

The Social and Political Consequences of the Great Fire of London

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The story of the Great Fire of London, Samuel Pepys' diary, and Christopher Wren rebuilding of London. If it was carelessness, it was carelessness that had enormous and disastrous consequences. The fire spread and soon the whole building was alight. In the close-packed streets of London, where buildings jostled each other for space, the blaze soon became an inferno. Fanned by an east wind, the fire spread with terrifying speed, feeding on the tar and pitch commonly used to seal houses. Pepys' View Our best account of the Fire comes from the diaries of Samuel Pepys, Secretary of the Admiralty. He watched the course of the destruction from a safe position across the Thames, and called it The Great Fire of London. The fire happened in Central London in 1666. The fire lasted for three days, from 2 September until 5 September. It is believed to have destroyed the homes of 70,000 of the 80,000 people that lived in the city. It is not known how many people died in the fire. Only a few deaths are certain, but for many of the victims there were no records. Also, the fire may have cremated many, leaving no recognisable remains. It threatened the aristocratic district of Westminster (the modern West End)

*The
Great
Fire of
London
is a
significant
event in
English
history
with far-
reaching
consequences.*

*Viewed
in its
proper
historical
context,
the fire
was more
than just
a
humanitarian*

*disaster.
It
occurred
at a
critical
moment
in
English
history,
only six
years
after the
restoration
of the
monarchy
ended
decades
of civil
war and
political
turmoil.
When the
fire
broke out
in
September
1666,
King
Charles
II was
struggling
to resolve
the many
problems
that had
been
facing
England
since he
was
restored
to the
throne.
This
paper
examines*

*how the
Great
Fire of
London
affected,
and was
affected
by, the
many
political
and
social
issues
that
existed
in
England
at the
time. I
discuss
how the
fire
inflamed
existing
political
dissent
and
religious
tensions,
exacerbated
the
King's
financial
troubles,
and led
to
English
defeat in
the
Second
Anglo-
Dutch
War. By
explaining
how the
fire*

*made
many of
these
problems
intractable,
I argue
that the
Great
Fire of
London
severely
impaired
Charles
II's
ability to
govern.
Because
it
diverted
resources
and
weakened
government
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Restoration.*

Introduction

The Great Fire of London was a major humanitarian disaster. In the first week of September 1666, the city was almost completely gutted by flames. The damage devastated the City of London, which the plague had already ravaged the year before. The fire turned many citizens into refugees and disrupted the economy of the entire nation. It was such a traumatic experience for the city that it still lingers in the historical imagination. However, a story of the Great Fire which discusses only the physical destruction and human suffering it caused would be incomplete. The fire was not an isolated incident. Many of

the issues facing England in the mid-seventeenth century either affected or were affected by the Great Fire of London.

Throughout the 1660s, the government of King Charles II grappled with several social and political issues, such as the legacy of the English Civil War, religious dissent, inadequate sources of government revenue, and a war with the Dutch Republic.

The Great Fire of London made addressing all these problems more difficult by exacerbating existing tensions and diverting the government's resources to handle the aftermath of the fire. As a result, the fire not only devastated the City of London; it also proved detrimental to Charles II's reign and increased instability throughout England.

Political

Dissent

By far the most dangerous issue facing Charles II's government was the legacy of the Civil War that ravaged England two decades prior.

The execution of Charles I by the victorious Parliamentary Army cast a long shadow over his son's reign.

Although political necessity forced Charles II to pardon many officials who had served the Commonwealth after the Restoration, this forgiveness did not extend to the men who had ordered his father's death.

Most of them were executed for treason. In addition, Charles II's first Parliament "ordered that the corpses of Cromwell, Ireton, and Bradshaw be exhumed and displayed, as an awful warning of the consequences of rebellion."^[1]

This display of

the regicides' severed heads, intended to dissuade rebellion, was deemed necessary because of continued dissent.

