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**Sir Christopher Wren:   
Buildings, Place and Genius**

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Good evening, Ladies and Gentlemen – it is very good to see you all here. This evening, I am talking about Sir Christopher Wren. I am not actually going to try this experiment on you all this evening, but I think if most people were stopped in the street and were asked to name a famous architect, they would say Sir Christopher Wren. This man, who lived over 300 years ago, has somehow captured the imagination, not only as the archetypal architect, but as England’s greatest and most successful architect, and I wonder how many of the so-called starchitects who are around today will be mentioned in the streets of London in three centuries’ time. Wren has basically grabbed the top slot and I actually do not think that anyone is ever going to budge him off it.

But what is it that Christopher Wren’s reputation actually rests on? Well, I am afraid to say it is essentially upon one building – St Paul’s Cathedral. I think many people, I even daresay most people, would struggle to name another building that was actually designed by him. Now, again, I am not going to do this on anyone tonight, I am not suddenly going to point to somebody, but I think most people would have to think quite hard to list five buildings designed by Christopher Wren. Just think in your own mind… I may be wrong – do you think you could do that? But even if you could name five buildings, and clearly, many of you think you can, I am sure that most of you would start with St Paul’s Cathedral.

St Paul’s Cathedral is in fact a really rather unusual building. As a cathedral, it is unique. Unlike all the other English cathedrals, it is named after its dedication rather than the city that it is in. It is just known as St Paul’s. It is not known as London Cathedral. But of course, this Cathedral is not just any old seat of a bishop because, when it was built, it was designed for a series of very specific purposes. It was designed to be the theatre of monarchy. It was designed to be the social nexus of the population of the city. It was designed to be the symbol of the commercial virility of the city. And only fourthly, and I would suggest lastly, was it the cathedral of the capital, and this is why monarchs through time had such concern for its fabric and why, after the spire of Old St Paul’s was destroyed by an Elizabethan bolt of lightning, both Elizabeth I and James I made great efforts to re-build it. But in the end, frustrated by a lack of progress, Charles I actually nationalised the work to the Cathedral and appointed his own architect, Inigo Jones, to re-clad the Cathedral and build the colossal portico which you see in this print, which was crowned by royal statues and royal slogans. The portico was in court taste and expressed the aspirations of the Crown rather than the aspirations of the Church.

This royal patching-up was, of course, all swept away by the Great Fire. In 1666, everyone hoped that the Cathedral, or at least bits of it, might be able to be saved, but it soon became very apparent that the damage had been too much. There were three almost irreconcilable tensions that had to be resolved in the new design: first were the ambitions of the City, the aldermen, the mayor and the merchants; then there were the ambitions of the Crown; and finally, and again I would suggest perhaps third, were the ambitions of the Church.

Wren’s preferred solution, as you probably all know, was for a centralised plan based on a Greek cross, so a centralised plan, but of course, liturgically, this was ruled out by the Dean and Chapter and, like its predecessor, the new Cathedral rose as a Latin cross, as a Roman cross.

Wren and his craftsmen were under huge pressure to build, and because work was pushed forward so quickly, he was forced to resolve the details of the building as it rose. The dome was not finalised until 1697 and the west towers were not finalised until 1704. So, in this way, the design of the Cathedral as it rose was a sort of scientific experiment in itself. Wren modified the details and the elements as he went along, until he achieved the desired effect.

I think that the Cathedral reveals Wren’s strengths, and also his limitations, as a designer. As you leave the Museum tonight, you might want to walk past it and have a look at the elevations of the flank walls because, actually, when you look at them, close to, the elevations are very busy, they are very fussy, they are overcrowded. You can see Wren adding a little bit here and a little bit there, trying to make the great bulk of these side walls that were very plain look a little bit more interesting. It was almost as if he could not leave the design alone. It looks, when you look at his drawings that he kept on going back, adding a little bit more here and a little bit more there. You can see it, to a degree, layer upon layer of it, on the side walls.

As for the dome, if you look at it closely, it is disconnected from the bulk of the building below. It almost seems, when you look at it, as if belongs to another building. Now, it has to be admitted that putting domes on rectilinear buildings is aesthetically a very difficult thing to do, which is of course why he wanted to build a Greek cross at first because a dome is much easier to sit on a centralised plan than on a rectilinear one. Now, of course Michelangelo had demonstrated this in St Peter’s in Rome, with a centralised plan, with the Greek cross, with the great dome that was designed to sit over the top of it.

