LONDON FALLING

IN 1666, THE CITY OF LONDON WAS RAZED ALMOST TO THE GROUND. BUT THE RAGING WALL OF FIRE THAT VIRTUALLY DECIMATED THE CITY BEGAN IN A HUMBLE BAKER'S OVEN. CHRIS WRIGHT RE-ENACTS KEY POINTS OF THE GREAT FIRE OF LONDON, AS ONE CITIZEN MIGHT HAVE EXPERIENCED THEM AT THE TIME

IMAGE: CORBIS

A

September 2, 1666.
Sunday.
Fish Street, London.
1am

I wake to the sound of bells ringing backwards. The peals are muffled, the chimes out of sequence; it is the middle of the night, not even a hint of dawn. I know what this all means. Fire.

In London, 1666, this is how we call an emergency. I get dressed quickly, and in neighbouring rooms here in the Star Inn on Fish Street, I can hear others doing the same, ready to investigate and help. It is not all altruism. The fact is, if there is a fire around the corner, you want to put it out so your own house doesn't go up in flames.

I'm not panicking. I am just lodged in this inn near the meat markets of Little Eastcheap to seek buyers for cattle, and my home and family are in the north. But as I emerge on the landing, I'm met by a host of grizzled faces showing bleary unease, merchants and workers pulling on shirts and heading out to the street.

Like every other city street in London, it is an achievement even to see the sky from here. The streets are narrow, and the houses and inns all jut outwards, bits of masonry tacked on to the upper floors, all eaves, gutters and jettied paraphernalia. Every house joins another, and another, in a jumbled timber terrace. But even here, so very late — one or two in the morning, they are saying, but who can be sure — it is bright. What little sky we can see is a vivid, flickering orange. The fire is behind us, a street away. Pudding Lane.

I walk around a row of houses, braced against a fierce wind that I know is terrible news in a fire, and I see it. It is the bakery on Pudding Lane, and it is aflame to the roof.

I know the owner by sight: Thomas Farriner is his name, and he has a daughter, Hannah. He makes ship's biscuit for the navy — a useful contract to have, with so many of our ships involved with the war with the Dutch and French. I like his bakery, if only because the smells of the bread and pasties are a welcome distraction from the reek of human waste in the open drains of the stinking street. As a neighbour emerges from another house, clutching gold in fear of his own house going up, I ask what became of the Farriners. He says the family got out by climbing across the eaves into a neighbour's window, though Hannah was burned along the way. A manservant made it too, but there is no sign of the maid. Nobody even seems to know her name.

You wouldn't call it a panic, or not yet anyway. The closest neighbours are pulling out prized possessions in bundles, and the bakery is clearly gone for good, but it doesn't look so very bad. I've seen much worse.

We are close to London Bridge, the one river crossing in the whole of London, and there are waterwheels under the northern end that pump water to the city. Already men are coming with buckets, and hurling them hopefully at the base of the flames. And as the parish constables arrive, closing off the ends of this little street and ushering us away, I can see ladders and fire hooks being brought from the nearby parish church, St Margaret Fish Street Hill. The norm is to pull down neighbouring buildings with the fire hooks, to stop the spread of the fire. It tells you something about how well we build our timber homes these days that a man can pull them down with a hook, but it has its advantages. Surely they now have this under control.

And yet, in the back of my mind, I have doubts. This wind! It is not much less than a gale. I can see chimneys have toppled already in the night, and if it takes the fire, there's no telling where it could end. It has just turned September, and I can't remember the last rain we had in this hot, draining summer. The timber of the houses must be dry as tinder.

