

2 September 1666

The Great Fire of London



The Tower of London to the right, London Bridge to the left – how an artist painted the Great Fire

September 2, 1666

Thomas Farriner was a baker who served King [Charles II](#) and supplied bread to the Royal Navy. Whether he chose to live in Pudding Lane, London, because he thought of it as an appropriate address for his trade we shall never know. But what we do know is that he went to bed on the night of September 1, 1666, leaving the fire that heated his oven still burning.

In the early hours of the following morning on September 2 sparks from the fire caused flames that soon engulfed the house. Farriner, sometimes spelt Faryner or Farynor, escaped with his family by climbing through an upstairs window, but his maidservant, Rose, perished.

She was one of only six people recorded to have died in what became known as the Great Fire of London, which caused colossal damage to the city's infrastructure. And although official casualties were mercifully few, it is likely that there were many more unknown victims, their bodies being cremated in the blaze.

As the fire spread and raged for four days, 80 per cent of London's buildings were claimed by the flames. They included over 13,200 houses, 87 parish churches, 52 Livery Company halls, the Guildhall, the Royal Exchange and St Paul's Cathedral. In the words of the great diarist [Samuel Pepys](#): "Medieval London is now all in dust."

His diary entry for September 2 reads: "Jane [his maid] called us up about three in the morning, to tell us of a great fire in the City. So I rose, and slipped on my night-gown, and went to her window; and thought it to be far enough off, and so went to bed again.

"By and by Jane comes and tells me that the fire is now burning all down Fish Street, by London Bridge. So I walked to the Tower [of London]; and there got up upon one of the high places; and did see the houses at that end of the bridge all on fire, and an infinite great fire on this and the other side of the end of the bridge.

"So down, with my heart full of trouble, to the water-side, and there got a boat and there saw a lamentable fire, every body endeavouring to remove their goods, and bringing them into lighters that lay off; poor people staying in their houses as long as till the very fire touched them, and then running into boats, or clambering from one [stairway] by the waterside, to another.

"I saw a fire as one entire arch of fire above a mile long: it made me weep to see it. The churches, houses are all on fire and flaming at once, and a horrid noise the flames made and the cracking of the houses.

"Having staid, and in an hour's time seen the fire rage every way, and nobody, to my sight, endeavouring to quench it, but to remove their goods, and the wind mighty high and driving it into the City, I to White Hall, and did tell the King what I saw; and that, unless His Majesty did command houses to be pulled down [to create fire-breaks], nothing could stop the fire."

Like so many big events of the late 17th century, Pepys is at the centre of things, according to London museum curator Kristian Martin: "Rudely awakened by his maid, Jane, at 3am with news of the distant fire, perhaps unsurprisingly – being used to seeing fires among the densely packed timber buildings of London – at first he shrugs it off and returns to bed.

"But in true Pepysian style, the diary has a knack of candidly chronicling little details and events about the fire that would otherwise have been lost to history. Pepys records scorched pigeons falling from the skies, people flinging their belongings into the river, a singed cat pulled alive from a chimney, flakes and drops of fire floating across the city, glass melted and buckled by the heat and the ground as hot as coals."

Like Pepys, the Lord Mayor, Sir Thomas Bludworth, was initially not too disturbed. "A woman could piss it out," he allegedly replied when told that the fire was a cause for concern.

After his meeting with Pepys the King took charge of the operation to save the city and create fire-breaks. This meant knocking down perfectly good buildings but starving the fire of the wood it needed to burn. Fortunately, by the fourth day, the wind that had helped the fire spread turned on itself and

drove the flames back into what had already been burned. So the fire had nothing to ignite and gradually died out.

Ironically, the conflagration brought a great blessing. It had destroyed the filthy streets associated with the Great Plague of the year before. Slums were simply burned away. And the River Fleet, a tributary that flowed into the River Thames, was nothing more than an open sewer associated with disease and poverty. The fire effectively boiled the Fleet and sterilised it.

The task now was to re-plan and re-build. The architect [Christopher Wren](#) was called in to mastermind the project and he made his stunning re-designed St Paul's Cathedral the centrepiece of a new London.

There was one more task for Samuel Pepys. As the fire spread he personally carried items from his home to be taken away on a Thames barge. On the second evening, he records in his diary, "I did dig another [hole], and put our wine in it; and my Parmazan cheese, as well as some other things."

In the end his house was spared from the fire, but as for the fate of his expensive Italian Parmesan cheese, we have no idea, as he did not record in his diary whether he recovered it or not.

by [Ray Setterfield](#)

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