

Teachers' guide to 1660s London

**LONDON
MUSEUM**

Here's a quick guide to the city of London in the 1660s, along with some extra information on some of the characters you'll meet in the videos.

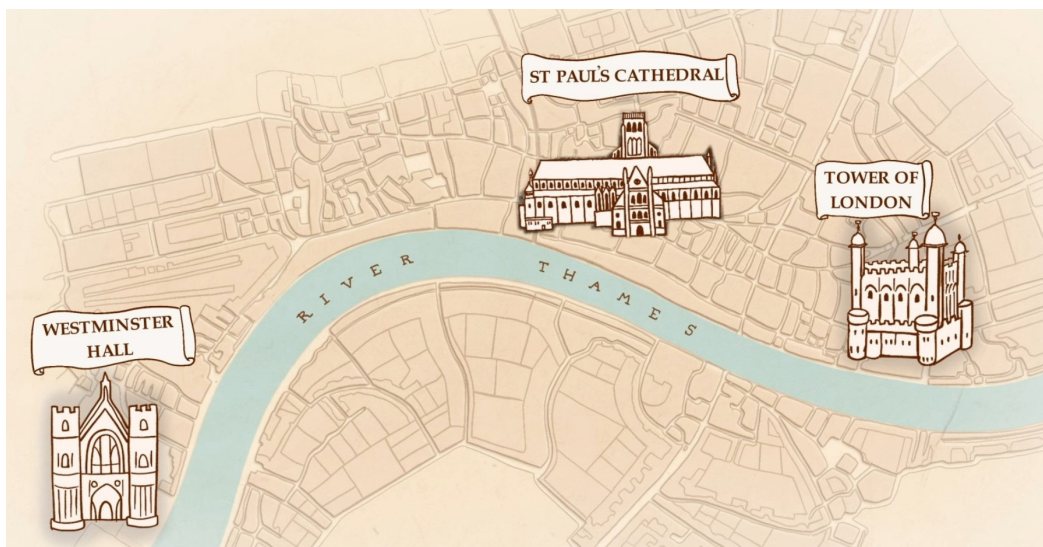


London

In the 1660s, London was much smaller than today, but densely crowded. Almost half a million people lived there. The area commonly called 'London' ran from eastern maritime suburbs, such as Shadwell, to Westminster in the west. The main built-up area on the south bank of the Thames was Southwark, where many tradespeople and sailors lived. There was only one bridge across the river: London Bridge.

Samuel and Elizabeth Pepys lived in the east of the City, in Seething Lane. This was next to the Navy Office and close to the Tower of London. King Charles II lived in Westminster, at the palace.

The video 'What was life like in 17th-century London?' shows Elizabeth Pepys go on a coach journey across London from east to west. Three major landmarks are shown: the Tower of London, St Paul's Cathedral, and Westminster Hall. St Paul's was destroyed in the fire. The Tower of London and Westminster Hall escaped damage and you can visit them today. Westminster Hall is now part of the Houses of Parliament: it was where people queued to pay their respects before the funeral of Queen Elizabeth II, in 2022. In the 1660s, it was lined with shops and bookstalls.





Characters

Each of these people lived in London in the 1660s and is mentioned in Samuel Pepys's diaries. In addition to understanding a bit more about who each of them were, this information might be useful for activities such as creative writing prompts or a project on life at the time of the Great Fire.



Fancy (c. 1660 – 1668)

Elizabeth Pepys's 'pretty black dog', given to her in 1660. Soon after, Pepys threatened to throw Fancy out of the window if she pooped in the house any more, but he grew very fond of her. She had several litters of puppies.

There were other animals in the Pepys household in the 1660s: dogs, cats, a starling, and, briefly, an eagle who, because she made a mess, was kept in the toilet room (politely called 'the house of office').



Elizabeth Pepys (1640 – 1669); pronounced 'Peeps'
Elizabeth was a gentlewoman who lived in Seething Lane with her husband Samuel. She had spent time living in France when she was younger – her father was French and her mother was English. She liked the theatre and reading. She longed to own her own coach so she could ride round London in it, rather than having to hire one. She finally got one in 1668. She died in 1669 of a fever caught while she was travelling abroad on holiday.



Samuel Pepys (1633 – 1703); pronounced 'Peeps'
In the 1660s Pepys lived in Seething Lane and worked at the Navy Office next door as an administrator. He started keeping his diary when he was a struggling clerk in 1660, but he got a better job when Charles II came to the throne. This job, 'Clerk of the Acts' for the Navy, brought him into contact with the King, courtiers, and politicians. By the time he finished his diary in 1669 he had become wealthy and influential through his work.



Susan

In 1666, Susan worked in Samuel and Elizabeth Pepys's house as the cookmaid, making dinners and cleaning. Described as 'little', she was probably in her early teens in 1666. She was also tough – she was able to lift a heavy iron chest that Pepys himself could not lift. In early 1666 he worried that she had the plague, but she got better.

Since Samuel and Elizabeth Pepys were wealthy, they employed a group of servants to work in their home, cleaning, cooking and waiting on them. As well as Susan, there was the head maid Jane Birch; Pepys's 'boy' Tom Edwards (who was 22); and Mary Mercer (19), who was Elizabeth's paid companion.