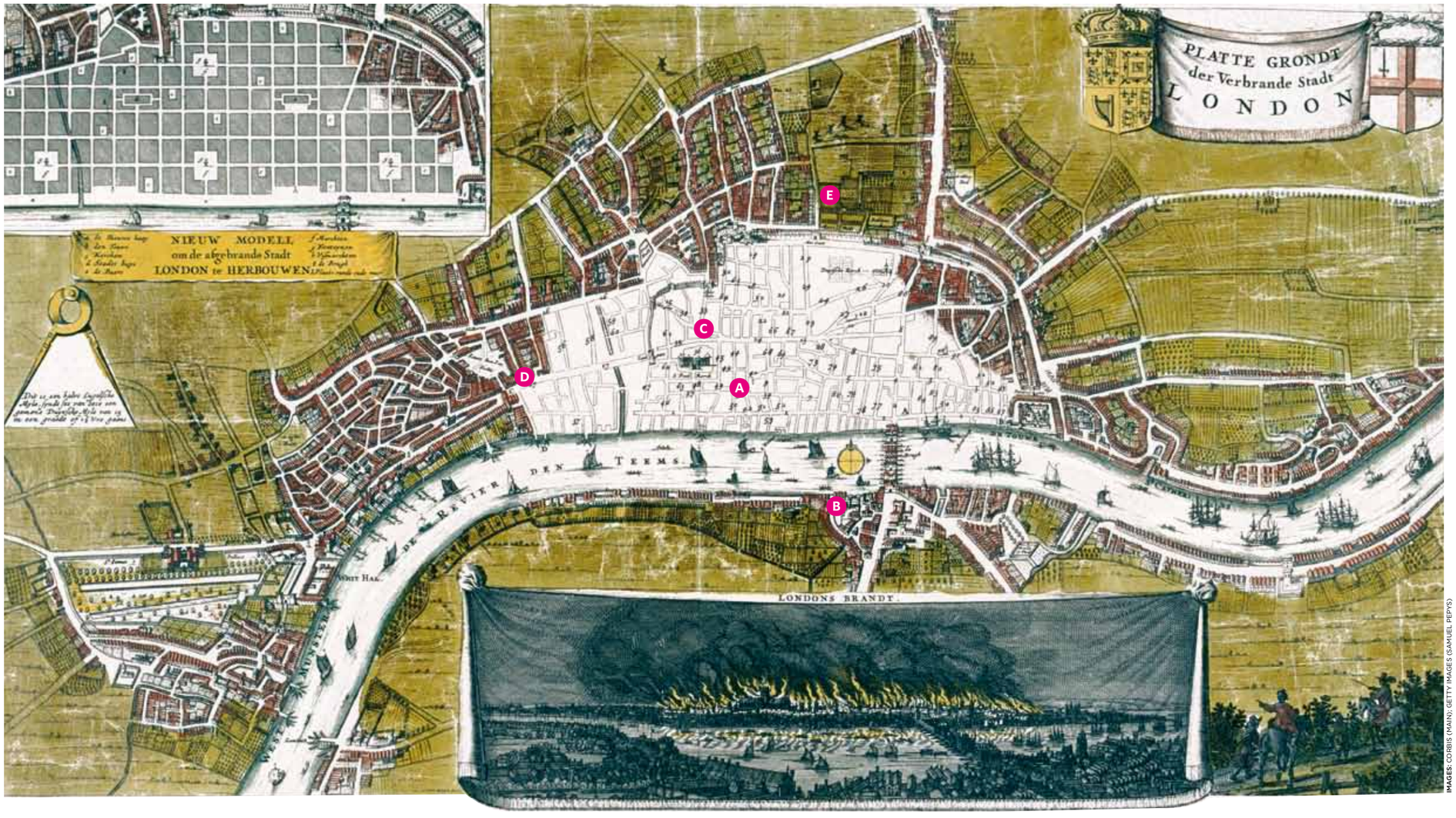
I head back to the Star Inn, to pack what little I have here into a bag. As I leave I hear the parish constables talking, and they share my concerns; they want to pull buildings down and are about to summon the mayor to give them permission to do it.

IMAGE: GETTY IMAGES

THE OLD LONDON BRIDGE, AS DETAILED IN THE 17TH CENTURY ENGAVING KNOWN AS *VISCHER'S LONDON*

TEMPTING FATE?

Due to the crowded conditions that urban Londoners endured at the time, everyone knew that fire was a serious threat. However, there were some regulations in place, including rules about the proper storing of fuel, that were enforced by local authorities. Fire engines were also more prevalent after around 1640 or so. In 1657, historian and writer James Howell proudly wrote of London: "There's no place [...] better armed against the fury of the fire; for besides the pitched buckets *(see page 98)* that hang in churches and halls, there are new engines for that purpose."



