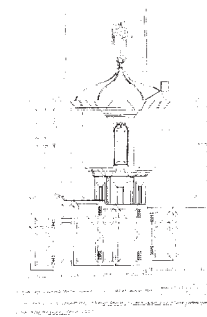


where ANGELS fear to tread



Much of the new carved joinery undertaken by the company takes place in the States and Canada, like this carved screen in St Thomas Church, 5th Avenue, New York. Other projects have included numerous design-and-build commissions for the National Cathedral in Washington DC and construction of choir stalls for the Church of the Heavenly Rest in New York.



Molland Church is nationally renowned for its perfect Georgian interior. One of architect Peter Ferguson's drawings for the conservation and rebuilding project is shown to the left.

If you feel in need of your own personal angel to watch over you this Christmas, then a picturesque drive along Anstey Common will lead you straight to the source. Nestling in the southern flank of the hillside is Ringcombe Farm, a secreted Exmoor base which belies the prestigious, international profile of Hugh Harrison Conservation, a company which both conserves ancient woodwork and designs and crafts new, mainly ecclesiastical woodwork.

The angels in question – and the sonorous spaces which they inhabit – are, as you might well imagine, special. You will have to be patient! Hugh's projects, executed with his specialised team, can run and run – like the nave ceiling at Peterborough Cathedral shown opposite, which dates back to 1232 and called for seven years of intricate craftsmanship to conserve.

"This is the largest, oldest timber ceiling in Europe and we started the project in 1998," explains Hugh. "In this country it is mainly conservation work that we do and it does tend to be ecclesiastical but this is not by design, rather a case that you get slotted into a groove. At the moment for example we are working on various churches but also two or three private houses.

"It is arguably a bit of a neglected area in that stonework which needs attention is more obvious. You can see that a window needs repair or that quoins on the corner of a building are crumbling. But woodwork can just sit there

quietly mouldering away and you might not have a clue that there is a problem until a long way down the line. For this reason jobs like repairing pews can become fantastically complicated with all of the damage that has occurred."

Molland Church was a case in point. As regular readers may recall from last autumn's magazine (page 8), the pulpit needed to be taken right down to ground and rebuilt from the bottom up along with the floor underneath.

In the United States, the company does far more in the way of new work, including lots of woodcarving. The carved screen shown at the top of this page was designed by Hugh and crafted by his team for St Thomas Church, 5th Avenue, New York.

"It is very much a team operation. I work in the office here and have people like Cameron, an outstanding conservation joiner, who can be away for weeks at a time." For the sculptors, joiners, paint conservators and carvers it is certainly fascinating work, but the travelling means that it is not for everyone and Hugh counts himself lucky to have such a dedicated pool of talent beavering away to bring the company's visions to life.

Each challenge begins at home in the cosy farm office. Here Hugh and architect Peter Ferguson debate the finer points of what each building needs. At the drawing board Peter patiently draws up the site surveys (for

Naomi Cudmore



conservation) or develops designs (for new work) into working plans which are aesthetic gems in their own right.

"We have to be very single-minded and focused because it is the fine detail which reveals the essence of the project. And this, like everything we do, takes time. Condition reports might have to be produced yearly for long-running jobs as with Peterborough, where every nail of over a dozen varieties and every board had to be logged, drawn and surveyed. It can be fairly relentless."

When I went to Ringcombe, the light was not long for the valley bottom and Peter was still bent quietly over his drawing board with no sign of imminent departure. Hugh's office meanwhile had nothing of the clocking-off feel about it, with plans for current projects very much in evidence.

Hugh explained that the company had just started work on a Queen Anne screen installed in Cruwys Morchard church after a terrible fire in 1689. "This project involves a conservation joiner, three paint conservators and a little bit of work for a wood carver. It is always a case of putting together a group of whatever specialists the job demands."

But although the work is by nature painstaking, there is always a story involved. At Cruwys the tower was struck by lightning, the bells melted and ran through the church, the entire interior of which had to be rebuilt as a result. "All of the panelling is typical Devon woodwork but the screen is of a completely different quality and the design of the whole piece is really quite rare. It has superbly carved

capitals and modillions (little carved brackets) in lime as well as an unusual frieze of yew veneer. I would love to know how an object of such quality came to be in the church. Perhaps the Cruwys family had contacts in London but sadly no record has so far come to light."

The 300-plus intervening years have taken their toll on the mysterious screen. "The sills are decaying and the columns are falling out. The woodwork was varnished in the nineteenth century, probably two or three times, and the old varnish has yellowed because of the linseed oil content which makes it oxidise and darken. Now you cannot see any of the polychromatic scheme which was such an important aspect of the joinery."

It will take no less than three months' work to fix the problem at Cruwys, which makes it an expensive business for the parish, so it comes as no surprise to learn that most of the UK work undertaken by Hugh Harrison Conservation is funded by English Heritage, the Lottery or charitable trusts.

The photograph below left shows paint conservator Liz Cheadle (from West Bagborough), conservation joiner Cameron Stewart (from Exeter) and Roland Notley, Chairman of the Fabric Committee of Cruwys Morchard Church, taking out the first column at the start of the job. The before and after photograph below right clearly shows the difference being made to the Cruwys Morchard screen's capitals.

Most of the conservation projects in which Hugh is involved are oak, but lime is a favourite amongst the wood carvers. "We have just finished working on some damaged lime carvings by Grinling Gibbons, arguably the greatest wood carver of all time. Lime is softer than oak with a very fine grain so it takes detail very beautifully in carving. The work, at the Middle Temple in London, was carried out by Laurence Beckford who lives in Dulverton and who has been with me for nearly 30 years."

One of the carvings in the process of being restored and repaired by Laurence is pictured opposite (left), with new sections showing in the paler new limewood.

So what of those angels then? Well, they are also lime creations and of course they are not just any old angels... Hugh explained: "Bath Abbey wanted two brand-new screens because the Abbey had never had transept screens – which meant that the choir's singing drifted out into the transepts and was somewhat lost. The new screens, made by Brett Wright, contained the sound and directed it into the Abbey. We convinced the Abbey to go for something a little bit special when it came to the angels themselves. Most medieval angels carry musical instruments and so would ours, as befitted the purpose of the screen. Our sculptor Paul Fletcher created a series of maquettes and made each and every one in the likeness of a real person, including the Abbey's Director of Music as the conductor of the angels!"

Pictured here are Laurence Beckford and Brett Wright (both from Dulverton) working on the heavenly creations.

Find out more at www.hugh-harrison.co.uk



Below left: Last year Hugh went on a research project to Northern Russia with the Society For the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB). "The purpose was to select one of the thousands of derelict country churches to conserve it under strict conservation principles using our own British craftsmen in order to teach Russian craftsmen conservation techniques in order to preserve their buildings. They have wonderful craftsmen but they do not have a tradition of conservation per se. The church shown below in Yeski in Tver province did not make it to the final selection, an honour which after painstaking deliberation was bestowed upon Zamytie not far away. The project is being funded by the Village Churches of Russia – they are looking for funding.

Below right, left to right: Dave Burgess, a joiner now working in New York, Cameron Stewart, Peter Ferguson and Bob Chappell, senior conservation joiner – now retired. The team are pictured at Bentley Hall in Derbyshire where they were repairing a badly fire damaged Jacobean staircase.

