

Facing up to catastrophe: The Great Fire of London



Previous Page: The Great Fire of London, with Ludgate and Old St. Paul's (Unknown Artist, 17th century)

The Great Fire of London was a true catastrophe. Over the course of four days (2–5 September 1666) the ‘most horrid malicious bloody flame’ destroyed 373 acres of the area within the city walls (about 85%), and a further 63 acres beyond the walls, wiping out 13,200 houses, and rendering 70–80,000 people homeless; also lost or severely damaged were 86 parish churches, 44 livery company halls, and key elements of the civic infrastructure like the Guildhall, Royal Exchange, the custom house, and the city prisons. The lost housing stock alone can be valued at around £3.2M; total losses were somewhere between £8M and £10M.

And yet what is truly striking in the response to the Fire is the resilience of the civic structures, the constructive role played by the state, and the speed with which the rebuilding proceeded. The number of casualties was in single figures, and the relief efforts combined with the rapid establishment of an improvised system of markets ensured that starvation was averted. Although foreigners feared for their lives, as many Londoners believed the

Fire to have been an act of terrorism by Dutch or French agents, public order was maintained by the intervention of royal troops, and the king provided a calming presence appearing personally in the refugee

camp in Morefields on 7 September to assure the victims that the Fire was an accident and not a plot. The structures of civic government were rapidly re-established: the Guildhall almost immediately moved its operations to Gresham College in the undamaged north-eastern quarter of the city; livery companies resumed their meetings within days of the conflagration; parish officers continued to be chosen even though the electors were resident elsewhere; some parishes even continued their Rogationtide processions amidst the ruins.

What was achieved was, in the

circumstances and in such a time scale, pretty remarkable. As early as 13 September the king set out the objective of rebuilding in brick or stone and proposed street widening schemes, the details of which were left to commissioners jointly appointed by the city and the crown; the first Rebuilding Act which laid down standards for construction received the royal assent on 8 February 1667; the city’s common council approved the plan which included the

realignment of some of the city streets by the end of April. Given the interminable delays to which seventeenth century legal

process could be subject, another essential component in the smooth rebuilding process was the establishment by parliament of the Fire Court, which essentially arbitrated disputes between landlords and tenants over the allocation of the cost of rebuilding. It provided pretty swift and effective justice, and it was emphatically not a tool merely for the protection of landlords’ interests. Crucial to its success was the fact that appeal was only allowed to a wider body of judges in the same court. As William Petty put it, it was a ‘legislative power to cut all knots’.

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Above: The fire as seen from a boat in vicinity of Tower Wharf, c.1700

It is true that the pace of rebuilding was initially slow; that was an inevitable result not only of the need to settle some of the legal issues, but also of gearing up the building trades. There was for example an immense investment in new brickworks around London: nearly 400 million bricks were needed for the replacement of the housing stock alone. To pump up the labour supply, and much to the chagrin of some of the guilds, the City relaxed its attitude towards builders lacking the city freedom. But all this took a while to take effect. Rebuilding only really got underway in 1668 when 1,450 houses were built; by the end of 1670 about 6,000 houses had been completed. In March 1672 it was remarked that the city had 'recovered itself in great measure out of its ashes'. Most company halls were rebuilt between 1668 and 1673; by 1674 all the public buildings apart from Bridewell Hospital had been completed. Recent historians have

