


You  
**Wouldn't**  
Want to...

BE IN THE

# **GREAT FIRE** **OF LONDON**



The piping  
hot history  
of Pudding  
Lane!

Written by Jim Pipe • Illustrated by David Antram



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**GREAT FIRE**  
**OF LONDON**

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# Introduction

You are Samuel Pepys (pronounced 'peeps'), born in 1633 and the fifth of eleven children. You're the son of a humble tailor, but through hard work and talent – and the help of a rich relative, Sir Edward Montagu – you become Clerk for the Royal Navy for King Charles II of England.

Around 1660, you begin keeping a secret diary. Little do you know what horrors it will soon detail. In 1665, London is devastated by a deadly

plague that kills 100,000 people. Then, around 1 a.m. on 2 September 1666, a fire breaks out in a bakery at the heart of the City. The blaze spreads rapidly, leaping from house to house down London's narrow streets. You're terrified your home and belongings will be destroyed. What can you do to stop the fire spreading, especially when the streets are packed with Londoners fleeing the inferno?

The Great Fire of London raged for four nights and days. Most of medieval London was burnt to the ground.



London 1666:  
How the fire spread.

- Sunday 2 September
- Monday 3 September
- Wednesday night 4/5 September

# Dirty old town

Strolling through London in the summer of 1666, it's easy to be swamped by the sights, sounds and smells of this busy metropolis. London is a giant city with over 300,000 inhabitants. It's also a centre for trade, finance and government – a wealthy place where lords are carried in grand coaches by servants.

Yet the old centre of London, the City, is a horrible place. Its smoky streets are narrow, stuffy and dark. The summer of 1666 is hot and the place is bone-dry after 10 months of drought. You hold your nose to avoid the stench of dead dogs and rotting waste.

## Why is life so grim?



### Noisy streets

Shouting matches are a common noise. There are no street signs so you find your way around by shop signs. A sign showing a dragon marks an apothecary (chemist), and Adam and Eve mark a fruit shop.



### Fashion

Women wear white make-up made from poisonous lead. It smells foul and cracks when they smile. People use small bits of mouse skin to make their eyebrows look stylish!

### Wigs

Charles II begins wearing wigs when he spots his first grey hairs. Many men copy him. Nits and lice are common.

### Medicine

Medicine is basic. Hospitals are a place to rest, but little else. Doctors cure their patients using leeches to suck their blood.

Mustn't smile, mustn't smile...



I feel much better, honest!



## Handy hint

Beware! People throw the contents of their chamber pots out of the window. Hug the wall to avoid this filth, but don't get in anyone's way – they might get angry!



### Pollution

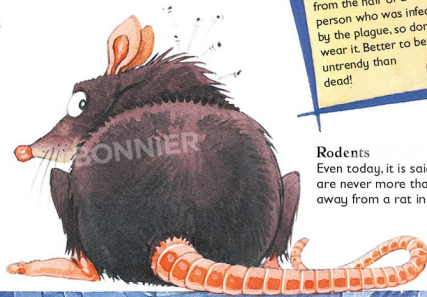
Ashes and dust are constantly thrown into the streets. Piles of steaming dung lie everywhere. Every home has a

cesspit for sewage. In your diary, you complain that your neighbour's cesspit has flooded your cellar.

# Troubled times

It isn't just the hot weather that bothers you. England is still recovering from a bloody civil war fought between Parliament and King Charles I. In 1660, King Charles II was restored to the throne, but old rivalries remain.

A year ago, a third of Londoners died during a horrific plague. The churchyards were full of bodies piled on top of each other. The plague has almost died out now, but death carts still rattle around the streets. To make matters worse, England is at war with the Netherlands, and there is constant tension between Protestants and Catholics.



## Handy hint

Your wig might be made from the hair of a person who was infected by the plague, so don't wear it. Better to be untrendy than dead!



### Rodents

Even today, it is said that you are never more than 2 metres away from a rat in London!

## Why are people so fearful?

### Plague

In September 1665, the plague killed 8,000 Londoners in a single week. In October, the disease died down, as cold weather killed rats carrying the infected fleas that cause the disease. By then, 100,000 Londoners had already died.

