Sir Christopher Wren Critical Texts

'History of the Royal Society', The Royal Society, n.d., <https://royalsociety.org/about-us/history/> accessed 4 January 2019.
'The very first 'learned society' meeting on 28 November 1660 followed a lecture at Gresham College by Christopher Wren [on astronomy]. Joined by other leading polymaths including Robert Boyle and John Wilkins, the group soon received royal approval, and from 1663 it would be known as 'The Royal Society of London for Improving Natural Knowledge'. The Royal Society's motto 'Nullius in verba' is taken to mean 'take nobody's word for it'. It is an expression of the determination of Fellows to withstand the domination of authority and to verify all statements by an appeal to facts determined by experiment.'

'Science, Religion and Politics: The Royal Society', National Portrait Gallery, 2010 <https://www.npg.org.uk/whatson/display/20101/science-religion-and-politics-the-royal-society.php> accessed 4 January 2019.
'They rejected the classical ideal that knowledge could be acquired through contemplation alone. Instead, they drew on the 'new philosophy' devised by Sir Francis Bacon to pursue knowledge through first hand observation, data collection and experimentation. This revolutionary approach to investigating the world laid the foundations for three and a half centuries of scientific discovery and innovation.'

Nikolaus Pevsner, *An Outline of European Architecture* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, [1943] 1985), p. 324-326.
'a blend of the classical and Baroque … The dome of St Paul's, one of the most perfect in the world, is classical indeed … [with] a reposeful outline … a colonnade round the drum … the alternation of bays where columns flank niches with bays where they stand in front of loggias introduces an element of unclassical variety. The lantern … is … bizarre … And as for the façade of St Paul's, begun in 1685, it is, with the coupled columns … and the two fantastic towers … a decidedly Baroque composition. … The dome is as wide as nave and aisles together … It adds splendour and surprise to the whole composition. The diagonally placed piers are hollowed out into colossal niches. Niches also set the outer walls of the aisles and choir aisles into an undulating motion. … Wren's style … is a Baroque version of classicism.'

Margaret Whinney, *Wren* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1971), p. 131/132.
'Wren was building, in the age of the Late Baroque, for a Protestant community, and a conservative clergy, who wished to preserve the Latin cross plan which they had inherited from the Middle Ages. Money was short, materials came in slowly and, at the beginning of the work at least, Wren lacked experience as an architect. He gained it by ceaselessly adapting himself to circumstances and using his mathematical genius to overcome difficulties.'

Quoted in Richard D Altick, 'National Monuments', *Representing the Nation*, ed. David Boswell (Abingdon: Routledge/Open University, 1999), pp. 240-257, p. 252.

The experience of visiting St Paul's, the 'National Church', was criticised in 1842:
'There is a fee for the body of the church, a fee for the choir, a fee for the whispering gallery, a fee for the library, a fee for the clock-work, a fee for the great bell, a fee for the little bell, a fee for the ball at the top, and a fee for the vaults at the bottom; wherever an Englishman would put his nose, in any corner of his own National Church, built by the contributions of his ancestors, he is met by a mob of money-takers, cheque-takers, and the like, vociferating fees – fees – fees! … The demands of the money-takers are studiously regulated so as to extort the greatest possible amount of money from the visitors.'

Christy Anderson, 'Masculinity and English Architectural Classicism', *Gender and Art*, ed. Gill Perry (New Haven: Yale University Press with the Open University, 1999), p. 146-152.

'Wren elaborated on the architectural ideas of [Inigo] Jones, and sought to make what was earlier thought radical, that this the classical architectural language, into a universal norm. The basis for this universal architecture would be the orders, and Wren wrote in an unpublished architectural treatise that 'architecture aims at Eternit; and therefore the only thing incapable of Modes and fashions is its principles, the Orders' … Instead of fashion, Wren appeals to a language he knew well, the vocabulary of scientific language as used by the newly formed Royal Society … through Wren's writings there is a desire to align architecture with the methods and practices of scientific analysis.

Wren wanted to keep architecture above fashion, or to be more specific, independent of the forces which govern women's fashion. He was particularly scathing in his view of French architecture precisely because it followed current taste. In a letter describing the new buildings at Versailles, Wren wrote that

> Not an Inch within but is crowded with little curiosities of Ornaments: the Women, as they make here the Language and Fashions, and meddle with Politicks and Philosophy, so they sway also in Architecture; works of Filigrand, and little Knacks are in great Vogue; but Building certainly ought to have the Attribute of the eternal, and therefore the only Thing incapable of new Fashions. The masculine Furniture of Palais Mazarine pleas'd me much better …'

… Wren criticizes the lavish interiors at Versailles as being filled with the small details, the 'Filigrand, and little Knacks', that are the purview of women, and by implication belong to an 'inferior feminine' category of architectural decoration. … Wren argues for a national character in architecture, one which would not be swayed by fashion on either the interior or exterior. …For Wren, the condemnation of French architecture as feminine allowed him to highlight English architecture and national character as masculine and scientific.'

