

# Columns

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THE FRIENDS OF CHRIST CHURCH SPITALFIELDS  
REGISTERED CHARITY NO. 276056

*Columns is the newsletter 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.*

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## Restoration of the interior of Christ Church: progress report

The restoration of the interior of Christ Church is now over half way through the contract and much has been done. The inside of the church is completely scaffolded with an immense structure approximately seven stories high built with great care so as to avoid damaging the stone and plaster decorations around the capitals of the columns and the aisle vaults. A wooden floor has been built across the entire church just below ceiling level to enable repairs to the plaster work and painting the ceiling.

In the roof void above the nave ceiling, new trusses have been installed which will take the weight of the ceiling and new lighting. This has allowed the old roof trusses to continue to support the roof only. When at some time in the future the existing copper covered roof needs to be replaced, it will be possible to reinstate its original lead. Installing these trusses during the heat wave of this summer was a major task for the builders, Wallis. The trusses themselves were brought up into the roof through the circular openings in the floors in the west end (designed for moving the bells) and then through a very narrow staircase opening into the roof void.

The plaster repairs and decoration are now almost complete. It has been possible to see at close quarters the charming cherubs (each one different) above the clerestory windows. In the Sanctuary, the three faces of the adult angels of the Gloria provide a striking contrast.

At the west end of the nave the fine plaster decorative swags above the organ can be seen at close quarters. It has also been possible to examine the lion and the unicorn of the Royal Arms above the chancel beam (described by Martin Davies of the Heraldry Society in *Columns* 20) and we can now see that this monument was signed and dated 'Croggon, Late Code, Lambeth, 1822'. Sadly, as illustrated at right, we discovered that the horn on the unicorn had been broken and needs repair. If you would be interested in helping us achieve this, please contact The Friends.

At the lower levels in the nave the extensive stone repairs are almost complete and the bases of

the columns are ready to receive their panelling. Above, the framing to the gallery fronts is well in hand. The underfloor heating to the nave and aisles has been installed and the screed and insulation to the nave floor is complete. This now awaits the Purbeck stone floor which will be laid once the scaffolding is struck after painting and decoration. The slabs for the Purbeck stone floor are being cut at St Aldheim's Quarry near Swanage in Dorset. Meanwhile, work at the east end in the former maisonettes is ongoing to re-install the vestries and rebuild the east end staircases.

Outside in the yard between the Rectory and the church work continues on new balustrades, a stone ramp, granite edging, tarmac driveway, access doors to crypt and a new lift entrance to provide disabled access. If you have passed Christ Church recently you will have noticed that the portico is covered in scaffolding. The portico was the subject of the first big major project of an earlier stage of restoration, but there were then only funds to repair its roof and ceiling and the associated stonework. Now, the walls below the portico roof are being carefully cleaned and the stone repaired.

There is also much work going on off site. The new joinery for the interior is being produced in Maidstone by Wallis Joinery. The work includes reusing and introducing old materials from Christ



Stephen Humphreys

Church which had been carefully restored and recorded. The intention, approved by English Heritage, is to reuse as much material as is possible and practical. The carving is being carried out by Ray Gonzalez and Ben Harms based near Chard in Somerset. They are working on a total of thirty-eight carved pierced brackets called ‘cartoozes’ in the original accounts. Gonzalez and Harms will also be carving eleven new brackets and the elaborate corniced mouldings which are to be fixed directly above them. Twenty-seven of the brackets survived after the Victorian alterations; some had been used on the double tier of galleries at the west end and the others were converted into alms boxes including one which was cut down to form a small seat in the pulpit. Gonzalez and Harms are also carrying out repairs to the original brackets, letting in new sections of oak and carving them to match the original.

The works that the Heritage Lottery Fund are funding need to be ‘matched’ by money raised by the Friends. The gearing on this means that for every pound you give, the Lottery will give £3. Thus even a gift of £25 will produce £100 worth of building work. There is also a substantial amount of further work to be done to make this great building fully usable as a place of worship and for public uses. Upgrading the crypt, providing seating and other furniture are necessary and these are not funded by the HLF. The Friends has launched an appeal to provide them. Please see the back page for details of how to support these works.