IMAGES: CORBIS (MAIN); GETTY IMAGES (SAMUEL PEPYS)

THE CITY OF LONDON, 1666. KEY LOCATIONS IN THE STORY ARE INDICATED ON THE MAP

A Fish Street

B Southwark

C St Paul's Cathedral

D Temple Bar

E Moorfields

SMOKEY STATISTICS
THE NUMBERS BEHIND THE GREAT FIRE

THE FIRE RAGED FOR FOUR DAYS, AFTER WHICH **80 PERCENT** OF LONDON WAS DESTROYED

AN ESTIMATED 13,000 HOUSES AND **89 CHURCHES** BURNT TO THE GROUND

ONE IN SIX LONDONERS WAS MADE HOMELESS, AROUND **100,000 IN TOTAL**

IN ECONOMIC TERMS, THE COST OF THE FIRE WAS ROUGHLY **£10 MILLION** — A HUGE SUM AT THE TIME, CONSIDERING LONDON'S YEARLY INCOME THEN WAS ABOUT **£12,000.** NEARLY 50 YEARS AFTER THE FIRE, PARTS OF THE CITY WERE STILL BEING REBUILT

LONDON WOULD NOT SEE SUCH WIDESPREAD DEVASTATION FOR OVER **270 YEARS,** UNTIL THE BLITZ OF WORLD WAR II

THE ACTUAL AMOUNT OF LONDON WHICH WAS BURNT IS EQUAL TO ABOUT **10 TIMES** THE AREA OF THE PENTAGON, IN WASHINGTON DC

DIARY OF THE GREAT FIRE

London historians owe Samuel Pepys (pronounced Peeps) quite a lot. The Englishman, who lived from 1633 to 1703, was a prodigious writer, who penned an extensive and highly candid diary of his daily life. Over nine years, he penned over a million words. His entries included descriptions of:

- His work rebuilding the Royal Navy
- His several affairs, despite the fact that he was married to a tempestuous younger French woman named Elizabeth
- The Great Plague of London, which happened just before the fire, between 1665 and 1666, and claimed the lives of as many as 100,000 citizens

Pepys also wrote about the Great Fire of London. During the fire, he grew so concerned for the welfare of his possessions that he buried many of his prized objects, including an expensive wheel of parmesan cheese from Italy, "as well as my wine".

He also noted in his diary that "I wrote to my father this night; but the post-house being burned, the letter could not go."

After meeting the Lord Mayor, Sir Thomas Bludworth (who previously noted that a woman could easily have urinated over the flames and put out the fire), Pepys wrote that "He cried like a fainting woman, 'Lord what can I do? I am spent! People will not obey me. I have been pulling down houses. But the fire overtakes us faster than I can do it.'"

One of his more unusual entries revolved around a visit to Westminster Abbey in 1668. There Pepys saw the mummified remains of Queen Katherine, widow of King Henry V, and wrote: "Here we did see, by particular favour, the body of Queen Katherine of Valois [...] And I did kiss her mouth, reflecting upon it that I did kiss a Queen, and that this was my birthday, 36 years old, that I did first kiss a Queen."

RENAISSANCE MAN AND REBUILDER

Sir Christopher Wren was an English architect and scientist, but has been justifiably remembered, and lionised, as one of the country's foremost architects. After the fire of 1666, Wren submitted ambitious plans to radically rebuild and improve upon London's streets and buildings, though the plan was not implemented. He did, however, design 51 new city churches, as well as his crowning achievement, the new St Paul's Cathedral.

But construction of the masterpiece was no easy task, and Wren was faced with constant criticism from the government and clergy. In the hopes of speeding up the project, Parliament withheld his pay for 14 years, though to little effect. Finally, in 1711, after 36 years of work, the new cathedral was opened.

When Wren died in 1723, he was interred in St Paul's, along with an inscription: LECTOR SI MONUMENTUM REQUIRIS CIRCUM-SPICE. Translated from Latin, it says, "Reader, if you seek his monument — look around you."

As if this wasn't enough, before Wren made his name as an architect, he also contributed to a dazzling array of scientific fields. In time, his work gained such acclaim that many great minds of the era, including Sir Isaac Newton, held him in high regard. Not surprising perhaps, for a boy who gained entry to Oxford University in his teens.

Over the years, Wren experimented with injecting fluids into the veins of animals at a time when blood circulation was barely understood; built a telescope measuring over 24 metres to study the moon; invented an instrument for writing in the dark (as well as one that wrote two copies of a document at once); and even constructed a transparent beehive — to better observe bees.

I pack my things, ask the nervous landlady of the inn if there's anything I can do, and am back at Pudding Lane in half an hour. To my shock, no buildings have been pulled down, the fire hooks standing idle. And now the fire is spreading up the street.

