

WREN | 300

SQUARE MILE CHURCHES



Fire in the City: Artists in the Blitz

A new pop-up exhibition in Sir Christopher Wren's Square Mile Churches

15 September – December 2003

The children's rhyme 'London's Burning' may be associated with the Great Fire of 1666 but the calls to 'fetch the engine' and 'pour on water' would certainly have had a particular resonance with people during and after the Blitz of World War Two. In 1940-41, fire again raged throughout the Capital, with 13 of Sir Christopher Wren's churches destroyed and the night of 29 December 1940 becoming known as the 'Second Great Fire of London'.

As part of *Wren 300*, which marks the 300th anniversary of the death of Sir Christopher Wren (1632-1723), the London Fire Brigade Museum, in association with the Square Mile Churches, has created *Fire in the City: Artists in the Blitz*, a series of pop-up displays featuring high-quality reproductions of paintings by firefighter artists, along with contemporary photographs from the London Fire Brigade archive, that tell a fascinating and inspiring story of resilience and regeneration.

Fire in the City: Artists in the Blitz incorporates several key themes including introducing the Auxiliary Fire Service and the Firemen Artists, the Blitz and the destruction of Wren's churches, and a landmark exhibition that took place in America, which was part of Britain's efforts to encourage the United States government to join the War in support of the Allies.

The exhibition will be on display across a selection of City churches from 15 September through to December 2023 and features a variety of dramatic scenes, including firefighters, many of whom were civilian volunteers, desperately trying to combat the gathering inferno. Among them, was a remarkable group of artists, including the painters Wilfred Stanley Haines (1905-1944), Reginald Mills (1896-1951) and Paul Dessau (1909-1999), who all recorded the experience of firefighters thrown into the horror of the Blitz, from dramatic paintings of incidents to more reflective scenes of colleagues at rest.

In 1940, ten artists serving with the Auxiliary Fire Service (AFS) formed their own Firemen Artists Organising Committee and, on 10 March 1941, held the first of six exhibitions in London, featuring over 100 paintings. This initial show lasted for three weeks, attracting over 30,000 visitors. One reviewer praised the works for their combination of 'the spectacular with the heroic', while also emphasising the authenticity of the subjects. Many were not straight documentary images, but composites, drawn from memory.

Women joined the fire service for the first time as volunteers in the AFS in the Second World War, working alongside their male counterparts in a variety of roles, ranging from control operators, despatch riders and delivery drivers. Although they did not train as firefighters, women in the AFS regularly worked as drivers and motorcycle despatch riders, which often involved perilous missions, such as driving petrol supplies during bombing raids.

Despite being dubbed the 'Firemen Artists', a small number of AFS women were also active artists, including Julia Lowenthal (active 1915-1935) and Mary Pitcairn. *Driving by Moonlight*, painted by the latter in 1941, evocatively shows AFS Firewoman Gillian 'Bobbie' Tanner at the wheel of a truck. She was awarded the George Medal for bravery and the citation read: '*On the night of 20 September 1940, Auxiliary G.K. Tanner volunteered to drive a 30 cwt lorry loaded with 150 gallons of petrol. Six serious fires were in progress and for three hours Miss Tanner drove through intense bombing to the point at which the petrol was needed, showing coolness and courage throughout.*'

Julia Lowenthal's drawings and paintings gave remarkable insights into life inside the fire stations during the Blitz. Unlike most of her fellow firefighter artists she worked primarily in pencil and watercolour. Lowenthal was based in Kilburn and most of her surviving work is of colleagues in the station, and often at rest. Her watercolour sketch *Bells Down* refers to firefighters being called to action by bells in their fire station.

After the original Great Fire of 1666, Sir Christopher Wren built 51 churches and St Pauls Cathedral in the City of London and while St Pauls Cathedral survived the onslaught of the Blitz, 13 Wren churches were destroyed. The London Blitz lasted from 7 September 1940 until 11 May 1941. Between 7 September and 2 November, the Luftwaffe subjected London to heavy bombing every night except one. More than 20,000 people were killed. 327 men and women from the fire service were killed in action and over 3,000 seriously injured. The Germans' key weapon in the Blitz was the incendiary bomb, a device designed not to explode on impact, but able to burn at 2,500 degrees. Thousands of these were dropped creating fires and threatening to overwhelm London. *Cannon Street* by Paul Dessau captures the hellish scenes surrounding the heroic AFS, as they fought to limit the raging fires around them. *Fire in the Strand*, a watercolour by Reginald Mills depicts St Clement Danes after it had received a direct hit from an incendiary bomb which pierced the roof. The bell tower acted as a funnel and sent flames shooting into the air. By morning nothing remained but the tower and exterior walls.

