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 **Handout 38d:** ‘**Why did the Great Fire of London get out of control and destroy so much of London?**’

House fires in 17th century London were an everyday occurrence and yet one such fire destroyed so much of London that it has become known as the Great Fire of London. Perhaps the explanation for why this particular fire got out of control is that such destruction was inevitable, given the way London was built, and was just waiting for the right weather conditions to happen.

A key long-term cause of the fire was that in 1666, London was a mass of narrow streets lined by closely packed wooden houses heated by fire. In such circumstances, it was inevitable that fire would often break out and, when it did, it would spread rapidly from house to house.

Because firefighting equipment was not very effective, the main method of preventing the fires from getting out of control was demolishing neighbouring buildings to prevent the fire from taking hold. Such preventative action could, perhaps, have limited the fire to a few buildings but the mayor rejected such action, allegedly saying, ‘Pish, a woman might piss it out!’ One probable explanation for what, in hindsight, appears to be serious human error, is the fact that the authorities would have to recompense property owners whose buildings were demolished and so the powers that be were often reluctant to select this solution. This contributed to the conditions for the Great Fire.

However, it would appear that the weather was the deciding factor. Unfortunately, when the fire broke out, the wind was very strong, so it rapidly spread from street to street with the wind fanning the flames. To make matters worse, there had been much less rainfall than usual that year so water levels were low, which made accessing water to douse the flames more difficult. Significantly, the fire was not extinguished until the wind subsided some two days later.

In conclusion, it would appear that at some point it was inevitable that London would burn to the ground because of the closeness of the wooden houses. Human error alone, although a contributory factor, is not liable to be the main cause, as it is reasonable to assume that the officials behaved similarly when other fires occurred. There is, however, much evidence to suggest that it was the strong wind that happened to be blowing at that time that was the deciding factor.