# **The Great Fire of London**

**Transcript**

Hi, good morning. How are you doing today? I hope you're all feeling pretty good. I feel great. Thank you for asking. It's a beautiful day. Okay. Today, I want to talk to you for ten minutes about the Great Fire of London. But don't forget, as always, after you finished listening to this talk, if you go to my Website, the link’s down below, you can find the script of this talk. You can find questions about the talk, multiple choice and essay type. You can find the answers, sample essays. And you can also find the MP3 if you want to listen to this talk. All of that stuff you can view online, or you can download as a word document or an MP3 file to use at your pleasure. OK, let's see how we go. Ten minutes on the Great Fire of London. Here we go. Three, two, one, go.

OK. The Great Fire of London was obviously in the city of London. London right now is the capital of the United Kingdom. The United Kingdom is four countries, of course. It's England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, together as one united country. Well, London originally was the capital of England, but we have to go back way before England was even an idea to talk about the beginnings of London. Let's very quickly, go over the history of London.

London began as a settlement probably about 2000 years ago. There are bronze findings and there are ships that have been dug up from the area that date back about B.C. 2000. ... that's 4000 years ago, sorry not 2000 years ago. About 4000 years ago. In about 1100 B.C., the area of London was named Cair Troie after the king or the the ruler of the area that settled it. And then it carried on existing quite peacefully as a trading town, trading settlement until about 50 A.D. when the Romans came and settled it. The Romans renamed it Londinium. But they didn't use it as the capital city. They didn't really use it as a big city at all. They used it as a fording place. London is on a naturally shallow part of the River Thames. And the Romans set up their main capital of England, when they colonised England, they set up the main capital at a city called Colchester, which they called Camulodunom, I think. So, they didn't use London as their capital, they just used it as a good place to park their ships, cross the river, and head up towards Colchester.

So, for a long time, Rome ... Rome ... sorry ... For a long time, London wasn't actually the capital city. Now, in about 880 A.D., England is being invaded by the Vikings, the Angles and the Saxons. They're invading a lot. Now, London still had Roman defensive walls around it, and the people at the time realised that that was quite a strong fortification and that would make London quite a safe city. So a lot of people started to move into London for defensive reasons. So, from about 800 A.D. onwards, the population of London starts to grow. Now, London doesn't become the capital of England until about 900 950 A.D. It doesn't actually become officially a capital, but the king starts to live there, the courts start to live there. And anybody that wants to be king in the future must hold London. Now, after this time, of course, London starts to become bigger and starts to become richer.

Right. Let's jump forward six hundred years. 1665 to 1666, there is a great plague that is spreading across Europe. This is the bubonic plague. It's carried by the fleas that travel on rats. And because London is a huge trading city, a lot of people, a lot of merchants and traders come from Europe to London and they bring the plague with them. Now, this plague was devastating. At that time, the population of London was about 500,000 people. And the plague is said to have killed about one hundred thousand of those people. Across Europe, all of the plagues together killed probably about a third of the population. It was a horrific plague.

Anyway, so 1666, the plague starts to die down. 1666, the population is starting to recover. It's not quite back at five hundred thousand, but it's starting to recover. Now, at this time, London is the richest city in the UK. It's a huge trading city. It's a huge merchant city. It's very well located on the River Thames. You can sail ships right up from the sea as far as London. It's a very useful port town, a very useful trading town.

So, because the city is becoming richer, more and more people want to live there. And, of course, more and more people living there means they have to build more and more houses, more and more shops, more and more restaurants. So, London is gradually becoming extremely crowded. London is still confined within the old Roman walls. It hasn't spread out. But it's becoming extremely cramped. Now, back then, most houses were made of wood. Richer people could build houses with brick, but most people built their houses of wood. And these houses were extremely close together. Streets were very cramped and sometimes the upper floors of the buildings would hang out. They built houses that had some street space but came out kind of this shape towards the top. London Bridge, of course, also was covered in shops and houses. It was actually quite difficult to pass London Bridge because of the shops, the houses and the traffic. A very, very crowded city. And of course, most of the roofs were made of thatch. Now, wood and thatch, those are flammable, of course.

