

# NEW HIGH ALTAR CANOPY OF ST. PAUL'S

## An Account of its Design and Construction

IN the summer of 1948, the Dean of St. Paul's announced that important changes were to be made in the planning of the east end of the cathedral.

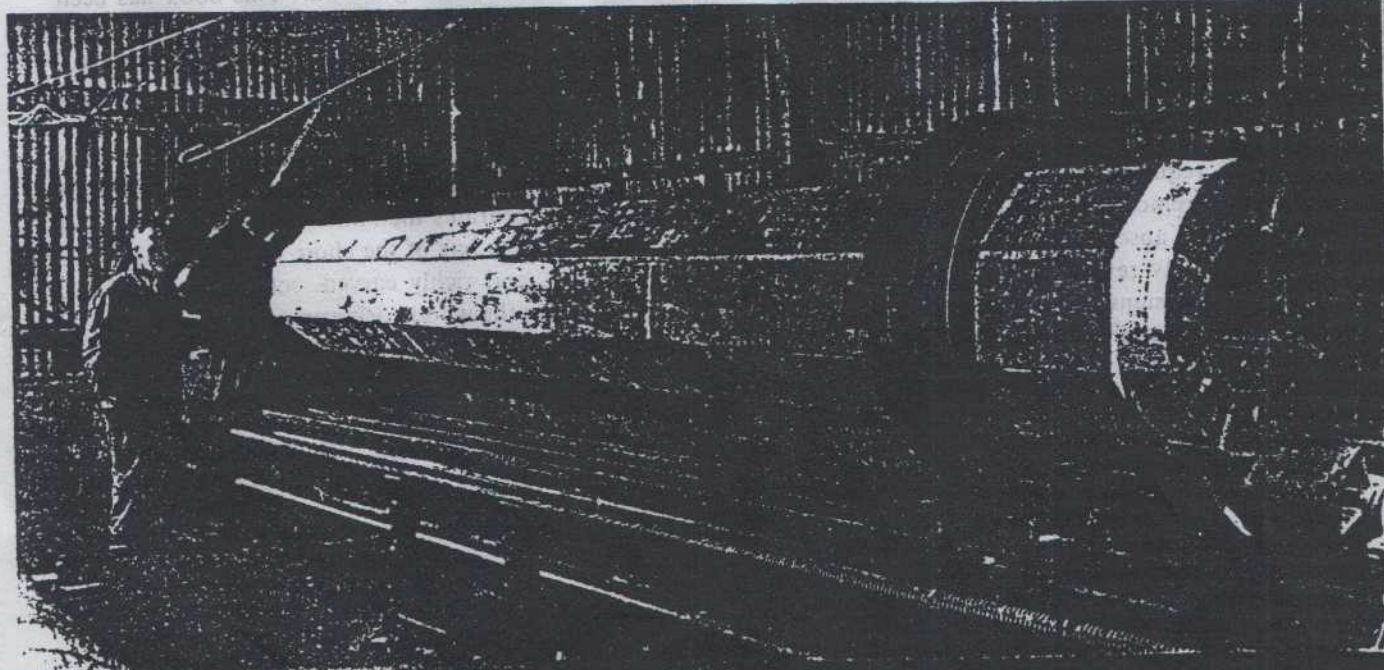
When Sir Christopher Wren built St. Paul's, the altar was placed in the apse and left incomplete in that no attempt was made to erect the superstructure which he seems to have envisaged. A note in "Parentalia" (memoirs written by the architect's grandson) makes it clear that Wren had wished the altar to be surmounted by a canopy or baldachino supported by wreathed pillars; and an incomplete model in the trophy-room of the cathedral appears to be a study for such a structure.

In the cathedral as completed by Wren, the choir was separated from the dome area and nave by the

organ screen, so that the high altar could not be seen from any great distance. In the latter half of the 19th century, however, the organ was divided and placed on each side of the choir and the screen removed altogether. Thus, for the first time, the altar could be seen from the extreme west end of the nave, and it was no doubt to give it the necessary prominence in this setting that the lofty marble reredos, designed by Bodley and Garner, was erected. This was a fine work of its time, and the question of its replacement only arose when it was seriously damaged by a bomb in October 1940.

