

Seventeenth century London

Part 6

Cheapside

The name Cheap comes from the old English word *chepe* meaning market.

Located next to St Paul's Cathedral and larger than most of the City's labyrinthine streets, Cheapside was the main high street of London before the fire.

One of its most distinctive features, at the eastern end of the street, was the Great Conduit fountain...

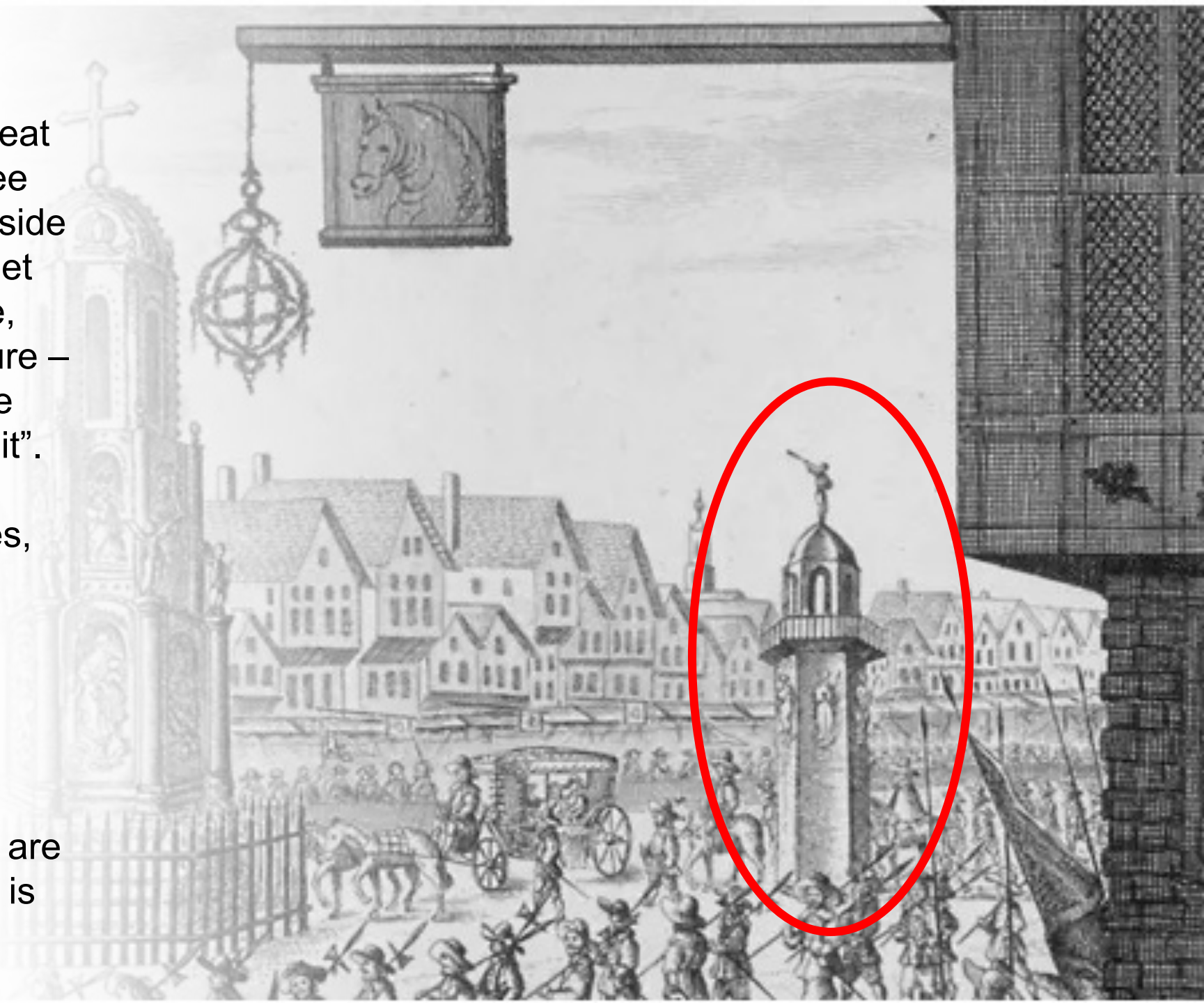


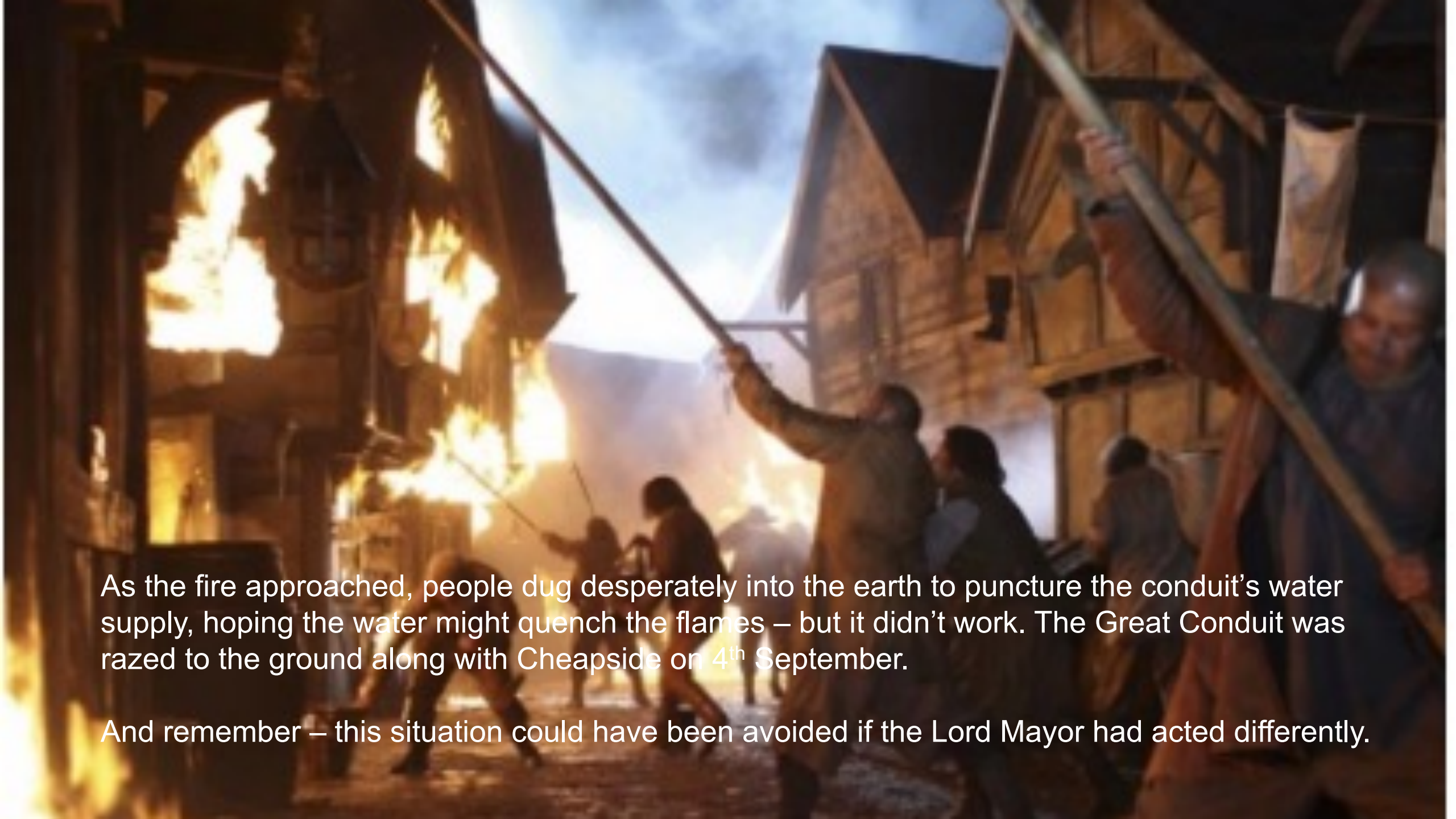
Cheapside

From the 1230s to 1666, the Great Conduit channelled water for free from the River Tyburn to Cheapside in lead pipes via Strand and Fleet Street. Illegal siphoning was rife, which reduced the water pressure – in Henry VI Part II, Shakespeare describes it as a “pissing-conduit”.

