

# Illuminating the Great Fire

**Everybody knows about the Great Fire... don't they? 350 years since the infamous date, Museum of London is using archaeology, scientific evidence and little known sources to shed new light on causes, effects, myths and aftermath.**

**Curator Meriel Jeater gave Becky Wallower a sneak preview of a revealing exhibition opening 23 July.**



We've been taught it in school, we've loved the diorama at the Museum with Pepys' dramatic account for decades, we had a look at that TV series a few years back, and we know that those 51 Wren churches would never have been built without it. But it seems we take far too much for granted. The press preview for the exhibition back in March confirmed how high the interest was, but, equally, it exposed just how many myths and misconceptions prevail about the Great Fire (if you thought the fire killed off the plague, think again...). And as they headed smartly for the artefacts, it was obvious that the press saw immediately what archaeology brought to both evidence and narrative.

In putting the exhibition together, curator Meriel Jeater was keen to take a fresh look at everything from how the

fire started to the lasting legacy, but to look especially at the personal stories bound up in the disaster. A decision was made early on to make the exhibition appealing to children and adults alike. 'For a start, it remains an important part of the Key Stage 1 curriculum,' she said, 'but we know that fascination with the fire stays with people.' An evaluation of families visiting MOL showed that children were intrigued by the fire, while adults were more curious about how the City and its people fared afterwards.

In each section, the exhibition questions the findings, asking not just what we know, but how. It has the impressive audio, visual and interactive aspects that would be expected, but also plenty of primary evidence.

A large reconstruction of Pudding Lane leads visitors through the lost streetscape into the nightmarish results of the fire. From records of more than 75 sites Meriel ultimately selected artefacts providing indications of the progress, damage, aftermath and rebuilding. Excavations around the Monument area in the 1990s

building boom brought up evidence not only of fire damage, but of the tradesmen and residents who suffered. From Pudding Lane [site code PEN79], two doors down from the seat of the fire at Thomas Farriner's bakery, came a handful of fused and melted hooks and eyes, perhaps from a tailor, and a bubbled and burnt delftware dish that indicates quite well-off occupants. Melted keys and burnt locks from Botolph Lane just behind [BPL95] suggest an ironmonger or locksmith, and a roof tile buckled in half testifies to the high temperatures. St Paul's Cathedral has lent scorched monuments and masonry to tell the story of the effect on even the greatest institutions.

Scientific evidence, such as that from Peninsular House, has provided corroboration of where materials that were said to have spread the fire rapidly, such as pitch, timber and oil, might have been located. Experts have determined that temperatures required to deform ceramic pieces in the exhibition would have been at least 1200° C.

Even artefacts found relatively unscathed add to the picture. A hoard of fine decorative glass found in Gracechurch Street hints of a high quality glass merchant, while a great store of Bellarmine vessels found in the cellars of the Guildhall [GYE92] may have been feasting supplies of the Lord Mayor, maligned during the fire for his





**OPPOSITE TOP** an embroidery panel from a house in Cheapside, reputedly saved from the fire

**OPPOSITE BELOW** a hoard of glass from Gracechurch Street

**ABOVE** clockwise from top left, fused hooks and eyes and blistered delftware from Pudding Lane; burnt padlocks and key (shown with x-ray image © MOLA) and domestic roof tile from Botoph Lane

**RIGHT** Smithfield market building: home to the next MOL? All except x-ray ©Museum of London

dithering. A review of how he, King Charles II and the populace fought the fire includes equipment such as a fire squirt, buckets, and fire hooks. Fragile pieces, like the unfinished embroidery, tell of what families sought to preserve as they fled with what they could carry.

After the drama of the fire, visitors enter a section through tent-like gauze, to encounter the little known stories of the aftermath: from the thousands of refugees living in squalid camps, to the panicky retributions, and the political fallout.

Documentary evidence provides more detail: letters – some written in apparent haste – vividly depict the uncertainty and terror; a petition on loan from the London Metropolitan Archives, from high-ranking Elizabeth Peacock, asks for help for her five children, who have ‘not a stool to sit on’. One panorama shows London in ruins, while another depicts the rebuilt City. Where visionary plans show what might have been, accounts show how carters and landlords profited from shortages. The tale is recounted of the desiccated body of a long dead Bishop of London being propped up for viewing outside St Paul’s after being exposed in its tomb by the fire.

‘Who was blamed?’ asks a further section. It covers the panic spread by rumours about the French and Dutch,

and the sorry tale of Robert Hubert, the innocent and clearly disturbed Frenchman executed for setting the fire. A plaque is featured trumpeting his guilt: installed in Pudding Lane some 15 years later at the time of the Popish Plot, it was only removed in the 18th century when tourists viewing it were blocking the lane. As indicated by books and documents on display, however, some people pointed firmly towards divine retribution as the cause, blaming the ungodly Londoners, and sparking days of penance.

Maps and prints in the exhibition give a contemporary view of London rebuilt, but with Stuart London largely obliterated by the Victorians, evidence from archaeological excavations on sites across the City now provides an essential source for vanished details.

A full programme of events for adults and families runs alongside the exhibition – exploiting still further the archaeological heritage of the fire.

### **Fire! Fire!**

**23 July 2016 – 17 April 2017**

*Exhibition, family and adult events*

**3 – 4 September 2016**

*City-wide events for 350th anniversary of Great Fire, including Minecraft: fight the fire and rebuild London*

[www.museumoflondon.org.uk/museum-london/whats-on/exhibitions/fire-fire](http://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/museum-london/whats-on/exhibitions/fire-fire)

## ...and where will archaeology fit in tomorrow's MOL?

Even as *Fire! Fire!* was being put together with extensive use of archaeology, a much bigger event has been coming over the horizon: the relocation of the Museum of London to an historic site in Smithfield. We've been trying to find out what impact this would have on how archaeology might be displayed, featured and stored.

Few would disagree that the 1970s London Wall premises are challenging in terms of space, presence and facilities. But although the proposed premises, four buildings on the edge of the market, are significantly larger, they are derelict and require a complete redesign to become museum space. Detail has been thin, and even viewing by senior staff limited to a few at a time, but some significant steps have been taken. The City now owns both freehold and leasehold. The Mayor of London has funded a design competition, and a shortlist of six was announced in April. The winning architect, chosen by a jury, will be announced this summer.



A spokesman says that much more work needs to be done before content can be discussed, but ‘archaeology will continue to be central to how we tell the story of London and Londoners.’ With around double the current space for permanent galleries and treble that for temporary exhibitions, there is potential for the display of many more artefacts. Watch this space – carefully...