After the war the Dean and Chapter gave long consideration to the replanning of the east end of the cathedral, and, following advice from the Royal Fine

*Figure 1. One of the columns, consisting of oak boards bonded into the form of an octahedron with 'Aerolite' 300. It is seen here in a lathe at the works of Geo. Stow & Co. Ltd., Slough.*





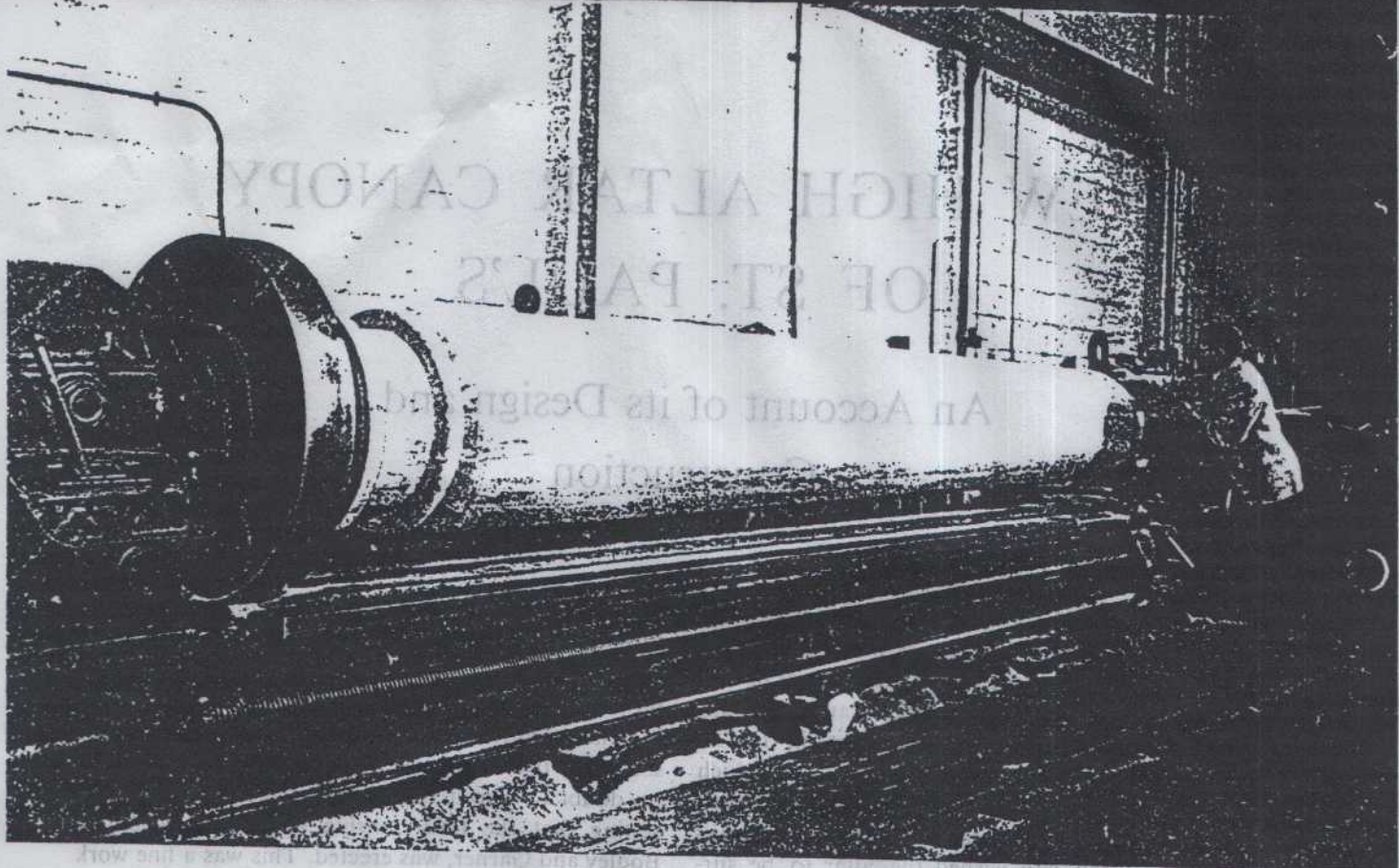


Figure 2. A column turned to approximately cylindrical form. The centre is slightly thickened so that from view-points at ground level it does not appear thin at the centre.

