

ENGLISH LEARNING FOR CURIOUS MINDS



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Episode #115

The Great Fire of London

15th Dec, 2020

[00:00:00] Hello, hello hello, and welcome to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English.

[00:00:11] The show where you can listen to fascinating stories, and learn weird and wonderful things about the world at the same time as improving your English.

[00:00:21] I'm Alastair Budge and today we are going to be talking about The Great Fire of London, when a huge fire [swept¹](#) through the centre of London, destroying 13 thousand houses, making 100,000 people homeless, and changing the face of the city forever.

[00:00:42] It's an amazing story, and one that is not very well known outside the UK, so I'm super excited to share it with you today.

¹ moved quickly and with a lot of force

The Great Fire of London

[00:00:52] OK then, let's not waste one minute, and get straight into the story of the Great Fire of London.

[00:01:00] In the early hours of the 2nd of September 1666, above a [bakery](#)² on Pudding Lane, in the City of London, a [baker](#)³, Thomas Farriner, was sleeping [soundly](#)⁴.

[00:01:15] He woke up to find smoke coming through the door, and managed to escape out of the window onto a neighbouring roof, with his daughter Hannah.

[00:01:26] His [maid](#)⁵, his servant, was too afraid to jump out of the window with them, and she [perished](#)⁶ in the fire, she was caught up by the [flames](#)⁷, and died.

[00:01:37] And this was to be how the Great Fire of London, the most famous fire in British history, started.

[00:01:45] Fires in London were relatively common at the time.

² a place where bread is made

³ someone who makes bread

⁴ deeply

⁵ a female servant

⁶ died

⁷ the hot, burning gas that comes from a fire

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[00:01:48] Fire was used for all sorts of purposes, from lighting to heating to cooking, and it was common for fires to be left [alight](#)⁸ in the house during the evening, to heat it.

[00:02:02] Whatsmore, the streets in London were very narrow, most buildings were made from wood, and people would often keep [flammable](#)⁹ material in their homes, things like [hay](#)¹⁰ and oil. Things that would set on fire easily.

[00:02:20] London was a living, breathing, industrialising city, very different to the London of today, so people had all of this highly [flammable](#), industrial material right in the city centre, right in the heart of London.

[00:02:36] If you're wondering exactly where Pudding Lane is, where the fire started, it is right in the centre of the City of London, just [a stone's throw](#)¹¹ away from London Bridge.

[00:02:50] The area is now very fancy, and the City is a centre of finance, it's the Wall Street of London, but back in 1666 it was very different, it was crowded, it was not fancy at all.

⁸ on fire

⁹ burns easily

¹⁰ long, dry grass

¹¹ very close

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[00:03:07] So, fires were a relatively frequent **occurrence**¹², they happened quite a lot and they were nothing to be hugely concerned about.

[00:03:16] Indeed, The Lord Mayor of London, a man called Thomas Bludworth, went to look at the fire above the **bakery** in Pudding Lane at 3 o' clock that morning, a couple of hours after it started, and he didn't consider it to be anything out of the ordinary.

[00:03:36] But in 1666 there had been a particularly dry summer, there was a **drought**¹³ in London, so there wasn't much water available to put out fires, and there was a strong wind.

[00:03:50] These factors caused this fire to be anything but ordinary.

[00:03:56] Over the next 4 days it **spread**¹⁴ and **spread, engulfing**¹⁵ large parts of the city, destroying 13,200 houses and 89 churches, including the **iconic**¹⁶ St Paul's cathedral.

[00:04:13] After the Lord Mayor returned to the scene of the fire the following morning, it was clear that he had been wrong. It was definitely something to be worried about.

¹² something that happens

¹³ a long period with no rain

¹⁴ moved quickly

¹⁵ surrounding, covering

¹⁶ famous, well known

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[00:04:25] The fire was **spreading**¹⁷ quickly and the sky was turning black.

[00:04:30] But back in 1666 there was no official fire brigade, no government authority was responsible for putting out the fire.

[00:04:41] And techniques for actually putting out fires were pretty **primitive**¹⁸, they were quite basic.

