

FIRE! IN CONTEXT: PAST... AND PRESENT

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On the evening of 15 March 1725, a fire broke out in a yard close to the Unicorn Inn in Buckingham. Burning thatch quickly spread the flames through the town. By morning 138 houses had been destroyed. Happily, no one had been killed, but two hundred families were homeless and had lost belongings, tools, stock and livelihoods (Poornan P, 2006).

Town and village fires were not uncommon, even in Buckinghamshire. In the north of the county Stony Stratford burned in 1738, Great Horwood in 1781; in the south Cliveden House burned, was rebuilt, then burned down again –

and when the village of Stoke Poges caught fire Queen Victoria saw the flames from the windows of Windsor Castle. And Buckinghamshire was not alone.

The aim of this article is to put these fires into a wider context, in place and time: in the past, historically, and the present. It will also examine the element of fire itself: how we human beings have used it, contained it, sometimes failed to control it, and its effects, past and present. The starting point is 49 years before fire broke out in Buckingham.

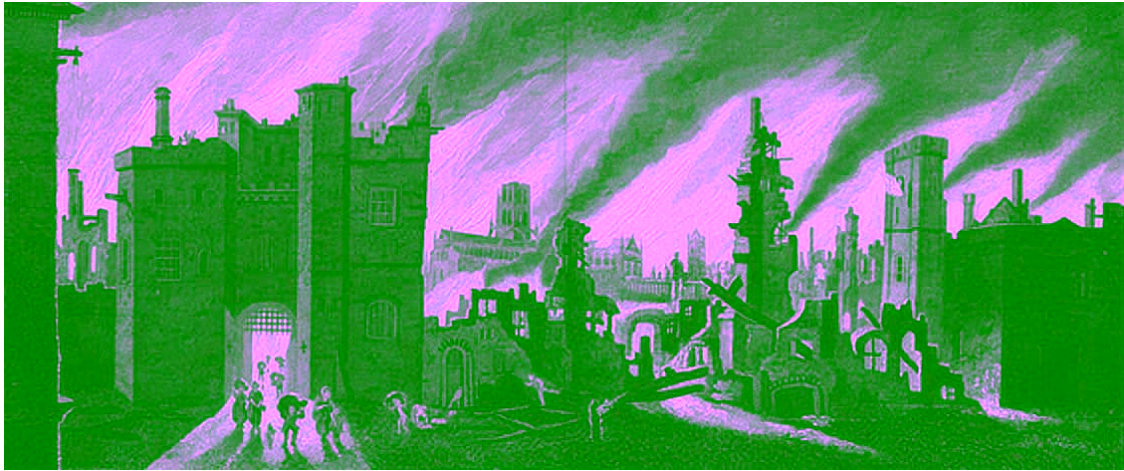


FIGURE 4 Devastation during the fire. Note Ludgate (left) and St Paul's tower (centre). This lithograph by James Stow is from a painting made after the Great Fire by Jan Griffier the Elder (Wiki Commons)

Lane, just west of the Tower of London and near All Hallows Barking, whose church tower he climbed. He wrote in his Diary:

'Lord! what sad sight it was by moone-light to see, the whole [City] almost on fire, that you might see it plain at Woolwich, as if you were by it. ...

'I expected to have seen our house on fire, ... it was not. ... But going [to the fire], I find by the blowing up of houses ... there is a good stop given to it, ... it having only burned the dyall of [All Hallows] church and part of the porch...

'...the saddest sight of desolation that I ever saw; every where great fires, oyle-cellars, and brimstone, and other things burning. I became afeard to stay there long, and therefore down again as fast as I could, the fire being spread as far as I could see it.' (Pepys S, Diary)

The fire raged for four days, destroying 13,200 houses and 87 churches, including the medieval St Paul's Cathedral and houses on Old London Bridge. Eight people died. Pepys's house survived, yards from the flames, but around 100,000 Londoners were left homeless.

FIRE: A SERVANT BUT ALSO A RISK

The Great Fire of London was 49 years before the Buckingham fire of 1725. It was a warning, perhaps, for the people of Buckingham, then a

three or four days' journey away from London. But they needed no warning. Everyone knew and understood the dangers of fire.

