

Source A - 21st Century non-fiction

The Great Fire of London Of 1666- written by C N Trueman

The Great Fire of London of September 1666 was one of the most famous incidents in Stuart England. It was the second tragedy to hit the city in the space of 12 months. Just as the city was recovering from the Great Plague, the inhabitants had to flee the city once again – this time not as a result of a disease, but the result of as human accident. The Great Fire of London, arguably, left a far greater mark on the city when compared to the plague.



The facts about the fire are simple:

The fire started in Pudding Lane. The fire started in a baker's shop owned by Thomas Farriner – who was the king's baker. His maid failed to put out the ovens at the end of the night. The heat created by the ovens caused sparks to ignite the wooden home of Farriner. In her panic, the maid tried to climb out of the building but failed. She was one of the few victims of the fire. Once it started, the fire spread quickly. The city was basically made out of wood and with September following on from the summer, the city was very dry. Strong winds fanned the flames

Despite the evidence to the contrary, the Lord Mayor was not too concerned by what he was told. "A woman could piss it out" was his apparent comment when he was told that the fire was a cause for concern.

Those who could get out of the city did so. Many gathered on nearby heaths such as Hampstead. Here they were safe but they also got a good view of the destruction of the fire.

In 1665, during the plague, the king, Charles II, had fled London. Many would have liked to have done the same and few criticised the king when he did leave for the countryside. However, in September 1666, he stayed in London and took charge of the operation to save the city. His plan was to create fire- breaks. This required knocking down perfectly good buildings but starving the fire of the wood it needed to burn. Charles also ordered that navy rations stored in the docks in the East End should be given to those who had fled the city.

The heat created by the fire was so great that the lead roof on the old St Paul's Cathedral melted. Many saw the lead flowing down the streets. It is said that many pigeons lost their lives as they refused to leave their nests and their wing feathers got burned and they plummeted into the fire. But the actual human casualty rate was remarkably small with possibly only 5 people dying in this fire.

The greatest fear the authorities had was that the flames might cross the River Thames and set fire to the south side of the city. If it could be kept north of the river, then the authorities could claim a victory. In this they were successful as the weather gave them help. The wind that had helped the fire spread, turned on itself and drove the flames back into what had already been burned. Therefore, the fire had nothing to ignite and the fire died out.

The Great Fire had burned down 84 churches and the old St Paul's. However, it had also destroyed the filthy streets associated the Great Plague. The Fleet, a 'tributary' that flowed into the Thames, was nothing more than an open sewer associated with disease and poverty. The fire effectively boiled the Fleet and sterilised it. Slums were simply burned away. In this sense, the fire did London a favour and it was now up to the city's authority's to re-build and re-plan the city. This task was given to Sir Christopher Wren.

Source B – 17th Century non-fiction

Samuel Pepys (23 February 1633 – 26 May 1703) was an English naval administrator and Member of Parliament who is now most famous for the diary he kept for a decade while still a relatively young man. The detailed private diary Pepys kept from 1660 until 1669 was first published in the 19th century and is one of the most important primary sources for the English Restoration period. It provides a combination of personal revelation and eyewitness accounts of great events, such as the Great Plague of London, the Second Dutch War, and the Great Fire of London. Here, he details an episode during 1666, the Great Fire of London.

September 2 1666

*Lords day*¹. Some of our maids sitting up late last night to get things ready against our feast today, Jane called us up, about 3 in the morning, to tell us of a great fire they saw in the City.

So I rose, and slipped on my nightgown and went to her window, and thought it to be on the back side of Markelane² at the furthest; but being unused to such fires as followed, I thought it far enough off, and so went to bed again and to sleep.

About 7 rose again to dress myself, and there looked out at the window and saw the fire not so much as it was, and further off. So to my closet to set things to rights after yesterday's cleaning.

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 was now burning down all Fish Street by London Bridge. So I made myself ready presently, and walked to the Tower and there got up upon one of the high places, Sir J. Robinson's³ little son going up with me; and there I did see the houses at that end of the bridge all on fire, and an infinite great fire on this and the other side of the bridge.

So down, with my heart full of trouble, to the Lieutenant of the Tower, who tells me that it begun this morning in the King's baker's house in Pudding Lane, and that it hath burned down St. Magnes Church and most part of Fish Street already.

So I down to the water-side and there got a boat and through bridge, and there saw a lamentable⁴ fire. Poor Michell's house, as far as the Old Swan, already burned that way and the fire running further, that in a very little time it got as far as the Stillyard while I was there.

Everybody endeavouring to remove their goods, and flinging into the River or bringing them into lighters that lay off. Poor people staying in their houses as long as the very fire touched them, and then running into boats or clambering from one pair of stair by the water-side to another.



Samuel Pepys

¹ **Lords day**- Sunday

² **Markelane**- old district of London

³ **Sir J. Robinson's**- English merchant and politician who sat in the House of Commons between 1660 and 1667. He was Lord Mayor of London in 1662.

⁴ **Lamentable**- full of or expressing sorrow or grief.