

Pillar talk

Around Town

As a new public space around it is unveiled, **Peter Watts** offers ten amazing things about Monument you probably didn't know

1. It wasn't built by Christopher Wren

Although often attributed to Wren, London's great forgotten landmark was most certainly designed by Robert Hooke, the seventeenth-century polymath, in 1677. 'Wren was the master planner and he set out the location of the Monument, but Hooke designed it,' explains the City of London Corporation's Street Scene Manager Victor Callister, who has redeveloped the area around the base.

The Monument was built to commemorate the Great Fire. At 202 feet (supposedly the distance to the baker's shop from which the fire originated), it is the tallest isolated stone column in the world, and is topped by a flaming urn of gilted bronze; Wren wanted a statue of Charles II, but Hooke had his way. If you pay £2 and climb the 311 steps, you will be rewarded with wonderful views of London, plus a handsome certificate.

2. There used to be something fishy about it

'Wren designed the yard around the Monument as an Italianate piazza, with a series of terraces,' says Callister. 'It was like that until 1870, when the Victorians decided to open up Monument Street to take traffic from Billingsgate Market.'

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couldn't be proven because the vibrations from the traffic made the Monument too wobbly

They got rid of swathes of post-reconstruction buildings and left the Monument isolated on a traffic island, with vehicles and men in white coats stinking of fish going either side.'

Since 1992, reduction of traffic in the City has allowed the area around the Monument to be opened up again, and more public seating installed.

It's part of a project called Street Scene Challenge that attempts to create open space throughout the City,' says Callister. 'The City has always thrived on interaction between people – in coffee shops, churchyards and bars – and we're working in that tradition. We find that whenever we create space, no matter how small, it's always used. Sometimes the



Piazza the action The new-look base, as seen from the top

seats get taken before they've been fixed to the ground.'

3. The Monument is a scientific instrument

Hooke had an inquisitive mind. He invented the spirit level, the sash window and the crosshair sight, spotted Jupiter's red zit and worked out the number of vibrations for each musical note. And the Monument is not just a monument.

Hooke believed that if you studied stars, you would see a wobble that would betray the gravitational pull of a planet. To be sure, he needed to make observations from a stable building. So the Monument was designed with an observatory in the basement and a hole running all the way through the building and out through the orb on top. Hooke's theory was correct, but it couldn't be proven because the vibrations from the traffic made the Monument too wobbly.

4. It's about to get a makeover

With the work around the base completed, the Corporation of London can start

working on the old girl herself. The Monument is due her 100-year refurb. 'The condition is amazingly good,' says Callister. 'We're keeping the bomb damage on the base, and will try to repair the structural decay on the statues.'

Said statues, currently somewhat mildewy, were designed by Edward Pierce the Younger, while the allegorical bas-relief panel, depicting Charles II in Roman costume tending to a ravaged woman representing the devastated city, was by Caius Gabriel Cibber.

5. It was an anti-Catholic column

The panel on the north of the base was altered in 1681 to attribute the Great Fire to 'Popish frenzy', chiming with the popular notion that the fire had been started by Catholic deviants. This inscription was removed, recut and then obliterated for good in 1831, but not before prompting Alexander Pope's admonishment:

'Where London's column, pointing at the skies

Like a tall bully, lifts the head and lies.'

6. It has reflected glory

As well as tidying up the ground area, the Corporation of London has installed a new pavilion with public toilets and facilities for those who work at the Monument. Built using the same black Irish limestone that's on the paving and viewing platforms, the pavilion's crowning glory is its roof.

'We wanted a connection between the building and the monument,' explains Callister. 'The architect came up with these diamond-shaped pieces of glass held with universal joints – which were invented by Hooke – so when you look down from the viewing platform, the orb is reflected back at you, and the whole roof appears as a gold surface.'

7. This used to be a suicide hotspot

The new roof will at least give thwarted jumpers something to look at. The Monument saw six suicides between 1788 and 1842. This prompted a fraudulent notice in the *Times* in 1827: 'A person will attend at the Monument, and will, for the sum of £2,500, undertake to jump clear of the said Monument, and in coming down will drink some beer and eat a cake, act some trades, shorten and make sail and bring ship safe to anchor.'

8. The Monument is 'not humane'

The construction of the pavilion means that the three people who work at the Monument can escape its horribly cramped conditions. 'Moving them out has allowed us to think about what we can do with the ground floor,' says Callister. An 18-month, £5-million scheme will see the installation of a permanent exhibition space.

9. Until then, head to the British Library

The Library's current 'London: A Life In Maps' exhibition includes some of Robert Hooke's original sketches for alternative versions of the Monument. This sort of material will soon be found at the Monument itself.

10. It's getting ready for a comeback

At the height of its popularity at the start of the twentieth century, the Monument was drawing around 500,000 visitors a year, but this has fallen off to 300,000. 'We hope that clearing up all the mess at ground level means school parties studying the fire will want to come back,' says Callister. 'This is one of London's icons, but it's dropped off the radar.' Time for rediscovery.

The Monument, Monument St, EC3 (020 7626 2717). Open daily 9.30am-5pm. Adm £2, children (5-15) £1, under-fives free. The new public space will open officially on Jan 31.

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