There is a man of some importance watching it all, surrounded by constables, and I recognise him as Sir Thomas Bludworth — the Lord Mayor of London. I get close enough to eavesdrop over the noise of fleeing residents and the growing roar of the flame. The constables, I hear, want the buildings pulled down; Bludworth will not allow it without the permission of the owners — and who knows where they are? Everyone on this street is just a tenant.

Pressed, Bludworth gets angry. "It's not so serious," he says. "A woman could piss it out." And with that, he goes back to bed.

GOODBYE, PUDDING LANE. AND GOODBYE TOO, MY STAR INN ON FISH STREET. I CAN SEE THE THATCH AFLAME, THE ROOM WHERE I WAS SLEEPING, BURNING

I think quickly. I need to get away from here. But as I go I look back, and for all the panic of people trying to save their families and their possessions, piling the detritus of their lives onto carts and fighting already over the right to use them, I can't help but observe to myself: good riddance, Pudding Lane. You know why they call it that? Not for some tasty apple pie or trifle. Here and now, pudding means entrails. It means bowels. The butchers in Eastcheap used to send the guts of pigs down here towards the Thames. Not much has changed: the place stinks. Open sewers, clogged with human excrement. Rats. You can still see the marks on the doors from the plague outbreak last year. They say one in five of all Londoners died of it, and even if the bodies are long since burned, the smell still lingers in the nostrils of everyone who lived through it.

So goodbye, Pudding Lane. And goodbye, too, my Star Inn on Fish Street. I can see the thatch aflame, the room where I was sleeping now burning. There was hay in the backyard, I remember, and that must have carried it. The Star will never see another dawn. None of these streets will.

The wind is blowing the flame west. East of me is the Tower of London, and I can't imagine King Charles II opening his doors. So instead I head south, to the Thames, to water.

As I go, and as I pass the wharves around London Bridge, I do so with deep foreboding. More timber buildings — barely more than paper, some of them — filled with tar, pitch, hemp, flax and gunpowder. I move faster, onto London Bridge itself, lined with buildings just as high as on the streets I've just left.

Already I am part of an exodus of people crossing the river in hope of the protection of the waterway. But even here, I know there is the potential for fire to spread. There is a gap in the housing on either side, about a third of the way down; the legacy of the last big fire in London more than 30 years ago. Looking back to the north bank, I see St Margaret's going up and the church next door, St Magnus the Martyr. I can see it is doomed. That church has stood there since Norman times. Fire has no respect for history.

The first light of dawn is appearing in the east as I finally make it to Southwark on the southern side of London Bridge. Tired, I head for the wharves near the bridge, just for somewhere to sit, and find myself among a growing crowd surveying the view across the river in a combination of horror, awe and fascination.

A PORTRAYAL OF KING CHARLES II *(CENTRE)* DURING THE GREAT FIRE OF LONDON. THE 17TH CENTURY WAS NOT AN EASY TIME TO BE KING, MUCH LESS DURING THIS CRISIS

IMAGES: THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY (MAIN); GETTY IMAGES (CHRISTOPHER WREN)

IMAGE: AFP

DEADLY ROOFING

In 17th century England, lead was quite widely used in buildings. Because it has a relatively low melting point, and is soft and malleable — hence easy to work with — humans have been using lead and lead compounds for centuries. For example, sheets of lead were used in roofs as they were effective at protecting buildings from the atmosphere and from weather conditions. However, the metal's low melting point of 327.5 degrees Celsius also made it dangerous in event of fire — as accounts of the destruction of St Paul's Cathedral in 1666 illustrate.

It is a pitiful sight now. The flame already covers a quarter of a mile (over 400 metres) of the north bank. At the side of the bridge, where I had been walking just an hour or so ago, by the Old Swan Lane steps to the river, small boats are bobbling in the churning river, as people throw bundles of belongings in. Where there isn't a boat to hand, they throw them straight into the river, hoping they will float. Mostly,

ST PAUL'S CATHEDRAL IS ALREADY BECOMING A SANCTUARY. IT HAS BEEN HERE FOR 600 YEARS, AND I'M CERTAIN IT WILL STILL BE STANDING CENTURIES FROM NOW

they don't. If there was no panic before, there is now.

It occurs to me that I never saw a fire engine anywhere around the fire. These fabulous things were invented about 40 years ago, with a pump attached to a cylinder, all mounted on a sort of sledge. By pumping a handle at each end, men can pump water towards a fire. They boasted that using one of these fire engines, just 10 men could quench a fire more easily than 500 with buckets and ladders. There are quite a few of them in the capital these days. So where are they?