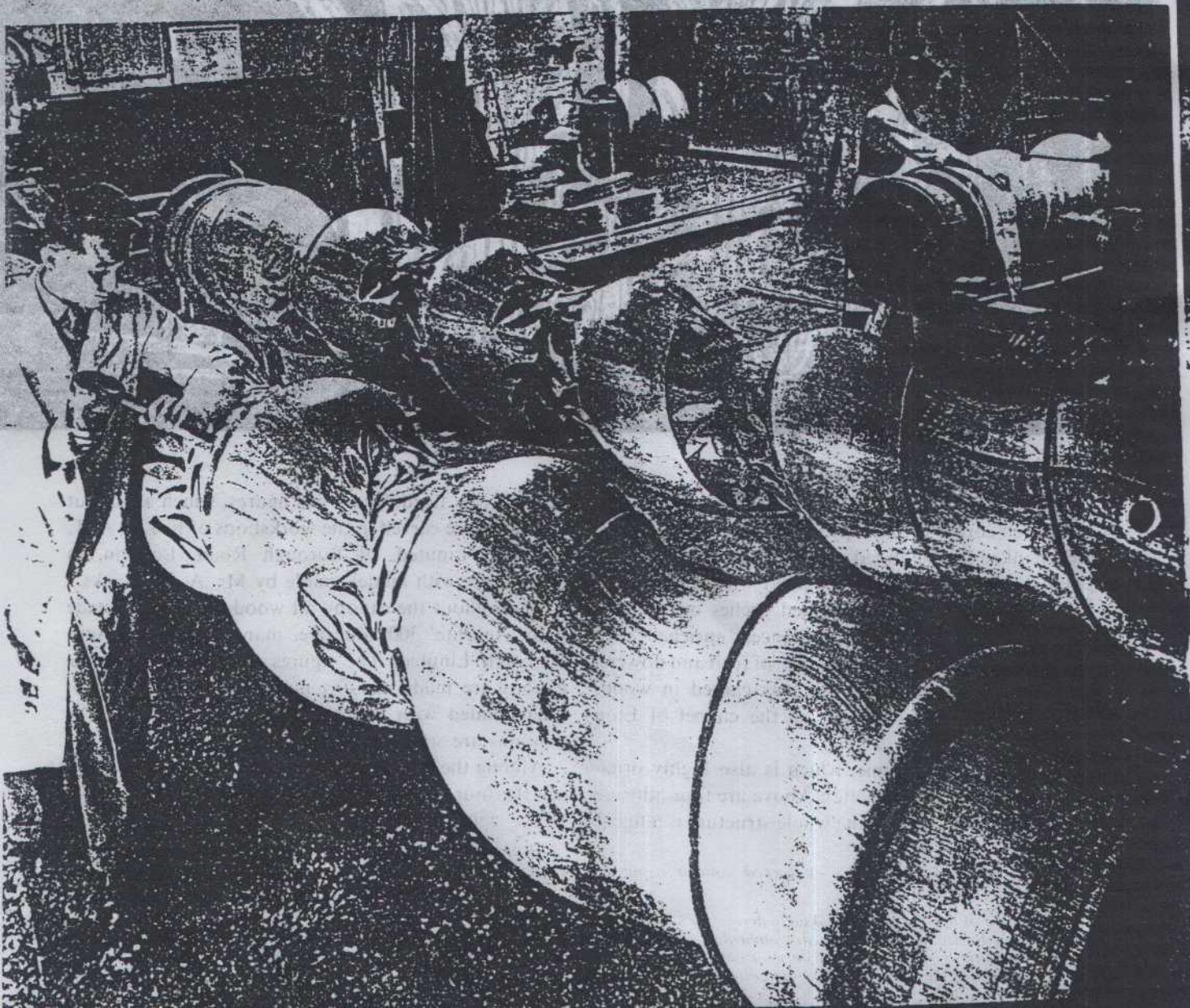
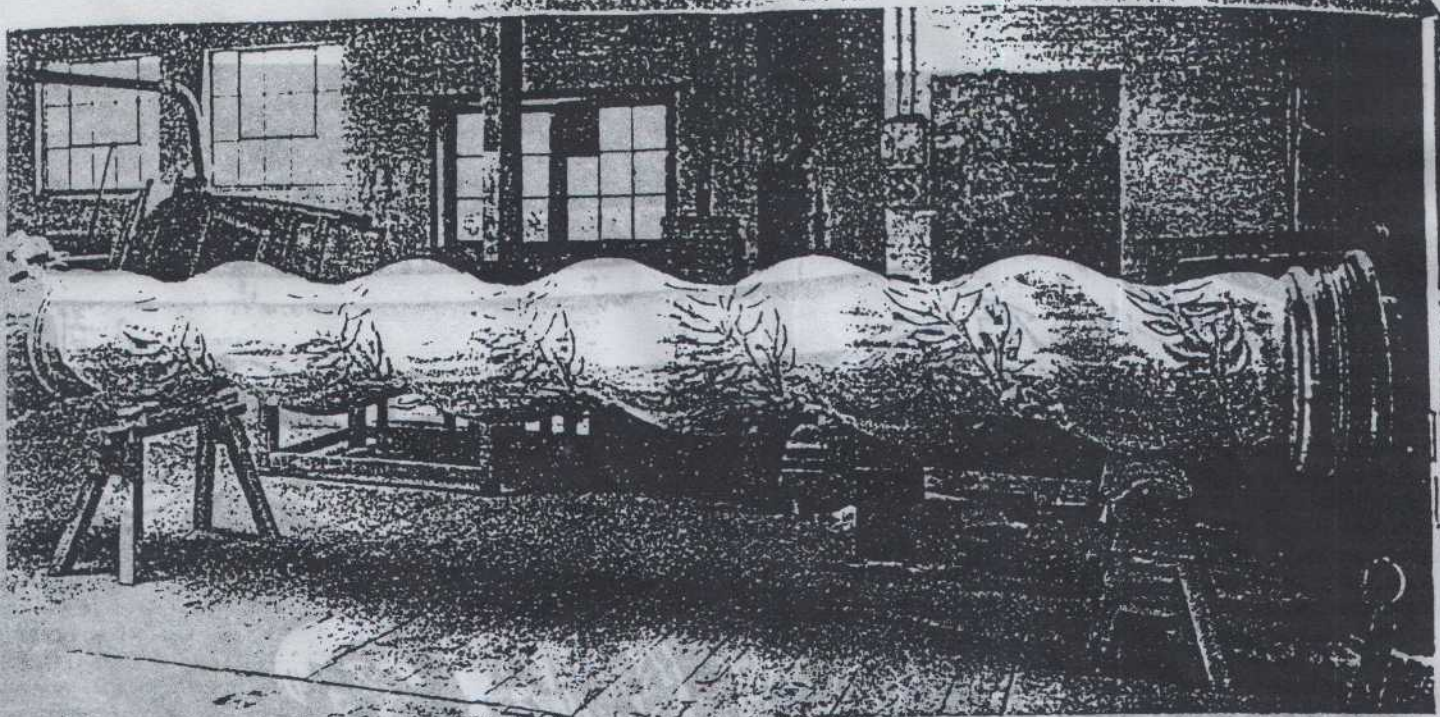
Art Commission, they decided that the opportunity had come to carry out the spirit of Wren's wishes. In this connection it is important to emphasise that Wren left no designs for a baldachino, and the new work is not based on any tentative sketches from his hand. The new designs have, indeed, been governed by conditions, some of which were not pertaining in the cathedral in Wren's time. The most important of these is perhaps the position of the organ, which has already been referred to. The interior of the cathedral is now open from end to end, making it necessary to give prominence to the altar as the focus of worship. A plan was required that would also allow adequate space for ceremonial, and it was desired that the grand sweep of the apse, hitherto obscured by the reredos, should be fully revealed.

