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THE BROCHURE SERIES  
**The Work of  
Sir Christopher Wren**  
NOVEMBER, 1900

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**PLATE  
LXXXIII**

**ST. PAUL'S CATHEDRAL:  
LONDON**

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THE  
**Brochure Series**  
OF ARCHITECTURAL  
ILLUSTRATION.

1900.

NOVEMBER

No. 11.

**THE WORK OF  
SIR CHRISTOPHER WREN.**

During the reign of James I. the Renaissance style in England, which in Elizabeth's time had been mingled in picturesque combination with the Gothic, was further developed, losing year by year more of the Gothic features and becoming purer as the Classic models and literature became better known. The Anglo-Classic, or fully evolved English Renaissance style, arose only, however, with the advent of the celebrated Inigo Jones, who brought to his work the fruits of long study in Italy, and a thorough knowledge of the work of Palladio who was his master in design. During his life Jones' influence was paramount, and up to the time of the Commonwealth he had a practical monopoly of the architectural profession in England. His work was taken up where he left it by an architect on the whole, more remarkable—one of the most remarkable figures, indeed, that architecture has produced—Sir Christopher Wren, whose influence after the Restoration was even more complete than that of Jones had been before it. No building of importance was erected in England during the last forty years of the seventeenth century, of which Wren was not the architect. To Americans, moreover, Wren's work has an especial interest. Our own Colonial style, particularly in the architecture of churches, was in no slight degree based upon models which he originated, and he has not without justification been called the "father of the American Colonial style."

Sir Christopher Wren was born at East Knoyle, Wiltshire, on October 20, 1632. He was the son of Christopher Wren, rector of East Knoyle. He early showed a taste for natural science and mathematics, and up to his twenty-ninth year devoted himself with great genius to scientific pursuits. His fame rests chiefly on his architectural achievements, but had his philosophical pursuits not been interfered with by the arduous profession to which he later devoted himself he could not have failed of securing a scientific position higher than that attained by any of his contemporaries, with of course one exception, Newton. Hooke in his "Micrographia" wrote of him, "I must affirm that scarce ever met in one man such a mechanical hand and so philosophical a mind." He made elaborate drawings to illustrate the anatomy of the brain, invented an instrument for planting, a method of making fresh water at sea, produced a scheme for the graphical construction of solar and lunar eclipses and occultation of stars, and solved a problem proposed by Pascal to the geometers of England. The practical use of the barometer as connected with the weather is attributed to him, though it was not commonly used as a weather glass until a much later date. He invented a method for transfusion of blood, experimented scientifically in the force of gunpowder, and made innumerable other like experiments and inventions.

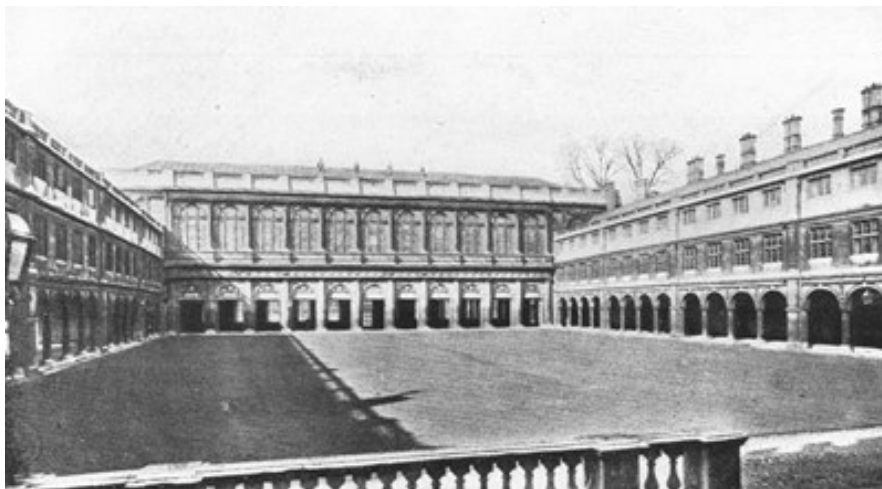


**PLATE  
LXXXIV**

**SOUTH FRONT, ST. PAUL'S  
CATHEDRAL: LONDON**

The first definite information we have of his applying himself professionally to architecture, is his acceptance in his twenty-ninth year of an invitation from Charles II. to act practically as surveyor-general to his majesty's works, though nominally as assistant to Sir Charles Denham. It is clear, however, that he must have already given proof of fitness before such an appointment could have been offered.

