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“Majestic St. Paul’s remains a cornerstone of London’s architectural history and historical legacy, as well as an obvious tourist magnet.”

Time Out: London



Photo Courtesy: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:St_Paul_and_The_eye_London.jpg

FINDING ST. PAUL'S

LONDON IS BUILT ON THE HISTORY OF INFLUENTIAL PEOPLE AND THEIR GREAT DEEDS.

By: John Selby

JULIUS CAESAR WALKED THE ROMAN STREETS OF LONDINIUM, John Nash straightened out the previously haphazard grid just before Florence Nightingale wrote Notes on Nursing at her London home, and 50 years later, Christopher Wren resurrected the city after it kissed too closely the fire which kept it alive. Now that these men and women are gone, the city is littered with their memorials. Kings and queens have statues, officers have columns, and Wren has churches. The 51 churches across the city of London are his only memorials; his grave in the crypt of St. Paul's reads "LECTOR, SI MONUMENTUM REQUIRIS, CIRCUMSPICE."¹

¹ "Reader, if you require a monument, look around you."

Each individual encounter with St. Paul's is slightly different; a church can have many meanings for many people. Part of the relationship between individual and city (or individual and church in this case) is the way in which you "find" it. From the tube, one runs into St. Paul's Churchyard, the least grand of its spaces. This intimate green area on the east side of the church is where traders eat their lunches, watched over by St. Paul himself. For the tourist, this approach must be confusing. *Where is the cathedral that I saw in the guidebook?*

From the west, buildings block the view up Fleet Street and hide the dome until the last moment. This is the way Wren intended it to be seen, but the newer encroaching spires have altered the original view. The opposite is true, however, when approaching from the South Bank. This journey is a pilgrimage across the Millennium Bridge which frames the Cathedral like the French would have designed it: long and straight. And finally from the North, coming from Newgate Street, you see it all: first the spire, then the dome, and finally the two bell towers.

However, it seems that no matter the method of your approach, you are destined to go to one of the spaces surrounding the church. If you are a tourist, you go to the front steps, guided by the screen on your digital camera. If you are a trader, you pass through the revolving doors into the London Stock Exchange. If you are apathetic, you bypass the Cathedral in your rush to get elsewhere. If you are a child, you enter the school near the churchyard. If you are an observer, you sit and watch all this happen, and enjoy the play that unfolds daily in the square.

The area which is currently Paternoster Square has more history than its sleek stone façades suggest. It was a sheep market long before it was a commercial center. During the blitzkrieg of 1940, it was completely destroyed, and the Cathedral only narrowly escaped the same fate, when the landmine dropped on the church did not, by chance, detonate. Now, the smell of steak and espresso replaces the smell of gunpowder, and you would never know there had been a war there.

As for St. Paul's, what little damage that was done is now repaired. The Church is possibly at its finest—framed by the Square, the Temple Bar, and the column in the middle of Paternoster Square. There is nothing humble or reserved about St. Paul's. Its spire seems to reach for some prize that the skyscrapers are getting closer to. Yet it seems impractical that this structure still stands. Its dome seems so fragile, resting on only eight columns, and yet there it is, defiant to weather, wind and bombs.

One bright Sunday morning, I decided to visit for the sole purpose of observation. I had visited in passing before, on my way to the South Bank, waiting for concerts or buying tickets, but never just to watch. When I got there it was quieter than I have ever seen it, populated only by a few hearty tourists and the faithful churchgoers. But what I noticed, and actually couldn't escape, were the bells. 'Bell Peals' I wrote in my journal. "RESEARCH BELL PEALS."

9:25 The clumsy bell peal goes off—why this specific time, I do not know, and after it finishes the silence of Paternoster Square is emphasized. 'Paternoster.' From my four years of Latin I remember very little, but I think "pater noster" means 'our father.' All the shops in the square are closed except for Starbucks where one solitary woman smokes a cigarette and drinks her latte. Corney & Barrow's deserted awnings flap to the chiming of the bells. The clouds are moving so fast behind the dome of St. Paul's that it looks like a time lapse film.

9:45 Another bell peal. There are children chasing each other in the Square. They are laughing, but I can't hear them over the bells. Their parents have to shout to be heard. It is like watching a silent film except instead of Wurlitzer, Whitechapel is providing the soundtrack. It would be much more appropriate to see a wedding party emerge from the church, or the Queen, but there are just people walking around, taking silent pictures that cannot capture the sounds of the bells.

9:55 The crowds going up the main stairs are increasing. I wonder if there is a service at 10? A girl and her brother chase the pigeons and scream while their mother videotapes them. I wonder what that tape would look like? Would the bells drown out the sound? Steal the spotlight from the simple skit?

Why do we feel the need to document our lives, the lives of our children? Admittedly, the videos of my childhood are precious to me, but if they burned, would I lose my memories? Certainly my past can exist without them, but would I be able to prove it? Is this why we film every second? Is this why we tape our children chasing pigeons?

10:05 I thought the bells would stop at 10 and repeat at some interval until the service started at 11:00, but they continue. For some reason, it does not seem like it has been 20 minutes since they started. How many people stay to hear the whole thing? The square is a place of vagrancy, much like

London itself. People come and sit for a few ticks, then move on. I feel like an old-timer.

Just short of 10:15 the peal stops and a single ring starts going. I count, 10, 15, 30, 40. 40? I try to make meaning out of this number, but find no answers. Absolute quiet invades the Square, and I can hear the pat-pat of children's sneakers on the pavement. The dark clouds roll in with the silence, and in the distance, another church is ringing its bells. The pedal tone of that bell with the 4th of some nearer one and the doorbell interval of a third make a beautifully spontaneous symphony.

