

OLD ST PAUL'S

by Dora Thornton, FSA, curator at the British Museum

The painting represents a dream—in this case a dream for the restoration of Old St Paul's Cathedral. Already a well-known tourist site as well as a place of worship, the Cathedral was in a poor state of repair by 1600. The legal clerk Henry Farley thought it such a disgrace that he campaigned for its restoration. In his poem *The Complaint of Paules*, printed in 1616, he dreamt he heard the Cathedral's lament. The Society's painting by John Gipkyn, a painter who worked on stage design and pageants, dates from the same year, and seems to be a private commission by Farley to illustrate the poem and promote his aims.



The painting is in three scenes on two hinged panels—one of them double-sided—which are designed to be read like a book. The story starts on the cover, with a panorama showing King James VI and I in procession from Southwark over London Bridge to the City. Biblical texts promoting a royal restoration of the Cathedral stream from Heaven,

while on the imaginary airy mountain on the right, Henry Farley lies dreaming, with his hat beside him. The propaganda element in the painting makes it much more than just a rare view of Jacobean London. Every detail counts. Ships on the Thames carry timber and stone for the proposed rebuilding. One flies an early version of the Union flag for Great Britain, the result of James VI and I's ambition to meld his two kingdoms of Scotland and England into one new nation, the British – an imperialist vision which was met with distrust on both sides of the border. Even more telling is the way in which the Globe and Rose playhouses in the notorious suburb of Bankside have been replaced by churches – despite the fact that there were no churches there and that the painter, Gipkyn, had strong theatrical connections. It was all part of Farley's need to transform London's red-light district into a place of piety in promoting his vision.



The message is revealed as you open up the two painted panels on their hinges. Inside the left panel, designed to be read first, is a scene showing public preaching at St Paul's in the presence of the King and his civic officials. The Cathedral looks dark, with the tower shorn of its spire which had been struck by lightning in 1561. The story ends in the right-hand scene, with its finale of the restored cathedral with a new cupola. Fluttering streamers held by angels proclaim a biblical message:

“BLESSED BEE THE LORD GOD OF OUR FATHERS WHICH PUTTETH SUCH THINGS AS THESE INTO THE HEART OF OUR GOOD KING TO BEAUTIFIE THE HOUSES OF THE LORD...”

The painting may have belonged to John Donne, poet and Dean of St Paul's, whose sermons drew large crowds as for a play. Acquired by the Society in 1781, it is not just one man's dream, but one of the first British paintings of a historic monument.



Further Reading:

J.Franklin, B. Nurse and P.Tudor-Craig, *Catalogue of the Paintings in the Collection of the Society of Antiquaries of London*, 2015, cat.77.

Pamela Tudor-Craig, *'Old St Paul's': The Society of Antiquaries' Diptych, 1616*, London
Topographical Society Publication, London 2014.

Jonathan Bate and Dora Thornton, *Shakespeare: Staging the World*, London 2012, pp. 22-3.

Making History, Antiquaries in Britain 1707-2007, exh.cat., Royal Academy of Arts and Society
of Antiquaries, London 2007, p. 42, cat.1