[00:04:49] There were quite simple water **pumps**¹⁹ and buckets, which were fine for smaller fires, but aren't very effective when entire streets, and entire buildings, are burning.

[00:05:01] The Lord Mayor instructed for buildings to be pulled down, to be destroyed, so that the fire wouldn't be able to **spread**.

[00:05:10] Men were instructed to go to where the fire hadn't yet reached and pull down houses, so that when the fire did get to the house before, it wouldn't be able to pass to the next, in effect creating a **void**²⁰, a **barrier**²¹, a **gap**²² to stop the **flames**.

¹⁷ moving quickly

¹⁸ basic, not advanced

¹⁹ equipment to move liquid from one place to another

²⁰ an empty area of space

²¹ an object that keeps two things apart

²² an empty space

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[00:05:30] Even though these houses weren't very structurally **sound**²³, they weren't very **robust**²⁴, pulling down a house with **hooks**²⁵ and ropes isn't easy, and it took a long time.

[00:05:44] By the evening of Tuesday the 4th of September, a full 72 hours after the fire had started, **flames** had **engulfed**²⁶ large parts of the city.

[00:05:57] Pulling down houses worked as a **principle**²⁷, creating these empty spaces did stop the fire, but actually pulling them down took too long, and the fire was still **spreading** too quickly.

[00:06:12] So they started using **gunpowder**²⁸, explosives to **blow up**²⁹ houses, destroying them and creating **voids**³⁰, creating **gaps**³¹, to stop the fire.

²³ in good condition

²⁴ strong and not likely to break

²⁵ curved devices used for catching things

²⁶ surrounded

²⁷ idea, theory

²⁸ an explosive mixture of substances

²⁹ cause to explode

³⁰ empty spaces

³¹ empty spaces

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[00:06:25] By this time hundreds of thousands of people had [fled](#)³² the city, abandoned their homes to escape the [blaze](#)³³.

[00:06:34] The population of London at the time of the fire was around 350,000 - it was one of the largest cities in Europe - and 100,000 people were left homeless by the end of the fire.

[00:06:49] Rich and poor, they both lived in this area of London, and there are reports of wealthy Londoners [fleeing](#)³⁴ with all of their possessions, packing up their entire large houses and trying to escape the [flames](#).

[00:07:05] Not everyone [fled](#) though.

[00:07:07] A man called Samuel Pepys, who was an advisor to the king, King Charles II, stayed to observe the fire, and it is actually through his [diary entries](#)³⁵ that we get a lot of our knowledge about what happened.

[00:07:24] Pepys didn't want to move everything out of his house, but he did want to protect his most valuable possessions.

³² left, ran away from

³³ a large fire

³⁴ escaping

³⁵ accounts written in a diary

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[00:07:32] To Pepys, two of his most valuable items were a bottle of wine and his parmesan cheese, which he decided to bury in his garden, to protect it from the fire.

[00:07:46] Luckily for Pepys his house wasn't burned down, so he was able to return to the garden and dig up the wine and cheese afterwards.

[00:07:55] In the end, the use of explosives did work, it did serve the purpose of containing the fire and stopping it **spreading** even further.

[00:08:06] By September the 5th, three days after it had started, most of the fires were out, and a day later the fire was declared to be completely over.

[00:08:18] Outside London, for the 3 day period that the fire was **raging**³⁶, the rest of the country had no idea what was going on.

[00:08:28] The London Gazette, the main London newspaper at the time, had contained a news story on the 3rd of September that there was a fire in London that was "continuing with great violence".

[00:08:43] The following day readers expected more news, but nothing came.

[00:08:49] Then the following day, nothing again.

[00:08:52] Rumours started circulating.

³⁶ continues strongly

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[00:08:54] Was there some kind of foreign attack? What was going on in the capital?

There was talk that thousands of people had been killed.

[00:09:05] The period before the Great Fire had seen Britain at war with France, Spain, and the Netherlands, and there was also a lot of suspicion towards Catholics. The atmosphere was [tense](#)³⁷, and the fact that London had gone silent was greatly worrying for the rest of the country.

[00:09:27] It wasn't until the 10th of September, a full week later that people outside London were to learn what had happened.

