St Martins in the field Church

PAYE Conservation were approached to examine and review an area of fallen plaster from this highly decorative 18th Century plaster ceiling; which could have posed a serious health & safety risk within this busy central London church. Historic plasterwork ceilings have been a fresh cause for concern since the Apollo Theatre ceiling collapse in 2014 when 88 people were injured during a performance.

From examining the large fragment of fallen material it was possible to deduce that weight was an issue, as was the lack of adhesion witnessed – an imprint of a single lath could be noted to the reverse, but not much more. It fell from an area directly behind the organ and so it was felt that the sound vibration may have been at least partly responsible for the disturbance and might not be an isolated incident.

A scaffold was erected and a survey undertaken at close quarter to establish and ensure the overall structural integrity. Inspections were undertaken to both face and back to the ceiling to make sure nothing sinister or unexplained was impacting on the loss (often water ingress can be the root cause of disturbing material that has otherwise remained stable and solid for hundreds of years).
St Martins in the field Church (cont’d.)

A detailed report was undertaken establishing historical context (identifying that the plasterwork here was by Bagguti and Atari; members of the Stuccatori and hailing from the Italian speaking Ticino region of the Swiss-Italian Alps and completed between 1724 & 1725). Further to the academic study, the construction process was able to be identified, materials were confirmed and later remedial works logged. It was evident that a number of previous interventions had been completed to stabilise and offer support. A partial collapse of the ceiling was noted in the archives having occurred in the 1960’s all of which suggests substantial pieces of embellishment may have posed a risk on an on-going basis. Having identified risk, an in depth ‘hands on’ ceiling survey was undertaken checking each piece in turn. Whilst this cannot be 100% conclusive, it does allow a skilled craftsperson to feel whether any other pieces of embellishment present an immediate risk.

No further areas of concern were identified and on completion of the survey, we undertook a repair to the area which had collapsed, installing physical fixings as well as re-adhering the detached fragment.