

# Columns

Number 10 Summer 1998

*The Friends of Christ Church Spitalfields*  
Registered Charity 276056

*Columns is the supporters' bulletin of the Friends of Christ Church Spitalfields who are leading the restoration of Nicholas Hawksmoor's church, one of the most important Baroque churches in Europe.*

*Please support us by subscribing or making a donation. Use the coupon sent with this issue to make a donation, or telephone the Friends' office on 0171-247 0165.*

## Goodbye and hello

*Eric Elstob, Chairman of the Trustees, writes:*

There has been a changing of the guard in the Old Vestry Room: Roland Jeffery, our appeal administrator, has decided to move on, and in his place we are happy to welcome Carolyn Fuest.

It was Eleanor Murray who recruited Roland five years ago and during that time Roland's energy and enthusiasm, and his intimate knowledge of the workings of the country's grant givers and charities, and indeed of local government, has done Christ Church immense service. Roland prepared our applications to the National Heritage Lottery Fund and English Heritage. These were, as we all know, immensely successful, almost £3 million in total, and that was the breakthrough that has set the restoration in motion.

Roland's fertile mind also provided many activities for us all as Friends. Probably the one that we will remember most is the bus tour of Hawksmoor's London churches, and it is typical of Roland's wide range of knowledge that he lectured on them himself and still had time to deal with the sometimes difficult publicans who were serving our lunches! I know that I speak on behalf of all the Friends when I wish Roland every success in his new job.

Carolyn, like Roland, is a local. In fact she lives even closer to Christ Church than Roland and has a fine view of the spire from the nursery behind the weaving garret windows of her home in Fournier Street. She is married to a clarinetist and has four small children, which has not prevented her from running her own music agency. Her skill and enthusiasm will drive the on-going appeal forward and we all welcome her warmly.



*The view from Broadgate*

*The newly repaired and cleaned tower and spire of Christ Church with, left, the Canary Wharf Tower in the far distance.*

## Beneath the galleries

Friends have constantly been asking when will we start work on the interior of the church, and this spring work started dramatically. The first task was to investigate the west end of the nave and the aisles: dark and gloomy with galleries at two levels, containing such narrow pews that only children could have sat in them. I have passed some very uncomfortable concerts there. But were the two levels Hawksmoor's original design? Clearly the upper galleries had never continued along the aisles, but perhaps this ponderous arrangement was for a choir.

So work started on dismantling the upper galleries, under the skilled hammer of cabinet maker David Luard. His chisels were all wedges of pine, because it was essential to use a material softer than the oak of the gallery fronts and the elaborate ornamental brackets; steel chisels would have done irreparable damage to the 18th century wood. At close quarters the details of the carvings were amazingly fine, more what one could expect in a piece of expensive period furniture than a big gallery. All this woodwork is now safely boxed up and in store.

The hard evidence, however, came from under the floor, where re-used beams showed clearly how the landings of the stairs had been projected outwards. Sadly we did not find any bits of rail

or sockets under the floorboards to tell us what the original banisters looked like.

The next task was to demolish the solid walls between the stairwells and the body of the church. The effect was dramatic; suddenly the aisles and the whole west end of the church were flooded with light, and for the first time for over a century one could appreciate Hawksmoor's original design. This was no dismal, heavy, solid wall: it sings with the afternoon light like a Handel aria. The organ gallery now stands like a projection of the tower down into the body of the church with open space on either side.

Red Mason's investigations suggest that the design projected forwards in three steps: the banister across the arch to the staircase, then a small balcony in front of the narrow arches next to the organ, and finally the organ gallery itself, thrust out into the nave of the church beneath the tower, like a grand Roman tribune. Here the Big Wigs (an appropriate 18th Century expression) of the Parish Council would have sat like senators surveying the congregation and having emerged from the Old Vestry Room, snug and warm in winter with its two big fireplaces, from where they ran the parish.

However, this arrangement only lasted for about ten years; for then the parish decided, probably to the architect's wrath and indignation, that they wanted an organ. So the great Bridge's organ, one of the finest left in the world from that period, was installed in the gallery and the big wigs had to move downstairs. The organ was also slightly too big for the gallery which had to be moved forward a couple of feet, cutting into the corners of the great beam that matches the one before the sanctuary, and obliging the builders to insert an extra panel in the ceiling beneath the gallery.

