



The night that changed London forever

Find out how a fire at a bakery transformed the nation's capital in just four days.

In today's London, a short walk from the imposing walls of the Tower of London, stands The Monument, a golden-topped column with 311 steps that looks out over Britain's capital. The Monument stands near the spot where a monstrous fire erupted 350 years ago in 1666. In the space of four days, the fire destroyed more than 13,000 buildings and left up to 80,000 people homeless, changing how the capital city looked forever. From the ashes of this great calamity rose much of the London that we see today – but how did a fire at a baker's house cause such a terrible disaster?



Monument in London.

The first spark

Although there has been some debate as to the exact location of where the fire started, most historians agree that it began near or on Pudding Lane. Before going to bed on the 1 September 1666, the king's baker, Thomas Farriner, raked the coals in the bake house, just as he



PUDDING LANE EC3

did every night. This time, however, there was an accident. While he was sleeping, something caught fire on the smouldering coals. Soon the blaze had grown out of control. With smoke filling the house, a servant woke Farriner and his daughter, who escaped through the roof.

A city built of wood

Today, London is a safe city of concrete buildings, with fire alarms and emergency exits, protected by a first-rate fire brigade. In contrast, in September 1666 it was a disaster waiting to happen. Much of the city had not changed since medieval times and it was made up of tightly packed timber buildings that leaned over winding narrow alleys. With so much wood around, fires were unsurprisingly frequent, as most homes had open fires and open candles were used to light houses. It was not unusual for entire streets to burn down.



This picture gives some idea of how narrow the streets were in London.

An illustration of the Great Fire. The smoke could be seen from as far away as Oxford.



A NEARLY EXPLOSIVE FINALE

With its giant stone walls for protection, the Tower of London was one of the few buildings to be spared by the fire. Even so, around 272 tonnes of gunpowder had been stored in the Tower. As the fire spread, a huge effort had to be made to remove it. If it had caught fire the explosion would have been enormous.

MAKING HISTORY

Some of the most interesting accounts of the Great Fire come from the diary of Samuel Pepys, who lived just a few streets away from Pudding Lane. Fearing that his house might burn down, he carted away as many of his things as he could. In his diary he wrote how he even dug a hole to bury his wine and Parmesan cheese to keep them safe.



Out of control

What made this fire different was the weather. The summer had been warm, drying out the wooden buildings and making them highly flammable. There was no proper fire brigade or water hoses, so when the first fires broke out, teams of people tried to put them out by pulling down buildings in their path. To do this they needed permission from the mayor of London, Sir Thomas Bludworth, but he was

angered at being woken. He told them the fire was not serious and went back to bed. In the early hours of Sunday morning a strong wind started to blow from the east, fanning Farriner's fire across 300 buildings. When King Charles II heard of the fire he immediately ordered buildings to be destroyed in its path, but the wind was so strong that flames simply leapt over the gaps. Over four chaotic days the

fire burnt down 13,000 houses, 87 churches, St Paul's Cathedral and hundreds of shops. The fire was brought under control after dozens of buildings were blown up on purpose in order to create gaps too wide for the fire to cross. Officially only six people died in the fire, although some historians think there might have been thousands of victims whose names were simply not reported or written down.

No smoke without fire?

After the Great Fire many people were angry and upset and looking for someone to blame. Parliament ordered an investigation, but decided that it had simply been an accident. However, England was at war with France and the Netherlands at the time, and some people believed

that the French had started the fire. A French watchmaker called Robert Hubert confessed to starting the fire along with 23 other conspirators and was hanged. However, people realised afterwards that he could not have done it because he was not in the country at the time.

Out from the ashes

Despite the damage, Londoners were determined to rebuild their city. The architect and favourite of the king, Sir Christopher Wren, led a team of six that was given responsibility for the rebuilding work.

Wren and his team designed buildings built from brick and stone rather than timber so that fires could not take hold so easily. Wren designed 51 of the city's churches, The Monument, which commemorates the

Great Fire, and his masterpiece, St. Paul's Cathedral, which he began rebuilding in 1675 and which was finished in 1710. Inside the cathedral is a Latin dedication to Wren that says: "Reader, if you seek his memorial – look around you".

BETTER LATE THAN NEVER

Members of the Worshipful Company of Bakers – a group that has existed since medieval times – apologised to the Lord Mayor of London because it was a baker who started the fire. However, the apology was only made in 1986 – 320 years later.



Sir Christopher Wren.

St. Paul's today.

