

EST. 1759

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**SYKES**

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& SON LIMITED

THE BRIEF HISTORY OF A  
LONDON BUILDING COMPANY  
SPANNING FOUR CENTURIES

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2018 EDITION

## ***Foreword***

All of us here at Sykes & Son are privileged to continue the legacy of an organisation trading for over 250 years in central London. We are incredibly proud of the part we have played in restoring, building, refurbishing and maintaining our capital's heritage over the years. From royal palaces to world renowned museums, galleries and universities, we continue to forge long-term working relationships at London's finest buildings.

The company has naturally undergone huge changes over the past four centuries in order to continue successfully trading. This brief history of Sykes was first produced in September 2009 to mark the company's 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Minor revisions have been made for this fourth edition together with this contemporary introduction.

Whilst our past is a source of great pride, Sykes have never rested on our laurels and over time we have evolved from a small glazing business into the multidisciplinary business we are now. Today, with established workstreams in Building Fabric, M&E Services and Maintenance we can offer a complete 'One Stop Shop' service to our client base. We continue to focus on self-delivery and our services are predominantly provided by in-house staff, many of whom are long term.



*Sykes & Son Directors (L-R: Chris O'Donnell, Commercial Director; Andrew Burr, Managing Director; Peter Banks, Finance Director; John Elwood, Chairman)*

2017 was another year in which we continued the development of the updated and integrated Sykes, building on a common set of values. I believe that we are continuing to make progress with our changes to make the Company fully fit for purpose in the modern day, acting with absolute integrity, openness and a passion for excellence, bringing all our history to bear in delivering efficiently in the modern world.

**Andrew Burr**  
Managing Director  
June 2018

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# THE BRIEF HISTORY OF A LONDON BUILDING COMPANY SPANNING FOUR CENTURIES

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Staff outside the Essex Street office on the occasion of a Company "day out" in the 1950's. Present are the following employees who attended the long service function shown on page 21: John Beslier, Harry Patterson, Jimmy Payne and Charlie Purvis.

The business now known as Sykes & Son Limited has been trading from Essex Street, and the adjoining courtyards, within the Parish of St. Clement Danes, London WC2., continuously since 1759.



The company's original premises were at 47 Essex Street and, whilst the building is long gone, it is astonishing that 250 years later our Head Office has moved less than 30 metres.

London was a far different place back in 1759. George II was on the throne – succeeded by his grandson George III in 1760. It was a time during which Britain's Empire was expanding across the globe and London experienced rapid growth.

The population rose from approximately 600,000 in 1759, to close on a million by the turn of the century. In 1759, the old London Bridge was the only passage across the Thames but, over the next 60 years, other bridges including Westminster, Blackfriars, Vauxhall, Waterloo and Southwark were constructed. London changed from an area of numerous villages to become the first metropolis in the world.

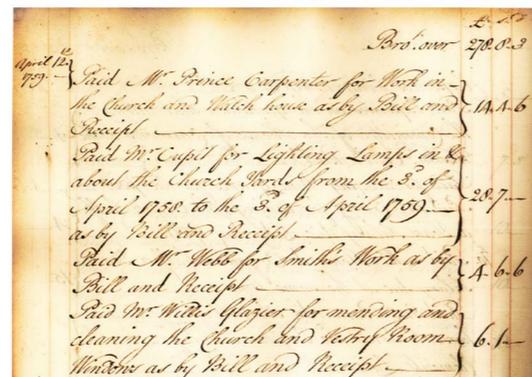
The establishment of the Sykes business also predates a number of the heritage sites that we are associated with in 2018. Buckingham Palace was not the home to the Royal family until 1761 and the famous museums in South Kensington were not established until nearly 100 years later.

Last year's work included the renovation of the Stone Gallery around the dome of St Paul's Cathedral. The cathedral was only declared complete by parliament in 1711 – less than 50 years before Sykes's inception.

The business that became Sykes & Son Limited was begun by John Willis, a member of the Worshipful Company of Glaziers and Painters of Glass. He married Mary Hoare, the daughter of another glazier, at St Clement Danes Parish Church in 1753. The St Clement Danes Parish Rate Books for 1759 show that John Willis was then living in Essex Street. Street numbers are not given in the Rate Books, but from the route the collector took it is possible to say with some confidence that he was living at number 47, which remained the address of the business he began until it was demolished to make way for the present building on the site in 1884.