Through most of human history people *depended* on naked flames: there would have been an open fire in the middle of the house or hut floor, for heating, cooking and washing. Light, when needed, came from rush torches, oil lamps or – if you could afford them – candles. All were naked flames; all were fire risks. Workshops also required heat. Blacksmiths are just the most obvious, but pots needed to be fired; bread to be baked; beer to be brewed, animal skins to be tanned, glass to be fired... and for many trades the workshop, with its open hearth, was just part of the house.

So, in home or workshop, people learned how to handle the naked flame and keep it safe. They had to. The great majority lived and worked in wooden buildings, most of them with thatched roofs.

THREE PIGS AND A WOLF

In 1666 and 1725 the majority of people could not read nor write. Essential knowledge was passed orally from generation to generation, often through myths, stories or folklore – in other words through accumulated folk wisdom.

This may seem irrelevant, but most children were told the tale of the Three Little Pigs and the Big Bad Wolf. They probably still are, so most readers will know the story:



- The first pig built his house of straw (thatch perhaps?) – but the wolf came and blew his house down.
- The second pig built his house of sticks. (timber-frame with wattle-and-daub?) – but the wolf came and blew that down too.
- The third pig built his house of brick. (stone would have done too) – and the wolf tried to blow it down, but failed.



So, you may ask: what has this got to do with fire?

Equally you could point out that a wolf might break into a house, barn or pigsty to get at your livestock, but not by *blowing it down*. But this is more than a children's story. The wolf is a metaphor: he represents the untamed force of nature. Whether this is a wild animal, or the wild wind, or the destructive force of fire – the folklore message is the same: straw and wood will not protect you, but bricks will.

So, people learned: by 1666 and 1725 the central open hearths had mostly been replaced by stone-built or brick-built chimneys. The open fire and its flames were now protected in a chimney-place with a brick hearth. The *risk of fire* was contained, but it was still there: the Great Fire of London showed that. It was then the largest – but it was not the first town or village to be burned, nor the last.

THE EAST WIND

In London in 1666 *fire* was the most destructive 'untamed force of nature', but it was not the only one. A key factor in the spread of the fire in London was the wind, a strong wind from the east that fanned the flames, caught the burning thatch and embers, and drove the fire westwards.

This is visible on the map of London after the fire. Wenceslas Hollar's map (Fig. 5) shows the burnt area without houses.

The bakehouse where the fire started is close to London Bridge and where the Monument to the Great Fire stands today. Pepys' house is to the east,



FIGURE 5 Wenceslas Hollar's map showing the area destroyed by the fire. The red dot shows where the fire started in Pudding Lane. The green dot shows Samuel Pepys' house



FIGURE 6 The different colours show how the fire spread each day driven by the east wind

just avoiding the destruction... because the strong east wind drove the fire to the north and west of its starting point. A modern map (Fig. 6) shows how far the fire spread each day, with limited destruction to the east.

Each parish had fire-fighting equipment, such as axes and hooks to pull down buildings in order to create fire-breaks, and some buckets for water.

But driven by the strong wind the fire jumped over these fire-breaks. It even jumped across the River Fleet, which was then an open wharf, destroying the former Bridewell Palace and other buildings.

And the destruction was halted only when the wind dropped. So, London in 1666 was destroyed by two 'wolves', the combination of two untamed natural forces: fire and the east wind.

AFTER LONDON'S FIRE

A section of Hollar's 'Panorama of London after the Great Fire' (Figure. 7) shows the destruction. Most of the standing ruins are of churches or high-status buildings, built in stone. The medieval St Paul's was also stone, but the fire caught the wooden scaffolding being used for repair work, and then set light to the roof.

For the rebuilding, an Act of Parliament for Rebuilding the City of London (1667) decreed that 'every house should be built with party walls, and all in front raised of equal height, and these walls all of stone or brick...' Peter Mills, one of the two surveyors appointed to oversee London's rebuilding, was by trade a bricklayer.



FIGURE 7 Destruction around St Paul's shown on Hollar's panorama after the Great Fire



FIGURES 8 The destruction around St Paul's showing surviving chimneystacks

The magnified view (figure 8) also shows something else of interest: the small vertical objects that are highlighted are brick or stone chimney stacks – these had survived when the timber-framed houses that contained them were destroyed by the fire.

JANUARY 2025, LOS ANGELES

So, this looks familiar (figure 9). It is a wood-built house, burned to the ground, leaving just a brick chimney-stack standing. This is in January 2025



FIGURES 9 Wood-framed houses that burned in the 2025 Los Angeles fires. Note the surviving chimneystacks where all else is destroyed

after the great fires in Los Angeles, California. The two photographs (figures 9 and 10) show no fewer than thirteen brick chimney stacks surviving where all else is burned.