Although Charles II's return to the throne was celebrated jubilantly by the English people, their enthusiasm began to fade as realities of Restoration government became apparent.[2]

Pockets of support for a return to the Commonwealth soon emerged, mostly among former Parliamentarians and groups disadvantaged by Charles II's policies, such as religious nonconformists.[3]

These proponents of a revival of the Commonwealth, which they referred to as the "Good Old Cause," organized several plots against the King throughout the early 1660s. For

example, in January 1661, Thomas Venner led 50 men into revolt in an attempt to topple the government. This rebellion was a futile effort, and it resulted in Venner and several of his followers being executed and the mounting of their heads beside those of the aforementioned regicides.[4]

Although Venner's Rising never seriously threatened the government, it did demonstrate the animosity dissenters felt towards Charles II. On January 1, 1661, when a captured rebel was interrogated, "he said that he and others would spend their last blood before the King should come into England." [5]

The tensions created by these plots were especially pronounced in London because of the role the

city had played
in the English
Civil War. Neil
Hanson
describes
London as “the
heart of the
revolution
against Charles
I... and the scene
of the
regicide.”[6]

London had also
been the site of
several plots
against Charles
II, including
Venner’s Rising.
More recently,
there had been a
plot based in
London in which
eight former
Parliamentarian
Officers had
conspired to kill
the King and
take control of
the government.
This plot was
suppressed in
April 1666, and
all the
conspirators
were executed
for treason.[7]

Inextricably
linked to this
tension between
Charles II and
his capital was
the people of
London’s desire
to maintain their
traditional
privileges.
London had
always enjoyed a
degree of
autonomy in its
local

government.
Traditionally, the
reigning
monarch was not
even allowed to
enter the city
walls unless he
received
permission from
the Lord Mayor
and the leaders
of the
Corporation of
London.

Although
Charles II was
wary of London
and its
traditional
privileges, he
was forced by
political
necessity to
accept them.[8]

One
consequence of
his acceptance
was that it was
difficult for
Charles II to
order soldiers
into the city.

Hanson writes
that, although
Londoners were
willing to accept
the presence of
soldiers in the
city during an
emergency, such
as Venner's
Rising, if there
was not
sufficient
justification for
the presence of
soldiers they
would be
"confronted by
the citizens
uniting against

them.”[9] On the eve of the fire, London still enjoyed its traditional autonomy, and the memory of the English Civil War still loomed large in the popular imagination.

Religious Tensions

Closely associated with the legacy of the English Civil war was the problem posed by religious dissenters. While awaiting the Restoration, Charles II issued the Declaration of Breda, which among other things promised religious freedom to his future subjects on the condition that they remain loyal.[10] However, this was not a promise the King would keep. After he was restored to the throne, Charles II reestablished episcopacy and “the Anglican Establishment clamped down quickly on nonconformity,

and well over 2,000 clergy and university lecturers and fellows were ejected from their livings and deprived of their posts between 1660 and 1662.”^[11] These nonconformists included a diverse array of sects, from Independents and Presbyterians to more radical Baptists and Quakers. They also included the extremely radical Fifth Monarchists, the sect to which Thomas Venner belonged. Adrian Tinniswood explains, “Many of the Dissenters... were temperamentally inclined towards the Good Old Cause and against the monarchy, which had after all ejected them from their livings, restored the Anglican hierarchy and introduced Papists into the royal household.”^[12] Because of their sympathies for

the
Commonwealth
and aversion to
the monarchy,
Charles II
considered
nonconformists
a threat to his
power, resulting
in a mutual
distrust. Thus,
another point of
tension between
Charles II and
his capital was
that religious
dissenters “were
clearly very
numerous in
London.”[13]
Writing in
November 1662,
the famous
diarist and naval
administrator
Samuel Pepys
recalled tensions
between the
Anglican
Establishment
and the City of
London because
“the City... is not
to be reconciled
to Bishoppes
[sic].”[14]



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L.W on Unsplash

Religious
dissenters’
reputation in
London
significantly
improved during
the Great Plague,

which swept through the city a year before the Great Fire. While the Anglican clergy fled the city for fear of the plague, dissenting ministers stayed behind to preach to its victims.

