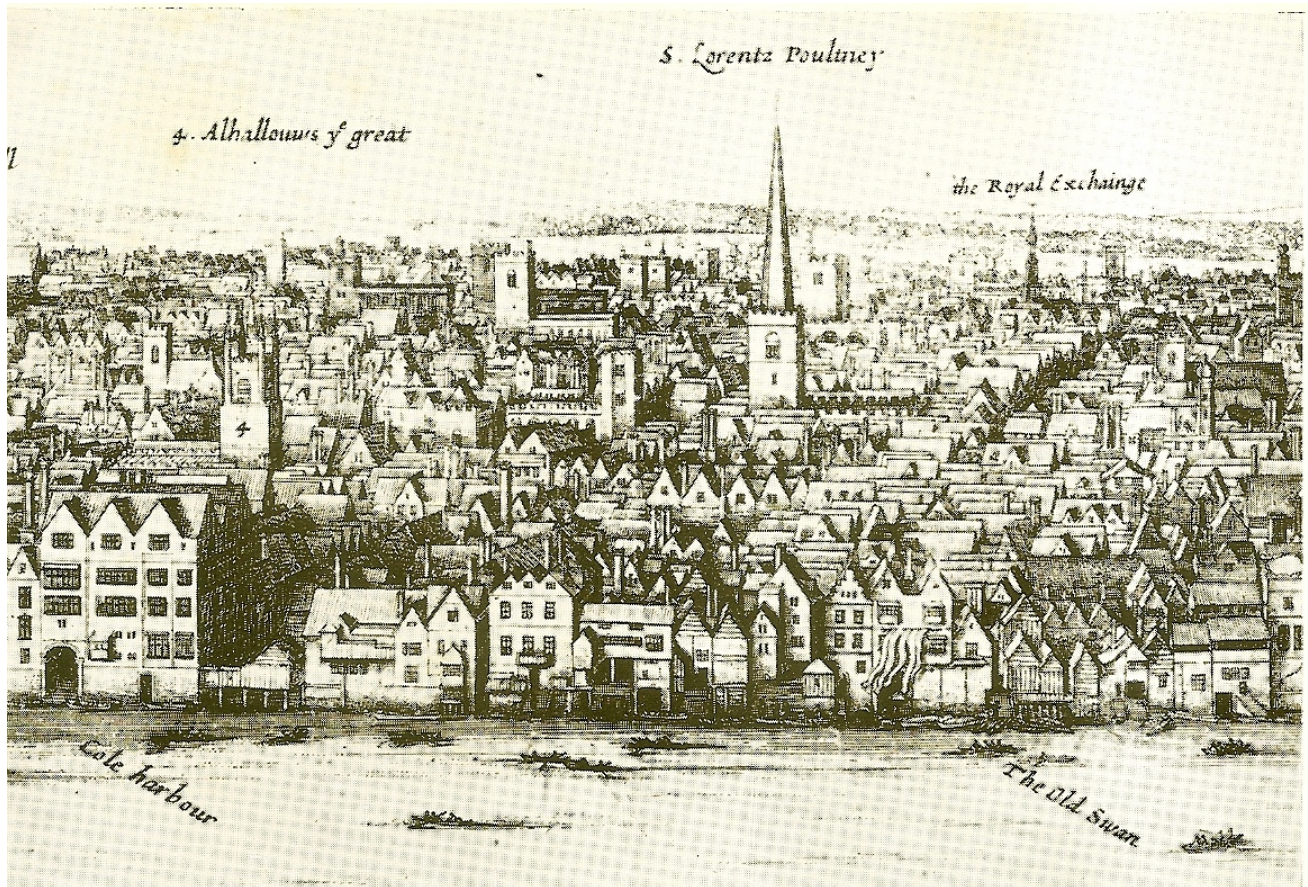


The Great Fire & the Dyers September 1666



Part of the Panorama of London from the South Bank of the Thames
by Wenceslaus Hollar, 1647

Courtesy The Dyers Company

The Fire of London began at night on the 1st September; by the evening of the next day both the Dyers Hall and the Dowgate property were destroyed. There is no record of how individual dyers or Company officials responded to the crisis as it unfolded but the lack of records suggests that there was no hero like the Renter Warden of the Skinners, Mr Foster. He organised the removal of their plate and muniments to successive places of safety even as his own property was burning. The Master of the Tallow Chandlers piled his coach with the Company charter, records and plate and removed it all to Hampstead. There is no memory of similar disinterest among the Dyers but someone certainly was concerned; some records and the beautiful charters survived: perhaps as much as could be hurriedly stuffed into a bag.

