

# Architect of Faith

## THE GENIUS OF NICHOLAS HAWKSMOOR

### SIX CHURCHES BUILT

### ALONG THE THAMES DURING THE

### EARLY EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

### HAVE BEEN HAILED AMONG

### ENGLAND'S FINEST EXAMPLES OF

### BAROQUE ARCHITECTURE.

A quest to build Jerusalem in England's green and pleasant land began nearly a century before William Blake composed his poem; for Queen Anne, in her 1711 Act of Parliamentary, decreed that "...50 new churches [were to be built] of stone and other proper materials, with Towers or Steeples to each of them." The churches would be needed to serve London's growing population; they would also offer an opportunity to secure an Anglican presence amid increasing numbers of Catholics and Dissenters. The Parliamentary Act, passed by a then recently reinstated Tory government, imposed a duty on coal to pay for the new churches, a cogent and visible collaboration between the state and church.

Of the 50 churches commissioned by the queen, only a dozen were ever built, six by Nicholas Hawksmoor (1661–1736), a protégé of Sir Christopher Wren, considered by many to have been England's finest Baroque architect.

Hawksmoor has frequently been overshadowed by the glory of his great master Sir Christopher Wren (1632–1723), and by his friend and contemporary Sir John Vanbrugh (1664–1726). All three men were masters of the English Baroque style, which came to fruition during the transitional period between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—it is a tempered version of the flamboyant and highly decorative Baroque found on the continent. It has some of the reticence of the English character, which

resisted the powerful continental messages of the Counter-Reformation. Despite the influence of the two great architects, Hawksmoor's work is highly individual and discernibly different. In contrast to Wren's graceful lines and Vanbrugh's flamboyance, the classical language of Hawksmoor's oeuvre is muscular and bold, almost cyclopean in its massiveness.

Although Hawksmoor never went abroad to study the remains of Classical antiquity like many of his contemporaries, he was nevertheless fascinated by the monuments of the ancient Mediterranean world, referencing them in many of his works. With their massive bulk, soaring height, and dramatic use of light and shade, Hawksmoor's six London churches provide a distinctive punctuation to the architectural landscape on both sides of the Thames.

St. Alfege (1712–1714) in Greenwich was the first of the churches to be built under the 1711 Act of Parliamentary. As shown in the plan, there is a central space and two axes, the longer running from east to west with the cross axis marked, in this case by two transepts. All these features are characteristics of Hawksmoor's other churches, setting the tone for the other five. The ceiling is flat and the auxiliary spaces are richly decorated, as at other Hawksmoor churches. The tower was finished by John James in 1730 and is insignificant compared to the rest of the mighty composition. The exterior is smooth with round-headed windows that contrast with the heavy, keystone square ones. The portico at the east end is plain yet majestic, with its Doric columns and Roman arch that breaks through the pediment. The interior was gutted by bombing during the Second World War, but restored by 1953, when it was rededicated.

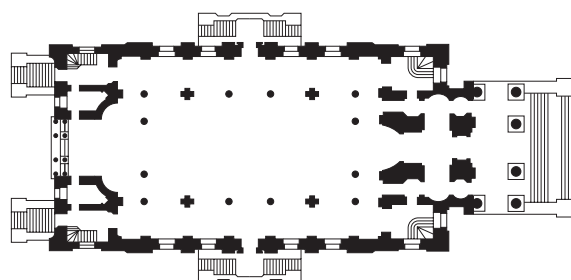
Christ Church, Spitalfields (1714–1729) suffered in the late nineteenth century from alterations made by the Victorian architect Ewan Christian, as well as from neglect and the threat of inappropriate reuse schemes during recent decades. A current restoration scheme aims to return the church back to its sumptuous, pre-1850 classical interior. A central space with a flat ceiling is flanked by aisles roofed with elliptical barrel vaults, carried on a



*I will not cease from mental flight,  
Nor shall the sword sleep in my hand,  
Till we have built Jerusalem  
In England's green and pleasant land.*

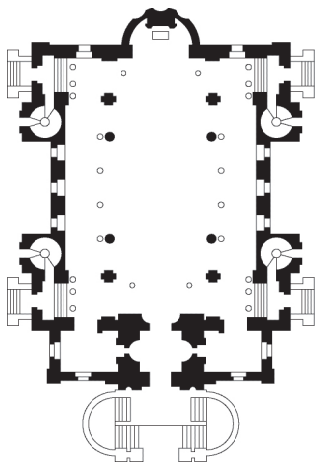
*Milton*  
William Blake (1757–1827)

