You Are There!

TIME

London 1666



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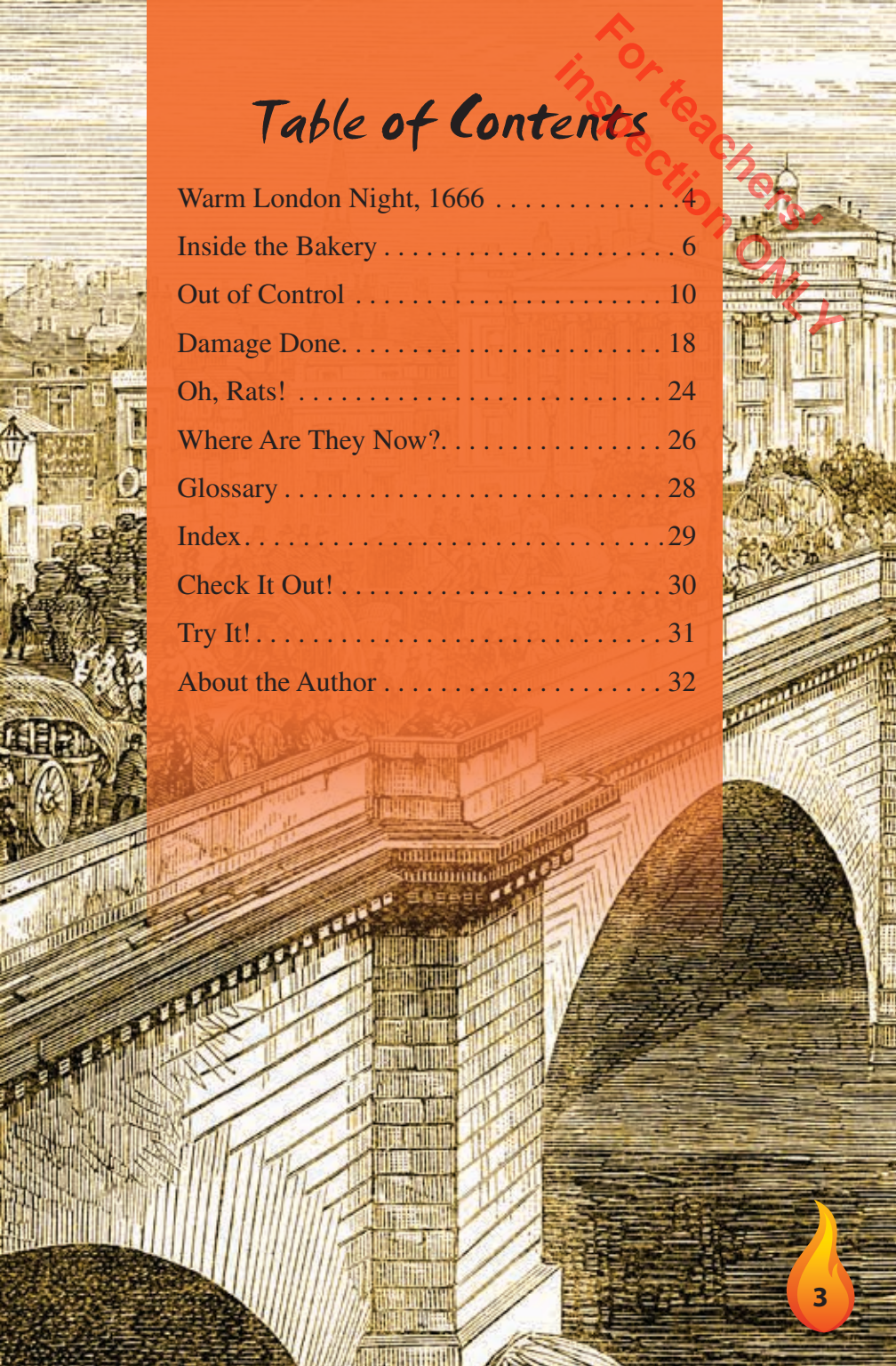
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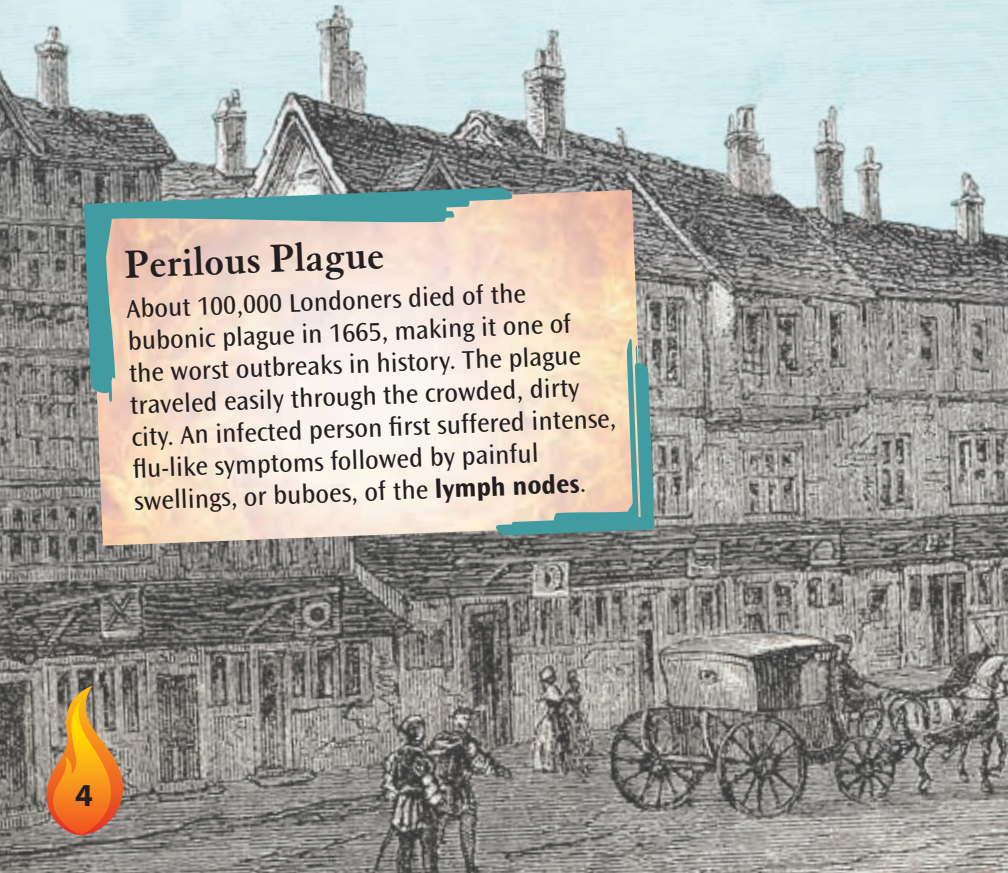
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Warm London Night, 1666

