

The Royal Hospital for Sick Children, Sciennes, Edinburgh - closed.



Phoebe Anna Traquair painted 3 significant mural schemes within Edinburgh. The first of these, a decoration for the mortuary chapel of the Royal Hospital for Sick Children, remains the least well known and least accessible.

In April 1885 the Edinburgh Social Union asked if she would decorate a converted coalhouse, 3m x 4m, on the original hospital site at Lauriston Lane, to be used as a mortuary chapel, "where the bodies can be left reverently and lovingly for the parents before the burials".

The decorations were completed in 1886 and strongly reflect themes of motherhood. In a time when as many as 8% of children did not live to see their first birthday, Traquair aimed to offer comfort and support to grieving parents through her decoration scheme. In style she draws on interpretations of mediaeval illuminated manuscripts and Byzantine art, and a review in the Scottish Art Review in 1889 refers to the murals as "A piece of illumination enlarged".

In 1891 the hospital moved to Sciennes and the chapel was abandoned. In 1894, thanks to a petition led by Traquair herself, some of the murals were successfully transported to a new purpose built mortuary chapel. The old hospital site had been acquired by the Royal Infirmary but the murals were at serious risk of slow destruction as the chapel was no longer being used, and it was felt that the risks of moving them were no worse than leaving them in place. There were significant difficulties; some of the panels were moved still attached to the bricks of the old building!

As the new mortuary was larger than the original, panels from the first scheme were repaired, surrounded with fresh plaster, and the spaces filled with an enlarged decoration scheme. Although the 2 schemes are united by their use of colour, the second scheme deliberately uses a simpler and more childlike manner.

The Sick Children's Hospital became the Royal Hospital for Sick Children and Young People when it moved to Little France in 2021. The site at Sciennes was sold to a developer and although the Mortuary Chapel has not been included in the housing development now there, its A-listed status has not prevented the murals from deteriorating. Some conservation work has recently been carried out but unless a use can be found for the building the future for these wonderful murals seems bleak. In an 1899 interview Phoebe Anna Traquair considered this to be "her finest piece of work". **The building is not generally open to the public.**