

The Great Fire of London

Karin Doull

Introduction

The Great Fire of London is a favourite National Curriculum teaching topic. This paper draws on the latest resources and teaching ideas to suggest how you can meet both the NC history requirements and the wider ones of the National Curriculum, particularly in integrated programmes that include teaching about the Great Fire of London. We begin with the historical background that provides an essential reference frame for teaching the subject. This leads in to a detailed account of the teaching of one of its sessions, resources and a scheme of work. The final elements are a teacher's account of teaching The Great Fire through dance, Dos and Dont's and What the co-ordinator might do.



The Historical Context

In 1665 a bright comet blazed through the skies prompting John Gadbury (London 1665) to list the dire effects of such visitations:

...Threatening the world with famine, plague and war. To Princes, death! To Kingdoms, many crosses. To all estates, inevitable losses. To Herdsmen, rot. To ploughmen, hapless seasons. To sailors, storms. To Cities, civil treasons.
www.ianridpath.com/halley/halley2.htm

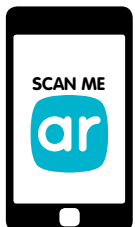
All England knew that that this was a portent of evil and great woe to befall the land and so it proved to be. Plague stalked the land through 1665 decimating the inhabitants of London and sending those able to leave scurrying to the country. The effects were felt throughout the country as a curate in Derbyshire noted:

In this yeare after the blazeing starr is the warr at sea with the Hollander and the greate Plague at London and many other places in this nation. In London

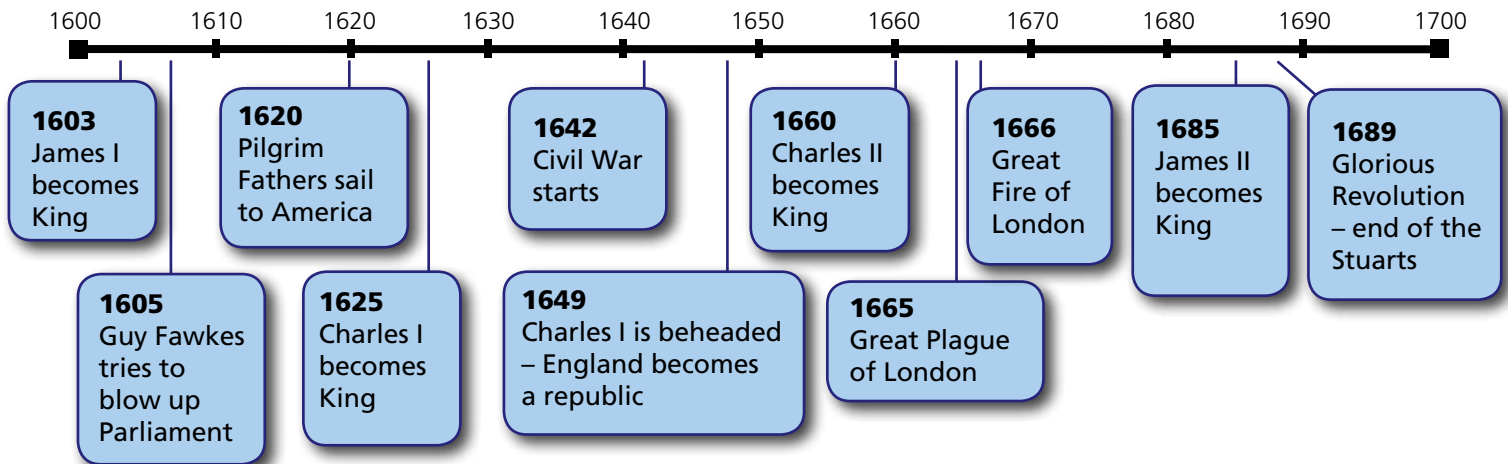
in this yeare there dyed of the Plague above ninety thousands.
<http://recordoffice.wordpress.com/2012/11/23/comets-plague-and-fire-as-seen-from-pleasley-1665/>

The Fire

Despite these disasters, through the summer of 1666 things began to improve. The court of King Charles II returned to London and the city once again began to go about its normal business. The summer had been long and dry. A season of drought had covered the city



