

Mozart Played Here, Retired Soldiers Live Here. It's Also the Site of an Art Fair.

Built in London centuries ago to house soldiers “broken by age and war,” the Royal Hospital Chelsea has lived many lives, including as home to the Treasure House Fair.

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The Royal Hospital Chelsea was founded by King Charles II in 1681 for soldiers “broken by age and war,” as they are described in a Latin inscription on the building. [Royal Hospital Chelsea](#)



By **Jillian Rayfield**

Reporting from London

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The Royal Hospital Chelsea, a retirement home for British Army veterans, has stood in Southwest London for over 330 years, outlasting monarchs, wars and even, according to a 1969 New York Times article, a “vulgar” invasion of [Mod fashion boutiques](#).

Next week, the centuries-old building, just north of the Thames, will be the site of the third edition of the Treasure House Fair, with dealers from London, New York and beyond selling rare works, including paintings by French and Dutch masters, 18th-century English furniture and antique jewelry. The event will have a fitting backdrop on the South Grounds of the hospital.

The hospital was founded by King Charles II in 1681 for soldiers “broken by age and war,” as they are described in a Latin inscription on the building. The king was inspired by the Hôtel des Invalides in Paris, a complex that was originally built for the same purpose.



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Charles commissioned the architect Christopher Wren to build it. At the time, Wren was helping to rebuild parts of the city after the [Great Fire of 1666](#) and is credited with designing dozens of churches throughout the city, most notably St. Paul’s Cathedral.

Christian Frost, a professor and the head of architecture at London Metropolitan University, said that Wren carefully considered how the hospital would fit in the city as it was being rebuilt. As a result, the hospital has “a slightly strange angle to the Thames,” he said, because in Wren’s original plans it was going to be on one end of a large boulevard that cut through the city and linked the hospital to Kensington Palace.

“It’s not just a building; it’s about actually situating itself in the city,” Frost said, adding that Wren wanted to create a bridge between the king and his soldiers.

The Royal Hospital took about 10 years to build, and by 1692, the first 99 of the Chelsea Pensioners moved in. These days, Kilnan said, it can accommodate over 300 of them.

To be admitted, a Chelsea Pensioner has to be over 65 and have served in the British Army. They are still easily recognizable by the traditional [bright red uniforms](#) and tricorn hats that they wear for official events and parades.

Some things have become less traditional: Women were first allowed to join in 2009, and there are now 17 among the pensioners, according to Kilnan.

“I often wonder that 330 years later, would anybody have foresaw that it would still be used for its original intended purpose,” Kilnan said.

In other ways, the site has had to evolve. As early as the 18th century, Kilnan said, the hospital began hosting events to help fund upkeep of the building and the pensioners. Today, those events include Treasure House and the Chelsea Flower Show, as well as show-jumping events and car shows.

Another section of the 66-acre property, Ranelagh Gardens, became a pleasure garden in the 1700s that held events like masquerade balls, fireworks and a performance by a young Mozart

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masquerade balls, fireworks and a performance by a young Mozart (who had not yet celebrated his 10th birthday). Many of these would attract royals or other members of high society.

The draw of the site, Kilnan said, showed how Chelsea “was starting to become really fashionable. And a lot of that was down to the existence of the Royal Hospital.”



The Royal Hospital Chelsea's Great Hall in 1910. Royal Hospital Chelsea

Centuries later, the world wars forced the Royal Hospital to evolve further. The building itself was altered both because of damage from bombings — one part of the northeast wing was hit in both 1918 and 1945 — and because of war preparations, as when multiple air raid shelters were built beneath the hospital.

The Chelsea Pensioners living through the war years had to adapt, too. Some were evacuated from London, but most were left behind, trying to go about normal activities, occasionally grumbling about disruptions from the bombings. “Was very annoying to be wakened so early and turned out of bed,” said one 101-year-old resident in November 1940 after a night of bombings, Britain’s News Chronicle reported.

Martin Cawthorne, the author of “The Royal Hospital Chelsea at War” and a volunteer at the hospital, said in an email that during World War II the property was hit by about two dozen high explosive bombs and a ballistic missile. Many of the bombs failed to detonate, he added, but about 21 people, including pensioners, staff and other residents, were killed because of air raids.

But, he said, given how many times the building was struck, “in many respects, it is remarkable that so much of the Royal Hospital survived the Second World War.”

Kilnan said that the Wren structures were later rebuilt, and mostly indistinguishable from the originals: “The buildings are scarred, but it’s now very much part of our history.”

And, she said, “that main magnificent building is pretty much as it was when Wren walked the corridors.”

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