To anyone with knowledge of the Great Fire of London, what happened in Los Angeles sounds familiar:

- Houses, shops, workshops, mostly wooden buildings: California's warmer climate and plentiful supplies of timber from local forests made this the obvious economic choice.
- The Santa Ana wind, an offshore wind which blows every year in southern California between September and January, was unusually strong, up to 80mph in places, and this fanned the flames and spread the fires, making them uncontrollable (figure. 11).

Several hundred people died, 18,000 homes were destroyed (more than in London in 1666) and 520,000 acres of land burned, much of this in the surrounding forests.

So, in Los Angeles 2025, as in London 1666, fire and wind, two untamed natural forces – two 'wolves' – combined to cause destruction.

But in Los Angeles there was additional risk.

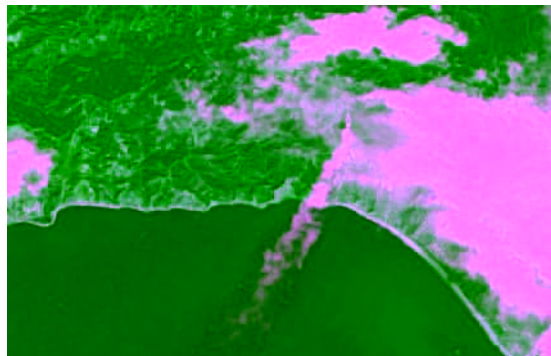
The periodical *Scientific American* reported that in southern California 'the summer and autumn of 2024 were extremely hot and dry – in fact this was the driest start to winter on record' (*Scientific American* Jan 2025). This drought also lasted longer, causing it to overlap with the Santa Ana wind season, with rainfall 'negligible' as autumn turned into winter. 'Climate change had amplified the dry conditions,' 'with temperatures up by nine degrees Fahrenheit and conditions up to 15 per cent drier.'

Wildfires in the forests of southern California are common. And they are usually controllable, but not in January 2025. *Scientific American* quoted French climate scientist Greta Cazzaniga, who wrote that 'the Los Angeles wildfires have shown how multiple extremes, exacerbated by climate change, can interact together to trigger an unprecedented disaster.'

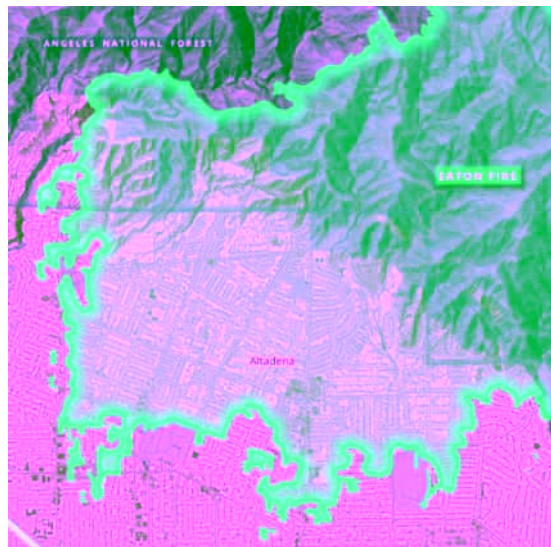
FIGURES 12 The map shows how the wind took the fire (shown in orange) from the parched forest land into the residential suburbs (grey). (Sky Online)



FIGURES 10 Two more views of the destruction in Los Angeles (CNN/Reuters online)



FIGURES 11 The plume of smoke in this satellite image shows how the Santa Anna Wind drove the fire from inland towards the coast. (CNN)



CONTROLLING FIRE

‘Those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it.’ Those are the words of the Spanish philosopher George Santayana. This is of course why we study history, including local history. We want to learn in order to avoid the mistakes of the past.

We may have learned how to control fire, though it seems not yet how to control all of its effects.

In the 19th century the open kitchen fire was already being replaced by the kitchen range, a cast-iron box which contained the flames. In the 20th century the living-room’s open fireplace was replaced by the central-heating boiler, again putting the flames in a metal box.

The earliest locomotives, burning coal, tended to set the grass verges alight. Exchanging the heat for steam in a boiler was more efficient, and kept the flames inside a metal box.

