

Columns

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THE FRIENDS OF CHRIST CHURCH SPITALFIELDS
REGISTERED CHARITY NO. 276056

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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The Christ Church pulpit

When Christ Church was consecrated in 1729, its nave was furnished with box-pews, a pulpit, and a reader's desk. The pulpit and reader's desk, both probably designed by Nicholas Hawksmoor, were made by the joiner Gabriel Appleby with carving by Thomas Darby and Gervase Smith.

The accounts and specifications for Ewan Christian's alterations to the church of 1865–6, included sums "for altering and reusing the present pulpit and desk" and for "the pulpit to be cut down, and re-fixed against the large north pillar. The desk and lectern to be new."

The pulpit was dismantled and the reader's desk modified to form a new pulpit. The carved swags or 'pendants' were taken from the pilasters supporting the sounding board, and possibly also the elaborate carved pulvino frieze, were salvaged from the original pulpit and were added to the reader's desk (see illustration on page 3). The wrought iron gate which stood at the foot of the pulpit stairs until 1866 is currently in store. The original sounding board from the pulpit, which had a decorative veneered soffit, was converted into a table which was presented in 1867 to the Rev Patteson when he left Spitalfields.

The *Survey of London* (Volume XXVII Spitafields and Mile End New Town), 1957, described the result:

"The reader's desk ... still survives to serve for a pulpit, being now raised on an inappropriate stone base ... It is constructed of oak and square in plan with re-entrant angles in the front face. The cyma-curved base and dentilled cornice-capping are richly carved, and the later surmounts a bold pulvino, undercut and carved with interlacing foliage-scrolls. On each face is a tall oblong panel, decorated with inlay, flanked by panelled pilaster-strips containing pendants of fruits, vegetable and flowers, suspended on tasselled ribbons. Similar pilaster strips adorn each face of the re-entrant angles."

When the recent major restoration works to the church started in the early 1980's, the pulpit was removed for safe keeping and stored. It was returned to the church in May 2007.

The Friends have commissioned David Luard, timber consultant to the London Diocesan Advisory Council, and contributor of this issue's Personal Column, to investigate and determine how much of the original reader's desk survives, the extent of earlier alterations and which parts came from the pulpit. This investigation will also provide a firm basis against which the proposals for the restoration of the pulpit can be assessed.



A section of one of the carved pilaster strips on the reader's desk

If you would like more information about the pulpit or would like to contribute to the costs of its restoration, please contact the Friends.

Glossary

Cyma: a cornice with an S-shaped moulding (from Greek, *kuma*, a wave or wavy moulding)

Pulvino: a convex moulding in a frieze (from Latin, *pulvinus*, a cushion)

Cleaning the wall monuments

Thanks to the generosity of our supporters, the Friends have been able to commission the conservation firm Taylor Pearce to attend to the some thirty five wall monuments in the main entrance and west staircases of Christ Church. This has formed part of the finishing works which have been part funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund.

The monuments are generally simple memorials and not grand works of art like the Peck and Ladbrooke monuments in the nave, but as with many modest memorials of this kind, the inscriptions reflect the history and character of the parish and its people. Some of this history is evident in the Hebrew script on many of the ten monuments from the Chapel in Palestine Place, Bethnal Green, moved to the church in 1897; in the star of David on the war memorial and by inscriptions with names of Huguenot origin such Dubois, Vaux and Chabot. Other notable monuments are to Richard Headington, who died in 1831 at the age of 57, after being surgeon at the nearby London Hospital for

thirty-one years, as well as President of the Royal College of Surgeons, and the contemporary monument to Sir James Stirling (1926–92), the distinguished architect.

Although the monuments were in reasonably good structural condition, atmospheric pollution and possibly past attempts at cleaning meant that they were generally dirty and stained. In consultation with the Council for the Care of Churches, the approach to their cleaning was, like that of the Peck and Ladbrooke monuments, to surface clean and degrease the marbles followed by, on the very soiled or discoloured Carrara marble inscription panels and details, applications of a clay poultice with water and the use of a dental steam cleaner, to remove the discolouration and staining where possible.

It was important to retain a uniform sense of appearance throughout a collection of monuments of similar age and style and not to 'over-clean' particular ones.

The result, which is well worth a visit, is a collection of monuments now restored to life. Information about each of them is on the Friends' web site:

www.christchurchspitalfields.org



Detail from the recently cleaned monument to Edward Peck (d.1736), who laid the foundation stone of Christ Church

Personal Column

David Luard Dip. Rest., Timber Consultant to the London Diocesan Advisory Council

The Great Fire of London in 1666 meant that large sections of the capital had to be rebuilt from the ground up, and this occurred shortly after the restoration of the Stuart Royal family in an age of emerging opulence and enlightenment. The returned aristocrats took advantage of the devastation of the fire to rebuild their London houses on a grand scale; the churches were also rebuilt. The large amount of rebuilding resulted in high demand for the trades required to decorate the new buildings, and tradesmen came from all over Europe to take advantage of the skills shortage.