It doesn't take long to find the answer. The sledges take 28 men or eight horses to move, and catch constantly on the cobbled streets of London. How can you move them to a fire, when people and carts clog the streets in a moving tide coming the other way?

Worse, those waterwheels to supply the water, under London Bridge; I can see them right now. They're on fire — flame in the water. I am certain there is just no future in fire engines.

My city is on fire. It is pitiful, and I don't see where it will end. With this thought in my head, and nowhere to go, I sleep right here on the wharf, the heat of the fire brazen across the width of the river.

B

Southwark
2pm

I awake in the early afternoon to a disaster magnified. The wind is still stiff, and the blaze has moved west along the river. Whatever order ever existed on the riverbank has gone. It is now a clamour not just to save belongings — but lives.

Don't ask me why, but I want to be a part of this. The fire is moving fast, but not so fast that you can't outrun it on foot. I want to see this, to see my city burn, perhaps to help. So with London Bridge aflame, I catch a boat back across.

This is not as hard as you'd think — dozens of boats are doing a roaring trade bringing people and their goods from north bank to south, so it's no problem at all to catch one going back across. I'm the only one on it though, bar a boatman who seems so mystified by my intentions he doesn't even bother to charge me. No need, he'll make a fortune loading his boat and coming the other way.

He's not a madman, though, and stays far from London Bridge, instead plotting a course further west, beyond the frontier of the flame, as near as the Thames gets to the mighty cathedral of St Paul's. "Safest place in the city, that," he says. "All made of stone."

I realise that he's probably right — and that he is not the only man to think so. As I battle through the crowded streets, clogged by wagons, handcarts and people on foot with all they own on their backs, past beds being carried with invalids still in them, past churches now being filled with furniture and gold, I realise that St Paul's is already becoming a sanctuary. And why not? Look at the place: huge, impregnable, mighty stone. It has been here for 600 years and I am certain it will still be standing hundreds of years from now.

This is where the booksellers of the city reside, and already they are storing their books, papers and inks in the cathedral's crypt.

But the fire is not yet here. It is not hard to find it — the flame covers the whole horizon to the east, the heat intense, bits of fiery material dropping treacherously from the sky. I walk towards it, to Cannon Street, between St Paul's and the river, where I find myself clapping eyes once again on Bludworth, the mayor.

I want to tell him that if he had done his job at two o'clock this morning and let the firefighters pull down the surrounding houses on Pudding Lane, he would still have a city to attend to. But I don't need to. Others have beaten me to it. One of them, well-dressed and stately, claims to be speaking on behalf of the King, telling him to pull down all houses in the fire's path, and offering soldiers.

Bludworth does not look well. "Lord, what can I do? I am spent!" he says. "People will not obey me. I have been pulling down houses. But the fire overtakes us faster than we can do it." Still, he refuses the offer of soldiers — and then, once again, goes home.

It doesn't take long to realise that Bludworth is no longer in charge, mayor or no mayor. I hear the regimented trudge of military boots in formation — the Coldstream Guards. That means the king, and maybe his younger brother the Duke of York, is running the show now. The soldiers set up at Three Crane Stairs, on the river; this is clearly where they mean to stop the fire. That means everything between it and the fire, including where I'm standing right now, is expendable. Time to move then.

I step back to where the soldiers are setting up their command post and realise that it is getting dark. It isn't, of course; there is no darkness amid this extraordinary, looping, arcing bow of flame. But it should be dusk, and if you look west, you can see darkness beyond the flame. Still, there will not be darkness tonight — or many more to come, if this keeps up. From this point I can see another problem: the wind has changed. Now it is not just moving east, but north too, and there is no river to stop it to the north. This flame is a mile (1.6 kilometres) long.

This time yesterday it was Saturday evening. I was in the Star, eating well, drinking ale. The Star is gone now. From what the soldiers are saying, a thousand homes have gone with it, and nine churches, six livery halls and countless wharves. It occurs to me, for the first time, that they might not be able to stop this until it has taken out everything inside London's ancient Roman walls. At least the Romans had the common sense to build in stone.

There is nothing to be done. I head, with the rest of the crowd, for St Paul's. I lie down on a pile of a bookmaker's papers and rest in the crypt, while the fire roars and groans outside.