Time-line of the fire

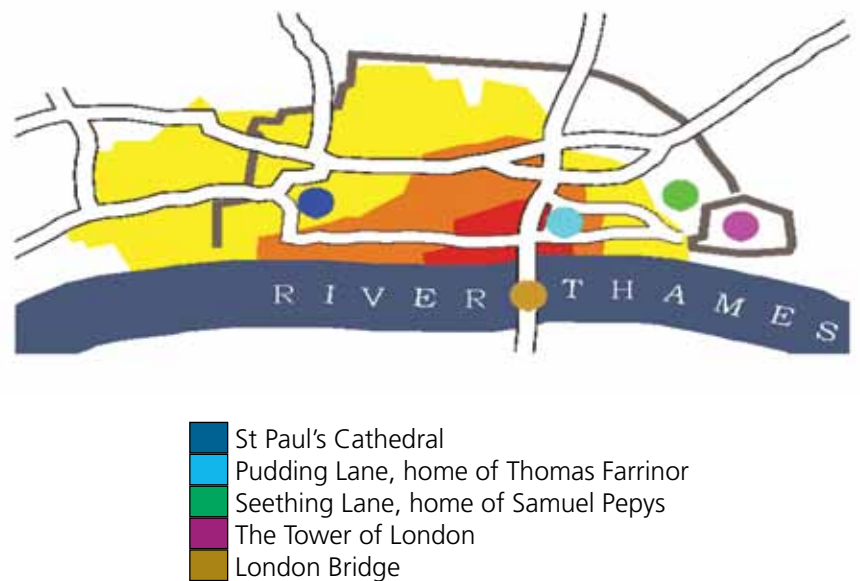


in a blanket of heat until the very air seemed dry. There were other unsettling concerns worrying the citizens of London. Rumours ran through the city whispering of war with the 'Hollanders' and ever-present danger from the French. Into this seething caldron of intrigue and suspicion was to come one 'small mistake ... with great consequences'. (Samuel Pepys)

During the night of 2 September 1666 a fire started in the premises of the King's baker in Pudding Lane. Thomas Farrinor's bakery was to be the first lost to the devastating conflagration that was to become Great Fire of London.

Farrinor and his family were woken by a journeyman crying that the building was on fire. They retreated upstairs and all jumped to safety from a window except for an unnamed maidservant. She became the first human casualty of the fire. Small scale fires were a hazard of city life. Heating, lighting and cooking involved open flames and most houses were timber framed with plaster and lathe interiors providing ideal fuel for fires. Industry nestled next to residences. Firefighting, although quite well organised, relied on the use of water and demolition. Sir Thomas

Figure 1: Map of the Great Fire of London – its extent



Bloodworth, the Lord Mayor, vacillated when asked to demolish properties around the bakery and water sources quickly got cut off. As the flames took hold, fanned by a strong wind, a firestorm ran on to London Bridge and through the city. Foreigners were set upon and attacked as rumours spread of an enemy plot to fire the city.

The fire raged for three days, affecting the homes of more than seven-eighths of the city, some 13,200 dwellings. In addition to St Paul's 87 parish churches were destroyed. The flames

and smoke from the city could be seen as far away as Oxford and reached up four miles into the air. Within the space of three days the majority of the inhabitants of the city were turned into refugees, huddling in makeshift tented cities through one of the coldest winters in record. While a new city would emerge from the rubble it would take time to rebuild for as John Evelyn said 'I went againe to the ruins, for it was now no longer a City.' (10 Sept 1666)



Websites

<https://www.pepysdiary.com/>

Samuel Pepys website with accounts from his diary.

<https://www.bl.uk/learning/histcitizen/timeline/accessvers/1600s/index.html>

British Library time-lines with evidence from Pepys' diary and London Gazette – also other pieces of literature from the time.

www.youtube.com/watch?v=NG-wA9U9dwQ Animated version of the fire by Lisle Marsden Primary, Grimsby. An excellent example of what can be achieved with Lego men, tissue paper and narrators.

www.fireoflondon.org.uk/

Teachers' resources – image bank – a really useful source of evidence.

www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/lessons/lesson47.htm

Fire of London resources including Charles' proclamation, hearth tax return from Pudding lane with Farrinor's name on it and Hollar's map after the fire

www.youtube.com/user/ThePlayHouseOnline/videos

Series of three videos, before, during and after the fire.

<http://puddinglanedmuga.blogspot.co.uk/>

The blog of the group that created the wonderful video of London before the fire – reading down the blogs allows you to identify which building is the bakery

www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dn6E_4g4UAW

Peter Ackroyd's Fire of London video with Pepys and Evelyn (00.00-05.10 mins) ~ aimed at adults and you need to use extracts but creating strong images to help children visualise the situation.

www.fireoflondon.org.uk/game

This uses original sources to help explain different aspects of the fire. Two characters lead you through events creating problems for children to solve. I think I would use this after or alongside taught sessions to supplement class activities.

An example of how this topic might be taught:

Key Question:

What happened on the night of 2 September 1666?