But Wren was not the only architect to find that putting a dome on a rectilinear building was a very difficult thing to do. These are the designs through which St Peter’s passed, eventually ending up with a building where the dome, again, does not really relate to the building underneath it, and the façade of St Peter’s has been hugely criticised by historians for really failing to reconcile all the individual elements together.

One of the very few – and I really think there are very few successful junctions of a dome and the body of a Latin cross church – was of course built a century earlier by Brunelleschi in Florence. You can see the dome as an organic part of the Cathedral because what he successfully did was linked the clerestory level of the Cathedral with the dome, so the dome seems to be growing out of the architecture of the building. You can see the clerestory level, and the dome just naturally coming out of it.

But, Wren could not do this. He could not copy what had happened here because his Cathedral was vastly larger and the clerestory walls in Wren’s Cathedral were more than twice the height of those in Florence, and so, as in a medieval gothic cathedral, he needed to build flying buttresses to support the clerestory walls, and that is in fact what he has done. Here, you can see St Paul’s. Here is the dome rising up, here is the clerestory level, and here are Wren’s flying buttresses, supporting the very, very high walls either side.

Of course, it was completely impossible, with a classical building, for the flying buttresses to remain visible, and so they were hidden by huge screen walls that prevented people from seeing that, actually, the Cathedral was constructed like its gothic predecessor. Here, you see one of Wren’s own drawings or one of the ones from his office, you can see the wall of the clerestory, you can see the flying buttress, and you can see the screen wall on the outside, with all that busy decoration which was there to hide them.

But what the screens also did was increase the size and bulk and impact of the Cathedral. So, let us look at it from the top. Here, you can see the nave, you can see the actual width of the clerestory at the top, and you can see the big screens that are hiding behind the flying buttresses but also creating this sense of bulk, which disconnected, in the end, the dome from the rest of the building.

So, the Cathedral was designed to dominate, and in many ways, these screens, although they made it more difficult to reconcile aesthetically the dome and the rest of the building, did actually allow it to rise above the houses of the city, showing the wealth and discernment of the metropolis, and I will come back to this point right at the end.

The fact is, ladies and gentlemen, that Wren was at his best when he worked on a big canvas. The Cathedral electrified the horizontal 17th Century skyline of the City of London. It had always been conceived in terms of his other great commission in the City, the rebuilding of the City parish churches. Now, of course, it is very easy to compartmentalise people’s lives at such a chronological distance that we are, but of course the fact is that St Paul’s was not some sort of standalone project, it was on the drawing board at exactly the same time as the City parish churches.

The Fire of London had rendered 87 of the City’s 107 churches unusable. Extraordinary, is it not? 107 churches in the Square Mile. It was agreed that 51 of these burnt churches should be rebuilt and of financed by the coal tax.

This was an extraordinary commission, the likes of which had never been seen before in England. Wren was appointed to preside, and he was assisted by the architect, Robert Hooke, and the Surveyor of Westminster Abbey, Edward Woodroofe. Later on in the project, three of Wren’s colleagues from the Office of Works, Nicholas Hawksmoor, William Dickinson and John Oliver, were recruited to join this team, and together, this gang of architects and designers, the most talented architectural designers in England, worked like a modern architect’s office. Wren presided over the whole thing, he set the parameters, but the design work was shared out between the various hands – I mean, it had to be, it was so enormous.

We have to remember that, in the 16th Century, the reformed church in England had taken a completely different direction to the churches elsewhere in Europe. In fact, the body that became known as the Anglican Church often saw itself as offering a more authentic Catholicism than even that of Rome itself. In 1660, the House of Commons successful re-established the Anglican Church under the bishops as a state-controlled monopoly. Legislation made holding public office entirely dependent upon taking Anglican communion, the so-called Test Acts, and the Act of Uniformity required clergy to subscribe to the 39 Articles. So, you see, the Church was strongly controlled by Parliament, and how these new parish churches in the City were going to be rebuilt was completely determined by the legislation that had established the Doctrine of the Church of England. The overriding liturgical concern with these churches was the audibility and the visibility of the preacher. The need to have clear lines of sight meant that obstructions such as pillars were not favoured and large undivided spaces were the goal.

