

“I did see the houses at that end of the bridge all on fire...”

Samuel Pepys, 2nd September 1666

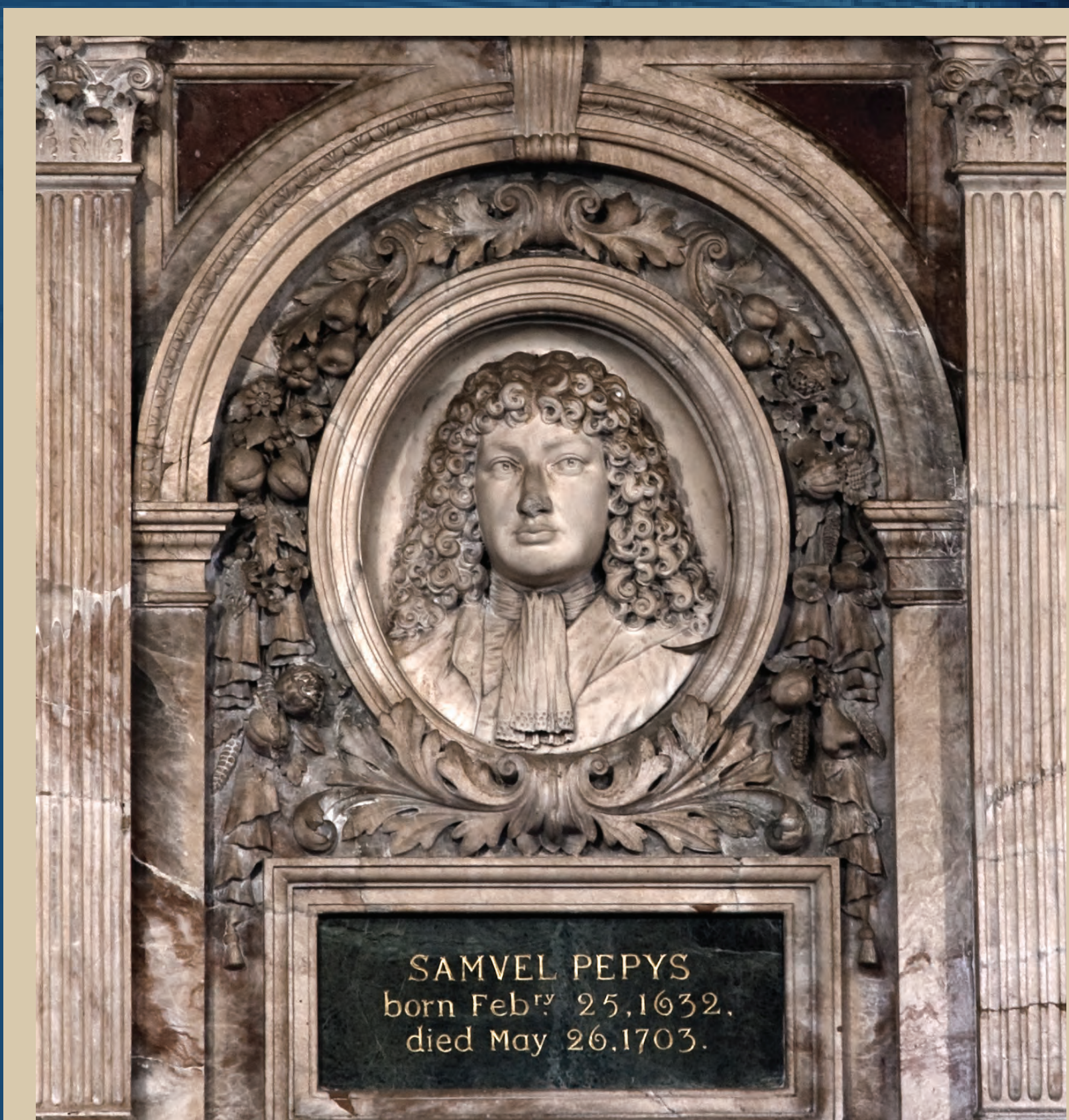


The Great Fire of London — Here

An eyewitness to catastrophe

In September 1666, Samuel Pepys, the most famous diarist in the English language, lived and worked only yards from here, at the Navy Office in Seething Lane. His parish church was St Olave Hart Street. Nearby is All Hallows by the Tower, known to Pepys as All Hallows Barking, from whose tower he watched the destruction unfolding across London.