Any temptation to condemn the senior members of the Company for not doing more should be resisted. Dyers Hall in 1666 was down by the river and close to the 'true heart of the fire', on Thames Street. Samuel Pepys awoke at 7am on the 2nd September, the Lords Day, and after various consultations and observations took to the river. The Fire had already reached the Old Swan and travelled very fast along the riverbank, reaching the Steelyard (next to Cannon Street) in an hour. I can imagine a sleepy Beadle or Clerk grabbing what records he could as his wife and children called

to him to hurry. Someone certainly did what they could in a panic-stricken area. The Skinners and Tallow Chandlers had much more leisure to organise a rescue as the Fire only reached Dowgate Hill in the evening. Of the 45 Halls that were destroyed Dyers Hall was among the first to succumb.

Dyers Hall

'The great messuage or tenement called the Three Starres & then also comonlye called the Dyers hall' was a venerable structure already standing in the 1460 and coming into the hands of the fledgling Dyers Company in 1484. Excavations have revealed evidence of some stone walls and an inventory of 1602 shows it had a great chamber over the hall and another chamber over the kitchen. In the great chamber was 'one large waynescott bedsteade & the painted cloth round aboute the chamber' as well as 'a compting house shelved rownde about'. The inventory was only listing the contents that were 'bargained and sold' to the new tenant. The Hall was 'Hanged rounde aboute with painted clothes, & waynescotted about the chymney' and contained '2 tables, one long waynescote table, to drawe out with 2 leaves, & the other a longe table of deale boorde, with a frame'. We cannot be sure that this was where the Court conducted its business as there was another building which probably overlooked river. Besides 3 chambers and another kitchen there was a 'Gallory at the waterside' which was 'Waynescotted over the chymney up to the seeling, with a waynescot cupboard at the end of it, with 2 rooms in it, & a drawer underneath'.

There was also a succession of 'howses' associated with dyeing. There were apparently two workehowses, a woadhowse, a blackehowse and a fyrehowse. No doubt they contained, besides the coppers, vats and various ironwork, trestles etc quantities of dyestuffs and liquids, some of which could have been highly flammable.

A deed from 1579 tells us the property was entered by 'a great gate' which opened onto a yard that was shared between the occupant of the inn, the dyer and any other tenants. On one side of the court stood the Company almshouses. Adjoining the Dyers' property to the west was another dyehouse and two properties to the east another dyer leased a riverside property from the Mercers. His cloth is waving on his gallery in the frontispiece. In fact there was a concentration of Dyers in the parish of All Hallows the Less, where Dyers' Hall stood.

That, though, did not make this an appealing area to live. Thames Street was a narrow, low lying rookery of stores and cellars, choked by carts. As W.G Bell wrote in 1920 'a Church stood here, a Livery Hall there and by these larger buildings a city is known, but a hundredfold more numerous are the smaller unconsidered houses, hovels and tenements' of which little or no record remains. There were 'devious alleys to the Thames where every available inch of surface was covered by the squalid buildings, mostly weather-boarded and coated with pitch and preserving no order or plan'. The riverside parishes were 'a sort of underworld of the City' where 'the people were of less consequence than the goods they landed'. So overcrowding was inevitable, even scandalous; in Dowgate Ward, which included the parish of All Hallows the Less, a small house was reported as accommodating 11 married couples and 15 single persons. Over all hung a 'horrid smoke', in the words of the diarist John Evelyn. He continued 'which obscures our churches and makes our palaces look old, which fouls our clothes and corrupts the waters, so that the very rain and the refreshing dews which fall in the several seasons precipitate this impure vapour'. These very modern-sounding concerns would not have been popular with the soap-boilers, brewers and indeed dyers of the City!