10:23 The Square is even more deserted now that the bells have stopped; the clouds certainly make it feel that way. I look for a nearby shelter in case it begins to rain, but decide I have seen enough and make my way home, stopping at two other churches to see what their bells are playing on this cloudy Sunday morning.

On a weekday visit, the green churchyard calls my attention. The monthly sundial on the side of the stock exchange tells me it is October, but the weather begs to differ. Enjoying the weather, I chose a comfortable spot to sit and watch.

2:55 I am an outsider. No purpose for being here, not defined as one thing or another. The camera is the first thing most people notice. The American backpack. But it is a little confusing because I am dressed smartly: pressed khakis, collared shirt, brown Rockports.

2:57 Suits, ties, crosswords—these are the telltale signs of workers trying to escape, even for 15 minutes from their workplaces. They eat smart lunches: plastic-wrapped-tear-open sandwiches, crisps² (baked), mango-passion-fresh-squeezed-orange-juice. These health foods define a generation defined by their desire to work and their desire to make work chic. The cooler they can look eating their lunch, the better.

3:05 The man next to me on the bench laughs out loud, and his convulsions shake the bench's back. The intervals between tremors seem too regular, too unnatural, like he is laughing at the same thing over and over again, making sure that I know he is comfortable laughing out loud. Another man doing the crossword pauses and stares into space with his chin in his palm. At first, he ponders 43 down, but his thoughts drift to where he

² potato chips

went wrong. He tries to figure out why he is stuck in a job that requires him to do the crossword. He likes Sudoku better anyways.

3:20 The arrogant man that I wanted to take a picture of, but was too afraid to ask, looks at me, and I look at him, but we each continue our rotational paths to avoid any prolonged eye contact. He scowls at the tourist taking a picture of St. Peter's golden statue. He forks the last piece of pineapple into his mouth, looks around to see if anybody is watching, then drinks the leftover juice from the bottom of the container. His grey business suit and combed hair cannot stifle the childish urge to have that last taste of sweetness.

3:25 Stained glass—2000 brilliant colors on the inside, two shades of grey on the outside. It's all perspective.

I did my research on bell peals. A bell peal is actually a very mathematical execution. It requires that the ringers, each in charge of one bell, pull a rope to ring the bell at the correct time then catch it before the bell rings again. The sequence is such that every possible combination of the bells is played without repeating and without any bell moving farther than one adjacent position at a time. The technique is called "change ringing," and is done by professional musicians. A peal is the full sequence, a touch is any part of that sequence short of the whole thing. The diagram shows how a peal is executed:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
2	1	4	3	6	5	8	7
2	4	1	6	3	8	5	7
4	2	6	1	8	3	7	5
4	6	2	1	3	8	5	7
6	4	1	2	8	3	7	5
6	1	4	8	2	7	3	5
1	6	8	4	7	2	5	3
1	6	4	8	2	7	5	3
6	1	8	4	7	2	3	5
6	8	1	7	4	5	2	3
8	6	7	1	5	4	3	2

To complete a full peal of four bells takes about 30 seconds.

To complete a full peal of six bells takes about 15 minutes.

To complete a peal of eight bells takes about 14 hours.

To peal all twelve of St. Paul's bells would require about 40 years.

I also asked an usher about the bell tower, and he had some other information about the single bells. It turns out that there were only three bells originally installed in the church. Big Tom, the main bell, sounds the hours. Big Paul sounds at 1 o'clock to signal the end of the lunch hour and obliges the apprentices to return to work. Another bell rings out just before mattins³ to call the faithful to worship. But the full complement of Whitechapel bells was not added until later, a rather impressive feat, as each bell weighs anywhere from several hundred pounds to over two tons.

The Lord Mayor's show took place one bright and cold Saturday. I stood

³ morning prayer

with my classmates on Fleet Street, watching the parade go by. When the new Lord Mayor arrived, the main center doors of St. Paul's opened (a rare occasion I believe), and the boy choir came out to welcome him into the city. The bells began to ring, and looking up to the tower, I could see the ropes moving up and down, silhouetted against the window. *Now this is an occasion for bells.*

It was on that mid-November day that I first glimpsed St. Paul's innards: The roof, the spiral staircases, which were built into the supporting columns, and the chain which encircles the dome to keep it from spreading apart. I felt comfortable knowing that the church was human too; the realization of how it stood up against the forces that should have pulled it down long ago intrigued me. Atop the dome, I felt as though only the Holy Spirit himself should be allowed this vantage, for the church is something that should be looked up to.

On one of my last visits to St. Paul's, I did not need the sundial to tell me it was almost December. The stone benches under the column were no longer inviting, nor were the benches in the churchyard. I have been pushed away, forced to make my lap of the church as quickly as I can.

There is a Christmas tree that has just been installed in the Square. Nobody pays any attention to it, and it looks sad all by itself resting against a bench. Around the front, there are considerably fewer tourists. The stairs leading up to the church (which are normally blanketed by people) are completely visible today. The south side of the Cathedral is still covered for restoration, but now there is a drawing alluding to the façade it hides from those approaching from the bridge. In the area between the transept and the churchyard, a teenage trio asks me to take their picture while they all squeeze into a red phone booth. Around the side even further, the rose garden still holds promises of life. The pinks and the whites are still alive, braving the winter. I pass through the empty churchyard once again and head for the underground. §

Image Cited

"St. Paul's" (photograph). Wikipedia.org. 28 Jan. 2006. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:St_Pauls_and_The_eye_leo_london.jpg.