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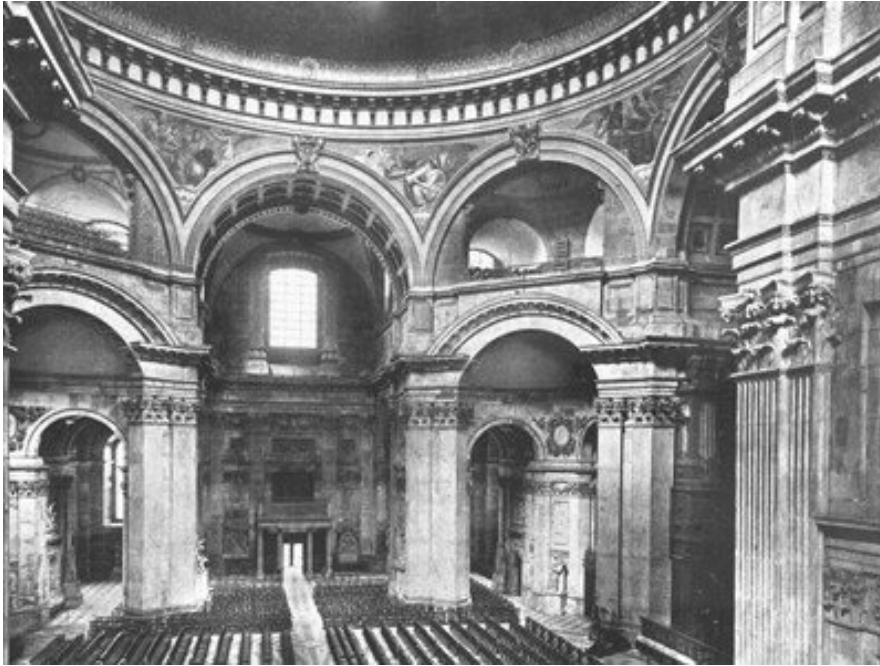
The two earliest original works we hear of are the chapel of Pembroke College Cambridge, built at the expense of his uncle, and the Sheldonian Theatre at Oxford. The chapel was finished in two years, but the Sheldonian Theatre not till 1669. We may therefore take Pembroke Chapel as his first original work, and it need occasion no surprise if we find in it signs of the 'prentice hand. Wren evidently felt the need of better opportunities for study, and took the earliest opportunity available to him to supply it by his journey to Paris in 1665, when ordinary business in London and in other parts of England was interrupted by the plague. This journey to France, where he seems to have resided for about six months, is the only one of which any information exists.

The architectural detail of the Sheldonian Theatre, though still not commendable, is much in advance of that of Pembroke Chapel; but its completion did not take place until 1669, and Wren had had by then more time for education in correct classical expression. He was thus in some measure prepared both by study and by practical experience when the great opportunity of his life presented itself. The great fire of London broke out in 1666.

Before the embers of the great fire had cooled, Wren, as virtual surveyor-general, had prepared a scheme for the rebuilding of the city. The fire raged from the second to the eighth of September, and during those six days, four hundred and sixty entire streets, eighty-nine churches, and over thirteen thousand houses were swept away. On the twelfth of September, Wren laid before the king a sketch plan of his design for the restoration of the metropolis. It is the plan of what would

have become a magnificent city, but the public spirit which would have been required to carry it out would have demanded great sacrifices of present interest for the sake of future benefit; and a more hand-to-mouth expedient was necessarily adopted. But Wren found employment enough in his official capacity in designing, supervising and rebuilding a cathedral, more than fifty parish churches, thirty-six of the Companies' halls, the custom house, beside several private houses and provincial works.