Awakened in the early hours of 2nd September with news of a fire, Pepys went out to investigate. Over the following days he explored the City, recording the Great Fire as it transformed the world around him.



Samuel Pepys and his wife Elizabeth are buried at St Olave Hart Street. Explore the church to find their memorials.

The Fire - In These Streets



From ‘Perspective Views of all the Ancient Churches, and other Buildings, in the Cities of London and Westminster’. Engraved by William Henry Toms and published by Robert Sayer between 1736 and 1739.
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St Olave Hart Street

Samuel Pepys lived in a house on Seething Lane next to the Navy Office, where he worked. During this time he wrote his famous diary. He worshipped at St Olave Hart Street and is buried beneath the altar with his wife Elizabeth.

St Olave Hart Street survived the Great Fire of London. Explore the Pepys Vestry and Crypt Chapel and stand in spaces Pepys himself would have known — survivors of both the Great Fire of 1666 and the Blitz of 1941.



From ‘Perspective Views of all the Ancient Churches, and other Buildings, in the Cities of London and Westminster’. Engraved by William Henry Toms and published by Robert Sayer between 1736 and 1739.
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All Hallows by the Tower

By 5th September 1666 the Fire had reached All Hallows by the Tower, then known as All Hallows Barking. After the flames were stopped there, Pepys climbed the church tower and saw “the saddest sight of desolation that I ever saw.”

The tower Pepys climbed is no longer accessible, but you can still look out towards the City in the same direction. Inside, look too for fragments of 17th-century stained glass which survived the Great Fire preserved in a new window.

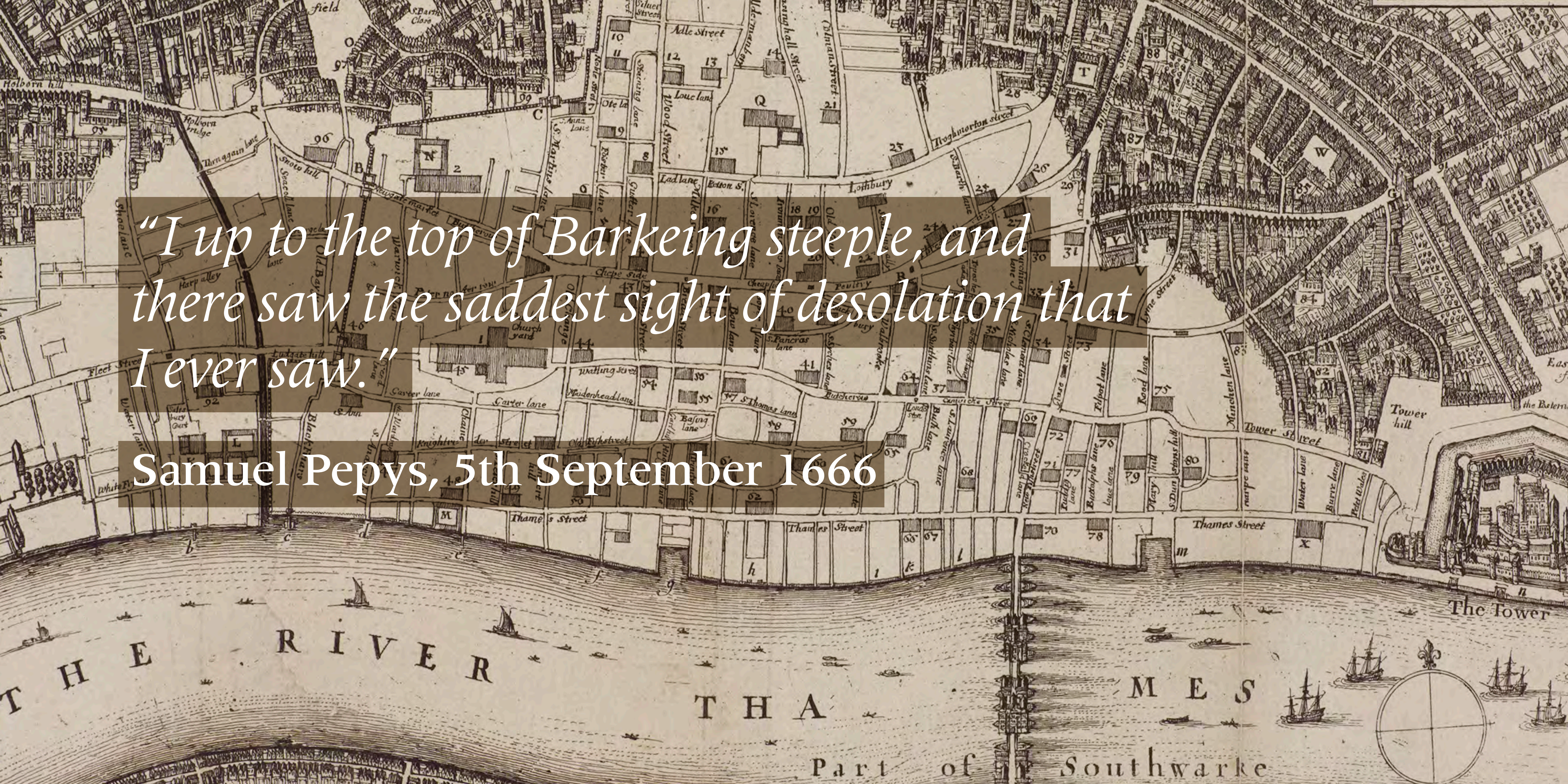
Take a fire walk around Pepys’s London.

