BATH STONE IN LONDON IN THE 1820s

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Until the Kennet & Avon Canal was opened, Bath Stone achieved only limited success in London. Transport was a major problem (although not the only one, see Journal, 2003). Whether by wagon on the poor roads of the day or by a river and sea passage via Bristol, haulage of stone from Bath to London was a lengthy and expensive business.

With the completion of the canal in 1810, it became possible to take stone by barge directly from Bath and the Avon valley to the capital. However it was not the best timing! The Regency may have begun that very year but the country had been at war for many years and would be for another five. Even after that, five more years of political and economic upheaval were in store. The nation was deeply in debt and the building industry was one of the principal casualties. Many building projects were deferred or abandoned in those years.

So it's perhaps not surprising that there seems to have been little movement of stone on the new canal in the first ten years of its operation.

After 1820, the business climate rapidly improved. Even so, selling Bath Stone in London, against competition from Portland and other suppliers, including the close look-alike stone from Caen, was never going to be easy. But there were some notable successes.

Bath Stone had influential friends in London. One was none other than the leading architect of the day, John Nash. Among Nash's sources of inspiration Bath held a prominent place. The architectural historian Sir John Summerson believed this was natural enough: 'Bath was the classic original to which any English architect would turn for ideas'. Less obviously Nash, again according to Summerson, 'thought of all his London work in terms of Bath stone' and used it when he could afford to. This must have been because of what Bath itself looked like, given the limited use of the stone in London hitherto.

Sadly, Nash was hardly ever able to afford his favourite material. He used ashlar masonry only three times in London, all in the 1820s and near the end of his career, at Buckingham Palace and for his two London churches. Generally he had to make do with brick. The question of appearance was solved by stucco, finished in his case so as to look like Bath Stone. To imitate ashlar, Nash, like other users of stucco in those days, would usually have it scored with lines to represent the mortar joints, and sometimes even 'frescoed' to imitate the weathering of the real thing (this was a more common sight then than it is now). For architectural detail he was able to use Bath Stone a bit more freely (e.g. in Regent Street, but all gone now).

The one place where Nash was able to use Bath Stone on a grand scale was Buckingham Palace. I touched on this sorry tale in the 2003 Journal. The stone, or at least some of it, apparently came from Farleigh Down. Nash's successor on the work at the Palace, Edward Blore, continued using Bath Stone as that initial work (north, south and west wings) proceeded to completion in 1832. Blore also used a lot of Bath Stone (from Winsley) at Lambeth Palace, c1830.

The second Nash building in Bath Stone is for us more interesting because it is still there pretty much in its original form, in a prominent position and open to view. It is the famous All Souls Church in Langham Place, completed in 1823, (drawing below).

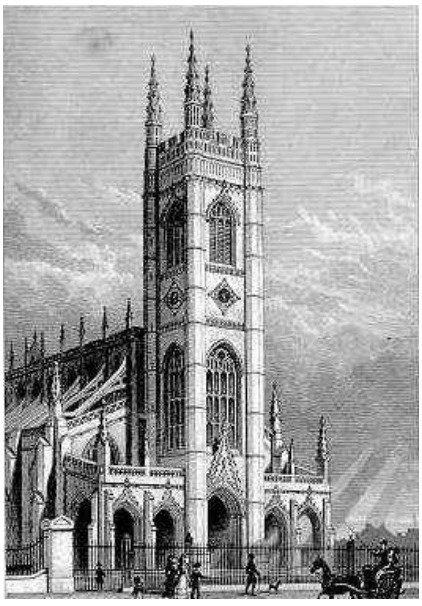
All Souls Church, Langham Place

Nash's other church in London was St Mary's Haggerston, in the East End. It was built in 1826 and demolished by the Luftwaffe in 1941. It had a brick body but a Bath Stone west front and tower.