When the work of dismantling began, no one was very sure how the original west end looked, but now that it is finished no one needs the archaeological evidence to realise that the upper galleries were a Victorian mistake. Aesthetically, that is blindingly obvious!

*E. E.*

## **Last bus tour in 1998**

There are some places still available for the last bus tour this year of the six London Hawksmoor churches on Saturday September 26. The guide for this tour will be the historian and broadcaster Dan Cruikshank. To book a seat, use the form with this bulletin, or send a cheque payable to 'The Friends of Christ Church Spitalfields' for £37.50 per place, the special price for Support-

## **Donald Findlay 1950–1998**

Many Friends of Christ Church will remember with delight Donald Findlay's guided tours of Hawksmoor's London churches. He was an outstanding lecturer, one of those rare scholars who could grip and entertain his audience with humanity and humour; and his untimely death earlier this year robbed the country of its greatest expert on Georgian churches.

Whenever Donald saw the steeple of Christ Church he always expressed his regret that the lucarnes had not been reinstated in the great restoration. I think he also would have fought a battle for the reinstatement of the box pews, but he was practical and I think he would have allowed electric light and heating. Georgian churches were one of his greatest interests and we hope that his meticulous research may one day be published, even if it will appear only as one or two chapters and a gazetteer.

For Donald was a perfectionist, and would never give an opinion or write a report without the backing of fact and balanced judgment. This was the hallmark of his work for the Council for the Care of Churches, where from 1974 until his untimely death he prepared reports on Anglican churches in England that were proposed for redundancy. These reports from being a sad necessity grew into authoritative, perceptive, and detailed accounts of buildings of all periods, many of which (especially the modern ones) had never before been researched. As Marcus Binney aptly remarked in his *Times* obituary, Donald made of his work an art-form and a record of permanent value.

But to his friends in Spitalfields he was much more than an academic or a church bureaucrat. Those who saw the garden he made at 4 Fournier Street recognised the skill and artistry of the plantsman. Those who knew his work in Banffshire saw a devoted son of Scotland, and especially of Speyside. On Christmas Day in Spitalfields he would wear his Lindsay tartan kilt for dinner - but never, never, in the street.

Donald was a High Anglican and those who attended the funeral Requiem in Grosvenor Chapel, where he worshipped for over twenty years, would sense the reality of his faith and the affectionate regard in which he was held. Spitalfields was fully represented; and all faiths and shades of churchmanship could. In the words of the final hymn (so often sung in St. Margaret's, Aberlour, where his ashes are buried), when the singing raised the roof:

“Let all thy days  
Till life shall end  
Whate'er he send  
Be filled with praise.”

*M. G.*



Photo: Christopher Woodward

## Work starts on south steps

After the successful completion of the restoration of the tower, work started in July on the next stage of the restoration: the building of the south steps by contractors Harry Neal (City) Ltd, and architects Whitfield Partners. When finished, the steps will complete Hawksmoor's magnificent architectural composition of the south side of the church, and with the existing portal provide a handsome entrance and exit for those attending the church, as well as a more dignified means of escape for Spitalfields Festival audiences who up to now have had to negotiate the ad hoc arrangements of scaffolding and plastic sheets.

The contract sum is £437,000. While no original working drawings of the steps survive, those prepared for publication as engravings by draughtsmen in Hawksmoor's office are held in the British Library. These show broad double flights of stairs to the central doors in the north and south flanks of the nave, and the accounts for the year 1715 show that these were indeed constructed as part of the original building programme. The steps both allowed easy ingress and exit for the large congregations which the nave could accommodate and further emphasised the importance of the cross axis of Hawksmoor's plan. The north steps were demolished in 1745 when Fournier Street was extended westwards, and later, perhaps in the nineteenth century when the crypt ceased to be used for burials, those on the south were removed.

