

GREENWICH

By Professor C. C. Lloyd

An address to the 37th Annual General Meeting of the Ancient Monuments Society in the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, on July 2nd, 1960.

I would like to congratulate everyone who has been connected with arranging this Meeting to have chosen a fine Saturday, and this particular Saturday, because it was only on Thursday* that the Painted Hall was officially re-opened after its restoration. There is a special Exhibition on there which will, I hope, explain to you the whole of that miraculous piece of painting and the rather obscure painter, Sir James Thornhill, who was responsible for it. It is to be hoped that this Exhibition will restore Thornhill to his rightful position as an artist, and not just as the father-in-law of William Hogarth.

I will not say anything in this address about the interiors of either the Chapel or the Painted Hall, which you will be visiting later on. As I see it, my aim should be to explain how these buildings ever came to be built here and something about the forgotten background of this place. This area has seen more history than almost any other single spot in Britain except perhaps Westminster itself. You can take the story back to the date when the Vikings arrived to murder the Archbishop of Canterbury in 1012. He is buried in the Church which Hawksmoor built—Greenwich Parish Church, St. Alfege. The Vikings also used Greenwich as a base for an attack on London in 1016.

The story proper starts in the days of Duke Humphrey of Gloucester, brother of Henry V, who decided to build himself a Hunting Tower on the site of the present Observatory and then a country house nearer the river, which was called by the various names of Placentia, Plesauce, or Bella Court. Duke Humphrey was the first great patron of the arts in this country and the wonderful library which he collected on this very site is now in the Bodleian Library at Oxford may still be seen in Duke Humphrey's reading room there. He ran into trouble in the time of the Wars of the Roses and when the Tudors came to the Throne they decided that this was the site on which to develop a great Palace.

From the times of Henry VII and Henry VIII an enormous Tudor

* June 30th, 1960.

