses now had to be faced in brick instead of wood. Some streets were widened and two new streets were created. Pavements and new sewers were laid, and London's quaysides were improved. The results were noticeable: '*(London) is not only the finest, but the most healthy city in the world*', said one proud Londoner.



Panorama of London in 1777

See also

Collections Online is an online database which allows users to find out more about the Museum of London's objects, both on display and in store. Go to

www.museumoflondon.org.uk/collections

The London's Burning website about the Great Fire of London:

www.museumoflondon.org.uk/londonsburning

Further resources for teachers/tutors

Explore the images for this topic in the Picturebank:

www.museumoflondon.org.uk/picturebank

Go to the Great Fire of London website for KS1:

<http://www.fireoflondon.org.uk>

Visit the Museum

Many objects relating to the Great Fire are on display in the War, Plague & Fire gallery at the Museum of London.

Further reading

Latham, R. & Matthews, W. (eds.): *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, (G. Bell and Sons Ltd, 2000)

Milne, G. *The Great Fire of London*, (Historical Publications Ltd, 1986)

Porter, S. *The Great Fire of London*, (Sutton Publishing Ltd, 1996)