The first evidence we have of work being done by John Willis comes from the St Clement Danes Church Warden Accounts, which show that on 12 April 1759 Mr. Willis was paid the princely sum of £6.1s.00d for mending and cleaning the Church windows. Using average earnings as a guide this is equivalent to £9,500.

Over the following years John continued to carry out glazing work in St. Clement Danes Church, but the work was shared with other local glaziers.



St Clement Danes in 1753



However, a greater source of work soon appeared, literally, just around the corner. This was the Honourable Society of the Middle Temple, one of the four Inns of Court. They have detailed account books going back to the 17th century.

In 1763 they show that John Willis replaced the aptly named Mr. Sharp, as the Middle Temple's glazier, and a year later was paid the sum of £7.17s.0d for his labours.

The work done is recorded in great detail on a two page bill in the Inn's accounts books, the beginning and end of which are shown to the right. More or less monthly visits were made to carry out glazing and glass cleaning.

(56.)  
1763  
April 18

Glazier's Bill

To cleaning of Library Windows . . . . .	0..4..6
To cleaning of Parliament Chamber Windows . . . . .	0..2..0
To cleaning of other Windows . . . . .	0..2..6

Interestingly, the next item shows the Inn paying as nearly as much for three dozen bottles of claret, as they had for a whole years work from John Willis.

11 April 1764

Received of the Treasurer of the Middle Temple  
Seven pounds and Seventeen Shillings being the Contents  
of the foregoing Bill by the hands of Mr. Dolphin Secy  
Treasr

7 17 0

John Willis

1763  
Apr. 16

Wine-merch.

To 3 Dozen of Claret . . . . .	7..10..0
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The Middle Temple records show that John Willis was the only glazier used by the Honourable Society and was working there almost continuously until his death in 1801. Gradually the amount of work increased, and his bills became larger and larger.

John Willis could not have realised when he first took on this work in the Middle Temple that his family and the succeeding Sykes family would be carrying out work in the Middle Temple almost continuously for the next 158 years and that the firm he started still carries out building and restoration work there to this day. Building good, long standing, working relationships with prestigious Clients, and gaining “repeat business” has been a cornerstone of the Sykes philosophy from 1759 to the present day.

In 1778 he took his son, also named John, as his apprentice, and the two presumably worked together, until John junior married Frances Hartley in 1790, at St Brides, Fleet Street. The couple settled down in Brides Passage, where they had three children, John (1795), Mary (1797) and Joseph (1798). Whether John II continued to work with his father during this period is not known, but in 1801, when his father died, he took over the family firm and moved back to 47 Essex Street. By this time the annual bills for the Middle Temple work range from £60 to £90, which is roughly equivalent to £25,000 to £37,000 today.

From the 1820's on the firm begins to diversify, and John Willis is advertised in the Trade Directories of the time as a Glazier & Painter, and sometimes as Plumber, Glazier & Painter. Nothing is known of what happened to his two sons, but it seems that his daughter Mary was the skilled painter of the family, as she is later described in the 1851 census as a “retired painter”.

John II died in 1836 leaving all his estate to his wife Frances, and his daughter Mary. Frances briefly took over the business, but her own death in 1838, left their daughter Mary, a spinster, in sole charge of the firm.

By this time the accounts show that the Honourable Society of the Middle Temple is employing the Willis family for all the painting work on their property, as well as their traditional glazing work.



In addition to general painting and decorating work, the firm were employed to emblazon the coats of arms and details of the Readers of the Inn. Two Readers are appointed each year, and the Arms of all the past Readers are displayed on small tablets which form part of the panelling of the Banqueting Hall, as shown to the left.

**Sykes & Son Ltd** a company with a continuous presence in Essex Street for over 250 years

Living at 47 Essex St in 1759  
First recorded work as a glazier in 1759  
at St Clement Danes Church  
bur. 30 Jun 1801 St Clement Danes

John WILLIS

Mary HOARE

bap. 28 Jun 1732 St Clement Danes  
m. 16 Aug 1752 St Benet, Paul's Wharf

Died 1836  
Bequeaths all his estate to his wife, and  
on her decease, to his daughter Mary

John WILLIS

Frances HARTLEY

b. c. 1762  
m. 6 Nov 1790  
St Clement Danes  
Briefly takes over the firm  
after her husband's death.  
d. 5 Oct 1838,  
47 Essex Street, Strand