Okay, so we have a very, very crowded city. We also have a huge quantity of gunpowder or blackpowder that is still kept in the city. The Tower of London had about 600 tons of it, but many people still have blackpowder in their houses. Why? Because the civil war has only just finished. The Civil War finished in 1651, so, we're only talking about 15 years back. And many people still don't trust the government. They still think there might be another uprising. So they keep quantities of blackpowder in their houses in case they have to fight again. So flammable city, very cramped, lots of gunpowder. Not a good situation. Oh, not much time.

Ok, so 1666, Sunday, September the 2nd, just after midnight. There is a bakery on a road on a street called Pudding Lane. It's owned by a man called Thomas Faryner. Somehow, we don't know how, in his bakery, a fire starts. Now, Thomas Faryner, he died in the 19 ... er 1970?! ... he died in 1670. He died four years after the fire finished. In the beginning, he denied all responsibility for it. But in the end, he admitted it. So, the fire starts in his house. Now, the fire straightaway burns his house down and it jumps to the houses next door and it jumps and it jumps and it jumps. And it keeps jumping and it keeps spreading.

These days, we have fire engines. We have water, we have hoses. We have water hydrants all over the place to get water to the fire. Back then, they didn't have that system. There were two ways of controlling a fire. One was to bring water from a river or to bring water from a storage area. The other was to make a fire gap. Now, because these houses are so close together, what they would have to do is they would break, they would destroy five or six houses in the path of the fire. So if the fire's coming this way, they would use gunpowder to destroy these houses to make a space that was too big for the fire to jump across. They would do that all around the fire. They would contain the fire and they would let it burn out. That's what they would usually do.

So why didn't they do that here? Well, it basically comes down to the lord mayor of London, whose name was Sir Thomas Bloodworth. A lot of people say that he was very indecisive. It takes a lot of courage to say, "OK, destroy all those houses," because you're destroying people's property, of course. And he didn't do that. People say he was indecisive, but actually, that's not quite true. He wasn't indecisive. The problem was a lot of the people that own that land, a lot of the wealthy people that own these areas sponsored him. He had become lord mayor of London because of these patrons. And if he went round and destroyed their land, they would no longer sponsor him. So, he wasn't thinking about the city. He wasn't thinking about the future and the safety of people. He was thinking primarily about his own prospects. So anyway, he didn't act and this fire just spread.

At the time, King Charles II, he'd only been king for a few years. After the civil war had finished, after Oliver Cromwell had died, he'd come back from France and he said, I will send the troops into the city and I will help. But of course, the civil war has only just finished, the city doesn't trust the crown. There is a huge conflict here. And the city says, "you are not sending troops into our city. Stay away." So, King Charles kind of has his hands tied and he has to leave it up to the mayor of London to deal with it. And the mayor of London does nothing. So, the fire starts on Sunday. And then it spreads.

Now look at this picture here. This is the fire Sunday. Monday. Tuesday. And finally, Wednesday. It starts to spread. It becomes a huge fire. It destroys the property of about 60,000 people, all together. Now people stop panicking, of course, who wouldn't? They start attacking foreign people. There is a rumor that the fire was started by the Pope, or followers of the Pope, because, of course, at this time, people are very scared of Catholics. And people start panicking. They start fleeing. The price of bread skyrockets, the price of a boat and the price of a cart goes up 10,000 percent. You always get racketeering in times like this. People start trying to bury their treasure, trying to bury their valuables because they think they'll be safer under the ground and people basically run away.

However, through all this panic, through all this fire and all this destruction, only six people are actually registered of having died in this fire. That's probably not correct because, back then, only wealthy people would register a death. Poor people wouldn't. They would just carry on living ... er ... carry on ... The family would carry on living, of course, the dead person wouldn't. So, there are reports, there are guesses that probably thousands of people actually died in these fires, but their bodies were cremated and their families didn't report the death.