The new designs, which are the work of Mr. S. E. Dykes Bower and Mr. W. Godfrey Allen, have provided for the conversion of the Jesus Chapel, in the eastern apse of the cathedral, into an American Memorial Chapel. This has been finished with its own altar in the centre of the apse, enclosed by elaborate

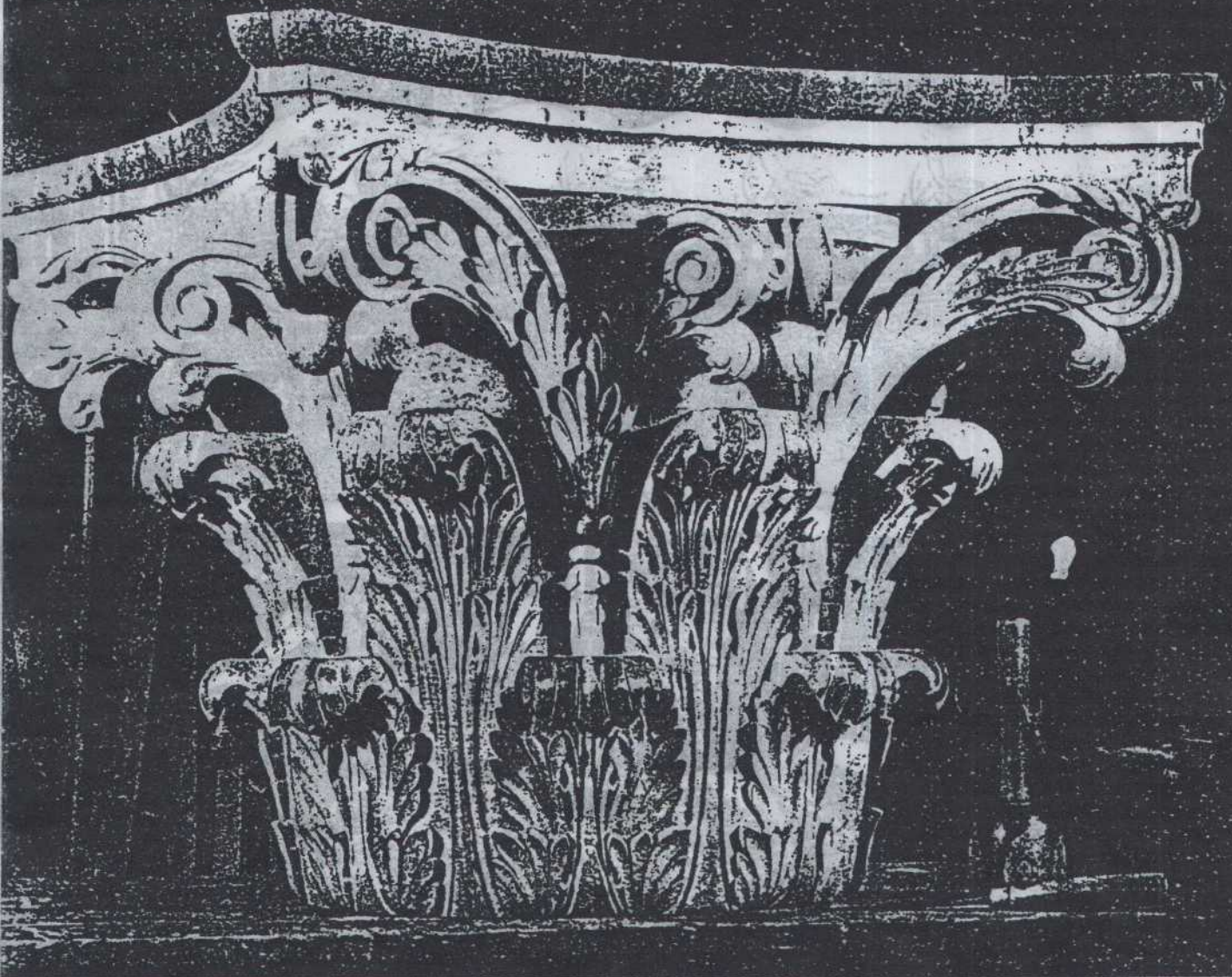
wrought iron rails and flanked by oak stalls and panelling, a marble floor embodying the five-pointed star in its pattern, and at the western end, and therefore immediately behind the high altar, a raised marble pedestal holding a book containing the names of every man of the American forces who lost his life while based on Britain during the war. This book has been prepared under the personal supervision of President Eisenhower, and its cost has been defrayed in America. The cost of the chapel has been met by subscriptions raised in Britain.

