



## Sir Christopher Wren and the Churches of London

Sir Christopher Wren would have described himself as a philosopher, a lover of knowledge. Christopher was born in 1632 in the bucolic countryside of Wiltshire, England. The son of Doctor Christopher Wren, the rector of East Knoyle, he was described as a 'sickly child', nonetheless he lived, in robust health, to the age of 91; no small achievement in those times. A rector was an excellent position, it gave a stipend which usually allowed the family to live comfortably, and it also gave plenty of spare time in which to follow other pursuits, Thomas Burnet in geology, Priestley with oxygen, and Charles Darwin are all good examples. When young Christopher was three his father was appointed the Dean of Windsor, the Royal Residence, and the family split their time between the Court and East Knoyle. There is an apocryphal tale that Christopher and the son of King Charles I grew up as play-fellows, this seems unlikely given the disparity in rank and his sporadic residence.

A private tutor was hired and the young lad became fluent in Latin and an adept draughtsman, a talent which he would put to good use later in life. In June 1650 Christopher went up to Wadham College, Oxford; a peculiarity of English speech that is still in use today describes the journey to London as 'going up', no matter what part of the country you are travelling from *unless* you are coming from Cambridge or Oxford, in which case you go down to London; hence the phrase 'to be sent down' as a euphemism for being expelled. He attended college as a 'Gentleman Commoner', an appellation particular to Oxford describing someone who was of the gentry yet without a title.

College life in those days was considerably different, an early form of social networking, the majority of students whiled away their time with raucous parties (not so different, I suppose), but the curriculum was far less rigid comprising mainly of Latin, a smattering of Greek and whatever other subjects took the student's fancy. The quality of the education was entirely dependent on what professors were available. The warden at Wadham was John Wilkins, a member of a group of academics who would later go on to

form the core of the Royal Society, England's pre-eminent scientific body which would include every great thinker from Boyle and Newton to Priestley and Cavendish. Receiving a B.A. in 1651 and an M.A. 2 years later, Christopher was promptly elected a fellow of All Souls College. He devoted his time to research and experiment and was appointed Professor of Astronomy at Gresham College, in London in 1657. Part of his appointment consisted of weekly lectures '*to all who may be interested*' in Latin and English, presumably to keep out the hoi polloi. It was from these lectures that the Royal Society was formed, for the '*promotion of natural knowledge*'. A fairly eclectic mind led him to study mechanics, optics, medicine, surveying and microscopy as well as astronomy and cosmology.

In 1663 the Bishop of Ely, who happened to be his uncle so nepotism must be presumed, asked Christopher to design the chapel for Pembroke College, Cambridge quite an achievement considering the rivalry between the two universities. His interest in architecture had sprung, quite naturally, from his interests in mechanics, physics and surveying, but the contract, as well as the subsequent design of the Sheldonian Theatre in Oxford, did place him in an advantageous position to benefit from the defining event of his life, the Great Fire of London. The theatre had got under way in 1664, a large, two-story, hexadecagon, slightly domed and topped by an octagonal 'lantern', it is believed to be inspired by Brunelleschi's wonderful cathedral dome in Florence as well as the classical Theatre of Marcellus in Rome, and was a landmark even while under construction. The Great Fire had destroyed 80% of the City of London, pretty much the area enclosed by the gates. The population had long since spilled over the walls, by this date Westminster and London were connected, so it is important to note that only the 'square mile' that constituted the heart of the city was destroyed. In fact, he all ready had his eye on St. Paul's Cathedral in London, he made a trip to Paris in 1665 expressly to study the architecture (he also avoided the plague, which was ravaging London that year) and made his first design for a replacement a week before the fire. Conspiracy theorists may consider the timing a little coincidental, but there has never been any real suspicion attached to the events.

Immediately after the fire he applied to rebuild the city but, probably due to his inexperience, was appointed King's Surveyor of Works in 1669, a post which at least allowed him to oversee the rebuilding, a bit like a government regulator may today. He did go a little beyond overseeing however, he was responsible for the design of 51 new and replacement churches including St. Paul's. The final design was actually the fifth and incorporated a basically Gothic interior, although the walls were made very thick to avoid the need for flying buttresses, surmounted by a dome to equal that of St. Peters in Rome. The model alone cost the equivalent of \$50,000 and can still be viewed. The cathedral was completed on Wren's 76<sup>th</sup> birthday, 20<sup>th</sup> October, 1708 and the Bishop of London delivered the first sermon, opening with "I was glad when they said unto me: 'Let us go into the house of the Lord.'" After 42 years I'm sure he was.



In addition to the 50 churches destroyed by the fire (in fact there were 87 burned down) Wren also rebuilt a number of others, such as St. Clement Danes. The styles he employed ran the gamut of Classical,

Gothic (the majority), 'modern' Empirical and even a basilica or two. St. Olave's in Old Jewry is shaped like a wine bottle on it's side. St. Peter upon Cornhill is a curious hybrid with a tower, topped by a dome, topped by a spire, topped by a 10 foot high key of St. Peter. An observant vicar in the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw that the designs for an adjacent new building encroached a foot onto the church's domain. After winning a lawsuit he had 3 terracotta devils mounted on the wall facing Cornhill, presumably to ward off any further attempts.

Any visitor to London will be well rewarded by a tour of some of these architectural gems, their diversity and the way they blend into the environment is well worth the time and effort. Wren became Sir Christopher in 1673 and continued to study a wide range of scientific fields including mathematics, he determined that the hyperboloid of revolution is a ruled surface, optics and mechanics, especially elastic collisions and pendulum motions. After the death of King Charles II, the new monarch, James II, commissioned Wren to work on Hampton Court, Kensington Palace, the Chelsea Hospital and his last great work, the Greenwich Hospital and Royal Observatory, immortalized by the adoption of Greenwich Mean Time. He also designed the Monument to the Great Fire, a fluted, hollow, Doric column, exactly 202 feet high, the distance to the baker's shop in Pudding Lane where the fire began. The central shaft was designed as a zenith telescope and visitors can still trudge to the top via steps exactly 6 inches in height to facilitate barometric pressure readings.



Sir Christopher Wren lived to the ripe old age of 90, actively pursuing knowledge to the end and, in many ways, defining the age in which he lived. His influence and contributions to science are enormous, the Capitol in Washington, D.C. is based on his work as is the Pantheon in Paris, while London's architectural character owes a great deal to him. His epitaph, in the cathedral he considered his masterpiece, finishes with the phrase, '*Reader, if you seek his memorial - look around you.*'

Sources: *St Paul's Cathedral: Sir Christopher Wren*, Vaughan Hart, ([ISBN 0714829986](#) paperback)  
C. Wren, *Parentalia, or, Memoirs of the family of the Wrens*(1750)  
Tinniswood, Adrian, *His Invention so Fertile: The Life of Christopher Wren*, (Oxford University Press, 2001)

Published by David Green, May 11, 2009