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Szerelmey
Stonework and Restoration

A comprehensive 300th anniversary programme of cleaning and repair is currently underway at St Paul's Cathedral. **Martin Stancliffe**, Surveyor to the Fabric of the iconic cathedral, explains the projects being undertaken and the enormous range of skills and techniques involved.

A cathedral dedicated to St Paul has stood at the top of Ludgate Hill for 1,400 years. Wren's cathedral – a masterpiece of English Baroque – was completed in 1710. To mark its 300th anniversary, a historic £40m programme of work is making the building ready for its next 300 years. This will see St Paul's cleaned and repaired inside and out, with greatly improved provision for those with disabilities.

Martin Stancliffe

£10m clean-up brings back the cathedral's sparkle

Architects is the project architect for the programme, which is being monitored by bodies such as the Cathedrals Fabric Commission for England and English Heritage.

The cleaning of the interior of the cathedral has been a major aspect of this programme. Shortly before the building's completion in 1710 Wren instructed that the interior stonework should be painted 'three times in oyle'. By the middle of the 19th century

it must have become extremely dirty, and the next 50 years saw an enormous operation undertaken to address the appearance of the interior.

In the 1930s the then Surveyor to the Fabric, Godfrey Allen, attempted to clean the dirty and darkened stone surface with little success. Another attempt to clean the interior after the Second World War was equally superficial. By contrast, the current £10.8m programme of work, which began in 2001, is enabling the stonework to be effectively cleaned for the first time, without any damage to its surface.

The project, which is due for completion in March 2005, has been carried out by a team of over 20 conservators and craftspeople managed by the main contractor for the project, Nimbus Conservation Ltd.

An important aspect of the interior programme is the work being carried out on the early 18th century dome painting by Sir James Thornhill, which shows eight scenes from the life of St Paul. Until now we had little evidence that Thornhill's painting had originally extended down to the Tambour – the area between the dome and the Whispering Gallery. After extensive research, we discovered a full scheme of fictive fluting, swags and crossed swords, and the continuation downward of the fictive shadowing used

by Thornhill in the dome above. Now, we are sealing what is there and have commissioned specialist artist decorator Charles Hesp to reconstruct the lost scheme using traditional materials. This project will be complete by the end of 2004 and will help to restore the architectural 'flow' of the interior.

Exterior work

As work on the interior nears completion, the focus of the programme is shifting to the cleaning of the building's exterior. The aim is not to make the stonework appear pristine but to remove harmful deposits and unify the Portland stone to restore the visual appearance of the cathedral.

The technique chosen uses minimal amounts of water to control dust, and therefore reduces the risk of water penetration and frost damage. It is also hand-controlled by skilled operatives using low pressure, so there is no risk of scarring or harsh abrasion to the surface of the stone. The £18.2m exterior programme of cleaning and repair will come to an end in 2010.

Work on the West Front and West Steps began in August 2003 and is due for completion in November 2004. After completing the cleaning and repair of the east end of the cathedral in March this year the cathedral's in-house team of stone masons is now starting work on the south side.

Other projects in the 300th anniversary programme of work include the relighting and redecoration of the Nelson and Wellington chambers in the crypt, and the creation of a Virtual Access Centre for those not able to visit areas such as the Whispering, Stone and Golden Galleries.

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