Mary WILLIS

bn. 17 Feb 1797  
9 Brides Passage  
bap. 20 Mar 1797 St Bride, Fleet St  
Continues business as a painter & glazier  
at 47 Essex Street after her mother's death.  
Enters partnership with John SYKES  
d. 17 Jun 1874 Sydenham, Kent  
Will Probate 15 Jul 1874  
John Sykes was her executor

bn. 12 Feb 1825  
bap. 20 Mar 1825  
Kings Weight House  
Independant Fish St Hill  
Business at 47 Essex Street changes to  
Willis & Sykes Painters & Glaziers in  
1848 to Willis & Sykes Builders in 1852  
and then to John Sykes Builders in 1856  
d. 11 Sep 1879  
29 Park Road Wandsworth

John SYKES

Emily Hird POTTER

bn. c. 1830  
m. 16 May 1854  
York St Chapel  
St Mary Newington  
Took over the business on the death of  
her husband.  
In 1883 changes the name of the firm to  
Sykes & Son and it moves to 10 Essex St  
d. 6 Jan 1908  
29 Park Road Wandsworth

Bn. 1865, Camberwell, Surrey  
d. 1923, Wandsworth

Edward Potter SYKES

Arthur SYKES

bn. 7 Feb 1859 47 Essex St  
d. Dec Qtr 1919 Wandsworth  
Takes over the business from his  
mother, but in 1921 it is sold to

Alfred Benjamin GEE

a builder of Biggin Hill, Kent.  
The name Sykes & Son Ltd is  
kept, as is the premises at 10  
Essex St.  
Upon the death of Alfred Gee  
the business passes to  
Stephen Gee.

1924

The company is  
incorporated as  
Sykes and Son  
Limited. Registered  
Nº 199712.

1972

By 1972 the  
company is no longer  
owned entirely by the  
Gee family.

2009

Sykes celebrates its  
250<sup>th</sup> anniversary

2017

The company is  
now owned by  
nearly 40 individual  
shareholders

Mary Willis was the last of her line, and ran the firm on her own until 1847, but the work load was steadily increasing. In April of that year a bill for £695-14s-04d from Mary Willis appears in the Middle Temple accounts.

Mary must have found that the work was getting too much for her for the next bill, for a more modest £47-08s, in October of that year, shows she has a new partner.

The new partner was John Sykes, who was to widen the scope of the business and set it on the path to becoming the multi discipline construction company it is today. John was the son of another John Sykes, a clothing merchant, and his wife Elizabeth. The early life of John Sykes the younger is unknown, but he may have been a carpenter, or have had experience in some other branch of the building trade, as the bills in the Middle Temple records show the firm is beginning to take on carpentry and construction work.

Rec<sup>d</sup> 27<sup>th</sup> Oct 1847 of the Honble Society  
of the Middle Temple by the hands of W. Aldred  
Sub-treasurer the sum of Forty seven pounds  
p<sup>d</sup> for the amount of the above bill for  
Painters & Glaziers' work  
£47. 0. -  
Willis & Sykes

47 8 2  
£5 -  
47 0 -

Mary Willis continued to work in partnership with John Sykes for another few years but sometime before 1851 she retired and left the business and her house to John Sykes. We know this because on the 30th of March of that year a census was taken and by chance Mary happened to be visiting, as shown below in the entry for 47 Essex Street.

She must have retained an interest in the business, as the Trade Directories still show the business as Willis and Sykes for a few more years, although they are now described as builders rather than painters and glaziers.

The census also shows that John was employing 10 men, and had two servants, so he was doing quite well.

The real relationship between Mary Willis and John Sykes is unknown, but there may have been an existing close friendship between the Sykes and Willis families, as Mary retired to 4 Park Terrace, in the new suburb of Sydenham, a few doors away from John Sykes's parents.

In 1854 John Sykes junior married Emily Hird Potter, the daughter of Samuel Potter, a solicitor, and soon after this the trade directories show that the name of the firm was changed to John Sykes, Builders.

Name	Relationship to Head	Marital Condition	Age	Trade	Where Born
John Sykes	Head	Unmarried	26	Builder employing 10 men	Middlesex
Mary Willis	Visitor	Unmarried	54	Retired Glazier	Middlesex
Ann Worley	Servant	Unmarried	49	Servant	Middlesex
Rachael Blakeborough	Servant	Unmarried	18	Servant	Surrey, Newington

The 1861 census shows John and Emily, still at 47 Essex Street with a young family.

However by 1871 both the family and the business had grown too large to be accommodated together in the house at 47 Essex Street, so John built his family a new house on a plot of land he had bought on Wandsworth Common and 47 Essex Street became the Company's office.

