London's Great Fire and its Aftermath
Transcript

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The Great Fire of London began innocuously enough as a fire at the premises of the baker Thomas Farriner in Pudding Lane during the early hours of Sunday 2 September 1666. Farriner was understandably reluctant to bear the responsibility for so great a disaster and insisted that it was not because of his negligence. He claimed that the fire in the oven of his bakehouse had been extinguished at about ten o’clock the previous evening, only one grate had any smouldering embers at midnight, and they had been raked over, and the doors and windows were closed to prevent draughts through the buildings. But it was his practice to place a stock of fuel next to the oven, so that it should be dry enough to re-light the fire in the morning, and according to one account it was actually in the oven. Farriner’s fire should have been just one of those blazes which occurred from time to time in any community, where fires were lit for warmth, cooking, in furnaces, ovens and stoves, with candles for light, and fire carried from place to place to avoid the need to kindle a new one. The risk was greater in an urban environment because the density of buildings made it difficult to isolate a fire. But with a prompt and well-organised response fires were generally put out without great loss and the flames at Farriner’s should have been extinguished quite quickly.

All urban communities took steps to minimize the risks of destructive blazes, through control of the building materials, especially prohibiting thatched roofs, which was enforced in London from the early thirteenth century. At the end of the sixteenth century John Stow attributed the absence of large-scale fires in the City to that policy. The bulk of the houses were timber-framed, with lath-and-plaster infilling, standing several storeys high in the main streets, with the upper stories jettied forwards. But there was much shoddy building in the alleys and courts, where one-third of the City’s population of upwards of 400,000 lived. Timber building was in decline as brick became the fashionable material; its use was stipulated in building regulations issued by successive governments from 1580, which also imposed minimum standards of construction and prohibited the subdivision of houses. Those issued in 1620 addressed the use of timber and the congestion of buildings and specified that the upper storeys should not project outwards above the street. A proclamation in 1625 stated the policy for London of ‘reducing the houses and dwellings . . . to a more orderlie and uniforme manner of building with brick for more ornament strength and safety and contynuance’ and an Act of Parliament of 1657, that was designed to perk up the policy, required that new buildings should be ‘built with Brick or Stone, or both, and straight up, without butting or jetting out into the Street, Lane or place’. This was aimed at producing uniform frontages, as well as being designed to save timber, with the further objective of ‘the prevention of the burning and firing of Houses’.

For the same reason, the parish officers’ duties included enquiring ‘if any Baker or Brewer, bake or brew with Straw or any other Jewell, which may indanger fyring’, and investigating the premises of ‘such who use any fire-presses . . . for pressing, or dressing of netherstocks [stockings], Wollen Clothes, or other things . . . all Armorers, and other Artificers, using to work in Metals, which have or use any . . . places dangerous for fire’. Fire-fighting equipment was kept by the officers of the local units of wards and parishes and the corporation required that ‘every parish should have hooks, ladders, buckets, and scoops, in readiness, upon any occasion’. The first fire-engines in England were made in the 1620s and by the early 1660s they had been widely adopted, as their design and effectiveness were steadily improved. Some were small and robust enough to be carried upstairs, as were hand-held squirts.

Perhaps the greatest incentive in the prevention of fires was self-interest, for however assiduous a household was in taking care with fire and flammable materials, a careless neighbour could bring disaster, the loss of buildings and goods and the suspension of business until new premises could be found. There was no fire insurance; charitable help from collections was typically both generous and inadequate, and took time to arrive. And so in an urban community everyone should have been careful and watchful, reporting dangerous practices. Despite all of that, the blaze in Farriner’s bakehouse was not quenched and he and his family fled the premises as the flames spread through the buildings. Effective fire-fighting depends on the speed and decisiveness of the response as soon as the alarm is raised, before the fire can develop. In that respect, the conditions in early September 1666 were against the fire-fighters. It had been a hot, dry summer across much of Europe and in England both July and August were warmer than any of the corresponding months during the previous seven years, literally since records began. Both 1665 and 1666 were also unusually dry years and the parched summer of 1665 was succeeded by a long drought in south-east England that began in November and continued until September 1666, and over the days when the fire blazed there was a strong gale blowing from the east, whipping in across the estuary, which fanned the flames. At that time of the year stocks of provisions and fuel were at their maximum, laid in ready for the winter.