Fire in the City will open from 15 September and can be seen in the following churches:

- St Mary Le Bow: Monday to Friday, 7.30am – 6.00pm. Open weekends on an informal basis.
- St Mary Aldermary: Tuesday to Friday, 7.30am – 4.00pm
- St James Garlickhythe: Monday to Wednesday, 10.00am – 4.30pm, Thursday, 11.00am – 3.00pm, Sunday: 9.00am – 1.00pm. Friday & Saturday, CLOSED.
- St Magnus the Martyr: Tuesday to Friday, 10.00am – 4.00pm, Sunday, 10.00am – 1.00pm (Mass at 11am)
- St Stephen Walbrook: Monday to Friday, 10.30am – 3.30pm

(Venue details may be subject to change so it is advised to check individual church websites for the latest information).

A second series of participating churches will host displays from the end of October through November.

London Fire Brigade Museum's Curator, Dinah Winch said: *"Like so many Londoners in the Blitz, the firefighter artists were very courageous and saw horrors that most of us can't even imagine now. They were also curious, creative and compassionate. Their paintings reflect this and are the reason they remain so compelling to a modern audience."*

"The firefighter artists are not well known, and with the Brigade's art collection currently in storage, this exhibition is a great opportunity to tell their story, out in the City, where they were working during the Blitz."

Helen Vigors from WREN 300 says: *"The Wren300 project provides a wide range of activities that will ensure these churches are better known and appreciated, that they are an enriching experience to all who come to them, Fire in the City: Artists in the Blitz will do just that in shining a spotlight on a pivotal moment in their history."*

For more information about the exhibition and participating churches, visit www.wren300.org and click on the 'What's On' button. Alternatively, go to the [London Fire Brigade museum](http://www.londonfirebrigademuseum.org) website.

NOTES FOR EDITORS

The **London Fire Brigade Museum** is currently closed while we work on plans for a new museum, aiming to create more accessible and engaging exhibits for our audiences. Our historical collection is in deep storage while our complex project is progressing. In the interim period the LFB Museum is running as a virtual museum, sharing its fantastic historical collection and stories digitally and through pop-up events in the community.

Wren 300 - 2023 marks the 300th anniversary of the death of Sir Christopher Wren (1632-1723) - mathematician, astronomer, physicist, anatomist and one of the United Kingdom's greatest architects. *Wren 300: The Square Mile Churches* will celebrate his achievements with a year-long education and conservation programme for children and adults, focusing primarily on the City churches and St Paul's Cathedral. For further information, please see: www.Wren300.org and www.squaremilechurches.co.uk/wren-300 Follow the Wren300 Square Mile Churches on: / Twitter: @Wren300M / Instagram: @wren300squaremile

About The National Lottery Heritage Fund - Using money raised by the National Lottery, we **Inspire, lead** and **resource** the UK's heritage to create **positive and lasting change** for people and communities, now and in the future. Since The National Lottery began in 1994, National Lottery players have raised over £46billion for projects and more than 670,000 grants have been awarded across the UK - the equivalent of more than 240 lottery grants in every UK postcode district. More than £30 million raised each week goes to good causes across the UK. www.heritagefund.org.uk. Follow @HeritageFundUK on [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#) and use #NationalLotteryHeritageFund

[HIGH RESOLUTION IMAGES CAN BE DOWNLOADED BY CLICKING ON THIS LINK](#)

FOR MORE INFORMATION, INTERVIEWS AND IMAGES

Tracy Jones, Brera PR – tracy@brera-london.com / 01702 216658 / 07887 514984 / www.brera-london.com



Made possible with

**Heritage
Fund**



— DIOCESE OF —
LONDON