The chief feature of the new design is, however, the baldachino standing centrally beneath the coffered arch which separates the American Memorial Chapel from the eastern bay of the choir. It is 54 ft. high and 26 ft. wide, and richly carved, coloured and gilded. Contracts for the woodwork were placed with Messrs. Rattee & Kett Limited, of Cambridge, and Mr. W. F. Haslop, head of the company's carving department, has directed its execution. Messrs. J. Whitehead & Sons Ltd., of Kennington, have been responsible for the marblework.









*Figure 8 (above). One of the Corinthian capitals.*

At each corner the canopy is supported on a square pier, flanked by one fluted and one twisted Corinthian pillar. Each twisted pillar is carved with a wreath of bay leaves. Above the segmented arches on the east and west sides are wooden valences, enriched with cherubs' heads, tassels and festoons of fruit and flowers. At the four corners are large urns carved in wood, two of which were originally in the chapel of Eton College.

The drum of the dome, which is also highly ornamented, is pierced by lunettes. Above are four adoring angels, and surmounting the whole structure is a figure

of the Risen Lord. These five figures, which are about life size, were carved in the workshops of E. J. & A. T. Bradford Limited, of Borough Road, London, in accordance with models made by Mr. A. W. Banks.

Throughout the canopy all wood joints were made with 'Aerolite' 300 adhesive, manufactured by Aero Research Limited. The figures which surmount the canopy are made up of a number of laminations of lime bonded with this glue, and the capitals of the columns are similarly made.

Among the most remarkable features of the canopy are the four spiral columns. Each of these consists of many segments of carefully selected oak, and the first step was the bonding of these pieces with 'Aerolite' 300 into the form of an octahedron 15 ft. long—the shaft-

*Figure 9 (top of opposite page). A carved column, complete with capital.*

*Figure 7 (foot of opposite page). Wood-carvers at work in the workshops of Rattee and Kett Limited, Cambridge. On the right the bayonet pattern is being traced on to a column; on the left a carver is cutting the column to leave the pattern in relief.*