[00:09:37] The reason for this was the [printing press](#)³⁸ of The London Gazette had burned down, and they had only managed to set up a new [press](#)³⁹ in a [churchyard](#)⁴⁰ after the fire had died down.

[00:09:51] So, the fire was over, the rest of the country received the news, and could relax in the knowledge that this wasn't a French or Dutch or Spanish [plot](#)⁴¹, that the Catholics weren't invading.

[00:10:05] But large parts of London were completely burned down, they were toast.

³⁷ if a situation is tense, you feel anxious and worried about what might happen

³⁸ a machine that prints books, newspapers or magazines

³⁹ a machine that prints books, newspapers or magazines

⁴⁰ the land around a church

⁴¹ a secret plan

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[00:10:11] Over a hundred thousand people were homeless, and large parts of the city were in ruins.

[00:10:18] Although there had been bad fires before, there was nothing quite of this [magnitude](#)⁴², nothing quite as large as this.

[00:10:28] Things that we might take for granted today, like home insurance, didn't exist.

[00:10:34] And the law stated that tenants, the people who were renting rooms or houses, were not only [liable](#)⁴³ for any repairs if the house was damaged, for example in a fire, but they also had to continue to pay rent even if they couldn't live in the property.

[00:10:56] So if you were renting a house that burned down in the Great Fire of London, not only did you now not have a house to live in, but you were responsible for the cost of rebuilding it and you had to continue to pay rent.

[00:11:12] Evidently, this wasn't a situation that was [feasible](#)⁴⁴, it just couldn't work, and so this led to the creation of something called the Fire Courts, which were legal courts to decide who should pay for the repairs, based on who had the money to pay.

[00:11:31] The city needed to be rebuilt as soon as possible.

⁴² large size

⁴³ legally responsible (for)

⁴⁴ able to be done

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[00:11:35] It was the capital of England, and the largest and wealthiest city in the country. People and businesses needed to get back on their feet.

[00:11:46] But the destruction that the fire had caused presented some opportunities that wouldn't have been possible without it.

[00:11:54] It had destroyed lots of the old, badly built buildings and offered an opportunity for a new start.

[00:12:02] There were ambitious plans for how to build a new, modern city. Some plans included grid-style urban design with straight roads. Others included wide streets with large squares.

[00:12:19] If you have been to the City of London, you'll know that the streets are neither in a grid system nor have straight roads with large squares.

[00:12:30] The King realised that completely changing the layout of the city would have taken too much time and required too much work. So instead, most of the original streets were kept, which is why the city of London is how it is today.

[00:12:49] The city's great church, St Paul's cathedral was to be rebuilt, and the man chosen to lead the project was the famous architect Sir Christopher Wren.

[00:13:01] Although he is now most famous for St Paul's cathedral, he was responsible for designing 52 of the churches around the City of London, so if you have ever

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wondered why there is such an architectural [consistency](#)⁴⁵, it is the design mainly of one man.

[00:13:21] The fire had also presented opportunities for [enterprising](#)⁴⁶ businessmen, and the concept of fire insurance was born after the Great Fire of London.

[00:13:34] Instead of just paying out in the case of a fire though, these insurance companies actually operated private fire brigades, because they discovered it was cheaper to prevent these fires from doing real damage in the first place than paying out the [compensation](#)⁴⁷ for damage that they did do.

[00:13:56] And although the fire was most probably just an unfortunate accident, it was no one's fault, the government looked for [scapegoats](#)⁴⁸, looked for people to [blame](#)⁴⁹, and it opened an investigation.

[00:14:13] Had someone deliberately thrown a [fireball](#)⁵⁰ into the bakery in Pudding Lane?

[00:14:20] Could the French, the Dutch, of the Spanish have been responsible?

⁴⁵ similarity

⁴⁶ good at thinking of new ways to make money

⁴⁷ money that is paid out in exchange for something bad being done

⁴⁸ people who are said to be responsible for something bad

⁴⁹ to say or think that someone is responsible for something bad

⁵⁰ a large ball of fire

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[00:14:25] Or was it the work of a Catholic, trying to succeed where Guy Fawkes, the man who had tried to [blow up](#) the Houses of Parliament, had failed 61 years

[beforehand](#)⁵¹?