Given these conditions and a long drought it is no surprise that the riverside area proved a tinderbox. Pepys watched its destruction from a boat: 'Everybody endeavouring to remove their goods, and flinging into the River or bringing them into lighters that lay off. Poor people staying in their houses as long as till the very fire touched them, and then running into boats or clambering from one stair by the waterside to another. And among other things, the poor pigeons I perceive were loath to leave their houses, but hovered about the windows and balconies till some of them were burned, their wings, and fell down'. What a heart-rending sight. Indeed it is this area of the City that Bell considered the true heart of the Fire. It had only become uncontrollable when sparks leapt over houses and ignited buildings on Thames Street.

Dyers

We are fortunate to be able to envisage the house of a Dyer that was destroyed in this first violent inferno. Thomas Champneys was already dead but the contents his house in the parish of 'Little Allhallowes' are recorded in an inventory drawn up and presented at the Court of Orphans* on the 14th May 1666. Possibly he had died of the Plague the previous year. As the appraisers went from room to room they noted the contents first of the Garret, the best Chamber, the Chamber next ye dyehouse, the Hall, the 'darke roome, the 'kitchin'. There is confusingly an 'upper house in the Hall', the Backward Chamber, the Inner Chamber, another kitchen and the Men's Chamber. Perhaps there were two staircases; it is noticeable there is no mention of staircases in these old houses whereas a generation later the walls of the staircases were a place for displaying pictures.

Whatever the layout he was a man of substance. His Livery gown and hood and a quilt gown are valued at £6 and he has a 'sad Coloured Cloth Sute, a mourning Cloake' and apparel, hats, hoods and shoes worth over £9. He kept his sword and 'javeline' in his best chamber where the contents were valued at over £5. The bed was hung around with green serge and the tester was of buckram. There were two chests of drawers, window cushions, cloths covering the surfaces, a carpet and a looking glass. In the fireplace was a small pair of brass Andirons. The Hall was the main living room containing a 'Drawing table', a court cupboard, a house clock and case and more brass fire irons. Presumably some items had already been removed as the only seat was a child's chair.

There is no mention of the parlour, dining and dressing rooms that appear in the houses built after the Fire. However the upper house in the Hall appears to have served as a sitting room as it contained a round table, seven leather chairs and six joint stools. Bizarrely there was also a chicken coop in the room.

The inventory gives evidence of his business. He was in partnership with Anthony Stanlake, another 'citizen and dyer of London'. £400-worth of 'Wares' had been sold and his share of the debts owed to the partners totalled for 'sperate' debts £800 and 'desperate' debts £99. Sadly the only possible evidence of what sort of dyeing the partners were undertaking comes from a list of 'Clothes'. He dyed a mix of quality and of colour. The most expensive material, valued at 12 and 11 shillings a yard, was black cloth. At around 6 shillings a yard was some mixed coarse broad cloth, some Stroudwater Red, also broad cloth and some light grey cloth. At the bottom of the scale was coarse red cloth called Kersey, from the North West, and baize of the same description. They were worth 8d a yard. Slightly more valuable was a 'Tawney' Manchester, probably also baize, worth 18d. 'Tawney' could be achieved by using a mixture of black and red dye. These reds and blacks suggest that he was dyeing with madder and logwood recipes.

The value of Champneys' goods and chattels, at between one and two thousand pounds is comparable to some dyers who died later in the century. One practising dyer's inventory in the Orphan Court reaches over £7000 but this is exceptional. Most 'citizens and dyers' recorded in later inventories in the Orphan Court with property worth over £2000 have been otherwise occupied.

Late in the 17th century the surviving Freedom records describe the occupations of those joining the Company. The majority are described as Dyers, Stuff Dyers and Silkmen. However some are Merchants of the Livery, joining by redemption rather than by apprenticeship. Two Dyers from the Orphan Court inventories stand out as having exceptional wealth with estates valued at over £13000 and £14000 respectively. They must be such 'Merchants of the Livery', employing others to do their dyework. They traded diverse goods across England, Europe and beyond, exchanged money and in one case owned shares in several ships. Others sold drapery or dyewares in large quantities.

