

That Englishman in New York

WHEN QUENTIN CRISP died on 21 November last year during a brief visit to England, it was only right that his ashes be transported back to New York and scattered over the Manhattan streets he loved.

Crisp spent his final 19 years living in a tiny bedsit apartment in New York's East Village. I spotted him there once, eating breakfast in the window seat of a favourite diner. He sensed me staring and glanced up nervously. Crisp knew full well that these were dangerous streets. In 1984's *Manners From Heaven* he wrote that, if he lived any further east, he would have had to "travel and do from all social engagements in an armoured vehicle".

Few would have blamed him if he had. Within two blocks' radius of Crisp's old East 3rd Street home lie both the headquarters of Manhattan's Hell's Angels and the once-notorious drug dealers' haunt of Alphabet City. The nearest subway station, Second Avenue, houses a well-documented community of homeless people, who squat in abandoned tunnels far beneath the city's streets. In the past 30 years alone, the area has played host to everything from a hippie bomb factory on East 2nd Street to a police riot in Tompkins Square Park.

These are also the mean streets patrolled by the TV

copies of *NYPD Blue*'s 15th Precinct. Here you will find not only the station house, but also many of the gritty storefronts and bars shown in its opening credits. And Quentin Crisp is not the only famous former resident. Madonna lived here in the late 1970s when she was a struggling young singer. "dumperst diving" for food in neighbours' bins near her East 4th Street home.

'The Hell's Angels have a bad name. But they never murdered me'

St Mark's Place lies on East 8th Street between Second and Third Avenues and is centred round the East Village Arts & Crafts Exchange. In 1966, Andy Warhol rented this blue and white moonlit — then called the Dom — as the venue for a seminal Velvet Underground and Nico concert. The building went on to become The Electric Circus, one of the hippie era's best-known rock venues. That era still survives thanks to a host of oddball shops. Visitors can buy a Star Trek uniform in St Mark's Comics and fetish underwear in Religious Sex, get

a piercing in Medusa Tattoo and round off the experience with a psychic reading — all in the space of a single city block.

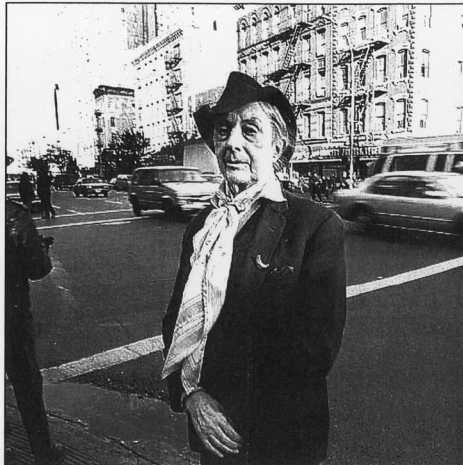
Another store in St Mark's Place, Village X, sells a wide range of T-shirts for customers who want to advertise their allegiance to New Yorkers' famously aggressive attitude. One pictures a handgun with a cross placed directly in front of the barrel. "New York City", says the slogan. "You are here".

Three blocks south of St Mark's Place, between First and Second Avenues, you will find the *NYPD Blue*'s East 5th Street station house. Actually home to New York's 9th Precinct, this building has seen many real-life dramas which match anything the TV show could serve up.

Next to the entrance is a plaque erected in memory of Gregory Foster and Rocco Laurie, two 9th Precinct cops shot dead in January 1972 near the corner of East 11th Street and Avenue B. The two men, both in uniform, were seen investigating a routine parking violation when they were surprised by a group of attackers who shot them repeatedly in what the following morning's *New York Times* called a "brutal and unprovoked" assault.

Crisp's books often mention his apartment's close proximity to the Hell's Angels' East 3rd Street clubhouse, which he had to pass every time he walked towards First Avenue. "They have a bad reputation", he writes in 1996's *Resident Alien*. "But they've never murdered me."

Others have not been so lucky. On 21 September, 1977, a 22-year-old Brooklyn woman, Mary Ann Campbell, was found dead on the sidewalk outside the clubhouse. Six months later, police charged a New York Angel named Vincent Girolamo



His Nibs on the streets of Manhattan

Robert Holmes/Corbis

with murdering Campbell by throwing her off the six-storey building's roof. Girolamo himself died in 1979 after a fight with rival Angels in Oakland, California. He is remembered with a brass plaque above the clubhouse entrance reading: "Big Vinnie. If in doubt, knock 'em out."

Alphabet City starts just a block and a half east of the Angels' clubhouse. Named for its three main thoroughfares, Avenues A, B and C, this area was the hub of New York's drug trade in the late 1970s and early 1980s. In his 1996 book *In-famous Manhattan*, Andrew Roth says the intersection of East 2nd Street and Avenue B "probably saw more heroin retailing than any other spot on Earth." When Alex Cox shows Sid Vicious (Gary Oldman) and Nancy Spungen (Chloe Webb) queuing for a fix in his 1986

film *Sid & Nancy*, this is the corner he had in mind.

New York's police decided enough was enough in January 1984. Operation Pressure Point flooded Alphabet City and the surrounding streets with a cop on every corner and made over three thousand arrests in just three months. Seeing the corner of East 2nd Street and Avenue B today, you would never guess its squalid past. The only evidence of drug sales now is King's Pharmacy, which shares the pleasant, airy junction with Teodoro Grocery and The Good Old Lower East Side Thrift Shop.

Alphabet City — like any poor area of New York — is peppered with spraycan memorials to the area's recent dead. The most durable examples I know of appear on East Houston Street near the corner of Avenue B. These adjacent

memorials show Elisa, a little girl of eight or nine, and Selina, a young woman who looks to be in her late teens or early twenties. Both memorials are signed "Chico & Pete". Work by Antonio "Chico" Garcia, one of the city's first wave of spraycan memorial artists, first started appearing around the Lower East Side in the late 1980s.

In their 1994 book *RIP - New York Spraycan Memorials*, Martha Cooper and Joseph Sciorra place such memorials squarely in the tradition of the makeshift wooden crosses erected in Catholic countries to petition prayers for car crash victims. Without these prayers, it is feared, those who die without benefit of the church's last rites will remain trapped in purgatory. Surely Crisp, who lived in the East Village for close to 20 years, deserves one too. Over to you, New York.