On occasions of military victories, royal births and coronations it sometimes ran with wine!

On morning of Tuesday 4th September London’s most prestigious shops in Cheapside are burned to the ground as the fire is blown westwards...



A historical illustration of a street fire in London. The scene is set in a narrow street with wooden buildings. A large fire is burning on the left side, with bright orange and yellow flames reaching up. Several people are visible, some holding long wooden poles or ladders, attempting to reach the fire. The sky is a pale blue, suggesting a clear day. The overall atmosphere is one of chaos and emergency.

As the fire approached, people dug desperately into the earth to puncture the conduit's water supply, hoping the water might quench the flames – but it didn't work. The Great Conduit was razed to the ground along with Cheapside on 4th September.

And remember – this situation could have been avoided if the Lord Mayor had acted differently.

Why was the fire spreading so rapidly?

Embers were blown by the wind and were causing new fires to be started elsewhere, just like wildfires do today. They could easily be blown hundreds of metres. The city was almost like a forest for the fire.





On day 3 of the fire, other methods were tried to halt it. Gunpowder for example.

The fire has reached the top of Ludgate Hill, and St Pauls cathedral. The old medieval St Pauls had been standing for 600 years. As well as a place of worship, it was a place of business and the centre of London's book trade.

ECCLESIA. PAULINA. PROSPECTVS
OVALIS OLIM ERAT PRVSQVAM LIVS PY
RAMIS. E. COELO TACTA CONFLAGAVERAT.

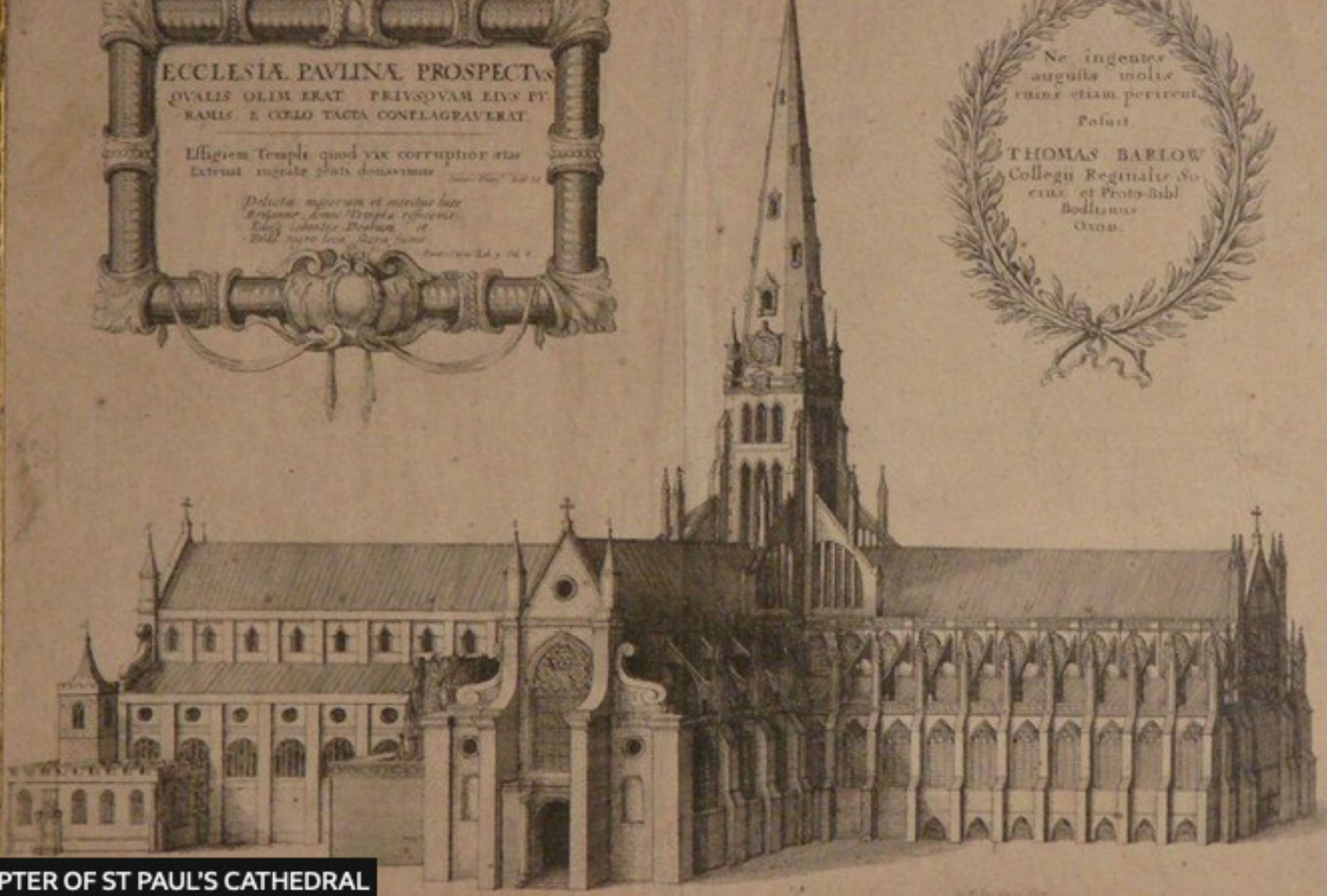
Effigiem Templi quod vix corruptior erat
Extitit integrè post donavimus