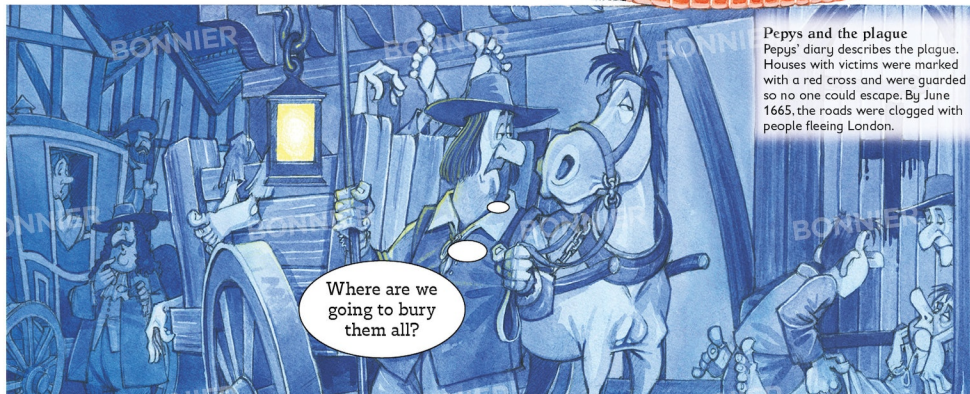


### Tension

London is a largely Protestant place. In 1605, a group of Catholics led by Guy Fawkes tried to blow up Parliament – the Gunpowder Plot. Protestants now fear another Catholic plot to destroy the city.

### War

In recent times, England has been at war with Spain and France, and in September 1666 it is fighting the Dutch. Londoners are suspicious of foreigners, especially the French, as they fear a French invasion.



### Peyps and the plague

Peyps' diary describes the plague. Houses with victims were marked with a red cross and were guarded so no one could escape. By June 1665, the roads were clogged with people fleeing London.



### Flooded and frozen

In 1663, high tide flooded central London. The River Thames also froze over for several winters in the 1660s. At the best of times, the river is full of floating corpses and waste. At low tide, it stinks horribly.



# A bonfire in waiting...

As if Londoners don't already have enough worries, fires are common. In 1633, a fire burnt for 8 hours and destroyed over 80 houses. Despite this, open fires burn in houses, shops and workshops. Craftsmen light braziers in the streets. The houses crowded inside the City walls were tightly packed together, built from timber and covered in a highly flammable substance called pitch. Straw is laid on floors and stored in stables – a careless neighbour could easily start a mighty blaze. On 2 September 1666, water was scarce, houses were dried out, and a strong east wind was blowing. It was a recipe for disaster... You've heard all sorts of predictions that London will burn down. Being a superstitious chap, you wear a hare's foot around your neck as a good-luck charm, but your worst fears are about to come true.



## Handy hint

If you must read in bed, don't use a candle. It's safer to use a lantern, like the one used by Guy Fawkes in the Gunpowder Plot!

## Fire starters!

Fire everywhere! People cook and heat their houses with open fires, and use candles in the dark. Some smoke in bed or sweep hot ashes under the stairs.



- Clothes hung too close to a fire can easily catch alight.
- Some people believe that smoking wards off the plague, so fires are a big risk.
- Barrels of cooking oil kept in a cellar can create a raging inferno if they catch fire.
- In 1649, 27 barrels of gunpowder stored in a cellar blew up, destroying 41 houses and killing 67 people.

## Who predicts the Great Fire?



### Fire hazards

In April 1665, Charles II warns the Lord Mayor of the fire risks posed by wooden houses and narrow streets. From 1600 to 1665, there were at least 70 big fires in English towns.

### Superstition

Some Londoners believe they see signs of disaster. At Easter, the sky rains fish in Kent. In July, egg-sized hailstones fall in Norfolk. Months before the fire, the Spanish Ambassador says he sees a monster with 'the legs of a bull, the tail of a wolf and the breast of a goat'.



