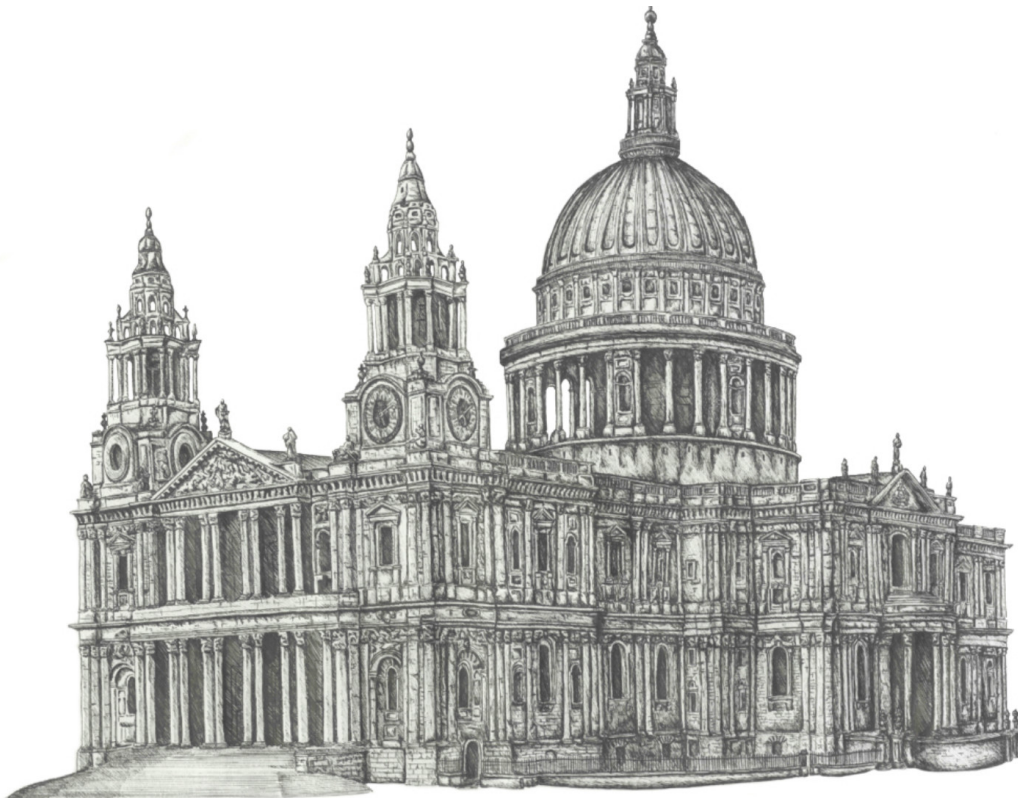


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# The Archaeology of St Paul's Cathedral Transcript

Date: Monday, 27 October 2014 - 1:00PM

Location: Museum of London



27 October 2014

## **The Archaeology of St Paul's Cathedral**

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The subject of this lecture is archaeological excavations and observations beneath, around and within the fabric of the present cathedral in the period 1969 to 2006. These are put in context by a narrative which outlines the archaeological history of the site from Roman times to about 1900. The observations go back to the time of Wren. In the time available for this talk, I will cover the history of the cathedral and its site up to the Great Fire of London in 1666, with a short look at recording of the Wren building of 1675-1711.

No certain evidence of the Anglo-Saxon cathedral has yet been identified, though a foundation of Anglo-Saxon or at latest 11th-century character found in a testpit on the north-west side of the cathedral in 1932 is significant: it suggests that where pockets of stratigraphy survive, they may include Saxon layers and features. But otherwise the Anglo-Saxon cathedral and its ancillary buildings remain unknown. One potential site for the Anglo-Saxon church, beneath the nave of its Romanesque successor, is suggested; but there is no firm evidence and other sites are equally possible. The significance of the famous Anglo-Scandinavian grave-marker in Ringerike style can now be reassessed and evidence of its reuse in a medieval building somewhere in the churchyard described. Other pieces of grave furniture of the 10th and 11th centuries are catalogued, two for the first time.

