

Large Print Guide. 17pt Arial

# **Christopher Wren: What Legacy Now?**

Hamish MacPherson

The Old Royal Naval College

This guide assumes you are walking along the exhibition with the photographs on your right-hand side.

Please return this guide when you have finished with it.

## **1. Bronze bust of Sir Christopher Wren**

Sir Christopher Wren (1632-1723), like many of his peers, was a polymath, engaged in a wide range of scientific and social questions throughout his life. As well as being prodigiously talented, he lived in a perfect time for collaboration and research — during the Restoration of the English Monarchy and the rise of the European Enlightenment.

Some of Wren's interests were merely fleeting, some he passed on to others to continue, and some he completely mastered. Although best known as England's greatest architect, Wren also left us with an intangible legacy of ideas and interests. A legacy that has spread and evolved over hundreds of years and through many thousands of people, eight of whom are featured in this exhibition.

## 2. Fahima Hussain

In the mid 1600s, when he was a teenager, Wren drew two fingerspelling alphabets for deaf people. We don't know whether they were ever used by deaf people, or what motivated him although many natural philosophers at this time were interested in communication and cognition in deaf people.

Deaf people have always used signs to communicate. However, it was only in the late 1700s that children in deaf schools started signing together to develop what became British Sign Language (BSL).

Today Fahima Hussain teaches BSL at Remark! a Deaf-led organisation based in London. Over 150,000 people in the UK use BSL and in 2022 it became a legally recognised language in Great Britain.

### **3. Rob Gow**

In the 1640s the English set up sugar cane plantations in Barbados using convicts and prisoners from the British Isles and enslaved people from Africa. Natural philosophers, impressed by the extraordinary profits made from Barbados sugar, wanted to repeat this success in England and so turned their attention to beekeeping and the production of honey.

In 1654, at age 22, Wren designed a three-storey octagonal beehive. Although not immediately successful, it was part of the development of new forms of hive consisting of separate wooden boxes with removable frames.

In 2009, industrial designer Rob Gow was commissioned by Omlet to design 'The Beehaus', a more accessible and easier to use beehive, aimed at people living in cities.

#### **4. Jaideep Pandit**

In 1653, aged 21, Wren was elected a fellow (a senior research position) of All Souls College in Oxford where he began a period of anatomical research. A few years later Wren, his associate Robert Boyle and a team of 'learned men' injected a mixture of opium, wine, and ale into the vein of a dog, inspired by the effects of arrow poisons used by Indigenous Americans.

The dog recovered and the experiment, along with others they performed, helped doctors better understand blood and circulation. It would be nearly 200 years before there was a surgical procedure using anaesthesia.

Jaideep Pandit is Professor of Anaesthesia at the University of Oxford and Consultant Anaesthetist at the Oxford University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, working at the forefront of anaesthesia research and practice.

## **5. Professor Katherine Blundell OBE**

Christopher Wren started experimenting in astronomy while at school. In 1657, aged just 24, he was appointed the ninth Gresham Professor of Astronomy. This position involves giving free educational lectures to the public in London.

Four years later he was appointed a Professor of Astronomy at the University of Oxford.

In 2019, Katherine Blundell was appointed the 38th Gresham Professor of Astronomy. She is also Professor of Astrophysics at the University of Oxford. Beginning with a grant from the Royal Society, she has established a network of five telescopes around the world to measure what happens when stars explode, and to investigate how matter behaves across the galaxy in the vicinity of black holes.

## 6. Dr Lucy Collinson

Wren had been fascinated by microscopes from his early twenties and, in 1661, he even impressed King Charles II with magnified drawings of fleas and lice. The King asked for more and Wren persuaded his associate Robert Hooke to continue the work. Hooke's 'Micrographia', published in 1665, included 38 illustrations of insects and plants magnified up to 50 times.

Lucy Collinson is Head of Electron Microscopy at the Francis Crick Institute. Her team uses light, electron and ion beam microscopes to image the structure of cells and tissues, revealing how viruses and bacteria infect cells, how tumours develop, the connections in the brain, and how transplant rejection progresses. Modern microscopes can magnify samples millions of times.

## **7. Professor Giles Harrison**

In 1662, aged 30, Wren presented a design for a 'weather clock' to the Royal Society that would record air pressure, rainfall, wind and temperature every quarter of an hour.

It was left to Wren's associate Robert Hooke, five years later, to build the device, the first ever automatic weather recording system.

Such automatic recordings remain at the core of Meteorology but are now performed by electronic instruments. Professor Giles Harrison at the University of Reading develops methods of recording atmospheric properties, both at the surface and with weather balloons. With these he investigates cloud electrification, space weather, and ways of improving air temperature measurements.



## **8. Sarah Coutts**

In 1666 Wren was 33 and witnessed first-hand the devastation caused by the Great Fire of London. More than 13,000 houses, 87 churches and the first St Paul's Cathedral were burned to the ground.

Wren was one of several people who proposed new plans for the city. His ambitious schemes were not taken up, mainly due to lack of finances, but he did redesign St Paul's Cathedral and 51 new churches.

Today, London is home to 30 times more people and facing a very different kind of housing challenge. Sarah Coutts is Head of Design and Planning at Barking Riverside Limited, a company delivering more than 10,000 new homes and facilities in East London.

## 9. Lyndsey-Jane Lupton

One of Wren's last great works as an architect was the Royal Hospital for Seamen in Greenwich, now the Old Royal Naval College, which was only half finished when Wren died in 1723, aged 90. The buildings that stand above this exhibition were home to disabled and elderly veterans between 1705 and 1869, with nearly 3,000 men living here in the early 1800s.

Today, several charities provide care facilities for navy veterans including the Royal Naval Benevolent Trust. In 2022 the Trust opened a new care home designed by Lyndsey-Jane Lupton for LNT Care Developments. Admiral Jellicoe House in Portsmouth is home to 66 veterans and their dependants and is designed for residential, nursing and dementia support. It has a ceremonial flagpole and flies the White Ensign, the flag worn on British Royal Navy ships and shore establishments.

## **About the artist**

Hamish MacPherson is an artist and researcher interested in the crossovers between movement, choreography and philosophy.

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## **Credits**

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