St Olave Hart Street → Seething Lane → All Hallows by the Tower → Monument

**FAITH
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The Great Fire did much more than transform London’s buildings and streets. It had a profound effect on its people, who tried to understand how it had happened, what it meant and how it should be remembered.

Explore our other displays to discover some of their answers — and consider your own.



"I up to the top of Barkeing steeple, and there saw the saddest sight of desolation that I ever saw."

Samuel Pepys, 5th September 1666

Recording The Fire

What did Pepys notice?

Pepys did more than record where the Great Fire spread. His diary reveals he noticed people and possessions, animals and buildings, heat and sound — the small details that reveal what catastrophe actually felt like.



The Great Fire of London, with Ludgate and Old St Paul's, c.1670. Unknown artist. Oil on canvas. Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.

SAVING WHAT THEY COULD

"Everybody endeavouring to remove their goods, and flinging into the river or bringing them into lighters that lay off; poor people staying in their houses as long as till the very fire touched them, and then running into boats..."

FEELING THE HEAT

"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."

A SURVIVOR IN THE RUINS

"And among other things, the poor sight of a poor cat taken out of a hole in the chimney, joining to the wall of the Exchange, with the hair all burned off the body, and yet alive."

What would you save?

As the Fire approached Seething Lane, Pepys helped move his household and possessions to safety — and famously buried his wine and Parmesan cheese in the garden.

If you had to leave your home, what would you take? What can be replaced? What cannot?

"For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."

Matthew 6.21

Experiencing fire today



Leih Cloesler sifts through the ashes of what was once a cottage she owned in North San Diego County, destroyed by a wildfire on October 23rd 2007 © Federal Emergency Management Agency.

People today recognise echoes of their own experiences in Pepys's account. In 2009 'Doug', a reader of PepysDiary.com, recalling his evacuation during a wildfire, wrote:

"Living in San Diego, I can't help but remember my own experience one morning almost two years ago that was very similar to Sam's experience....Being awakened by phone & being told to evacuate; Standing in the cul-de-sac in the pre-dawn darkness with the neighbours, wondering whether we really need to go; Packing the car with what we thought were the things we really needed and/or wanted; Watching my neighbour's house burn down on TV with the same surreal sense of "this can't really be happening"."

Learning to see

FAITH SCIENCE CULTURE

Rowan Williams describes faith as an education in seeing — learning to recognise that "what we see isn't the whole story". Faith, science and culture can enlarge our vision, helping us to notice more, ask better questions and discover connections we might otherwise miss.

What might we see differently when we look together?

“Of Fire, Fire, Fire
I sing...”

