

Factsheet

The Rubens Ceiling at the Banqueting House

- The paintings, commissioned by Charles I in 1629 to celebrate the glorification of his father James I, have decorated the ceiling of the Banqueting House at Whitehall since 1635 and are the only Rubens paintings to remain in their original location.
- These works have been described as 'the greatest decorative painting ever executed of an English interior' and are said to have launched a taste for grand Baroque schemes.
- In 1635, three years after the paintings were installed, Peter Paul Rubens was paid £3,000, the equivalent of £218,000 today, and given a heavy gold chain for his work. At their installation he had had to retouch the paint and mend cracks resulting from the way in which his fresh canvases had been stored prior to shipping them to England.
- Many removals, cleanings and 'mendings' followed, generally repairing damage caused by damp problems in the roof; first in 1686-88 as instructed by Christopher Wren, then in 1729-33 by William Kent, who also relined them; and three times again in 1748, 1776-77 and, when the roof leaked in 1830-31.
- The painting also survived the 1698 fire which destroyed most of the Whitehall palace and alterations Cromwell made to the Banqueting House, possibly because it is set so high in the ceiling.
- Most dramatically, in 1906, the canvases were adhered to plywood to prevent further 'sagging and tearing from their frames' presenting 'a billowing appearance like quilts or feather beds'.
- During the Second World War the panels were cut in twenty pieces to evacuate them through the windows of the Banqueting House to safe storage near Beaconsfield.

- After the war, in 1946-50, the Ministry of Works artist-restorers worked on them in The Orangery of Kensington Palace, since which only two surveys and some minor remedial work have needed to be carried out, in 1994 and 1995.
- These massive paintings are in remarkable condition, considering they have survived 12 major restorations in their 370 year life, along with a major fire, roof leaks and world war. It is fantastic that the public today can enjoy them in their original setting as monarchs and their courtiers have done for nearly 400 years.