

How Many People Does It Take To Change A Light Bulb At The New West End?

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Have you ever looked up at the main chandelier in the middle of the Shul and wondered how the bulbs are replaced? I have long been aware that the chandelier can be winched down for maintenance, but in all my years as a member of the community I have never been allowed to access the mechanism - until a couple of months ago when I took an "executive decision" to scale the heights of the building (I was still a Warden at the time, so I felt entitled as a member of the Executive to act in a thoroughly dangerous and irresponsible fashion...).

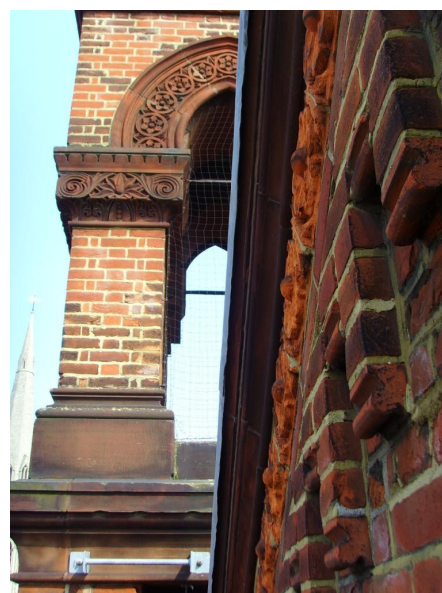


Clad in jeans, tee shirt and trainers, and with instructions from our caretaker Fabricio (who, rather worryingly, seemed extremely happy that I had volunteered to do the job in his place) I strapped myself into a safety harness and started up a stepladder in the Ladies Cloakroom on the first floor of the north side of the building (the left hand side as you enter the front doors). For those of you unfamiliar with this location, there is a trapdoor in the ceiling which leads directly into the main north turret of the Shul. Let into the wall of this turret is a metal ladder with a safety runner which is clipped to the safety harness - the theory is that if you slip off the ladder you will merely dangle uncomfortably in mid-air screaming for help rather than plummet to the bottom and remain silent.

You can see at the bottom of the picture a couple of metal hoops let into the wall - until a few years ago these went all the way to the top and were the only means of ascent until a Health and Safety inspector threw a fit and insisted on a less Victorian approach to the welfare of our maintenance staff.

When you reach the top of the ladder you are faced with the hairiest bit of the operation - disconnecting yourself from the safety runner and exiting from the shaft through a small door. I imagine that with a bit of practice this can be achieved without taking your life in your hands as there is a small retractable platform to stand on, but the complications of lowering the platform, working out how to get onto it, and then fumbling with the release mechanism for the harness almost persuaded me to give up at the first hurdle (actually, the second hurdle - the first one was transferring from the stepladder to the turret ladder).

Your spirits rise considerably when you go through the little door and find yourself on a narrow parapet above



the West Rose Window of the Shul, way above the front doors. Your feelings of safety are considerably enhanced by a substantial stone railing and you get a great view of St Petersburg Place, St Matthews Church and the fourth floor windows of Lancaster Close across the road. The stonework of the turrets was renovated some years ago and much of it is beautifully carved. At the same time the open parts of the turrets were fitted with anti-pigeon netting - apparently more than a century of occupation by our feathered friends had left its mark - several inches thick.



When you get your breath back after the climb you walk a few feet to the centre of the parapet and there is a small door into the main roof space. Despite the fact that this door will never be seen by anyone except the maintenance staff (and lunatic thrill-seekers like me) it is beautifully designed with an arched stone surround to match the rest of the building.

Once through the door you are on more solid ground - a wooden walkway through the main beams supporting the roof. There is a single light bulb (usually broken) so a torch is an essential requirement for this part of the journey. Once again the Health and Safety people have left their mark - there is a wire running the length of the roof space to which your trusty safety harness must be attached.

There are actually two winches, one for the smaller chandelier above the Ladies Gallery and the other for the main chandelier. The winch is well oiled as my hands, jeans and shirt were soon to discover. Lowering the chandelier should really be a two-man job (I am not being sexist here, just realistic) because there are three cables which have to feed out through the hole in the Shul ceiling - the main steel supporting cable, the electricity cable and a safety cable - when the chandelier is fully raised there is an additional short steel cable fixed to a roof beam in case the winch fails, but in order to retrieve this when the chandelier is pulled back up there is a thin wire attached to it

And so you start turning the handle....and turning....and turning. The chandelier is so heavy that the gearing on the winch requires several turns per foot of cable paid out - and it's a long way down. Eventually you hear someone down below yelling at you to stop, and the job is done - someone else can come up and reverse the process.

Of course, you still have to get down the ladder.....