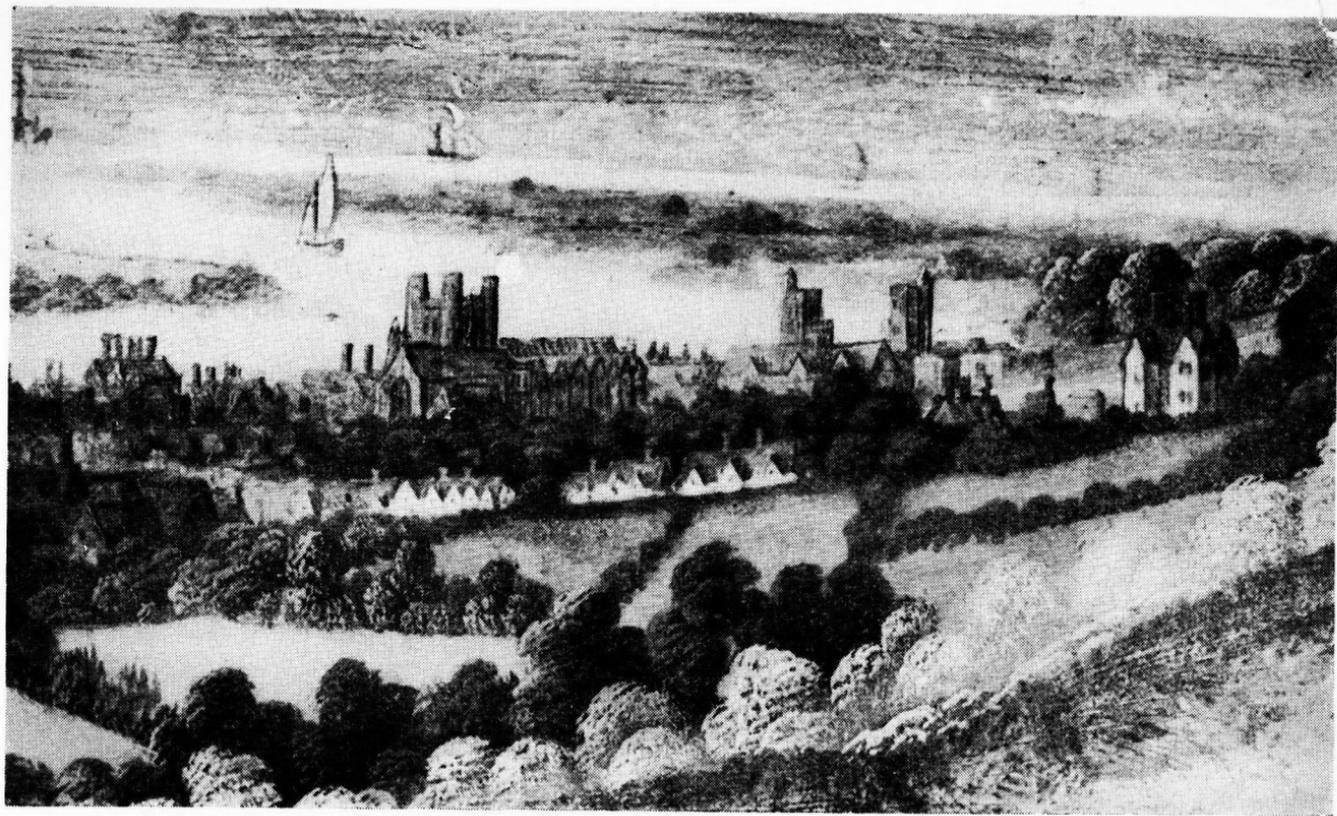


FIG. 1. The Tudor Palace at Greenwich seen from the site of the Observatory.

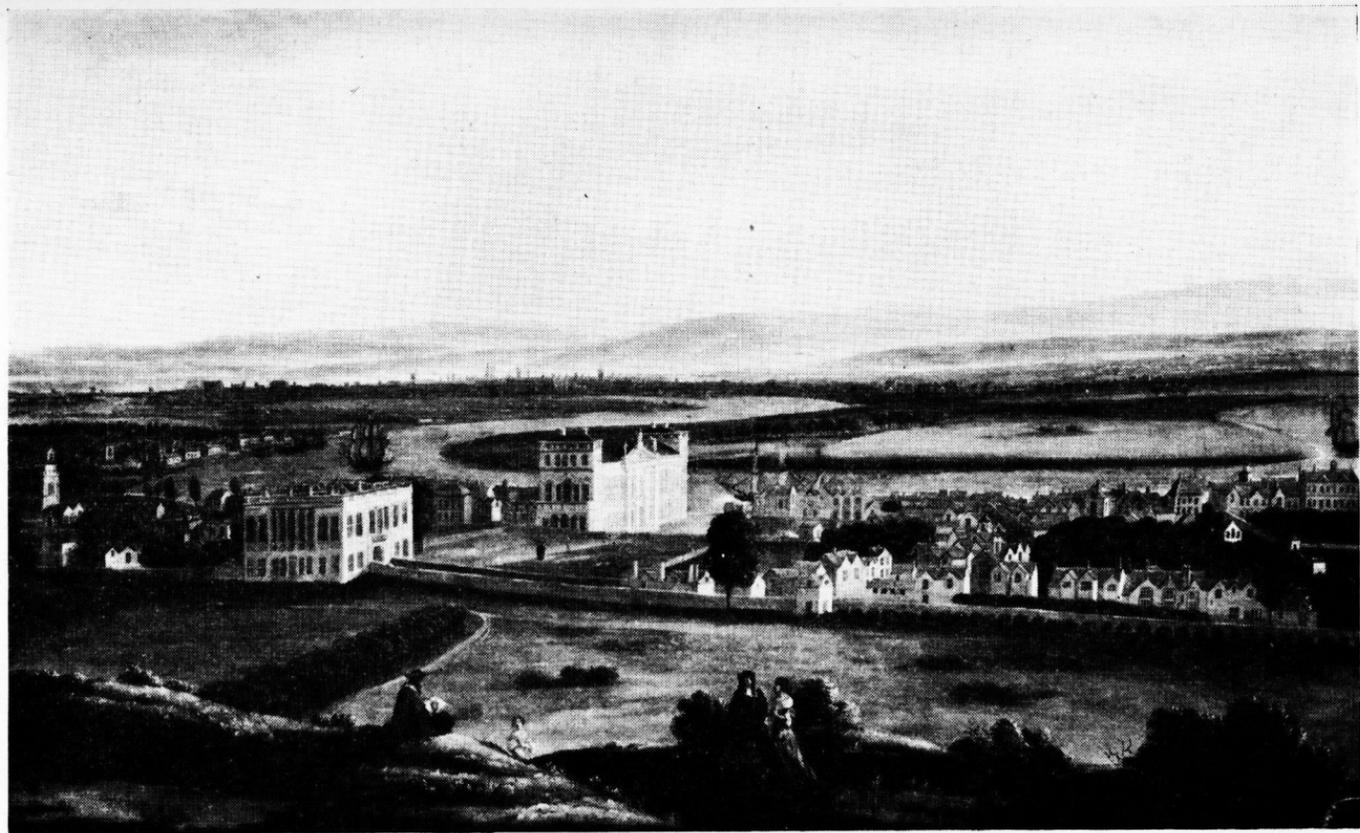


FIG. 2. A view of the Queen's House, the King Charles block and the ruins of the Palace painted about 1680.
Deptford and London may be seen beyond.