Prior to the Great Fire the predominant timber used in woodcarving was oak, which was also used in great quantities as structural building material, as well as for panelling. The English carving style was somewhat bulky in appearance: great bunches of flowers carved on the outside of solid lumps of oak.

Grinling Gibbons was 'discovered' by John Evelyn in 1671 and quickly became the dominant master carver, his style being widely copied. His style can be traced back to ancient Rome, augmenting it. His skill lay in his ability to design 'lightness' into the carvings – he cheated slightly by using a structure where the deeper sections of carving are made up of up to three layers of timber superimposed one on the other. At St. James Piccadilly, the three layers produce a depth of some 14 inches. The new style was enhanced by the use of limewood as the preferred carving material, a wood much lighter in colour that created a contrast between the oak of the panelling, creating an illusion of even greater depth and delicacy. Oak was still commonly used as a carving material. At Christ Church the carving of the pierced brackets beneath the galleries, the organ, the pulpit, reader's desk, and no doubt the choir stalls and other furniture were all executed in oak, though in the new style and using new interpretations of the old motifs and iconography.

The advances in carving technique and style were relatively short lived however, and in the early to mid eighteenth century advances in plaster and casting production techniques made it possible to mass produce highly decorative sections of plaster. This, in conjunction with the arrival of the Baroque style, which used decorative plaster in greater quantity, led to a reduction in the use of woodcarving in decorative interiors. This is not to say that large scale carved schemes were not commissioned; the apse at Redland chapel in Bristol was completed in 1742 and the fantasy of Luke Lightfoot's work at Claydon House also dates from the mid 1700s. Carving gradually became less commercially viable over the following century and it was not until the resurgence of the Gothic style in the nineteenth century that the wood carvers resumed their deserved importance with regard to the architectural interior.

My first sight of Christ Church Spitalfields was some twelve years ago as a freshly self-employed timber and carvings conservator, back in London after seven years



The present state of the reader's desk, showing the damaged pulvino frieze

working for a company based in Devon. Looking for work, I had decided to use a personal approach and visit the buildings that I felt I should be working in. Christ Church appeared to be closed, entrenched behind its substantial railings, glowering at the City.

Eventually I discovered that the gardens were open, as was the south door. I cautiously entered to find myself in the gloomy interior; no floor and the space under the west end galleries filled with scaffold shelving crammed with sections of timber. Light filtered in through grimy windows to show the faded paintwork of the walls and the dusty dry joinery of the gallery fronts and the organ.

A voice gently enquired if he could help and I explained why I was there. I was kindly shown round the building and it was explained that full restoration was the target. I departed having left my business card but not expecting any contact in the short term. Some years later I received a telephone call enquiring as to whether I would be able to write a report on the gallery fronts, this led to being commissioned to remove and dismantle the galleries at the west end of the Church. The idea was to ascertain how much the joinery had been altered by the Victorians during their high speed transformation of the church in the nineteenth century. While no conclusive results were obtained we were able to glean valuable information as to the shape of the original soffits, which helped to determine the shape of the joinery as it met the columns.

My next involvement was to investigate the organ, an oddity in that the console could not be approached without passing through the body of the organ case;

My latest involvement has been to assist in the reintroduction of the pulpit, brought back from storage after fifteen years. This brought me back into the church after the interior had been completed. The change is amazing; gone is the gloomy dusty barn, replaced by the welcoming light of the peaceful and graceful interior.

Having been involved with the church on and off for the previous eight years it came as rather a surprise to find that I had failed to notice during that time that one of the monuments in the narthex is of one of my ancestors – no matter how hard one looks there is always more to see.

Thank you

The Friends are grateful for the generosity of the many individuals and organisations who support the Restoration and Organ Appeals. We would like to thank the law firm Ashurst for generously providing an office; for printing this issue of *Columns* and other printed material. Thank you to Charles Gledhill and Marianna Kennedy for the notices outside the crypt entrance. Thank you to our volunteers who come and help both in the office and at special events. We

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We would like to take this opportunity to thank all those who prefer to remain anonymous and those who give to the restoration by standing order, thereby saving on administrative costs. We would also like to thank the following for their recent donations:

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To become an acknowledged Supporter of the Friends of Christ Church Spitalfields please make a minimum annual donation of £25 (£30 for overseas). You can contribute towards the restoration of Christ Church or the Richard Bridge Organ. Supporters receive the Friends' newsletter *Columns* and advance notice of tours, lectures and other special events that the Friends organise.

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