There was a model of such a church that Wren and his team could look for. It was built before the Fire. This of course was Inigo Jones’ St Paul’s Covent Garden, the first new church in London before the reign of Queen Elizabeth, and this had to grapple with the issue of a new type of space for the Anglican tradition. It was, basically – many of you will have been into it – a single room, and its pulpit was the single most expensive fitting.

So, the City churches took this as their model. Many of them were built very quickly and very cheaply, in the context of an extreme shortage of building materials. Wren took a very pragmatic approach, treating each church, its site, its surviving walls, and the preferences of the individual church wardens distinctively. There was no stylistic dogma. Every style known to man was applied to these churches – not quite, but virtually. Each church was composed using a mix of gothic and classical elements, drawing on native traditions. As they were almost all built on cramped sites, such as at St Stephen’s Walbrook, the churches were really designed to be appreciated from the inside. Externally, they were plain, and generally, they had a single show front, just one bit where the money was put to show off.

Their greatest architectural expression was their towers and their steeples. Here is St Mary-le-Bow in an old print, and I use an old print rather than a modern photograph because this makes a very important point, and that is that these towers, each one of which was deliberately designed to look different, were towering over the rooflines of the houses that were built after the Fire, all of which, by regulation, had to be of a uniform height, and this way of having individual designs for each of these churches I think was Wren’s great achievement because what he left to London were not individual buildings of genius, but some of them clearly are great buildings, but what he left London was a new landscape.

This print here shows how the churches – and this painting will show it better – and the Cathedral together went to create this extraordinary skyline for London. This view, and this is just one of many, many prints and paintings that were done through the 17th Century and the 18th Century and into the early-19th Century, it was the single most remarked upon feature of the City of London, the skyline, and people were astounded by its beauty, its variety and its picturesqueness.

Now, I am not out to do a hatchet job on Christopher Wren, saying he is not a great architect, because of course he was and I am a great fan of his, but I wanted to start by suggesting that his most famous buildings in the City are, if you look at them as individual pieces of architecture, quite flawed. If you understand and appreciate the achievement of the man properly, I think you need to look at the City as a whole because what Wren ended up doing was defining the look of London for two centuries.

But how was it that an Oxford mathematician ended up defining a vision for London for generations and went on to be this extraordinarily famous architect? This I think is a question that has never really been adequately explained, the despite the fact that, at the last count, there have been over 100 biographies of him. So, this evening, I am going to suggest that to understand Christopher Wren, we do not have to get behind the mathematics, we do not have to understand the astronomy, we do not have to grasp the engineering, we do not even have to appreciate the architecture, because the most important thing about Sir Christopher Wren was that he was a courtier. This is why, in one of the most turbulent periods in English history, he was able to win the Surveyorship of the King’s Works in 1689 and then remain in office over five reigns, before finally being dismissed in 1718. I cannot think of a single other figure of similar statue who achieved that level of continuity in public service in that period.

So, let us get to grips with the argument that I am putting forward tonight, and to start with, to kick it off, we need to remember that Wren’s father was a clergyman who rose through the ranks to become the Dean of Windsor in 1635. Now, just let me remind you for a moment what this meant…

St George’s Chapel was the most important royal chapel in England. It was sited in the lower ward of Windsor Castle and, of course, it was the home to the Order of the Garter, the premier order of chivalry in England. The Sovereign was the head of the Order, and its members were, of course, the most important and influential people in the realm, plus a sprinkling of the more senior European royalty. Charles I was particularly interested and fond of the Order of the Garter and was very concerned with the minute details of the liturgy that took place in this chapel, and he worked on reforming the liturgy in very close collaboration with Christopher Wren’s father. So, for the first 11 years of his life, the young Christopher was brought up in his father’s country rectory, but much more importantly, in Windsor Castle, in the Deanery here which you see in this photograph. The Dean had quite splendid lodgings. His successor still lives in them. These were the rooms in which Wren had his childhood. But, as the Civil War began, the Wren family were booted out of the Deanery at Windsor by the Parliamentarians, but before we think about what this meant, let us just reflect for a moment on his boyhood at Windsor Castle.

The Wrens were as close in with the royal family as it was possible for non-royals to get. Charles was absolutely determined to drive through ceremonialising reforms in the Anglican Church. Today, we would describe this as requiring worship to be more High Church, but the term that was used then was “ceremonialising”, becoming more ceremonial. Wren’s uncle, Matthew, was a bishop, and he was amongst the most thoroughgoing ceremonialisers in the country. At Windsor, Christopher would have been brought up in an atmosphere for reverence for the King and a very strong awareness of the rich ceremonies in the chapel, and he must have been present at many of the St George’s Day ceremonies.