John Sykes must have had other clients apart from the Middle Temple, but the Temple records are the only ones that we have uncovered. During the 1870's extensive restoration and construction work was undertaken there, and we can definitely identify one item that still survives from the work done by John Sykes's company.

Name	Relationship to Head	Marital Condition	Age	Trade	Where Born
John Sykes	Head	Married	36	Builder	Barking, Middlesex
Emily H Sykes	Wife	Married	40		Middlesex
John H Sykes	Son		5		Westminster, Middlesex
Anne M Sykes	Daughter		3		Westminster, Middlesex
Arthur Sykes	Son		2		Westminster, Middlesex

In 1879 a new bookcase was constructed for the Old Parliament Chamber in the Middle Temple. It was made from old oak which used to be part of a medieval bridge that crossed the Thames from the end of Middle Temple Lane, and was much used by the barristers who enjoyed the hunting on the south side of the river.

The bookcase is still there today, although it has now been moved from its original position.



The top photograph, taken in 1932, shows the bookcase in its original position, in the Old Parliament Chamber. The coloured photograph on the left shows some of the ornate carving.

This bookcase was one of the last pieces of work undertaken during the life of John Sykes, as on the 11th September 1879 he died due to a ruptured aneurism that he had apparently had for five years.

It had been thought that John's son Arthur took over the business at this point, but recent research in the Middle Temple records has shown that it was John's widow Emily Hird Sykes that stepped into the breach as the bills presented to the Society are headed E. H. Sykes from the end of 1879 to 1881.

The records between 1882 and 1917 have not been searched, but the firm's name changes to Sykes & Son Builders in the trade directories from 1883 onwards, and they are now described as of 9 and 47 Essex Street.

Presumably it was Arthur that took on the business at this point, and he seems to have been assisted by his younger brother Edward Potter Sykes, as both are described as builders in subsequent censuses.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries Sykes & Son carried out much building work in and around the city, when large schemes such as the Aldwych entailed the pulling down of many old houses, and building new offices.

The First World War gave a small taste of greater disasters that were to befall the city in the 1940's when there was a German Zeppelin raid on London in 1917.

The Old Parliament Chamber in the Middle Temple was damaged, and Sykes & Son were called in to repair the damage.

TELEPHONE GERRARD 5091.

The Honorable Society of the Middle Temple.

313  
10, Essex Street, Strand,

and at Kennington.

December, 1917

To Sykes & Son, Ltd.  
Builders & House Decorators.

1917

To amount of our agreed estimate for  
making good the damage caused to fabric by shell  
through roof of Old Parliament Chamber September  
1917.

£111 18 5

In 1919 Arthur Sykes died and the business is sold to Alfred Gee a builder of Biggin Hill, Kent. The business remains in Essex Street and undertakes substantial new build contracts and refurbishment work far removed from the artisan type jobbing contracts from its earlier days.

Public Works Projects were undertaken in these early years of Mr. Gee's direction and included work outside of London. These included various projects at the military camp in Catterick, Yorkshire and the high explosives factory at Gretna and Eastriggs in Scotland. New housing schemes included Leigh in Kent.

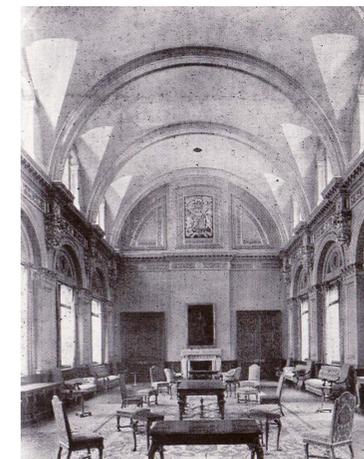
Decoration was still a major source of work for the company and projects included Tate Gallery (now called Tate Britain), National Gallery and Home Office (now called Foreign & Commonwealth Office). It was in the latter building that we carried out redecoration under the direction of Sir Edwin Lutyens of the function rooms in advance of the Locarno Treaty signed in 1925 – photographs of the Locarno Suite are shown on Page 19.

Major redecoration was also carried out by Sykes during the 1920's of the Victoria & Albert Museum.

Upon the death of Alfred Gee the business was taken over by the next Gee generation. Stephen Gee ran it most successfully through the period of World War II. Following the war the company undertook a great deal of work for the Ministry of Works which later became the Property Services Agency (PSA) until it was disbanded in 1992.



Current photo of Locarno Suite  
Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Whitehall



*“very softly decorated in colour,  
enriched with gold.”*

Image and text from Sykes brochure in early 1930's.