Anyway, so the fire is spreading until Wednesday. At that time, two things happened. Firstly, the wind starts to die down. There's been a strong easterly wind which has been carrying this fire. Oh, the time's up. Ok. I'm going to keep going. A little bit more. And the second thing is King Charles II, he finally says enough is enough and he sends his troops into the city to create firebreaks and they blow up houses around the edge of the fire to contain the fire. Luckily, we talked about the London Bridge earlier, how it's covered in houses. There was actually a gap right in the middle of the London Bridge and so the fire couldn't spread across the river. So that saved a lot of houses on the south side ... the south side? ... yeah, on the south side of the river, luckily.

OK, so the fire has finished. The fire is put out. I mean, it smolders for quite a long time, it smolders for weeks because there's a lot of heat still on the ground there. Now, after that, there's a lot of talk about what can we do. A lot of architects have great ideas here. There's an architect called John Evelyn. There's another one, Christopher Wren, obviously quite famous. They put forward proposals, they drew up plans for amazingly beautiful cities. They looked at Paris, across the sea, and Paris, the capital of France, was an amazingly, beautifully well laid out city. If you go there now, you can still see how well laid out it is. London wasn't like that. London was all higgledy-piggledy. It was all mixes of small streets and small houses and stuff. So, these architects said, "Here's our chance. Let's make a beautiful city." And the king was right behind them. The king said, "Yes, that's an amazing idea. We should do that."

The problem was these people are wealthy and they're living outside of the fire area. The people who were affected by the fire, they have gone back to where their houses were and they've put up tents, temporary accommodation, and they're about to suffer a winter that is just coming, a very harsh winter. There is very little food and disease is going to start spreading. The crown is thinking about the appearance of the city and the future. The people on the ground are thinking about now. We need somewhere to live, or we are going to die. So, in that situation, it was the people that won out. They started building. They just started building.

So, what happens is the Crown decides ... realizes that they can't win here. So, they set up something called a fire court. The fire court is basically a group of judges and a court who hear people's arguments about where their land was and who should rebuild the house on their land. And basically, the fire courts, they met for about six years after that and they just decided there and then "ok, that's your land. You have to build. That's your land. You have to build." Because of that court, building started really really quickly. If that court hadn't been there, these arguments might have gone on for decades. And who knows what London would look like right now.

So anyway, London was basically rebuilt in the way it was before. They used slightly different materials and the roads were slightly spaced out, but that was about it. Christopher Wren, he was allowed to build a few buildings. If you go to London now, obviously the most famous building he built is St Paul's Cathedral because the original cathedral was completely destroyed in the fire. If you go to London and see St Paul's Cathedral, it is very beautiful. You can also go and see monuments. One of them commemorates the fire itself. One of them, this one over here, it shows the extent of how far the fire went.

So that's the great fire of London. It destroyed about 60,000 thousand houses. It knocked London back for quite a few years. It killed probably more people than we think.

But people overcame it and they carried on. London went from strength to strength and became stronger and stronger and became the city it is today.

All right. Thank you. That's the great fire of London. Oh, it's called the Great Fire of London, because there have been numerous fires of London throughout history. This was just the biggest one.

Okay, if you go to my Website, you can read the script of that talk. You can listen to the MP4, you can try and answer some questions. You can write some essays. The more you speak, the more you listen, the more you read and the more you talk, the better your English is going to get. English is a skill like any other skill. The more you practice, the better you will get. All right. Thank you. I'll see you next time. Goodbye.

**Questions**

1. Which of these is not a country in the UK?

A: Wales

B: Scotland

C: Ireland

2. Why was London originally called “Cair Troire”?

A: It was named after the king who settled it.

B: It meant three kings in the local language.

C: It was named by the Romans.

3. What did the Romans use London for?

A: A market place

B: A trading place

C: A fording place

4. What happened in England in about 880AD?

A: London became the capital city of the country.

