

Spitalfields, London

1 November 2008

A group of us gathered before the colossal west front of Hawksmoor's Christ Church. There can be few more dramatic buildings in the country, and when it was built the double Serlian arch surmounted by a broach spire must have looked quite outlandish.

Christopher Claxton Stevens competed with the police sirens and lorries in Commercial Street to tell us of the Fifty New Churches Act of 1711, which actually resulted in the building of 12 churches, six of them by Hawksmoor, funded by the coal tax. Christ Church was undoubtedly the finest of these, and it is only as a result of pressure from the Hawksmoor committee and then The Friends of Christ Church that the building was saved from the state of decay into which it had fallen in the 1950s. Now, after the expenditure of over £10 million, it is gratifying to experience the building in something like its former glory.

The original box pews were stripped out during Ewan Christian's 'improvements' of 1851 and no attempt has been made to restore these, but the resulting cavernous space of the interior (half the volume of the nave of St Paul's) enables one to experience the noble scale of the architecture in all its grandeur. The galleries which Christian removed have been restored, and much oak panelling and supporting consoles (carved by Gonzales and Harmes of Somerset) introduced. The organ by Richard Bridge, Handel's organ master, is currently being repaired and, with over 2000 pipes and three manuals, it promises to be an instrument of major significance when reinstated. The pulpit, which should be Christ Church's focal point, was massacred by Christian and what to do with the

remnants remains a problem. Christopher reminded us of some of the more macabre features of the church's history, including the removal in the 1980s of 983 bodies buried in the crypt, nearly half of which were identified.

Moving on from Christ Church we stopped to admire Fournier Street, saved from the dereliction into which it had fallen, and now largely gentrified following the arrival of a few enlightened pioneers in the 1970s. After the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes the resultant influx of Protestant craftsmen from Flanders in the late 17th century changed the local industry from wool weaving to silk weaving. The present terrace houses were built in the 1720s for the more prosperous master silk weavers whose looms were housed in separate buildings. Christopher explained that it was only later in the 18th century, when foreign imports made silk weaving less profitable, that looms were moved into these houses, multiple occupancy developed and the characteristic long attic windows were introduced to maximise the daylight. During the 19th century the whole area became depressed. Irish immigrants were followed by Ashkenazi Jews and, in the last century, Bengalis and Bangladeshis.

Christopher told us that Spitalfields has the highest concentration of early 18th century houses in London, although 90 were lost between 1957 and 1977, leaving 140 surviving.

In Folgate Street we were ushered into Dennis Severs' house, where, after a brief introduction by the custodian and a request to maintain silence, we were allowed to wander through the house. This aims to create the impression that we are back in the early 18th century and the owner has just nipped out, leaving the beds unmade, the candles lit and discarded oyster shells still on the table. Severs, who died in 1999, was evidently quite eccentric and went to extraordinary lengths to create the illusion, even forgoing electricity in the cause. The result is certainly interesting and in its crowded disarray escapes what one might call the National Trust approach, but some of us felt that it was more successful as the theatrical creation of one man's fertile imaginative spirit than as an authentic historical experience.

John Stabler