*Delicta. marmorum et meritis hinc
Responde. Anno Templi rediviva.
Eius. Libenter. Barlow. et
Bill. nunc loco. hinc sunt.*

Ne ingentes
angusta molis
ruinae etiam perirent.

Posuit

THOMAS BARLOW
Collegii Reginalis So-
cius et Proto-Sibl
Bodlicianus
Oxon.



THE CHAPTER OF ST PAUL'S CATHEDRAL



THE CHAPTER OF ST PAUL'S CATHEDRAL

Booksellers, printers and traders were of course surrounded by flammable materials. They decided to store their goods to beneath the crypt of the cathedral.

However, the cathedral was being repaired at the time, and wooden scaffolding being used caught fire. The stones of the cathedral caught fire with intense and searing heat of over 1,000C, and with large parts of the structure falling to the ground, the crypt was opened up and destroyed – and with it, all the books and knowledge that booksellers had tried in vain to save.

Lead from the cathedral roof melted and ran down Ludgate Hill.

Even today, a small part of the old cathedral survives, located in a discreet corner – a small part of the crypt (not easy to visit).



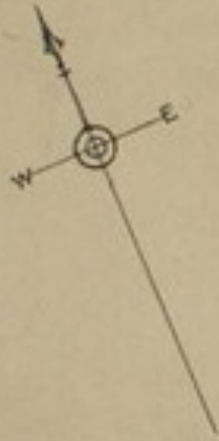
The burning of St Pauls led to recriminations.

Surprisingly, people wanted to blame foreigners to begin with. A mob of enraged Londoners took the streets following a rumour of a Dutch invasion. The British were at war with the Dutch at the time, and the French, and these became easy targets.

But strangely, the baker Thomas Farriner managed to avoid the wrath of Londoners.

The authorities began interrogating a 26-year-old French watchmaker's son called Robert Hubert. He was French and catholic. Amazingly, he confessed to starting the fire, and was hanged at Tyburn on 29th October 1666. The original trial record still exists. However, he was mentally unbalanced and should not have been convicted. Three of the Farriner family testified against him.

