

The Great Ormond Street Hospital Chapel

By Nick Baldwin, Archivist, Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children NHS Foundation Trust

The Hospital for Sick Children at Great Ormond Street opened in 1852 in a converted 18th Century townhouse on the corner of Powis Place, but did not have a purpose-built building until one was built along Powis Place using the back garden space of Nos.48-49 Great Ormond Street, opening in 1875. The only surviving part of this, although not in its original location as we shall discover, is its magnificent Victorian chapel. The new building was designed by Edward Middleton Barry, one of the several notable sons of the better-known Sir Charles Barry, principal architect of the Houses of Parliament. The chapel was endowed by his cousin, wealthy city broker William Henry Barry, in memory of his wife Caroline Pitman. Its cost of £60,000 was as much as the rest of the building in total, a reflection of Victorian priorities. Its opening service was conducted in November 1875 by another of Sir Charles Barry's sons, Canon Alfred Barry, Provost of King's College London and later the first Anglican Archbishop of Sydney.



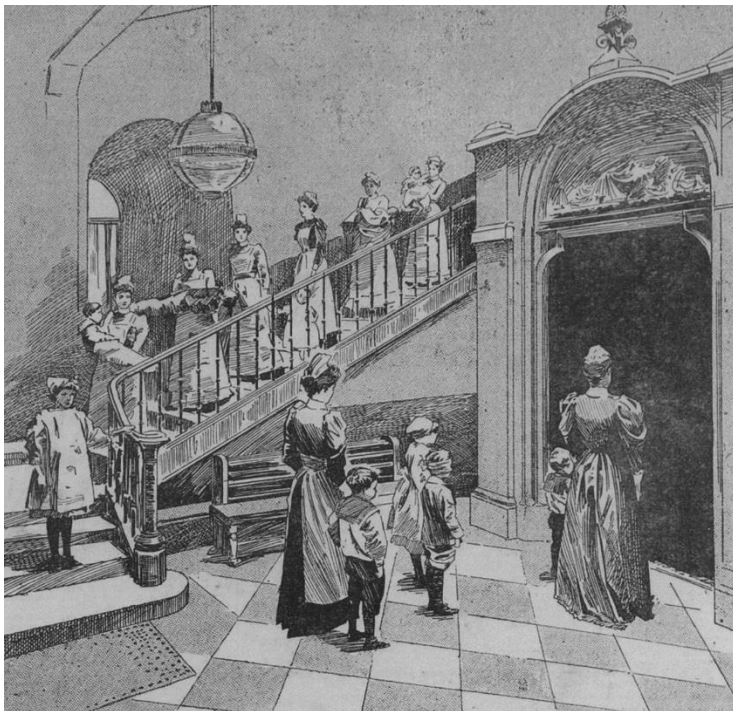
Engraved version of A.H. Haig's painting of the Chapel, from 'The Builder', 1876

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Although the main building was in a loosely Flemish Renaissance style, the chapel was elaborate Venetian/Byzantine Gothic, clearly inspired by St. Mark's Cathedral in Venice. All the decoration was of the highest quality, with stained glass windows by the leading firm Clayton & Bell, who glazed many of Britain's cathedrals, and the mosaic floor by the distinguished Antonio Salviati from Venice.

The mural in the dome depicts the Christian symbol of the pelican in her piety, and the one on the north side includes children in historical dress of various periods, one of them looking remarkably like Sir John Tenniel's depiction of Alice in Wonderland in Lewis Carroll's novel.

William Barry's endowment of the chapel also funded an ongoing stipend totalling £40,000 to the clergy of the local parish church, St. George the Martyr in Queen Square, in return for them conducting a weekly service at the chapel, to which patients well enough to be mobile were taken. The terms of the Barry endowment were quite strict, and confirmed by his will on his death in 1890. The Hospital has in its possession a fine watercolour of the chapel by leading architectural illustrator A.H. Haig, which was owned by William Barry. One of the bequest terms was that the services must be lit by candlelight, but the wax dripped over the pews and their occupants, and in the early 20th century, Hospital board member Sir John Murray funded replacement electric lighting. The bequest was managed at the Hospital for most of its duration by a sub-committee run by the Matron.



Nurses taking patients to the chapel, c.1893

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Most of the rectors at St. George the Martyr were happy to offer their services to the hospital, but there were ructions at intervals. The rector in the 1920's, Rev. Lancelot Andrewes, was obliged to resign after being declared bankrupt in 1926, and the Hospital was pursued for his stipend by Andrewes' creditors. The chapel survived

the Second World War unscathed, while several adjacent buildings were bomb damaged. In the 1950's the Hospital and the then rector R. Mercer Wilson had a number of clashes on both theological and practical grounds. By now, with the Hospital increasingly becoming a specialist national and international centre with patients of many backgrounds and faiths, the original terms of the Barry bequest, and its demands for exclusively Anglican services, put the bequest under strain.

By the 1980's, the original bequest had run out, and with its terms no longer fit for purpose, it was shut down, and an in-house Anglican Chaplain appointed with funding from the Hospital's Charity. The Chaplaincy has since expanded into a larger multi-faith team reflecting the very diverse and international patient clientele of the Hospital.

The celebrated national 'Wishing Well Appeal' of 1987-89 raised £54M to fund the construction of a new main clinical building at Great Ormond Street. This required the demolition of the 1875 clinical block, by then already shabby and crumbling. It was decided to preserve the chapel, as both still functionally required and a Grade One listed building. However, had it been left where it was, it would have been in the middle of the new clinical block, so an imaginative scheme was devised, to demolish the rest of the building around it and then underpin it and move it several hundred yards north and east. It was underpinned with a concrete base, and then gently moved on a hydraulic device over 3 days in November 1990, with Frank Bruno and a group of patients giving it a symbolic push to get the process under way. This was the first time such a task had been attempted in Britain with a brick or stone building.



Chapel boxed during move process, November 1990

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The concrete base was lowered to become the permanent foundation, and the chapel was now alongside the main central corridor of the Hospital, allowing ease of access and proximity to other services. Its projecting porch, over which the main staircase in the 1875 building had risen, linked it neatly with a new vestibule area and office for the Chaplaincy. The move was survived with only a few minor cracks,

and the opportunity was taken to clean and restore all the interior décor, which had grown dark after over a century of pollution.

The Chapel was reopened with a re-dedication service on May 1 1994, and later in the month, Charles' Dickens' family, including all his surviving great-grand-children, visited for the unveiling of a plaque alongside the apse celebrating Dickens' support for the Hospital in its early years, when he was living nearby at Tavistock House. One of them, David Charles Dickens, made himself look as much like the great man as possible, with an immaculate recreation of Charles' beard, and gave a reading from the chapter of 'Our Mutual Friend' describing the admission of Little Johnny to 'The Children's Hospital' and the good care and kindness he receives there.

The Chapel continues in use today, and under normal circumstances is open all hours for patients, families and staff to access. It is also licenced for most church functions.



The chapel as it looks today

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