### Fiery retribution

Religious pamphlets have been warning of a great fire for years. They believe that God will punish Londoners by setting their city ablaze. You're afraid bad things may happen in 1666 because 666 is the symbol of the devil.

### Predicting the future

In a book written in 1641, Mother Shipton, a so-called witch from York, predicts that 'London in '66 should be burnt to ashes'. People take such warnings very seriously.



# The fire begins

Saturday 1 September 1666 is another hot, dry day. Trade is busy and by closing time, baker Tom Farynor is exhausted. When he cools the ovens, he misses a glowing ember.

While you are sleeping in the early hours of Sunday 2 September, a small fire starts in Farynor's bakery on Pudding Lane. It is fanned by the easterly breeze blowing across London. The fire spreads quickly throughout the house. Soon after 2 a.m., Farynor's assistant is woken by thick smoke. He raises the alarm and Farynor and his family escape through an attic window to a neighbour's house – all except a maid, who is scared of heights and stays behind. She is the fire's first victim.

## How does the fire spread?



### 1. Farynor's bakery

As Farynor's bakery burns, a group from the nearby Star Inn stand and gawp, rather than trying to put out the fire. Farynor's neighbour even has time to remove his goods before the fire spreads to his house. Then, without warning, the roof of the bakery suddenly collapses.



### 2. Star inn

Sparks blow across the yard to the Star Inn, which instantly catches fire. The flames are soon roaring. People living in Pudding Lane and Fish Street Hill pour onto the streets to put out the flames.



Hurry up!  
I'm starting  
to smoke!



The yellow area (above) shows how far the fire spread on Sunday 2 September



It's hotter  
than the devil's  
underwear.

### 3. Thames Street

Sparks carried by the strong east wind set alight wooden houses up to 200 metres away. Timber beams fall across the streets and provide another route for the fire. Towards dawn, the fire spreads to St Botolph's Lane and down Fish Street Hill to the warehouses on Thames Street.

## Handy hint

Take the fire seriously! When the Lord Mayor is woken and told about the fire, he says: 'Pish, a woman could put the fire out by peeing on it!', and goes back to bed.



### 4. The riverside warehouses

Oil, pitch, hay, coal, hemp and tar are packed into the riverside warehouses. These add fuel to the fire, which burns so fiercely that no one can get close enough to fight the flames.

### 5. The City

The strong wind spreads the flames into the City. By 8 a.m., the blaze has spread halfway across London Bridge, destroying the houses that are built on the bridge itself. Luckily, a gap in the houses created by the fire of 1633 stops it spreading across the river.





# The blaze spreads

A couple of hours after the blaze starts, your maid wakes you to warn of the danger. Seeing the fire is some way off, you head back to bed. She bursts in later with news that 300 buildings are already in ashes. This is no ordinary blaze. You hurry to the top of the Tower of London to see for yourself. Getting into a boat, you watch burning timbers fall into the water – the river itself seems on fire! The blaze is spreading west at great speed, whipped along by the wind. Around 11 a.m., you travel to Whitehall to tell the King.

## How do people react?



### What fire?

It's a while before people realise the danger. Swedish diplomat Francisco de Rapicani describes having lunch out with friends. They return home to find their houses have gone up in fire and smoke!

### Firebreaks

By the time the Lord Mayor arrives, the fire has spread to the river. One way of stopping it is to create firebreaks by pulling down houses in its path. But when the owners refuse to let him demolish their homes, the Mayor hesitates. Quick action could have stopped the fire from spreading.



**Holding out**  
People stay in their homes as long as they can. You see pigeons unwilling to leave their nests, hovering above the flaming roofs until their wings burn and they fall into the fire.



Forget it!

Please! Let me pull down your house!



Everything will burn, even the churches! I must tell the king!

## Handy hint

If you're making a run for it, don't forget your pet! Later in the week you see a shivering cat. Its fur has been burnt off by the flames but it is still alive.



### Panic

By now everyone is fleeing, pushing their way through narrow streets. People and horses are running over each other! It's very hard to get water pumps (see page 16) to the fire quickly.



He's got a firebomb!