Stephen Gee died in the mid 1960's leaving his wife Dorothy as the sole owner of Sykes & Son Ltd. Mr. Cyril McKellow took on the day to day running of the business for Mrs. Gee and, on his death in the late 1960's, Mr. Len Buttleman took over with the able assistance of Mr. John Beslier.

Dorothy died in the early 1970's at which point the company ceased to be wholly owned by the Gee family. Shares were then divided between a variety of family, friends and company staff so that 35 years later there are about forty individual shareholders in the company.

On Dorothy Gee's death the Chairmanship passed to Mr. Victor Morley Lawson QC who held the position until his death in 1988. At this point Mr. Len Buttleman who had been a director of the company since 1972 succeeded to the role. Mr Buttleman ran the business successfully into its fourth century of trading. During this period its core business was building and decoration with a strong emphasis on the public sector. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, new Directors were identified resulting in John Hayden being appointed as Managing Director in 1990 and Chairman in 2008. Mr Hayden oversaw further growth in the business and the establishment of both Facilities Management and Mechanical and Electrical workstreams. John retired in 2013 and Andrew Burr was appointed Managing Director after serving on the board for nearly 20 years.

In the past five years, Andrew has overseen further changes in the business to place Sykes as a multidisciplinary organisation fit for the 21st Century. Changes have included the establishment of a Maintenance workstream to replace Facilities Management in an effort to focus on Sykes's self-delivery of both building fabric and services maintenance. The business has also established a Heritage workstream to offer a service dedicated to the sympathetic restoration and refurbishment of some of London's most prestigious properties.



*Company function in early 1980's to honour long service from staff. Held at the Barley Mow pub in Horseferry Road. Gold watches were presented to the guests.*

*Top: Jimmy Payne, Ray Peake, Bill Childs, Harry Pearce, Bill Wessels, Colin Fletcher, Mick Barry, Charlie Purvis*

*Middle: Jimmy Holmes, Bill Graham, Tom Oxley, Ted Winkless, Harry Buckingham, Harry Patterson, Micky White, Alan Evans, Sonny Critchell.*

*Bottom: John Evans, Terry Cox, Len Buttleman, John Beslier, Danny Bush, George Cordrey*

*The Company continues to work on London's most prestigious buildings.*



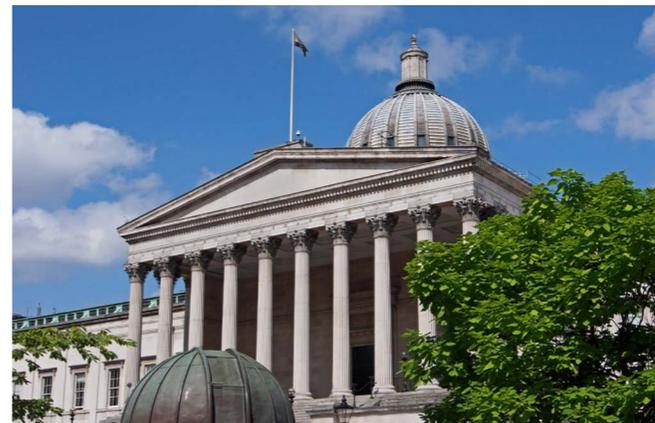
*A few of our current and recent key contracts...*

**Victoria and Albert Museum - Gallery 46A, Cast Courts Refurbishment**

First opened in 1873, the Cast Courts are amongst the most popular galleries at the V&A. This extensive refurbishment by Sykes with a project value at over £1.5m included rooflight replacement and specialist redecoration carried out by our in-house team. The work included an access scaffolding utilising nearly 4000 scaffold boards.

**Fulham Palace – Phase 3 Refurbishment**

The Sykes Heritage Projects team are currently working on an exciting restoration project at the Grade I listed Fulham Palace. The third phase of works aims to restore the iconic Tudor Quadrangle; refurbish key historic rooms including the Great Hall and improve access to, and enhance the Grade II\* listed botanical gardens including the replanting of various historic plants. Works are set to complete in May 2019.



**University College London – Building Works Framework**

Sykes have a three-year framework agreement to carry out minor works on over 200 buildings across the UCL estate. The main campus is at Bloomsbury, just a mile or so away from our head offices.



**English Heritage – Cyclical and Responsive Maintenance**

Whilst predominantly working in London, Sykes have a long-term maintenance contract with English Heritage covering London and the south of England. This includes Queen Victoria's favourite private residence, Osborne House on the Isle of Wight together with Eltham Palace, Dover Castle (pictured) and Apsley House.

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