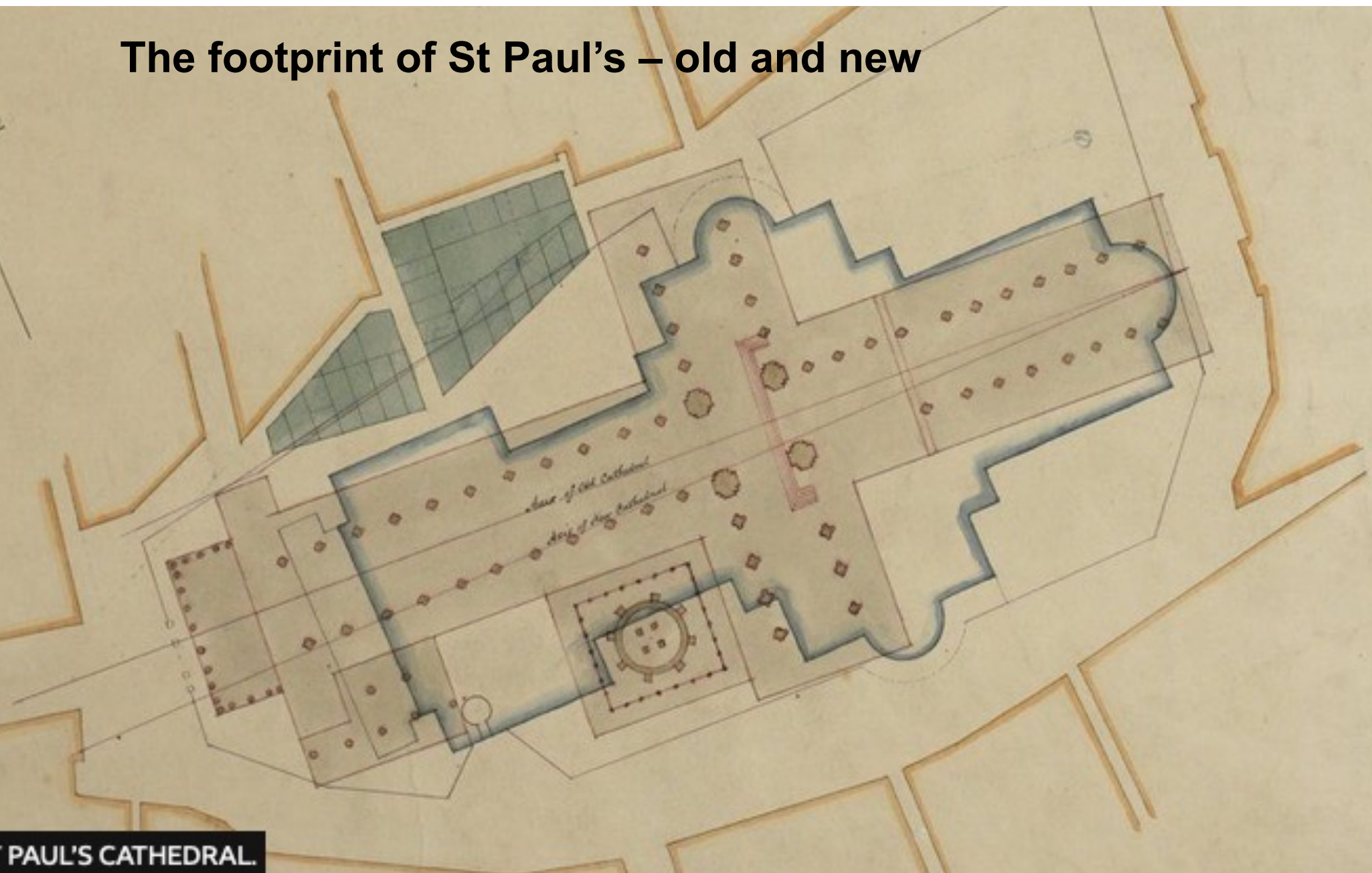
The footprint of St Paul's – old and new



Ludgate Hill

Base of Old Cathedral
Base of New Cathedral

THE CHAPTER OF ST PAUL'S CATHEDRAL.