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**PLATE LXXXV INTERIOR, ST. PAUL'S CATHEDRAL: LONDON**

In regard to the Cathedral, Wren gave an unhesitating opinion that nothing but an entirely new structure ought to be contemplated. This advice was not at once taken, but the fall of a part of the Cathedral where repair was being attempted gave convincing proof of the wisdom of his judgment, and in 1668 he was summoned to London from Oxford (where he was still a professor of astronomy) to advise respecting a new edifice. The taking down of the old walls—in which Wren was wonderfully ingenious in inventing devices,—lasted through part of 1668; and in 1673 Wren, who had meantime been knighted, submitted his first design for the new Cathedral,—a design which he himself wrote that he considered "antique and well studied, conformable to the best style of Greek and Roman architecture." The king greatly approved of it, and a commencement of it was actually made, but so much clerical opposition was brought to bear on account of its being different from the usual cathedral shape that Wren was reluctantly obliged to turn his thoughts in another direction; and he proceeded with several trial plans in Gothic form. One of these was accepted, and he was ordered by a royal commission, dated May, 1675, to proceed with it. The authorization was accompanied by the permission to make variations, "rather ornamental than essential"; but happily, as the whole was left to his management, he found himself able to make use of this permission without troubling himself as to the qualification as to essentials.

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**LONDON**

## THE MONUMENT

There is no concealing the point that if the design which the king's warrant authorized had been carried out unaltered, St. Paul's would, externally at least, have proved a gigantic failure. In design we may perceive that there was in Wren's mind a struggle between two ideas as respects the great central feature of the dome,—namely, that of retaining the fine and well studied internal proportions of his first design, and at the same time attaining the quality of great loftiness demanded for the external appearance. This he proposed to attain by means of a lofty spire; but before long he abandoned this attempt and adopted the idea of general height as the leading principle, by which he ultimately arrived at the unrivalled exterior of the Cathedral.

Now that he was fully authorized to proceed, Wren devoted all his energies to maturing his design, and many studies are extant which show the steps by which he arrived at the final result. He had no doubt a sufficiently clear general idea in his mind's eye of what the complete structure should be, but these studies show that the details of even such essential features as the profile of the dome and the western towers were not settled until the time approached when they would be required.

For thirty-five years work was continued on the immense edifice, the third largest church in Christendom, under Wren's sole supervision, and in 1710 Sir Christopher, who had been a year old when the first stone was laid, now laid the last stone of the lantern above the dome. The scene could hardly be better painted than in the works of Dean Milman:



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PLATE LXXXVI

SHELDONIAN THEATRE: OXFORD

"All London had poured forth for the spectacle, which had been publicly announced, and were looking up in wonder to the old man ... who was on that wondrous height setting the seal, as it were, to his august labors. If in that wide circle which his eye might embrace there were various objects for regret and disappointment; if, instead of beholding the various streets of the city, each converging to its centre, London had sprung up and spread in irregular labyrinths of close, dark, intricate lanes; if even his own Cathedral was crowded upon and jostled by mean and unworthy buildings; yet, on the other hand, he might survey, not the Cathedral only, but a number of stately churches which had risen at his command and taken form and dignity from his genius and skill. On one side the picturesque steeple of St. Mary-le-Bow; on the other the exquisite tower of St. Bride's. Beyond, and on all sides, if more dimly seen, yet discernible by his partial eyesight (he might even penetrate to the inimitable interior of St. Stephen's Walbrook), church after church, as far as St. Dunstan's-in-the-East, perhaps Greenwich, may have been vaguely made out in the remote distance; and all this one man had been permitted to conceive and execute; a man not originally destined or educated for an architect, but compelled as it were by the public necessities to assume the office, and so to fulfil it as to stand on a level with the most consummate masters of the art in Europe, and to take his stand on an eminence which his English successors almost despaired of attaining."

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But though his most notable achievement, the building of St. Paul's had only absorbed a fraction of Wren's amazing energy, it would be impossible even to catalogue his achievements in our present space.



**ENTRANCE TO KENSINGTON PALACE**

Temple Bar was rebuilt from his designs about 1670-72. This historic Bar had formerly served as a sort of official entrance to the city, and when the reigning sovereign visited London on state occasions he was wont, in accordance with an ancient custom, to wait there till the Lord Mayor gave him permission to pass it,—a formal acknowledgment of the rights of the freemen of the city. (The photograph of Sir Christopher's Temple Bar shown in [Plate LXXXIX](#), was made in 1877, one year before the arch was demolished to permit the widening of the street.) In 1684 Wren was appointed by Charles II. as comptroller of works in the Castle of Windsor, and besides all these spheres of activity he took some part in politics, and was three times elected to parliament.