Palace arose along the river bank, as big as Hampton Court. We know very few details of the Palace of Placentia, for little now remains. There is a crypt in the Queen Anne block, and this week, we have discovered what may prove to be Duke Humphrey's bathroom as the result of excavations following bomb damage. The Tudors, particularly Henry VIII, made this the centre of England. It pleased Henry VIII because he was interested in building his warships at Woolwich and Deptford. It was here that he fell in love with Anne Boleyn. It was here that most of the Reformation and divorce proceedings took place. It was here that Queen Elizabeth I was born and, indeed, many of the Tudors were born or died in this Palace. In those great days Princes, Ambassadors, even the Emperor Charles V (accompanied by 2,000 horsemen) used to arrive at Greenwich at regular intervals and be entertained in this enormous Palace.

What the Palace actually looked like is a little difficult to know. We have to rely largely on the sketch of a Spanish spy, a Fleming, Antonius Wyngaerde, who in 1558 drew a view of it which suggests a whole series of great courtyards, a banqueting hall, a chapel, and a huge Armoury; here they made the Greenwich armour, which is now in the Tower of London, the best armour ever made in Britain. There was also a tilt-yard just outside these windows, a gatehouse near the site of the Queen's House leading into the hunting and hawking open country, because Blackheath was really Blackheath in those days and not just Greenwich Park.

Elizabeth was very fond of the place, too. She signed the death warrant of Mary Queen of Scots here; she knighted Sir Francis Drake on board the *Golden Hind* just up the river from here. It is possible that the site of the Sir Walter Raleigh cloak story is a herbaceous border behind the Queen's House. Sir Walter Raleigh certainly made his name in the Palace at Greenwich.

After the death of Queen Elizabeth, James I was not interested in the place. He therefore built for his Queen a Queen's House down here, but for himself he intended a great Palace in Whitehall, and the architect whom he employed was Inigo Jones. Inigo Jones did build the Banqueting House in Whitehall, but nothing more came of the Palace. Inigo was also employed to build this beautiful little Palladian building called the Queen's House, which was not finished for James's Queen but for the wife of Charles I, Henrietta Maria, who was the only Queen who ever inhabited the place. It was opened in 1635. Inigo Jones had to build the whole house over the main road from Woolwich to Greenwich, because that was a right of way and nobody could stop

