

Topic Page: [Wren, Christopher, Sir, 1632-1723](#)

Definition: **Wren, Sir Christopher** from *Philip's Encyclopedia*

English architect, mathematician, and astronomer. After the Fire of London (1666), Wren designed more than 50 new churches in the City of London based on syntheses of classical, Renaissance, and baroque ideas; the greatest of these is St Paul's Cathedral. Other works include Chelsea and Greenwich Hospitals, London, and the Sheldonian Theatre, Oxford.



Image from: [Thirty-two buttresses surround the drum...](#) in *Philip's Encyclopedia*

Summary Article: **Wren, Sir Christopher**
From *Encyclopedia of Urban Studies*

Although his 1666 plan for London after the Great Fire is famous, Sir Christopher Wren's (1632-1723) place in history is first as a scientist, and then, most prominently, as an architect. In both capacities, however, Wren did contribute significantly to the shaping of the early modern city.

Born into a conservative English family of high churchmen in 1632, Wren was famous as a child for his “marvelous gifts” in mathematics and mechanics. He pursued these subjects, as well as astronomy and experimental philosophy, at Oxford University as an undergraduate at Wadham College and then as fellow at All Soul's. At 25, he became professor of astronomy at Gresham College in London. Three years later, with the Restoration of the Stuart monarchy in 1660, he was part of a small group that founded the Royal Society for Natural and Experimental Philosophy. By the age of 30, now back in Oxford as Savilian professor of astronomy, Wren had made significant achievements in science. At this moment however he began to involve himself in architecture, giving advice on repairs, designing buildings, and making his 1666 plan for London. Wren's new career was secured when he was made surveyor general in 1669. For the next 40 years, as the king's architect, but also through private commissions, he designed palaces, hospitals, collegiate buildings, and churches.

During the 1660s, while making his transition to architecture, Wren joined a group of friends at the Royal Society to address problems in London that had been recognized since Elizabethan times—congestion, decay, filth, and uncontrolled growth, as well as the threats of fire, disease, and civil disorder. Wren may have been a member of the royal commission appointed on May 14, 1662, “for reforming the buildings, ways, streets, and incum-brances, and regulating the hackney coaches in the City of London,” which included his close friend John Evelyn, diarist, virtuoso, and founding member of the society. Evelyn had already written about the deplorable effects of pollution from burning coal, proposing remedies modeled after Paris, Rome, and other cities he visited during 10 years of travel on the continent.

The Crown's interest in reforming London was driven by fears of catastrophes that did come to pass—widespread plague and fire in 1665 and 1666, respectively. Equally important, however, was its desire to create a new symbol for the restored Stuart monarchy. Paralleling the Rome of Augustus, London would be “from Brick made Stone and Marble” by the restored king. After the fire, the Royal Society declared its support of Charles II's proposals to build “a *New City*,” employing better materials and designs.

Wren and Evelyn were among the three society members who produced new plans for London immediately after the fire, plans that addressed these ongoing concerns. The other was Wren's friend Robert Hooke, the society's curator of experiments and professor of geometry at Gresham College. Together, Wren and Hooke played the largest role in guiding the rebuilding of the city. Both served on the royal commission, created a few weeks after the fire, that formulated the regulations, which appeared in the Rebuilding Act, for wider streets, brick and stone construction, and safer house designs. On its passage in late March 1667, Hooke began his more than five-year long survey of the city. Over the next few decades, Wren built the new custom house, the new St. Paul's, and about 50 churches, many in collaboration with Hooke, as was the case for the monument to the Great Fire. Thus, although London was returned more or less to its original layout, Wren ultimately, more than any other contemporary, helped establish new, more modern standards for the urban environment.

See also

Christopher Wren, Plan of London, City Planning, London, United Kingdom

Further Readings

- Bennett, J. A. (1982). *The Mathematical Science of Christopher Wren*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Downes, Kerry. (1982). *The Architecture of Wren*. New York: Universe Books.
- Soo, Lydia. (1998). *Wren's "Tracts" on Architecture and Other Writings*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

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