- ➢ Consider this late Victorian description of the Cathedral, made at the height of Empire.
- Mark technical vocabulary.
- Mark sections that praise Wren and the Cathedral, and sections that are critical.
- What critical comment could you make about the perspective of the writer?

Banister Fletcher, *A History of Architecture on the Comparative Method* (London: Athlone Press, [1896] 1967), p. 906, p. 913.

'S. Paul's Cathedral, London (1675-1710), occupying the site of the Mediaeval cathedral destroyed in the Great Fire, is Wren's masterpiece. The first design, of which there is a model in the north triforium, was a Greek cross in plan, with projecting vestibule, but the influence of the clergy, who desired a long nave and choir suitable for ritual, finally caused the selection of a Latin cross of Mediaeval type of plan. The interior has a length of 463 ft including apse, a breadth including aisles of 101 ft, and an area of about 64,000 square ft. This plan, in which Wren wisely so spread the weight of the structure that in the crypt solids and voids are approximately equal, consists of a great central space at the crossing suitable for vast congregations … crowned by a dome painted by Sir James Thornhill; choir and nave in three bays, north and south transepts with semicircular porticoes, and projecting western portico of coupled columns. The western bay of the nave is, unlike the other bays square on plan, and is flanked by chapels, which project externally. This bay has coupled columns supporting lateral arches, through the northern of which is visible the Chapel of S. Dunstan, with its fine columnar screen of carved woodwork. The piers of the nave are fronted with Corinthian pilasters, entablature, and attic which conceals the triforium, while the nave is crowned by ingeniously designed

saucer-like domes, 91 ft high, beneath which the clear-story [clerestory] windows (not visible from the exterior) have lunette vaults. The choir is enriched with fine stalls and organ case by Grinling Gibbons, and beautiful hammered iron gates by Tijou, while it terminates in the modern reredos, the vaulting being decorated by Sir William Richmond with coloured glass mosaics. The dome and its support presented a complicated structural problem. The dome is carried on eight piers, and is 112 ft in diameter at the base of the high drum, at the level of the Whispering Gallery, diminishing to 101 ft at the top of the drum, and is of triple construction. The inner dome of brick, 18 ins thick, has its eye 214 ft 3 in above the floor, while the intermediate conical dome, of brick 18 ins thick, strengthened by a double chain of iron, supports the stone lantern, ball, and cross; besides which the outer dome also rests on this intermediate cone and is formed of timber covered with lead. Eight openings are formed in the summit of the outer dome to admit light to the inner dome.

The vaulted crypt, extending under the whole church, is the last resting place of many famous men, including Nelson, Wellington and Wren himself.

The exterior is exceedingly effective and groups well with the central dome. The facades have two Order, the lower Corinthian and the upper Composite, totalling 110 ft 6 ins in height. The aisles are only one storey high, so the part above them is a screen-wall introduced to give dignity and to act as a counterweight to the flying buttresses concealed behind it, which receive the thrust of the nave vault. Considerable criticism has been direct against this screen wall, which said to be a sham, since the space behind it is unroofed, and a suggestion is here put forward that such objections might be removed if the wall were pierced with openings so as to show the flying buttresses behind. The western façade, 177 ft wide, approached by a broad flight of steps which give scale to the building, has a central two-storeyed portico of coupled Corinthian and Composite columns superimposed, surmounted by a pediment sculptured with the Conversion of S. Paul. The portico is flanked by two beautifully proportioned tapering steeples, which are pleasing features in the design, 212 ft 6 ins high above the nave floor, that on the left containing bells and that on the right
the clock, while the fine semicircular porticoes to the transepts are notable. The external dome is probably the finest in Europe, for the projecting masses of masonry at the meeting of nave and transepts, forming the vestries and stairs to dome, express support from the ground upwards. The peristyle round the drum, with an external diameter of about 139 ft 6 ins, is particularly effective with three quarter columns attached to radiating buttress-walls; while as every fourth intercolumniation is filled with masonry, there is an appearance of strength and solidity lacking in the Pantheon, Paris. Above the colonnade is the ‘Stone Gallery, and attic supporting the dome, which is crowned with lantern, ball and cross, weighing 850 tons, rising to a height of 366 ft above the pavement.

There are some striking contrasts in the history of the building of the great metropolitan cathedral and that of S. Peter, Rome. S. Paul’s, London, had one architect and one master mason, and was built in 35 years, during the episcopate of one bishop; while S. Peter’s, Rome, had 13 successive architects and numerous master-masons, and the building extended over 100 years, during the pontificates of 20 popes.’