According to Adrian Tinniswood, by staying behind they “earned the respect of Londoners.”[15] The increasing prestige of religious nonconformists in London made Charles II’s government uneasy. This led to the passage of the Five Mile Act, which forbade dissenting ministers “to come within five miles of any parish in which they had previously preached, or any city, town or parliamentary borough at all.”[16] This act soon proved to be a misstep, because its main effect was to alienate further religious nonconformists from the King’s government. The

Five Mile Act led many of them to believe, if they were not convinced already, that their best hope for tolerance lay with the Good Old Cause.[17] Another point of contention between Charles II's government and the religious nonconformists was the presence of Catholics within the royal household. There was still a prominent Catholic circle at court surrounding Charles II's mother, Henrietta Maria, and his wife, Queen Catherine of Braganza. These relations were bound to arouse opposition because of the historic prominence of anti-Catholic sentiment in England, which was not confined to religious dissenters. As John Miller writes in his biography of Charles II, to the people of England, Catholicism "was

not just another religion, but the quintessence of evil and degeneracy.”[18] Charles II’s decision to pursue a policy of repression towards religious dissenters, combined with the presence of Catholics in his family, greatly increased unrest in England in the lead up to the fire.

Financial Troubles

Another problem Charles II struggled with throughout his reign was finding the money to finance his administration.

After the Restoration, both Charles II and Parliament agreed that the exploitative and questionably legal taxes his father had levied would not be revived during his reign. As Parliament moved to permanently abolish some of the revenue sources abused by Charles I,

such as the Court of Wards, it attempted to compensate for their loss by providing Charles II with new tax grants to fund his government.[19] Unfortunately, Parliament underestimated how much funding the government would require. For the first several years of Charles II's reign, he constantly struggled to find sufficient revenue. When this funding gap was brought to the attention of later Parliaments, they refused to grant the King any permanent tax increases, in part because, as Miller writes, "they would not surrender the bargaining power given them by the king's financial weakness." [20] The struggle to finance his government further complicated the tense relationship between Charles

II and his capital, because London merchants were a key source of loans for the King.[21]

Ultimately, Charles II's lack of funds forced him to make decisions that were very unpopular with the English people. Charles II repeatedly asked King Louis XIV of France for loans.

Additionally, in 1662, he sold Louis XIV the port city of Dunkirk, which had come under English control during the Commonwealth, for the sum of 5,000,000 Livres.[22] The sale of Dunkirk "proved bitterly unpopular" among the English people, to the point that there was an attempt to impeach Lord Chancellor Edward Hyde, the Earl of Clarendon for proposing it.[23]

In a diary entry written on October 19, 1662, Samuel Pepys recalled with regret "that the

news of the
selling of
Dunkirk is taken
so generally
ill.”[24]

The Anglo- Dutch War

Charles II's
financial
struggles were
made even more
difficult to
resolve by his
decision to
prosecute a war
against the
Dutch Republic.
By the mid-
1660s, Oliver
Cromwell's
victory over the
Dutch in the
First Anglo-
Dutch War was
only a decade
old. Since then,
tensions
between the
English and the
Dutch had
continued to
rise. The English
passed the first
Navigation Acts
to restrict trade
within their
empire, while
the Dutch
attempted to
block English
access to the
East Indies.[25]
Before the war
was officially
declared in early
1665, conflict had
already broken
out between
English and

Dutch ships off
the coast of
Africa and in the
Mediterranean.[26]

In accordance
with an existing
defense treaty
between France
and the Dutch
Republic, Louis
XIV joined the
war on the side
of the Dutch,
despite Charles
II's repeated
attempts to
convince him to
remain

neutral.[27] At
the outset of
hostilities,
Parliament voted
Charles II
£2,500,000 to
finance the war
effort.[28]

However, this
lump sum was
quickly
consumed. The
war soon
disrupted trade,
and Charles II's
government
found itself
struggling to
finance the war
and his
administration.