Added to the problems caused by the high wind was the fact that this part of the City was a difficult one in which to deal with a major fire. Pudding Lane ran northwards from Thames Street to East Cheap in an area of narrow streets and alleys ‘close built with wooden pitched houses’. Many of the occupiers were tradesmen dealing in flammable goods relating to shipping and sea-borne commerce. The excavation of a cellar in Pudding Lane has
shown that barrels of pitch, a caulking agent, were stored there and that the building above was timber-framed with a tiled roof. Those premises were typical of the Thames Street area, which contained ‘old paper buildings and the most combustible matter of Tarr, Pitch, Hemp, Rosen, and Flax’, while the nearby wharves were stacked with timber and coal.

What of the response to the alarm? A witness later claimed that the fire did not spread from Farriner’s house to the adjoining properties for an hour. Whether that was an exaggeration or not, a next-door neighbour was able to remove his goods before his house caught fire. But the flames gradually took hold of the nearby premises and by three o’clock in the morning the fire was prominent enough for Samuel Pepys’s servants in Seething Lane, over a quarter of a mile away, to be aware of it. Jane Birch, the maid, called her master, telling him that there was ‘a great fire’ in the City, but after watching for some time and judging where the fire was, and that it was ‘far enough off’, Pepys went back to bed. Many others must have reacted in the same way, because fewer people needed to be up and about as early on a Sunday morning as on a weekday.

After the alarm had been raised - apparently with ‘a great noise of drums’ - the Lord Mayor, Sir Thomas Bludworth, was called to the scene from his house in Aldersgate, and, having assessed the situation, was said to have remarked that ‘a woman might piss it out’. Whether he did say that or not, it was held against him thereafter, as was the allegation that he refused to order the demolition of nearby properties to create a fire-break – the common practice in such an emergency - reportedly asking ‘When the houses have been brought down, who shall pay the charge of rebuilding them?’. He and his officers clearly did not think this fire to be an unduly dangerous one, but they made the wrong call; a later judgement was that by the time that fifteen or sixteen houses had caught fire, the chance of containing the blaze in the strong wind had already passed.

That wind drove the flames through the buildings, creating heat, smoke, ash and flying debris which made firefighting almost impossibly difficult. The fire-fighters’ problems were exacerbated by the crowded streets as the citizens moved their possessions to safety, on foot, by cart, by whatever means they could find. Initially, those whose houses were threatened moved their goods relatively short distances, only to realise fairly quickly that they had to take them further away. As the area threatened with destruction grew, so did the number of people whose premises were endangered. The Thames was a possible escape route for those living close to the waterfront and Pepys described it as full of lighters and boats loaded with their belongings, while other goods were floating in the water. John Evelyn saw the river ‘coverd with goods floating, all the barges & boates laden with what some had time & courage to save’. The flames mostly drove westwards, but also made progress northwards and, more slowly because against the wind, eastwards, towards the Tower, so that houses on Tower Hill were demolished as a precaution. The king ordered the establishment of eight fire-posts around the conflagration from which the fire-fighting would be co-ordinated, and he put the Duke of York in overall control. But the fire-post in Coleman Street had to be abandoned as the flames threatened. There was no stopping the fires with the means and manpower available, and those who lived within the threatened area would surely have been more concerned about their house and possessions than with fire-fighting. Only when the wind dropped, on the Wednesday, could the fires be brought under control and then quenched.