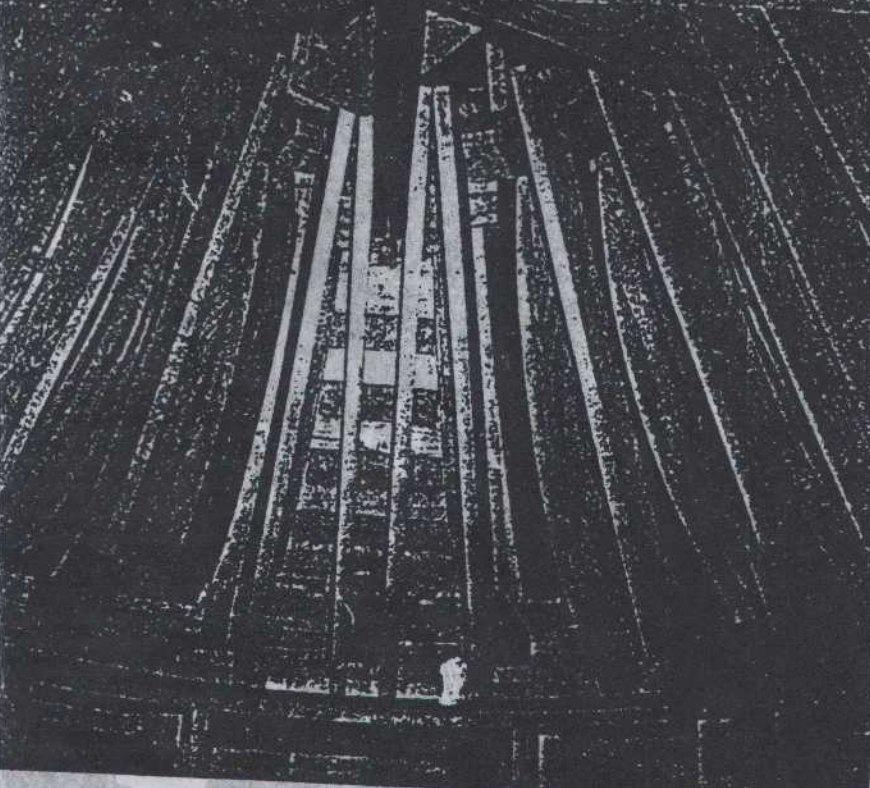
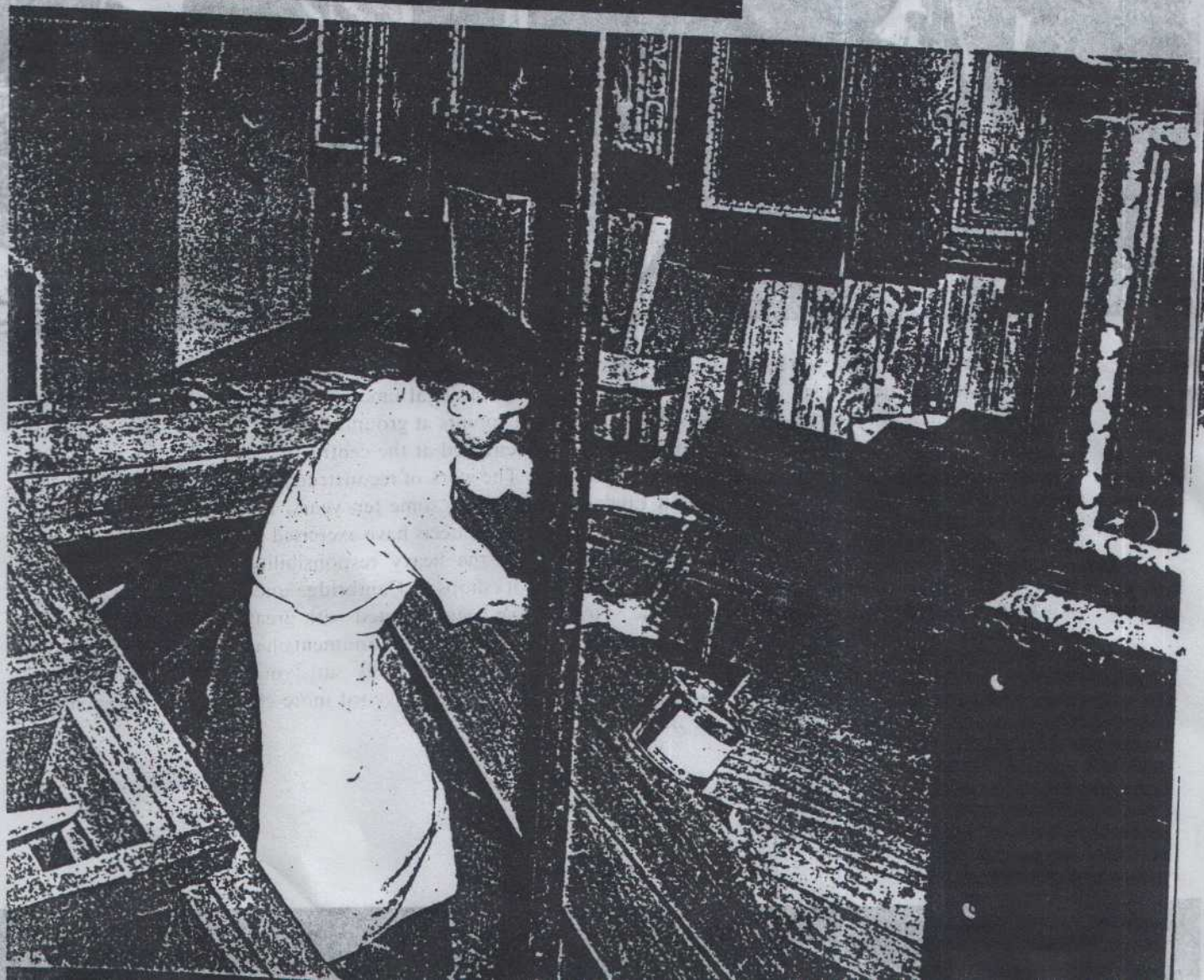


Figure 9 (left). Woodwork inside the dome of the canopy.

