

## The Great London Fire

**Directions:** Read Samuel Pepys's diary entry describing the London fire in 1666, and answer the questions that follow.

By this time it was about twelve o'clock; and so home. Soon as dined, away, and walked through the city, the streets full of nothing but people and horses and carts laden with goods, ready to run over one another, and removing goods from one burned house to another. They now removing out of Canning Street (which received goods in the morning) into Lombard Street, and farther; and among others I now saw my little goldsmith, Stokes, receiving some friend's goods, whose house itself was burned the day after. We parted at Paul's; he home, and I to Paul's Wharf, where I had appointed a boat to attend me, and took in Mr. Carcasse and his brother, whom I met in the street, and carried them below and above bridge, to and again to see the fire, which was now got farther, both below and above, and no likelihood of stopping it. Met with the King and Duke of York in their barge, and with them to Queenhithe, and there called Sir Richard Browne to them. Their order was only to pull down houses apace, and so below bridge at the waterside; but little was or could be done, the fire coming upon them so fast. Good hopes there was of stopping it at the Three Cranes above, and at Buttolph's Wharf below bridge, if care be used, but the wind carries it into the City, so as we know not by the waterside what it do there. River full of lighters and boats taking in goods, and good goods swimming in the water, and only I observed that hardly one lighter or boat in three that had the goods of a house in, but there was a pair of virginals<sup>1</sup> in it.

Having seen as much as I could now, I away to Whitehall by appointment and there walked to St. James's Park, and there met my wife and Creed and walked to my boat; and there upon the water again, and to the fire up and down, it still increasing, and the wind great. So near the fire as we could for smoke, and all over the Thames, with one's face in the wind, you were almost burned with a shower of firedrops. This is very true; so as houses were burned by these drops and flakes of fire, three or four, nay, five or six houses, one from another. When we could endure no more upon the water, we to a little alehouse on the Bankside, over against the Three Cranes, and there stayed till it was dark almost, and saw the fire grow; and, as it grew darker, appeared more and more, and in corners and up steeples, and between churches and houses, as far as we could see up the hill of the City in a most horrid malicious bloody flame not like the fine flame of an ordinary fire. Barbary and her husband away before us. We stayed till, it being darkish, we saw the fire as only one entire arch of fire from this to the other side of the bridge and in a bow up the hill for an arch of above a mile long; it made me weep to see it. The churches, houses, and all on fire and flaming at once; and a horrid noise the flames made, and the crackling of houses at their ruin.

So home with a sad heart, and there find everybody discoursing and lamenting the fire; and poor Tom Hater come with some few of his goods saved out of his house, which is burned upon Fish Street Hill. I invited him to lie at my house, and did receive his goods, but was deceived in his lying there; the news coming every moment of the growth of the fire; so as we were forced to begin to pack up our own goods and prepare for their removal; and did by moonshine (it being brave dry, and moonshine, and warm weather) carry much of my goods into the garden, and Mr. Hater and did remove my money and iron chests into my cellar, as thinking that the safest place. And got my bags of gold into my office, ready to carry away.

<sup>1</sup>pair of virginals: a small, legless harpsichord popular in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries

and my chief papers of accounts also there, and my tallies into a box by themselves. So great was our fear, as Sir W. Batten hath carts come out of the country to fetch away his goods this night. We did put Mr. Hater, poor man, to bed a little; but he got but very little rest, so much noise being in my house, taking down of goods.

*3rd.* About four o'clock in the morning, my Lady Batten sent me a cart to carry away all my money, and plate, and best things, to Sir W. Rider's at Bednall Green. Which I did, riding myself in my nightgown in the cart; and, Lord! to see how the streets and highways are crowded with people running and riding, and getting of carts at any rate to fetch away things. I find Sir W. Rider tired with being called up all night, and receiving things from several friends. His house full of goods, and much of Sir W, Batten's and Sir W, Pen's. I am eased at my heart to have my treasure so well secured. Then home, with much ado to find a way, nor any sleep all this night to me nor my poor wife.

1. What details from Pepys's description of the London Fire help you to picture the fire in your own mind?
2. What details in the diary seem personal?
3. What does this account tell you about human nature in a time of distress?
4. What does it show about life in the 1660s?
5. What is your impression of Pepys's character?

## The New Historical Diarist: You

**Directions:** Create a fictional historical document—a diary covering life during a particular decade. Answering the following questions will help you plan your character, research, and finished diary entries.

### Character

- What persona do you wish to assume?
- How old are you at the start of the decade?
- Which gender are you?
- What is your position in English class structure?
- Where do you live? What adjectives best describe the place?
- How big is your family? You may want to list the names of family members.

### Research

- What is one of the historical or social events your character would care about most?
- What literary works were popular, what music was played, and what forms of entertainment were available?
- What church would you have attended?

### The Diary

- What form will your diary take? What is your level of education?
- How will you incorporate information about your family?
- What items might you save in your diary? The commonplace book—a term for diary—of a young woman in Scotland in 1839 includes pressed flowers, a “receipt for the bite of a mad dog,” and sundry comments on neighbors’ personal lives. Your diary may include items you have attached or drawn to represent your daily life.