building for the future: learning from the past

The Fire
Fire broke out at Thomas Farriner’s bakery in Pudding Lane shortly after midnight on 2nd September, 1666. It raged for the next three days, at the end of which most of the medieval City of London lay in ashes.

The fire consumed 13,200 houses, 87 parish churches, St. Paul’s Cathedral and most of the buildings of the City authorities. It destroyed the homes of almost 90% of the City’s inhabitants. The monetary value of the loss was reckoned to be at least £10,000,000 (over £1,000,000,000 today) although some estimates put the figure at 10 times this amount. The fire is said to have ended the Great Plague that had devastated the population of London the year before, and led to the building of St Paul’s Cathedral, by Sir Christopher Wren. In 1986, 320 years after the event, the Bakers’ Company issued an apology for the fire.

Early Legislation:
Prevention is better than cure
The Great Fire of London made people think and led to the foundations for organised firefighting. The fire led to the first insurance companies and some private, insurance backed fire brigades were established. The first attempt at rudimentary building regulations and control was initiated. King Charles II issued a proclamation in which the walls of all new buildings were to be of brick and stone.

Making buildings safer
In 1666 the narrow streets of London were packed with timbered buildings and wattle-and-daub shelters. It was these structures, and a total lack of fire safety knowledge, that allowed the fire to spread with such alarming speed. Passive Fire Protection (PFP) is about protecting property and saving lives. In the event of a fire it maximises fire containment and the speed and efficiency with which fire can be extinguished. PFP is designed to keep a burning building standing – so the occupants can get out and firefighters can get in.

In 2006 the law changed. All businesses in the UK have to nominate one employee with sole responsibility for all aspects of fire safety. This individual must conduct a thorough risk assessment of the business’s premises – including an appraisal of PFP measures. Business without a relevant and up-to-date assessment may find their insurance is now invalid and are liable for criminal prosecution. Individuals could even face jail.

Passive Fire Protection Federation
To help companies and organisations meet their responsibilities under the new regulations the PFPF has produced this guide (see over) to the main PFP measures illustrating where to find them and what to look for.

1666 - The Great Fire Of London

For an interview with David Sugden, PFPF chairman please call 01453 521621
More information is available – free – from the PFPF website: www.pfpf.org