

## Plague 1665-1666

The winter of 1664-65 was bitterly cold and followed by a hot summer and mild autumn. The Great Bubonic Plague of 1665 was carried by the brown rat and passed on to humans through the flea. The death toll increased from tens in early May to tens of thousands in late September. In the year of 1665 London Mortality Bills show a total of 68,596 deaths due to Plague, however Chancellor Clarendon writes 'many who could compute very well, concluded that there were in truth double that number.'<sup>4</sup> Over ~~the~~ next year the still evident pestilence declined and 1666 saw a massive reduction but not eradication. Mass graves were filled and churchyards were heaped high. Often there was not enough lime to cover the graves adequately and the smell and sight of putrefying flesh must have been intolerable. Infected households were closed and marked by a one foot red cross and the words 'Lord, have mercy upon us.' One infected member of a household would sentence the rest to death in their own home, as no one was allowed to leave. The plague struck the poor hardest, few persons of wealth were infected; those who could afford to leave the city left. The plague was called 'The poore men's Plague', but providence would soon strike the rich in the Great Fire of London.<sup>6</sup>

## The Great Fire of London 1666

At 2:00am on Sunday 2 September 1666 a bakery in Pudding Lane, London Bridge caught fire and so began the Great Fire of London. The fire burnt for four days and four nights and by Thursday had burnt itself out. At first the fire on the bridge was underestimated by all in London. Samuel Pepys himself thought little of the fire at first glance 'I thought it far enough off; and so went to bed again, and to sleep.'<sup>8</sup> People soon became astounded by the ferocity of the fire and did little to check its rapid growth. Londoners started to congest the streets trying to move all their belongings to a safe distance, instead of containing the fire they made the situation — hundreds of times worse, anyone fighting the fire had great difficulty moving through crowded streets. Soon shouts of 'To arms, to arms!' added a new element of confusion to the disaster. Rumours had started to circulate that the fire was due to Papist revolt or that the Dutch had invaded. — fire fighters were eventually organised and set about demolishing houses to prevent the spread, but by this time the fire was too fierce and overtook their work, the sparks from the fire could travel hundreds of feet and kindle roof tops behind the fire fighters. Even King Charles and his brother James Duke of York helped fight the fire but all attempts to contain the now apocalyptic flames were futile. The fire finally died only when the wind changed direction and sent it burning back towards the smouldering ruins of the old City. All in all 436 acres of the City were engulfed, 13,200 houses had been lost and some 200,000 people made homeless. All the public administration buildings, the General Post Office, — Newgate prison and most of the food markets had been consumed. Yet London recovered remarkably quickly and in less than ten years the city was rebuilt, with wider streets and safer buildings.