Writing on
December 31,
1665, Samuel
Pepys explained
that "The Dutch
war goes on very
ill, by reason of
lack of
money."[29]

Initially, the
fighting seemed
to favor the

English. In June 1665, James, Duke of York, had been put in charge of the war effort and he “won a striking victory” at the battle of Lowestoft.[30] Then in August 1666, Sir Robert Holmes, Rear-Admiral of the Red, captured the Dutch town of West-Terschelling, looted it and burned it down before withdrawing.[31] However, neither of these engagements was decisive. At the beginning of September 1666, the main Dutch fleet remained undefeated and the war continued, putting an ever-increasing strain on the royal treasury.

The Fire

Although the many issues facing his kingdoms remained unresolved as September 1666 began, Charles II’s government had to turn its attention to a

new disaster. On Sunday, September 2, 1666, in the early hours of the morning, a fire broke out in a bakery on Pudding Lane in southeastern London.[32] A strong wind blowing northwest spread the fire quickly. Its spread was aided by the fact that the summer had been very dry; furthermore, most houses in London had frames made of timber.[33]

During the early stages of the blaze, the city's leadership showed itself to be ineffective. Sir Thomas Bludworth, the Lord Mayor of London, refused to begin pulling down buildings, then considered the best way to prevent the spread of fire. He also refused Charles II's offer that royal troops be allowed to enter the city to help fight the fire. In both cases, the Lord Mayor made his decision because

of political considerations.[34] By Tuesday, September 4, the fire had encompassed almost the entire city of London. It had even spread beyond the city walls to the west, causing many to fear that the fire would reach the Palace of Whitehall.[35] On Wednesday, September 5, Samuel Pepys described the scene as “the saddest sight of desolation that I ever saw; every where great fires, oyle-cellars, and brimstone, and other things burning.”[36]

Before the fire reached this critical point, Charles II had granted his brother, James, Duke of York, control of the city in place of the Lord Mayor. James quickly ordered royal troops into the city, authorized the demolition of property to prevent the fire’s spread, and set up fire stations around the city

that were tasked with stopping the blaze.[37] James personally visited each station to manage the firefighting effort, and his conduct during the fire was rewarded with “the greatest praise, for his ability to keep his head in a crisis [and] his determination to stop the fire.”[38] Eventually the flames were contained, and, as the wind died down, the flames died down with it. On Thursday, September 6, the Lord Lieutenant of Hertfordshire, who had been ordered to muster the local militia in case they were needed in London, received a report that said, “the raging fire is now abated.”[39] By then, however, London was a changed city. The fire had caused a surprisingly small number of deaths, but the physical damage was considerable.[40]

Many of London's public buildings, such as St. Paul's Cathedral, the Royal Exchange, and several of the city's guildhalls, had burned down.[41] In addition, over 13,200 houses had been destroyed, and between 70,000 and 80,000 people were now homeless.[42] The damage was so great that on September 8, Sir Geoffrey Shakerley, the governor of Chester Castle, reported that "All are in amazement at the heavy judgement fallen on London, which is concluded to be a total devastation and destruction of the metropolis." [43]



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Diplomatic and Military Consequences

Although

relatively few
perished in the
fire, many would
suffer in a
subsequent
outbreak of
xenophobic
violence.

Londoners were
notoriously
distrustful of
foreigners, and
the fire broke
out amid the
tense
atmosphere of an
ongoing war. As
a result, soon
many began to
suspect that the
Dutch and
French residents
of the city had
started the fire
purposefully as
revenge for the
burning of West-
Terschelling.[44]

According to
Walter George
Bell, many
people believed
“that the
conflagration
was begun by a
Dutch baker,
who was bribed
to do this work,
and that the
French went
about scattering
fireballs in the
houses.”[45]