It's just a tennis ball!



### Anger

On the way to see the King, you meet an angry crowd who believe God has sent the fire. There's also a rumour that foreigners are throwing fireballs to start the fires. Mobs, armed with clubs and home-made weapons, attack anyone who can't speak good English.

\*Despite what Pepys had seen, he still had a dinner party for his friends that night!

# Battling the inferno

When you tell the King the bad news, he leaps into action. A coach takes you to the Lord Mayor with orders that no houses are to be spared in putting out the fire. By noon, a few firebreaks have been created, but they're too close to the fire to stop it. That afternoon, the King lends a hand to the people fighting the fire. By now, the flames are shooting 30 metres into the air. Later that night, you watch from the river. Your face is burned by a shower of 'fire drops'.

## How can the fire be stopped?

I'm too tired to care! I need more men!



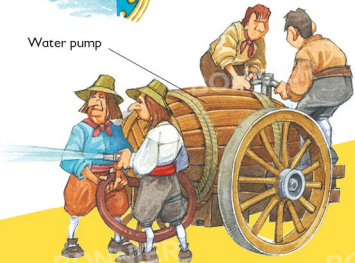
### Ask the mayor?

Don't bother. When you finally deliver the King's message to the Lord Mayor he drops to his knees, whimpering.

### Fire brigade?

There isn't one. Locals fight the flames with water carried in leather buckets or by beating the fire out. The authorities have a few hand-pumped machines that squirt water, but they won't stop fast-moving fires.

Water pump



On Tuesday night, soldiers and sailors use gunpowder to knock down houses, which proves far more effective.

BOOM!

That's more like it!

Those wigs must be soundproofed!

## Handy hint

By Sunday evening the fire is so strong it's moving against the wind – toward your house! Go home and pack up your belongings!



### Water pumps?

There's a system of wooden water pipes below ground to feed the pumps during fires. In the rush to stop the fire, people tear up the streets, piercing the pipes in so many places that there is no pressure to squirt the water out.

### Pull homes down?

Where fires threaten to spread, people use axes, ropes and iron fire hooks to drag down buildings and create firebreaks. But the wind sweeps the fire so fast that the houses can't be pulled down quickly enough. At its peak, the blaze wrecks about 100 houses an hour.



HEAVE!



Uh-oh!

# A lake of fire

## How can you save your belongings?



### By river

You pay £8 for two boats to carry your furniture downriver to Deptford. Other people flee in 'wherries' – small river boats. You see a few boats carrying virginals (musical instruments). The Thames is littered with abandoned goods.

### By cart

When the river boats are filled with refugees, there's only one way for people to move their things – by cart. The price of a cart rises from £3 to £30 in two days. One desperate man even pays £400 (around £40,000 today).



£400?

It's my hottest price!

At 4 a.m. on Monday, the next day, you move your silver and valuables to a friend's house outside the City walls. You're in such a rush that you don't even change out of your nightgown!

Meanwhile, the Royal Exchange building, packed with expensive silks and spices, goes up in flames. The smoke turns the sky red.

By Tuesday, the flames have moved west and north. Shortly after midnight, they destroy the Guildhall and St Paul's Cathedral. Lead melted from buildings runs down streets that are glowing with the heat. Around 2 a.m. on Wednesday, your wife wakes you. The fire is perilously close to your house. You escape by boat.

### On foot

Some people can't afford boats, so they carry what they can. Sick and elderly people will need a helping hand. With London Bridge in flames there's no way across the river except by boat. Few people know how to swim.

### Underground

People with valuables bury or hide them underground before fleeing. On Tuesday you bury your wine stores and your prized Parmesan cheeses. You also put some important documents in your neighbour's pit.

## Handy hint

Wear a tough pair of boots: hot ashes can burn through your shoes! In many places the ground is too hot to walk on for days after the fire.



Pepys wrote in his diary that the night sky was lit 'as if the whole heaven was on fire'.

I'm glad we left the kitchen sink behind.

