

Issued by New Century PR.

For further information, images and interviews contact: Lesley Booth

0779 941 4474 lesley@newcenturypr.com



News Release

First close up view of Painted Hall ceiling in over 50 years as condition survey gets underway



Specialists have begun work on a condition survey which is the starting point for the conservation of the Painted Hall. The Old Royal Naval College (ORNC) has appointed leading experts Paine & Stewart, who also worked on the conservation of Sir James Thornhill's paintings in the dome of St Paul's Cathedral, to undertake this vital survey. Their report will help the ORNC prepare its full Heritage Lottery bid for the first phase of the much-needed conservation of this Baroque masterpiece: the west wall.

The conservators were able to examine the lower hall ceiling up-close for the first time in over half a century. A 12-metre high tower scaffold gave access to an area of the paintings that demonstrated the full range of issues facing the conservation scheme as a whole. Paint samples have been taken and preliminary cleaning trials are underway.

The paintings were examined extremely closely, using a range of imaging techniques. A 200 magnification hand-held USB microscope exposed fine cracks in the varnish layer. Raking light photography revealed aspects of the original technique as well as interesting details about the last restoration conducted in the late 1950s by the Ministry of Works



“The plaster ground is in a sound state but many darker passages suffer from a characteristic blanching, as well as a surface bloom across many highlights,” said Stephen Paine. *“There is also a surface layer of 50 years’ accumulated dust and grime, which disfigures and obscures much of the scheme. Together, these phenomena significantly suppress Thornhill’s original exuberance of colour.”*

“We were fascinated to discover that Westby Percival-Prescott, the lead 1950s restorer, was meticulous in his attention to removing 17 old varnish layers. Very fine crack filling and detailed retouching could be observed beneath 50 years of grime,” he added.



Around 50 paint samples will be analysed scientifically, using a range of optical tools and some. Finally, discreet cleaning and treatment trials will be undertaken which help identify the most appropriate and sensitive conservation methods for this national treasure.

“Throughout the conservation process our approach will be one of minimum intervention, gently removing dust and grime with the most benign materials and soft brushes,” says Martin Ashley, Surveyor to the Fabric of the Old Royal Naval College. *“It will be as if we were cleaning a very old face to reveal its beautiful delicate skin.”*

The Old Royal Naval College will submit its full application to the Lottery Fund for a grant of £335,000 in the summer of 2012 with conservation work on the west wall scheduled to begin in the autumn.

Ends

January 2012

Notes for Editors

The ORNC was awarded a first-round pass for the west wall conservation by the HLF last autumn. A first-round pass means the project meets HLF criteria for funding and HLF believes the project has potential to deliver high-quality benefits and value for Lottery money. The application was in competition with other supportable projects, so a first-round pass is an endorsement of outline proposals. Having been awarded a first-round pass, the project now has up to two years to submit fully developed proposals to compete for a firm award. On occasion, an applicant with a first-round pass will also be awarded development funding towards the development of their scheme.

Old Royal Naval College

Sir Christopher Wren's twin-domed riverside masterpiece is one of London's most iconic buildings. It was built three hundred years ago as the Royal Hospital for Seamen, a refuge for injured and impoverished sailors of the Royal Navy. In the 19th century it became the Royal Naval College, where the Navy's officers were trained. In 1998 the Royal Naval College moved to Shrivensham, and the Greenwich Foundation took over management of the site to conserve the buildings and open them to the public. By 2010 the site, which includes the Painted Hall, Chapel and Discover Greenwich visitor and interpretation centre, and stages a year-round programme of events, had become the 15th most popular visitor attraction in the UK. www.ornc.org

Heritage Lottery Fund

Using money raised through the National Lottery, the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) sustains and transforms a wide range of heritage for present and future generations to take part in, learn from and enjoy. From museums, parks and historic places to archaeology, natural environment and cultural traditions, we invest in every part of our diverse heritage. HLF has supported over 30,000 projects, allocating £4.7billion across the UK. www.hlf.org.uk

Paine & Stewart

Stephen Paine and Sophie Stewart (www.paineandstewart.co.uk) are experienced conservators of oil paintings on plaster who have worked on many prestigious conservation projects, including Sir James Thornhill's paintings in the dome of St Paul's Cathedral, the ceiling paintings by Rubens in the Banqueting Hall, and Cardiff Castle, Glamorgan. Paine & Stewart Ltd currently hold a measured term contract as wall painting consultants to English Heritage.

THE PAINTED HALL

A stunning dining hall painting commissioned for Wren's Greenwich Hospital

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

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.

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.