

Derek Clarke - The Restoration of the Old Royal Naval College, Greenwich

Derek's fascinating and detailed presentation concerned the repair of the external fabric to the King William, Queen Mary, King Charles and Queen Anne Buildings, which together make up the Old Royal Naval College.



Derek Clarke RIBA, AABC

Derek introduced his presentation by saying that he does not give talks, but shares stories, and this was borne out by his anecdotes, humour and passion for his work and his subject.

The Old Royal Naval College, Greenwich, was started in the reign of King William, and was originally the Royal Hospital for Seamen. Sir Christopher Wren, assisted by Nicholas Hawksmoor, was the Surveyor and designer, and Hawksmoor completed the final plan in 1751 after the death of Wren.

The first buildings were constructed of Portland limestone, but as the project ran out of money during the reign of King William, the stone was replaced by brick in the less visible areas. In the reign of Queen Mary Portland limestone was again incorporated into the buildings. Derek pointed out the different materials used in photographs he had taken while working on the project. The buildings are of classical design and superb examples of their era.

Among the interesting facts Derek shared with us was that between 220 - 250 timber sash windows in each building needed replacing. Also that English Heritage was involved and supervised the renovations as the buildings are Grade I listed.

Derek explained the intricacies of the repairs, using identical or similar techniques and materials to the originals and following detailed plans to exactly reproduce what was being replaced. Photographs taken by Derek highlighted the care taken to be as authentic as possible in the renovations. Some photographs showed 'before and after' work and emphasised the attention to detail that this project entailed.

Derek mentioned some particular rooms that were outstanding in their beauty and these included the Royal Naval Chapel, a spectacular space of blue and gold, and the Painted Hall, which took Thornhill 19 years to complete. Thornhill was also responsible for painting the Staircase at Hanbury Hall, a local National Trust property on which Derek has also worked.

Safety was of paramount importance, especially as the public had access to the grounds while the repairs were ongoing. Lightning conductors were installed and anti-bird mesh covered some surfaces which were particularly prone to bird damage.

The Group found the presentation fascinating and appreciated the incredible level of skill needed to complete this project on one of London's most iconic sites.

Heidy Hague