

## **TWO men are chatting away, perched high on scaffolding in the City of London.**

By Ian Kelly

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“His brother’s a flamingo dancer you know.”

“Flamenco, Jorge, flamenco.”

“Whatever.”

The conversation between John Houston and Jorge Soares-Vieira — surely London’s only Franco-Portuguese-Cockney furniture restorer — is taking place 30ft above Bishopsgate in the City. They are pegging the first floor of St Ethelburga’s tower back into its position, 330 years after Christopher Wren’s joiners first did the job. More startling still, they are using the original timbers.

A decade after the IRA blasted it into the international spotlight, St Ethelburga’s bell-tower is rising again on Bishopsgate, over the entrance to a new Centre for Reconciliation and Peace.

Though it is the tiniest City church — only 56ft by 30ft — and serves a parish smaller than the acreage of the Bank of England, St Ethelburga’s has a long history.

A late-14th-century church, built on Saxon foundations, was partly destroyed in The Great Fire of 1666. Wren then added a small belfry tower over the cramped street entrance — though until 1932 the view of it from Bishopsgate was half-obsured by a shop and a house. And then, nine years ago, an IRA car bomb tore through the church, blowing fragments of medieval rendering 50ft into the nave. The wood-framed tower took the full force of the blast.

It is a tribute to Wren, to the resilience of old English oak, and to the craftsmen who constructed the tower, that much of it is being rebuilt with the original timbers. They were salvaged from the rubble and stored during the long debate over the future of St Ethelburga’s, the even longer and continuing fund-raising marathon and, more recently, the search for craftsmen to recreate the wooden structure using traditional joinery skills. Just as it originally was, the belfry tower will be supported by a wooden frame that uses no bolts, nails or glue. Instead, each mortise-and-tenon joint is fixed with wooden pegs.

There have been many obstacles to the re-opening of St Ethelburga’s, which is now scheduled for November. There have been drainage problems, debates over how much of the bomb damage to leave visible and even where to put the lavatories that medieval architects had neglected to provide.

One unique problem for St Blaise, the main contractor which was booked to restore St Ethelburga's after its triumph at Windsor Castle, was finding "period joiners".

A modern builder would simply have bolted the surviving timbers together. But Ian Constantinides, St Blaise's founder, believes in the need to "preserve the noble marks of time" in restoration. In this case, that meant 17th-century oak beams, pegged and jointed as Wren intended. The search was on for some rare craftsmen. It led to Stoke Newington in London and a co-operative of young men and one woman. They were not builders, but furniture restorers.

The staff at Classic and Modern Interiors had the skills. They could work wood in the 17th-century manner, because they used the same joints in antique furniture and modern reproductions. They are young for such a venerable commission, and are less than a year into turning a network of friends and lovers into a business.

Houston met Soares-Vieira at school and they later shared a flat. Then Soares-Vieira introduced Houston to Tracy Martin, a fellow furniture restorer. Houston fell for Martin — and for woodwork. The trio, and another skilled carpenter, Richard Joseph, set up the cooperative.

"Restoration of the tower is furniture restoration on a huge scale," says Houston. "We keep the look and integrity of the old, but allow it to function now."

The tower has four floors, each smaller than the one below, and is surmounted by a wooden cupola. "Obviously the bottom one is the most important," says Houston. "It supports the rest. It is also the most difficult, because it's the heaviest. And it's the first one to be assembled." This is now firmly back in its place above the Bishopsgate entrance. "It's amazing to think that the last time a joiner worked on these timbers was three centuries ago," he says. "There is no reason they shouldn't be here for another 300 years."

"They did it without plans and solved a problem as they found it," Soares-Vieira says, "which is a great way to work with wood."

Such old-fashioned skills are proving useful in the modern world of Stoke Newington and Islington, too. "So many of the houses here are Georgian," he says. "They are large, but oddly angled; a lot of people want furniture built in because it is practical — and it looks good."

· St Ethelburga's still needs funds to complete restoration of the tower and consolidate the new centre's operating costs.

[www.stethelburgas.org](http://www.stethelburgas.org)

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