Learning Intention:

Show understanding that the past has been interpreted in different ways

Assessment criteria:

Can the children recognise that there may be different viewpoints about what or who caused the spread of the fire?



Resources

HA website:

The Great Fire of London topic pack:
www.history.org.uk/go/GreatFireTopicPack

You can find more exemplar lessons on the HA website.

1. Script for role play with various characters
2. Video "During the Great Fire" online www.youtube.com/user/ThePlayHouseOnline/videos
3. i>clickers (if available) / voting cards if not (green/red laminated cards)
4. Images for Thomas Farrinor/Samuel Pepys/ Thomas Bloodworth/ King Charles II/east wind
5. Sketch map of area
6. Figure 3

Activity:

Timings	Teaching strategies	Children's responses
3 minutes	Whole class watch 'During the Great Fire'	
7-10 minutes	<p><i>What impression does this give you of the fire?</i></p> <p>Points to listen for: ~ initially not worried as think it is localised ~ takes hold swiftly ~ people are overwhelmed ~ drastic action needs to be taken</p> <p><i>Who were some of the main characters involved?</i></p>	<p>No one is trying to fight the fire/ people trying to save themselves and their goods/ running to the river/people don't think it is very serious to start with/ the fire is huge and takes over everything/ King comes to help</p> <p>Thomas Farrinor/Samuel Pepys/ Thomas Bloodworth King Charles II/ fire and wind And fictional cat!</p>
5 minutes	<p>Pose the question to the class <i>Why did the fire spread so disastrously?</i></p> <p>Could anything have been done to stop the spread of the fire?</p>	<p>Children might refer back to the video of London and refer to the physical characteristics of the city: Wooden houses close together/ open fires/ narrow alleyways for fire to jump.</p>
15 -25 minutes	<p>Suggest that we need some evidence. Explain that we will listen to accounts from different people and vote to see if we think that they have been responsible for not stopping the fire from spreading.</p> <p>(Teaching Assistant and Classroom Teacher in role as judge and witness)</p> <p>Children listen to accounts from different characters and vote at the end of each piece of evidence on the question <i>Did you contribute to the spread of the fire?</i> (either using yes /no on I>clicker or green for no/ red for yes with voting cards)</p> <p>Characters to be interviewed: ~ Thomas Farrinor ~ Samuel Pepys ~ Thomas Bloodworth ~ King Charles II ~ east wind</p> <p>After listening to the entire evidence children vote again by placing stickers on images of characters to see who the class think is most to blame. (Or for characters through i>clicker to produce grid to show guilt)</p>	

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Enquiry: What happened to London during the fire of 1666?

Learning objectives	Key question and suggested lesson ideas	Suggested resources	Assessment criteria
<p>Children should : Show knowledge and understanding of aspects of the past beyond living memory ~ identifying characteristic features of a period.</p>	<p>What was Stuart London like? Whole class ~ Watch the video of 3D London. Give tick sheets to record observations Individual ~ Factual description and image</p> <p>Cross-curricular: Art ~ create image of buildings ~ restricted palette of black, white and terracotta (chalks and charcoal)</p>	<p>Off The Map ~ London in 3D City before the Great Fire http://puddinglanedmuga.blogspot.co.uk/ (video and screen shots)</p>	<p>Can the children create a factual description that identifies characteristic features of Stuart London?</p>
<p>Children should : Show understanding that the past has been interpreted in different ways</p>	<p>Could anyone have stopped what happened on 2 September 1666? Whole class Watch video Teacher / Teaching Assistant role-play judge and witnesses. Children vote after each scenario for who they think is responsible. Class vote at the end of the session.</p>	<p>Script for role play with various characters</p> <p>Video 'During the Great Fire' ~ on-line www.youtube.com/user/ThePlayHouseOnline/videos</p> <p>i>clickers (if available) voting cards if not</p>	<p>Can the children recognise that there may be different viewpoints about what or who caused the fire?</p>
<p>Children should: Begin to realise that there are reasons why people acted as they did</p>	<p>What did people do first? Groups ~ investigate resources (documentary and visual) to consider what people may have done and felt. Individual ~ draw character for class collage with speech bubble to explain actions or feelings.</p> <p>Cross-curricular: Art ~ collage with houses on to flame background ~ add people to forefront.</p>	<p>http://gfol.webs.com/londonmap.htm clickable map showing how the fire spread from 2 to 5 September www.pepysdiary.com/indepth/2009/09/02/evelyns-fire/ John Evelyn's account of the fire www.pepys.info/fire.html Samuel Pepys website with accounts of fire and plague (also recipe for cakes) www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dn6E_4g4UAW Peter Ackroyd's Fire of London video with Pepys and Evelyn (00.00-05.10 mins) www.fireoflondon.org.uk/ image of firefighting and London in flames from teachers' resources ~ image bank</p>	<p>Can the children give reasons for actions within the speech bubbles?</p>