Now, when the family left Windsor, they retreated to the family’s country parsonage in East Knoyle in Wiltshire. Here is Christopher Senior’s – because his father was also called Christopher – church, and here you see what he did in the chancel. Talk about ceremonialising… I mean, here, you have got this extraordinary decoration on the walls, which was commissioned by Sir Christopher’s father to make the chancel more beautiful, create the beauty of holiness that Charles I and the ceremonialising clergy wanted to create.

The Dean was peripherally involved in the Civil War. He joined the Royal Court on a number of occasions. But he was also busy trying to defend his family interests against the Parliamentarians. He was imprisoned twice, and his family life was terribly disrupted, but not so much that the young Christopher neglected his education. In fact, we know that, by the time he was admitted to Wadham College Oxford, aged 14, he was already a mathematician with an interest in fluid dynamics, engineering, natural science, and many, many more things, and it was not long before Wren had attracted the attention of Dr John Wilkins, who you see here, the Warden of the College, and Dr Seth Ward, who was the Professor of Astronomy there.

Before you think I am leaving my theme, you need to know that John Wilkins was also a courtier. He was a man who was chaplain to Charles Louis, who you see here. Charles Louis was cousin to Charles I and brother to Prince Rupert of the Rhine, so Prince Rupert, Charles Louis and Charles I were a little gang together, and Wilkins was the chaplain to Charles Louis. In fact, Wilkins had been at the court at The Hague with Charles Louis and he had also been a very close friend of Dean Wren’s and a regular visitor at the Deanery in Windsor. In fact, Charles Louis, the King’s cousin, Wilkins, his chaplain and the Dean of Wadham College, and Dean Wren were all very close friends, meeting at Windsor, where they discussed the scientific interests they had in common.

So, Wren’s life during the Commonwealth, ejected from his luxurious surroundings at Windsor Castle, were spent with a small circle of men who were intensely interested in mathematics and science and never far away from the very loyal Royalists. In this group, Wren not only grew in technical competence but he seems to have grown in likeability and charm, and his elders wanted to push him forward as their protégé.

Now, the late and much-missed Lisa Jardine, in her very good biography of Christopher Wren, suggested that, at this point in his life, Wren might have slipped out of England, with Wilkens and Charles Louis, and paid a visit to the exiled Charles II in the Low Countries. Now, I like this theory very much, but there is, unfortunately, no direct evidence to prove it. After reading Lisa’s book, I spent six months looking for evidence to try and prove that this had actually happened, before I gave up the project, feeling rather exhausted, I must say. I actually managed to find the name of the boat on which I think Wren most likely sailed. It was the boat on which Wilkins and Charles Louis actually sailed. I know the names of everyone who sailed on it, apart from four people, and I think Wren was one of those, the teenage Wren was probably one of those. If he was on that boat, he would have gone to meet Charles II, and Charles Louis had, in his baggage, the Great George, that is the great diamond-studded star that Charles I wore that is the badge of the Order of the Garter, that Charles Louis, after the execution of Charles I, presented to Charles II in The Hague. What more natural thing would there have been for the son of the Dean, who Charles II would have known well, to be there on that occasion when that was presented?

Well, I have not given up hope of proving this point because, in Munich, there are the lists of the people, the English, who landed in the Low Countries in the 1650s, and one of these lists may just contain the name of the young Christopher Wren, but for now, this must just remain a strong possibility and not a fact. But the fact that this is even a possibility drives home the point that the Wrens, and now young Christopher Wren, were regarded as inner circle Royalist supporters, and this is the key, ladies and gentlemen, to everything.

When Charles II was restored in 1660, many felt that it was payback time, and hundreds of people who had fought for him or been in his entourage in exile or had been his spies and go-betweens pleaded for salaried posts, and if we look at the people who were successful in getting jobs in the Royal Office of Works – that is the state architects’ office – they were all people who had been loyal during the Interregnum. Some of them had worked for Charles I and then had been deprived of their offices during the Commonwealth. Others who had switched sides under Cromwell were ejected, even though they had originally worked for Charles I. New men who had been loyal to the Royalist cause throughout the Interregnum were inserted in the place of these turncoats. Some were very well-qualified for their positions. For others, their posts were sinecured. So, for instance, Charles II gave the job of Sergeant Painter, a very important job in the Office of Works, to a man called Sir Robert Howard, who was rather a self-seeking Cavalier, who had never touched a paintbrush in his life.

