

Heritage revival

Three major historic properties have been in the news this spring for ambitious schemes of restoration, extension and display. Becky Wallower has been on a pilgrimage from Greenwich to Fulham via Bankside to discover how these distinctive sites are presenting London's history and archaeology.

Completed in 1705, the Painted Hall in the south-western building was originally intended as a ceremonial dining hall, with the seamen being served meals in the undercroft. Sir James Thornhill, father-in-law of William Hogarth and also the artist for the dome of St Paul's Cathedral, was commissioned in 1707 to paint the celebrated ceiling and walls, taking 19 years to compile a hugely complex allegorical work extending over 3700 m² (for which he charged £3 per square yard). Stability, prosperity and resourcefulness are repeated themes, defined through the interaction of hundreds of mythological deities and allegorical figures with royal or renowned Britons.

The Seamen's Hospital became the Royal Naval College from 1873 to 1997, with care of the buildings then being handed over to an independent charity.

The latest restoration is the first major work since the 1950s, and the paintings had deteriorated badly after decades of atmospheric dirt and decay, with 'blanching' or whitening across large areas. Starting in 2016, the team of seven conservators worked to stabilise and rejuvenate the painted surfaces. Among the new details revealed were sections of Thornhill's own revisions, 'improvements' by earlier restorers, and the signatures of some 30 previous conservators, including one in the bosom of Mary II. A key part of the restoration was the use of new technologies to illuminate the paintings, and to stabilise the environment and ensure the longer-term preservation.

The King William Undercroft has been returned to



Last year's opening of Westminster Abbey's stunning Queen's Diamond Jubilee Galleries in the triforium of the medieval building (see LA Summer 2018) has turned out to be the precursor of noteworthy transformations at some of London's other outstanding historic monuments. The most recent of these are both setting local archaeology in a new light, and using it to inform the presentation of the monuments. The varied approaches in evidence are shaped by the nature of the buildings, funding and objectives.

First to follow the Abbey was the spectacular Painted Hall in the Old Royal Naval College (ORNC) in Greenwich – part of another UNESCO World Heritage Site – which re-opened in March. One of Christopher Wren's landmark buildings on the site of the former Tudor royal palace of Placentia, the Painted Hall has been transformed in an £8.5 million project. Not only has it been thoroughly conserved and restored, but the undercroft has been opened to the public for the first time, complete with a window on the Tudor archaeology unexpectedly discovered during preparatory works (see LA Autumn 2017).

Part of the ORNC complex was originally constructed as a new royal palace for Stuart kings, the palace of Placentia having become outdated and fallen into disrepair. The Queen's House was designed by Inigo Jones in 1616 for James I, and completed in 1636 under Charles I. The first of four blocks eventually framing its view to the Thames was designed by James Webb after the restoration in 1664. In 1694, William and Mary decided instead to found a new Royal Hospital for Seamen on the site, perceived as an equivalent for the navy to the army's Royal Hospital in Chelsea. The north-western King Charles block was remodelled, and Christopher Wren, his assistant Nicholas Hawksmoor and, later, John Vanbrugh oversaw the construction of all four blocks.

LEFT the undercroft of the Painted Hall, newly opened for the first time in over 100 years, features the remains of bee boles in the cellar of the Tudor palace (in the foreground)
BELOW the contrast in clarity and detail between the restored (left half) and previous (right half) paintings is dramatic (this painting on the western wall features George I) (images: ORNC)





its original form, with later accretions removed to highlight the elegant baroque vaulting. As part of a key priority to balance access and conservation, the main entrance was moved to the north side of the building, and leads to the undercroft. This now contains an airy café and shop, as well as a small museum setting out the history of the building and featuring a glazed window into the Tudor palace's remains below. This opening is smaller than the excavated archaeology that has been retained, but an explanation setting it in context has been engraved on the railings to aid interpretation. The museum (bearing the now controversial Sackler name) is rather rudimentary – several cases and wall displays contain mainly photos, prints and text – but visitors to the Painted Hall are offered printed or multimedia guides, as well as live talks through the day, object handling and activities.