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*Detail of one of the plaster swags just below the ceiling on the west wall of the nave. The original accounts for Christ Church record that the plaster work was executed by Isaac Mansfield who also worked on the Library at Blenheim.*



Stephen Humphreys

## Personal Column

*Kerry Downes*

In 1946 I must have been weird, though people were kind. Architectural history was part of “A-level” Art. I was going to be a printer. From sketches I had progressed to photography with a wooden quarter-plate camera, later something handier. I made a fuzzy wide-angle lens. Saying I was making a survey, I got into all sorts of places closed for repair. I read Summerson’s *Georgian London* and Gerald Cobb’s *Old London Churches*. I was going to write a book (based more on desire than knowledge) on how to understand architecture, using examples in Greater London.

To find out what there was, especially after six years of war, I went through the London boxes in the National Buildings Record. With an A–Z marked in red ink I cycled around, ticking off what I saw. And Hawksmoor’s Stepney churches very definitely, very physically, were there. Back home in Ealing I re-read Summerson’s words about them, and re-thought what architecture was about.

So I don’t know when I first got inside Christ Church. I had my British Museum library ticket honestly but precociously at nineteen, and had studied Hawksmoor’s original drawings well before May 1951 when the Rector showed me around. I was writing a paper for a professor’s birthday. *Georgian London* glosses over Christ Church, maybe because it doesn’t obviously fit Summerson’s rectangle-in-rectangle formula. But by then I knew the oddly centralised churches on the Continent; I knew also how Hawksmoor’s middle nave arches were wider than the others – my first ace. And I knew that my future would, come what else might, be with ‘Mr H’.

But how did it start? I enrolled at the Courtauld in October 1948. I studied the Renaissance, the Seventeenth Century, and English art after 1550; and you could attend lectures in all three concurrently. Perfect for a butterfly mind – and I was painting, learning photography, and developing what is still a major interest: why the world in general, and buildings in particular, don’t look as they do in pictures and photographs. Books and received wisdom were – still are – full of half-truths and side-steps. In an essay over Christmas 1949 “hammering out” these problems (my tutor’s phrase), Christ Church’s hidden cross-axis served to exemplify centralised planning – I must have been inside by then – but my sceptical tutor said Hawksmoor was a muddler: ‘look at the ceiling!’ I hadn’t then yet rumbled the middle arches, but I *felt* something. Drawings might vindicate the ‘muddler’.

A colleague’s doctoral thesis began when her tutor said, “If you think *that*, go away and prove it”,

and she did. That sort of determination carries you over the bad times in research. In 1952 I was allowed to register for an MA on a catalogue of all Hawksmoor's drawings; three years later I was upgraded to explore the mind behind them. The catalogue lies largely unread in Senate House, but 'the rest is history'.

Kerry Downes is Emeritus Professor of the History of Art at Reading University and author of *Hawksmoor*, London, Thames & Hudson, 1959, 2nd, revised edition, 1979.

## Back up support

The Friends Office is run with a small number of staff in order to keep our overhead costs to a minimum.

**Volunteers:** we need volunteers for work in the office, which might include help with the mailings, and also at our special events. Please contact us if you would like to become involved.

**Postage:** if you or your business could help with postage facilities this would help greatly with our mailings.

Please contact the Friends office: 020 7859 3035.

## Thank you

The campaign to restore Christ Church relies on the support of many people. The Friends would like to thank law firm Ashurst Morris Crisp for generously providing an office for them; for printing this edition of *Columns* and other printed material.

Thank you to our volunteers who come and help both in the office and at special events. We are particularly grateful to Fiona Ligonnet and Christopher Woodward who provide reliable and regular back up in the office throughout the year.

We would also like to take this opportunity to thank publicly all those who give to the restoration by standing order, thereby saving us paperwork and money.

