

REPORTAGE

# ALL THINGS BRIGHT AND BEAUTIFUL?

AT ST PAUL'S, RICHARD MORRISON GETS THE FIRST SNEAK PREVIEW OF A CONTROVERSIAL £40m RESTORATION

LIKE A PARCEL lost in the post, St Paul's Cathedral seems to have been wrapped up for an awfully long time. People trudging up Ludgate Hill in recent months have seen not Wren's majestic portico, but a rather sketchy artist's impression of it, hoisted on a giant plastic sheet across the West Front. The cathedral's south side meanwhile, looks as if it is cocooned in cotton-wool.

Join the bemused tourists threading through this clobber to inspect the interior, and you are confronted by even more startling embellishments. Suspended from the very pinnacle of the cathedral is a vast cradle of scaffolding. It is being revolved slowly round the inside of the Dome, allowing craftsmen access to the curving walls above the Whispering Gallery. You don't know what to gawp at first: the dizzying audacity of the engineering, or the nonchalance of the people working on it, seemingly oblivious of the 200ft (60m) drop below.

What's going on? The answer is that St Paul's is having a wash and brush-up. But as befits a cathedral that took 35 years to build and caused decades of fierce arguments in Restoration London, this has turned into the Father, Son and Holy Ghost of all cleaning projects. First proposed in the early 1990s, it has another four years still to run and will cost £40 million — or £39.2 million more than the cathedral cost to build. What's more, it's triggered one of the liveliest debates (or, in less scholarly language, flaming rows) in British conservation circles for years.



In the eye of the storm at St Paul's is Martin Standcliffe, an urbane architect who rejoices in the title of Surveyor to the Fabric — only the 17th since 1718, when Wren retired from the post at the age of 86. "I was appointed 15 years ago on the ticket of putting the cathedral right for the next generation or two," he says. "So I sat down and tried to do just that."

## ST PAUL'S MUST "SHINE AGAIN", SAID PAUL GETTY

Standcliffe wrote a report detailing everything that needed fixing, from regilding the great copper pineapples topping the west towers to improving the dingy crypt lighting round the tombs of Wellington and Nelson. "I expected the scheme to take 25 years," Standcliffe says. "But when we started cleaning, the Dean and Chapter became gripped by the results, and said 'we must do this faster'. So they began a fundraising campaign to make that happen." Though the fundraising is still

£11 million short of its £40 million target, it has already received some eye-popping donations. (Of course, it helps that many of Britain's richest people look out on St Paul's from their City boardrooms.) The Scottish banker Robin Fleming gave £10.8 million to pay for the internal decoration. And Sir Paul Getty chipped in £5 million to rebuild the crumbling west steps and clean the West Front — recalling before he died last year how he had seen St Paul's "standing proud above the ruins of war" when he was brought to England as a boy, and declaring that "it must be made to shine again". Little did Getty realise how contentious his words were, for it is precisely the degree to which St Paul's ought to "shine again" — and the method used to make that happen — which has agitated heritage guardians. The 70,000 tons of Portland stone used by Wren for his magnum opus certainly shone when they were quarried in the 1670s. But the smoke of 10,000 London coal-fires started blackening them even in Wren's lifetime.

The question is: had Wren anticipated that? After all, the brilliant subterfuges he concocted to build a very different cathedral from what the authorities were expecting suggest a mind with a genius for planning down to the last detail. And even if he hadn't expected this blackening, surely a cathedral at the heart of a great city — especially one that became such an icon of indomitable endurance during the Blitz — should be allowed to wear its centuries-old discolouring like battle medals?

"That was the nub of the debate in the 1960s, when the place was last cleaned," Standcliffe says. "It's a very English approach: let the effects of time take their course. But I think the blackening embarrassed Wren. There is a report of him getting fire engines to hose down the outside in an attempt to clean it before Queen Anne came to a service."

How long will the newly-cleaned bits (such as the now rather Disneyesque east end) stay pristine? "No one knows," Standcliffe admits. "But London's air is much cleaner these



St Paul's shrouded in scaffolding, above, and, left, a restored capital carved on the south west tower