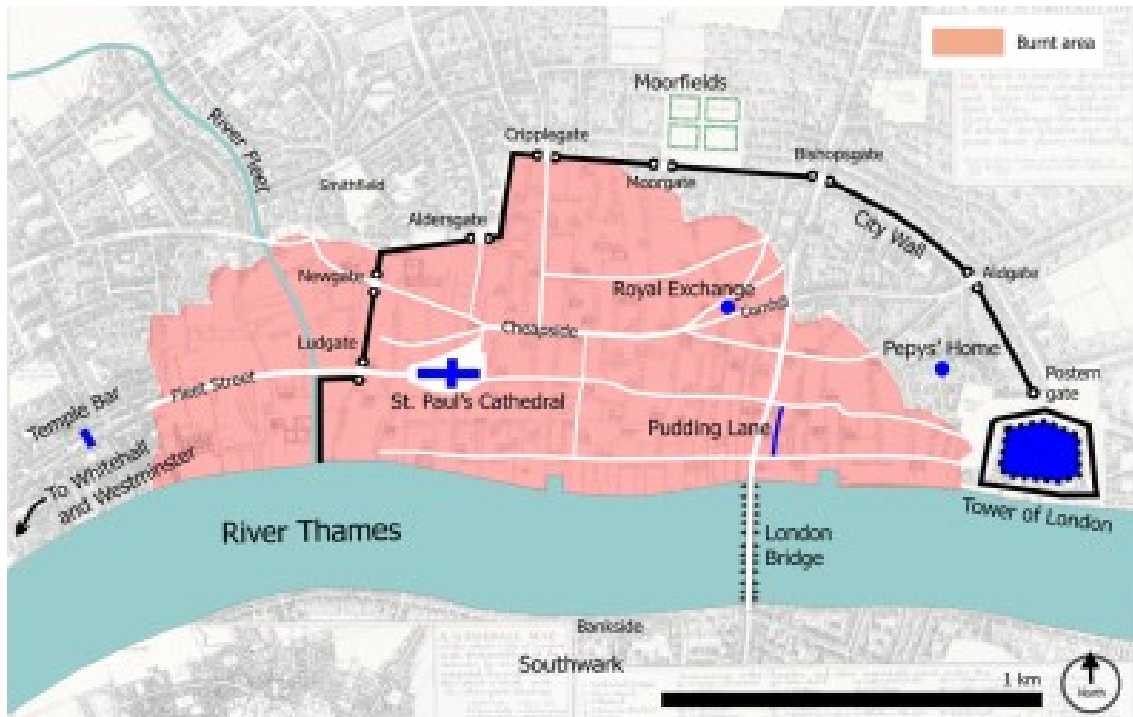


## The Great Fire of London (1666)

The Great Fire of London was an enormous fire which occurred in London in September 1666. The fire was out of control for 4 days. It destroyed almost the entire “City of London” which was inside the old Roman wall (see map below). It came close to, but did not reach, the aristocratic district of Westminster and the king’s palace at Whitehall. It destroyed 13,200 houses, 87 churches, St Paul’s Cathedral and most of the council’s buildings. It destroyed about 85% of the homes of the 80,000 inhabitants of the City of London. The number of deaths is unknown, but only six deaths were officially recorded. This is because the deaths of poor and middle-class people were not recorded, and many victims were burned to ash. The fire attacked the old, rotten wooden slums of the poor with furious speed, trapping the old, the young and the weak, probably killing many thousands of people.



After a long, hot summer, the wooden buildings were extremely dry. The fire started at Thomas Farriner’s bakery, in Pudding Lane, early on Sunday morning, September 2<sup>nd</sup>, and spread rapidly across the city. The main technique of that time to fight fires was to create “firebreaks” by demolition. This was critically delayed due to the indecisiveness of the Mayor of London, Sir Thomas Bloodworth. He panicked when faced with many important decisions. When demolitions were finally ordered, on Sunday night, the strong east wind had already created a firestorm that was unstoppable. On Tuesday, the fire spread to most of the City of London, destroying St Paul’s Cathedral and many official buildings. The mayor was later called “extremely stupid” over his lack of action. The fire was finally stopped by two factors: the strong east winds diminished, and soldiers used gunpowder to explode some buildings to create firebreaks.

In 1666, London had more than half a million inhabitants. However, due to the *Great Plague of London* in 1665, its population was much lower than before. At that time, London was an unplanned and unregulated congestion of wooden houses, and was a great fire risk.

London had been a Roman settlement for four centuries, and had become extremely crowded inside the city wall. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the “City of London” (the area enclosed by the city wall and the River Thames) was only a small part of London (2.8 km<sup>2</sup>), but was home to about 80,000 people, approximately one sixth of London’s population. The City was, and is today, the commercial heart of the capital.