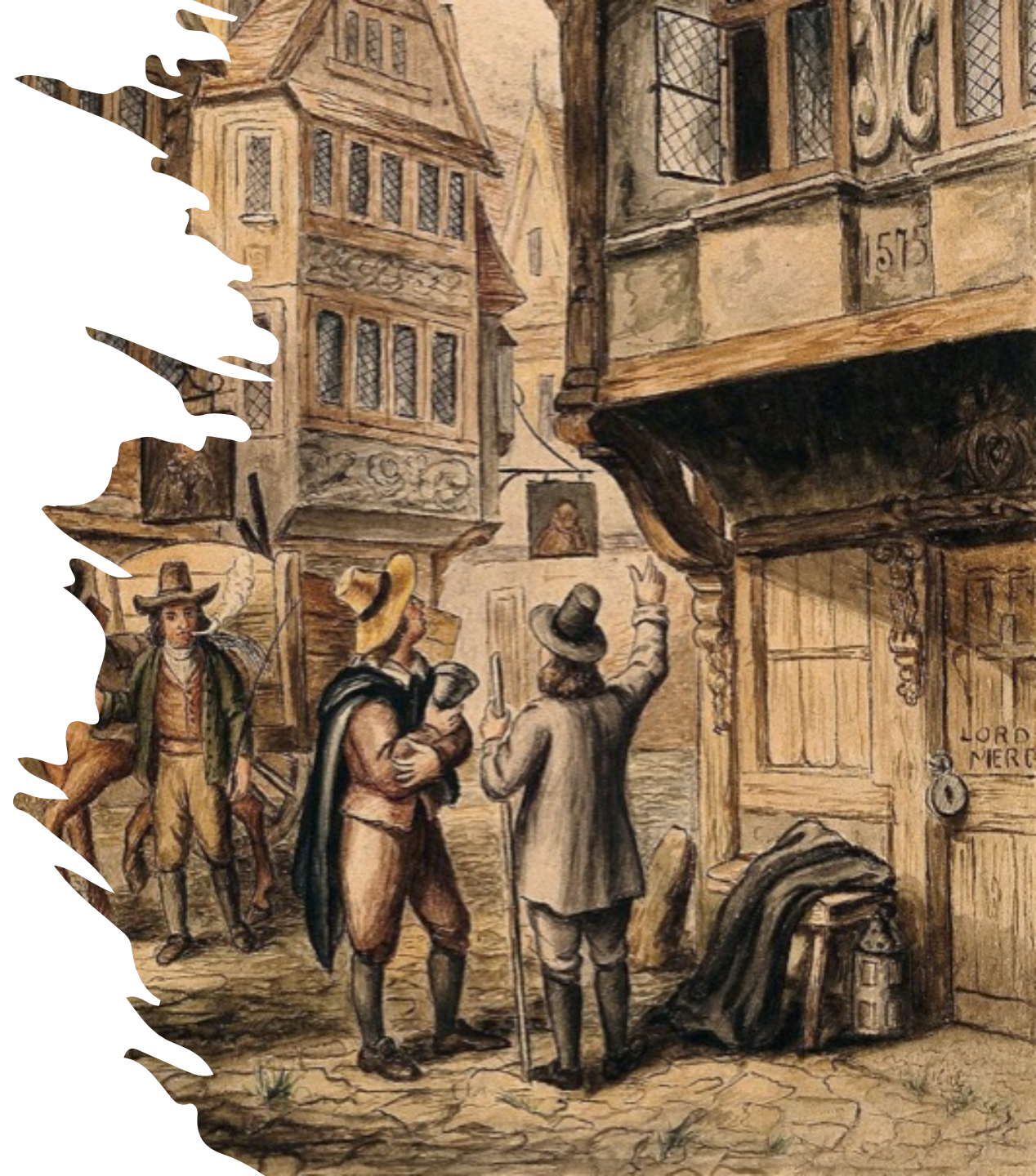


THE GREAT PLAGUE A YEAR EARLIER...

The Great Plague of London 1665 (which continued into the year 1666) was the last significant outbreak of bubonic plague in Great Britain. It is believed to have caused the deaths of almost a quarter of London's population as it was at the time. Whilst the official death toll of this outbreak is recorded as 68,595, historians think the actual number is around 100,000, out of a population of 380,000. At least a further 100,000 people are estimated to have died across the country in this plague outbreak.

The plague was still endemic in 17th-century London, as it was in other European cities – and it periodically erupted into epidemics. For example, 30,000 deaths in the City of London were attributed to the plague in city deaths records of 1603. A further 35-40,000 deaths were attributed in London in 1625; 10,000 in 1636, followed by smaller numbers in subsequent years.

Then a major plague outbreak occurred in Europe in the mid-1600s, including its sweep across London during 1665 and 1666 – the event known as The Great Plague.



Churches played a key role in responding to the epidemic. Parish officers organised money and food, and they had to deal with burying the ever-increasing numbers of the dead.

Early in the pandemic, each death was marked by a toke (a death knell) of the church bell. As the epidemic intensified, church bells were tolling over 20 times a day. They would be heard all the time in the city (and remember that the city did not have nearly as many buildings as it does now, so the sound would be even clearer).

If you starting to hear the bells get closer to your neighbourhood, you knew it was coming to you.

