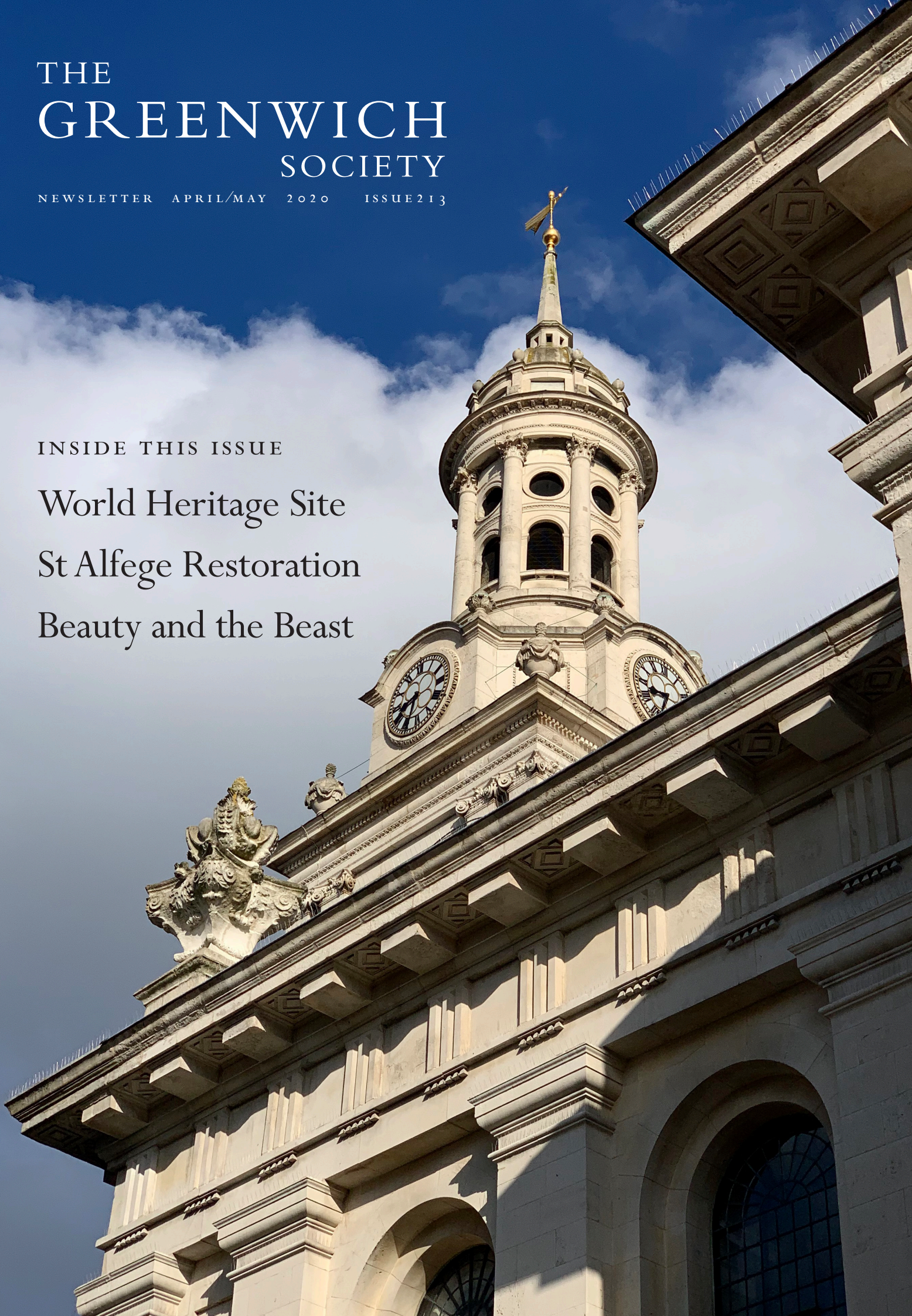


THE GREENWICH SOCIETY

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St Alfege Greenwich

Heart of Greenwich Project

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St Alfege's North elevation with the portico facing towards the centre of Greenwich and the rest of the World Heritage Site.

I was appointed as architect at St Alfege in 1996; 25 years later we have finally completed the project for making the church open and welcoming to visitors. Hawksmoor's great church – the first that he designed under his own name having acted as assistant to Wren and Vanbrugh for the rest of his career – emulates an ancient Roman Temple, and was described as a 'Templum' in the fund-raising print that he produced in 1714. This extraordinary moment in English architecture, when English Baroque turns late Roman, has been a source of fascination to me over the years, as has Prof Albert Richardson's rebuilding of St Alfege after it was burnt out by incendiaries during the War, with Dove Brothers joinery and pendant light fittings of the highest quality.

Thanks to the enthusiasm of Rev'd Chris Moody and the wonderful project leadership of Gill Moody, the church decided to apply to

the National Lottery Heritage Fund for a grant towards making the church accessible and welcoming to all. The NLHF objective is to increase visitor numbers, improve the visitor experience, interpret the building, and ensure a viable business plan. These objectives may seem a long way from the religious purpose of the church, but this is intentionally so; assistance can be given to enabling extended uses of a church so that the cost does not fall on the congregation.

We decided early on that the main visitor entrance should become via the north portico, facing towards the centre of Greenwich and the rest of the World Heritage Site. We found in the crypt a splendid Albert Richardson gate overthrow, and used this to act as the main entrance to the churchyard, fitted with one of Albert Richardson's glass lanterns. We repaved the front courtyard re-using the York stone paving stones and the Limestone

setts leading around the church to a 17m long ramp leading to the north portico entrance. This solution to the intractable problem of creating an accessible entrance to a church that is raised by 8 steps was hard won. We had looked at maybe ten or twelve different possibilities of creating access through internal and external lifts or ramps before agreeing on the present solution – as it happens the same concept that I proposed at interview 25 years earlier. The ramp aims to set an elegant long curving line of walkway and handrail, to contrast with the noble geometry of Hawksmoor’s architecture.



17m long ramp leading to the north portico entrance.

The project offered the possibility of completing the external cleaning and repair of the elevations started a few years ago. Though built of massive Portland stone blocks of extraordinary quality, Hawksmoor unfortunately used iron cramps across the joints which had rusted and in places spalled the corners of the masonry blocks. These required piece-in or mortar repairs. At the same time we relaid the lead roofs to the north and south porticos which had leaked badly, staining the internal decorations, and introduced new overflow pipes discharging between the details of the cornice. Inside the church we have automated the internal north doors, and introduced two extra toilets into the well of two of Hawksmoor’s four identical stairs. The idea of ‘pods’ –



External cleaning and repair of the Portland stone blocks.

freestanding reversible interventions in an old building – is now something of a trope, but our pods are lined internally and externally with oak planks, and the wc pan fits within the door opening below the stairs.

One final aspect of visitor access is both innovative and exciting: visitors can now book onto hard hat tours of the crypt, a wonderfully evocative space, with its burial vaults still intact. Notable burials include Angerstein whose collection of paintings is one of the formative collections of the National Gallery and Samuel Enderby of the whaling family who discovered Antarctica. Many 18th century crypts have now been cleared for the creation of ancillary uses. At St Alfege we hope that the enhanced use of the main body of the church thanks to the new facilities will allow the crypt to remain intact and open to visitors.

Do come and see St Alfege in its restored glory and marvel at heart of Greenwich!