C

September 3, 1666.
Monday.
St Paul's Cathedral

When I wake, it is not just the flames that have spread. Suddenly, somehow, everyone seems to know what happened, and it is rather different to what I remember. According to the popular verdict, it wasn't a baker whose oven went out of control. It was the French. Or the Dutch. Or maybe the French and the Dutch.

This is how it works now, with our limited communication. There is a newspaper we all see, the *Gazette*, but beyond that it's all just what you tell me and what I pass on to my neighbour, plus or minus a couple of embellishments. So if the last person said it was the Dutch, then the Dutch it will be.

This is no time to be a foreigner here. It is bad enough at the best of times, our nations are at war, after all: the Dutch and English fleets are probably fighting right now in the North Sea, unaware of the burning capital. But normally, this city's love of trade and profit turns something of a blind eye to nationality. Not now. On the street, Frenchmen are being beaten, their shops looted, on the pretext that they were surely about to set their own premises on fire, an attempt to make the conflagration worse.

FIRE RELICS

FIREFIGHTER'S HELMET
Made sometime between 1650 and 1700, this helmet is strikingly similar to those used by modern firefighters — down to the flap at the back, which helps protect the wearer's neck

FIRE BUCKET
A typical bucket made from leather, used to combat fires in the 1600s. Although cleverly waterproofed with a layer of pitch inside, these buckets had to be handled with care, lest they split open. Firefighting equipment such as this was often stored in local churches

FLOOR TILES
These tin-glazed floor tiles are originals found in the cellar of a shop on Pudding Lane, where the Great Fire of London started. You can almost sense the heat coming off of them, and traces of soot still remain on the surface. Intricately decorated, it is thought that the tiles may have come from a wealthy household

Clawing out of the jammed and stacked crypt of St Paul's to the street, I see the fire has moved further east in the night. And I see something else — nobody's bothering to try to put it out, not really. There is no shortage of cobble-clogged cart-borne traffic trying to get to the city gates, people fleeing the flame. But stopping to fight for their homes? No. It is as if there's an air of finality to it. People are talking about prophecies that have been hanging around for years, that something apocalyptic would come in 1666, the number of the Beast, and all that. Everyone seems to think that we've known for years the city would burn to the ground. And if it's predestined, why fight it?

I talk to the soldiers. The General Letter Office on Threadneedle Street went up in the night — with who knows what mail, what vital wartime mail, within it? There is looting now, and everybody knows it, casks of wine being lifted from the wharves and rolled down the cobbles. We don't trust banks, us Londoners, these weird and conceited inventions, so most of us keep our money in bags and chests in our houses. Now it is either being carried out by frantic owners, burning in homes, or being looted by thieves.

A strange commerce is springing up too. On a normal day, you might pay a shilling a mile for the use of a cart. Yesterday I heard four pounds quoted for a four-mile trip. Today, it is moving out of all common sense: first five pounds for a cart, then 10, then 30.

London, the greatest centre of business and commerce on earth, its monuments turning to ash. Venturing east once again, I see the Royal Exchange, home to our nation's traders, take flame. One after another, the statues of English kings crash to the ground. There's something else, too: the strangest smell, exotic, even pleasant. It takes forever to work out what it is. It's the spices from the cellars of the nearby shops, all going up in perfumed Arabian flame. If nothing else, it makes a change from the smell of burning waste from the sewers.

History is vanishing, and public order too. No movement in the traffic, particularly at the city's eight gates. Looting everywhere, robberies in broad daylight — and it's all broad daylight now beneath the flame. And amidst it, the most savage beatings of blameless Dutch and Frenchmen.

Then strangely, in the midst of all this, I find myself a job.

D

Temple Bar.
2pm

In the middle of Monday, a new plan becomes clear. The Duke of York is in charge and sets up command posts around the fire — the last one, Three Crane Stairs, having gone up in flames earlier. Going to the closest one, Temple Bar on Fleet Street, I find myself recruited by a parish constable. I fear at first the tradition of the press gangs — no choice, just a brutal beating before waking up on a stinking warship. But this constable has an offer, and it's not a bad one. He needs a hundred men as a firefighting team, and is offering five pounds worth of bread, cheese and beer per man. That's a great deal. I reckon that is about three gallons of beer.

And what a cast of characters we are. Policemen and soldiers, obviously, but also merchants and gentlemen too. Courtiers, no less. After a while, I work out why — no common man like me will ever order the destruction of another man's house as a firebreak. Whereas a courtier has absolutely no problem doing that.