The fire destroyed property in an area of 436¾ acres, shown by Wenceslaus Hollar in an adaptation of his earlier plan, using a detailed survey of the burnt area. The flames destroyed St Paul’s cathedral, eighty-seven churches and six consecrated chapels, fifty-two halls of the livery companies, the custom house, the Royal Exchange, Blackwell Hall, Newgate prison, Bridewell, the compters at Wood Street and Poultry and the Sessions House; the guildhall was gutted but was repairable. The fire had not reached the Strand, Westminster, the northern and eastern suburbs, or Southwark, and it was estimated that the 13,200 houses destroyed were ‘but a fifth part of the whole’.

Farriner’s maid was one of at least six people who died during the fire; there may have been a few more, but there were no contemporary claims that dozens of people were killed. The number of houses destroyed suggests that at least 65,000 people were made homeless, but almost 80,000 may be closer to the truth, at a time when Norwich, the next largest English city, contained fewer than 30,000 inhabitants. The losses for houses and contents can be put at almost £8 million, while a detailed estimate made in 1720 which included the cost of reconstructing the public buildings and erecting the Monument as a memorial to the disaster produced a figure of £10,788,500. (The government’s revenue after the Restoration was set by Parliament at £1.25 million pounds a year.) Those who had lost their rental income from properties that had been destroyed included not only individuals, the livery companies and London charities, but also many in the provinces, who drew an income from properties in the city bequeathed to them by people who had gone to London and made good, and remembered their relatives and home communities in their wills. And so the fire had a far wider impact than just in the area that was gutted.

In the immediate aftermath of the fire most of those who had been made homeless settled briefly in the open areas around the city; they were ‘the people late of London, now of the fields’ who lived ‘Some under tents, others under miserable Hutts and Hovells, without a rag or any necessary utensils, bed or board’. Yet all of them quickly found somewhere to stay, according to the Earl of Clarendon: ‘in four days, in all the fields about the town, which had seemed covered with those whose habitations were burned, and with the goods which they had saved, there was scarce a man to be seen’.

The Great Fire was blamed by some moralists on the sinfulness of Londoners, as the Great Plague in the
been caused by an enemy, none other than Hubert, whose conviction was a convenient legal scapegoat for the
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regulations were issued in 1667, aimed at achieving such uniformity and preventing the return of
cottages in the alleys and courts. Houses were classified according to their site, in four categories. The smallest
of two storeys and garrets, were those in ‘by-streets and lanes’, those of the second sort were of three
storeys and garrets on the ‘streets and lanes of note’ and facing the river, those in the next category were one
storey higher and they fronted the ‘high and principal streets’, while the biggest were ‘mansion houses for
citizens and other persons of extraordinary quality’, not necessarily standing on the streets, but nevertheless
also limited to four storeys. All houses had to conform to those categories and the desired appearance was
furthered by a ruling that the roof lines within the first three sorts of houses should be uniform.
The regulations also contained detailed stipulations concerning the height of storeys, depths of cellars and
thicknesses of the walls. Bow windows and other projections were prohibited, although houses fronting the high
streets could be fitted with balconies no more than four feet deep. The earlier insistence on brick and stone was
repeated, and control of materials was extended, by banning wood from the outsides of all buildings, except for
window-frames, door-cases and cornices, and shop-fronts, which had to be of oak, which was relatively fire-
resistant but also expensive.

One major issue to be resolved was the responsibility for undertaking the rebuilding of a property. A blaze
among the buildings at the northern end of London Bridge in 1633 wrecked about a third of the houses on the
bridge itself and nearly eighty more in the parish of St Magnus the Martyr. Disputes over the liability for rebuilding
led to long delays and the buildings on the bridge had not been reconstructed by 1666. The vacant sites in such
a prominent position were visible evidence of the consequences of such wrangles. Although it should be said
that the gap in the buildings at the north end of the bridge acted as a fire-break, so that the Great Fire did not
reach Southwark, which was to experience its own great fire ten years later.