London Mourning in
Ashes, 1666



Fire in Song and Scripture

Singing the Great Fire

Broadside ballads — printed songs sold cheaply in the streets — told the story of the Fire through words and music.

Two surviving ballads, *London Mourning in Ashes* and *The Londoners Lamentation*, describe the flames moving through familiar streets, destroying homes, businesses and churches. Both were written to be sung to tunes their audiences may already have known.

The ballads did more than describe what people had seen. They interpreted it. For these writers, describing the Fire and asking what it meant could not easily be separated.



*“The sins of Men,
Made Churches then,
in Dust and Ashes mourn.”*

Fire in Scripture



Moses and the Burning Bush, c. 1500. German hand-coloured woodcut. National Gallery of Art, Washington. Public Domain.

Fire can be both beneficial and destructive. Controlled fire gives heat, light and power. In some natural environments fire can renew vegetation, recycle nutrients and remove accumulated fuel. Uncontrolled or exceptionally severe fire can destroy lives, communities and ecosystems.

The Bible also uses fire in contrasting ways — as an image of judgement and destruction, but also of God’s presence, purification and renewal. The same flame can make us think about danger and hope, destruction and renewal.

Presence

Exodus 3

Moses encounters God in a bush that burns but is not consumed.

Guidance

Exodus 13.21

A pillar of fire guides the Israelites through the darkness.

Refining

Malachi 3.2–3

The prophet Malachi speaks of God as a “refiner’s fire” — an image of purification and change.

Transformation

Acts 2.1-4

At Pentecost, the disciples see what appear to be “tongues as of fire” as they are filled with the Holy Spirit.

What does fire sound like?

*“And kindle it,
thy holy flame
bestowing.”*

People have sung about fire for centuries. The ballads of 1666 told of destruction and loss; Christian hymns use fire as an image of God’s presence, love and transformation. What hymn, pop song or classical piece makes you think of fire, danger, hope, change or starting again?

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Fire is something we experience, study and interpret. Through science, faith and culture we discover different ways of seeing it — as danger and destruction, but also as an image of hope and transformation.

What does fire mean to you?

"Is not the Fire still in our bones?"