B: The Romans came back.

C: A lot of different people started to invade.

5. Why did people think that London was safe?

A: It was in the south of the country.

B: Because it still had strong Roman walls.

C: Because many people lived there.

6. Why did the Bubonic Plague spread to London from Europe?

A: The disease was spread through food brought from Europe.

B: Traders brought the rats that carried the disease from Europe.

C: Fisherman brought the disease in with their fish.

7. About what percentage of the population in Europe did the plagues kill?

A: 25%

B: 30%

C: 50%

8. Which of these was not a reason why London was flammable?

A: many houses were very far from the river

B: there was lots of gunpowder in the houses

C: the houses were made of wood

9. What kind of building did the fire start in?

A: a church

B: a butcher’s shop

C: a bakery

10. What is a fire gap?

A: a way of stopping a fire

B: a way that a fire can jump to the next building

C: a way of making a fire burn hotter

11. Why didn’t the Mayor of London take action?

A: He didn’t want to lose his support from his rich patrons.

B: He was too indecisive.

C: He didn’t have the support of the people in the city.

12. Why couldn’t King Charles II bring troops into the city?

A: because the civil war had only just finished and people didn’t trust him.

B: because the Mayor of London was afraid that the king would take away his power.

C: because he didn’t have enough soldiers to make a difference.

13. Steven says, “The price of bread skyrockets, the price of a boat and the price of a cart goes up 10,000 percent. You always get racketeering in times like this.” What do you think that “racketeering” means?

A: Doing something that is helpful.

B: Doing something that is noble.

C: Doing something that is dishonest.

14. Why do experts think that many more people died than were reported?

A: because poor people didn’t report deaths.

B: because there were too many people that died.

C: because they only counted people who were born in England.

15. What did architects like John Evelyn want to do?

A: They wanted to build a new and more modern London.

B: They wanted to rebuild London in exactly the same way.

C: They wanted to build a second London in England.

16. Why couldn’t these architects do what they wanted?

A: because it was too expensive.

B: because the poor people needed somewhere to live straight away.

C: because the king didn’t want to.

17. What was the purpose of the fire courts?

A: to deliver a verdict on the king’s performance in the fire.

B: to decide who was responsible for the fire and to decide what should happen to them.

C: to determine who owned what land and who should build there.

18. What natural disasters have befallen your country and how did they deal with it?

19. If you could rebuild your city, what would you change and why?

20. Rich and poor people often live in different worlds within the same city. Will we ever have equality?

21. In the Great Fire of London, people turned on foreigners. We often turn on people in times of stress. Talk about an example of this from your life and explain what you did.

**Answers**

1. C (N. Ireland is part of the UK. Ireland is a separate country) 2. A 3. C 4. C 5. B 6. B 7. B 8. A 9. C 10. A 11. A 12. A 13. C 14. A 15. A 16. B 17. C

18. What is a natural disaster that has befallen your country and how did they deal with it?

Living in Japan, we are often overwhelmed by earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, landslides and typhoons. The government’s response and the attitude of the people always play a large part in the way the country handles each disaster. Japan has suffered many earthquakes, from mild ones that do no damage to larger ones that kill thousands and cause tidal waves that kill thousands more. I would like to focus on an earthquake that struck the city I live in two years ago. The earthquake struck at about five in the morning and, after the initial shaking had died down, there didn’t seem to be any damage. That’s when the lights went out. The main power station that supplies electricity to the city had gone into emergency shut down because of the earthquake. Unfortunately, it would take 48 hours to get the power station back online. So, for the time being, we were without electricity and, because they run on electric pumps, water. I have seen news stories of riots that have started in situations like this in other countries. People seem to think that a short blackout is a reason for them to be able to loot and take whatever they want from any store. I have never understood the logic behind that. Anyway, in Japan, that did not happen. People lined up outside shops to buy supplies. The army opened up water mains and people lined up to get water. Shops handed out stuff they couldn’t keep frozen and people lined up for that. The traffic lights were out, so people drove more slowly and gave way. There was no violence, no aggression, no looting, no crime of any kind. People were decent and law-abiding. And then, when night fell, people came out into the streets and onto their roofs to see the stars that our usually bright city kept hidden.

