



THE CHAPEL OF ST PETER AND ST PAUL 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, originally known as Greenwich Hospital, 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, Vanbrugh and Stuart.

The first Chapel was the last major element in the Hospital's construction and was completed in 1752 by Thomas Ripley. The original interior was much plainer than today, with a flat, panelled ceiling, an apse (alcove) at the east end, and much smaller galleries, relying for its effect on space and proportion rather than decoration. At 6am on 2 January 1779, a tremendous fire broke out, gutting the building and leaving only a shell. The fire was thought to have started in the tailor's workshop, situated in the roof at the east end of the Chapel, after some rather lively New Year celebrations.

The current Chapel was redesigned and rebuilt under the Surveyorship of James 'Athenian' Stuart, so called because he became fascinated by the ancient buildings of Athens when he visited Greece in the 1760s. However, his Clerk of Works, William Newton, was responsible for much of the detailing. Unlike many churches, which are a mixture of styles through the ages, the Chapel is a complete and unaltered neoclassical period piece in Greek Revival style. After a full restoration in the 1950s, including the reestablishment of the original colour scheme, the Chapel appears today almost as it did at its re-opening on 20 September 1789.

Decorative features and motifs There is a fine mix of ancient Greek and naval imagery throughout the chapel, covering almost every surface. A recurring motif is an alternating pattern of honeysuckle flowers (anthemion) and palmette (lotus) – a favourite of Stuart's – which was often used as a decoration in Greek architecture. The naval motifs would have appealed to the Chapel's congregation of pensioners who may have been missing their former life at sea.

The ceiling has a neo-classical design of squares and hexagons, with wonderfully ornate central ornaments. These features were carved, rather than cast in moulds, by master plasterer John Papworth. The plaster is made of limestone, horsehair and sand, and has a Wedgwood-inspired colour scheme. Its curve is almost certainly responsible for the excellent acoustics of the Chapel.

The black and white marble floor includes a ship's anchor lying north to south, and a rope design said to match exactly the diameter of an anchor cable of a first-rate ship of the line.

Coade stone The Chapel contains many examples of this curious artificial stone, manufactured in Eleanor Coade's factory in the 1780s. Coade stone is actually a ceramic, made of a mix of new and reused materials, resulting in a clay ideal for placing into very detailed moulds. The capitals of the columns are Coade stone, as well as the angels either side of the altarpiece and the Hospital Coat of Arms on the balconies. In the Chapel vestibule there are life-sized statues of the virtues – Faith, Hope, Charity and Meekness. While it was a training college for naval officers, the statue of meekness had her name covered as it was not felt to be an appropriate attribute for a fighting man!

Trompe l'oeil ('trick the eye') The high degree of decoration in James Stuart's planned neoclassical design would have been very costly to put into practice, so a number of money-saving decorative effects were used. For example, the imposing pairs of columns at either end of the Chapel are impostors; they are not made of marble as many people assume, but rather a mixture of plaster coloured with pigment and mixed with animal glue called Scagliola. In addition, there are a large number of figures in the Chapel

which at first glance appear to be sculpted from marble. The life-sized figures of apostles and evangelists in the niches between the upper windows together with the paintings above the lower windows are in fact paintings, using a technique called grisaille. This monochrome technique represents solid objects in relief and the shadows they cast in various tones of grey. The apostles in their niches were painted by Biaggio Rebecca, to the designs of Benjamin West.

The Pulpit is made from oak, mahogany and lime-wood and carved by the renowned craftsman Richard Lawrence. It is decorated with six Coade stone medallions showing incidents from the life of St Paul.

The vast painting above the **Altar** (the Altarpiece) by the American artist Benjamin West shows the story of St Paul's Shipwreck on the Island of Malta. While gathering firewood to warm the victims of the storm, Paul disturbs a viper, which fastens itself to his arm. As he casts the snake into the flames, his Roman guards and other survivors and islanders, look on in amazement as he is unharmed by his contact with the poisonous snake. West was paid £1200 for this 25 foot (7.5 metres) high canvas, and it is the only one of West's paintings to remain in the same place for which it was commissioned.

The marble top of the **Altar** is supported by six Coade stone cherubim, which were later gilded as a memorial to naval chaplains killed on active service during the Second World War. The rails have a corn and grape motif which are symbols of the Eucharist.

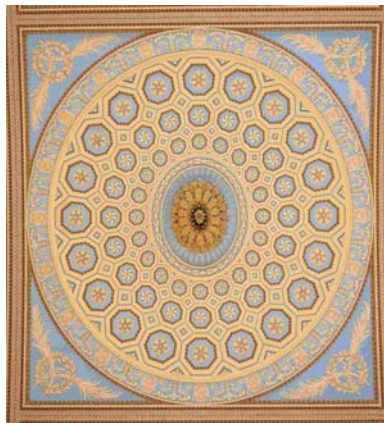
The Organ is a fine example of the work of Samuel Green, the leading organ builder of his day. It was completed in 1789 at a cost of just £1,000. It is the largest example of his work to survive in its original position, and has three manuals, a delicate tone and some rare 18th century mixtures. Its case is made of Spanish mahogany. The organ gallery is supported on six fluted columns, each carved out of a single piece of marble. It is used virtually every day by the organ scholar at Trinity College of Music, and weekly during Sunday services.

Before you leave the chapel, do have a look at the door surround, which is made from a single piece of marble carved in intricate detail by the court sculptor John Bacon.

The Chapel today continues to be a place of worship and prayer. Its regular congregation celebrates Eucharist each Sunday at 11am and visitors are welcome to join the service. Each Wednesday there is an opportunity for silent prayer between 1.30 and 2pm. Other services take place throughout the year at festivals and feast days.

Music in the Chapel – in part because of the marvellous acoustic provided by the shape of the ceiling, and in part because of its proximity to Trinity College, there is a whole range of musical performances produced by Trinity Students and staff: performance classes, recitals, concerts, assessments and graduation ceremonies. Particular care is taken to feature music by composers contemporary with Greenwich Hospital for public concerts.

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



Ceiling detail