[00:14:38] Indeed, a Frenchman called Robert Hubert actually admitted to starting the fire, but he was [mentally unstable](#)⁵² and it's now not believed that he had anything to do with it.

[00:14:52] In any case, he was a very convenient [scapegoat](#)⁵³, being French, and he was [hanged](#)⁵⁴, he was [executed](#)⁵⁵ on the 27th October 1666.

[00:15:05] Although this story doesn't have a happy ending for Robert Hubert, it does have a happier ending for London.

[00:15:14] And despite the fire [wreaking](#)⁵⁶ destruction across the city, very few people died.

[00:15:22] It's thought that as little as six people died, which out of a population of 350,000 and with 13,200 houses destroyed, seems like a bit of a miracle.

⁵¹ earlier

⁵² suffering from a mental illness

⁵³ someone who is said to be responsible for something bad

⁵⁴ killed by attaching a rope around their neck and dropping them

⁵⁵ killed as a legal punishment

⁵⁶ causing

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[00:15:37] London as a city has evidently not suffered long term, and of course the best news of all was that Samuel Pepys managed to return to his house and recover his parmesan.

[00:15:53] OK then, that is it for today's episode on The Great Fire of London, when one of the world's great cities almost burned to the ground.

[00:16:02] I hope it's been an interesting one, and that you've learnt something new.

[00:16:06] If you do go to London, make sure you make a trip to Pudding Lane to see where the fire originally started.

[00:16:14] It obviously looks a little different now, but it is quite amazing to stand there and think that it all started from a bakery in this little road.

[00:16:25] I should also say that the Museum of London has a fantastic section on the Great Fire of London, so make sure you go there too.

[00:16:33] As always, I would love to know what you thought of this episode.

[00:16:37] You can head right in to our community forum, which is at community.leonardoenglish.com and get chatting away to other curious minds.

[00:16:46] You've been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English

[00:16:51] I'm Alastair Budge, you stay safe, and I'll catch you in the next episode.

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[END OF PODCAST]

Key vocabulary

Word	Definition
Swept	moved quickly and with a lot of force
Bakery	a place where bread is made
Baker	someone who makes bread
Soundly	deeply
Maid	a female servant
Perished	died
Flames	the hot, burning gas that comes from a fire
Alight	on fire
Flammable	burns easily
Hay	long, dry grass
A stone's throw	very close
Occurrence	something that happens

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Drought	a long period with no rain
Spread	moved quickly
Engulfing	surrounding, covering
Iconic	famous, well known
Spreading	moving quickly
Primitive	basic, not advanced
Pumps	equipment to move liquid from one place to another
Void	an empty area of space
Barrier	an object that keeps two things apart
Gap	an empty space
Sound	in good condition
Robust	strong and not likely to break
Hooks	curved devices used for catching things
Engulfed	surrounded
Principle	idea, theory

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Gunpowder	an explosive mixture of substances
Blow up	cause to explode
Voids	empty spaces
Gaps	empty spaces
Fled	left, ran away from
Blaze	a large fire
Fleeing	escaping
Diary entries	accounts written in a diary
Raging	continues strongly
Tense	if a situation is tense, you feel anxious and worried about what might happen
Printing press	a machine that prints books, newspapers or magazines
Press	a machine that prints books, newspapers or magazines
Churchyard	the land around a church
Plot	a secret plan
Magnitude	large size

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Liabe	legally responsible (for)
Feasible	able to be done
Consistency	similarity
Enterprising	good at thinking of new ways to make money
Compensation	money that is paid out in exchange for something bad being done
Scapegoats	people who are said to be responsible for something bad
Blame	to say or think that someone is responsible for something bad
Fireball	a large ball of fire
Beforehand	earlier
Mentally unstable	suffering from a mental illness
Scapegoat	someone who is said to be responsible for something bad
Hanged	killed by attaching a rope around their neck and dropping them
Executed	killed as a legal punishment
Wreaking	causing

We'd love to get your feedback on this podcast.

What did you like? What could we do better?

What did you struggle to understand?

Let us know in the forum community.leonardoenglish.com