SOFTWARE & TECH

# What Happened In The Great Fire Of London

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## Introduction: The Blaze That Reshaped a City

In the early hours of Sunday, September 2, 1666, a small fire broke out in a baker's shop on Pudding Lane in the heart of London. What began as a minor household mishap would soon escalate into one of the most devastating urban catastrophes in European history. The Great Fire of London consumed not just timber and thatch, but an entire medieval cityscape—along with its ancient institutions, its crowded tenements, and its deep-seated social structures. To understand what happened in the Great Fire of London is to witness a story of human error, heroic failure, destructive winds, and ultimately, a phoenix-like rebirth that laid the foundations for the modern metropolis we know today.

The conflagration raged for four relentless days, from Sunday September 2 to Wednesday September 5, 1666. When the smoke finally cleared, it had gutted over 13,000 houses, 87 parish churches, St. Paul's Cathedral, and countless public buildings. Remarkably, official records suggest that only six confirmed deaths occurred, though modern historians suspect the true toll was far higher—especially among the poor, whose lives were seldom documented. The fire changed everything: property laws, building regulations, insurance practices, and the very fabric of London's identity.

## London Before the Flames: A City Primed for Disaster

### The Medieval Timber Maze

To fully grasp what happened in the Great Fire of London, one must first understand the city that burned. In 1666, London was a crowded warren of narrow, winding streets. Most buildings were constructed from timber—oak beams, plaster, and thatched roofs. Buildings overhung the streets, leaning so close to one another that neighbours could shake hands across the upper windows. This density created a perfect fuel bed for any spark. Open hearths, candles, and oil lamps were everyday necessities, and firefighting consisted of little more than leather buckets, hand-pumped engines, and a prayer that the wind would not gust.

### A Summer of Drought and Heat

The summer of 1666 had been exceptionally dry, with a long drought that left wooden structures tinder-dry. After a harsh winter and a sweltering spring, the city was a parched maze of combustible material. The Thames had receded, and water supplies from the river were less accessible than usual. This seasonal dryness meant that any fire that started would spread with frightening speed.

### Social and Political Context

London was also recovering from the Great Plague of 1665, which had killed an estimated 100,000 people. The city's population was still anxious, and the economy was fragile. King Charles II had only been restored to the

throne for six years, and the nation was wary of foreign threats—especially from the Dutch, with whom England was at war. These tensions would later fuel conspiracy theories about the fire.

## The Spark: What Happened In The Great Fire Of London Begins

### Pudding Lane Bakery

At around 1 a.m. on Sunday, September 2, a fire erupted at the bakery of Thomas Farriner, the king's baker. Farriner's oven had likely not been properly doused the night before. Embers from the oven ignited stacked faggots of wood nearby. The flames quickly spread to the surrounding timber houses. Farriner, his daughter, and his manservant escaped through an upstairs window, but the maid perished—possibly the first victim.

The fire might have been contained if not for a fatal misjudgment. The Lord Mayor of London, Sir Thomas Bloodworth, was summoned to assess the blaze. Famously, he dismissed it with the words, "A woman might piss it out." He ordered the houses around the bakery to be pulled down—a standard firebreak technique—but by the time his orders were carried out, the wind had already carried sparks to neighbouring rooftops. The opportunity to halt the fire in its infancy was lost.

### The Wind Plays Its Role

A strong easterly wind fanned the flames, driving them westward through the city. The fire leaped from roof to roof with terrifying speed, igniting pitch, tar, and other flammable materials stored in warehouses along the riverfront. Within hours, the blaze had grown from a manageable incident into an unstoppable inferno.

## The Four Days of Terror: A Chronology of Destruction

### Sunday September 2: The Fire Takes Hold

By mid-morning on Sunday, the fire had reached London Bridge and was threatening the warehouses along the Thames. The bridge itself—lined with houses and shops—became a bridge of fire, as flames raced across its wooden structure. Many citizens, expecting a routine Sunday, were caught off guard. By evening, the fire had consumed the area from Pudding Lane to Fish Street Hill, and the sky glowed an ominous red for miles around. Panic began to set in as families gathered their belongings and fled toward the fields.

### Monday September 3: The Heart of the City Burns

Monday was the day of greatest destruction. The fire now stretched across a half-mile front, devouring everything in its path. The Royal Exchange, the city's commercial hub, was engulfed. The Guildhall, the seat of civic governance, was badly damaged. The great merchant houses along Cheapside—home to goldsmiths, silk merchants, and bankers—collapsed in flames. The fire showed no respect for wealth or status; it was an equal-opportunity destroyer.

Samuel Pepys, the famous diarist, recorded the scene with chilling clarity. Watching from a barge on the Thames, he described "a most horrid, malicious, bloody flame" that consumed everything within its reach. Pepys played a key role in alerting the Navy Office officials, urging them to prepare boats and emergency supplies. His diary remains the most vivid eyewitness account of what happened in the Great Fire of London.

### Tuesday September 4: St. Paul's Cathedral Falls

Tuesday brought the most iconic loss of all. St. Paul's Cathedral, the majestic symbol of the Anglican Church, had been undergoing restoration after years of neglect. Its massive wooden scaffolding and lead roof made it a deadly trap. Sparks ignited the scaffolding, and the lead roof melted, cascading down the walls in molten streams. The cathedral's interior became a furnace, and its great stone walls cracked and collapsed. Pepys described "the stones of Paul's flew like grenades" as the heat became so intense that stone literally exploded. The loss of St. Paul's was a psychological blow—a symbol that the old order had been utterly consumed.