These rumors
spread rapidly,
and soon mobs
of Londoners
began seizing
anyone who
seemed foreign,
beating them,

and in some cases lynching them.[46] Adrian Tinniswood writes that by Tuesday, September 4, “Any foreigners stupid enough to walk out on the streets of London... were in more danger from the mob than the flames.”[47] The Duke of York and his royal soldiers attempted to protect innocent foreigners from mob violence, and they managed to save several from lynchings.[48] However, this protection would come back to haunt James. Despite his admirable conduct during the fire, his protection of foreigners would be used as evidence against him during the Exclusion Crisis over a decade later.[49] Mob attacks on foreigners caused problems for the government both domestically and internationally. The violence perpetrated

against
foreigners would
feature
prominently in
several accounts
of the fire
published
abroad, which
severely
damaged
England's
reputation.[50]
This proved
detrimental to
the ongoing
English war
effort against the
Dutch Republic
and France.

Beyond this
reputational
damage, the fire
had a far more
direct and
disastrous
impact on
England's ability
to wage war. The
fire had depleted
English morale,
and the
government was
in disarray. The
Parliament,
which met
shortly after the
fire, was
thoroughly
dissatisfied with
government
conduct and
"bemoaned the
mismanagement
of the war
effort." [51]
Charles II
eventually
convinced the
MPs to grant him
more money for

the war but only after he promised to account for previous war expenditures.[52]

With England in dire straits, peace negotiations soon began.

However, these negotiations stalled in early 1667, and the Dutch fleet launched a surprise attack into the Medway in the Thames estuary, burning many ships and capturing the English flagship *Royal Charles*. [53]

This defeat provoked public anger about how poorly the war effort was being managed. In a letter written in June 1667, Sir Geoffry Shakerley recounted that “The late dishonour received from the Dutch has much perplexed all, and made some say we were asleep, or we should have fortified ourselves against such an attempt, knowing the enemy near.” [54]

Shortly

thereafter, the Treaty of Breda was signed, ending the conflict in exchange for minor English territorial concessions. The disastrous conclusion of the Second Anglo-Dutch War caused such public outrage that Charles II decided to dismiss his Lord Chancellor, the Earl of Clarendon, blaming him for the government's lacking conduct.[55] Public animosity was so great that, in the following months, Parliament voted to impeach Clarendon and to banish him from England in perpetuity.[56]

Economic Fallout

Along with bringing the war with the Dutch to a swift and calamitous conclusion, the fire made the problem of financing the government almost

intractable.
London had been
England's
principal trading
and
manufacturing
hub, and its
destruction
diminished the
government's tax
revenues just as
its expenses
were increasing.
After the Dutch
raid on the
Medway, the
state of the
King's finances
was so desperate
that some of
Charles II's
councilors
seriously advised
him to raise an
army and collect
new taxes
without
Parliamentary
approval.[57] On
July 12, 1667,
Samuel Pepys
commented on
these
suggestions by
saying, "the
design is... to
have a land-
army, and so to
make the
government like
that of France,
but our princes
have not brains,
or at least care
and forecast
enough to do
that." [58] As
rumors of this
plan spread, they
aroused stern
opposition and

discontent from Parliament and the public. In the end, Charles II decided against arbitrary taxation. After appeasing Parliament with several measures, including the dismissal of Clarendon, the King finally managed to secure the passage of a new tax on imported wine and spirits. This tax kept the government solvent for the moment.[59] However, the problem of sufficient royal finance was far from resolved. The fact that the King's councilors were willing to suggest illegal taxes enforced with arms showed just how serious the problem had become.

In addition to financing the Kingdom's administration and the war, Charles II's government faced the additional challenge of securing funds

for the reconstruction of London. Although homeowners and tenants would be held responsible for rebuilding their own properties, the government still had to finance the reconstruction of the many destroyed public buildings. The government also had to enforce new building regulations instituted after the fire, such as wider streets and a ban on timber frames.[60] In the weeks after the fire, many homeless residents left the city for the towns surrounding it, and the government considered it critical to begin reconstruction “before the population of London dispersed to such an extent that it would never come back.”[61] In February 1667, Parliament partially remedied this

problem when it passed *An Act for Rebuilding the City of London*, which enshrined the new building regulations in law and imposed a tax on coal shipped into London. The proceeds of this tax would be used to fund the city's reconstruction.[62]