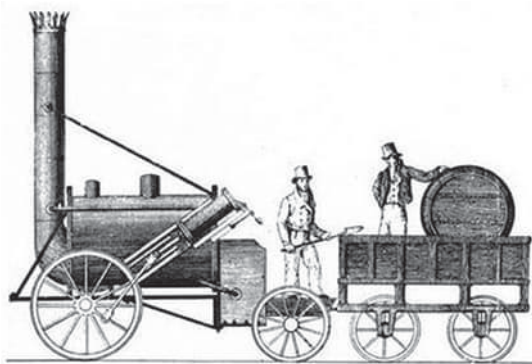


FIGURE 13 A drawing of Stephenson’s ‘Rocket’ of 1829, where the coal was burned in what its builders called (literally) a ‘firebox’. (Wikimedia Commons)

Our lighting now is electric: the burning of coal, gas, oil or even woodchips is done in a power station to produce electricity, and this also drives our tools, on every scale from the humble toaster to the robots in a car factory.

In this, the 21st century, the power may come from wind turbines or solar panels, without burning any fuel – though they do themselves have to be built.

But the biggest advance was the internal combustion engine, petrol and diesel. Today these drive our trains, ships, aircraft, buses, heavy

lorries, and – for most of us every day – our cars. Basically, a car engine is fire contained in a metal box. The force produced by the explosive burning of fuel is captured in the engine, and used to drive the vehicle forwards.

So, we have learned to protect ourselves from the heat of burning, and we have learned to use it to give ourselves all sorts of benefits. But fire, in any of its forms, produces more than just heat. Burning fuel – any fuel – produces gases. Sure, we don’t want to breathe these, so we have chimneys and car exhausts to direct them out into the atmosphere. But it turns out that our planet isn’t happy breathing them either.

Scientists tell us that climate change is the result, the climate change that created the drought, that fed the fires of Los Angeles, and that brought changes in other places around the world this summer; though fortunately most of these were less destructive, so far.

But the events in Los Angeles, and elsewhere, show that climate change increases some risks. And it is the result of fire. The burning that others have done in the past, and that we still do; the burning that is done on our behalf to power our lives, all contributes to these climate-change effects, large and small.

Maybe switching to bricks is not going to be enough this time.

BUCKINGHAMSHIRE IN CONTEXT

A common factor shared by London in 1666 and Los Angeles in 2025 is that both were cities packed with wooden buildings. As the saying goes, it only needed a match.

Buckinghamshire has no cities, and our towns and villages are not packed with wooden houses. Yes, the town of Buckingham itself burned in 1725, with 138 houses destroyed – but you would be pushed to find any comparable fires in Buckinghamshire in the past 150 years. We build in brick now and enclose the fire in metal.

We also live on a smaller scale here in Buckinghamshire than London or Los Angeles, and a safer one. But even at our small scale, the big events – such as the burning of 138 houses in Buckingham, with 200 families made homeless, with all their possessions lost and no means to support themselves – should be seen as a wake-up call.

Let’s learn from our history, and not repeat it.

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PICTURE CREDITS

- Figure 2: Drawing by R Schnebbelie in 1817 reproduced in John Schofield, *Medieval London houses* (Yale University Press, New Haven and London 2003) page 72
- Figure 3: West Smithfield survey plan, 1612, from A Surveye of all the Landes and Tenementes

- belonginge to the Worshipfull Company of the Clothworkers of London ... 1612 (© The Clothworkers' Company, CL/G/007/001/062 f. 31r)
- Figure 4: Lithograph by James Stow, from a painting Jan Griffier the Elder (Wiki Commons).
- Figure 5: Wenceslas Hollar, 'An exacte survey' 1666, reproduced in Felix Barker and Peter Jackson, *London: 2000 years of a city and its people* (Macmillan, London 1974) page 146
- Figure 6: Plan of fire area day-by-day from Cathy Ross and John Clark, *London: The illustrated history* (Penguin Books, London 2011) page 113
- Figure 7 AND 8: Wenceslas Hollar, 'A true and exact prospect ... after the sad calamitie and destruction by fire', etching 1666 (Bodleian Library, Oxford, Gough Maps 21 folios 32v-33)
- Figure 9-12: Los Angeles fires, January 2025, from online news reports at the time: CNN, Reuters Online, SKY Online.
- Figure 13: Drawing of Rocket' locomotive (Wiki-media Commons)