# The fire dies down

The fire rages for four nights and days. You see houses in the east being blown up by gunpowder, which creates large firebreaks and saves the Tower of London. But in the west, the fire leaps across the Fleet River and threatens Whitehall and the royal palaces.

Finally, on Wednesday morning, the wind drops. The fire slowly begins to burn out. At last, people can put out the flames, though they battle for another 36 hours before the last fires are extinguished on Thursday night. Earlier that day you walk around the smoking ruins of the City. Small fires smoulder for many weeks after.

## Why did the fire stop?

### Wind

The east wind fanned the fire. When it dropped, the flames died down.

### Stone walls

The Temple is an ancient medieval church surrounded by stone buildings belonging to lawyers. Finally the fire had come up against buildings it couldn't burn.

### Demolition

On Monday the King asked the Duke of York (the future James II) to take charge. The Duke organised a series of explosions that stopped the fire.

Pepys was very sad to see the smoking ruins of St Paul's Cathedral.



## What about the survivors?

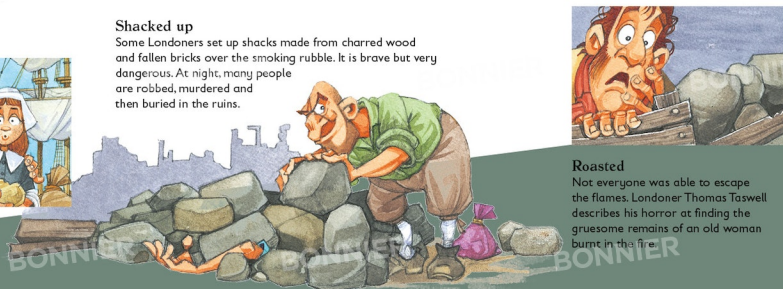
Over 100,000 Londoners have had to flee their homes. Many go to the suburbs and stay there. Some go to other towns, while others emigrate to America. In the winter of 1666, the fields around London are full of the homeless living in tents.

Navy biscuit – hard biscuits used by the Navy – is handed out but many people refuse it.



### Shacked up

Some Londoners set up shacks made from charred wood and fallen bricks over the smoking rubble. It is brave but very dangerous. At night, many people are robbed, murdered and then buried in the ruins.



### Roasted

Not everyone was able to escape the flames. Londoner Thomas Taswell describes his horror at finding the gruesome remains of an old woman burnt in the fire.

# A city in ruins

You're incredibly lucky – the fire stops at the end of your street, Seething Lane, and your house remains untouched. As your house is a government building, you persuaded the Duke of York to create firebreaks nearby to protect your street! But all around there is devastation. The Great Fire is one of the greatest disasters in London's history. Thousands of people have lost their homes, businesses and belongings.

News of the Great Fire quickly spreads around Europe and foreign newspapers print the story with dramatic drawings of the fire.

## Destruction

The Great Fire has destroyed 13,200 houses and four-fifths of the City of London, including the Royal Exchange and the Custom House. As well as St Paul's Cathedral, 87 churches are destroyed.