The aristocracy preferred to live in the countryside or in the exclusive Westminster district. After the bubonic plague of 1665, wealthy people preferred to live far away from the City of London, which was regarded as crowded, polluted and unhealthy.

The City was a crowded place with narrow roads. It had experienced many fires before 1666. Most houses were built with wood and thatch (cheap materials) although both had been prohibited for many years. Every inch of space was used to accommodate the rapidly growing population. These areas also contained workplaces, many of which were fire risks (foundries, smithies, glaziers) which were technically illegal in the City of London, but they were tolerated in practice.



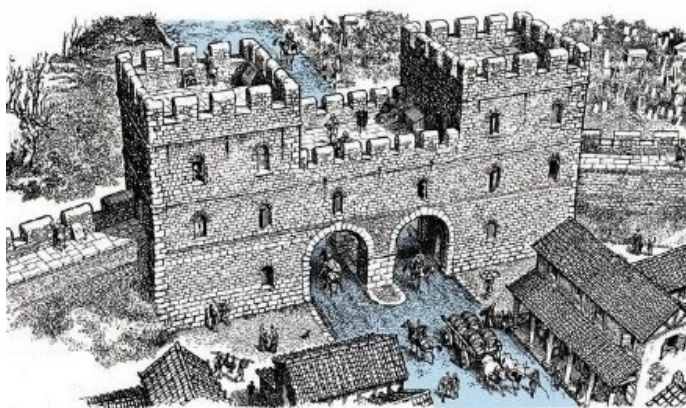
A typical six-floor London house had "jetties" (projecting upper floors). They occupied a small area at ground level, but maximized their use of the land by increasing the size of the upper floors (see image on the left). In many narrow streets, houses opposite each other almost touched. Even today, there are many narrow streets in London (see image on the right).



London Bridge was the only connection across the River Thames, and was also crowded with houses, but due to an open space between two buildings on the bridge, the fire did not reach the other side of the river (see image on the right).



The 5.5m Roman wall around the City was an obstacle to the people trying to escape the fire. There were scenes of panic at the narrow gates of the City as people tried to leave with their bags, carts, horses, and wagons (see image below).



The biggest factor which frustrated firefighters was the narrow streets. Normally, the mix of carts, wagons, and pedestrians in the small streets created frequent traffic jams. However, during the fire, as well as normal traffic, there were people carrying all their belongings. This meant that the fire engines could not move past them.

The fire was fed by wood, fabrics, thatch, oil, pitch, tar, coal, tallow, fats, sugar, alcohol, turpentine, and gunpowder, all stored in the riverside district. The fire was so hot that it melted steel (a melting point of 1,250°C) and the iron chains on the City gates (a melting point of 1,650°C). The monetary value of the loss was estimated to be £10 million (equivalent to £1.7 billion in 2020). Having fled the city, hundreds of thousands of people later lay in the roads and fields of Islington and Highgate, with their piles of belongings.

The social and economic problems created by the disaster were enormous. Despite many excellent proposals, London was eventually reconstructed using the same street plan that existed before the fire. In the chaos and unrest after the fire, Charles II feared another London rebellion. He encouraged the homeless to move away from London and settle elsewhere. He proclaimed that "*All Cities and Towns must, without any contradiction, receive distressed persons and permit them the free exercise of their manual trades.*" A special "Fire Court" was introduced to deal with disputes between tenants and landlords, and to decide who could and should rebuild. The Court was in session from February 1667 to September 1672. Cases were heard and verdicts usually given the same day. Without the Fire Court, long legal fights would have seriously delayed the rebuilding.

Many new, grand, radical, rebuilding plans were offered to the King. If it had, indeed, been rebuilt using one of these plans, London would have rivalled Paris in Baroque magnificence. The Crown and the City authorities tried to establish ownership of all the plots of land, in order to negotiate compensation but this idea was eventually abandoned, because it was too slow. Many people had fled the capital, creating a shortage of labour, so it was almost impossible to find workmen to rebuild the houses.

With the complexities of land ownership unresolved, none of the grand Baroque schemes could be realised for a city of piazzas and avenues. There were no people to negotiate with, and no means to calculate how much compensation should be paid. Consequently, most of the old street plans were simply recreated in the new City, but with improvements in hygiene and fire safety (wider streets, and buildings constructed of brick and stone). New public buildings were created on the same sites, including St Paul's Cathedral and 50 churches.

It has been suggested that the fire saved lives in the long term, because it destroyed many unhealthy houses, which had rats and fleas, responsible for the plague in 1665. No more plagues occurred after the Great Fire of London.

**Traditional kids' song:** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9RkX8WG6HS0>



**An artist's image of the Great Fire of London.**