

# Green Light for Phase II of the Painted Hall conservation

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The Painted Hall, Greenwich

The Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) today announced that it has awarded earmarked funding of £2.77million, including a development grant of £98,800, to The Greenwich Foundation towards its £7m scheme to complete the conservation of the Painted Hall at the Old Royal Naval College (ORNC). This first round pass will enable the foundation to proceed with its plans for the conservation of the remaining 3,700 square metres of paintings: one of the most ambitious painting conservation projects ever undertaken within a historic interior. It will also support improved interpretation and accessibility, the delivery of conservation skills training, and a programme of associated community, learning and public events including scaffolding tours which proved immensely popular during Phase I of the conservation.

Created in the early 18th century by Sir James Thornhill for Sir Christopher Wren's Royal Hospital for Seamen, the spectacular, Grade I listed, Painted Hall is one of Europe's most important architectural interiors and is considered to be the greatest achievement of English Baroque art. Phase I of the conservation, which was also supported by a grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund, saw the west wall and upper hall ceiling restored to their former glory. Phase II will see the lower hall, with its spectacular ceiling, the entrance vestibule and cupola similarly restored.

Sue Bowers, Head of Heritage Lottery Fund London, said: "This baroque masterpiece is one of the lesser-known treasures at the heart of the Greenwich World Heritage Site. HLF funded the first stage of restoration works and we are now delighted to support plans to complete the project."

"This is absolutely wonderful news," adds Brendan McCarthy, Chief Executive of the Greenwich Foundation, "Ever since the first phase of conservation was completed, we've been looking forward to restoring the rest of the Painted Hall."

"The next few months will be very interesting. The Painted Hall will be transformed into a veritable development lab, with changing exhibitions, exciting talks and hands-on workshops. We will be inviting the public to play an active role in shaping this project."

"Phase II of the Painted Hall conservation will transform the experience of visiting and viewing this remarkable painted interior, and people can also be part of the exciting project by helping us to reach our £7m target."

The Foundation will submit detailed project proposals, based on a feasibility study by Martin Ashley Architects, to HLF at the end of 2015 with a view to starting work on the project in the summer of 2016.

The Painted Hall will be under scaffolding for around two years after the start of works, however the public will have access to the hall, including on the scaffolding itself. Visitors – including wheelchair users – will be able to get close up to the painted surfaces and watch conservators at work – an exciting element of project.

Key elements of the Phase II programme include:

- Cleaning and conservation of the remaining 3,700 square metres of painted wall surface, including the great ceiling in the Lower Hall, executed by James Thornhill between 1708 and 1712. This will remove layers of obscuring dirt and varnish, unlocking the colour and vibrancy of these great paintings. The work will be undertaken by Paine & Stewart, leading specialists in the conservation of historic wall paintings who also undertook the conservation work in Phase I
- Re-presentation of the interior with improved lighting, new seating and interpretation
- Introduction of environmental improvements to ensure the best possible conditions for the painted surfaces
- Creation of a new, fully accessible visitor reception in the King William Undercroft, with improved facilities, innovative interpretation, dedicated retail and a new café
- Improved visibility of the Painted Hall within the Discover Greenwich visitor centre, including a new audio-visual exhibit

The conservation work is expected to be completed by the summer 2018 with the overall project completed the following year.

## **Notes to editors**

### **Old Royal Naval College**

Located at the heart of the Maritime Greenwich World Heritage Site, Sir Christopher Wren's twin-

domed riverside masterpiece is one of London's most famous landmarks. Built three hundred years ago as the Royal Hospital for Seamen on the site of Henry VIII's great Tudor Palace, Wren's buildings were originally a refuge for injured and impoverished sailors of the Royal Navy. From the late 19th to the late 20th centuries they were then home to the Royal Naval College providing courses for naval officers.

Within the ORNC complex are the Painted Hall and the Chapel of St Peter and St Paul. Their extraordinary interiors, crowned by twin domes (memorably rendered in Canaletto's view of Greenwich across the river Thames), are open to the public free of charge throughout the year. Often described as "the finest banqueting hall in Europe", the Painted Hall is one of the UK's most important painted interiors. Since 1998 the site has been cared for by the Greenwich Foundation for the ORNC, a charity established to conserve the buildings for the benefit of present and future generations. Over the next few years the ORNC is seeking funding to conserve the beautiful site and buildings. By June 2016, it needs to raise £1million to match a £1million Future Fund grant from the Department for Culture Media and Sport (DCMS) and the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF), for the future maintenance cost of the Painted Hall and the Chapel.

Both a Grade I listed site and a Schedule 1 listed monument, the ORNC is today one of the UK's most visited heritage attractions, with over 1.8million visitors a year. For further information visit the [Old Royal Naval College website](#).