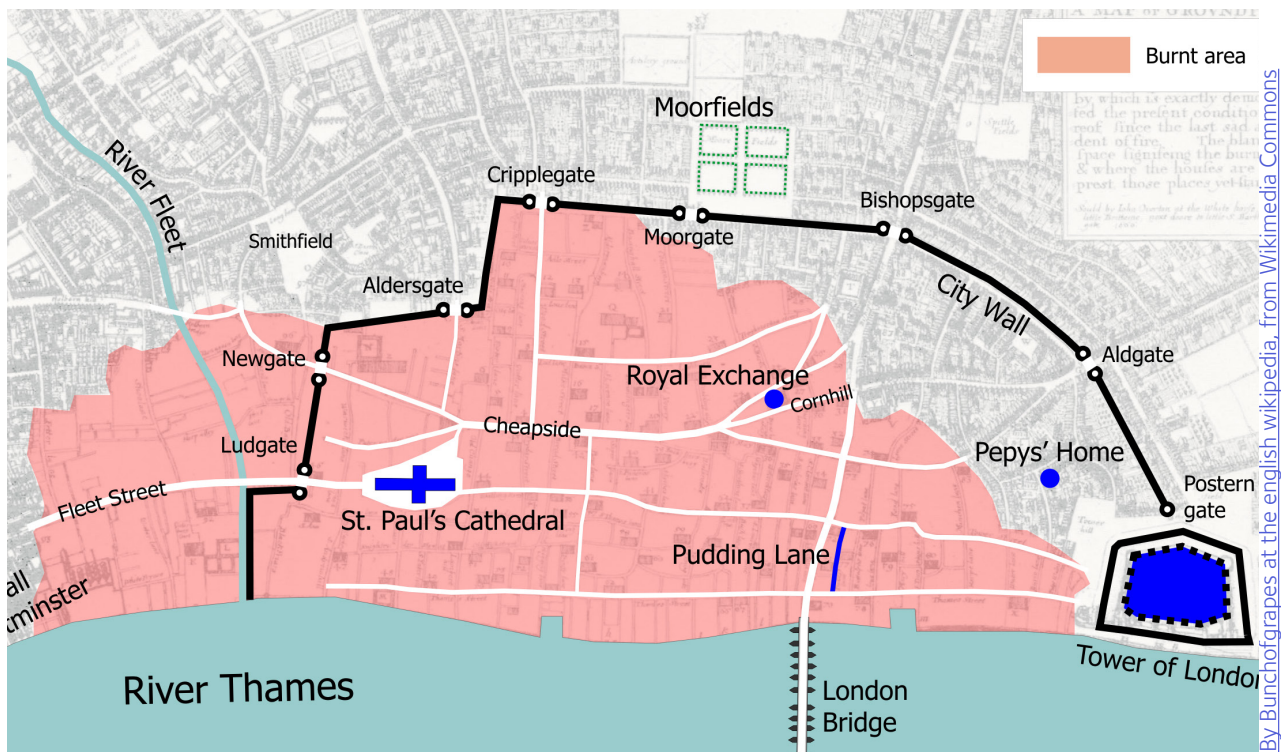
questioned the degree to which the face of the city was transformed, pointing out that the building regulations had much in common with those of the early Stuart kings, that there was little change in the basic room structure, and that the unburnt area of the city retained its traditional form. But there was surely a difference from early Stuart measures in that the Rebuilding Acts had real teeth; the pace of change was massively accelerated.

How was all this possible? The answer is made more puzzling by the fact that metropolitan government in the later seventeenth century does not have an altogether spotless record, and its flexibility in handling the post-Fire situation is therefore in some ways anomalous. The City's own finances were in a state of spectacular disarray leaving the corporation dependent on the central government for

solutions. The lord mayor at the time of the Fire, Sir Thomas Bludworth, the man who infamously said that ‘a woman could piss it out’, was widely criticised for his ‘simplicity’; his successor ended his civic career ignominiously, having been found guilty of embezzling some of the money collected for victims of the Fire. The city corporation was capable of extraordinary pig-headedness in the protection of its privileged position, opposing the development of any new markets or a new river crossing. But it seems that the conviction among politicians that London simply could not fail (its commerce was too critical to state revenues), and some unusually decisive leadership from the crown, meant that flexible solutions were found. The city was also fortunate in the calibre of some of its agents. The energetic and (by seventeenth century standards at least) disinterested service of the polymaths Christopher Wren and Robert Hooke in the rebuilding was an extraordinary boon.

In retrospect some have seen the Fire as a lost opportunity to build a fully remodelled city in the grid-iron formation favoured by those like Wren, Hooke and John Evelyn who submitted plans in the aftermath of the disaster. Wren’s son claimed that it was the opposition of the petty-minded businessmen who ran the city that prevented the plans from coming to fruition, but the truth is that their fulfilment would have required additional investment in funding for the compensation of property owners on a scale which was simply not available. In the event, the levy on coal imported into London to fund the necessary infrastructural projects and the rebuilding of St Paul’s Cathedral and 51 of the city churches was the most that the political system could deliver.

-Ian W. Archer



Above: A map showing the extent of the damage caused by the fire in London