



The Great Fire of London: Fire, Fear, and a False Confession

In September 1666, a fire tore through London, destroying 80% of the city in just five days. A young Frenchman confessed and was executed. But he almost certainly didn't do it. So, what really happened, and why was everyone so ready to believe a lie?

**0:00**

Text 'London 1666'; crowded town with flames throughout; illustration of Robert Hubert holding his hat; striking of judge's gavel; noose; tombstone with text 'Here Lies Robert Hubert OOPs'; 17th century locals in a town overrun by large rats, overlaid is a skull and '100,000'; crowded town with two handheld flags above, one labeled 'Unrest' the other 'Poverty'; large hands surrounding and pointing at scared locals.

London, 1666: a massive fire ripped through and destroyed around 80 percent of the city core in mere days. Its population reeled from tragedy. The devastation was almost too much to fathom. So, when 26-year-old Frenchman Robert Hubert claimed to have started the blaze, they believed him. He was convicted and executed.

The problem? He definitely didn't start the fire. So, if Hubert didn't, who did? And why was everyone else so ready to believe him? To answer those questions, we need to take a closer look at exactly what was going on before the city set a flame.

London in the 1660s was not a great place to be. In 1665, the city endured its last major bubonic plague outbreak, which killed 15 to 20 percent of the city's population—somewhere between 70 and 100 thousand people. Despite that, the city was still densely-populated, with narrow streets and poor infrastructure. And it was burdened by poverty and unrest, which, as is often the case, fed into prejudices against the city's most marginalized groups. In this case, Catholics and foreigners.

1:11

Angry Pope and Christian Monk separated by a lightning bolt; crowded meeting of English Parliament with a drawing of King Charles I in the forefront and thought bubbles of people fighting; drawing of King Charles II with fingers crossed; large hand holding a crown and religious people who fall off; hands making two ship bump into each other; large eyes staring at a town and locals that get knocked down by rocks labeled 'Poverty' and 'Poor Infrastructure'.

See, the Catholic Church had been the sworn enemy of the Protestant Church of England ever since the two had their messy divorce, over a divorce in the 1530s. In the first half of the 1600s, England's Parliament clashed with then King Charles I over his ties to Catholicism—among many other things—which led to two civil wars and the king's eventual execution. By the 1660s, his son, Charles II, was in charge, but Protestants were skeptical of his reign. Many were still wary of Catholic potential power grabs by Rome and the papacy. Plus, even though Charles II promised religious freedom, if you didn't conform to the Church of England, things were still pretty gnarly. Presbyterians, Baptists, and Quakers were kind of out of luck, as far as the government was concerned.

Things weren't great for immigrants living in London, either. As England fought a series of clashes at sea over control of global trade as part of the Second Anglo-Dutch War, French and Dutch refugees were seen as the enemy, too. These tensions were playing out in a densely-populated city of narrow streets plagued by poverty and poor infrastructure, and I guess plague.

2:16

Pile of dead rats; planks creating a wood house that has tar poured over it and is connected to a lit fuse; explosion; calendar and clock rotating from night to day; people asleep as a fire is happening outside an open window; wood houses amongst large flames as someone pours water over a flame; crowded town with a large section burned and surrounded by flames.

The whole thing was a tinderbox, metaphorically and literally. See, London's medieval houses were largely made of oak timber, and many of those homes were covered in tar—which kept people dry, but was a major fire hazard. That is to say, London was a city ready to explode. And explode it did.

The Great Fire of London started in the middle of the night, late September first or early September second, 1666. Now, fires were pretty common in 1600s London. See, wood houses covered with tar. So, local officials didn't take things too seriously at first. When London's mayor, Sir Thomas Bloodworth, was informed of the blaze, he initially dismissed it.

But this fire was different. Thanks to windy, dry conditions, things started to heat up fast, and the firefighting go-to of the time—dumping buckets of water on the flames—wasn't doing a whole lot to help. By September 3rd, 300 houses had collapsed as panicking Londoners fled the city. On September 4th, St. Paul's Cathedral burned down, and the fire was still raging, with no end in sight.



3:24

King Charles II in front of a town on fire with gun powder explosions all around, a large group enters the town; flames blowing out; grid of homes with most exed out; paintings of London fires; two exhausted figures looking at destroyed homes; Robert Hubert holding his hat as a judge's gavel strikes his head; scale with 'Conspiracy' on one side and 'Accident' on the other.