While the fire was burning there was some wild talk of arsonists and fifth-columnists who would take advantage
of the confusion and seize the city for the Dutch or French, with whom England was then at war. The French
were the preferred arsonists because they were Catholics. Some people were arrested or roughly handled
during the fire as suspects. It was in that atmosphere that Robert Hubert was arrested in Romford a few days
later, after bragging that he had started the fire. He was the son of a watchmaker in Rouen, and had worked as
a watchmaker there and in London. He confessed to the Justice of the Peace who examined him that he had
started the conflagration by firing Farriner's house. He was indicted at the Middlesex Sessions on 16 September
and imprisoned in the White Lion prison in Southwark. After he was imprisoned he changed his story so that it
agreed with what was known about the origin of the fire, which was surely being widely discussed; a boy who
was just ten years old told Lord Lovelace how he and his family, abetted by a Dutchman, had started the blaze in
Pudding Lane with fireballs. Nevertheless, attention was focused on Hubert. There was no convincing evidence
against him, except that he was unerringly able to go to the site of Farriner's premises among the ruins and
describe the house's appearance and the window into which he had pushed a lighted fireball of gunpowder,

brimstone and other flammable material on the end of a pole. Familiarity with the building and the ability to find
ruins which were understandably attracting much attention as the seat of the fire were scarcely convincingly
proof, while his various accounts were unsatisfactory and riddled with contradictions. Farriner, his son and
daughter signed the true bill against Hubert, but they also maintained that there was no window in the place he
described and that the fire had not started in that part of the buildings. Yet Hubert was convicted at the City
Sessions in October on his own confession and was hanged at Tyburn. The mood of the time required that he
should be a Catholic. He and his family were known to be Protestants, and so it was alleged that he had been
converted while in prison by the Queen Mother's confessor and had died as a Roman Catholic.
The obligation to maintain a property lay with the tenant, but who would invest in a new building when they would
get the benefit only for the remaining years of their lease? The exception which was allowed was when a
property had been damaged by a foreigner. After the fire the judges upheld existing opinion regarding
leaseholders’ liability, but also concluded that they were not responsible in this case because the burning had
been caused by an enemy, none other than Hubert, whose conviction was a convenient legal scapegoat for the
fire, hence Pepys’s comment that it was an ‘excellent Salvo for the Tenants’. Hubert’s confession and conviction were indeed mightily convenient in the context of the preparations for rebuilding, yet were directly contrary to the government’s consistently held view that the fire had been an accident. Hubert’s death is a nasty story, even by the standards of the late seventeenth century.

With the legal liability settled, landlords and tenants were able to agree terms for rebuilding, and a court was established to deal specifically with disputes relating to the destroyed property, avoiding the interminable delays in the equity courts. Such differences, the stringent regulations and the straight-jacket of the building types specified in the Act did not discourage progress. Most of the new houses were built by 1672 and the majority of the livery companies’ halls by the late 1670s. The Royal Exchange, the Custom House, Guildhall and other public buildings were also rebuilt within a short time and the Monument was finished in 1676. A second rebuilding Act, in 1670, provided for the construction of St Paul’s and fifty-one churches (thirty-one fewer than the number destroyed). Christopher Wren was given overall control and he designed the new churches, with assistance from Robert Hooke. All of them were in use by 1696, although some steeples and towers were added later. St Paul’s took far longer; begun in 1675, the first service was held in 1697, but the building was completed only in 1710.

The skyline formed by the churches and the great dome of St Paul’s was in marked contrast to that of the pre-fire City, but was appealing because of the very lack of uniformity in the towers and steeples. The appearance of the streets had also undergone a dramatic change. This new City was much admired, by Dr John Woodward, physician and antiquarian, in 1707, when he wrote that the Great Fire ‘however disastrous it might be to the then Inhabitants, had prov’d infinitely beneficial to their Posterity’; and by the historian John Strype, in 1720: ‘Divers Churches, the stately Guildhall, many Halls of Companies, and other Publick Edifices; all infinitely more Uniform, more Solid, and more Magnificent than before’.