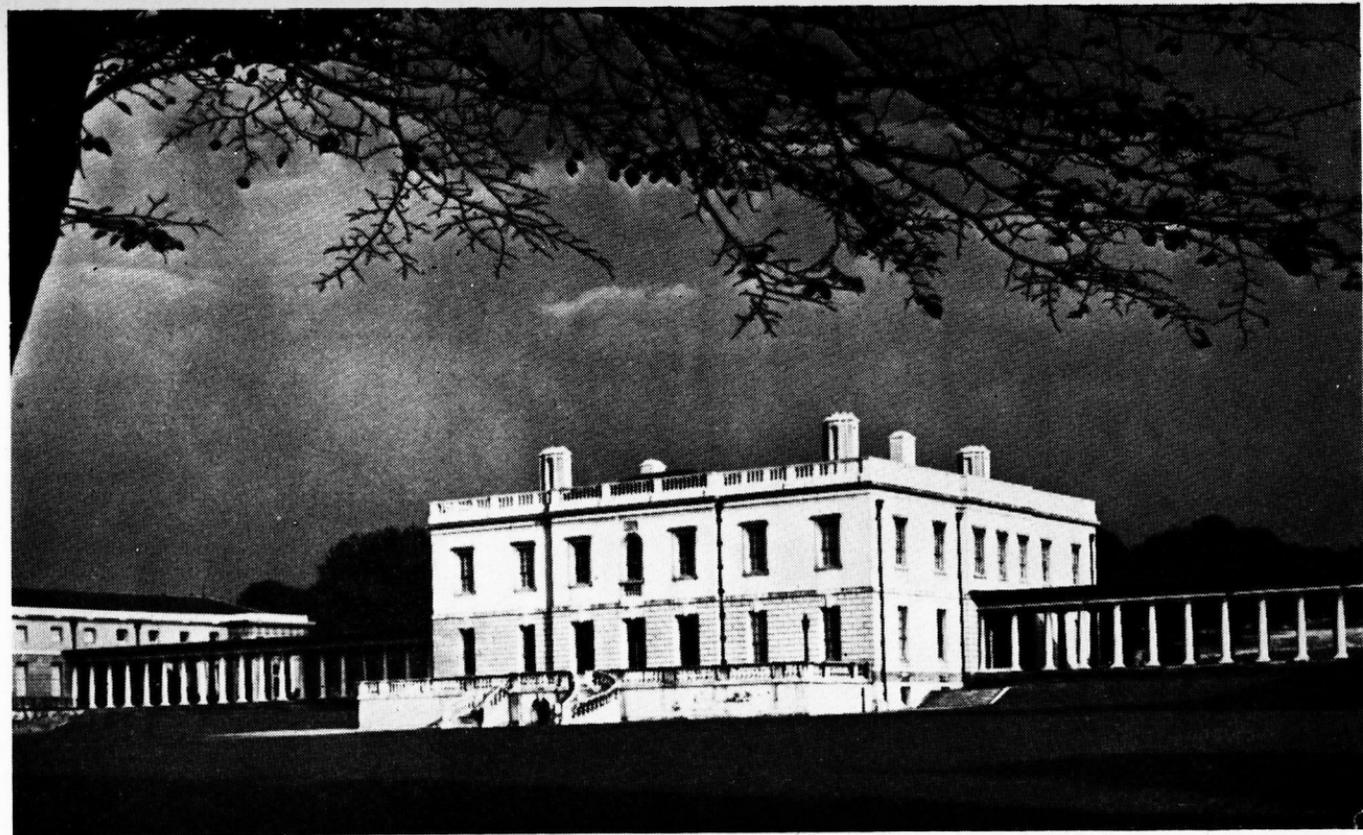


FIG. 3. The Queen's House, now the National Maritime Museum, built by Inigo Jones for James I. The colonnades were added later.

it. That is why you find the curious H-shaped structure built over the road and the original cobble stones underneath it. They could not have the road deflected until the end of the century, because the Palace buildings were still standing in the ruins between the Queen's House and the river.

It was in the Queen's House that Charles I collected the greatest collection of pictures that any monarch has ever collected in this country. Then unfortunately came the Civil War—and Cromwell. The first thing that Cromwell did was to sell up Charles's collection of pictures, which is why you will find the pictures originally housed in the Queen's House at places like the Prado and the Louvre and all over Europe. He also tried to sell up the derelict Palace, but couldn't find a buyer, and so for a time it was a biscuit factory for the New Model Army, and a Prisoner of War Camp in the first Dutch War.

When Charles II came to the throne he determined to revive the glories of Tudor Greenwich and build himself another Palace. He therefore turned to Inigo Jones's nephew-in-law John Webb, and Webb built what is now known as the King Charles Block, which is the western block of the college; but then, of course, being Charles II, the King ran out of money.

It was in his day that the Observatory was built, which is one of Wren's earliest buildings, and on Thursday next, July 5th, that is to be opened as an Astronomical Museum by the Queen. The Royal Observatory itself has moved to Herstmonceaux Castle, Sussex. The building has been restored to the state in which Wren left it.

When Charles II ran out of money, there was left one great block of the proposed palace and the private Queen's House by Inigo Jones. So the situation remained until after the Revolution, which resulted in a war with France. In the year 1692 we won the battle of La Hogue, which is the Trafalgar of the 17th Century, and as a thank-offering for that, William and Mary decided to build a hospital for seamen—a Royal Hospital for Seamen on the same lines as the Royal Hospital for Soldiers, Chelsea, which Charles had built and Wren designed. But it was to be a grander effort and Wren once more was called in.

Now Wren was an old man at that date. He attended the laying of the foundation stone in 1696 in the company of John Evelyn, who was the Treasurer of the new hospital estate. Soon after that it would appear (and here we get into one of the conundrums of architectural history) that he felt too old to continue. You know the old rhyme about him: "Sir Christopher Wren went to dine with some men, He said if anyone calls, say I am designing St. Paul's". Well, he was designing