### **10 facts about the Painted Hall**

- The Painted Hall is the largest continuous figurative scheme in the UK with over 2,600 square metres of allegorical wall paintings
- It took Sir James Thornhill over 19 years (from 1708 to 1727) to complete the paintings in Sir Christopher Wren's maritime masterpiece
- Thornhill's payment for his work in the Painted Hall was calculated at £3 per square yard for the ceiling and £1 per square yard for the walls. Today the conservation of the paintings is estimated to cost around £675 per square yard – or £75 per square foot
- The original commission was partly paid for by the booty of notorious pirate, Captain Kidd, which had been confiscated by the crown
- In the 18th century, the Painted Hall became a celebrated visitor attraction instead of being used for its original purpose – a refectory for naval pensioners
- The body of Admiral Nelson lay in state in the Painted Hall in 1806 before his funeral up river at St Paul's Cathedral, and the Old Royal Naval College holds an annual Trafalgar Night dinner in this historic setting
- For over a century, from 1824, the Painted Hall was the National Gallery of Naval Art, while for almost 60 years, from 1939, it served its original purpose as the dining hall of the Royal Naval College
- The public has had free access to the Painted Hall for up to 363 days a year since 2002, following the Greenwich Foundation taking over management of the Old Royal Naval College in 1999
- There were over 1.8m visits to the attractions making up the Old Royal Naval College last year, putting it among the UK's 20 most popular visitor attractions in 2013
- From time to time the Painted Hall is used as a location for filming including the scenes in the recent Fire of London (ITV) and the soon to be released Cinderella.

### **A stunning dining hall painting commissioned for Wren's Royal Hospital for Seamen**

Sir James Thornhill was invited to make a painted interior in the refectory of the Royal Hospital for Seamen while he was working on the dome of St Paul's Cathedral. Whereas for the former the artist was commissioned to paint a biblical subject (Eight Scenes from the Life of St Paul), for this later commission the subject was to be a celebration of Britain's maritime power. Begun under the Stuarts (Queen Anne) and completed under the Hanoverians (George I), the Painted Hall also marks a key moment in British royal history.

### **A masterpiece that was almost 20 years in the making**

With its 2,600 sqm of allegorical wall paintings, the Painted Hall was Thornhill's most extensive commission, taking the artist almost 20 years to complete. In the dining hall proposed for the Royal Hospital for Seamen the artist was asked to create an homage to Britain's maritime power and royal family. The astonishing ceiling of the lower hall shows the contribution the British navy made to the prosperity of the nation at the time of William III and Mary II, under during whose reign the Hospital was commissioned, and the Upper Hall ceiling features the last of the Stuart monarchs, Queen Anne, during whose reign the Lower Hall paintings were made.

The allegorical theme of the huge and exuberant Lower Hall ceiling is the Triumph of Peace and Liberty over Tyranny, and pays due tribute to Stuart monarchs William and Mary and British maritime power. Within the oval frame are the four seasons and other references to the passing of time including the signs of the zodiac. Beyond the arch in the Upper Hall Queen Anne surveys the continents of the world, while on the west wall her Hanoverian successors, George I and his family, are shown in sober glory. Elsewhere much use is made of trompe l'oeil painting, on the columns, windowsills and in the vestibule. During the period when he working on the painting Thornhill became court Painter to the new King, George I, and was subsequently knighted.

After completion in 1727, the Greenwich pensioners moved their dining room to the undercrofts below, and the hall became a popular visitor attraction with an admission price of 6d. In the early 19th century the Painted Hall became the home of the National Gallery of Naval Art – one of Britain's first public art galleries. It was not used again as a dining room until 1936, when the paintings were moved to the newly-established National Maritime Museum.

### **Sir James Thornhill (1675 - 1734)**

Born in Dorset in 1675, artist James Thornhill was to rise to become a court painter and sergeant painter to George I and George II, a master of the Painters' Company and a fellow of the Royal Society. He was the first English painter to be knighted for his work, in 1720, and sat as a Member of Parliament for 12 years from 1722 until his death in 1734. The eight scenes in the dome of St. Paul's Cathedral (1715–19) and the allegories in the Painted Hall, Royal Hospital for Seamen (1708–27), are his two most considerable commissions with the majority of his paintings largely executed on the ceilings and stairs of country houses and palaces such as Hampton Court, Blenheim, and Chatsworth. Among Thornhill's few canvases are the altarpiece for St. Mary's Parish Church, Weymouth, and a group portrait of the members of the House of Commons in which he was assisted by William Hogarth (who eloped with Thornhill's daughter in 1729).

Thornhill also made a number of portraits (his sitters including Sir Isaac Newton and co-founder of the Spectator Magazine, Richard Steele), book illustrations, theatre scenery, and the rose window of the north transept of Westminster Abbey. Thornhill's works can be seen in collections across the globe including The Louvre, Paris; Metropolitan Museum, New York; and National Portrait Gallery,

Tate, Royal Academy and Courtauld Institute, London.

**Further information**

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