Figure 10 (below). A joiner at work on the roof of the canopy. Some of the stained and gilded panels are in position.

Figure 11 (right of opposite page). The figures which surmount the canopy are carved from large timber blocks, consisting of boards of lime bonded with 'Aerolite' 300. In this photograph a figure begins to take form in the workshops of E. J. & A. T. Bradford Limited, London.

Figure 12 (left of opposite page). The figure of an adoring angel as finished by the wood-carver.







length of the column. This work was done by Messrs. Rattee & Kett, at Cambridge.

The columns then required to be turned, and for this purpose they were taken to the workshops of George Stow & Co. Ltd., waterworks engineers, of Slough, one of the few firms in southern England having a suitable lathe for turning objects of this size. In turning, each column was cut down from a total weight of 25 cwt. to 16 cwt. First the column was turned to a smooth cylindrical shape and the spiral groove was then cut.

The first cut was not strictly cylindrical because the columns in their finished form are an example of "entasis", that is to say the centre of the shaft is

slightly thickened. This practice, which comes down from classical times, is necessary to ensure that from viewpoints at ground level the columns do not appear attenuated at the centre.

The work of reconstructing the east end of St. Paul's has taken some ten years. Its completion shows that the architects have exercised judgement in accordance with the heavy responsibility of their task, and in workshops in Cambridge and London their drawings have been executed with great skill. One of our most noble national monuments has been greatly enhanced, and it is especially satisfying that the cathedral has been made to accord more closely with the intentions of its designer.





Figure 13. A wood-carver at work on the figure of St.



# High Altar

The cathedral's original altar was a simple wooden table, which was not grand enough for Victorian tastes. So, in 1888, a large, ornate altar, topped by a monumental marble screen, was installed in the centre of the quire.

It stood for little more than 50 years. A bomb hit the quire in 1940, damaging the screen, which had to be removed. After the war, the rest of the altar was also taken away.

The current high altar was installed in 1958 as both a focus for worship and a memorial from the British people to the 335,451 members of the Commonwealth who were killed in the two world wars.

Its base is made of a slab of Italian marble that weighs four tonnes and its magnificent canopy is taken from a sketch by Wren. This design was vetoed by the priests of Wren's time, who found it offensively decorative. The structure is crowned by the gilded figure of Christ with his right hand extended in blessing.

On either side of the high altar are two enormous carved candlesticks, copies of a pair commissioned by Cardinal Wolsey in the 16th century to stand with his burial casket. Before he had any need of this elaborate

memorial, the Cardinal argued with King Henry VIII, who promptly confiscated both the casket and the unfinished candlesticks.

The candlesticks were completed, with the addition of Henry's own emblems – Tudor roses and the Tudor coat of arms – and were sold to a Belgian cathedral by the republican Oliver Cromwell during the 17th century. Copies also exist at St George's Chapel in Windsor Castle and at London's Victoria & Albert Museum.

The Wolsey casket was stored at Windsor Castle until Admiral Nelson's victory and death in the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805.

It was considered suitable for a national hero, so the original carved Cardinal's hat was removed from the top and replaced with a Viscount's coronet before Nelson was buried in the crypt of St Paul's.



## RESTORING THE DAMAGE

*The bomb that came through the quire roof in 1940 caused considerable damage to the east end of the cathedral, as well as to the altar. As the redevelopment, the American Memorial Chapel was co-financed by the British people.*

*A national appeal for funds was launched in 1945, which included a short film made by the Dean of St Paul's. The film was shown in churches throughout the country and afterwards members of the Women's Voluntary Service collected donations.*

*More than £57,000 (equivalent to about £1.28 million today) was raised, ranging from cheques from wealthy corporations to pennies by children in an orphanage.*



*This page*

*The high altar, which is also a war*

*Opposite page*

*Looking down the east*