One other riverside inventory from before the Fire survives and demonstrates how many working dyers were relatively less wealthy. George Jackson lived in the parish of St James Garlickhythe. Drawn up in March 1666 it was only exhibited in 1668. His 'Livery Gowne and Hood' was valued at £7 but his estate was much smaller than Champneys'. The value of household goods was just over £50. The house was apparently much smaller, consisting of a garret, a Hall, a chamber over the Cloth Loft, a kitchen and 'the New roome' which had a bed hung with 'stript stuff (and) a piece of green Curtens'. There were also five green chairs and two leather ones making the contents the most valuable of the rooms, at £9.

There were 'wares remaining in the house valued at £280' but no details of what they were given. Nor was a dyehouse described. Perhaps that was at his business partner's, Andrew Tither, also a citizen and dyer of London. With the mention of the cloth room and no mention of a dyehouse it is possible that he was not actively dyeing, rather was selling cloth as a draper. Jackson owned two thirds of the partnership.



Left: Location of the Dyers' Hall or the Three Stars

In 1562 this map, known as the A.G.A.S. map of London, was drawn. The tower marked M shows the church of Allhallows the Less and the neighbouring tower V is Allhallows the Great. We can only guess which structure bordering the river represents the gallery of the Dyers' property 'at the waterside'. The editors have placed the Hall, with a question mark, south of Thames Street in the middle of the block of houses. But from later records we know that it reached down to the Thames so the suggested location can certainly be regarded as provisional. What is certain is that the map, being a woodcut, does not capture the jumble of the rookeries that was the parish of Allhallows the Less.

the water dock' (Bell). Here the Tallow Chandlers had a fine Hall, formerly belonging to a merchant prince while the Skinners owned the ancient Copped Hall. Each of these had shops facing onto the street and the area was altogether more salubrious than the riverside.

The Dyers also owned a historic property, the former Jesus Commons. It had this interesting name because the City had tried to mitigate the effects of the closure of monastic houses by providing a secure home for the former occupants of religious institutions. Described as a College of Priests in its former glory it was 'a House well furnished with brass napery and plate etc besides a library well stored with books. All of which were of old time given to a number of priests that should keep commons there; as one left this place (by Death or otherwise) another should be admitted to his room'.

Probably it had served its purpose by 1587 when it was acquired by the Company and later it was divided into dwellings. Part of the site had been leased out on terms of around 27 years to a Merchant Taylour and from an indenture of 1646 we learn the property was built round a yard with a well in it. He occupied the west part and leased out the rest of his portion to two widows. He had paid an entry fine of £20 and the rent was £10 plus 'one fatt buck of Season' or £3 at the choice of the Wardens. Each September they had to make this difficult choice!

Clearly the former Jesus Commons was a substantial property as the remainder was leased to various tenants varying in number from three to eight, even if it was smaller than the Halls of the Skinners and Tallow Chandlers.

It was in this pleasant but doomed environment that Pepys met the brother of James Houblon, in future one of his best friends and to be a founding Director of the Bank of England. The Houblons were second generation members of the Company and wealthy Merchants of the Livery. However their fortunes were at this moment in dreadful danger. 'Here I saw Mr Isaccke Houblon, that handsome man – prettily dressed and dirty at his door at Dowgate, receiving some of his brothers things whose houses were on fire; and as he says, have been removed twice already, and he doubts (as it soon proved) that they must be in a little time removed from his house also – which was a sad consideration'. Some people were putting their trust in God and storing their goods in the churches. Perhaps Pepys observed this as he passed one of the churches near Dowgate for he made the remark immediately after writing about Mr Houblon. James Houblon was a trustee of a charity at St Stephen Walbrook, another casualty of the Fire.

Recovery

The Dyers enjoyed other property in the City. During the night they suffered another loss as St Pauls Wharf was destroyed. Before departing to France and his triumph at Agincourt Henry V had confiscated this from a refractory noble. There is no record of how it came into the Company's hands, nor of its destruction. This would have been overlooked given the conflagration caused by the destruction of neighbouring Baynard's Castle, a medieval fortress-like palace west of Blackfriars, and two neighbouring churches.