Perhaps the only aspect of this excellent scheme that grates somewhat (apart from the omnipresent concept of 'visitor experience'), is the repackaging of the Painted Hall with other ORNC features under a £12 entry fee, when it was previously free to enter. The chapel building is included as part of the price, as is the skittles alley beneath it, previously only open for special tours. The ticket lasts for a year and includes a self-guided tour of the complex. Concessions are offered and, on the first Wednesday of the month, visitors (other than groups) can 'pay as you wish' or, in recognition of the £3.1 million National Lottery Heritage

TOP the undercroft beneath the Painted Hall provides access to the Ripley Tunnel, leading eastwards under the Grand Square to the chapel building opposite
ABOVE in 2017–18, some 80,000 visitors (including these from CBA London) were able to see the Painted Hall restorations in progress at close quarters from towering scaffolding (photos: Becky Wallower)
RIGHT the community excavations at Fulham Palace as part of the Cultivating Compton project exposed a probable Bronze Age barrow – 44 archaeological volunteers have so far been involved at Fulham (photo: Alexis Haslam)

Fund grant, present a lottery ticket for free entry. Still, as competition for visitors in Greenwich is so strong – the National Maritime Museum and Queen's House (free), and the Royal Observatory and *Cutty Sark* (paid) – ORNC will need to position its offering carefully.

In May, several miles up the Thames, Fulham Palace opened newly restored rooms and a new museum as well as a new planting scheme in its historic gardens. Again, the National Lottery Heritage Fund has contributed significantly, here providing £1.9 million of the £3.8 million three year project.

The home of the Bishops of London from AD 704 to 1973, Fulham Palace was a major landmark in west London that was little visited by the public for most of its life. Having been put to all manner of uses since the Church of England leased it to the local council in the 1970s, the palace is now run by a trust which strives to give ever-wider audiences an unexpected treat. They've re-branded the site as 'Fulham Palace House & Garden' to position it more clearly. It is already well known to local people and groups, with some 250 volunteers involved in every aspect of its operation, but the trust's mission is to become less of a 'hidden gem' and more of a favourite outing for people from across London and beyond.

The three Tudor facades of the Henry VII-era

courtyard have been impressively restored to a near original state, with previous poorly executed repairs excised. Work on the interiors of surrounding rooms have surprisingly revealed fragments of walls, timbers and decoration (see Mosaic in LA Winter 2019), hidden during periodic remodelling by successive bishops. The contractors, Sykes and Son, have clearly been thoroughly engaged in the project – using traditional methods and materials for brick-making, double-struck mortar joints to match their research, and imaginative solutions to display historic fabric, as well as engaging with both archaeologists and the local community, for instance in a 'Brilliant Bricks' family fun day.

Also restored is the Tudor great hall of 1495, although much of the decorative scheme has long since disappeared (some of it apparently emerging from the 2017 archaeological excavations – see LA Winter 2018). A range of previously inaccessible rooms now form the reception, shop and new museum, which has three times more exhibition space than in the past. The underlying architecture and earlier decoration is revealed in places, becoming part of the historical story.

The first temporary display in the flexible exhibition space focuses on the work involved in the restoration, including conservation, building works and archaeological discoveries. An archaeological timeline highlights finds including late mesolithic/early neolithic struck flint, Elizabethan bone dice (called 'Fulhams' when they were illicitly weighted), Roman coins, Saxon pottery, bones from one of the first turkeys to be eaten in Britain and an 18th-century wine bottle. The stories of the Bishops of London who inhabited Fulham Palace and influenced history can likewise be told: Bishop Ridley was burned at the stake for supporting Lady Jane Grey; Bishop Bonner flogged Protestants in the great hall; Bishop Compton became a renowned botanical collector in the 17th century.