CLASSICAL ELEMENTS SUCH AS A FLAT CEILING FLANKED BY AISLES  
ROOFED WITH ELLIPTICAL BARREL VAULTS GIVE CHRIST CHURCH,  
SPITALFIELDS A DISTINCTLY ROMAN CHARACTER. THE CHURCH WAS  
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WITH ITS TWO TOWERS, ST. GEORGE'S  
IN THE EAST, IN WAPPING, EAST  
LONDON, OFFERS ONE OF THE CITY'S  
FINEST BAROQUE FAÇADES.  
LITTLE IS LEFT OF THE BUILDING'S  
ORIGINAL INTERIOR, HOWEVER.  
TODAY, IT IS A SHELL HOUSING AN  
ENTIRELY NEW CHURCH STRUCTURE.



raised composite order. These classical elements give the Hawksmoor interior a deeply Roman character. The exterior is punctuated with plain, bold, and massive elements, including round clerestory windows positioned by Hawksmoor to create a dramatic play of light and shade. A Tuscan porch with a semicircular pediment is attached to the west end, and with the tower and spire immediately behind it, the whole composition is quite overwhelming for any viewer. At the east end, there is a Venetian window. This may indicate the growing popularity of the Palladians, or it might simply be echoing the arched pediment of the entrance portico.

St. George's in the East (1714–1729), in Wapping, East London, is now a shell housing a completely new church structure. As at St. Anne's, Limehouse, and Christ Church, Spitalfields, it has two right-angled axes. The cross axis is marked with stair towers set towards the corners rather than the transepts, as at St. Alfege. The whole composition with its two towers, the horizontal box of the nave, and the wide principal tower, creates one of the finest English Baroque compositions.

St. Anne's, Limehouse, built from 1714–1730, is not as elemental in its external composition as St. George's in the East. It was gutted by fire in 1850, but painstakingly restored from 1851 to 1854 by John Morris. It is based on a four-column plan with east and west transepts. But like St. George's in the East, the tower is Gothic in spirit. As at all of the six churches, the ceiling is flat and the emphasis is on the cross axis.

St. Mary's, Woolnoth, in the city of London, was built from 1716–1727, and is unlike any of the other five Hawksmoor churches. It differs in plan, being based on a square, and in its elements, with the external rustication and decorated blind niches of the south side being more Mannerist than Baroque or Antique. Unlike Hawksmoor's other churches, the tower at St. Mary's is very broad, occupying almost the full width of the west front.

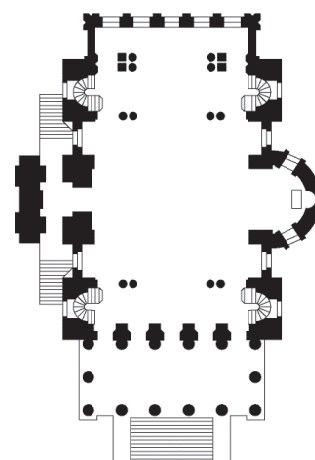
Hailed as Hawksmoor's greatest London church, St. George's, Bloomsbury (1716–1731) was built just a stone's throw away from what are now the British Museum, the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, and Russell Square, where a number of the University of London buildings are clustered. Despite its reorientation in the late eighteenth century, the interior of St. George's still belongs to Hawksmoor in its classical grandeur,







HAILED AS HAWKSMOOR'S GREATEST LONDON CHURCH, ST. GEORGE'S, BLOOMSBURY, IS SLATED FOR RESTORATION. ITS CORINTHIAN-COLUMNED PORTICO RECALLS THE GRANDEUR OF IMPERIAL ROME; THE DESIGN OF ITS TOWER WAS INSPIRED BY RECONSTRUCTION DRAWINGS OF THE TOMB OF HALICARNASSUS. LITTLE HAS BEEN DONE IN TERMS OF RESTORATION SINCE THE CHURCH'S CONSTRUCTION, EXCEPT FOR REPAINTING ITS INTERIOR.



its characteristically flat ceiling, and even in its fabric, which is thought to date largely from the original 1716 design. The impressive Corinthian portico on the south elevation of St. George's vividly recalls Imperial Rome and makes it the grandest of all the Hawksmoor churches. This was the first time this feature had been used in a London church and at none of the other five churches does he use the Corinthian order. The tower also differentiates St. George's from the other five churches. It is centrally placed on the west side and is square rather than rectangular, continuing right down to the ground. It is often considered to be the most whimsical of all Hawksmoor's church towers, with its stepped spire, statue of George I, and its blatant reference to the Mausoleum of Halicarnassus. There were originally two crowned unicorns and two crowned lions placed on the sides of the spire, but they no longer exist. The north elevation is punctuated with a two-story arcade, positioned over the massive keystones of the crypt windows.

Since their construction in the eighteenth century, Hawksmoor's churches have suffered greatly. The heavy hand of Victorian architects, the ravages of war, and the new development of the past decades have all contributed to the demise of their physical fabric and distinctive character. They form the bulk of Hawksmoor's oeuvre—along with the West Towers of Westminster Abbey—and demonstrate the qualities that make him the most significant of English Baroque architects, making their neglect even harder to fathom.