What a terrifying night! Witnesses struggled to describe 'the splendid horrors of the night', as Bell put it. One witness wrote 'The Fire carried the noise of a whirlwind in it, and was so informed with terror that it surprised the eyes and hearts of men with fear, as well as their houses and goods with

flames'. John Evelyn wrote 'The noise and crackling and thunder of the impetuous flames, the shrieking of the women and children, the hurry of people, the fall of towers, houses, and churches, was like a hideous storm; and the air so hot and inflamed, that at the last one was not able to approach it, so that they were forced to stand still, and let the flames burn on...'

No record of the immediate response of the Dyers to this disaster survives because in 1680 Dyers Hall was again burned down. So the Court Minutes only begin in the aftermath of that disaster. Perhaps the members had become inured to such events because the Minutes phlegmatically record no comment on them. Rather they are looking at what was to be done to recover. Ogilby and Morgan's 1676 map shows that the Hall had been quite extensively rebuilt to include a wharf with access from White Cock Alley (n20) and buildings facing onto Thames Street. No description or lease survives but the tenants, iron importers, attended later meetings and no doubt persuaded the Court to leave it to them to rebuild the Wharf to their own convenience. So after nearly 200 years Dyers Hall ceased to border the Thames. Dyers Hall became Dyers Hall Wharf, a purely commercial asset which members of the Court no longer regularly attended. Equally the Art and Mystery of Dyeing was no longer carried on within its boundaries.

Happily we know more about the rebuilding of the Dowgate Hill site. The Court took the standard form of building lease and retained the separation between two tenants. So in 1669 they leased part to John Sawyer, 'citizen and sadler of London', 'a toft whereupon a tenement was heretofore erected which was lately burned down by the late fire'. The lease was for 60 years and 'for the time being' the rent was £6. Sawyer was 'in twelve months in truly workmanlike manner to erect one strong substantial sufficient handsome and convenient new dwelling house with so many cellars storeys and garrets and built with such brick stone etc and contain such heights scantlings thickness and other dimensions with such pipes gutters set up the arms of the Wardens carved in Portland stone etc etc as mentioned for houses of the second sort to be fronting streets and lanes of note according to the late act for the rebuilding of the City of London'. The lease was to expire in 1729.

In 1671 Adam Taylor, a dyer, leased four remaining tofts 'between the newly erected house of Sawyer on the east, the College of Whittington on the west and Paternoster Lane now commonly called Elbow Lane on the south and Skinners Hall on the north' for 61 years. The Wardens clearly felt that the market was much more promising now as the rent asked for had risen to £50.



Left: 1676 Skinners (C33), Tallowchandlers (C22) and Innholders (C34) Halls and the leaseholds of Sawyer and Taylor.

So future Wardens were relieved of the responsibility of fulfilling the commands of Parliament and the vision of Sir Christopher Wren. The 1676 map shows that by devolving the duty to rebuild to tenants the work was done expeditiously. However there were inconveniences. Perhaps Taylor skimped on the building work as decades later part of his property fell down. Our historian, Judge Daynes, considered the fact that part of Sadler's lease had been sub-let to our neighbours the Skinners was potentially embarrassing; but this was resolved ultimately without rancour. More seriously for the Court and the smooth running of the Company they had no

immediate powers to move into Dowgate after the second fire at Dyers Hall. So the Court was condemned to a peripatetic existence and the goodwill of other Companies. The Great Fire had destroyed the historic home of the Company and introduced a period of uncertainty; happily the Court hopefully supported by the Company's corporate spirit was capable in the long term of resolving the enormous challenges ahead.

*The Court of Orphans was established by the City to ensure that the property of citizens of London was properly administered when they died leaving orphans. Inventories were drawn up and these survive in good condition and cover a period starting just before the Fire and petering out in the early decades of the 1700s. Apprentices on joining a Livery Company paid 2/6d towards the cost of maintaining this service. The inventories, of which about 40 survive for Dyers, make a remarkable record of both the business and the household of the deceased.

Judge Daynes History of the Dyers Company

WG Bell The Great Fire of London

Samuel Pepys' Diary

The A to Z of Elizabethan London

The A to Z of Restoration London

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After the Fire, by Hollar