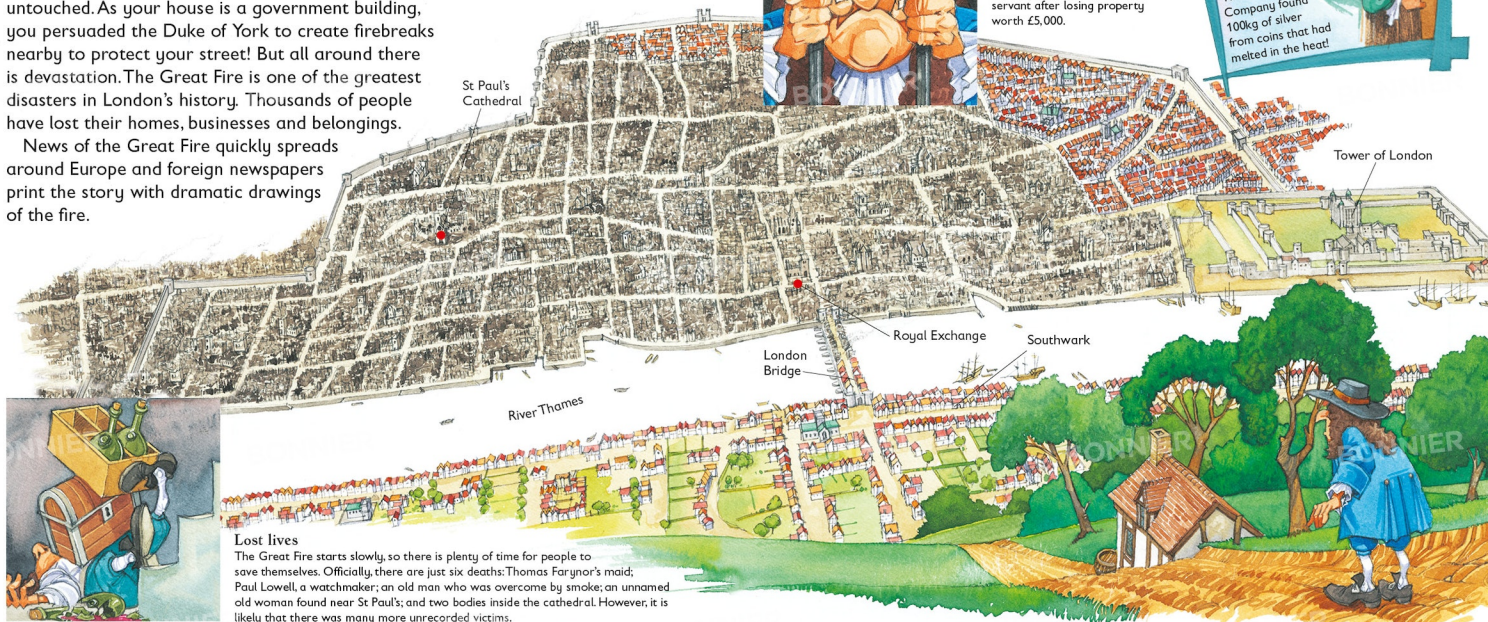


## Bankruptcy

So many merchants are ruined that a new prison is built for those who can't pay their debts. Others kill themselves. After the fire, Sarah Crofts, once a wealthy woman, has to work as a servant after losing property worth £5,000.

## Handy hint

Even if your house is burnt, check your cellar for any goods that aren't ruined. The Grocers' Company found 100kg of silver from coins that had melted in the heat!



## Lost lives

The Great Fire starts slowly, so there is plenty of time for people to save themselves. Officially, there are just six deaths: Thomas Farjnor's maid; Paul Lowell, a watchmaker; an old man who was overcome by smoke; an unnamed old woman found near St Paul's; and two bodies inside the cathedral. However, it is likely that there was many more unrecorded victims.

# Who's to blame?

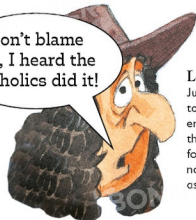
During the Great Fire many post offices and newspaper offices were burnt down, so there is little reliable news. Instead, rumours spread that the fire was an attack by the French or Dutch. Mobs roam the streets, attacking anyone they suspect. To calm things down, King Charles speaks to refugees at Moorfields. He tells them the fire was simply an accident, but most people still believe the fire was started deliberately.

## Whodunnit?

**Charles II?**  
Some whisper that Charles II (below) started the fire to distract from scandals at court. The 'Merry Monarch' is not as popular as he once was, thanks to badly behaved courtiers. But it's unlikely the King is to blame, as he lost a lot of money in the blaze.



Don't blame me, I heard the Catholics did it!



**A Frenchman?**  
Confused watchmaker Robert Hubert (right) confesses to starting the fire in Westminster, even though he wasn't in London until two days after it started! The jury probably knows he is innocent but everyone is keen to point the finger. Poor Hubert is hanged on 27 October 1666.



**Catholics?**  
When the official inquiry publishes its first report, it includes rumours that Catholics started the fire. Many Londoners are willing to believe these made-up stories.