As reconstruction finally began, however, the impact of the government's financial constraints was made evident yet again. Several proposals were put forward to re-design the city's layout. One of these was a particularly innovative plan created by the renowned architect Christopher Wren, who had a "deeply thought-out sense of how a modern city should function." [63] In the end, all re-design plans, including Wren's, were rejected because of financial and logistical constraints, and

the city was rebuilt with only minor changes to its layout.[64]



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Effects on Politics and Religion

The fire also served to exacerbate existing religious and political tensions. The wave of xenophobic violence that the fire unleashed quickly took on an anti-Catholic hue, which would color the narrative of the event for years to come. In 1681, during the Exclusion Crisis, a plaque was erected in Pudding Lane to commemorate the fire, with an inscription claiming it was started deliberately by Catholic terrorists.[65] The fire also

increased tensions between the Anglican establishment and religious nonconformists. Just as they had during the Great Plague, dissenting ministers stayed in the city when the fire broke out while the Anglican Clergy fled, increasing Londoners' respect for the dissenters and their faith.[66] This religious tension was inextricably linked to political tensions because of the sympathy many nonconformists harbored for the Good Old Cause. Their association with dissent was also a liability, however, and many nonconforming ministers took the lead in blaming Catholics for the fire in part to deflect suspicion from themselves.[67] Charles II attempted to appease religious dissidents by pushing for Parliament to

pass a religious
comprehension
bill. Parliament,
however, was
averse to
dissenters, and
the bill was
defeated.[68]
This failure
exemplified both
the depth of
religious tension
in England and
the
government's
inability to find a
settlement that
would satisfy
either side of the
religious divide.
Religious
tensions in
England would
continue
unabated for the
rest of Charles
II's reign and
beyond.

The legacy of the
English Civil
War, and the
political tensions
associated with
it, weighed on
Charles II's mind
as the fire died
down. With
many people
now homeless
and mobs
roaming the
streets, there
was major
potential for
social unrest. To
prevent a
potential
upheaval,
Charles II called
General George

Monck, Duke of Albemarle, back from his command of the English fleet to address the situation in the capital. Monck was a very popular figure because of his role in restoring the monarchy and his conduct in government ever since, so much so that Hanson describes him as “a man who commanded far greater public confidence and respect than [the King] himself.”[69] Although Monck’s presence did help to calm potential unrest, it seemed unnecessary in the days following the fire, as no major revolts against the government took place. Most Londoners had already placed the blame for the fire on foreigners, not Charles II, and many dissenting preachers were too wary of government reprisals to blame the King

directly.[70]
However,
officials within
the government
itself actually
increased
political tensions
in the aftermath
of the disaster,
as “tactless
courtiers
rejoiced at the
Fire, claiming
that the city
would now be
less able to resist
the king’s
will.”[71] These
careless remarks
demonstrated
that the fire had
not destroyed
the existing
tensions
between the
King and his
capital. Despite
the lack of an
open rebellion
against the King,
the Great Fire of
London did
contribute to an
increase in the
religious and
political tensions
that had been
plaguing Charles
II since the
earliest days of
his reign.

Conclusion

Overall, the
Great Fire of
London severely
hindered the
success of
Charles II’s
reign. Beyond

being a humanitarian disaster, the fire exacerbated many problems the King was already struggling to solve. Because of the fire, issues like unresolved political and religious tensions, insufficient government revenue, and an ongoing war with the Dutch became intractable. This was because the fire diverted resources and weakened the government's resolve at a critical moment. As a result, the fire's damage was far more extensive than the list of properties burned, because many of these issues would continue to plague Charles II for the remainder of his reign. Many of these controversies would remain unresolved until the Glorious Revolution brought his brother James II's reign to an

end two decades
later.

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CHICAGO

APRIL 21, 2020
CHARLES II, GREAT
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