

Architectural Walking Tour with Benedict O'Looney

Thursday 10th July 2014 - Westminster

This year the CoreNet UK Chapter's annual summer walk, took us on a tour round some of back streets behind Westminster Cathedral, from Vincent Square, Marsham Street, Smith Square and Dean's Yard. We met, on a rather unpromising evening, in Land Securities's Cardinal Place Gallery.

Yet again we had been lucky enough to persuade **Benedict O'Looney, M.Arch (Yale), RIBA**, architect and teacher of Kent University and the AA (the Architectural Association), to be our guide. As ever, he provided a running commentary - a mixture of anecdote and informed deep knowledge - giving us all a series of fascinating insights into London's buildings.



Before setting off, **Oliver Knight** gave us a brief look at Land Sec's long term plans for Victoria including the station. What did surprise is that the company, which has owned property in the area for decades, is now demolishing some of its own buildings as part of this massive redevelopment project.

First stop was Victoria Street and then across to Westminster Cathedral. Designed by John Francis Bentley it is 'one of the UK's greatest late 19th century buildings'. Constructed on the site of a prison, to a design heavily influenced by Byzantium, in red brick from Bracknell, with Portland stone flashings and terracotta decorations, the cathedral itself was completed economically and in record time, leaving the interior decoration to be done much later and as funds allowed. Sadly we were unable to enter as planned because some recording was taking place so we walked round the back to admire the 87m high Venetian campanile and large windows made by the Doulton Pottery just south of the river.



On to Rochester Row with its stunning Westminster Kingsway college by Harry Goodhart-Rendel striking with its 'elaborate and confident' brickwork and original steel windows, and on again to Vincent Square with the Royal Horticultural Society's Old and New Halls.



Then on again to Horseferry Road and Channel 4's Richard Rogers designed headquarters. Here Benedict marched us into the foyer, rather to the surprise of the security guard who allowed us to stay (but 'no photos') while Benedict explained how the plate glass entrance front is suspended on a network of steel wires.



Back down Horseferry Road to look briefly at the Westminster Coroner's Court (more confident Edwardian brickwork) before taking in the Regency Café in Regency Street, and on into Page Street with its monumental blocks of flats. These were constructed after the disastrous overnight flood in 1928 which destroyed many slums, drowning 14 occupants trapped in the basements in which they lived. Striking for the chequerboard motif of brick and cement panels they were built specifically for 'artisans' - and designed by Lutyens! No, neither did I.

Up Marsham Street, past the site of the old Westminster Hospital, now executive flats, and back onto Horseferry Road before turning left into Smith Square. All of this accompanied by remarks from Benedict, a fantastic mixture of gossip, history and architectural knowledge.

Once in Smith Square we admired at length St John's, solidly occupying the middle - no garden here - a glorious example of Baroque architecture, one of 50 churches built by Queen Anne in the early 1700s, designed by Thomas Archer and clearly showing a strong Italian influence. And still faced by a small row of contemporary houses 'demonstrating clearly the scale of 18th century London'. Down Lord North Street and across into Cowley Street and then Barton Street and Church House, designed in the 1930s by Sir Herbert Baker and notable for its use of napped flint as a building material. The entrance to Dean's Yard being closed, we walked round and up Great Smith Street to finish up in front of Westminster Abbey with its two great west towers designed by Sir Nicholas Hawksmoor.

And here the walk ended, in splendid sunshine, flanked by the Abbey, the foundation stone of the City of Westminster, and faced by the Methodist Central Hall and the Queen Elizabeth Conference Centre with the towers of the Treasury in the background. As Benedict remarked, 'high church, low church and the tax man'.

A V Sutherland