By beginning July, 470 people / week dying, and the contagion was spreading East. It triggered a mass exodus from London those who were better-off fled the city. Merchants, lawyers, professional classes all packed up and left. The poor were left behind, with their back alley slums the perfect breeding ground.

Pepys did not flee the city during the plague, unlike most wealthy people.

By mid-October 1665 most plague deaths were in Aldgate and Whitechapel. In western parishes, by this time the vulnerable had died and those who survived had built up some resistance to the disease.

In late October 1665, some life returned to the streets and the death rate was declining. By 30 Oct it was 1,000 deaths/week. Pepys talks about how it was still all about who had died and who was ill. This encouraged the many who had fled to return.

The influx caused a brief spike in deaths, but from mid-November, plague deaths fell every week. By mid-winter 1665 the death rate was about 40/day.

After Christmas 1665, Charles II returned to Westminster from Oxford. His abandonment in London's hour of need did not go down well with the population.

Extract from
diary of
Samuel
Pepys 14th
Sept 1665

Where, when I come home I spent some thoughts upon the occurrences of this day, giving matter for as much content on one hand and melancholy on another, as any day in all my life. For the first; the finding of my money and plate, and all safe at London, and speeding in my business of money this day. The hearing of this good news to such excess, after so great a despair of my Lord's doing anything this year; adding to that, the decrease of 500 and more, which is the first decrease we have yet had in the sickness since it begun: and great hopes that the next week it will be greater. Then, on the other side, my finding that though [the Bill](#) in general is abated, yet [the City](#) within the walls is increased, and likely to continue so, and is close to our house there. My meeting dead corpses of the plague, carried to be buried close to me at noon-day through the City in [Fanchurch-street](#). To see a person sick of the sores, carried close by me by [Gracechurch](#) in a [hackney-coach](#).

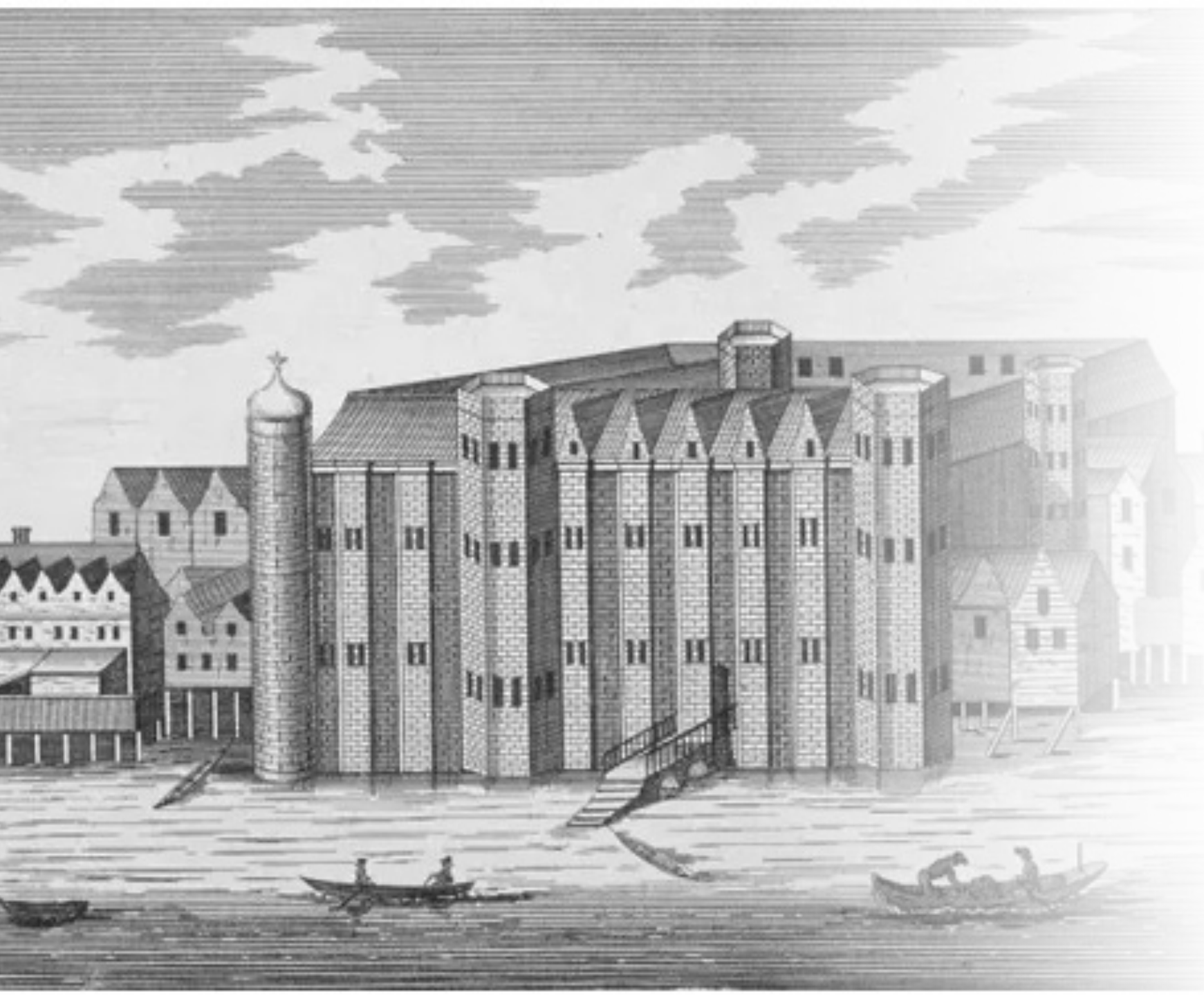
My finding the [Angell](#) tavern, at the lower end of [Tower-hill](#), shut up, and more than that, the alehouse at the [Tower-stairs](#), and more than that, the person was then dying of the plague when I was last there, a little while ago, at night, to write a short letter there, and I overheard the mistresse of the house sadly saying to her husband somebody was very ill, but did not think it was of the plague.