The cathedral was rebuilt into its gigantic medieval form from 1087. The form of the eastern arm and transepts of the Romanesque cathedral were suggested by Richard Gem in 1990, and their significance hinted at, though not much could be said as the information was so exiguous. The London region was where a fully-developed style of Romanesque architecture might be expected before the Norman Conquest, and the rebuilding of the cathedral from 1087 would fit into this context. The presbytery of four bays and underlying crypt place St Paul's alongside the major church projects at Winchester and Bury St Edmunds; its long nave also suggests that its building was intended to rival or stand as an equal to Winchester. Its nave elevation may have derived from St-Etienne in Caen. The analysis of moulded stones (architectural fragments) from the recent excavations, probably from the nave, has filled out this picture and identified one main building stone as from Taynton in Oxfordshire. The plotting of the outline of the whole church, from all the evidence, has suggested the size and arrangement of the building for the first time since the work of the cathedral Surevivor Francis Penrose in the 1870s.

As we progress through the succession of cathedrals on the site, the information increases and our understanding of the building and therefore its architectural and historical significance become clearer. The main construction periods of the medieval cathedral are the rebuilding of transepts and tower in the first half of the 13th century, the extension of the choir called the New Work in 1269-1314, and the chapter house and cloister of 1332 south of the nave. The New Work was presumably intended to provide an enlarged, spacious setting for the shrine of Erkenwald; a similar extension for the patron saint had just been finished at Ely in 1252. The architecture was similar in scale and character to contemporary parts of other great English churches which have survived, particularly Lincoln, Lichfield, St Albans and York; but there are also elements which suggest precedents in France, especially the window tracery and the large rose window in the choir gable. From 1270 to the 1290s, St Paul's was the greatest architectural undertaking in the London area, surpassing even the works at Westminster Abbey. The buildings attached to the medieval cathedral can be described as far as archaeological observation can contribute, and their outlines tied down on the modern map as far as is possible.

At the Reformation in the 1530s the cathedral suffered, like all other great churches. Its fabric was despoiled and neglected; in 1561 the spire caught fire and was afterwards demolished. During the Elizabethan and Jacobean decades, however, the choir of the cathedral became the site of prestigious, assertive tombs of courtiers and high-ranking officials. This collection of post-Reformation monuments is second only to those which survive in Westminster Abbey.

A major new element in our understanding of the development of the pre-Fire cathedral comprises the recovery and analysis of fragments of the Jones portico and other fragments from his restoration of the church in 1633-41. The majority of these fragments come from excavation of 1994-6, but now others in the historic collection, in the south triforium of the present building, can be recognised as also being from Jones's works. The portico can be reconstructed from fragments, and a detailed picture of his whole restoration is emerging from the

conjunction of archaeological and documentary study. Apart from the work of Jones, however, the immediately post-Reformation period is little known, right up to the Great Fire of 1666.

A large archaeological report on all the above appeared in 2011: *ST PAUL'S CATHEDRAL BEFORE WREN* by John Schofield, published by English Heritage. I am now working on the second, successor volume which will be about the archaeology of the Wren building, from 1711 up to the present. Here is a summary, from which I will give some highlights in the lecture.

The first part of this biography of the Wren building is a detailed account of the construction of the cathedral which started in 1675. The progress of building, which was officially declared finished in 1711, can be followed by a detailed comparison of the fabric with voluminous building accounts which have survived. Separate parts of the building, the crypt and vaulting above the choir, nave and aisles, the roofs, ironwork and statues can all be assigned to named masons, craftsmen and artists.

Though faced in Portland stone, the walls of St Paul's contain probably thousands of carved and occasionally painted pieces of stonework from the medieval cathedral and its monuments. Excavation for the Wren crypt or basement, under all four arms of the new church, required the removal of much of the pre-Fire cathedral, but small parts of the latter survive outside the Wren footprint, underground. Wren's foundations are described, largely from test pits of 1932. There may have been an emphasis on the east end, with carefully layered foundations, but they were quickly superseded by more practical foundations made largely of stones from the previous building. The construction of the Wren building and its embellishments, including carved work above the main windows, recently cleaned, and the panels below the windows by Grinling Gibbons are then described.

