

SAINT PAUL'S CATHEDRAL

William Sancroft (1617–1693), Dean of Saint Paul's (1664–1668)

to Christopher Wren (1632–1723), Savilian Professor of Astronomy at Oxford (1661–1673)

25 April 1668

As he said of old, *Prudentia est quædam divinatio*, so science (at the height you are master of it) is prophetic too. What you whispered in my ear at your last coming hither is now come to pass. Our work at the west end of Saint Paul's is fallen about our ears. Your quick eye discerned the walls and pillars gone off from their perpendiculars, and I believe other defects too, which are now exposed to every common observer.

About a week since, we being at work about the third pillar from the west end on the south side, which we had new cased with stone where it was most defective almost up to the chapitre, a great weight falling from the high wall so disabled the vaulting of the side-aisle by it that it threatened a sudden ruin so visibly that the workmen presently removed, and the next night the whole pillar fell, and carried scaffolds and all to the ground.

The second pillar (which you know is bigger than the rest) stands now alone, with an enormous weight on the top of it; which we cannot hope should stand long, and yet we dare not venture to take it down.

This breach has discovered to all that look on it two great defects in Inigo Jones' work.¹ One, that his new case of stone in the upper walls (massy as it is) was not set upon the upright of the pillars, but upon the core of the groins of the vaulting; the other, that there were no key-stones at all to tie it to the old work, and, all this being very heavy with the Roman ornaments on the top of it and being already so far gone outwards, cannot possibly stand long. In fine, it is the opinion of all men that we can proceed no further at the west end. What we are to do next is the present deliberation, in which you are so absolutely and indispensably necessary to us that we can do nothing, resolve on nothing, without you.

It is, therefore, that, in my Lord of Canterbury's² name, and by his order (already, I suppose, intimated to you by the Dean of Christ Church³) we most earnestly desire your presence and assistance with all possible speed.

You will think fit, I know, to bring with you those excellent draughts and designs you formerly favoured us with; and, in the meantime, till we enjoy you here, consider what to advise that may be for the satisfaction of His Majesty⁴ and the whole nation, an obligation so great and so public that it must be acknowledged by better hands than those of your affectionate friend and servant.

London, 2 July 1668

Yesterday, my Lords of Canterbury, London, and Oxford⁵ met on purpose to hear your letter read once more, and to consider what is now to be done in order to the repairs of Saint Paul's. They unanimously resolved that it is fit immediately to attempt something, and that without you they can do nothing. I am therefore commanded to give you an invitation hither, in His Grace's name, and the rest of the commissioners, with all speed that we may prepare something to be proposed to His Majesty (the design of such a choir at least, as may be a congruous part of a greater and more magnificent work to follow), and then for the procuring contributions to defray this, we are so sanguine as not to doubt of it, if we could but once resolve what we would do and what that would cost.

¹ Inigo Jones (1573–1652), first prominent English architect

² Gilbert Sheldon (1598–1677), Archbishop of Canterbury (1663–1677)

³ John Fell (1625–1686), Dean of Christ Church College, Oxford (1660–1686), where Christopher Wren served as professor

⁴ Charles II (1630–1685), King of England (1660–1685)

⁵ The Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishops of London and Oxford

So that the only part of your letter we demur to is the method you propound of declaring first what money we would bestow, and then designing something just of that expense; for quite otherwise—the way their lordships resolve upon is to frame a design, handsome and noble, and suitable to all the ends of it, and to the reputation of the city and the nation; and to take it for granted that money will be had to accomplish it, or, however, to let it lie by till we have before us a prospect of so much as may reasonably encourage us to begin.

Thus far I thought good to prepare you for what will be said to you when you come, that you may not be surprised with it; and if my summons prevail not, my Lord the Bishop of Oxford has undertaken to give it you warmer, *ore tenus*⁶, the next week, when he intends to be with you, if at least you be not come towards us before he arrives; which would be a very agreeable surprise to us all, and especially to your very affectionate humble servant.

George d'Oyly, *The Life of William Sancroft, Archbishop of Canterbury* (London: John W. Parker, 1840):86–88.

⁶by mouth; orally