

Dishonest Endeavours: the Man who Ended Wren's Career

by Adrian Tinniswood

Like Pietro Torrigiano, who has gone down in history as the man who broke Michelangelo's nose, William Benson (1682-1754) is remembered today for one thing - ousting Sir Christopher Wren from the prestigious Surveyorship of the King's Works. And with more justice. At least Torrigiano was a sculptor of genius; Benson was a crook with the management skills of a sheep and the moral rectitude of a tax-gatherer.

The son of a Bristol iron-merchant, Benson was an architectural dilettante and an ardent Palladian - not that we should hold either of those things against him - who first came to the notice of George I in 1716, when he designed a waterwork for the King's gardens at Herrenhausen in Hanover. This and his support for the Whigs meant that soon the talk was of how 'Mr B [is] a favourite of the Germans'.¹ He looked for advancement, and in 1717 he was promised the reversion of a lucrative sinecure, the Auditorship of the Imprests, as and when one of the two incumbent Auditors died. While he waited, he hit on the idea of taking over the King's Works. With more influential friends at court than the old Surveyor, he succeeded and Wren was sacked on 26 April 1718, after forty-nine years in office.

This was hard for Wren. But there was nothing to be done, and he received the news stoically. He duly cleared out his house in Scotland Yard and 'betook himself to a Country Retirement' at Hampton Court,² where he sought refuge in the study of Scripture. He was, as his son recalled, 'cheerful in solitude, and as well pleased to die in the Shade as in the Light'.³

But Benson wasn't finished yet. He sacked Nicholas Hawksmoor, giving his posts as Secretary to the Board and Clerk of the Works at Whitehall to his own brother. He gave the Clerkship of Works at Winchester to the Mayor of Shaftesbury, where he happened to be seeking re-election as an MP; and he did his level best to have John Vanbrugh removed from the Comptrollership of the Works. One of the 'dark Strokes in the King's Closet', as Vanbrugh put it,⁴ was to accuse the ex-Surveyor and the other officers at the Works of gross mismanagement, a charge which the Treasury took seriously - seriously enough to demand an answer from Wren. Bruised, battered and bewildered at this ignominious end to his career, the old man replied with dignity:

There will be no just grounds for the censuring former Managements; and as I am Dismiss'd, having worn out (by God's mercy) a long Life in the Royal service, and having made some Figure in the World, I hope it will be allow'd me to Die in Peace.⁵

Benson's attempt to discredit Wren and the others failed, and no more was heard of the charges. The remainder of his term as Surveyor, which has rightly been described as 'beyond question the most disastrous episode in the whole history of the royal works',⁶



Sir Christopher Wren, 1711, by Godfrey Kneller

was mercifully short. Having bullied and alienated Vanbrugh and the other Officers of the Board (the Paymaster, Charles Dartiquenave, was 'scar'd out of his Witts')⁷, he brought the Works to a virtual standstill. No business was done and the regular monthly meetings fell by the wayside, while Benson devised an ingenious plan to contract out the maintenance of the royal palaces for an annual fee of £12,000. Ostensibly the contractors were to be the master mason, master carpenter and master bricklayer of the Works, but in reality they were paid to keep their mouths shut and act as front-men for Benson himself. Even in an age where corruption was almost expected from those in public office, this was quite astonishing.

And emulating Sir Christopher Wren's dream of a new Parliament House, the Surveyor and his more talented Deputy, Colen Campbell, concocted a clever scheme to rebuild the Houses of Parliament. Not content to leave anything to chance, they announced to the Lords that the old building was structurally unsafe, and that their Chamber was about to collapse. The stonework was not fit to bear any weight, the wall plates were quite rotten and the roof in such a dangerous condition that even with props there was no guarantee that it wouldn't fall down. Their Lordships had better evacuate the premises without delay.

The Man Who Ended Wren's Career (cont.)

This was Benson's undoing. The Lords were unconvinced and called for a second opinion from the master-mason at the Works, Benjamin Jackson, who had no love for his new employer. He blew the whistle on him and exposed the claims as a pack of lies.

Benson was duly asked to leave his post in July 1719, having, as Hawksmoor said, 'got more in one year (for confusing the

King's Works) than Sr Chris. Wren did in 40 years for his honest endeavours'.⁸ He later went mad. The only good to come out of the whole sorry affair was that around the time of his dismissal, still pursuing his dreams of a Palladian England, he persuaded his brother-in-law to commission a new Palladian villa from Colen Campbell. The brother-in-law was Henry Hoare, and the villa was Stourhead in Wiltshire.

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- 1 Memoirs of John Ker of Kersland (1726), II, 111.
 - 2 Stephen Wren [with Christopher Wren junior], *Parentalia, or Memoirs of the Family of the Wrens* (1750) 344.
 - 3 *Parentalia*, 344.
 - 4 Geoffrey Webb (ed.), *The Works of Sir John Vanbrugh*, Nonesuch Press (1928), IV, 109.
 - 5 Treasury Board Papers 220 f216.
 - 6 H M Colvin (ed.), *History of the King's Works V* (1976), 65.
 - 7 *Works of Sir John Vanbrugh*, IV, 109.
 - 8 Quoted in Howard Colvin, *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects 1600-1840*, John Murray (1978), 109. For a fuller account of Benson's disastrous Surveyorship, see Colvin (ed.), *History of the King's Works V* (1976), 57-65. Colvin suggests Benson was already of unsound mind in 1718. This is a charitable view.



About Adrian Tinniswood

Adrian Tinniswood is an accomplished historical author and architectural expert. His London books include *By Permission of Heaven: The Story of the Great Fire of London* and *His Invention So Fertile: A Life of Sir Christopher Wren*. His latest work, *The Pirates of Barbary*, was published in 2010. Adrian's web site is www.adriantinniswood.co.uk.