



THE GREAT FIRE OF LONDON

By Jesse Maloney

One of the most destructive disasters to affect not only a city, but the whole of England happened more than 300 years ago. Just as the country was recovering from the impact of the 1665 Great Plague of London which killed almost a quarter of the city's population, another catastrophe hit – this time in the form of a blaze that wiped out the capital.

How, though, did a whole city burn down?

It all started very small, the sort of fire that no doubt happens regularly nowadays, and which we could easily **extinguish**. Back in 1666, however, fire extinguishers

and fire brigades were yet to be invented and so, a small blaze could lead to a much bigger one. This is exactly what happened when a fire broke out at midnight in Thomas Farriner's bakery on Pudding Lane one night in September 1666.

At around 1am, Farriner's servant awoke, discovering that the house was full of smoke. Unable to get to a door because of a line of fire, the two men climbed out of the window to escape. With a wooden structure and **thatched roof**, the bakery soon went up in flames. It quickly spread to the adjacent houses. Narrow streets and overhanging wooden


balconies enabled the fire to jump from building to building and quickly engulfed the city, which soon became a **tinderbox** .

In the 17th century, wood was a major construction material. The majority of houses, shops and other buildings were timber-based. This was a cheap and efficient means to erect buildings.

London was filled with wooden homes and structures, all built closely together. This was a recipe for disaster as far as fire was concerned and sure enough, when the Great Fire unfolded, the nature of London's architecture helped

it spread fast and fierce, bringing the whole of the city down to the ground!

Most of what we know today about the Great Fire of London is from the diaries of Samuel Pepys, a loyal servant of King Charles II. In his writing, he states that at 3am, he saw fire from his window but then went back to bed as he wasn't concerned. However, he proved to be very wrong. The fire soon spread to the warehouses that were located on the riverside. These contained goods such as gunpowder and sugar: items that were highly **flammable** if reached by the fire.

A scene from the TV series "The Great Fire" showing a man holding a young girl and a woman in a burning city. The background is filled with flames and smoke, with a wooden cart on wheels in the distance.

A scene from "The Great Fire" - a TV Series based on this historical event.

By 8am, the warehouses were alight and the riverbanks were full of people trying to load their goods onto boats in the river to save them. Samuel Pepys saw how serious the fire had become and rushed to the King to inform him of the severity of the blaze.

King Charles ordered a number of houses to be pulled down, to try and stop the fire spreading any further. However, the fire had overtaken so much of the city that it was becoming impossible to stop.

By 9pm that night, over a thousand homes had been burnt down, including several warehouses and churches. The postmaster, James Hickes, abandoned his post office. This meant that the country's communications was stopped in its tracks. At a time before telephones, post was the only method to deliver messages. So from this point, no news could reach or leave London.

Escaping London was now imperative and many tried to make their way towards green space. Within two days the fire continued to move towards the Tower of London. Volunteers and soldiers attempted to stop the spread but their efforts were **fruitless** against the force of the fire.

The blaze was getting dangerously close to St. Paul's Cathedral, one of the city's best loved and most important architectural treasures. The roof was the first to catch, and being made of lead, started to melt before



the whole cathedral began to collapse. London's skyline was unrecognisable to the one just two days before; the city had been fully engulfed by what started as a little fire in a Pudding Lane bakery.

The rebuilding of the city after the Great Fire used bricks and the idea of a fire service was developed. In 1677, a monument was erected as a memorial to all those that lost their lives in the Great Fire of London. Designed by Sir Christopher Wren, the flame-topped monument is the tallest isolated stone column in the world. The monument stands 202 ft high and is positioned 202 ft from the spot in Pudding Lane on which the Great Fire is believed to have started. Every year, over 100,000 visitors climb the 311 spiral

steps to the monument's observation gallery to enjoy unique and exhilarating views across London.



LEVEL:

Extinguish – put out (a fire)

Thatched roof – a straw roof; thatching is an old method to create roofs before tiles

Tinderbox – a wooden box easily burnt

Flammable – can easily catch fire

Fruitless – useless/with no results