Wren's site office, housed in the refurbished octagonal medieval chapter-house and its surrounding square cloister on two floors, can now be reconstructed in outline, from 1671 until its demise after 1700. This is from study of the documentary records and pieces of masonry in the ground south of the present nave. Here Wren's Clerk of Works for the majority of the project, Laurence Spencer, worked, and nearby in the crypt of the new south transept, first Spencer's wife and then Spencer himself and his son, also briefly Clerk of Works, were buried. Their graves were excavated and the gravestones moved in 2006.

Eighteenth-century surveyors were concerned about the settlement of the south transept, and Robert Mylne inserted metal bracing in the 1780s. He also made arrangements for the funeral of Admiral Nelson in 1806, which required a hole to be dug in the middle of the dome floor, through Wren's design, so that the coffin could be theatrically lowered into the crypt.

The most important surveyor after Wren, the one who did most to change the cathedral and its setting, was Francis Penrose, Surveyor from 1852 to 1897. His significant work is reviewed here. He removed the choir screen and divided the organ; moved the choir stalls; cleaned the interior; inserted heating and lighting; radically changed the configuration of the Wren railings by lowering them and removing the section of railings round the west end, replacing them with the present row of bollards; and landscaped all the churchyard around the building, by bringing many gravestones from the north-east churchyard into the crypt, afterwards installing a fountain in that part of the churchyard; inserting a new gate to Cheapside; and finding and partly exposing fragments of the medieval cathedral and its cloister. Hardly any part of the cathedral or its immediate setting was left untouched by Penrose; only the roofspaces and the western part of the crypt remained in their 18th-century form.

The 20th century also brought changes and conservation projects. In the first three decades the cathedral was reinforced by several campaigns of metal braces and grouting of pillars, notably the 'Great Restoration' of the crossing and dome under Mervyn Macartney in 1925-30. The building was hit by two bombs in World War II, and all its windows blown out. The Wren Chapter house was gutted, and the area around devastated in the Blitz of 1940. Plans for the area after the War would have radically changed the setting, but apart from the construction of Corbusian blocks at Paternoster Square immediately to the north, little of the proposals took effect. One road, New Change, was laid out alongside the east end of the cathedral, but other roads remained on their pre-War alignments, some of medieval origin.

During the 1990s and first years of the present century, the west half of the crypt was brought into more and successful use as a public space. The refurbishment of the south-west part of the crypt required the digging of a tunnel through the foundation of the south-west tower, and this produced many architectural fragments reused as rubble, not only from the medieval building but from Inigo Jones's west portico of 1635-42, which had stood nearby after the Fire until it was demolished in 1687-8 to make room for these foundations and to provide some of the rubble for them. The south-west churchyard was landscaped to enhance disabled access to the building in 2004-6, and the fragments of medieval cloister found by Penrose briefly re-exposed then backfilled to allow their plan to be reproduced in new stone above them. A simultaneous cleaning of the exterior allowed examination of the carved decoration of the building, including the work of Gibbons in stone to match his masterpieces in wood inside the building.

Certain themes have come out of this study of the Wren building. It is clear that Francis Penrose, in the second half of the 19th century, made the cathedral far more accessible than before, introduced light and heat, and created the public space in the north-east churchyard. Second, from around the time of the burial of Nelson in 1806, the cathedral became even more than before the nation's church and the central church of the British Empire.

Two overall conclusions can be drawn from this work and the two reports. First, although the Wren building was itself destructive of traces of the previous cathedrals throughout its footprint and possibly for some distance outside in certain directions, a great deal survives beneath the ground and it has the capacity to elucidate, as no other source can, the early history of the cathedral and its site. Second, it may be suggested that St Paul's Churchyard, a rectangular block of land and strata in the western part of the City, comprises probably the best and most significant remaining block of strata for the understanding of the evolution of the City of London through 2000 years. We know the Wren building very well; now we can begin to understand the medieval cathedral in detail. In time, understanding and appreciation will reach the Anglo-Saxon cathedral and by examination of the Roman topography will suggest why St Paul's is where it is.

Wren's St Paul's Cathedral still holds many clues about its own history and about the history of the previous cathedrals on this site, in its standing fabric and in the strata of the Churchyard around it. It is the most important historic building in the City of London.