

Friends of Mansfield Place Church

NEWSLETTER

MAY 1992

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'REJECTION OF DISCO PLAN SAVES MURALS' ran a headline in *The Scotsman* on 30 April 1992.

If only it were so simple!

The murals in question grace the interior of the former Catholic Apostolic Church near the foot of Broughton Street, Edinburgh. The building, its mural decoration and its place in religious history are all very special.

We present a potted history later on in this bulletin. But first, about ourselves:

The building is threatened by developments and the interior is slowly being destroyed by rain damp penetrating from the roof & gutters. The growing public concern led to a public meeting in April.

The *Friends of Mansfield Place Church* was formed on 21st April 1992 at the inaugural meeting in the Glasite Meeting House, 33 Barony Street, Edinburgh. That meeting was attended by 35 people, some as individuals and some representing amenity bodies, but all united in their concern to rescue and re-open the splendid Rowand Anderson building.

Oliver Barratt, Secretary of the Cockburn Association (The Edinburgh Civic Trust), welcomed everyone and particularly the 12 former members of the Catholic Apostolic Church who had come from as far as The Netherlands to contribute to the success of the meeting. There was tremendous strength of feeling and messages of support were read out from, among others, Mr Frank Lawrie, Deputy Director of Historic Scotland. Nigel Tranter proposed the name *Friends of Mansfield Place Church* and the meeting then appointed the following persons as a Steering Group, with powers of co-option, to see the project through to its completion:

Ian Dunn (Convenor)
Gerry Burns
Councillor Margaret McGregor
Nigel Tranter
Father Columba Flegg
Sue Herzmark
Emma Crawford and
Stewart Brown

Our job is to save the building for the nation and to nurture the impetus for its complete restoration. Our aim is to have the building open to the public as a very fine example of Scotland's artistic, architectural and ecclesiastical heritage. We have discussed various uses for the building, including a museum, a performance hall, a craft and restoration centre or a mix of these and other uses. But we have not committed ourselves to any view at this stage - indeed we want to hear ideas from readers of this Newsletter.

The Steering Committee has co-opted David Reith WS to give us advice on legal matters connected with the purchase of the old church.

The Treasurer has reported that voluntary contributions have already amounted to £173 (£65 was collected at the inaugural meeting). An account has been opened at the Alliance & Leicester Building Society, Broughton Street.

The money gathered into this account is not for the purchase of the building, but to publicise our project and keep Friends informed as the occasions arise.

To become a **Friend** a £3 minimum donation is solicited from members of the public including the 600 or so who signed the Petition when they visited the church on one of the recent Open Mornings.



Join

£3

(minimum)

I WISH TO SUPPORT the project to rescue and restore the former Catholic Apostolic Church, Mansfield Place, Edinburgh, as a living example, open to the public, of Scotland's architectural, artistic and ecclesiastical heritage. Please put me on your mailing list (*I do not object to my name and address being held on a word processor file*)

Name _____ Date _____

Address _____

_____ Postcode _____

I enclose a donation (£3 suggested minimum)

Cheque payable to "Friends of Mansfield Place Church". Post to address above.

Rejection of disco plan saves murals

By Gary Duncan

A SERIES of religious murals, widely regarded as among the finest of their kind in Europe, were yesterday saved from potential destruction when controversial development plans for an Edinburgh church were thrown out by councillors.

Members of Edinburgh District Council's planning committee voted to refuse planning permission for the creation of a discotheque and health club in the former Bellevue Baptist Church, a listed building in East London Street.

Councillors rejected an application from a Musselburgh-based developer, James Shoemark, after hearing that the disco plans would create noise and disturbance in the quiet residential area around the church.

The decision will delight both local residents and conservationists who were united in opposition to the application.

There will be particular relief over the fate of the murals painted by Phoebe Traquair, one of the leaders of the Edinburgh arts and crafts movement between 1893 and 1901.

Commissioned by the Catholic Apostolic Church which originally occupied the building, the murals depict scenes from the Book of Revelations and have been described as one of the grandest examples of mural decoration in Europe. Although they have now fallen into disrepair, they are still said to be remarkably impressive "making the whole chapel scintillate and glow".

