AWESOME stories

Great Fire of London - 1666

London was devastated by the Great Fire of 1666, which began on September 2. Burning for days, it destroyed thousands of buildings—including "the old" St. Paul's Cathedral.

This clip—from "Peter Ackroyd's London"—explains what happened and references the contemporary account of Samuel Pepys (whose home was located very close to the burned-out area and whose ten-year diary encompassed numerous volumes).

It also references the diary of John Evelyn (whose writings similarly provide descriptions of the disaster).

A note about these diaries. Their contents contain personal observations. What we read about events, like fires and plagues, are from the writer's point of view.

The Great Fire of 1666 came on the heels of London's Great Plague outbreak (between 1665-1666). One positive result of the fire was that it consumed much of the rat population whose fleas were spreading plague.

What is the story of the fire itself?

In early September, of 1666, London was extremely dry following a hot spell. How dry was it? Some historians say it was tinder-dry.

That's an especially important term—tinder-dry—when we consider that London, at that time, was essentially a city of wooden buildings. If one building succumbed to a blaze, others were sure to follow.

Especially in hot, exceedingly dry conditions.

So ... where, and how, did London's Great Fire of 1666 start? It began at a baker's shop, in Pudding Lane, owned by Thomas Farynor. A maid, who'd failed to pay attention, had forgotten to douse the bakery's oven.

A small blaze, emanating from the still-lit oven, started its destructive path. Soon it was spreading to nearby homes.

The shop was fairly close to the Whitehall Palace of the current King, Charles II (whose father, Charles I, had lost his head during England's Civil War).

Under normal conditions, the Thames would have provided enough water to stop the blaze in the city dominated by wooden buildings. But September 2, in 1666, was not a normal day in a town which had seen its share of fires.

The city, at that time, did not have a fire brigade, per se, although watchful wardens patrolled the streets. They were always on the lookout for smoke or flames. If they saw any evidence of fire, they would activate the signal—the peal of muffled church bells—to Londoners.

There was something else going on in London that September night. At the time, Britain was fighting a war with Holland and France. Barrels of gunpowder, located along the river, could blow-up in the city just as easily as they could blow-up in a war.

Gunpowder, in short, could really feed a fire.

Starting shortly after midnight, on September 2nd, the fire could have been contained had it not been for the Lord Mayor's lack of decision-making ability. Sir Thomas Bloodworth couldn't decide whether to give the order to demolish buildings in the fire's path in order to stop its spreading flames. Then he more or less dropped out of sight.

By dawn, the raging flames had consumed around 300 buildings in the City of London, including several churches. The houses along London Bridge were also on fire.

Making things much worse, the wind pushed the flames along, allowing the fire to jump gaps of twenty houses, or so, at a time. The city became one massive conflagration.

The following day, the fire took a northern turn. Among other things, in its newly directed path, was the City's financial district. Before long, the Royal Exchange and various financial houses were also in ruins.

The King—a veritable playboy—was not held in very high esteem at the time. He, and his entourage, had left the city the year before (when the current plague epidemic was at its most-virulent).

Residents of the burning town were becoming upset with the authorities, including the King, who seemed to have no clue how to stop the spreading disaster. As people streamed from their homes into the city's streets, fighting the blaze became even more difficult. It was hard for anyone to move around.

Charles, and his brother James—the Duke of York—took to the streets as well, riding their horses and urging people to stay calm. Since the Lord Mayor seemed to be out of sight, the King put his brother in charge of trying to save the city. One of his techniques was to turn able-bodied men into firefighters.

The King also turned himself into a firefighter. In addition to making fire-breaks, to stop the flames spreading from building to building, he was seen throwing water on the fire. Like any other fireman, the King's face was soot-covered, his clothes were soaked and he was covered with dirt and mud.

By the third day it was clear that St. Paul's Cathedral—believed to be fireproof because of its stone-wall structure—would also fall victim to the inferno. How could that happen? Because it was covered with wooden scaffolding. It was massively damaged, just like so many other London landmarks.

Of St. Paul's fate, one eyewitness—John Evelyn—wrote:

> *The stones of Paul's flew like grenades, the melting lead running down the streets in a stream, and the very pavements glowing with fiery redness, so as no horse, nor man, was able to tread on them.*

Then ... on the fourth day ... the winds began to calm. That fact, coupled with open spaces created by deliberately demolished structures, began to slow-down the fire's intensity.

By the time the disaster was over:

- More than 13,000 homes were gone
- 87 churches were destroyed
- 3 of London's main gates were consumed
- Around 70,000 people were homeless
- Refugee camps dotted the city's outskirts
- The damage, using today's money, was around £1 billion

The monarchy actually benefitted from the fire, since Charles II was able to establish a better rapport with his people. The day after the fire was over, he told a massive crowd, numbering around 100,000 individuals, that the fire was an "Act of God."

The people of London, and their city, also benefitted—in some respects—from the blaze:

- The flames killed the rats which were spreading plague
- The new capital had wider streets
- The new buildings were made of brick and stone, not wood

Casualties were surprisingly low, but the maid - whose actions started it all - was herself a victim of the fire.

Credits:

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:
http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/Great-Fire-of-London-1666

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:
http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/Great-Fire-of-London-1666