

The Chapel of St. Christopher

Great Ormond Street Hospital
for Children NHS Trust

St. Christopher's Chapel

Background

Designed by Edward Middleton Barry, third son of Sir Charles Barry (architect with A.W.N. Pugin of the Houses of Parliament), the Chapel was originally an integral part of the old hospital building. Completed in 1875, it is dedicated to the memory of Caroline, wife of William Henry Barry (eldest son of Sir Charles Barry) who gave £40,000 for the building of the Chapel and provided a stipend for the chaplain.

In the Byzantine idiom, the Chapel is of relatively modest dimensions, though the immediate impression is of a much larger building – an effect created by the excellence of the architectural proportions and the grandeur of the decorations. It is a real 'tour de force' of high Victorian ecclesiastical style, and arguably the most sumptuous hospital chapel in the country. Oscar Wilde described it as "the most delightful private chapel in London".

Inside the Chapel

The lower parts of the walls are panelled in alabaster, with an exuberant display of polychromatic decoration above. Four massive pillars of rare Devonshire marble, with carved and gilded capitals embodying mythical beasts and foliage, support the central dome, around the base of which can be seen the 'Angel Orchestra' and at the apex 'The Pelican in Her Piety'.

On the north and south walls are two large mural paintings and to the left and right of the door are the figures of St. Peter and St. Paul. Note that the children in the picture on the north wall are wearing clothes of many centuries, one little girl looking very much like Alice in Wonderland. (The Tenniel illustrations of Lewis Carroll's work were produced in 1865, just a few years before these murals were painted).

The Sanctuary is approached through a magnificent pair of fine brass gates with glass ornamentation in a low marble screen with inset brass decoration. Note also the splendid eagle lectern.

The stained glass depicts the Nativity, the childhood of Christ and biblical scenes connected with children, and above is a series of angels holding tables inscribed with the Christian Virtues.

The terrazzo floor is by the Italian mosaicist Antonio Salviati and is said to be modelled on a pavement in St. Mark's, Venice.

The stained glass, murals and all the decorative work is by Clayton & Bell, a name renowned in the field of church decoration since 1855 and whose work can be seen in cathedrals and churches all over the country. One example of particular note in this context is the chapel at Crewe Hall, Cheshire, also by E.M. Barry, where the stained glass and contemporary decoration is very similar to that at Great Ormond Street.

Chapel – Past and Present

The Chapel move

As the Chapel is a Grade 2 listed building it could not be demolished along with the old hospital in the late 1980s, nor was it practicable to incorporate it on its previous site in the redevelopment plans. In association with English Heritage it was therefore decided to move it 'en bloc' to the position it occupies today.

This was the first time as far as we know that a building of this size and importance had been moved, so there was no precedent to follow. A scheme had to be devised which would ensure the safety of the structure and at the same time offer the greatest measure of protection for the interior fabric and decorative works.

How it happened

The whole building was heavily braced to withstand any possible movement, and all the inner surfaces fully protected (the stained glass and furniture were removed beforehand for repair and restoration). After underpinning by a huge concrete raft the Chapel was enclosed in an enormous waterproof box and then lowered to the ground (it had previously been at first floor level). It was then moved on greased 'slides' by hydraulic rams to its new position where it arrived without mishap and with half an inch to spare.

A full photographic record of this remarkable operation was made and is kept in the hospital archives.

The interior has been completely restored and returned to its original condition as far as possible, including the stained glass, the metal work, wall tablets, chandeliers and furniture. New carpets and upholstery were provided to match the old. The ancient single manual pipe organ, too expensive to move, restore and maintain, was quietly laid to rest and replaced with an electronic instrument which occupies the same position.

The restoration was under the care of Mr Peter Larkworthy, the consultant conservator and great grandson of Alfred Bell of Clayton and Bell who were the original decorative artists. The work was carried out by Messrs Howell & Bellion of Saffron Walden.

After six years almost to the day since work started, the Chapel emerged from its chrysalis in all its former splendour, and was reopened along with the other new buildings on February 14th 1994 by H.R.H. The Princess of Wales.

The Chapel today

The Chapel will continue to be at the centre of the hospital's activities as it has been for the last 130 years, and will always be a place for prayer and contemplation, where solace may be found.

On the floor of the doorway you will see the word 'PAX' set into the mosaics. We hope you will find peace within and will take peace with you as you leave.

Prepared by Raymond J. Lunnon, Curator, The Museum & Archive Service, GOS NHS Trust
in consultation with the Chaplaincy

Bibliography:

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Other material from the Museum and Archives Service records

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Bronze Family Group - Naomi Blake 1993

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