Learning objectives	Key question and suggested lesson ideas	Suggested resources	Assessment criteria
<p>Children should: Describe the event studied in structured work</p>	<p>What was it like at the height of the fire? Pairs ~ Use extracts to create a piece of found poetry.</p>	<p>Extracts from John Evelyn and Samuel Pepys</p>	<p>Can the children create an account of what the fire was like?</p>
<p>Children should: Select and combine information from different sources</p>	<p>What was left of London? Group ~ From a variety of sources select 3 that are significant in explaining what happened ~ prepare PowerPoint or Padlet slide and presentation per group</p>	<p>www.fireoflondon.org.uk/images/firefighting equipment, burnt artefacts, map of city destruction from teachers resources ~ image bank www.telegraph.co.uk/property/propertypicturegalleries/10275938/10-buildings-that-survived-the-Great-Fire-of-London.html 10 buildings that survived the fire and can still be seen today</p> <p>http://padlet.com/ blank wall format to upload information.</p>	<p>Can the children select three examples to demonstrate what they think might be significant?</p>
<p>Children should: Gives reasons for and results of changes</p>	<p>What did the King do to make London better? Whole class ~ discuss how to avoid another such fire? Look at solutions proposed by Charles. Groups ~ look at different proposals for rebuilding city and then create own plan. Whole class ~ discuss what actually occurred (rebuilt on old plan) and why this was</p> <p>Follow up activity: Fieldwork ~ monument and Pudding Lane with visit to St Olave Hart Church where Pepys is buried.</p>	<p>www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/lessons/lesson47.htm Fire of London resources including Charles' proclamation</p> <p>Plans for the city: http://mapco.net/london/1666evelynb.htm John Evelyn's plan for rebuilding http://archive.museumoflondon.org.uk/Londons-Burning/objects/image.htm?rid=62231&size=3&pid=9&personid=150768 Robert Hooke's plan for rebuilding http://mapco.net/london/1666wren.htm Christopher Wren's plan for rebuilding</p>	<p>Can the children explain why choices were made when rebuilding London?</p>



The Great Fire of London through dance

While this lesson is for year 5 pupils, the ideas and approaches can be readily adopted for 5 to 7 year old Key Stage 1 pupils. It is important to tie the dance in to the historical context with appropriate reference to both the history of the fire and the sources upon which the history is based.

Introduction

I like to try to deliver history through a variety of media to keep it fresh and so when I was asked to teach the Fire of London through dance I saw it as an exciting challenge.

The pupils

The children (60 Year 5 pupils) were at first a little apprehensive, especially the boys who are often more self-conscious when it comes to expressing themselves in this way. However, the mention of the use of ropes to show fleeing citizens caught their attention and I was able to win them over.

First-hand, original sources

To bring the piece together and give it historical credence, I decided to use diary extracts from both Samuel Pepys and John Evelyn's writings as an introduction to each section of the dance. We also wrote some extra verses of the Nursery Rhyme 'London's Burning' to make it a cross-curricular experience (dance, music, history and literacy).

Pupils in role

Two of the children acted as Samuel Pepys and John Evelyn, sitting either side of the stage,. The rest of the children worked in groups of four to six. Each group was allocated various actions to perform.

Some represented the houses that were pulled down; child after child rolled to the floor to show the house's gradual collapse, while one person pretended to tug at its frame. We had four houses being torn down to the sound of the 'Dies Irae' from Mozart's *Requiem*, K626.

Another group of children represented the fleeing Londoners. While some scaled the ropes, others rowed through the waters of the murky Thames. Six children dodged each other with bundles on their backs while hurrying to the boats with their possessions. This

piece of dance was accompanied by the wonderful and terribly evocative music of *Carmina Burana*. It was interesting trying to get the children to row in time but in the end we got some semblance of synchronisation.

Historical reconstruction: imaginative, creative teaching

The children enjoyed the blowing up of the houses. We had children being rolled by others as though they were barrels of gunpowder. Once they reached the houses (constructed of five children in a pyramid formation) the children fell dramatically to the ground in an explosive fashion (they felt that they needed a lot of practice with this part of the dance – I wonder why?)

