

St Paul's Cathedral has Risen above its Critics for 300 Years

Jonathan Glancey (1 Mar 2011)

St Paul's Cathedral was barely a year old when the attacks began. What we accept as one of the greatest of all British buildings, crowned with one of the most inspiring domes of all, was suspicious and even meretricious stuff if you happened to be Anthony Ashley Cooper, 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury. In his "Letter Concerning the Arts, or Science of Design" published in 1712, this prominent Whig politician condemned what he saw as an excessive and even vulgar form of design – Christopher Wren's very English baroque – because this voluptuous style was associated with Rome and all things Catholic and was therefore a very bad thing indeed in Protestant England.

Poor Wren. By the time his cathedral was declared complete, 300 years ago this week, (the official opening was held as early as 1697; detailed work on the great City of London cathedral continued until the early 1720s), his style was both out of fashion and politically incorrect. The most influential of the young critics to take up Cooper's attack was Colen Campbell, a Scottish architect whose book *Vitruvius Britannicus*, first published in 1715, condemned English baroque while not quite daring to put the boot into Wren. Instead, Campbell published an engraving of his own Palladian design for an ideal Protestant church alongside St Paul's; the reader was clearly meant to side with Campbell's model of chastely classical style.

The Luftwaffe attacked St Paul's in 1940, but that was a physical assault and, thank God (Protestant, Catholic or otherwise) did little harm considering the scale of the bombing during the blitz. A bigger boot was put in half a century later by, of all people, Maxwell Hutchinson, then president of the Royal Institute of British Architects. Hutchinson's case was that St Paul's had always been a preposterous design because it was really a medieval English cathedral – one that happened to be built between 1675 and 1711 – that only masqueraded as a baroque temple. It was fakery on a huge scale. If you care to look behind its high nave walls, you will even find that the Renaissance stone vaults you see by looking up from inside the cathedral are supported by flying buttresses, one of the defining characteristics of medieval cathedrals.

So, Wren bodged together a design that we are right to question even today, 300 years after those early debates on whether or not the baroque was Papist and, therefore, un-English. In a way, the Hutchinson line makes sense. St Paul's is indeed a marriage of medieval and Renaissance design. In Wren's defence, however, there had been little or no alternative.

Left to his own devices, Wren would have shaped a beautiful Greek cross-style Protestant temple without a hint of compromise. There is, and never has been, a building like this in Britain. But his patrons – the church commissioners – wanted something more recognisably cathedral-like. Wren fused his vision of a grand baroque temple with theirs of an updated English medieval cathedral (free of Catholic excess, of course), and held the result together with a dome that is at once an engineering marvel and an utterly sublime design. In achieving this extraordinarily difficult compromise, Wren had not just tested his genius to the limits, but realised the most monumentally discreet of all English compromises. And, in doing so he had created a building that holds an appeal to people of so many backgrounds and walks of life today.

More than this, he managed to surround his cathedral with a constellation of parish churches that form a lovely architectural necklace around his peerless dome. For any of you in doubt, go and climb up into, around and above Wren's dome and then tell me he did something wrong. Perhaps St Paul's is not a pure work of art. Somehow, though, 300 years on, St Paul's retains both its serene majesty and sense of being.

As for Wren, did he really care what critics thought? He was nearly 90 when St Paul's was declared complete in 1711 and, as he had survived so many attacks and even attempts to oust him, perhaps criticism was simply water off an old architect's frockcoat. As old Clerihew goes:

*Sir Christopher Wren
Said, I am going to dine with some men.
If anyone calls
Say I am designing St Paul's*

1. Read the text quickly and answer these questions:

i. Why was Christopher Wren criticised for his work?

ii. Does the author of the article agree with the critics?

iii. What would have been the reaction of Christopher Wren to his critics according to the author of the text?

2. Find the following phrases in the text and explain their meaning from the context:

i. voluptuous style

ii. put the boot into Wren

iii. fakery on a huge scale

iv. bodged together

v. recognisably cathedral-like

vi. retains both its serene majesty

vii. holds an appeal to

viii. attempts to oust him

ix. water off an old architect's frockcoat

3. Write a letter to Maxwell Hutchinson, which reacts to his argument in the text.