St. George's, Bloomsbury, is listed by English Heritage as a Grade I Listed Building, the highest recognition a British building can be granted, yet the church has mysteriously slipped through England's heritage safety net. No major repair work has been undertaken since 1871, and in its current state of





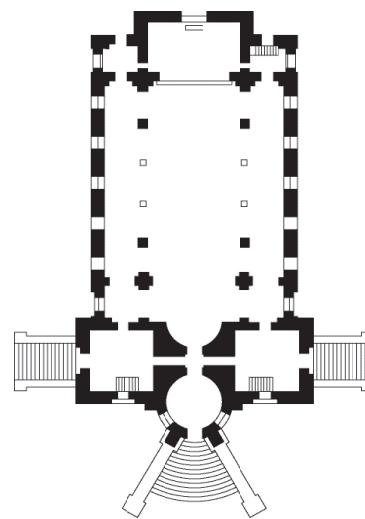
decay, the restoration and conservation of the church have been estimated at around \$8.25 million.

The area surrounding St. George's has had a chequered history, which has undoubtedly contributed to the decline of the church. The gin epidemic of the 1740s, which was famously alluded to in William Hogarth's engraving, *Gin Lane*, was replaced by a drug explosion in the 1990s. The area has also been transformed into a commercial district and has hosted an influx of recent immigrants. A proposed redevelopment in the 1960s and 1970s, which would have destroyed most of the British Museum-Bloomsbury neighborhood around the church, also delayed major conservation works, as it was believed the church would benefit from this at a later date. Fortunately for the neighborhood, the project was shelved, but St. George's continued to decline. The church had found a new life in the 1960s as the University Chaplaincy, but when that institution relocated, it left a small and struggling congregation. Over the years, lack of funds and maintenance caused the drainage system to fail, leading to water infiltration and damage to the interior. The only restoration undertaken in recent years was between 1974 and 1976, when the interior of the church was repainted to a then-fashionable color scheme, and the roof structure reinforced. The low morale then pervading the area immediately surrounding St. George's seemed to be echoed in its blackened elevations.

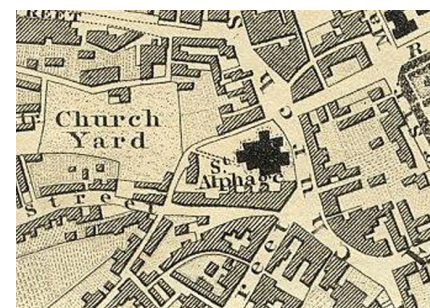
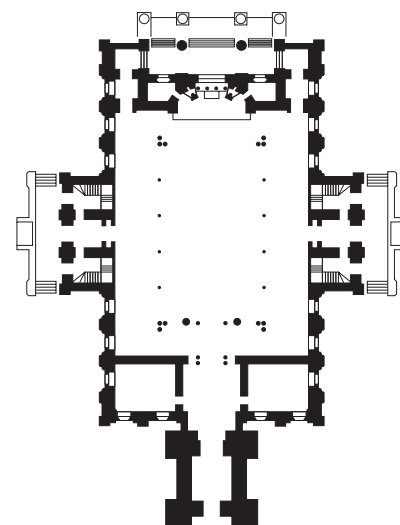
Concerned over the plight of this neglected masterpiece, WMF in Britain began talking with the conservation architect Colin Kerr; the church's treasurer Julian Sharpe; and the current and active rector, the Revd. Perry Butler, about a possible restoration. Given the importance of the building and its poor condition, St. George's, Bloomsbury, was included on WMF's 2002 list of the *100 Most Endangered Sites*. As a result of the listing, the church's future is much more rosy.

WMF has been given a generous gift of \$5 million from the Estate of Paul Mellon to help with the restoration of this fine Hawksmoor church, provided the work is completed within three years. Once cleaned, this fine elevation, currently blackened with soot, will be appreciated fully and will greatly enhance the street it faces. WMF in Britain is committed to helping the church raise a further \$3.25 million for the restoration of the interior.

Today, a new priest in charge has begun to attract a congregation of young and lively professional people. On St. George's Day 2002, he was made rector—a clear vote of confidence by the diocese with regard to the church's future. The church is a growing force of stability in a community in transition, directing its funds towards the community outreach programs and offering the parish a valuable arts venue. Through its commitment to the restoration and conservation of



ST. ANNE'S, LIMEHOUSE, WAS BUILT ON A FOUR-COLUMN PLAN WITH EAST AND WEST TRANSEPTS AND A GOTHIC-INSPIRED TOWER. THE CHURCH, GUTTED BY FIRE IN 1850, WAS PAINSTAKINGLY RESTORED BETWEEN 1851 AND 1854 BY JOHN MORRIS.



