How do we know what happened?

**The Great Fire Of London**

An eyewitness can help us to understand what happened in the past.

Samuel Pepys is famous because he was an eyewitness to the Great Fire of London.

**Can you remember what an eyewitness is?**

An eyewitness can help us to understand what happened in the past.

This is a portrait of Samuel Pepys. It was painted by John Hayls in 1666. It shows us what he looked like at the time of the fire.

Samuel Pepys was jolly lucky, because the fire he wrote about in his diary stopped almost at the end of his street and his own house was untouched. When the fire started on September 2nd and then spread, he expected his house to be burnt down and he had tried hard to protect his property.

On 3rd September, he hid all his money in the cellar of his house and on 4th September at 4 o'clock in the morning, he got a cart to take his valuables to a friend in Bethnal Green. It must have been a mild night because he didn't even bother to change out of his nightgown for the journey!

By 4th September, things had taken a turn for the worse, and so Samuel Pepys decided to dig a pit in the garden to take his most treasured possessions – a Parmesan cheese and the contents of his wine cellar.

The next day, 5th September, he started to panic about his gold. He had sent that to a friend in Woolwich together with his wife who was locked up in a room at his friend's house with the gold and told not to move, night or day. She was to guard his gold and make sure no one stole it!

**What do you think an eyewitness at that time might have seen?**

Pictures of the fire that were drawn at the time give us clues about what the eyewitnesses would have seen.

This picture was painted at the time of the fire in 1666. No one knows who the artist was but it is believed that the artist was an eyewitness to the Great Fire. It shows the fire as it would have looked between 8 and 9 o'clock on the evening of Tuesday 4th September 1666.

Here are some other pictures that show us what an eyewitness would have seen. What do the pictures tell us?

What did London look like before and after the fire?

This is another portrait of Samuel Pepys. It was painted in 1689, twenty three years after the fire. He is wearing a brown silk coat and a long, curly wig that was very fashionable in those days!

Samuel Pepys' diary is very important because it tells us what life was like at the time of the Great Fire of London. We say that it is an eyewitness account or an eyewitness report.

That means that it has been written by someone who was there and saw what happened during the Great Fire. Samuel Pepys told us what happened by writing his diary!

When Samuel Pepys wrote his diary he wrote it very quickly in a sort of shorthand or code. When he died he left (gave) his diary to his university college and it is still there, protected as he had asked.

Samuel Pepys wrote about many things. He wrote about what it was like when he was a Clerk to the Navy Board which was responsible for building and repairing ships.
He loved the beautiful ship models which were made by designers when they were planning to build new ships. He was also interested in fashion and often dressed in very fancy clothes because his job was an important one and he liked to look smart! His main problem was his sore eyes and blurred vision. He was sure that too much work had ruined his sight and at work he paid people to write for him whenever he could.

When Samuel Pepys started to write his diary he was quite well off but he was afraid that he might be tempted to spend too much and end up poor. When he went out drinking with his friends he kept just 3 old pennies in his pocket so he couldn’t spend too much.

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**Monday 3rd September 1666**

Jane told me she had heard that 300 houses were burned down and that now the fire was burning near London Bridge. I walked to one of the high places to see for myself and I saw the houses at the end of the bridge all on fire. I told the fire began in a bakers shop in Pudding Lane. The poor people were staying in their houses until the houses themselves were on fire and then they fled to try to get to the boats to make their escape.

**Tuesday 4th September 1666**

I walked the streets and the fire is fierce. The fire has burned all day with buildings crashing down and the flames roaring. The fire is blowing up houses in Tower Street next to the Tower, it has frightened people more than anything but it has stopped the fire spreading in those places where it has been done. St. Paul’s has been destroyed. I wrote a letter to my father but the post house is burning and the letter could not go.

**Wednesday 5th September 1666**

About two o’clock in the morning I was woken and told there were new cries of “Fire! Fire!” coming from the area around Barkers Church which is at the bottom of our lane. I got out of bed quickly and found it to be true. I took my wife and my gold away by boat. What a sad sight. The whole city seems to be on fire. When I returned I expected my own house to be on fire but it is not. The wind has dropped!

**Thursday 6th September 1666**

The last of the fires are gone. There is so much destroyed. It is a sad sight to see how the river looks – no houses nor church near it. St. Paul’s has gone, all its roofs fallen in. So many houses destroyed, my father’s house also.

**Sunday 2nd September 1666**

I was woken from my sleep by Jane, one of the maids who told me of a great fire in the city. Looking out of my window I saw a yellow glow in the sky but I thought the fire far off so I went back to bed.

**Click here if you need a reminder.**

### Objectives
- Children should learn:
  - what an eyewitness is
  - about the part played by artists in recording the events of the Great Fire

### Activities
- Discuss with the children what an eyewitness is, and how an eyewitness can help us to know what happened in the past. Show children some photos of the fire produced at the time. Help them to recognize those things an eyewitness would see, eg people in boats on the river, the direction of the fire’s smoke.
- Show them the portrait of Samuel Pepys again. Help them to remember who he was, and tell them about him. His work and his diary.
- Discuss what a diary is, whatever it is fact or fiction, and the sort of information people keep in diaries. Why might diaries be useful to us today?
- Read short, edited extracts from Pepys’ diary about the fire and what happened in London afterwards. What do the diary extracts tell us about the Great Fire that we didn’t know before?

### Samuel Pepys Diary

#### Complete diary for 1666

**Outcomes**
- Children should be familiar with the idea of a diary and how it can be used to record events as they happen.
- They should know that Pepys saw the fire and that he wrote about it in his diary.

**Points to note**
- Children could be told that people started to take out fire insurance after the fire. Teachers could make links with personal, social and health education and citizenship education by talking more generally about fire safety and the work of the fire brigade.
- There are opportunities to develop this activity further by looking at the rebuild of London and the work of Sir Christopher Wren. This would be particularly suitable for children who know London and realise that there are many buildings that have ready access to the city.

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