It's Hawksmoor's Day Again in London Town
By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLELONDON.
New York Times (1923-Current file); Jun 13, 1971; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times
pg. D25

Architecture

It's Hawksmoor's Day Again in London Town

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

LONDON.

YOU can't escape. In this city, where architecture is an immutable, magnificent fact, and where critic Ian Nairn can have 450 rigorously selected favorite buildings, I had hoped for a busman's holiday. When not paying professional attention to the British determination to do London in with rational planning, I would simply gorge on greatness.

For some, then, champagne and foie gras, or even simple grass. For me, Hawksmoor's London. For immediate reassurance, a special pilgrimage to Christ Church Spitalfields.

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And there, in the neat and inevitable sign on the steps, was the neat and inevitable notice: "Christ Church Spitalfields, built in 1729 by Nicholas Hawksmoor, is considered one of the finest buildings in the country. £67,000 ($160,000) is needed to restore it to its former glory, and gifts, no matter how small, will be gratefully received at the Rectory, 2 Fournier Street." The church is closed.

The first time I saw Christ Church I wasn't looking for it. I wouldn't have known it if I fell over it, which I did. A tourist visit to Petticoat Lane on a Sunday morning, a turn into the deserted Spitalfields market, a sudden view of that looming ecclesiastical ghost at the end of the street, and whamI the shock of Architecture Power.

A strange church, unlike any English baroque I had ever seen before. A sure massing of unorthodox parts into an unconventional, overwhelming, haunting whole. Great hollow scoops in the tower's sides that play brilliant tricks on solid form. A bravado Palladian arched portico that makes correct Palladianism look puny. The structure is not composed, says Nairn in "Nairn's London," "it is transmuted somewhere right down in the blood so the whole building becomes a living idea."

The unfashionable 18th-century Spitalfields streets around the church are shabby, and winos are draped against the iron fence on a warm spring day. A small white lilac blooms in the churchyard, like hope. And yet, these Spitalfields streets are doomed, Nairn says, by lack of love.

"Even now, this could be one of those living areas in the heart of cities over which so many words are spilt at conferences. Charity is far away and compassion even further." If slow death by neglect overtakes Hawksmoor's masterpiece, he warns, "the church might as well present a banker's order for 30 pieces of silver. For this is the faith, manifest."

I was haunted by that building until I discovered what it was. Finding out was as gratifying as knowing that one had recognized a great vintage wine at a blindfold tasting. I joined the Hawksmoor buffs.

Sir Christopher Wren's London is the London of guidebooks and histories — better known than Hawksmoor's London and easier to see. St. Paul's is Wren's great orchestration; his smaller churches are grace notes that have set London's style for 300 years.

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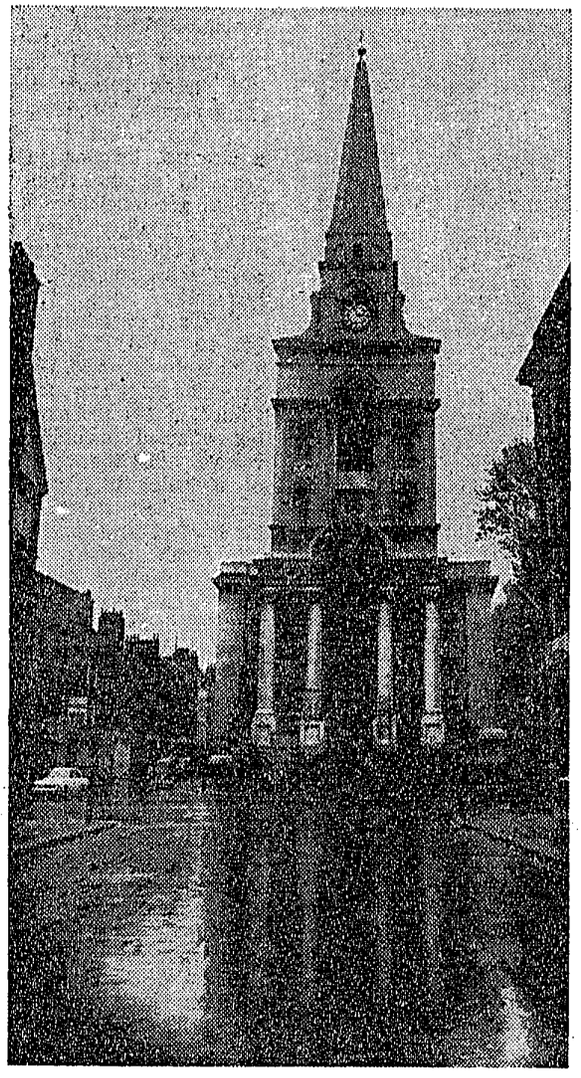
Nicholas Hawksmoor was Wren's "back-room boy," first apprentice and later associate, before he became an independent practitioner. With Wren's and Vanbrugh's, his work spans the late 17th and early 18th centuries, a time — one of many — when England demonstrated its peculiar genius for building with art and grandeur. (London has always survived its planners; what it may not survive in this century is its architects.)