A hot, dry breeze **wafts** the yeasty scent of baking bread down Pudding Lane. Most residents of the city sleep inside the tightly packed homes that line London's narrow, cobbled streets. But in the stifling **byways** on this September night, cats howl, rats scurry, and countless homeless citizens huddle in doorways and alleys. Though their lots in life are challenging, today they are grateful simply to be alive. Twenty percent of London's population has died over the past two years. A deadly and painful **plague** has ravaged the city throughout 1665 and even unto this date—September 2, 1666—a day that history will long remember.



Perilous Plague

About 100,000 Londoners died of the bubonic plague in 1665, making it one of the worst outbreaks in history. The plague traveled easily through the crowded, dirty city. An infected person first suffered intense, flu-like symptoms followed by painful swellings, or buboes, of the **lymph nodes**.

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While the city sleeps, Thomas Farriner's bakery shows signs of life. The staff has mixed, rolled, and baked their wares, preparing for the morning's customers. Customers they will never see. Because on this hot night, no one notices a wayward spark from the oven…until it is too late. And the city burns.

The Facts

The Great Fire of London began at Thomas Farriner's bakery on Pudding Lane, just past midnight on Sunday, September 2. Farriner, a baker for King Charles II, lived upstairs.



Inside the Bakery

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The summer of 1666 had been unseasonably dry and windy. The land was **parched**, and the people felt parched, too. Disease had ravaged them, and they were tired, worn out, and fearful of what may come. The reign of Death—an **indiscriminate** reaper—can do that to people.