St. Paul's and about 20 other churches at the same time. Apart, therefore, from designing this great Hospital, he did not himself have time to see to its actual building, because it took a very long time to build. He made a model for it and he designed the layout. In the original design he wanted to pull down the Queen's House and have the biggest dome in Europe here, but the Queen (Queen Mary) said "No, that is the Queen's House, it must stand; it must be the end of your vista". Wren tried to point out that what was contemplated was something in the Baroque style not the Palladian style, and something on a very much bigger scale. But it was no good. So he had to solve the problem with these twin domes which you see to-day with the line of the colonnades leading the eye up to the Queen's House. When you walk round the College you should notice that the breadth between the domes is exactly the breadth of the Queen's House. The whole thing is laid out with extraordinary mathematical accuracy. Wren also inherited Webb's King Charles Block, so the other blocks had more-or-less to conform with that. It was a very difficult architectural problem which he had to solve, but he solved it with the ground plan which we now have, and then it was left to Sir John Vanbrugh and above all Nicholas Hawksmoor to complete. I think it would be best to look upon the building of Greenwich as the work of the greatest team of architects this country has ever produced. Wren as the senior and somewhat sleeping partner; Sir John Vanbrugh very busy with Blenheim, Castle Howard, besides being the most popular dramatist of the day. I rather fancy him as a sort of Public Relations man and Nicholas Hawksmoor as the modest genius to whose ability we are only now beginning to pay just tribute. Those three were responsible, but no authorities can agree on what feature of Greenwich is actually due to which particular person. It used, only five years ago, to be said that Vanbrugh's first shot at architecture was the King William Block because it is such an awful mess architecturally; but we now discover that he could not possibly have built it, because it was up to the third storey by the time that Vanbrugh became Surveyor of the Works. The dating of these great buildings is very difficult. The foundation was laid in 1696. The King William Block was complete in 1708, the Queen Anne Block follows, and the Queen Mary Block (which is the one to the east) was not completed until in the region of 1740 to 1750. You also get the succession of the greatest architects of England connected with the building—Vanbrugh, Hawksmoor, Gibbs, James, Ripley, Colen Campbell, all had a finger in the pie.

Furthermore, the charity ran out of money very frequently, so the

citizens of London had to be taxed for their cauldrons of coal, the seamen of the Navy paid 6d. out of their monthly wages, and then (fortunately) there was a Jacobite Rebellion and the Earl of Derwentwater took the wrong side, with the result that he forfeited his estates. Ever since, the Royal Hospital Charity has benefited by owning much of the county of Cumberland. It also owned any unclaimed prize money at the end of any great war in the 18th century.

The blocks therefore gradually rose. What is now seen dates from between 1696 and 1730, with the exception of the Chapel which is part of the Queen Mary Block. In 1779 there was a fire in a tailor's shop for the old pensioners which burnt down Wren's Chapel. It was re-built by James Stuart, called "Athenian" Stuart, and reopened in 1789. It is for that reason completely different in style to the Baroque conception of the Painted Hall, and you have here a very interesting contrast between the age of Adam and the age of Vanbrugh in the Chapel and the Hall, which you will see as you visit the interiors, although of course the design of the exteriors was kept the same.

What was this place built for? The Hospital was built for naval pensioners—anybody who was wounded or became old in the service of the Queen or the King. The first pensioners arrived in 1705; by the time of Nelson 100 years later there were some 2,700 of them. There was also the hospital school for 600 boys. After the Nelson period that school was moved across the road here and extensions were made to the Queen's House with the colonnades and wing blocks by an architect called David Alexander. That school remained in these buildings from about 1815 to 1933, when it was moved to the Royal Hospital School, Holbrook, in Suffolk. It was then that the National Maritime Museum was founded and actually opened in 1937. The Painted Hall, was converted back to its original use as a dining hall, because for 150 years that Hall had been a museum. All the windows were blocked up and the great portraits which you find in the Museum were hung on the walls. Nobody was in the least interested in Thornhills paintings, nor in the architecture for that matter. A real piece of Victorian vandalism. In 1937 the treasures were transferred across the road to the National Maritime Museum, and the Hall became the Officers' Mess of the Royal Naval College.

The Hospital became a College in the year 1873; actually the Hospital closed down in 1869 and the College opened in 1873. In the days of Pax Britannica there were not so many pensioners and people preferred Out Pensions. So in 1873 the Admiralty took over the buildings and made them into a Royal Naval College. But of course



FIG. 4. A photograph of one of the two domes of the Royal Naval College today.

the original Hospital Charity still goes on and they are the owners of these buildings, so there is a curious sort of triarchy (if that is the word) between the Greenwich Hospital Estate, the Admiralty and the Ministry of Works. For some reason which I cannot explain the Queen's House is an Ancient Monument, but the College is not an Ancient Monument under the act. All I know is that it is next door to it and you have to ask permission for all sorts of people to do anything. But we do try to preserve it to this day as Wren designed it. It is open to the public every afternoon, except on Thursdays, and it is the finest example of Baroque building which we have in this country as part of our National Heritage.