But the most important post went to this man, Sir John Denham, a fiercely loyal Royalist and accomplished poet, who pressed Charles II on the dock at Breda, before Charles had even got into his ship to come back to England, for the post of Surveyor of the King’s Works, Chief Royal Architect, and he was granted it there on the dockside in Breda. He was appointed Surveyor of the Works. He, as I said, was a poet. He was not an architect, and although he administered the Office of Works well, until he died in 1669, he never designed a thing himself. The absolute key to everything, you see, was being a courtier, and if we look at the two architects who were active in the years immediately at the Restoration, we will see just how important being an inner circle Royalist was.

The most accomplished architect in England in 1660 was John Webb. He was the former assistant to Inigo Jones and a considerable practitioner in his own right. By all logic, it should have been him who was made Surveyor in 1660, and he petitioned the King for that, but he was not in this select group of super-loyal Royalists, and although he was given some architectural crumbs by Denham, he never got the official post.

The other very talented architect in 1660 was Hugh May, who you see here with Lely, the painter. He had been in exile with Charles II, he had been at the Battle of Worcester with Charles II, and he was to be given a number of important and lucrative posts, including Paymaster of the Office of Works, and he was given a number of architectural commissions.

So, in this group of designers, who were near Denham’s Office of Works but not actually in it, was Christopher Wren. He was now Professor of Astronomy at Oxford and he was an experimental scientist, and amongst his experiments were architectural ones, and as early as 1661, one year into the Restoration, Charles II offered Wren the Surveyorship of the King’s Works when Sir John Denham there died. Was this in return for his and his family’s loyalty or was it because Charles II had spotted the man’s potential? Remember, at this point, Wren had not built a single building.

Then, in 1664, Wren got two commissions. First, he was invited to design a new ceremonial hall for his University. This, the Sheldonian Theatre, built in 1664-7, was a landmark in English architecture because, here, a University academic, an architectural amateur, solved engineering problems that would have defeated the most seasoned master craftsman. Wren’s extraordinary laminated trusses, roof trusses that sit above this amazing ceiling, spanned a colossal 70 feet, allowing uninterrupted views internally, and this was recognised at the time as a technical marvel.

And then the second commission of 1664… This was the big one. In the first years after the Restoration, despite a widespread feeling that Charles II was going to completely rebuild Whitehall Palace, absolutely nothing happened, mainly because there was no money, but on 28th October 1664, the diarist John Evelyn recorded a remarkable occasion – let us quote from his diary. He was casually in the privy gallery at Whitehall, speaking to the King, who asked whether Evelyn had a crayon and paper. Evelyn presented him with both and then, laying it on the window-stool, “He, with his own hand, designed to me the plot for the future building of Whitehall, together with the rooms of state and other particulars”. There is Charles II, sitting on the window, sketching out his new building to Evelyn. Now, this sketch, sadly, does not survive, and so we do not know what was in it, but we do know that, that very same autumn, Christopher Wren was already helping Charles to design a new palace at Whitehall. This is a plan of Whitehall, taken in Wren’s orders to survey what already existed before he started to make his new proposals.

The fact that Wren was working on a major scheme for the rebuilding of Whitehall with the King in the autumn of 1664 is astonishing, for a man who had only build the Sheldonian Theatre before, and actually the Sheldonian Theatre had only just started – he had only just designed the Sheldonian Theatre, it was not even out of the ground.

And it is partly because Wren was so inexperienced that, in January 1665, he sent him to Paris to see Louis XIV’s Palace of the Louvre as it was rising. It had been designed by Mansart and the famous Italian architect Gian Lorenzo Bernini. You see one of Bernini’s drawings here. But this is more or less what Wren saw, and this trip was an extremely important influence on Wren’s future career. Every day in Paris, when Wren went to the Louvre and closely watched the craftsmen at work, watched their engineering methods, their constructional techniques, he managed to grab an interview with Bernini, and snatch a glimpse of his drawings that I just showed you, and then leaving Paris, he went on a tour of all the most modern houses and palaces in the vicinity, and then went to the bookshops and systematically bought every single architectural book and print that he could lay his hands on. On his return to London, his imagination was filled with everything he had seen and he had boxes and cases of books and notes that were delivered to his office in Scotland Yard.

