

# THE BUILDING THEN & NOW

## The History of St. Nicholas Cole Abbey

The name Cole Abbey is generally thought to be a corruption of “Cold Harbour”, a medieval type of lodging house for travellers which most likely was located close to the church. In the Victorian era it was sometimes called St Nicholas Cole Hole Abbey because the smoke from steam engines in the newly built underground came through a vent and blackened the building.

Dedicated to St Nicholas, the fourth century Bishop of Myra in Asia Minor who became the patron saint of travellers and seamen, St Nicholas Cole Abbey is first mentioned in a letter of Pope Lucius II in 1144 and is considered to have been founded in that year. From the late 13th century the church is recorded as St Nicholas-behind-Fish Street and is clearly associated with the fish trade. A fish market existed in this part of London well before Billingsgate Market was founded; with the development of the fish trade during the reign of Richard I, a fish market was established near the church and fishmongers in the 16th century were buried in the church’s burial ground. During the reign of Elizabeth I a lead and stone cistern fed by lead pipes from the Thames was set up against the north wall of the church; it was donated by a wealthy fishmonger who gave £900 “to bring Thames water (...) for the care and commodity of the fishmongers in and about Old Fish Street.”

Until the Reformation the church had three chantries served by three chantry priests, and, as it was dedicated to St Nicholas, it preserved the tradition of a boy bishop officiating on the Feast of St Nicholas. With the reintroduction of Catholicism in England under Mary following the reign of Edward VI, St Nicholas Cole Abbey was the first church in which the Mass was celebrated in Latin once again with a cross and candles on the altar. A century later, however, the church passed into the patronage of the Puritan Colonel Hacker who commanded the guard at the execution of Charles I.

A devastating event in the life of St Nicholas Cole Abbey was the Great Fire of London in 1666 when it was burned down. It broke out in the early hours of Sunday 2nd September and was thus described by John Evelyn in his diary:

“The Conflagration was so universal & the people so astonish’d that from the beginning (...) they hardly stirr’d to quench it, so as there was nothing heard or seene but crying out & lamentation, & running about like distracted creatures, without at all attempting to save even their goods; such a strange consternation there was upon them, so as it burned both in breadth & length, The Churches, Publique Halls, Exchange, Hospitals, Monuments, & ornaments, leaping after a prodigious manner from house to house & streete to streete, at greate distance one from the other, for the heate (with a long set of faire & warme weather) had even ignited the aire, & prepared the materials to conceive the fire, which devoured after an incredible manner, houses furniture, & everything (...).”

Eighty seven parish churches were destroyed, 12,000 homes burned down and 65,000 inhabitants made homeless. Although in the 17th century fires were common, one on this scale was exceptional. Nevertheless it was under control by 5th September and plans for its rebuilding submitted by Sir Christopher Wren on 11th September and by John Evelyn by 13th September. In fact both these gentlemen had for some years been discussing and planning new street patterns, discussing circulation routes and the widening of streets. Both were influenced by continental radial streets superimposed on a grid with a substantial quay such as the one in Paris. Charles II’s early dreams of restoring his kingdom could at last be embodied in the reconstruction of a devastated city. In early October 1666 the King set up the Rebuilding Commission, consisting of six members who had to report every week to the Privy Council. Three, including Wren, were appointed by the King and the rest by the City of London.

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St Nicholas Cole Abbey was one of the first of the City churches to be designed by Wren and rebuilt between 1672-1678. Of the 87 destroyed, 51 were rebuilt; by 1677 nearly 30 were under construction and by 1686 nearly all the rebuilding was complete. Wren was described by his friend John Evelyn as a “universal” man of art whose virtuosity made him an artist in the fullest sense. His family had been close to Charles I and so had gone into a quiet backwater during the Commonwealth, re-emerging during the reign of Charles II. Wren was the son of the Dean of Windsor and the nephew of Bishop Matthew Wren of Ely. He was an expert in astronomy, geometry, mathematics and the latest scientific discoveries. After becoming Surveyor of the King’s Works thanks to Evelyn, just a year before the Great Fire, Wren was sent to France to explore French culture, architecture and science in and around Paris; he was expected to look carefully at the constructional and financial management of Jean-Baptists Colbert for Louis XIV. Charles II was particularly interested in the Louvre and hoped Wren would return with ideas for the reconstruction of Whitehall. Thus he was well-prepared for the tasks facing him as from 1666 with the disaster that hit the City of London.

Little remains of the open rectangular box which Wren designed apart from parts of the external walls and the tower. Before the 19th century you entered the church from the north side off a narrow street, but in 1861-1871 Queen Victoria Street was built along the south side of the church. Thus the back door became the main entrance and a gilded statue of St Nicholas was placed above the gateway in 1874 at a time when the interior was re-arranged. Some restoration work took place in 1928-1931, but during the Second World War, in 1941, the church was completely gutted by incendiary bombs. Contemporary post-war photographs show nothing other than parts of the walls and tower still standing

In 1961-1962 Arthur Bailey, a past president of the RIBA, undertook the reconstruction of St Nicholas Cole Abbey, an organ made by Noel Mander was installed and stained glass, influenced by Chagall according to Pevsner, using dark rich colours by Keith New was incorporated in the three east end windows as the architect hated the view of Sir Albert Richardson’s Bracken House built for the Financial Times in 1955-1959. These new windows depict rivers, an ark - the church spreading the gospel throughout the world – and the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. Built of Portland stone, the church still has some brickwork from the medieval church in the south and west wall. A carved stone head from the medieval church was found during the 1962 restoration and lies behind panelling near the south-west door. The church has no clerestory and a balustrade encircles the top. Round-headed windows have straight hoods supported on console brackets. The north-west steeple has a low tower with belfry windows under pediments rising above the cornice and an inverted trumpet-shaped spire crowned by a weathervane in the shape of a ship which came from St Michael’s Queenhithe (demolished 1876). The interior has plain walls except for gilt Corinthian pilasters and panelling; the furnishings are in light woodwork. The chandelier is a fine brass 17th century original, part of the communion rail, taken from another church, is also 17th century, and a sword rest in the church is dated 1747. The 17th century pulpit, apparently designed by Wren for another church, is elaborately carved with festoons, swags and cherubs’ heads. The font cover is an original by Richard Kedge from elsewhere: it is richly carved with a crown on top. The royal arms of Charles II are attached to the face of the west gallery.