To quote Summerson once more, and underline the point about Nash's use of stucco, Bath Stone was used for All Souls 'to bring the church into harmony with the painted stucco of its surroundings'. So in the end the real thing arrived to match the imitation! The stone Nash used for All Souls was from Combe Down. It did well enough, spire and all, in the foul London air of the time, but not as well as he said it would. He claimed the church would require no maintenance for 200 years but in less than half that time a stone balustrade that went right round the

church was so badly decayed that it had to be removed except over the portico. A report as early as 1874 (Building News) said the stone 'showed symptoms of decay in several parts'. The building suffered severe bomb damage in 1940 but was faithfully restored using Bath Stone and re-opened in 1951. By the 1980s eroded stonework on the spire and rotunda was in need of repair and this time French limestone was used. Whether Bath stone was not available, or too expensive, or not wanted, I do not know. French stone has always been widely used in southern England, virtually a domestic market. But at All Souls the warm Bath stone ashlar is still there, making a sharp contrast with the white Portland of the looming hulk of Broadcasting House next door.

At the same time as John Nash was planning All Souls, designs were invited for an important new church to be built in Chelsea, then a burgeoning village still separated from London by open country. Nash submitted a design for this as well, but the commission went to John Savage. The Gothic revival was just then gathering pace and Savage's church, St Luke's, took it literally to new heights, with a 142-foot tower (cf Beckford's Tower 154 ft). Consecrated in the same year as All Souls, 1824, St Luke's was the first stone-vaulted church of the Gothic revival. It is all in Bath Stone: tower, walls, full-width 5-bay arcaded porch, 60-foot high vault and no fewer than eighteen flying buttresses. It is the tallest and biggest parish church in London. Unlike All Souls, St Luke's stands in an open area, and soars above everything around it ('Chelsea Cathedral' to some contemporary commentators, not without irony). It cost £40,000, something like eight times the average for new churches at that time and more than twice as much as All Souls.

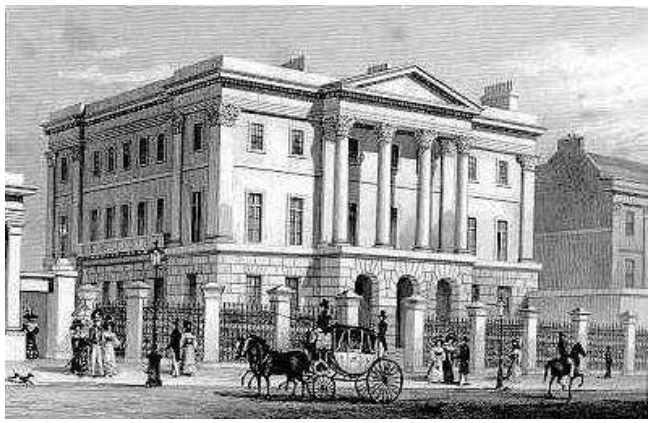


St Luke's Church, Chelsea

I have come across three other major architectural works of the 1820s in London which used Bath Stone. These were the Royal College of Physicians at Trafalgar Square and the re-development of two great houses, Apsley and Syon. In addition, Combe Down stone was used at that time in restoration work at the Henry the Seventh Chapel and other parts of Westminster Abbey.

The Royal College of Physicians was the work of another leading architect of the time, Sir Robert Smirke (in 1824-7). The building is still there, with its Bath (and Portland) Stone intact, but today forms the core of Canada House. Its stonework has recently been cleaned and looks very handsome.

Apsley House at Hyde Park Corner (now the Wellington Museum) was built in the 1770s by Robert Adam, with brick walls. It was acquired by the Duke of Wellington after his triumph at Waterloo and considerably enlarged. Later, in 1826-30, Wellington (who became prime minister in 1828) had the house faced entirely with Bath Stone complete with giant Corinthian portico. This was to the design of the brothers Benjamin and Philip Wyatt. The Combe Down quarrymaster and master-mason Philip Nowell, who had a depot at Kensington Basin, Paddington, was employed on this work. He was paid £7,624, which substantial sum seems likely to have included a payment for supply of stone.



Apsley House, Hyde Park Corner

Syon House is the London home of the Dukes of Northumberland. Built in Tudor times, again of brick, it too was entirely encased in Bath Stone in the 1820s, probably by Thomas Cundy. I do not know who the masons or stone suppliers were.

I am assuming the stone for all of these projects was shipped to London via the Kennet & Avon canal. These were big contracts. Philip Nowell of Combe Down has been mentioned as a presumed supplier. Does anyone know who any of the other suppliers were?

Acknowledgements

My thanks to David Pollard, who is researching a new book on Bath Stone, for information on Buckingham and Lambeth Palaces and on Philip Nowell's activities in London.

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