19. If you could rebuild your city, what would you change and why?

There is not a lot I would change about the city that I live in because I think it is an incredibly good place to live. We have excellent public transport, parks, a wide range of shops and restaurants and entertainment. If I had to change something, though, there are two things I would like to change. First, I think I would choose more random trees. I come from the UK and one thing about streets in the UK is how random they generally look. The roads are not straight, the houses, although made from a similar mold, look fairly different, and there are trees that are random enough to give the appearance of nature. Japan is not known for “random”. The roads where I live are wide and straight, the parks are organized, and the trees look as though they have been planted with a ruler. I would like to see random trees. Second, I would make the roads narrower. When you are driving through a city, you obviously want wide and well-spaced out roads. The straighter they are, the more fuel efficient your driving can be and, theoretically, the less congestion you will get. However, from an aesthetical viewpoint, cities with huge, wide streets do not look attractive. Smaller, preferably twisty streets are much more pleasing to the eye. They are more fun to walk along and they look far better. So, if I were given the power to change my city, I would change the amount of trees and I would change the size of the streets.

20. Rich and poor people often live in different worlds within the same city. Will we ever have equality?

I believe that we will, but not within our lifetimes, and possibly not even within our children’s lifetimes. What do we mean by “equality”? “Equality” means that all people have equal access to choices, equal access to an education, equal access to health care, equal treatment from the police, equal access to housing, food, entertainment, and equal access to pursue the career they desire. It doesn’t necessarily mean that all people have an equal financial situation because all of the above things could be provided without money. So, is this kind of situation achievable? Of course it is, and it doesn’t require Marxism or Communism. It could be done with two changes. A change in people’s way of thinking and a redistribution of public funds. In the present world, most people are fixated on money and work to get more of it. Some people are more successful than others. There is always talk of taking the rich more, but, in general, they pay far less tax than they could. Rich people always talk about why they should be taxed so much for just working hard. However, what if people thought differently? What if, instead of the goal being to accumulate as much money as possible, the goal was to help society as much as possible? People would work harder so that they could help society more. In this situation, people with more would happily pay more tax to ensure that those with less had equal access to everything. A truly civic minded society. This could happen one day. The second change would need a government that could put the money where it was needed. Currently, the US government spends about $700 billion, 54% of its budget, on its military. What if this money were redirected to other areas? Wouldn’t this help towards equality? And, in this hypothetical future, if people have become civic minded, then, presumably, we will no longer need a military because war will be a thing of the past. I think all of this is possible, but I don’t think it will happen for a while to come. It is going to take a large change in our way of thinking. We have to learn that there is no “them and us”. It is just “us”.

21. In the Great Fire of London, people turned on foreigners. We often turn on people in times of stress. Talk about an example of this from your life and explain what you did.

I am not proud of it, but I have often shouted at my daughter when she has done nothing wrong. I tend to get stressed and dwell on the problem. If something happens at work, I will sit there and go over the problem in my head. This does not help, and I invariably make the problem far worse than it initially was. I would love to be able to forget things like this and just live in the moment, but I cannot. So, I sit there with this problem going through my head and my daughter wants to play. She wants to play with me because she loves me, and I spend so much time at work. She wants to talk to me because she doesn’t see me as much as she’d like to. But I just want to sit there and dwell on my misery. She doesn’t know this. Of course she doesn’t. Why would she? So she gets noisy and boisterous and I just grunt and play along. And then I lose my temper and I shout at her. Not because of what she has done, but because of what I have done. Not because of her failure, but because of my failure. And I hate myself for doing it. And I promise myself that I will never do it again and I will be a better father. And I manage, most of the time. But it does happen again. I can keep trying. I don’t have to be perfect; I simply have to be better.