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**PLATE  
LXXXVII**

**STEEPLE, CHURCH OF ST. MARY-  
LE-BOW: LONDON**

Of the fifty-two churches which Wren built in London, and of which a considerable number have been demolished, every one that remains is a valuable study in planning, and they show the greatest skill in their adaptation to irregular sites and their suitability for Protestant worship. In all of them the main proportions are excellent, but minor details are not in all good alike. Nothing that has been achieved in modern architecture has surpassed the beauty of their spires, not only from the elegance of each, but from their complete variety, and at the same time their harmony with one another. Indeed Wren may be called the inventor of the English Renaissance type of steeple, in which a conical or pyramidal spire is harmoniously added to belfry on a square tower with classical details. Two of these churches in particular are especially good examples of his genius,—namely St. Mary-le-Bow and St. Stephen's Walbrook.



**STEEPLE, ST. BRIDE'S CHURCH LONDON**

St. Mary-le-Bow, or simply Bow church (so named after an earlier church on the same site, borne upon stone arches, or "bows"), was one of the most historic structures of old London. "Bow bells" hung in its tower, and served the city as a curfew; and persons born within the sound of them were considered true Londoners or "cockneys." Sir Christopher's church on the same site and called by the same name, was commenced in 1671 and completed six years later. The exterior is so much closed in with houses that only a plain solid outside was required, and Wren expended his chief architectural effort on a steeple, of which Mr. Fergusson has written: "There are errors of detail which probably the architect himself would have avoided in a second attempt, and, as they arose only from an imperfect knowledge of classical details, might easily be remedied at the present day. It only wants this slight revision to harmonize what little incongruities remain, and, if this were done, this steeple might challenge comparison with any Gothic example ever erected. No modern steeple can compare with it either for beauty of outline or the appropriateness with which classical details are applied to so novel a purpose."





**STEEPLE, ST. DUNSTAN'S-IN-  
THE-EAST LONDON**

St. Stephen's Walbrook, commenced in 1672 and finished in 1679, like St. Mary-le-Bow has a plain exterior, and for the same reason; but Fergusson has rightly praised the interior for its originality, and as "the most pleasing of any Renaissance church that has yet been erected." The plain exterior tower was surmounted by a beautiful spire. One of Wren's principles was, that when sufficient funds were not available for the elaboration of the whole of a design, some one or more important features should be worked up to a higher standard than the rest, instead of adopting a lower standard for the whole.

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**PLATE LXXXVIII INTERIOR, CHURCH OF ST.  
STEPHEN'S WALBROOK: LONDON**

Another of Wren's most admired steeples is that for St. Bride's in Fleet Street, built in 1701. The upper stories of it have, however, been criticised because of their sameness and the want of connection between them. Another famous spire is that which he built in 1699 for the church of St. Dunstan's-in-the-East.

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In 1698 Wren was appointed surveyor to Westminster Abbey, and proceeded to carry out very important repairs. He built the central tower as we see it, and intended that it should have been surmounted by a lofty spire. The western towers which formed part of the project have been

built, but not as he intended. The general proportion of the towers alone is Wren's.

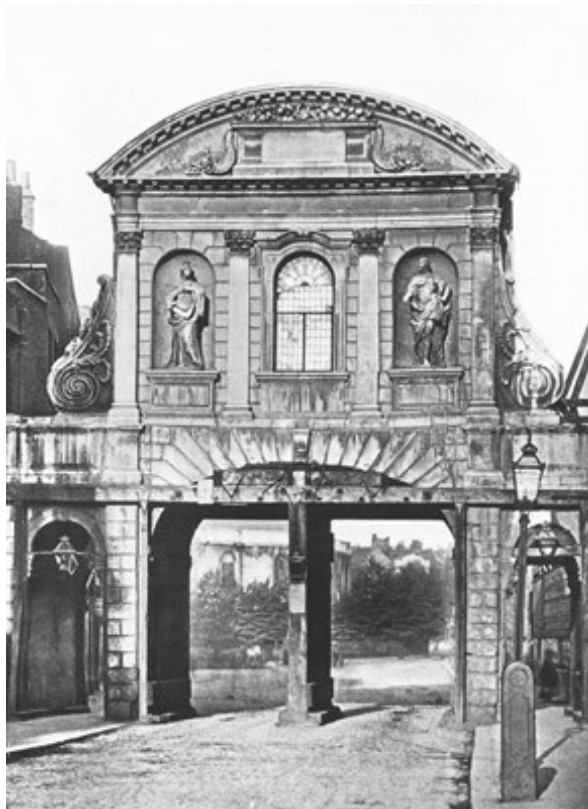
The "Monument," the Roman Doric column which commemorates the great fire, was built by Wren, between 1671 and 1678. He had at first intended that it should be left hollow from top to bottom to serve as a vertical telescope tube for astronomical purposes, but its height proved insufficient for this. There was great debate about the ornament for the summit. Wren wished it to be a large statue as "carrying much dignity with it, and being more valuable in the eyes of foreigners and strangers," but this project was abandoned on account of the expense, and the present ornament, a flaming vase of gilt bronze, substituted. "The great inequality of Wren's achievement," writes Fergusson, "is nowhere more marked than in a comparison of this Monument, which is one of the most successful Classical columns that have been erected in Europe, with Temple Bar, which is perhaps the most unsuccessful attempt ever made to reproduce a Classical triumphal archway."

