

## THE PAINTED DOME OF ST. MARY ABCHURCH

By ERIC E. F. SMITH

The Angel Choir on the dome of the City church of St. Mary Abchurch was painted just two hundred and fifty years ago and now that it has been cleaned and restored to much of its pristine beauty it seems a suitable moment to investigate its authorship and recapitulate its history.

The Church was rebuilt after the Great Fire by Sir Christopher Wren between 1681 and 1686 and furnished with woodwork carved by some of the finest craftsmen of the period, but there is no mention of the dome painting in the accounts which have here survived with unusual completeness. Nor is it mentioned in the "New View of London", published in 1708, which gives a very detailed description of the interiors of all the City Churches at that time.

It appears however from the Vestry Minutes that in 1707 it was decided that some repairs were necessary and on 10th May 1708 the Vestry appointed a Committee to "treat and finally agree with the workmen for the repairing and beautifying of the Church". Six years later in a small book published in 1714 entitled "Pietas Londinensis, or the Present Ecclesiastical State of London" by James Paterson, a brief description of the church concludes with the statement "the Dome is curiously painted above with Angels, Cherubins etc." This is the first recorded mention of the painting and suggests that it formed part of the work done in 1708. Turning now to the Churchwardens Accounts for the year in question we find that the amounts paid for various repairs were small. A joiner, a smith, a stonecutter and a "plummer" received only £32.2.0 between them. But on September 25th there is an entry "pd Mr. Snow £20", followed at intervals by eleven further payments, the whole totalling £170. In addition there is a single small item "Expenses with ye Painters at time 0.1.8". The entries made by Mr. Charles Fowler, churchwarden, are tantalizingly lacking in information but what possible "beautifying" of the church at that period could have cost so large a sum except the painting of the dome?<sup>1</sup>

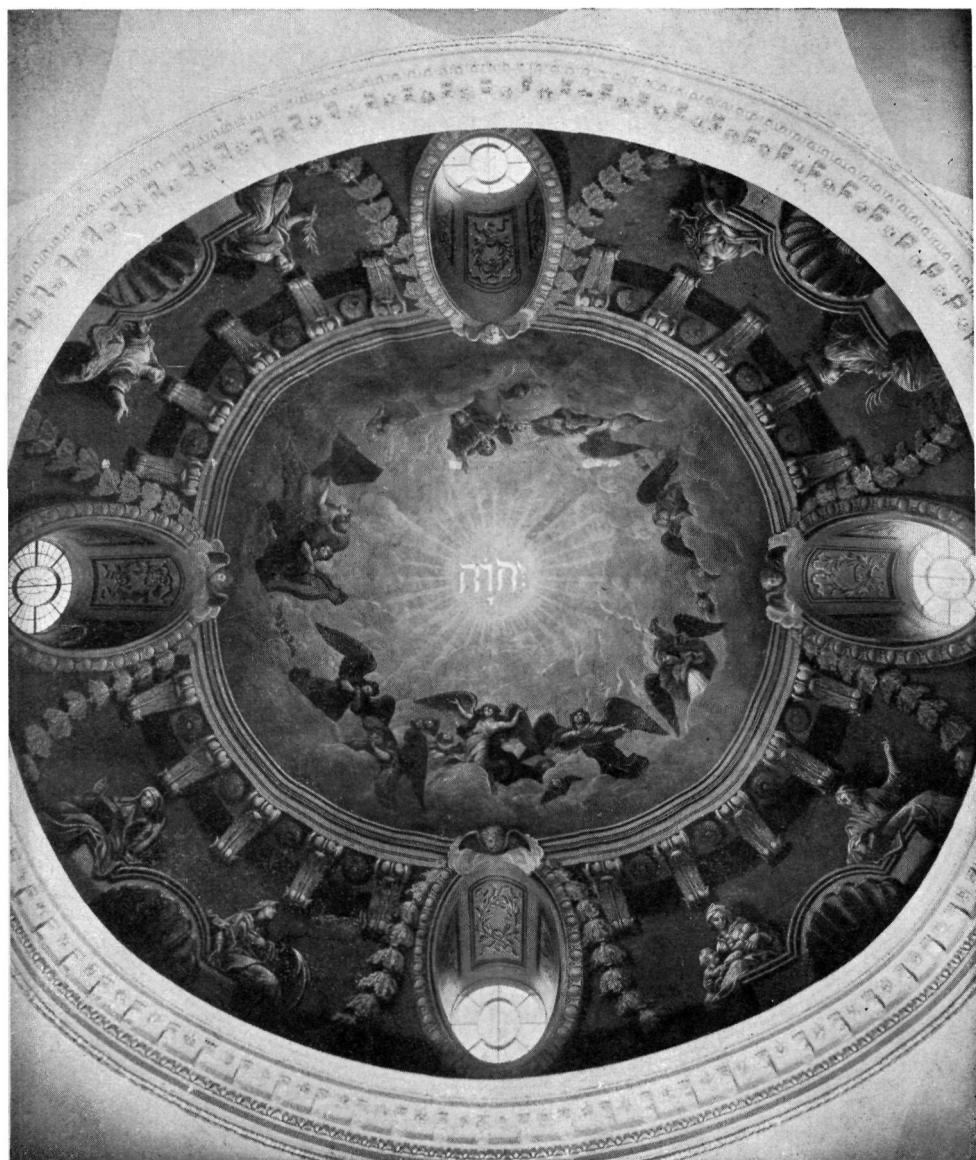
The few details that have so far come to light about Mr. William Snow lend colour to the suggestion that he was the artist of this final piece