They have a plan, the Duke and his men: let the fire burn to these command posts, and save everything else. Here in Temple Bar, our job is particularly important, for Temple Bar is where the City of London ends, and Westminster — where the government is — starts. I quickly get a sense of how important my station is, when the Duke himself, brother of the King, turns up to check on us.

He is not stupid, the Duke, for he has seen a natural barrier in our favour, the River Fleet. This stinking, turgid ditch has been a blight on London for as long as I can remember.

AN ANONYMOUS PAINTING FROM AROUND 1670, DEPICTING THE FIRE OF 1666. ON THE LEFT, PEOPLE ARE PICTURED SAVING ANYTHING THEY CAN FROM A BUILDING

IMAGES: THE MUSEUM OF LONDON (SIDEBAR); AGEFOTOSTOCK (ILLUSTRATION)

IMAGE: CORBIS

THE AFTERMATH

If you had gone to London one year after the Great Fire, you would have noticed something odd: it was full of pubs. Many workers were drawn to London to help with clearance and then rebuilding, and they needed somewhere to stay and eat.

The burning of London clearly provided something of an opportunity, and today it is often credited with some more positive outcomes, most commonly the end of the Great Plague (though this is debated) and certainly improvements in sewerage and general sanitation. Some highly ambitious plans were proposed for the redevelopment of London, including several from Sir Christopher Wren. In the end, most of London followed previous road layouts, but Wren was entrusted with rebuilding St Paul's Cathedral, and many other of the city's most celebrated churches.

A survey after the Great Fire found that 13,200 houses burned down in 400 streets or courts, making at least 70,000 to 80,000 people homeless. A shocking 80 percent of the city within the Roman walls was gone. The one remarkable bright side was the death toll. Officially, it was just six or seven, though many others must have gone unrecorded.

London eventually recovered in epic style. Its landmarks were rebuilt, and the city remained Europe's heart of commerce. In the 19th century in particular, it was considered the centre of the civilised world. Today, the fire is commemorated by The Monument *(pictured left)* — also designed by Wren — which stands at 61 metres, mirroring the fact that it is 61 metres away from the spot on Pudding Lane where the fire began. Pudding Lane is still there.

One difference from the 17th century is that the River Fleet, the stinking ditch Londoners hoped would be a firebreak, is no longer there — or it is, but it is underground, covered over long ago. It emerges into the Thames underneath the Blackfriars Bridge.

You find dead dogs in it. It catches fire all by itself. But it is at least a place that creates a gap in the buildings. Burning to the River Fleet and then no more — that is the end game for our Great Fire.

C

September 4, 1666.
Tuesday.
St Paul's Cathedral.
Midday

I would give anything for sleep, but I don't think my fire-parched lungs would allow it. Five pounds worth of beer? They could have given me the Crown Jewels and it wouldn't have compensated for a day and night of fruitless defence. Here is what I've seen, repeated all night: a swamping, living, seething wall of flame, in front of me, beside me, everywhere. Punctuated only by streams of the last of the refugees, those who left it late in ill-placed confidence that others would put the fire out. And there are many of these. They are a press, a movement en masse, as if a single body with countless thrashing arms and legs. There *is* no putting the fire out. It has a life of its own, a will far in advance of mine. And this morning, it jumped the River Fleet.

I don't really know how. There were embers, flakes, what looked like whole flaming beams in the air, drifting across, and they must have landed in Salisbury Court behind us. We were fighting what was in front of us and never realised it was behind us too. We made it to Somerset House on the Strand, and relative safety, but I thought to myself, what's the point? There's no stopping this. There will be no London left. Even the bells of St Mary-le-Bow, after two full days and nights of the alarm, have stopped. They must have burnt down, the bells melted into lumps.

So here I am now, at St Paul's again, the last refuge of the city. All the surrounding streets are gone or going: Cheapside, where the richest shops in Britain are, or were; Bow Lane, Bread Street, Old Change, right up against the east end of our cathedral. The company halls for the drapers and the guilds; the Inns of Court — all gone.

It is bright but it is dark. It's like there is no sky. The pall of smoke covers everything, everywhere, and there's only the flame beneath it to light the way in the middle of this September day. It is virtually impossible to breathe. There is heat and grit and ash in every cubic inch of the air.

I'll give him this, the Duke is not giving up. He is in there in the trenches with his men, grabbing fire hooks and trying to pull down Holborn on his own. They say even his brother King Charles made an appearance, even manned a pump. But it is not enough.