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## Recent gifts

The Friends are grateful to the many individuals and organisations who are giving with such generosity to the Restoration Appeal. We value donations large and small. We would like to thank the following for their recent donations, and those who prefer to remain anonymous.

### Gifts between £100 and £200

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\* Fully or partly towards Richard Bridge Organ Appeal



Hugo Glendenning

*Eric Elstob at the opening of the rebuilt South Steps of Christ Church, 1999.*

The Friends are sad to announce the death of Eric Elstob, our President.

Over a quarter of a century, first as Treasurer and then Chairman, he committed himself energetically to the parish and to the restoration of Christ Church, and perhaps contributed more than any other individual to the restoration.

Generous in every way, his determination to advance the project saw him equally happy to make strategic decisions or turn himself to menial tasks. His positive spirit and excellent sense of humour kept us all sane when the going got tough. We shall miss him terribly.

By way of a tribute we reproduce the obituary written by Nicholas Johnson which appeared in the *Independent on* 11 November 2003.

## Eric Elstob

Financier and champion of Christ Church, Spitalfields

Eric Carl Elstob, financier, writer and conservationist: born Hawkhurst, Kent 5 April 1943; joint manager, Foreign & Colonial Investment Trust 1973–95; died London 28 October 2003.

Eric Elstob was a financier, conservationist and social historian. For over a quarter of a century he was a director at the investment trust group Foreign & Colonial, and he gave a vivid account of post-Communist European reunification in his 1997 book *Travels in a Europe Restored 1989–1995*. He was also at the helm of the restoration of the architect Nicholas Hawksmoor's most significant church, Christ Church, Spitalfields, in east London.

In 1974 Elstob had purchased a house in Fournier Street, Spitalfields, an early Georgian building first used by Huguenot weavers, which lay in the shadow of Christ Church. In the house next door, "Art for All" had already been established by the visual artists Gilbert and George. "All" in the vicinity included the conceptual artists Langlands and Bell, the poet and playwright Rodney Archer, the theatre historian Geoffrey Ashton, Denis Severs – epic conveyer of the imaginary Jarvis family at No 18 Folgate Street – and the Argentine painter and set-designer Ricardo Cinalli.

Cinalli embarked with Elstob on the restoration of his four-storey "rag trade" house. Elstob's quintessentially Nordic-English outlook complemented Cinalli's mediterranean temperament, and together they achieved their vision of a unique house. The previous owner had kept a pair of greyhounds on a double bed with a pink counterpane. Elstob's own aesthetic was Spartan: his bed teetered on pallets garnered in the fruit market.

Elstob's house backed onto the church primary school, of which he later became governor, and the Seven Stars pub, home to lethargic strippers. Spitalfields was predominantly Bangladeshi, with a Jewish and East European diaspora, a vibrant rag trade and Spitalfields fruit market. Pubs were licensed through the night for market porters; Phyllis and Clyde's Market Café, where Gilbert and George had painted the kitchen floor, opened at 3am.

The remarkable Christ Church towered above. In the 1950s the church had been threatened with demolition, but growing recognition of the importance of Hawksmoor's work saved it and in the Sixties the roof had been repaired. Its Rector from 1974, Eddie Stride, was soon convinced of

the significance of this church in an impoverished area. He ran a homeless men's refuge in the crypt; its most charismatic tenant, "Banjo" (James Cross), had a police record for stealing a lifeboat from Birkenhead and sailing it up the Thames.

The Friends of Christ Church, Spitalfields was founded in 1976 and Elstob became Treasurer. Research and building work began and in 1977 the Friends launched an annual music festival, under the direction of the conductor Richard Hickox. This was the progenitor of the Spitalfields Festival.

The restoration of Christ Church was an enormous task but Elstob was a prudent, astute treasurer, handling scarce funds. His careful management for 25 years, for which he was appointed chairman in 1996 and president in 2002, has ensured that the Friends, while still fund-raising, should complete restoration of the church next year.