### *Turning the first sod*

*The Rector, the Reverend Paul Bowtell (right, with spade) helps dig a trench for the foundations of the new south steps. With him are, from left to right, Paul Shannon, Site Agent of Harry Neal (City) Ltd, the contractors; Carolyn Fuest, new Director of the Friends; and Danny McCurry Campaign Assistant.*

Whitfield Partners have designed the new steps following the publication drawings and taking details of the mouldings from those of the existing steps at the west and east ends of the church. The stairs will run between the wall of the church and a new wall which contains a replacement door to the crypt in its centre and under the landing. The foundations, now being laid, are of reinforced concrete, as will be the steps' main structure. Some brick will be used on the inner faces, and the whole will be finished in Portland stone. The new door to the crypt will be of oak. While the restoration in the 1980s of the masonry of the nave window openings went some way to re-establishing Hawksmoor's intentions, Red Mason, Job Architect for the new steps, says 'they will constitute the most dramatic change to the external appearance of



*Restored south elevation of the nave with the new steps*



## Personal column

*Andrew Martindale*

The recent removal from the west end of Christ Church of the upper galleries put there in the nineteenth century allows enthusiasts for Hawksmoor's spatial drama to appreciate much of the subtlety and originality of his western nave elevation for the first time in living memory. Now that these additional elements have been removed, and prior to the reconstruction of the nave galleries, new vistas and perspectives of this great space can be enjoyed. Light now floods through the upper openings, particularly in the late afternoon. When the nave galleries are replaced, the space will once more be appreciated as its designer envisaged it, although some of the recently opened viewpoints will no longer be possible.

Galleries were an essential feature of almost all late seventeenth and eighteenth century churches. Since the Victorians removed almost all those that had been installed in medieval churches, and often altered or removed those in classical buildings, it is easy to forget the extent to which they dominated church interiors of that period. Georgian churchmanship, with its focus on preaching, required the efficient provision of the maximum number of seats so that the congregation could both see and hear the minister. These demands often led to the provision of pews whose occupants faced north or south or even, on occasion, west, as well as to the more correct liturgical east, so as to focus on the pulpit and reading desks. These latter were often grouped in a tower-like three decker arrangement.

Hawksmoor responded to these needs with his characteristic inventiveness, and fully integrated the galleries into the form of his interiors. This is unquestionably something that must have developed within the office of Christopher Wren. Faced with the requirements of the reformed church, the architects involved in rebuilding the City churches after the Fire of 1666 adapted the required seating to many varied plan forms and gallery layouts.

Each of the churches Hawksmoor designed originally had galleries, but none survive intact. It is a tragedy that so many spatially exciting arrangements were lost during the nineteenth century, yet this is easily explained by then popular church practice. As the Ecclesiologists returned the focus of worship to the sacrament of Holy Communion, seating that focused on the pulpit was considered outmoded. It was felt that on both liturgical and theological grounds the whole congregation should face east, and so

north and south galleries were usually removed. This is the probable reason that at Christ Church the west gallery survived and further accommodation there was provided, while the side galleries were removed.

The rebuilt north and south galleries at Christ Church will allow visitors once again to appreciate the spatial relationship between the high nave and low side aisles ceiled by the underside of the galleries. Further architectural exploration will be possible at the upper level, where the galleries will open up new perspectives of the remarkable cross vaults, and the east and west walls.

Even so, to someone who has recently stood in the church on a rare, bright summer day, with sunlight flooding onto the floor of the church, any division of the space must be accompanied by the smallest tinge of regret. It would certainly be my recommendation to anyone who is excited by Hawksmoor's use of space should view the nave before the galleries are installed, as this is an architectural experience of true value which Hawksmoor himself must have been experienced while the church was being built, even if it is not one that he intended us to share.

*Andrew Martindale is a Caseworker at the Georgian Group.*

## Thank you

To Herbert Smith, Spitalfields Development Group and Lehman Brothers for photocopying for us; and to Ashurst Morris Crisp for supplying the photograph on page 1.

And to our faithful office volunteers Fiona Ligonnet and Christopher Woodward. We are always looking for people to help us in the office during the daytime and regularly. If you think you might be able to help, telephone the office: 0171-247 0165.

---

Supported by the  
**Heritage Lottery Fund**



---

*Published by the Friends of Christ Church Spitalfields  
A Registered Charity No. 276056*

*The Old Vestry Room, Christ Church, Commerical Street,  
London E1 6LY Telephone 0171-247 0165*

*Editor: Danny McCurry*