While councillors have already ordered the church's current owners to make repairs to protect both the murals and the integrity of the building, the fate of both remains uncertain after yesterday's decision. However, a proposal from Councillor Douglas Kerr that the council should investigate alternative uses for the building was also agreed by the committee.

A POTTED HISTORY

The church was built in two phases to the designs of Sir Robert Rowand Anderson (1834-1921). The major part of the church was completed in 1876 after three years' building work at a cost of £17,000. The proposed square tower at the west end was not built, instead a narthex and circular baptistry were built 1884-85. The tunnel ceiling in the chancel (main hall) was painted by Andrew Hutton, the walls and side chapels by Phoebe Traquair.

Mrs Traquair started work in 1893 and spent the next 8 years creating some of the finest Arts and Crafts mural decoration in Scotland on a truly grand scale. The church, interior and exterior, is Listed Grade A of Architectural/Historic importance.

The Catholic Apostolic Church formed a pivotal point in its architect's career, one of the principal steps in a decade which took Rowand Anderson from relative obscurity in 1870 to being Scotland's pre-eminent architect by the early 1880s. The Mansfield Place Church is the largest and most ambitious of his thirty church commissions.

The importance of Phoebe Traquair's work within the late development of the Arts and Crafts movement, and within the history of women painters, is now becoming recognised. The paintings in this church are the last and most extensive of her three major mural schemes in Edinburgh. They form a unique testament of the visual symbolism of the Catholic Apostolic Church.

The congregation occupied the church in 1876, having migrated downhill from Edinburgh's original Catholic Apostolic Church at 24 Broughton Street, built in 1843 to a design by John Dick Peddie (1824-91). In 1901 the last ministers ('Angels') were ordained and the Catholic Apostolic Church worldwide gradually contracted. The last service was conducted on Easter Sunday 1958 and the London-based Trustees sold the Church to the Reformed Baptists in 1974 for a reputed £15,000.

The altar and brass eagle lectern were given to the Roman Catholic Cathedral (St Mary's at the top of Broughton Street). What happened to the organ or the pews we don't know. The main part of the building became a store. Today it is empty.

The incongruously named *Edinburgh Brick Company* bought the building from the Baptists in 1989 for £155,000. They obtained planning

consent to convert it to offices and put it on the market for £500,000 in 1990. A planning application, by another company, to convert to a Night Club was refused on 29th April 1992.

Meanwhile the interior of the church has been deteriorating with sad rapidity and the murals are suffering from ingress of rainwater. On 21st April 1992 a Building Repairs Notice came into effect empowering the Edinburgh District Council to enter the building and carry out repairs to the gutters and roofs. The owners have challenged the Council's right to take action. The Council may do the work - the Building Control Department is obtaining tenders - and seek to recover the cost from the Brick Company. There are also powers available to the Council to serve a Compulsory Purchase Order.

The Steering Group will be making approaches to individuals and institutions to seek views on uses for the building. As to its purchase, the Steering Group heartily endorses the Cockburn Conservation Trust's maxim: "There's no such thing as a problem building, simply problem owners!"

THE OWNERSHIP OF THE CHURCH

The Steering Group desires to maintain cordial relations with past and present owners of the Church. With this in mind we have decided to set up a Charitable Trust, a Trust with the aim of purchasing or leasing the building and restoring it. We have kept the Catholic Apostolic Trustees and Mr Robert Gibbons, a Director of the Edinburgh Brick Company, fully informed of our plans.

WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP

We believe that too few members of the public have seen the inside of the building. We would like to open the church as far as we are able and the next opportunity arises with **OPEN DOORS DAY** on 12th September 1992 (owners consent permitting). The previous Saturday (5th September) we will be organising a Grand Tidy-up (whole day). If you can donate your time and labour (including cups of tea, sandwiches, etc!) then please write to the Convener, Ian Dunn (address on cover).

Our plans in the future include a Big Occasion for the summer of 1993, exactly 100 years after Phoebe Traquair started her work in the Church. We will reveal more in the next *New-sletter*. So, please send £3 (min) and put yourself onto the mailing-list. *All welcome!*