Hawksmoor was a thorough professional, something the British have traditionally treated with condescension. The gentleman-dilettante was always preferred; he cut better butter and got better jobs. There have been some superb ones, including Wren.

Hawksmoor died in 1736, when the Georgian Palladian style was making Wren and Vanbrugh unfashionable. Wren's reputation had to be "rehabilitated" by Sir Joshua Reynolds and the brothers Adam. Hawksmoor's has waited until now.



Garth Huxtable

Hawksmoor's Christ Church, London, built in 1729
"In 20th-century eyes, he is example and mentor"

For all this and more, there is a properly passionate and scholarly book by Kerry Downes, "Hawksmoor," published in New York by Praeger in 1970, based on his monograph and catalogue raisonné of the architect's production. It is one of those rare, readable works, soundly grounded in knowledge and sensibility.

By the standards of the later 18th century, Downes points out, Hawksmoor lacked "the supreme virtue of Taste." The Baroque, by way of Italy and France, was out; the Renaissance, by way of Palladio, was in. Refinement was admired; delicacy supplanted robustness. Hawksmoor's work seemed gross and incomprehensible and "the age of Taste could make little of it." The 19th century lost view of him, involved as it was in everything from Regency classic to Ruskinian gothic and Butterworthian Victorian blowouts. (As Nairn says, in cataloguing churches, there is more than one way to reach God.)

Hawksmoor is very much the taste of today. For 20th-century eyes, he is example and mentor. An age that deals in pure form, that sees architecture as organic mass, that no longer deals in the wall as an inert surface to be decorated, is bowled over by Hawksmoor's sophisticated complexity in which style and form become a sculptural and architectonic whole. This is architecture that has what Vanbrugh defined as the "Solemn and Awful Appearance" of greatness. That's what gets you at the end of a Spitalfields street.

Hawksmoor's London is in unfashionable places: St. Alfege Greenwich, St. Anne Limehouse, St. George-in-the-East Wapping Stepney. It is in the City, too, at St. Michael Cornhill, an essay in unacademic Gothic with a churchyard tucked behind it bright with spring tulips and serene with that quality Londoners call amenity. It is near the Bank of England, where the twin towers of St. Mary Woolnoth, on the tightest of sites, fuse onto walls that teach every lesson about plane, mass and decoration an architect needs to know. Small church, much art.

It is at St. Mary Bloomsbury, where the steeple puts George I atop a Roman altar crowning a stepped pyramid on columns with lip service to the Mausoleum at Halicarnassus. Surprisingly, it is at Westminster Abbey, in the towers, "familiar to the world, but recognized by few," says Downes "It is surely a fitting but also ironical conclusion to so brilliantly obscure a career as his that his last executed work should be the self-effacing completion of a great medieval monument."

At St. James Garlickhythe, where a steeple that may be Hawksmoor's or may be Wren's tops a restored Wren church that fairly bursts onto the narrow slope of Garlick Hill, there is another notice. But this one, unlike that at Spitalfields, does not call for salvation.

It calls for three "poor, honest young women" to share in the 18th-century bequest of one Signor Pasquale Favale, who left dowries for deserving London girls about to be married, or married in the past 12 months, to be given each year. This year's applications are invited by June 30. Signor Favale married a London girl, it seems, and was very happy. There is salvation of all kinds.