

Soaring beauty



Carole French visits 300-year-old St Paul's Cathedral to see how its statues, paintings, stonework and mosaics are being brought back to their original glory as part of a £40million restoration programme

It is a curious fact that wherever you stand along the embankment or on a bridge crossing the Thames in London the chances are you'll catch a glimpse of the mighty dome of St Paul's Cathedral.

For the past 300 years, its soaring structure has assumed its rightful place on the London skyline. The masterpiece creation of Sir Christopher Wren, who, astonishingly, designed and saw its completion in his own lifetime, never ceases to capture the imagination of the millions of visitors who, like me, are drawn to the building at the top of Ludgate Hill every year. We gaze in marvel at its architecture and ascend its stone steps to see its breathtaking interior and the treasures within.

In recent years, however, the cathedral has taken on a slightly grimy, dishevelled look, which, to be fair, is not surprising given that it has seen 300 years of city pollution and harsh weather, plus a couple of wars. It has seen primitive motor vehicles and trams, trains given to polluting the air with smog, soot from coal-burning homes and rather a lot of second world war bombing in nearby streets. It survived the blitz with a few battle scars. Add to that long-standing concerns about fractured stone in its structure as a result of

settlement after its completion in 1710, and you have a case for a major restoration project.

I visited St Paul's Cathedral to see just some of the work being done as part of a £40million restoration programme that will see the cleaning and repair of its creamy-white Portland stonework, statues, paintings and mosaics, and preserve them for generations to come. The work began in 2001 and will be complete by 2008, but this spring sees the unveiling of a major part of the project, the newly cleaned west wing and the interior.

Martin Stancliffe, Surveyor to the Fabric of St Paul's, and his team, working together with English Heritage and the Cathedral Fabric Commission for England, has restored the interior of the cathedral, inch by inch. Using state-of-the-art conservation techniques, the team has gradually removed centuries of grime to reveal the ivory luminescence of the stone.

A new technique, the Arte Mundit technique, has been developed especially for St Paul's. Layers of latex that contains alkaline EDTA are applied to the stone surface and left for around 24 hours to set. The flexible material can be used both inside and out, and be moulded

around intricately carved details. The latex draws out ingrained dirt and is then peeled away to reveal a cleansed section of stone. It is a long, laborious job, and I have nothing but admiration for the craftsmen and craftswomen who have such astonishing patience.

In turn, the work to the stonework has improved the quality of light inside the cathedral to such an extent that many architectural details and ornate decorations that have for years been obscured can now be seen clearly. You can't help but gaze in awe.

Outside, the west wing is, again, luminescent, with other sections of the building following suit in the coming phases of the restoration programme. Carbon, which creates a black crust on stonework, and sulphur dioxide are both found in the city's air even though the levels are markedly down than those of the 1960s. It is these substances that cause so much damage to stone as delicate as Portland.

The teams have also used state-of-the-art techniques to clean and restore paintings, marble monuments and mosaics, plus the magnificent dome painting. A precision engineered platform and scaffold was erected to cover a quarter of the

Opposite page

St Paul's and Blackfriars from the Thames

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The cleaned South Transept

Under the Dome of St Paul's looking towards the Quire

DID YOU KNOW?

- The cathedral is 157 metres long and 76 metres wide. Its height to the top of the cross is 111 metres
- The Dome and superstructure weigh approximately 65,000 tonnes
- The Crypt which contains the tombs of Lord Nelson and the Duke of Wellington, is the largest in Europe
- There are 259 steps to the Whispering Gallery





reminder of the importance of the spiritual side of life. The current cathedral - the fourth to occupy this site - was built between 1675 and 1710 after its predecessor was destroyed in the Great Fire of London.

As the cathedral of the capital city, St Paul's is the spiritual focus for the country and where people and events of overwhelming importance have been celebrated, mourned and commemorated since 1697. Services have included the funerals of Lord Nelson, the Duke of Wellington and Sir Winston Churchill; the Jubilee celebrations for Queen Victoria and King George V; peace services marking the end of the first and second world wars; the launch of the Festival of Britain and the Service of Remembrance and Commemoration

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St Paul's and the Millennium Bridge

ST PAUL'S CATHEDRAL

• St Paul's Cathedral holds matins, sermons, Holy Communion and choral services most days, to which visitors are welcomed. For further information of service times, along with details of tours, admission charges, facilities for disabled visitors and treasures to see visit www.stpauls.co.uk or telephone 020 7246 8348.

dome area, and then rotated through 90 degrees as restoration experts completed each 'quarter'.

The result is a part brilliant creamy-white building with a stunning interior that is well worth a visit. There's lots to see including the Whispering Gallery, the Nave, the dome itself and a number of historic crypts, plus as part of the celebrations marking St Paul's Cathedral's 300 years there are a number of other previously hidden areas to visit.

The library, for instance, is imposing and has remained virtually unchanged since Sir Christopher Wren had it built to his exact specifications all those years ago. It contains a remarkable record of historic public, religious and social debate in tomes that had survived almost unscathed, and is now open for visitors to see.

A collection of models, paintings and artefacts that include original designs for the cathedral are also on public display, including the magnif-

icent 18-foot model dating back to 1674 that Sir Christopher Wren commissioned as a guide for his craftsmen. The design was rejected in favour of the one we see today, somewhat to Wren's disappointment according to hearsay.

The Triforium, which means three-part gallery in Latin, is on a level high up on the walls of the Nave and contains archaeological remains of early London, while the seemingly unsupported geometric staircase that provides its access is an awesome construction in itself. Each step appears to support the next and thereby appears to 'hang' in mid air. Both the Triforium and the staircase are a must to see.

While the treasures and architecture of St Paul's Cathedral are inspiring, they serve to remind visitors such as myself of its long history and the fact that it was and still is an important religious building. It can trace its history back to 604AD when a cathedral dedicated to St Paul was built on the site as a constant

for September 11, 2001.

The 80th and 100th birthdays of Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother were also marked with services at the cathedral, as was the wedding of Charles, Prince of Wales, to Lady Diana Spencer and, more recently, the Thanksgiving for the Golden Jubilee of Her Majesty the Queen.

Over the centuries, St Paul's has changed to reflect shifting tastes and attitudes. Decoration has been added and removed, services have been updated, different areas have been put to new uses. Today, the history of the nation is written in the carved stone of its pillars and arches and is celebrated in its works of art and monuments.

Above all, St Paul's Cathedral, a heritage site of international importance, is a place where thousands worship and find peace. And with its £40million restoration programme well underway, it is a monument that has and will stand the test of time, attracting more and more visitors to its doors.