The singed feathers of the pigeons were more difficult to conjure up as a piece of dance, especially considering the budget available. Consequently we chose to create origami-type pigeons which flew down into the melée of children who were trying to put out the fire by passing water along the line in imaginary buckets. All this was done to the music of Hans Fagius' Suite Gothique pour *Grande Orgue*, opus 25

These were just some of the examples; naturally we had children being flames and the blowing wind as well as a child being Samuel Pepys digging a hole in which to bury his cheese. I wanted however to take it a step further by looking at the aftermath of the fire, in particular the vigilantes who strove to attack foreigners and Catholics, many of these groups being blamed for the start of the fire. And reconstruct the trial of Hubert (the Frenchman who was executed for his part in the whole affair). Sensitivity was going to be of utmost importance and had to be handled with care.

Conclusion

The children got a lot out of the exercise and thoroughly enjoyed learning in this way. It is something I would repeat as I believe it lends itself to a creativity that is sometimes missing in our curriculum today.

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Dos and Don'ts

1. Focus on historical learning

Historical understanding is derived from our ability to develop the concepts that underpin subject knowledge. Knowing many pieces of information is of no use (except in a pub quiz) unless we can also make sense of them.

We need to develop conceptual understanding and apply skills.

Concepts

- Chronology – time-lines and sequencing events but understanding how those sequences can be traced back to each other
- Change and continuity – similarities and differences within times as well as across periods
- Characteristic features – how we recognise the defining features of a period or event through physical features, such as dress, architecture, transport, and the ideas that shape the period
- Cause and consequence – why things happened and the effect that these events then provoked. The ripple through time if you like
- Counter-argument or historical interpretation – an awareness that there can be different versions of the same event, that history is about fact, bias and point of view.

Skills

- Enquiry – history is all about investigation – leave time for questions from the children as well as focusing on what you feel is key
- Evidence – we don't make things up so we rely on sources of evidence. Use as much primary evidence as you can. Layer different sources to extend understanding and allow for different learning styles. Don't be frightened of using documentary evidence, scaffold if necessary but give children a chance to use the full range of material.
- Evaluation – select and combine information, and investigate for bias. Analysis is all-important here as you encourage children to identify what is significant.
- Organise and communicate – historical understanding can be shown through image, discussion and debate, diagrams and tables, drama and dance as well as written tasks.

2. Widen the scope of the study

Think about some of the effects of the fire. Where did the homeless people go? How long were they there? How did they survive without homes and livelihoods? Who was Robert Hubert and why were people so willing to believe ill of him? Could a jury with three Farrinors on it be considered to be objective? Try to investigate some of the more controversial issues as well.

3. Teach history not literacy: don't fall into the literacy trap

It is easy to focus on developing skills in reading and writing, particularly when the outcome is written work. It is important however to remember that the learning intention and any success criteria derived from it need to relate to developing historical understanding. 'To know what an eyewitness is' followed by writing an fictional account of the fire, focusing on introducing and sequencing events is easily about developing written language rather than history.

4 Don't set things on fire just for the effect

There are a number of videos on YouTube with teachers enthusiastically setting fire to paper houses as the onlookers squeal with excitement. While I am sure that health and safety was considered (although I am not convinced that pouring on lighter fuel is a responsible act) the purpose of this activity needs to be clear.

- First* the houses should look like Stuart buildings and should be grouped together.
- Second*, you need to think about what would have affected the spread of the fire such as direction of wind, water barriers and space as a barrier. **The activity should be a problem-solving situation rather than a show.**
- Third* you need to focus on the consequences considering how devastating it could be to lose your home to fire.

What the co-ordinator might do:

The Great Fire of London



This is a familiar topic for many Key Stage 1 teachers although the context of Stuart Britain might be less well understood. A basic grasp of some of the key features of this time would be helpful such as who the monarch was, other recent events such as the Great Plague and the importance of London. London was not the only town to be badly affected by a major fire, so it might be useful to see whether the local area was also affected.

When devising a scheme of work it is important to remember, as this article states, that the aim is historical understanding. History processes, content and concepts should therefore be planned for explicitly even if there are plenty of excellent cross-curricular opportunities. The Historical Association website contains a draft scheme of work although there may be benefit in altering it especially if there are local comparisons that can be made.

When teaching this topic, it is always worth considering the key ideas that might be developed here but also reinforced through other history. Teachers might be encouraged to consider ideas such as these which can be picked up again with other historical content in other topics.

- A small event can lead to a major unplanned result;
- Times in the past did not have the degree of planning, health and safety we have today;
- Disasters can have some benefits in the longer term, e.g. a cleaner, safer London;
- Different people react differently when faced with a sudden catastrophe;
- Hindsight can give a much clearer picture than that faced by those living through the chaos of the event;
- We rely on the sources to give us the best possible picture and this event has the benefit of eyewitnesses.

Such ideas can be revisited elsewhere in the primary years.

Tim Lomas