



Some very interesting Plumbers' Company family connections with the building of St Paul's Cathedral

By John Carnaby

After the Great Fire of London in 1666, the architect Christopher Wren was given the contract to rebuild St Paul's Cathedral that was built between the years 1675 to 1710.

This article shows the close association of Liverymen of the Plumbers' Company with Christopher Wren and also the marriage of one of their daughters to a member of the Strong family of stone-masons, who built St Paul's Cathedral.

It was in 1669 that Christopher Wren became the Surveyor of the Kings Works, a position that was previously held by Liveryman and Past Master John Embree, who was also Sergeant Plumber in 1639-1661.

Stone mason brothers Thomas and Edward Strong senior came to London in 1672 and were awarded their first London contract by Christopher Wren, St Stephen's Walbrook, this lovely church still stands.

Christopher Wren was knighted in 1673. Sir Christopher Wren as Surveyor of the Kings Works had to keep in close touch with all senior tradesmen at the time to ensure he had the very best and reliable men working for him. It is interesting to note his personal connection in a comment that was made by him in 1676, prior to Charles Atherton receiving the position of Sergeant Plumber *"This is to certify that Charles Atherton, plumber, hath been constantly employed in his Majesty's work, as assistant to his brother-in-law, Peter Brent, Serjeant plumber to his Majesty; and I have always found him an able and honest artisan."* This recommendation from Sir Christopher Wren certainly secured his position.

It was during this period that Sergeant Plumber Atherton's main contracts were at Windsor Castle and Hampton Court where he employed many plumbers and also took on a number of apprentices. Liveryman Matthew Roberts (later Master of the Plumber's Company in 1701) being his senior master plumber at Windsor Castle.

The building of St Paul's Cathedral was well under way with Sir Christopher Wren overseeing all the work of the stone masons. Sadly Thomas Strong died 1681 but the contract for St Paul's still continued and headed by Edward senior (1652 – 1723) and much later assisted his son Edward junior (1676 – 1741). Edward (junior) had been apprenticed to his father and became a Liveryman of the Masons' Company in 1698, a warden in 1712, then Master in 1718.

By 1694 Edward Strong senior and junior were employing some 65 Masons working on St Paul's and whilst working on the building, Edward Strong junior met Susannah Roberts (1674-1741). Susannah was the daughter of plumber Joseph Roberts who in turn was the son of plumber Matthew Roberts, who at that time was working with Sergeant Plumber Atherton at Windsor Castle. Joseph Roberts also worked on the Tower of London, Westminster Palace and Hampton Court.

In 1697 St Paul's Cathedral was consecrated and the first service was held there even though the building was still being built.

Then in 1698, Edward Strong junior, after completing his apprenticeship with his father, travelled to France and Holland with his friend Christopher Wren junior, the son of Sir Christopher Wren to look at the architecture and buildings, Wren junior worked for his father as clerk of works. It was understood at that time these two young men were thinking of moving to Europe permanently, but this did not happen. They returned and were both later recorded as two young men working on Marlborough House, which was designed by Sir Christopher Wren.

In the following year Edward Strong junior aged 23, Citizen and Mason of London married Susannah Roberts aged 25, the daughter of plumber Joseph Roberts. As the Strong family were responsible for the building of St Paul's Cathedral it is not surprising that they were married there on 20th April 1699.

In 1701 Susannah Strong's grandfather, Matthew Roberts, became Master of the Plumbers' Company and a year or so later he petitioned the Lord High Treasurer for work he had carried out at Hampton Court, Kensington and Windsor that amounted to £3,971-5s-2d, saying ... *"that had it not been for his care in maintaining of servants at his own charge, who resided constantly at Windsor, the painted ceilings as well in St George's Hall as of several other places had been quite ruined, the lead which covered the same being decayed, & the gutters soe very much sunk, till mended by the petitioner."*

The following will give you a good idea of their children's marriages into the gentry and the aristocratic circles that the Strong family moved in.

Edward junior and Susannah's first daughter, also Susannah, was born in 1701 and later married John Strange in 1722, (later Sir John Strange), a politician and judge. It was recorded at the time of their wedding that her father in law, *"Mr Strong, the Mason at St Brides Church in Fleet Street, with whom tis said, he will have seven thousand pounds portion."*

They then had a second daughter, Letitia Strong who was born in 1705. In 1730 she married James Munday, an Inner Temple Attorney, in the Chapel Royal, Westminster.

Edward junior and Susannah's third daughter Martha was born in 1707. She first married Henry Cranmer an "*Eminent solicitor in Chancery-Lane and Attorney at Law, who died very rich*" of "mortification" in 1738. She secondly married Sir Thomas Parker in Somerset House in 1740, an "*English barrister and judge, Privy Counsellor and Lord Chief Baron of the Exchequer.*"

In 1705 masons, Edward senior and Edward junior were also given the contract to build Blenheim Palace; this project caused a number of payment problems for them. The Marlborough family refused to have Sir Christophe Wren as their Architect and chose Sir John Vanbrugh who they later fell out with. It was during construction the Marlborough family were forced into exile abroad and building work stopped. Eventually when the contract was complete the outstanding payments took a number of years to be resolved.

Matthew Roberts (Past Master Plumber) who was grandfather to the above children sadly died in 1705 and was buried in Christ Church, Newgate Street.