The Court was still very quickly full of rumours that work would start on the rebuilding of Whitehall, but of course nothing happened because, the very next year, the City of London burnt down and it was impossible for the King to contemplate rebuilding his own palace with the smoking ruins of his capital city just a mile and a half away.

But Wren’s notable success in rebuilding the City and his increasing royal favour were eventually to culminate in his appointment in 1669 as Surveyor of the King’s Works, finally assuming official responsibility as Royal Architect.

So, let me, if I may, summarise my argument so far. I am going to summarise it in 11 words: it is not what you know, it is who you know. Wren, who we might regard as a cold-blooded scientist, was actually an extremely smooth operator. He was a courtier first and foremost. He has been brought up at Court, had probably served Charles II in the Netherlands, and had been surrounded by royalists and aristocratic patrons all his life. The job of Surveyor, for which, at the very least, Hugh May and John Webb were better qualified, went to him because he had impressed the King with his scientific brilliance, but, crucially, because he was in the club. Webb had never been in the club, and despite his howls of protest, had been overlooked a second time – he was overlooked in 1660, and he was then overlooked in 1669. Webb was ignored, and he was retired to the country, where he very soon after – and if I was a romantic novelist, I would say he died of a broken heart, but he did die very soon afterwards. May was also in the royalist club. He did not get the big job, but Charles II recognised him, wrote to him, and said, “Terribly sorry you didn’t get the big job, but I am giving you a pension of £300 a year anyway,” and eventually he was to be given the most important design job of the Restoration – the remodelling of Windsor Castle. So, all the best architectural jobs went to the Royalists.

So, on March 29th 1669, Sir Christopher Wren became the Surveyor of the King’s Works. Now of course, in England, there was no Academy of Architecture, as there was in France. Instead, there was the Office of Works. For major buildings, the Office was the architectural focus of the nation, and for three decades, it was led by Christopher Wren. Wren’s office was at Whitehall, and from there, he did not only manage the royal projects but he oversaw the parish churches, the cathedrals, the royal hospitals, Westminster Abbey, his work in Oxford and Cambridge, as well as miscellaneous private commissions. His office was a mix of medieval and modern. It was part a sort of masons’ lodge, full of craftsmen, but it was also part an architects’ studio. Over 30 years, he employed a large number of assistants to help draw and design details, but he himself took overall responsibility and, most importantly, overall credit for the output. The men who assisted him, both as draughtsmen and master craftsmen, also had their own architectural careers, and in fact, from the 1680s, it was these assistants who did most of the detailed work, providing sketches, and in the end, his office was effectively run by his most brilliant protégé, Nicholas Hawksmoor. But in all this ceaseless activity, 30 years of activity in his drawing office at Whitehall, Wren was the frontman. He was the salesman. He was the man who charmed, amused and dazzled everyone. He alone treated with the royal family and was in their confidence. He alone understood how the King wanted to live, and he designed palaces to suit. Hawksmoor and all the others were in the engine-room and could never have been anywhere else.

Of course, this point leads us to ask the question about where did these buildings come from – did they come from Wren, did they come from his patron, the royal family, or did it come from his assistants?

Well, I just want to turn to one building now, to look very closely at its genesis and just see what it tells us about Wren and the way his buildings were commissioned and the impact they had. This building is not in the City. It is in Chelsea.

One of the things that happened at the Restoration was, for the first time, England had a standing army. Now it may seem strange, but despite the fact it had an army, no one really knew who was in charge of it. George Monck, the Duke of Albemarle, was unquestionably the head of the army in the 1660s, but after he died in 1670, the King took over and signed most of the bills. His brother, the Duke of York, briefly was given the title of Generalissimo in charge of the army, but of course he had to resign all his appointments when he revealed that he was a Roman Catholic. But in fact, the man who eventually was put in charge of the British army was Charles II’s illegitimate son, James Scott, the Duke of Monmouth. At first, he was given what was described as “the care of” rather than the command of the army, but very quickly, it was apparent to everybody that he was in fact the man in charge of it. He was in fact the only person who had spent two seasons campaigning in the Low Countries with Louis XIV and he probably had more recent experience of military action than any senior officer in England.