Yet although the buildings were praised, the hoped-for uniformity along the street frontages had not been achieved and it was misleading to write that ‘Since the burning, all London is built uniformly, the streets broader, the houses all of one form and height.’ That was not the case, because small units of ownership, differences in decoration, balconies and doorways, and the stepped effect caused in streets built on an incline, had all prevented the creation of uniform frontages. The developer Nicholas Barbon wrote that a house’s appearance owed much to the trade of the master-builder responsible for it, whether he was a bricklayer, stone mason, glazier or carpenter. Variety in the appearance of the façades was produced by the differing finishes of the bricks; the regulations had not been specific enough to prevent such effects.

Economic practicality also explains why most of the alleys and courts were rebuilt, although the king’s proclamation of 13 September – just a week after the fire was extinguished - had planned to remove them. In his proposals for rebuilding Richard Newcourt had hoped to do away with the ‘multitude of bye-lanes, rooks and alleys, huddled up one on the neck of another’. They were rebuilt because affordable housing within the City was needed and that need took precedence over aesthetic judgements. But the regulations did successfully prevent the building of tenements in the back streets and courts.

At the other end of the social scale the wealthy merchants did not move away from the City after the fire, but built fine houses on enlarged sites. Yet despite the money and pride lavished upon them, such complexes were generally not up-to-date in stylistic terms, with the house built not on the street front but continuing the long-established practice in London of placing it at the rear of a courtyard, flanked by warehouses and offices.

The overall effect produced disappointment as well as praise. The architect Nicholas Hawksmoor was particularly severe, contrasting the ‘convenient regular well built City’ that might have risen from the ashes, with the reality, which consisted of ‘a Chaos of Dirty Rotten Sheds, always Tumbling or taking fire, with winding Crooked passages (Scarce practicable) Lakes of Mud and Rills of Stinking Mire Running through them’.

Despite such complaints, the policy of using former street plans can be seen as well-judged and a success; and the most innovative of the regulations, the house-types laid down in the Rebuilding Act, far from proving an irksome restriction, were taken up by builders and erected in the areas newly developed during the capital’s expansion in the late seventeenth century. Landlords wishing to control the kind of building to be erected on their ground adopted that terminology of house-types, specifying the ‘rate’ of house to be built long before it was given formal expression in the Building Act of 1774. What London did first, other places followed, with rebuilding Acts obtained after fires in Northampton in 1675, Southwark in 1676, Warwick in 1694, Blandford Forum and Tiverton both in 1731, Wareham in 1765 and last and smallest of all, Chudleigh in Devon in 1807. And other towns mimicked London’s materials and styles when rebuilding after fires, following the growing fashion.

Uniformity of appearance could only have come with large-scale changes of ownership and a rearrangement of sites, indeed with the implementation of the kind of ideas that were considered immediately after the fire but dismissed as impracticable. Half a dozen plans to radically re-design the street layout within the City were produced, aimed at creating a model renaissance city on a new layout, and the disappointment with the rebuilding came to centre on the failure to implement one of them, that of Christopher Wren. This train of
The image conjured up was a powerful one of scheming opponents and unimaginative and obstructive citizens, and this was often repeated, despite its divergence from the truth. Wren’s plan certainly had an appeal for later generations and the portrayal of the visionary architect whose proposals were frustrated by narrow-minded and selfish dullards helped to fuel the disappointment. That disappointment continued into the twentieth century, despite Thomas Reddaway’s study of the rebuilding, published in 1940, which demonstrated convincingly that the financial and administrative means to implement such a complete re-planning were just not available. Neither the corporation nor the crown could have financed the compensation needed for property owners and their tenants, nor was there a civil service large and able enough to oversee the necessary transfer of property. The process would have been very slow and a speedy rebuilding was the overriding priority.