Eric Carl Elstob was born in Hawkhurst, Kent, in 1943. He was the only child of a Royal Navy captain, Eric Elstob, and his wife Signe Ohlsson. His mother was Swedish, from the southern coastal town of Ystad. His father died when Eric was six and in 1952 Signe, a physiotherapist, moved with her son to Bath, running a practice from home and supplementing her wage with hospital employment.

Following prep school at Hawtreys, Wiltshire, Eric Elstob attended Marlborough, like his father before him. He excelled at languages, literature and boxing. He continued to be athletic; in 1995 he scaled the Andes and, sporting an array of herringbone jackets, tweeds, plus-fours and green military socks, he walked in many countries. He later smoked a pipe (except in Lent). He observed many saints' days and had a store of folklore kept, like much of his business work, in his head.

At 15, meeting his guardians in the old United Services Club, he told one of them – an admiral – that he would not follow his father into the Navy. At 16 he won a scholarship to Queen's College, Oxford, and graduated with first class honours in Modern Languages in 1965. That summer he visited Greece, and recited a Shakespeare sonnet, "Th'expense of spirit in a waste of shame", at Epidaurus, at the temple erected to Dionysus.

As undergraduates, Elstob and his schoolfriend Richard Barber (the future historian and Elstob's publisher at the imprint Boydell & Brewer) travelled in Sweden with the future Conservative minister Tim Boswell. Barber remembers:

Elstob instructed us that when drinking a toast in schnapps before dinner, the glass should be lowered when empty opposite where the second

waistcoat button would have been. We duly did this at one house, and our host laughingly exclaimed "You can't all three of you have been in the Swedish navy."

In 1965 Elstob joined Foreign & Colonial Management in London and by 1969 was appointed a director. Linguistically gifted, with Latin, Greek and some Provençal alongside French, German, Swedish and English, he was drawn to international financing. After a rocky start, Foreign & Colonial's operations in Japan flourished and in 1972 Elstob helped establish the GT Japan Investment Trust.

He was pre-eminent in researching Far Eastern economies and trailblazed Foreign & Colonial investment policies in Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Japan and Thailand. Until 1995 he was a joint manager of the Foreign & Colonial Investment Trust. This was a golden era of performance for Foreign & Colonial, which became the largest investment trust in the UK.

Elstob's mother had resettled in Sweden in 1966, and died two years later. He had been her close confidant and her death was painful for him to overcome. He maintained close ties with his Swedish relatives and in honour of his mother founded the Signe Trust, slanted to help the young, the arts and the artisan. In 1979 he published a lively account of Sweden's past, *Sweden: a traveller's history*.

The late 1980s brought Elstob personal and business difficulties, and were a lonely time. More gentle was his post as Treasurer to the Worshipful Company of Parish Clerks. He was also trustee at St Andrew's, Holborn. In 1989 he was diagnosed with cancer but he fought it stoically.

In the spring of 1990 he drove to Eastern Europe. Over the next five years, with petrol cans and a tent in the boot, he sought to see for himself how the economies could withstand change after Communism. The resulting John Buchan-esque book, *Travels in a Europe Restored*, was by turns dark and wry.

Elstob continued to travel widely for business and pleasure, ably assisted by his companion Eva-Lena Ruhnbro. He holidayed in Ystad annually, and returned often to his childhood house in Bath, where time was slower. He maintained and developed eclectic passions: blackberry crumble, skiing, trekking, Ealing comedies, schnapps, cats and kayaking. A fine-looking man, with a hunting-dog face, he was brave and uncomplaining.

*Nicholas Johnson*

## How to support the Friends

To become a Supporter of the Friends of Christ Church Spitalfields please make a donation of a minimum of £25 p.a. (£30 for overseas). Supporters receive the Friends' quarterly newsletter *Columns* and advance notice of tours, lectures and other special events that the Friends organise.

Your gift will be matched by Lottery funding: this means that £25 donated to the Appeal enables the Friends to do £100 of restoration work.

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- Christ Church Spitalfields  
 The Richard Bridge Organ

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