**Lord Mayor?**  
Just two years earlier, Charles II wrote to the Lord Mayor (left) asking him to encourage builders to use brick rather than wood. If the mayor had only followed the King's advice, the fire might not have spread as far or as quickly as it did.



**Cornelius Rietveldt**  
A Dutch baker from Westminster is attacked by a mob and his bakery looted. He is nearly beaten to death.

## Handy hint

If you're not British, consider staying at home. It may be best if you lay low until everything calms down!



You've got the wrong baker!



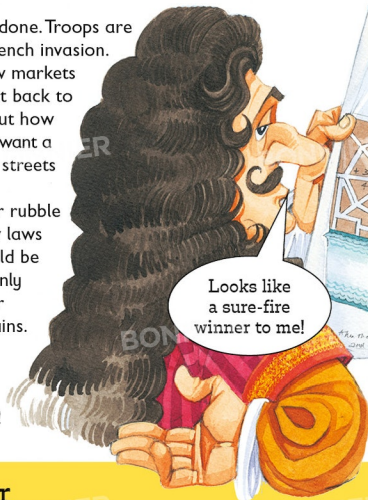
**The baker?**  
When they were in court, Thomas Farynor said he didn't start the fire. But then, he was on the jury that said someone else did! It's a little strange that he got to decide who was guilty when people thought the fire started in his bakery.

# Rebuilding London

After the fire, there's lots to be done. Troops are put on alert in case there's a French invasion.

The streets are cleared and new markets are created so everyone can get back to business. People also argue about how the City should be rebuilt. Some want a modern, elegant city with wider streets and fireproof houses.

Throughout 1667, people clear rubble and survey the burnt area. New laws are passed on how houses should be built. But by the end of the year, only 150 new houses are finished. For decades, parts of the City lie in ruins. The rebuilding lasts for nearly 50 years. The new St Paul's Cathedral is only completed in 1710 – almost 50 years later!



Looks like a sure-fire winner to me!

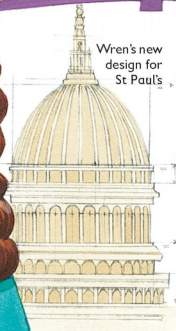
Famous architects, such as Christopher Wren and Robert Hooke, design new layouts for London. But none are ever used! It would take too much time and money to buy the land and work out who owns what. Instead, most streets are rebuilt to the old plan.



I'm not sure I like the sound of that!

## Handy hint

If rents in the City are too high, why not move out to the cheaper suburbs? Many traders also move to the West End.



Wren's new design for St Paul's

## Change is in the air

### Relief fund

A sum of £16,201 is raised to help victims of the Great Fire, but it doesn't really compare with the £10 million lost in the blaze! King Charles II wants to show that London is a great city, so public buildings are paid for by a new tax on coal. The Guildhall, Customs House, Royal Exchange, prisons, as well as churches and St Paul's Cathedral, are all rebuilt.

### Restoration

By 1671, some 9,000 houses are rebuilt. The majority are built in brick instead of wood. City streets, like Fleet Street, are widened and new streets are created. Pavements are built for the first time and new sewers are added. By 1672, most of those who lost houses have new homes.



The new streets look good!

Wow! They smell good, too!

### Rent rises

According to the law, you have to pay rent even if your house is in ruins. After the fire, rents shoot up as landlords try to recover their losses. A house once rented for £40 a year now costs £150. A Fire Court is set up to deal with arguments between tenants and landlords. This helps Londoners to rebuild as quickly as possible.



# The Aftermath

The Great Fire is a disaster, but it does bring change. Many of the new houses are built in brick and stone. A huge army of migrant workers come to rebuild the city, along with craftsmen to furnish the new houses. By the early 18th century, London is the largest city in Europe, and probably the richest, too. It also has wonderful new buildings, such as a new St Paul's.

Though houses built after the Great Fire are safer, a large fire in 1676 destroys over 600 houses south of the river. In January 1673, a fire destroys your home. Eleven years later, another home of yours is only saved when a neighbour's house is blown up to create a firebreak. Will you ever be able to sleep in peace?



Oh, not again!