To hear that poor [Payne](#), my waiter, hath buried a child, and is dying himself.

To hear that a labourer I sent but the other day to [Dagenhams](#), to know how they did there, is dead of the plague; and that one of my own watermen, that carried me daily, fell sick as soon as he had landed me on Friday morning last, when I had been all night upon the water (and I believe he did get his infection that day at [Brainford](#)), and is now dead of the plague.

To hear that [Captain Lambert](#) and [Cuttle](#) are killed in the taking these ships; and that [Mr. Sidney Montague](#) is sick of a desperate fever at my [Lady Carteret's](#), at [Scott's-hall](#).

To hear that [Mr. Lewes](#) hath another daughter sick. And, lastly, that both my servants, [W. Hewer](#) and [Tom Edwards](#), have lost their fathers, both in [St. Sepulchre's](#) parish, of the plague this week, do put me into great apprehensions of melancholy, and with good reason. But I put off the thoughts of sadness as much as I can, and the rather to keep my wife in good heart and family also .



Castle Baynard

This now disappeared riverside castle was built in the late 13th century, inheriting the name of a destroyed castle further west – the Tower of London's lost twin – that had been built by the Norman Ralph Baynard after the 1066 Conquest.

Richard of Gloucester was offered the crown here in 1483, and many of Henry VIII's wives lived at this castle.

On the eve of the fire the castle was a big, brooding stone structure on the Thames, with gabled towers, a dock, thick walls, a central courtyard, and big turrets. Host to lavish royal banquets and coronations, the castle was destroyed in the fire apart from just one round tower, which was later converted into a house, and has since disappeared.

Today, part of the site is occupied by an office block and commemorated by a blue plaque on Castle Baynard Street.



BRIDEWELL IN 1666 (*see page 4*).

Bridewell Palace

Built in 1515-20 on the western bank of the River Fleet near Blackfriars, this lost inner-city palace was one of Henry VIII's favourites.

It was a large, rambling brick structure set around three courtyards with gardens and a private wharf. An imposing feature of the riverfront, it was probably the scene of Catherine of Aragon's final meeting with the king in 1529 (over a quarrelsome dinner).

Under Henry's son Edward VI, it became a poorhouse but was decimated on the third day of the Great Fire. The Fleet, contrary to expectations, proved no firebreak at all even though attempts were made to pull down the riverside houses. Something of the palace's stateliness lives on in the Ionic columns of Unilever House, the art deco building that occupies the site today.