

THE LONDON THAT SIR CHRISTOPHER WREN FIRST KNEW.

BY

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CHRISTOPHER Wren was born on the 20th October, 1632, at East Knoyle, Wiltshire, near Fonthill Abbey, his mother being the daughter and heiress of Mr. Robert Cox, the owner of that estate, and his father, Christopher Wren, holding the living of East (or Bishop's) Knoyle. The Wrens were an old family connected for generations with the Court, the Church, and the City of London. Christopher's father was a learned man closely attached to his patron, the saintly Bishop Lancelot Andrews. There are few records of the earlier years of the younger Christopher, years which were spent at East Knoyle and Windsor where owing to his delicate constitution he was educated by a private tutor until, in 1641, at the age of nine years, he was entered a scholar at Westminster School under the celebrated Doctor Busby. Here he shewed a developing taste for science, astronomy having a special attraction for him. Christopher's father, as also Matthew Wren, afterwards Bishop of Ely, was the son of Francis Wren, and was born 1589, in the parish of St. Peter Cheap. The churchyard of this parish still remains and its tree, overshadowing the old four shops fronting Cheapside, is well known to all true lovers of the City.

Both Matthew, the elder son, and Christopher were educated at Merchant Taylors' School and there they attracted the notice of Lancelot Andrews, then Dean of

Westminster, to whom both were indebted for their advancement in their future lives.

The London that our Christopher first knew cannot have changed greatly since John Stow made his survey some forty years previously, a walled mediæval city of narrow streets and courts over-crowded by its privileged inhabitants, insanitary to a degree, split up into numerous parish units, each centring on its church. The houses, with the exception of those of some wealthy merchants, were of wood, with each floor overhanging the one beneath until the topmost would nearly meet its neighbour of the opposite house. All this must have impressed the youthful Christopher and have borne fruit in later years in the ordinance that the frontages must be built "straight up," an ordinance continued in our building laws today.

In 1646, at the age of fourteen, Wren was entered at Wadham College, Oxford, where he came under the notice of the Principal, Dr. Wilkins, who had married Oliver Cromwell's sister. At Wadham, there gathered weekly a number of learned and ingenious men "to discourse of philosophic enquiries and such as related thereunto: as physick, anatomy, and geometry, astronomy, navigation, statics, magnetics, chymicks, mechanicks and natural experiments with the state of those studies as then calculated at home and abroad," so wrote Dr. Wallis, one of the number who met with Dr. Wilkins and Mr. S. Foster, the Gresham Professor of Astronomy. It was this company that John Evelyn visited, meeting Christopher Wren and inspecting the Doctor's and Wren's inventions.

We may here note that Christopher took his B.A. degree in 1650 and his M.A. degree in 1653, and was elected Fellow of All Souls in the same year. In 1656, Dean Wren, Christopher's father, died.

In 1657, the Gresham Professorship was vacant. The chair was offered to Wren but he, only twenty-four years of age, was dubious as to accepting it, preferring to continue his studies at the University. On the advice of his friends he

accepted the Chair; consequently on every Wednesday in term-time he lectured at Gresham College. None of his lectures has been preserved as he spoke from rough notes only. His opening address, however, appears in *Parentalia*. It concludes with a pretty conceit after describing London as "a Pandora of Cities to whom each of the Planets gave a peculiar blessing . . . is lastly blessed by the Moon, the governess of floods who alluring the Seas thus far inland by means of the beloved Thames makes her the city which nourishes the best seamen of the World."

In 1658, Oliver Cromwell died and his son Richard's feeble rule soon threw all into disorder. The Gresham Professors were driven out and the College garrisoned while Crosby Hall opposite was turned into a prison. Dr. Sprat, Dean of Westminster, a college friend of Wren's wrote to Wren at this time—"Dear Sir, this day I went to visit Gresham College, but found the place in such a nasty condition, so defiled, and the smells that if you should now come to make use of your tube, it would be like Dives looking out of Hell into Heaven. Dr. Goddard, of all your colleagues, keeps possession, which he could never be able to do had he not before prepared his nose for camp perfumes by his voyage into Scotland, and had he not such excellent resoratives in his cellars."

In 1661, Wren resigned the Gresham Professorship, and received the degrees of D.C.L. and LL.D. at the two Universities. At this period Wren was an active member of the Royal Society in which King Charles took a great interest, and for whom Wren constructed a globe of the Moon. Also in 1661, Wren was appointed Deputy Surveyor-General under Sir John Denham and came into official touch with St. Paul's Cathedral for the first time. King Charles who had some acquaintance with architecture may probably be credited for this appointment knowing that Denham's position was obtained by jobbery and that, whatever Denham's qualifications as a poet might be, he was no architect. Wren

examined the condition of the Cathedral and suggested the removal of the tower and the insertion in its place of a domed octagon; but the Great Fire of the 2nd September, 1666, occurred and swept away the greater part of the City of London that Wren had known.

[Mr. Hopwood's paper, of which the above forms the major part, was fully illustrated by lantern-slides.—Ed.]