## Better firefighting

### Insurance

Unfortunately, there is no home insurance, so Londoners have to pay for their burnt houses to be rebuilt. This is such a problem that in 1680 Nicholas Barbon sets up the first insurance company, and calls it 'The Fire Office'. However, London doesn't have a proper fire brigade until 1866.

### Planning ahead

In 1668, a new law is introduced that requires Londoners to keep a better look-out for fires. Large numbers of buckets, ladders and pick-axes are kept at the ready.

### Fire engine

In the 1670s, Dutch inventor Jan van der Heyden invents a new fire engine with a leather hose known as a 'worm' or 'snake'. It also has an air pump that creates a continuous stream of water. The fire engine is first used in London in the 1690s.



The Monument



## Handy hint

Look out for the yellow flowers of wild mustard that grow over the wastelands created by the fire. The flowers spread so fast that they are nicknamed 'London rocket'!

## What survives today?

### Burnt

Very few buildings from before the fire still stand today, though some survived into the 19th century.



### The monument

Designed by Wren and Hooke, this column (right) marks the Great Fire. It stands near Pudding Lane, close to where the fire started. It's 62m tall. You can still climb the column's 311 interior steps to enjoy the view from the top.



### St Paul's Cathedral

The most famous building designed by Wren, the new cathedral was built from 1675-1710. Twenty-nine of the other fifty-one churches designed by Wren are still standing.



# Glossary

**Apothecary** A historical name for a chemist or pharmacist.

**Bankrupt** Having no money and unable to pay one's debts.

**Brazier** A large metal container in which coal or charcoal was burned, used to warm people.

**Cesspit** A large pit dug into the ground, used to collect sewage or rubbish in the days before towns had sewers.

**Chamber pot** A bowl-shaped pot with a handle, kept in the bedroom under a bed or in a cabinet, used for going to the toilet in the night. Also known as a bedpan.

**Civil War** The war fought between the supporters of Parliament, led by Oliver Cromwell, and King Charles I. It lasted from 1641 to 1651. It ended with the Parliamentary victory at the Battle of Worcester on 3 September 1651.

**Clerk** Pepys' full title was Clerk of the Acts. He was responsible for organising supplies for the Royal Navy.

**Coal tax** After the Great Fire of London, Parliament introduced a tax on coal which it used to rebuild the city.

**Courtier** Someone who attends the court of a king or queen. In the past, the court was a centre of power and courtiers who flattered the king might be rewarded with money, land or titles.

**Drought** A long dry spell of weather, often leading to a shortage of water.

**Ember** A hot fragment of wood or coal left from a fire that is still glowing or smouldering.

**Fireball** A ball of animal fat, called tallow, set alight and used to start fires.

**Firebreak** A gap between houses that stops a fire from spreading. During the Great Fire, firebreaks were created by pulling down houses or blowing them up.

**Fire Court** A special court set up after the Great Fire to settle arguments between landlords and tenants.

**Hemp** A fibre made from the hemp plant that was used in the past to make ropes and nets.

**Inquiry** An official investigation.

**Insurance** An agreement that protects against a future loss. For example, if you insure a house and it burns down, you will be paid the money to rebuild it.

**King's Council** A group of ministers who helped advise the king.

**Leech** A bloodsucking worm-like creature that often lives in water. In the past, leeches were used to draw blood from patients as a supposed cure for many different illnesses and diseases.

**Lord Mayor** The elected head of the City of London's governing body.

**Metropolis** A large and heavily populated city, such as London.

**Migrant** Someone who comes to live in a different country.

**Navy biscuit** A hard biscuit made of flour, salt and water used by the Royal Navy to feed crews on long sea voyages.

**Parliament** The government of England which passes new laws.

**Pitch** A black, sticky substance, also known as tar, that is used to stop wooden ships from leaking.

**Plague** A deadly disease spread quickly by fleas.

**River Fleet** A small river that flows south into the River Thames in London.

**Smoulder** To burn without a flame.

**Suburb** A district lying in the outer parts of a city.

**Warehouse** A store for goods and merchandise.

**Wherry** A small boat used to transport goods along a river.

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