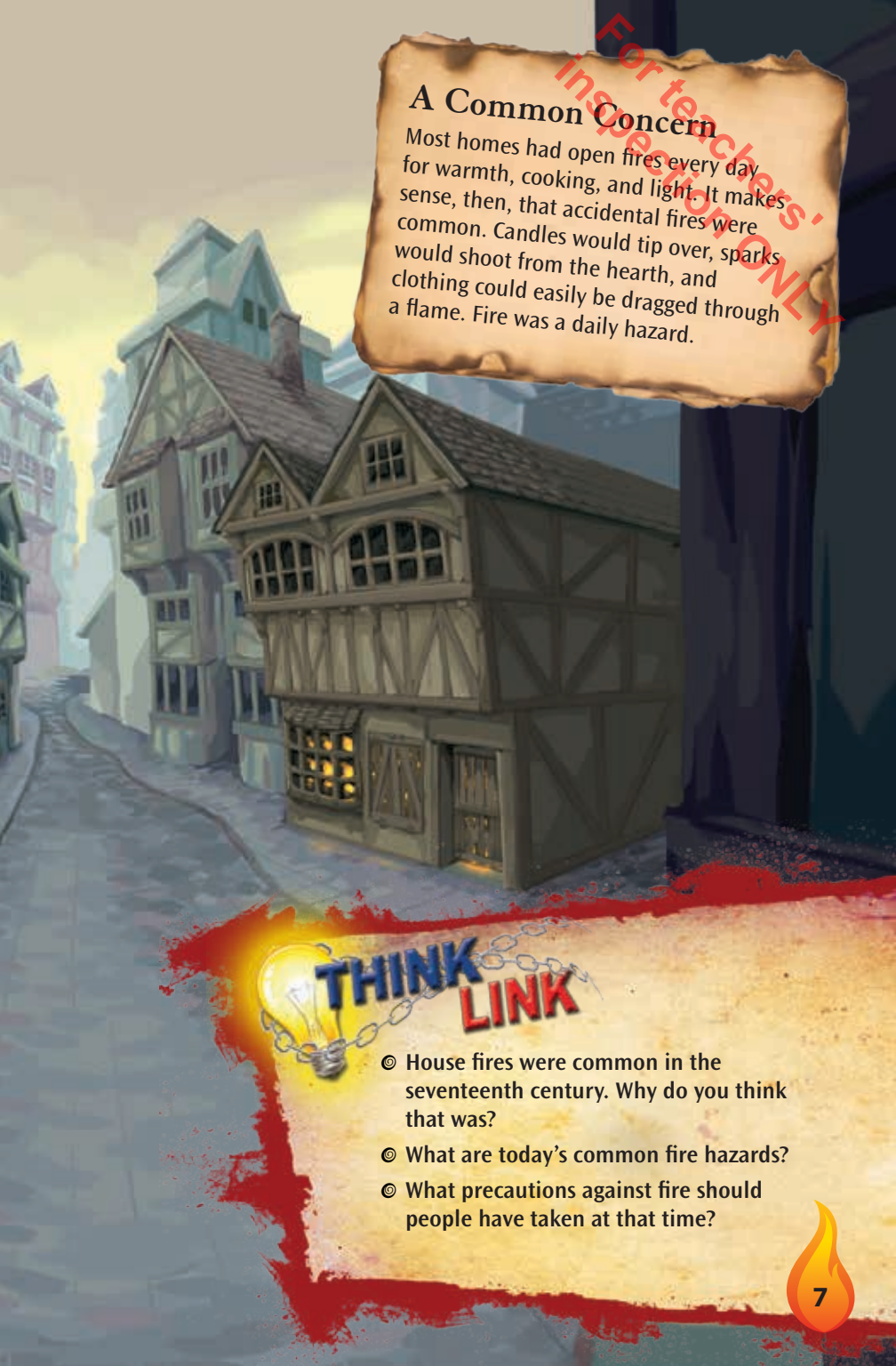
Saturday, September 1, dawned as dry and windy as the many days before it had been. The people felt stifled in the suffocating city streets, where their tightly packed houses fit together like pieces of a patchwork quilt.

Thomas Farriner's bakery was similar in many ways to the warehouses that surrounded it. The wooden buildings were crowded and highly flammable. The timbers themselves were dry as bone from months of parched, dusty weather.

With the right conditions, everything could go up in smoke. As a single chime from the clock tower heralded the hour early Sunday morning, the right conditions had fallen into place.

An Eyewitness Account

"It made me weep to see it," seventeenth century diary writer Samuel Pepys famously wrote of the Great Fire of London. His home was a few blocks from Pudding Lane.



A Common Concern

Most homes had open fires every day for warmth, cooking, and light. It makes sense, then, that accidental fires were common. Candles would tip over, sparks would shoot from the hearth, and clothing could easily be dragged through a flame. Fire was a daily hazard.

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THINK LINK

- House fires were common in the seventeenth century. Why do you think that was?
- What are today's common fire hazards?
- What precautions against fire should people have taken at that time?

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Wake Up!

After raking coals from the ovens and—they thought—**extinguishing** the embers, the baker and his staff retired for the night. Unaware of the troubles sparking below, Farriner and his family slept soundly upstairs. But downstairs, a manservant was startled awake. The air was thick and clouded, and what was that he smelled? Smoke! It filled the bakery. The servant lunged from his bed, calling out to a sleeping chambermaid, warning her to awake. Disoriented and fearful, he rushed upstairs to rescue the family. Whether exhausted from the day's work or affected by the **engulfing** smoke, the family members were difficult to rally as precious moments ticked away. By the time they were up, the spark had **ignited**, hungry flames devoured the bakery, and all possible escape routes seemed severed.

But what about the maid? Perhaps she was blinded by smoke, blocked by fire, or immobilized by fear. She never left the bakery and died in the consuming flames. History does not remember her name—the first **casualty** of the great fire.

The family was more fortunate. Someone suggested using an upstairs window, and they escaped directly into a neighbor's bedchamber. From there, they crawled along the neighbor's roof to safety. Although Hannah, Farriner's eldest daughter, was badly burned, all members of the family and their manservant survived.

Sizzling!

A piece of pottery that melted in the fire on Pudding Lane is on display at the Museum of London. Tests on the pottery show that the fire's heat reached an intense 3,092°F (1,700°C).

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Who Did It?

Robert Hubert, a Frenchman, confessed to being a spy and starting the fire. He was hanged for the crime. He said he threw a fireball through a bakery window. But it turns out he couldn't have done it. The bakery had no windows, and Hubert wasn't even in London at the time!



Reader's Guide

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1. Who is to blame for the Great Fire of London?
2. Were the practices used to rebuild London the best, most efficient ones?
3. What might you have done if you were present during the Great Fire of London?
4. The government was very involved in the rebuilding of London. Compare this to government involvement in the aftermath of any modern disaster you know about.