The bright new city that was built did not survive intact for very long; from the early eighteenth century the post-fire buildings, typically constructed on leases of no more than sixty years and so not all well-built, were gradually replaced by new houses and shops, later by warehouses and offices. This process was carried out with some enthusiasm in the nineteenth century, when Classical uniformity was much out of favour and even some of Wren’s post-fire churches were demolished, without regret. The replacement process was given added impetus by further fires. In 1715 a boy in a house in Thames Street was mixing his father’s gunpowder to make fireworks when he made some kind of mistake and detonated an explosion that blew up the house and started a blaze which ran along the street and burnt as many as 100 houses and the Custom House before it was brought under control. As in 1666, Thames Street was at risk from fire because of the large stocks of flammable goods on the quays and in the riverside sheds, but another blaze, in 1748 in Cornhill and Exchange Alley, began at a wig-maker’s, and the nearby buildings were coffee-houses, which surely presented no great fire risk, nevertheless it burnt about ninety houses. So the enforcement of building in brick and tile, minimising the amount of external woodwork, removing tenements and preventing the subdivision of buildings did not prevent multiple-house fires within the area rebuilt after 1666.

The Great Fire is usually regarded as a major disaster, destroying one-fifth of the city’s buildings in the year after the Great Plague had killed one-fifth of its population. The conflagration surely had an awful impact on those whose property and goods were destroyed, and those who tried to stem the flames, or even who just watched it. But it did provide a boost for business, with the replacement of the fuel and supplies for the coming winter, and then provision of materials and labour to erect the new buildings and to re-stock the workshops and shops. The pioneering statistician John Graunt had calculated that the population recovered to its former level within two years of the major epidemics in 1603 and 1625, in both of which the proportion of the population that died was similar to that in 1665, and that also applied after the Great Plague, despite the destruction and disruption caused by the fire. The average number of burials for 1668-72, when the houses were being completed, was almost seven per cent higher than for 1660-4 and coal shipments from Newcastle to London in 1667-71 were the at the same level as they had been in 1660-4. London continued to grow, from a population of roughly 400,000 in 1650 to 575,000 by the end of the century, and the proportion of the national total population living in the metropolis increased during the same period from under 8 per cent to over 11 per cent.

Buildings are the expression of a community, not its essence, and skills, acumen, determination, industriousness and business connections were not destroyed by the fire. Nor was much of the city’s portable wealth; the merchants’ capital was in coin, gold, bonds and paper instruments, and they were removed in advance of the flames, and their bullion was stored in the Tower; many of the artisans’ tools were movable and some of their stock may have been saved. Those who lived close to Pudding Lane may not have been able to save as much as they would have liked, but the fire burned for four days and so householders in the districts which the fire reached on the Monday, Tuesday or Wednesday had ample time to take their possessions away. Even on the first day, according to Pepys the citizens were able to rescue their keyboard instruments.

Some people left London in the aftermath of the fire, to set up in business elsewhere, but the effect of that surely was to strengthen the contacts between London and their new city, for they would continue to do business with those they had dealt with in London. Nor did the fire initiate the trend for retailers in luxury goods to follow their wealthy customers to the Strand and the West End, which was just beginning to develop, because that process was already under way. And it certainly was not the reason for the end of the plague. The conjunction of the fire with the ending of plague epidemics in Britain was assumed to be a case of cause and effect, with the fire acting as a purifying agent, cleansing the ‘poisonous filtrations’ from the ground on which the City stood. But only one-fifth of just this one city had been destroyed in the blaze.

It is not possible to have a ‘good’ disaster, but the impact of a catastrophe does depend upon the state of the community affected at the time; one which was struggling economically would clearly find recovery difficult. The examples in that respect would be Buckingham after a fire in 1725 and Tiverton after its fire in 1731. But London
in the mid-1660s was a prosperous city that continued to thrive, and the fire, although making a huge visible impact, did not impair its prosperity or growth. It is difficult to conclude that such a dramatic event was just a glitch when seen in the city’s longer history, but perhaps we should at least consider that possibility.

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