And so we wait in our sanctuary, hundreds of us, praying for the protection of St Paul. And there's a moment when I believe it will be all right, that everything will eventually burn out and leave us protected in this holy stone. But it is not a moment that lasts long. I catch the eye of another fireman, and together we look up. The south transept of the cathedral roof is covered in wooden scaffolding.

There's a man, quite famous these days, called Christopher Wren. He is tasked with refurbishing the dome of the cathedral. It must be his. But I touch the stone, several feet thick. It couldn't go, could it? Not St Paul's? The size of the thing!

At eight o'clock, it happens. Flames appear on the roof. Most people stay close by, but I start to walk west, the one direction the fire hasn't taken yet, and I watch the fire take hold. Soon there is something dripping to the ground. Lead, from the roof.

There is an almighty crash, the worst sound I have ever heard, as the stones start to split and fall 150 feet (over 45 metres) down from the nave. The lead is a stream now — a lethal, boiling black stream, running down Ludgate Hill, making the pavements glow red. And then the fire reaches the crypt, the packed books and ink, and the whole thing goes up in an explosion. It has taken just an hour. It's gone. St Paul's is gone. Six hundred years of our history, our sanctuary, our last hope, gone. Later, they will say they could see and hear it in Oxford, 40 miles (64 kilometres) away.

Tuesday night

All is chaos now. The prisons are deserted, and who can blame the inmates for breaking out? I am back on the firefighting front line for want of anything else useful to do, helping to rip down houses further west, yet another attempt at a firebreak. There are booms, deep rumbling explosions, from the east. Can it have reached the Tower of London? Or are they using gunpowder to bring the closest houses down?

I have been awake for days. I work automatically, lodging my fire hook into somebody's home, tearing it down without compassion. I would head north, go home, but how? How to get out of this inferno, or find a place where there is no fire?

And then, after midnight, something changes. We do not notice it at first, except that the fire's march west seems to have paused. At first we think we are doing something right, fighting back, but that's not it. The wind has changed. It has turned south. And there is nothing left to burn to the south — just the Thames.

Gradually, more ordinary people, totally absent for the last three days, sense the tide turning and start to help. Finally, though far too late, there is a united attempt of our city to fight the fire. And it is working.

Dawn breaks — I can see it, for once, though the smoke is still everywhere — and it is clear it is almost over. The wind keeps dropping. There is fire all over the city, but finally there are proper breaks where the homes have been torn down.

By afternoon we have won. James, Duke of York, is still around, exhausted now, but he is ready to declare victory. I will later hear that 70,000 Londoners have lost their homes. But it is over.

So where do I go now?

E

September 5, 1666.
Wednesday.
Moorfields

People move in tides, following one another, assuming everyone else knows the way to go. We all drift north towards the fields that still exist, in Clerkenwell and Islington. I head, like most of the city it seems, to Moorfields. It is, I must confess, usually the home of London's most notorious brothels, but all I really care about today is that it is a civic park, and therefore surely it can't burn.

I arrive and find it is hell. There are tens of thousands here, trying to make tents from what little they've saved from the fire. What do they have, these people? What do any of us have? No beds, or clothes, no sheets, no food or water. All gone, the wealthy and the poor now identical.

And no police. Why would there be? They are homeless themselves. We didn't come together to fight this fire, we citizens, and we are not any closer now it is over. There's suspicion everywhere, people jealously clutching the pathetic bundles they've got left. The threat of riot is now real.

I am swamped by a feeling of utter hopelessness. Where will the food come from, now the corn has gone up in smoke? Who will bake bread, with all the bakeries burned? Even those whose shops haven't burned are not around to open them, to make food or drink. If they could, they've fled. A market strikes up. The price of bread doubles in an hour. Then it doubles again. All it took to ruin our powerful, million-strong city was a flame from an oven.

I sleep awhile, uneasily, then can't stand the misery here and head into the embers to see how it looks. The fire is out, but the ground is almost too hot to walk on. The soles of my shoes are sticking and scorching. It is impossible to pass through a street between the debris, and I wonder how a city can ever be built here again. Will we abandon it — London no more?

I make my way back to the smouldering rubble of St Paul's, still not believing the spiritual heart of my city has gone. But it has. The bells have melted. The nave has no roof. There are bits of monuments, statues, artworks. Tombs have broken open, and old bones and corpses litter the ground.

It is like they have died twice. ●