Wednesday September 5: The Fire Is Contained

By Wednesday, the wind finally began to subside, and the firefighting efforts organized by King Charles II and his brother, James, Duke of York, began to take effect. The king himself appeared among the crowds, giving orders and encouraging the exhausted firefighters. Gunpowder was used to create massive firebreaks by blowing up entire rows of houses, halting the fire's advance toward the Tower of London and the wealthy districts of Westminster. By evening, the flames were contained, and the city lay in smouldering ruins.

## Aftermath: A City in Ashes

### The Scale of Devastation

When the embers cooled, Londoners faced a landscape of apocalyptic ruin. The fire had destroyed 436 acres—roughly 80% of the city within the ancient Roman walls. Over 13,200 houses were gone, leaving approximately 100,000 people homeless. Eighty-seven parish churches, 44 livery company halls, the Royal Exchange, the Custom House, and countless shops, taverns, and warehouses were reduced to ash. The economic damage was estimated at over £10 million—an astronomical sum for the 17th century.

### Uncertainty and Blame

In the immediate aftermath, suspicion fell on foreigners, Catholics, and Dutch spies. A French watchmaker named Robert Hubert was hastily tried and executed for starting the fire, despite overwhelming evidence that he had no connection to the Pudding Lane bakery. He was likely a scapegoat, sacrificed to public hysteria. Modern historians agree that the fire was an accident, but the search for a culprit reflected the deep religious and political divisions of the time.

### Relief and Temporary Shelter

Homeless Londoners set up makeshift camps in the fields of Moorfields, Islington, and Hampstead. King Charles II issued a proclamation ordering neighbouring towns to provide shelter and food. A national relief fund was established, and the government temporarily suspended rent payments. The city's poor, already struggling after the plague, faced the greatest hardship.

## Rebuilding London: A New City from the Ashes

### Sir Christopher Wren's Vision

One of the most remarkable outcomes of what happened in the Great Fire of London was the architectural renaissance it sparked. King Charles II immediately commissioned Sir Christopher Wren to oversee the rebuilding. Wren dreamed of a grand, baroque city with wide boulevards, piazzas, and elegant stone buildings. His plans for a completely redesigned London were ambitious, but they faced insurmountable obstacles: property owners insisted on rebuilding on their original plots, and the old street patterns were deeply entrenched.

Nevertheless, Wren left an indelible mark. He designed 51 new churches, including his masterpiece—the new St. Paul's Cathedral, with its iconic dome that still defines the London skyline. He also oversaw the rebuilding of the Monument, a 202-foot column erected near Pudding Lane to commemorate the fire. Its height is exactly 202 feet—the distance from the bakery to the spot where the fire is believed to have started.

### The Rebuilding Act of 1667

Parliament passed the Rebuilding Act of 1667, which set new standards for construction. Houses could no longer be built from timber and thatch; they had to be brick or stone, with tiled roofs. Streets were widened, and new regulations governed height, thickness, and sanitation. These reforms created a safer, more fire-resistant city—a direct lesson from the disaster.

Insurance and Firefighting

The fire also gave birth to modern fire insurance. In 1667, Nicholas Barbon founded the first fire insurance company, the "Fire Office," which employed its own fire brigades to protect insured properties. These early insurance brigades evolved into the organized fire services of later centuries. The concept of a paid, professional firefighting force—equipped with pumps, hoses, and ladders—emerged directly from the catastrophe.

## Key Figures in the Story

### Samuel Pepys

Pepys, a naval administrator and diarist, provides the most detailed account of the fire. His diary entries from September 1666 are a primary source for historians. His cool-headed decision to bury his valuables in the garden and his efforts to coordinate the navy's response saved many lives. Pepys's observations—from the chaos in the streets to the king's involvement—capture the human dimension of the disaster.

### Sir Thomas Bloodworth

The Lord Mayor is often blamed for the fire's escalation. His hesitation to order firebreaks, his dismissal of the early blaze, and his indecisive leadership made a bad situation catastrophic. Bloodworth's legacy is a cautionary tale about the cost of poor decision-making in a crisis.

### King Charles II

The king emerged from the fire with his reputation enhanced. He rode among the crowds, organized relief, and personally directed firefighting efforts. His commitment to rebuilding projects and his support for Wren's vision helped transform London into a modern capital. The fire, paradoxically, strengthened the monarchy's standing.

### Sir Christopher Wren

Wren's genius was not just architectural but logistical. He managed the massive rebuilding project with remarkable efficiency, balancing the demands of property owners, the crown, and the church. His St. Paul's Cathedral remains one of the world's great architectural achievements.

## Legacy: Why the Great Fire Still Matters

### Urban Planning Lessons

The Great Fire of London is a landmark event in urban planning history. It demonstrated the catastrophic vulnerability of densely built, timber-dominated cities. Modern fire codes, building regulations, and emergency response systems owe a debt to the lessons learned in 1666. Cities around the world studied London's example when crafting their own safety standards.

### Historical Memory and Commemoration

The Monument (erected 1671–1677) remains a prominent landmark, and each year on September 2, the City of London holds a commemorative service. The fire is part of British school curricula and popular culture, from children's songs to historical documentaries. The story of the fire—the "small spark that

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