

The Great Fire of London 1666



The Extent of the Great Fire of London

This decision gave rise to a further major problem, because most of the houses in the City were held on full-repairing leases, under which the tenants would be liable to pay rent even if the property was uninhabitable and also to rebuild the property. This would have been difficult enough if the replacements could have been built in timber like the previous ones, but the King had decreed that all the new buildings should be built in brick. So rebuilding would be far too expensive for most of the tenants.

The solution was quite extraordinary. The Fire of London Disputes Act of 1666 created a Fire Court of 22 judges, which had sweeping powers to settle all differences arising between landlords and tenants of burnt buildings. The judges were drawn from the Kings Bench, the Court of Common Pleas, and the Court of the Exchequer.



The Fire Table, at which the Fire Court Judges sat in Cliffords Inn



Sir Matthew Hale, one of the Fire Court Judges

1666 was a long hot summer, so when a fire started at a bakery near what is now the Monument, it spread rapidly, fanned by a strong East wind. It burned for four days and destroyed 80% of the City, including 3,200 houses, 87 churches, and 4 livery halls.

The extent of the fire in Fleet Street is shown on the attached map. It effectively stopped at Fetter Lane, though one or two buildings on the east side were consumed. South of Fleet Street, it made inroads into the Temple.

After the fire, these were some proposals for a completely new street design for the City. Among them is the well-known proposal by Sir Christopher Wren for wide boulevards radiating from a rebuilt St. Pauls Cathedral. But money was short, and rebuilding needed to start quickly so it was decided to retain the previous street pattern.

A quorum of 3 judges constituted the Court, which sat in the Hall of Clifford Inn in Fetter Lane, which had escaped the fire. The judges had the power to cancel contracts, and to decide whether the landlord or the tenant should be responsible for rebuilding the property. The first session of the Court was on 25th February 1667. The judges sat at a small table which is now preserved in the Museum of London and was exhibited at their "Fire of London" exhibition. This gate-leg oak table was used by the Fire Court at Clifford's Inn. A brass plaque fixed into the end of the table bears the inscription: 'Sir Matthew Hale & the other Judges, sat at this Table in Cliffords Inn to determine the disputes respecting Property, which arose after the Great Fire of London AD1666. Presented by R.M.Kerr Esq. L.D. 1893.'

The City of London was so grateful to the Fire Court judges that they commissioned a series of very large paintings of each one of them to hang in Guildhall; 2 of them still do, but the others were dispersed during the Second World War.



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Additional notes

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Further reading: Webpages - Museum of London, Great Fire of London live stream parts 1,2 and 3

Photos:

1. The Extent of the Great Fire of London
2. The Fire Table, at which the Fire Court Judges sat in Cliffords Inn
3. Sir Matthew Hale, one of the Fire Court Judges