of magnificence which the Vestry decided to add to their already very beautiful church. The Register of Freedom Admissions of the Painter Stainers Company shows that he had been apprenticed to one Isaac Bayley, of St. Michael Cornhill Parish, and was admitted to the freedom on January 7th 1699. On 24th August 1701 he was married at St. Matthew, Friday Street to Frances Lewis and on June 18th 1702 a son William was born and is recorded in the registers of St. Mary Abchurch as having been baptised the same day. At this time there stood just to the north of that church three houses belonging to the parish distinguished by their signs of The Cradle, The Crown and The Painters Arms, and in the third of these lived William Snow paying a yearly ground rent of £5. The house is identifiable as that afterwards numbered 15, Abchurch Lane which was demolished, with its two neighbours, in 1914. In 1711 he removed to a larger house on the east side of Laurence Pountney Lane (No. 25) and in 1721 his son William became free by patrimony of the Painters Stainers Company. On February 20th in the same year Frances Snow died and was buried in the new churchyard on the site of the destroyed church of St. Laurence Pountney. Three years later her husband moved again and nothing further is known of him.

St. Mary Abchurch dome is some forty feet across and is pierced by four windows at the cardinal points. The painting, done in oils direct upon the plaster, is divided in two horizontally by a painted cornice, similar in detail to that which supports the dome, which shows by its present distorted outline how the original roof timbers behind it have warped and twisted. Above, painted in bright colours, is a choir of angels and cherubs in adoration around a golden "glory" in the centre of which is the Sacred Name in Hebrew characters. One angel figure in red is seated, amid clouds, at an organ and behind her another robed in blue plays on a harp. Below the cornice are eight seated female figures painted in chiaroscuro in representation of sculpture, variously described as "saints and martyrs" and "Christian virtues and graces". Only Faith, Hope and Charity have ever been individually identified. The four windows have wreaths and palm fronds painted in their embrasures. At the top of each a cherub peers from a cloud and at the sides depend swags of foliage.

Most late 18th century authors ignore the painting (it had not yet attained to respectable antiquity). Malcolm, in 1803, speaks of it somewhat slightly—"Much cannot be said in commendation of the drawing in general: but I may venture to pronounce there are many happy touches dispersed over the surface". Thomas Allen in 1828 describes it

ST. MARY ABCHURCH



ST. MARY ABCHURCH, THE RESTORED DOME PAINTING

By Courtesy of the Guild Vicar



HEADSTONE MANOR



BOSTON HOUSE

with customary thoroughness but it was left to Godwin and Britton in their "Churches of London" in 1838-9 to attribute it to Sir James Thornhill, a statement which lacks any documentary backing but has been repeated by innumerable authors ever since. It would now seem that credit for the work must be given to that hitherto unknown parishioner Mr. William Snow, Citizen and Painter Stainer. It would be interesting to know whether this was his only achievement. There was nothing comparable in any other church in the City, but it is quite possible that he may have decorated the houses of some of the more wealthy inhabitants with the painted panels and overmantels so popular at that time. If so, though the houses are gone long since, some panels may well have survived. His own house in Abchurch Lane was later occupied by the Perchard family, goldsmiths and bankers, one of whom, Peter Perchard, became Lord Mayor in 1804.

The dome painting was restored by a painter named William Russell in 1765 and twice in the succeeding century, first in 1858 by G. W. Anderson on the recommendation of "Mr. Parris who was then engaged on the restoration of the Dome of St. Paul's Cathedral", and again in 1879 by Messrs. Foord and Dickinson of Wardour Street at a cost of £280. It was then stated to be in a very dirty and perished condition. By the time that G. H. Birch wrote his book on London Churches (published 1896) it was difficult to make out the details of the picture, so begrimed had it become by the action of the London atmosphere and the smoke of candles which were the only form of illumination until 1895. In 1931 damage by death watch beetle necessitated considerable roof repairs and the opportunity was taken to clean the dome again and insert concealed lighting at cornice level. But in September 1940 a high explosive bomb which destroyed the nearby "White Hart" in Abchurch Lane caused extensive damage to the painted plaster and it was at first feared that this was irreparable. In 1946, however, Professor E. W. Tristram undertook the work of restoration, the first portion of which he completed, with the help of his assistant Mr. Mobley, in about two years. The whole of the remaining plaster-work was taken down in sections, cleaned and replaced with great skill, and the gaps torn by the bomb-blast filled with new plaster. The reconstruction of the roof began in 1948, causing the temporary cessation of work on the dome and before it could be recommenced Professor Tristram died, in January 1952. Mr. Walter Hoyle then took up the task which was completed in the following year. Three of the cherubs above the dome windows, some of the angelic choir and parts of the architectural features are new, but at least three quarters of

the original painting were saved. The restoration indeed has been wonderfully successful and it is only by reference to a large photograph taken in 1945 which now hangs in the Church that the damage caused by enemy action can be realised.

If St. Mary Abchurch can no longer claim possession of a work of Sir James Thornhill it is still deserving of the title that has been given to it—"a treasury of 17th century art". The reredos carved by Grinling Gibbons is the only authenticated work of that master in any of the parish churches of the City; there is much fine woodwork by William Emmett who carved the doorcases, gallery front, font cover and rails and the Stuart Royal Arms, (his work may also be seen at Kensington Palace and the Royal Hospital, Chelsea); and there is also a pair of attractive iron sword rests and a fine series of mural tablets dating from the late 17th to the early 19th century.

- 1 That it was part of the cost of "beautifying" is proved by an entry in the Vestry Minutes of the united parish of St. Laurence Pountney on June 2nd, 1709, when it was agreed to pay "one hundred pounds to ye churchwardens of Abchurch for our part of beautifeing and other worke done to Abchurch as by agreement." The Vestry paid a half share of all such items.