Monmouth brought to the Army a determination to improve its effectiveness, and he published all sort of rules and regulations, but he became increasingly concerned about the welfare of sick and injured soldiers. Now, he was not the first person to be worried about this because Oliver Cromwell had had a concern about it, but he had really struggled, as he was in a position of command in the Low Countries, to find positions for disabled servicemen, and he, in Paris, had seen the extraordinarily lavish arrangements made by Louis XIV for his army. As he was living in Paris, he saw the masons toiling on the massive walls of Louis XIV’s palatial hospital for injured soldiers, Les Invalides, which you see in plan and perspective here. In fact, if you go there today, in this great hall here, on the wall, there is, one of the great murals in the refectory, a painting of the Duke of Monmouth fighting with Louis XIV at the Siege of Maastricht.

So, back in England, in the mid-1670s, Monmouth raised the issue with Charles II. He said he wanted a comparable British foundation, a royal hospital for wounded soldiers. Monmouth wrote to his friend, Louvois, who was the Minister of War in France, asking him to send, and I quote, “the plan of the Hotel des Invalides, drawn with all the fronts, for the King will be very glad to see it”. Very soon, it was public knowledge that Monmouth was encouraging Charles II to build a great royal hospital. In the end, the money was raised by Monmouth’s financial advisor, Sir Stephen Fox, and on 17th February 1682, Charles II laid the foundation stone of the Royal Hospital at Chelsea, with his son at his side.

Despite Monmouth’s inspiration being French, what Wren built for him in Chelsea in 1682-89 was very, very English. It looks down towards some now-lost water-gardens at the River’s edge, but what you see here is the architecture of post-Fire London. If you look at these elevations, you can see that essentially what he is building for the soldiers is based on the elevations of terraced houses in the City, but of course enlivened every now and again with these great door-cases and pediments.

So, this great building was a building that came directly out of the Court. Wren knew Monmouth extremely well. He had dealings with him probably every week. He designed and built Monmouth’s lodgings at Whitehall Palace, for instance. The Royal Hospital was a personal project of the King’s and his favourite son’s, and it was executed by a man who was intimate with both of them. Of course, this building was Wren’s building, but it was equally the King’s and equally Monmouth’s. Chelsea is about Wren, the courtier, just as much as Wren, the architect.

But as I now close, I just very briefly want to return to the big picture for a moment and to Wren’s trip to Paris because, as I said, on the year after his return, back in London, instead of putting his new knowledge to use for a massive new residence for the King at Whitehall, he proposed a plan for the City of London that had been devastated by the Fire. This reconstruction plan and the other proposals that accompanied it are famous for being the first time anyone seriously thought of creating an orderly and geometrical masterplan for London. For many people, the failure to implement this grand vision was a disaster. Periodically through the following centuries, it was noted that 1666 was a lost opportunity. As the bombs fell on London during the Blitz, the spirit of Wren was revived. In 1642, the Modern Architecture Research Group, which was known as MARS, put forward a Corbusian plan for a new London, an open landscape, dotted with towering residential blocks. It was a first of a series of plans for dealing with the opportunity that Hitler’s bombs had created. Amongst these plans, symbolic was going to be the attitude of the Corporation of London. Those hungry for a radical approach pointed out that it had been the City’s eagerness to get on with the squalid business of making money in the late-1660s that had prevented any of the wholesale plans from being implemented. So sensitive was the Corporation of London to this accusation that, in their reconstruction plan, published in 1944, there was an entire appendix defending their record 270 years earlier! The fear in those brave days after the end of the War was that somehow a great opportunity was about to be missed again. But London was never going to be a centrally-planned gridiron city because there is something very significant that sets London apart, which is an aesthetic issue: London is a picturesque city. Unlike the classical Roman model cities of the Continent, the picturesque aesthetic relies on unexpected juxtapositions, changes in angles, domes, spires and towers, jostling for position on the skyline. This is very different to the sublime effects of the great boulevards of Continental Europe, which impress through scale, monotony and repetition.

So, though Wren failed to introduce European geometrical planning to London, he was in fact the first to implement a plan, an aesthetic programme to enhance its picturesqueness, and here is the genius of the man. This was no Court commission. It was someone who had the instinctive feel for the City and its appearance. I called tonight’s lecture “Buildings, Place and Genius”. While I have argued that Wren was first a courtier, and so many of his buildings came from the Court, I still believe he was a genius, and if the 20th Century had not destroyed the skyline of the City, we would still be able to appreciate the genius who used buildings to create a unique sense of place.

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