Matthew's son Joseph Roberts in 1707 was asked by Sir Christopher Wren to give an estimate for lead-work on St Paul's Cathedral... "*To cover the Cupola on St Paul's with a girth of about 30,000 feet in Derbyshire lead to be cast at £12 to the foot and weighing around some 170 tons for a cost of £2,500.00, and may be performed before Christmas, 1708 if not obstructed.*" Sir James Thornhill later decorated the inside of the Cupola.

In October 1708 the two sons named after their fathers, Christopher Wren junior and Edward Strong junior, laid the



The Lantern

Cathedral's very last stone on the St Paul's lantern that sits on top of the dome. It was a form of "topping out" ceremony, as we know it today, some 85mts (approx 300ft) above the ground that supports the Golden Cross.

Sergeant Plumber, Charles Atherton died in 1709 aged 69 yrs; therefore a new Sergeant Plumber had to be found.

It was in the same year that Mason Edward Strong junior, Plumber Joseph Roberts and Clerk of Works Christopher Wren junior were all still

working together on the Marlborough House contract in London under the supervision of Sir Christopher Wren.

Sir Christopher was requested once again to suggest a competent person to take over the vacant position of

Sergeant Plumber.

He wrote to the Lord High Treasurer saying.... "*of the late serjeant plumber. Recommends for that place Mr Joseph Roberts as "a very able & honest man," having a great debt due from the Crown in the last and present reigns, and continuing with great cheerfulness to give credit in the office of H.M. Works, where he had been employed since the decease of the late serjeant plumber. Dated Scotland Yard, 20 June 1710.*" Joseph Roberts was duly elected as Sergeant Plumber.

Joseph and his late father Matthew had both served under Sergeant Plumber Charles Atherton for a number of years at Windsor Castle.

In 1711, two more memorable events took place, Sergeant Plumber Joseph Roberts became Master of the Plumbers' Company and St Paul's Cathedral was now "formally" open.

Edward Strong junior went to Europe again in 1711, this time with James Thornhill (later Sergeant Painter). This famous artist was responsible for work at Blenheim Palace, the dome at St Paul's Cathedral and the ceiling in the Painted Hall in Greenwich.

Edward and Susannah's last daughter Lucy was born 1715 and later married Thomas Phillips of the Middle Temple in July 1737. They were married in St Paul's Cathedral.

It was recorded that.... "*On Tuesday Councillor Phillips of the Temple, a Gentleman of a very considerable estate, was married at St Paul's Cathedral to Miss Strong, (Daughter to Mr Strong of Greenwich) youngest sister to the Solicitor General's lady an agreeable young gentlewoman with a fine fortune. The company had a splendid dinner provided for them at Pomack's.*"

Edward junior's good friend, now Sir James Thornhill, was knighted in 1720 and made Sergeant Painter of all his Majesty's Palaces and Houses.

Sad news was recorded in 1723/4 that Edward Strong senior of "*New Barns, St Albans, formally Mason to St Paul's Cathedral*" had died and in the same period his good friend Sir Christopher Wren also died. Sir Christopher was buried in St Paul's Cathedral and Edward senior in St Peter's, St Albans.

It was now and extremely demanding time for Edward junior overseeing not only his own work but also his late father's contracts. Edward junior had previously been nominated and agreed to serve the office of Sheriff in the City of London, but had to decline the position. He was fined accordingly...

"*On Thursday Mr Edward Strong paid his fine of £400 and 20 marks into the chamber of London, to excuse himself from serving the office of Sheriff.*"

1725 brought to an end the numerous Court proceedings regarding the lack of payments to the Strong family for the building of Blenheim Palace. Edward junior had no alternative but to appeal to the House of Lords for his outstanding payments for work he had carried out. The Duchess of Marlborough then had to pay Edward junior

the sum of £9,000 that was very long overdue.

In 1729, Edward Strong junior became a Governor of St Bartholomew's Hospital and in the same year his friend, Sergeant Painter Sir James Thornhill, attended the marriage of his daughter to another famous painter William Hogarth.

Edward Strong junior made his very detailed will in July 1741 and died in the same year. He owned very many houses and farms in and outside of London that he left to his large family. The Bank of England also recorded an additional £12,000 along with stocks worth another £9,000. Edward was buried in Greenwich.

A year later Susannah Strong's father, Sergeant Plumber Joseph Roberts also died at his house in Scotland Yard, Whitehall in 1742 a very wealthy gentleman..... *"He left the bulk of his estate amongst his three nieces, the Lady Strange the wife of John Strange, Knt. His Majesties Solicitor General, Mrs Parker, wife of the Hon Mr Justice Parker; and Mrs Munday, wife of James Munday, Esq of Chancery-Lane."*

The Plumbers' Company family connection with St Paul's Cathedral still continues to this day. In 2011 Mr Oliver



In 1732, a painting by Charles Philips of the Strong family.

It shows Edward Strong junior standing in black and Susannah (nee Roberts) on the left seated next her grand children and other family members.

(Families at tea demonstrated their wealth, domesticity, and genteel informality. Tea-drinking came to epitomise civilized behaviour in the eighteenth century.)

Bragg Caroe was appointed as "Surveyor of the Fabric of St Paul's Cathedral."

Oliver is the son of Martin Bragg Caroe, who was Master Plumber in 1985.

His grandfather and great grandfather were also Past Masters of the Plumbers' Company.