Jane Birch (1641 – 1715)

Jane was the head maid in the Pepys family's home in 1666. She was born in Gloucestershire and had come to London as a teenager to work as a servant – a lot of young people came to London to work as servants or learn trades. Jane was one of the first people to see the Great Fire, waking up Pepys to see it at 3am in the morning. She married twice, the first time to Tom Edwards who also worked as a servant for Pepys.



Hester Buckworth

She was a merchant's wife, living close to Pepys's house. Her husband had lived in Aleppo in Syria and traded there. During the Great Fire, Pepys saw Hester and her son John, who was nearly 4, by the river and arranged for her to move her goods to safety in a boat (3 September 1666).



Isay William Mingo (c.1645 – ?)

He was a young Black man who worked as a personal servant for Pepys's neighbour Sir William Batten. He had been enslaved as a child and very likely remained enslaved during the early 1660s. In Pepys's diary he has only one name, 'Mingo'. He first appears joking with Pepys about Valentine's Day in 1661. As Batten was in London during the Great Fire (burying his wine, among other things), Mingo would have been too.

In 1667 Batten died. His will implicitly confirmed Mingo's freedom (again, here he has one name). In 1668, he was baptised as Isay William Mingo and subsequently used the name William Mingo. Batten had left him money and the rights to run the navigation lights at Harwich port (a trusted and secure role). However, William Mingo chose instead to remain based in London, working for the navy.

Pepys's diary mentions several Black people living in his neighbourhood, including a Black cookmaid called Doll who worked for him in 1669. He does not say whether the people working as servants were free or enslaved, but other evidence shows Pepys was certainly an enslaver during the 1670s and 1680s.



Sir William Penn (1621 – 1670)

He was a navy admiral during the 1650s and 1660s and also became an MP. He was a significant figure in colonial history: he led the English force that invaded Jamaica and took it from the Spanish in 1655, which started the long British occupation of the island. His son William Penn, the Quaker leader, later became a founder of Pennsylvania, which was named after Sir William. Sir William worked with Pepys in the Navy Office, and joined him in wine- and cheese-burying during the Great Fire.



Ann Mitchell

She was a bookseller in Westminster Hall, selling pamphlets, newspapers, and medicines. Although her husband's name appears on the business papers, Pepys's diary makes clear that Ann ran the shop day-to-day. Women often ran businesses with their husbands, and in Westminster Hall there were single women running stalls too. Much of London's book trade was destroyed in the fire but Westminster Hall sellers were safely outside the fire zone.



The Deaf Boy (name unknown)

Pepys knew him in the 1650s and encountered him again at a party on 9 November 1666, two months after the Great Fire. During the party there was another fire scare nearby, in Whitehall. Pepys watched the boy sign fluently to party guests about the emergency. This is one of the first detailed accounts of a signed conversation in England, but Pepys does not record the boy's name. Although Pepys calls him a 'boy', he was probably older than he is shown in the video.

You can find out more about him in our comic 'Deaf Londoners in the 1660s' at fireoflondon.org.uk Also in that comic are two more figures who you can spot in the animations: the boy's signing companion, Captain John Downing (wearing yellow), and the deaf artist Framlingham Gawdy (blonde hair, grey suit).



Thomas Farriner (1615 – 1670)

Farriner owned a bakery on Pudding Lane in the east of the City of London, where he lived with his daughter Hanna (23), his son Thomas (25), their journeyman baker, and a maid. On the night of 1 September 1666, the family had been preparing to bake Sunday lunches. Hanna checked the bakehouse at midnight. At 2am the next day the family were woken by smoke – and by what became the Great Fire of London.

Their maid (whose name isn't recorded) was the first to die in the fire. The family denied responsibility for the fire and supported claims that a Frenchman Robert Hubert had started it. He confessed and was executed, but evidence later proved he had been onboard a ship at the time the fire started.



Betty Mitchell

Betty was the daughter-in-law of Ann Mitchell the bookseller. With her husband, Michael, she was running 'a strong water house' (a shop selling brandy and other spirits) at the time of the Great Fire. Their home and business, near London Bridge, were burnt. They managed to reopen their business on the site two months later, but were still rebuilding there in March 1668.



Sir Christopher Wren (1632 – 1723)

He was a 'natural philosopher' (the 17th-century term for 'scientist') and an architect. He took a major role in the rebuilding of London after the fire. As a young man, Wren studied mathematics and astronomy. He was also interested in how deaf people communicated, and designed a finger-spelling alphabet. He became a professor of astronomy at Oxford University and started working as an architect in the early 1660s.

After the Great Fire, Wren helped to devise the laws that governed how houses and streets were rebuilt. He designed replacements for many London churches that had been burnt in the fire and for St Paul's Cathedral. The new cathedral was officially declared finished in 1711.



Charles II (1630 – 1685)

For much of the 1640s and 1650s there seemed no prospect of Charles becoming king. His father, Charles I, had been executed in 1649 and the monarchy abolished. However, by the late 1650s, he appeared the surest prospect for ending decades of war and turmoil. He was invited to take the English throne by parliament and became king in 1660. His coronation in 1661 was widely celebrated. By 1666, his popularity had dimmed.

However, during the Great Fire he provided leadership. Pepys had access to Charles through his navy work and rushed to tell him about the extent of the fire. Charles promptly ordered the destruction of houses as firebreaks and sanctioned use of troops as firefighters. After the fire, he received plans for the ambitious redesign of London (creating new streets, squares and buildings). The need to rebuild quickly and economically meant the City was largely rebuilt on the same street plan.