In 1677 he commenced the library of Trinity College, Cambridge. The work, which was not finished till 1692, is one of the handsomest buildings in England, remarkable externally for breadth and correctness of style, and internally as a model of excellent arrangement. In design it is not unlike the much admired Library of Ste. Genéviève in Paris. To Greenwich Hospital he contributed gratuitously the design for two noble blocks of buildings completely in harmony with the earlier portion by Inigo Jones.



**STEEPLE, ST. STEPHEN'S  
WALBROOK LONDON**

He was long engaged on extensive works on Hampton Court Palace, where, at the desire of Queen Mary, the old buildings were in part pulled down and two sets of royal apartments built. The queen, though she amused herself with planning the gardens and making suggestions, had yet the wisdom to defer to Wren's better taste and knowledge. Her husband, with characteristic obstinacy, insisted on his own ideas, thereby dwarfing the cloisters and marring much of the architecture. It is, however, fair to say that King William always owned that the defects were his, the merits, Wren's; and these merits are very great, for in spite of defects of detail, the general design is one remarkable for dignity and breadth of conception.



**PLATE LXXXIX                  TEMPLE BAR: LONDON**

Having been appointed by the Stuarts to the office of surveyor-general, Wren retained the royal favor unclouded through the reigns of William and Mary, and Queen Anne; but on the accession of the Hanoverian family in 1714, the jealousies which his high position had created were able to prevail against him. At first he was subjected to repeated annoyances, but, after having endured these for four years, during which time he was able to complete the fabric of St. Paul's, he was finally superseded in 1718. Wren after this retired from practical business (he was eighty-six years old), retaining only the supervision of Westminster Abbey, which he held until his death. [Pg 179]



**FOUNTAIN COURT                  HAMPTON COURT PALACE**

For the last five years of his life Wren resided much at his house in Hampton Court, which he held on a lease from the crown. Once a year it was his habit to be driven to London and to sit for a while under the dome of his own Cathedral; on one of these journeys he caught a cold, and soon afterwards, on February 25, 1723, his servant, thinking Sir Christopher slept longer after dinner than was his wont, came into the room, and found his master dead in his chair. He was ninety-one years old. On the fifth of March he was buried in St. Paul's Cathedral, under the south aisle of the choir, and in his honor an inscription was placed at the entrance to the choir ending with the words, "Si monumentum requiris, circumspice."

Sir Christopher's personal appearance is only known to us through pictures: it appears that he was mild yet dignified of countenance, and "thin and low of stature."

"Though he did fail sometimes," writes Mr. Fergusson, "it cannot be denied that Wren was a giant in architecture, and, considering the difficulties he had to contend with, not only from the age in which he lived, but from the people he had to deal with, and the small modicum of taste or knowledge that prevailed anywhere, we may well be astonished at what he did accomplish that

was good, rather than wonder at his occasional failures. His greatest praise, however, is, that though he showed the way and smoothed the path, none of his successors have surpassed—if, indeed, any have equalled—him in what he did, though more than a century has now elapsed since his death, and numberless opportunities have been offered in every department of architectural art."

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## Brochure Series Competition "P."

Competition "P." the details of which are printed on an advertising page of this issue, closes on Dec. 15, 1900. The prize awards will be announced in January.

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**PLATE XC      GARDEN FAÇADE: HAMPTON COURT PALACE**

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