It was time for King Charles II to intervene. He ordered the city to create fire breaks by using gunpowder to quickly tear down the houses in the fire's path. But the gunpowder explosions led to rumors that the French were invading, leading to even more panic and hysteria among the people of London. Despite the chaos, the fire breaks did help tame the fire, with some help from Mother Nature. The winds that had literally fanned the flames slowly died down, and by September 6th, the fire was out at last.

But after five straight days of burning, flames had destroyed about 80 percent of the city core, and a quarter of the Greater London area. 13,000 homes and nearly all government and religious buildings were burned to the ground. London's survivors were largely houseless, traumatized, and hungry for someone to blame. And that someone, as we know, was Robert Hubert. His identity as a foreigner and a suspected Catholic made him a convenient scapegoat.

But even though Hubert confessed to the crime, his story was absolutely implausible from the beginning—for one thing, he wasn't even in London when the blaze started. And an investigation in the following weeks found that the fire was probably just a terrible accident.

4:36

Large eye focused on flames; bakery kitchen with lit oven and baker running with loaves as a woman is engulfed in flames; baker holding a newspaper headlined 'Fire' that burns up; man holding a 'Someone II Blame' sign amongst a protesting crowd; opening of evidence folder with pictures and texts in it; large '6'.

Early in the morning of September 2nd, a baker by the name of Thomas Farriner awoke to find both his bakery and his home on fire. It's hard to know exactly what happened that night, but lots of people think somebody just failed to put out the oven. Farriner fled with his family, but left behind a maidservant—the fire's first official victim.

Even though the fire was ruled accidental, it was hard to get the word out with newspapers and post offices burned down. Plus, Londoners were pretty committed to the idea of the fire being a foreign Catholic conspiracy, whether or not they believed in Hubert's guilt specifically. It wasn't until the modern era that the real story became common knowledge—long after Hubert's execution for a crime he didn't commit.

To this day, nobody's exactly sure why Hubert confessed to starting the blaze. And other questions remain, too. Like, the Fire of London had a confirmed death toll of just six people, which seems suspicious.

5:35

Figures being engulfed by flames as they move through a town on fire; man with notebook and pen near piles of ashes that are swept away; death counter showing a large increase; displaced people amongst rubble and smoke as a looter walks by; handshake; large eyes staring angrily at a group being grabbed and crushed by claws.

On one hand, people did evacuate the city pretty quickly. But on the other, a densely populated urban maze of twisting alleyways and hay-stuffed structures set aflame? It's kind of a recipe for some major casualties. Plus, fire destroys victims' bodies into char and ash, and with a population made up largely of impoverished laborers, there was no reason for officials to actively look for or count their casualties. Spending the time and money to do so was a privilege reserved for the wealthy.

That means it's possible that many more perished in the Great Fire of London, their final moments ignored by history for centuries. Today's experts say hundreds to thousands of people may have died in the blaze. And for those who survived, life was pretty bleak. The city was rife with mass houselessness and disease. Most residents were refugees in their own country, camped out in tents surrounded by rubble, while looters roamed the city. And with its finances devastated, England soon ended its war with the Dutch.



6:50

*Bricks stacking and creating a house;
historical firefighting engine; two
hands trading cash for insurance
documents; houses being layered
and creating a town; pile of skulls;
town on fire; people amongst rubble
and smoke; group surrounded by
large pointed fingers; London
landmarks against a blue sky.*

London's xenophobia, or suspicion of strangers, only strengthened. Hate crimes against Dutch and French Catholics spiked. Many people were assaulted, severely beaten, or even lynched solely because of their religion or nation of origin.

As the city rebuilt (out of less flammable materials this time around), there were some changes for the better— like the establishment of London's first official fire brigade, which could respond much more effectively than a bunch of people with buckets of water. And the advent of fire insurance as a means of recovering lost funds and items. Eventually, London was reborn from the ashes a more modern city— but at a staggering cost.

The Great Fire of London was a horrible urban catastrophe. And while the entire city shouldered the cost, the highest toll was paid by already marginalized groups— those living in poverty whose deaths went uncounted, and foreigners and religious minorities who faced suspicion, hostility, and brutality at the hands of their fellow Londoners. However, out of the destruction, London was able to build back better, creating a thriving urban ecosystem with new innovations that have helped bring it into the modern era.