

# THE PAINTED HALL — A GUIDE FOR VISITORS



**Introduction** The Old Royal Naval College at Greenwich is one of the most extensive groups of public buildings in the baroque style in Britain. It is also the only group of such magnificence built for charitable public purposes rather than to glorify personal status. It was the wish of Queen Mary II to provide for injured and disabled sailors, in the same way as the Royal Hospital at Chelsea provided for soldiers. The buildings survive more or less as originally planned in the 1690s by Sir Christopher Wren, and they show the work of some of our finest architects including Hawksmoor and Vanbrugh. The Painted Hall was built to Wren's design between 1696 and 1704.

This Greenwich site has an incredibly rich history. In Tudor times the palace that was reputedly Henry VIII's favourite lay alongside the river Thames. Greenwich Palace was Henry's birthplace, as well as that of his daughters, future queens Mary I and Elizabeth I, and was associated with entertainment on a grand scale.



**The Artist** Sir James Thornhill, who decorated the inside of the dome of St Paul's Cathedral, was commissioned to decorate the Hall, which was intended as a dining hall for the sailors. He started work in 1708 and did not finish until nineteen years later in 1727. Thornhill shows his remarkable skill in the use of trompe l'oeil painting throughout the Painted Hall – on the columns, window sills and in the grisaille works in the Vestibule and Upper Hall.

**The Vestibule** contains the monograms of the members of the royal family most concerned with the building of the Hospital – William and Mary, Anne and George of Denmark. Three plaques show donations from citizens towards the cost of the building.

**The Lower Hall** In the central oval, Thornhill's painting shows Peace and Liberty triumphing over Tyranny in a complex mix of modern and classical history, ancient mythology, Christian allegory, traditional symbolism and the painter's own ideas. Enthroned in heaven with the Virtues behind them, are William and Mary. Above, the sun god Apollo sheds his light while Peace with her doves and lambs, hands an olive branch to William. He in turn hands the red cap of liberty to Europe, a kneeling woman holding a white horse. Below William, clutching a broken sword, is the defeated French king Louis XIV, who wears a yellow tunic, the colour of fear and treachery. Below these figures, the Spirit of Architecture holds Wren's design for the Hospital, while Time bears up the naked figure of Truth. At the bottom, the goddess Minerva/Athena (wisdom) and Hercules/Heraclides (strength) hurl the Vices out of heaven. The passing of time is represented by the signs of the zodiac and the four seasons positioned round the edge of the oval. Winter is modelled by John Worley, an energetic Greenwich pensioner who was still being punished for drunkenness and swearing at the age of 96.



In the corners outside the oval, Thornhill has painted the four elements as the gods of earth, fire, air and water. His vision of heaven is supported by symbols of naval power: cannon, coils of rope, spars, drums and muskets. At either end of the Hall you can see ships – at the east end there is a captured Spanish galleon, full of booty, while at the opposite end is a British man-of-war, its gun ports open to show the Navy's readiness to defend the country. In the extreme corners of the ceiling at the east end are astronomers – Flamsteed, Weston, Copernicus, and Tycho Brahe – while figures representing navigation, geography, astronomy and military architecture can be seen at the west end.

**The Upper Hall** is reached through the arch carrying Hawksmoor's beautifully designed Royal Arms and gilded signs of the Zodiac. Thornhill's paintings here reflect Britain's triumph as a maritime power. The central ceiling panel shows Victory saluting Queen Anne and her husband George of Denmark, to whom Neptune offers up his trident, representing power over the seas. The four corners of the world look inwards: Europe with her white horse, Asia with a camel, Africa with a lion and America, who is thought to be modelled on Princess Pocahontas, with her bow and arrows. Australia had yet to be encountered by Europeans. In the ceiling corners are the arms of England, Scotland, Ireland and France.



**The West Wall** (straight ahead) shows Britain's new royal family, from Hanover, in Germany. George I is surrounded by his children and grandchildren. The future George II stands beside Naval Victory, while the sweet little boy in a red sash on the steps is William, Duke of Cumberland, who crushed the Jacobite Uprising of 1745. St Paul's Cathedral, Wren's most famous building, looms large in the background. Thornhill himself appears in the bottom right hand corner, with his paintbrushes and paints, possibly painted by himself but more likely by Andre Dietrich, who also painted the features of the royal family. Thornhill's hands are outstretched, one indicating his great work while the other is believed to be asking for money! For his 'great and laborious undertaking' he was only paid £3 per square yard for the ceiling, and £1 per square yard for the walls.

**The South Wall** (to your left) shows William of Orange arriving at Torbay in 1688 to take up the position of joint ruler with his wife Mary, following James II's flight to France. Neptune presents William, who is dressed as a Roman emperor, to Britannia. **The North Wall** shows King George I arriving at Greenwich to claim the throne in 1714. He is shown alongside Justice and Peace while St George tramples the dragon of Popery (Catholicism).

**Nelson and the Painted Hall** Three months after the battle of Trafalgar, 21 October 1805, Nelson's body was brought back to Greenwich and taken to the Painted Hall. Nelson lay in state for three days, 5–7 January 1806, viewed by (reports say) 30,000 members of the public. His body was then taken by river to St Paul's Cathedral for the state funeral the following day. Today a plaque marks the spot where his body lay.

**Naval Gallery** Once it was completed, the Painted Hall was thought to be much too grand for pensioners to eat in, and became a popular tourist destination. Respectable visitors were admitted for 3d (about 1p today) and often hired pensioners to give them guided tours. In 1824 the Hall became the National Gallery of Naval Art – or the Naval Gallery, and remained so until the 1930s when its contents were transferred to the newly created National Maritime Museum. From the start of the Second World War until the departure of the Royal Navy in 1998, the Hall was regularly used as a dining room for naval officers.

**The Old Royal Naval College today** After the Navy moved out in 1998, The Greenwich Foundation, a registered charity, signed a 150-year lease and took responsibility for looking after the buildings and their grounds for the benefit of the nation. Today, the University of Greenwich occupies three of the main courts, Queen Anne, Queen Mary and King William, while Trinity School of Music is based in King Charles court. The Foundation manages the Painted Hall and the Chapel, the related undercrofts, the Visitor Centre and the grounds.

If you would like to learn more about the Old Royal Naval College please ask our knowledgeable Yeoman Guides for a short tour. Full tours of the site take place daily from the Visitor Centre at 2pm (subject to availability), where there is also a café and a gift shop.

**Please return this guide when you have finished with it – thank you**