William Wray, preaching at
St Olave Hart Street, 2nd September 1682

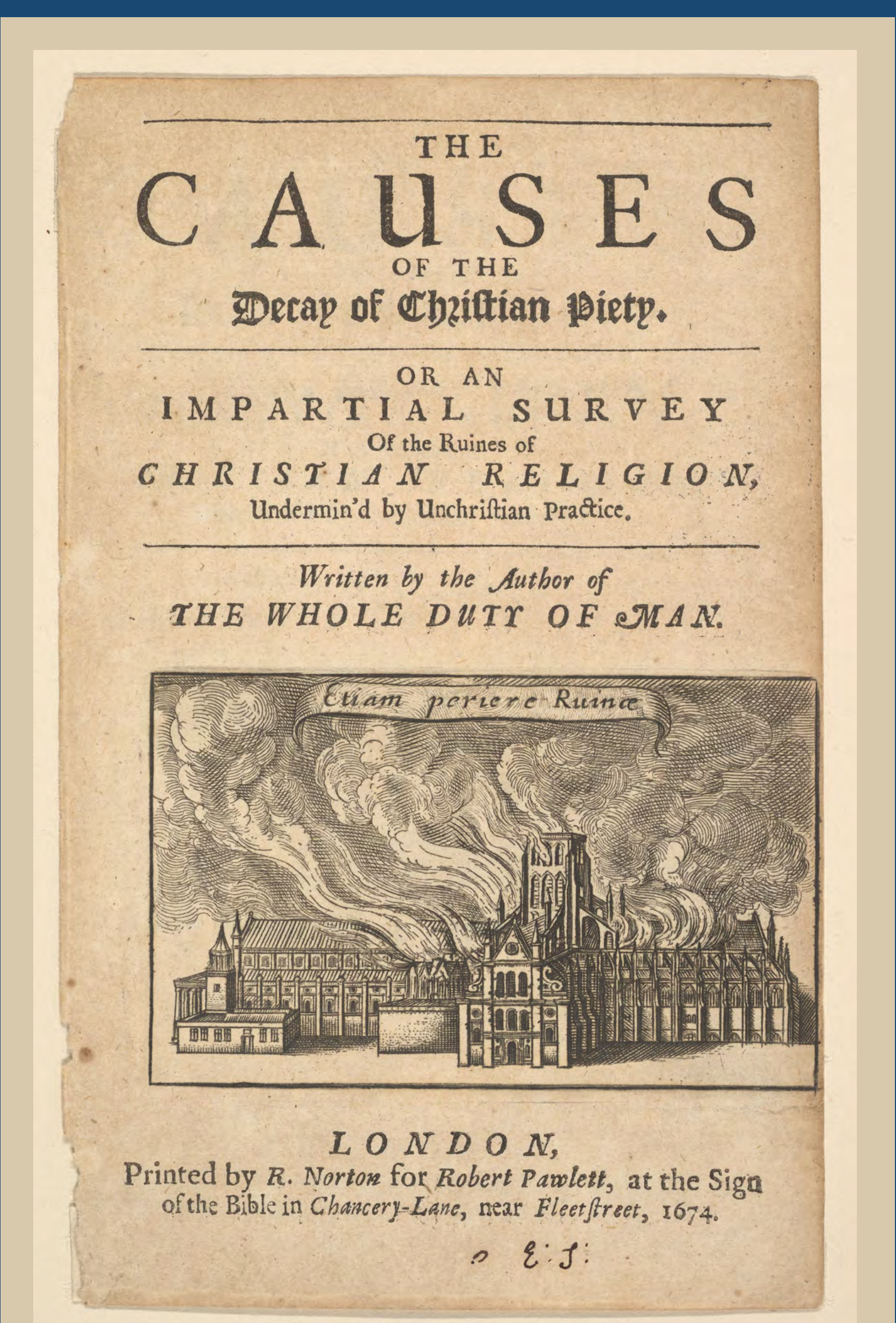


Faith and Fire

Making sense of catastrophe

People in 1666 wanted to know not only how the Great Fire had happened, but what it meant. Rumours blamed foreigners and Catholics. Many also interpreted the disaster through their Christian faith, seeing it as a judgement from God and a call to repentance. The Church of England appointed a special annual service for 2nd September. Its prayers encouraged people to examine themselves.

A sermon preached at St Olave Hart Street



The Causes of the Decay of Christian Piety. Title page with Wenceslaus Hollar's image of St Paul's in flames, 1671 or later. The work interpreted contemporary disaster within a wider argument about sin, Christian conduct and divine judgement. Metropolitan Museum of Art. Public Domain.

On 2nd September 1682, William Wray preached an anniversary sermon at St Olave Hart Street. Like many of his contemporaries, Wray interpreted the Fire as divine judgement. He blamed London's religious and political divisions — an interpretation shaped by the turbulent events of his own century. But he also warned against simply blaming somebody else. Even if another person had started the Fire, Wray believed its anniversary should prompt people to examine themselves and their society. He concludes:

"Be of One Mind, and Live in Peace."

Sixteen years after the Fire, London was being rebuilt. For Wray, rebuilding churches and houses was not enough: the divisions between people needed healing too. When we rebuild after disaster, what kind of community do we want to build?

Rebuilding with hope

Science and faith work in different ways, but both contribute to protecting life and building more resilient communities.

Science and engineering give us hope through understanding. By understanding fire, we can prevent and control it, limit its consequences and design safer communities. Faith strengthens the human dimension of resilience — bringing people together, encouraging care for one another and sustaining the conviction that rebuilding is worthwhile. Science tells us what happened and how to do better. Faith reminds us why it matters, and gives us the strength to keep going together.

The Great Fire can be both a case study and a parable — a story from which we can learn:

- What happened? Why did it happen?
- What can we do better?
- What kind of community do we want to become?



Understanding how fire behaves. Controlled laboratory experiments allow scientists to observe and study fire. Image courtesy of Professor Guillermo Rein, Imperial College London.

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The Great Fire raises questions that still matter: how do we understand disaster, how can we reduce its risks, and how do people and communities recover? Science, faith and culture offer different ways of exploring these questions — helping us learn from the past and imagine a more resilient future. What might we learn — and what will we do differently?