The gardens have featured in the latest restoration programme through the 'Cultivating Compton' project. Following archaeological excavations in autumn 2018, new beds around the walled gardens have been created, with paths and vistas cleared of undergrowth and excess trees. The beds pay tribute to Bishop Compton, who instructed his clergy around the world





to bring specimens of native plants back to Fulham in the late Stuart period. Many such specimens, including the *Magnolia virginiana*, were the first in Britain, or even in Europe, and are given pride of place.

Community Archaeologist Alexis Haslam stays in post for another year, with further hands-on events, talks, tours, YAC sessions and volunteer opportunities planned. And archaeology continues to be inherent in the story and restoration of Fulham Palace.

The third restoration that's come to the fore this spring is just in the starting blocks, and will be a very different project from either Greenwich or Fulham. Thirty years ago, eyes turned on an excavation in Southwark that would affect both archaeology in Britain and the development of the area profoundly. The remains of the Rose playhouse – the first built on Bankside, in 1587 – had been discovered in the final days of a brief dig before redevelopment of the site began, and were at risk of being destroyed.

They weren't, of course, as archaeologists, actors, scholars and local people turned up in force to 'Save the Rose'. Very big names – Dustin Hoffman, Dames Peggy Ashcroft, Judi Dench and Sir Laurence Olivier (who recorded his last public statement for the cause, ending 'Cry God for Harry, England and the Rose') – brought international interest that turned the tide. More time and money were found to complete the first ever excavation of an Elizabethan theatre, alter the building plans and enable the remains to be conserved below ground. This and other threatened sites led to archaeology being embedded in planning law in the form of PPG 16 in 1990 and subsequent legislation.

Inspector of Ancient Monuments, Jane Sidell, dons waders every month to check the remains, preserved

under conservation film, sand and water meant to last two years. On view is a red-lit outline of the two-thirds of the playhouse excavated in 1989, and displays about its history and Bankside theatres. The Rose Theatre Trust was formed in 2001 to preserve the site, present the history to the public and offer a small performance space. At various points, it has seemed that an excavation of the remaining third of the site – which trial excavations have shown is equally well preserved, and includes the eastern boundary – and provision of new facilities might be possible. However hurdles (mainly changes in ownership of and plans for the building above) have so far frustrated progress.

Now at last it seems that the excavation, restoration and expansion of the Rose site may be realised. A 20+ year lease on the full area was signed in 2018 with new owners, WPP. At a gala event in May, the Rose Revived project set wheels in motion for an £8–10 million scheme that has already received planning consent.

WPP see the Rose as a major feature of their London headquarters. Included in their renovations and extension of the building, will be a new façade to the Rose, with windows at street level and a new entrance. If possible, excavation of the remains to the east could begin during the renovations. Rose Theatre Trust chair Harvey Sheldon hopes that the excavations, which will also involve stripping out the existing conservation regime in the west of the site, will be public, and intends to open all the remains for viewing for a period. Afterwards, they will then be covered with a modern, shallower conservation scheme and a new floor. Finally, visitor resources, displays and a performance space will be provided with new facilities and access. Visitors will descend via a ramp featuring archaeological finds, interpretive displays and audio-visual stations to the lower floor where the story of the Rose, Bankside and the people who lived and worked there will be told.

Works on the Rose Court building above should take about two years, and the new Rose Revived project a similar time, with the two potentially overlapping somewhat. Watch this space for news on progress and plans that could once again transform Bankside's theatre landscape, and its archaeology.

LEFT ABOVE much of the decorative, but crumbling brickwork on the tower (c. 1500) was remade and replaced

LEFT BELOW huge beds have been planted around the walled garden to highlight the exotic plants brought to Fulham Palace by Bishop Compton c. 1700 (images: Fulham Palace)

BELOW INSET the original excavations of the Rose in 1989 attracted thousands of visitors and transformed understanding of Elizabethan theatres
BELOW new viewing platforms and windows into the site of the Rose feature in the current plans for extending and updating the Rose Playhouse space (images: Rose Theatre Trust)