ST. ALFEGE IN GREENWICH WAS THE FIRST OF HAWKSMOOR'S CHURCHES TO BE BUILT. AS SHOWN IN THE PLAN, THERE IS A CENTRAL SPACE AND TWO AXES. THE INTERIOR OF THE CHURCH WAS DESTROYED BY BOMBING DURING WORLD WAR II AND REBUILT IN 1953.

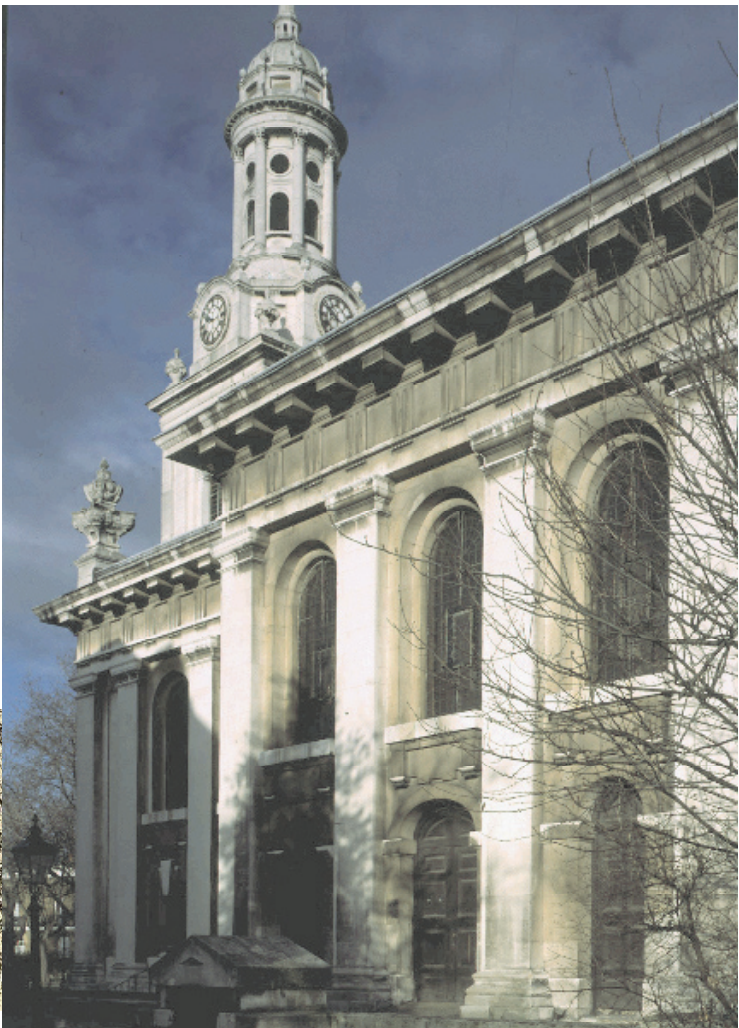


St. George's, Bloomsbury, WMF in Britain will not only be significantly contributing to the future of a Hawksmoor masterpiece and a national landmark of international renown, but also to the regeneration of the area immediately surrounding the church.

Prior to its involvement with St. George's, WMF in Britain had supported the restoration of Christ Church, Spitalfields, an almost archaeological restoration scheme initiated in the late 1970s, which aimed to be the first accurate restoration of a Hawksmoor building. The project is still in progress, more than 20 years later. All involved with the St. George's project are committed to ensuring progress is made swiftly, particularly with the three-year condition placed on the gift of \$5 million from the Estate of Paul Mellon. It is hoped that St. George's, Bloomsbury will become a model conservation and restoration project.

The project is currently in the planning stages. Colin Kerr has recently completed a report on the history and development of the church, and its current condition. Following the completion of the survey at the beginning of April, a design scheme will be produced based on the requirements of the church and the repair work required to secure the fabric of the building. A visual examination of the building has shown that extensive stone repairs are required. The external fabric of the church will be cleaned before individual masonry repairs and joint repairs can be carried out. Work to the exterior is due to commence in the Spring of 2003, with the interior restoration starting later in the year and running right through to the end of 2004. A permanent exhibition on Hawksmoor is planned for the crypt, and a program of lectures on Baroque architecture will be given at the Paul Mellon Centre.

—Colin Amery



ST. MARY'S, WOOLNOTH IS UNLIKE HAWKSMOOR'S OTHER LONDON CHURCHES, BEING BUILT ON A SQUARE PLAN WITH DECORATIVE ELEMENTS FAR MORE MANNERIST THAN BAROQUE. ITS TOWER IS NEARLY THE SAME WIDTH AS THE FAÇADE.

