

Eyewitness accounts of the Great Fire (I)

Samuel Pepys' diary

Sunday 2 September 1666

Jane came and told me that over 300 houses had burned down during the night and that the fire was now burning by London Bridge. Some people stayed in their houses until the fire almost touched them, then ran to the boats. I saw some poor pigeons hover near the fire until they burned their wings and fell down. Walking along Watling Street, I saw many people trying to escape the fire with goods in carts or on their backs.

Monday 3 September 1666

At 4 o'clock in the morning I packed my money, silver and best things into a cart and moved to Bethnal Green to keep safe at a friend's house.

Tuesday 4 September 1666

I dug a hole in my garden and buried my wine and Parmesan cheese for safe-keeping.

Friday 7 September 1666

I got up at 5 o'clock and found that all was well. But I saw all the town burned and the miserable sight of Paul's church with all the roofs fallen.

Eyewitness accounts of the Great Fire (2)

John Evelyn's diary

Sunday 2 September 1666

On this night about ten, a terrible fire started near Fish Street. We took the coach to the bankside, where we saw an awful sight; the whole city in flames.

Monday 3 September 1666

The fire had continued all night thanks to a fierce eastern wind and the dry season. I saw the whole south part of the city burning as well as St Paul's Church.

Many people were crying out and seemed to run around not knowing what to do. The heat burned everything – houses, furniture and churches. We saw the Thames covered with goods on barges and boats, and carts driven to fields outside the city. Tents were put up to shelter people and the goods they saved.

All the sky was aflame like the top of a burning oven and it was lit up for many miles. You could hear the crackling and thunder of the flames, screaming of women and children and the crash of falling buildings.

Tuesday 4 September 1666

The burning is still going. Most of the city has been burned and the pavements are so hot that no man or horse could tread on them. I saw crowds of sad people camped in the fields around the city. Many have lost all their goods and homes.

Friday 7 September 1666

I walked through the city today. St Paul's Church is in ruins. People walked around in shock. I saw two-hundred-thousand people, poor and rich, laying by the heaps of goods they saved. King Charles has ordered that fresh food is given to them all.