

Then and Now 3 - Greenwich



Top Picture - Greenwich Hospital by Canaletto 1752
© Royal Museums Greenwich

Canaletto (1697-1768) was a landscape painter from Venice. He became a popular artist amongst British aristocracy in the 18th Century who had been to Italy on the [Grand Tour](#). In 1746 he came to London and painted this view of Greenwich Hospital from the Isle of Dogs on the North bank between 1750 and 1752. It is possible that it was commissioned for Consul Joseph Smith for his residence on the Grand Canal. He was British Consul in Venice from 1744 to 1760, where he entertained many English Grand Tourists.

Look at both pictures and find these comparative details:

Canaletto Painting - 1752

1: The hospital in this painting was not as we understand a hospital today, which treats ill and injured people, but a retirement home that provided hospitality for men from the Army and Royal Navy. Royal Hospital Chelsea was a retirement home for old soldiers and Greenwich Hospital for old seamen. Greenwich Hospital was open to retired or injured seamen from 1692 to 1869.

2: This was the site of an earlier Tudor Royal Palace called “The Palace of Placentia” from 1443 until 1660. It was the birth place of King Henry VIII, Queen Mary I and Queen Elizabeth I. There is a plaque in the ground (see right) near the water gates which marks the site of the old Tudor Palace. There is no other evidence left today.

3: The Queen’s House was added, just south of the Tudor Palace, in 1616 for Anne of Denmark, the wife of King James I of England. The architect was Inigo Jones, who was the best known architect of his day. The Queen’s House is the white building on the left shown in the painting below.





A View of Greenwich and the Queen's House from the SE by Hendrick Danckerts 1670 © Royal Museums Greenwich



Almost exactly the same view of the Queen's House from Greenwich Park looking north towards Docklands on the Isle of Dogs

4: The Tudor palace was demolished by King Charles II in 1660 and replaced it with a new building. Queen Mary II was concerned at seeing injured sailors returning from the Battle of Le Hougue in 1692 and wanted them to be offered the same hospitality as soldiers at the Royal Hospital Chelsea. She ordered the new King Charles wing of the Royal Palace to be turned into a hospital for the sailors, which opened as Greenwich Hospital for Seamen in 1692. Sir Christopher Wren, Nicholas Hawksmoor and Sir John Vanburgh all worked as architects to make the Hospital bigger. The Queen did not want the view of the River Thames from the Queens house to be blocked (as can be seen in the 1670 painting above) so the building closest to the river bank was demolished and the new buildings for Greenwich Hospital were split to the left and right into four parts with a gap in the middle. The four main quadrants were not finished until 1742, just before Canaletto painted this view.

5: There were many magnificent paintings in the Painted Hall of Greenwich Hospital, which was supposed to be the dining room for the pensioners but was rarely used by them. These pictures, part of the Royal Collection, were then transferred to Greenwich Maritime Museum which opened in the Queen's House in 1936.



Painted Gallery has an elaborate painted ceiling and used to be a picture gallery. It is now open to the public.

6: Although the buildings of the Hospital are quite distinct, Canaletto's painting also shows us the types of boats on the Thames in the mid-18th Century. There are numerous boats being rowed by water boatmen but also some sailing boats and some larger galleons, possible war ships, leaning over at low tide.

7: The perspective of Canaletto was quite low compared to some other paintings of the time which show this view from much higher above the ground, as if in a hot air balloon. The view is from the North bank of the River Thames, on the Isle of Dogs, looking due South. Danckerts painting of 1670, a hundred years before, is almost the opposite view looking North towards the Isle of Dogs, which were an undeveloped meander in the River Thames at that time. Look at a map of Greenwich and work out where these two paintings were painted from. It is likely that Canaletto did sketches on site in London but completed the full painting in his studio back in Venice.

Photograph - 2015

1: The building in the painting looks almost identical to the one in the modern photo. It has physically changed very little and is still very recognisable. Between 1873 and 1998 (within living memory for many adults) the buildings became the Royal Naval College, Greenwich, which trained Royal Navy officers. In 1998 it became known as the Old Royal Naval College and now welcomes thousands of visitors every year as a World Heritage site. Because of the preserved architecture, dating back to the 18th century, it has often been used as a film set, for example Spooks, Pirates of the Caribbean and the Man from UNCLE.



The Old Royal Navy College was used as an 18th Century street in the film "Pirates of Caribbean, On Stranger Tides."

2: The Queens House is still dominant in the centre of the historic site, the Royal Observatory (home of Greenwich Mean Time) sits on the hill behind. The Queen's House is part of the National Maritime Museum and displays many of the pictures that used to hang in the Painted Gallery.



Queen's House and Royal Observatory on the hill

3: The boats are the one thing that look quite different today. Sometimes Royal Naval ships do still visit but most of the time you will see the large tourist and commuter boats, as in this photo. The one sailing ship that you can see at Greenwich is the recently repaired Cutty Sark. This was one of the last great sailing ships built just before steam took over. It often sailed to India to bring back tea leaves and was known as Tea Clipper.



Cutty Sark at Greenwich was launched in 1869.

4: It is still possible to see classic view of Greenwich Hospital / Old Royal Naval College, as painted by Canaletto, looking South across the River Thames from the Island Gardens. This lovely park is right next to the Northern entrance to the Greenwich Foot Tunnel (opened in 1902) and very close to the Island Garden Station on the Docklands Light Railway. This area of the Isle of Dogs has changed considerably since Danckerts painting of 1670. We are lucky that we can look at Canaletto's painting of 1772 and still recognise so much still there today when we look at the modern photographs, or even better go and visit Greenwich.



Island Gardens on the southern tip of the Isle of Dogs.