The former church building that we now call the Mansfield Traquair Centre has been known by a number of names since it was consecrated in 1876. Its present name was acquired only in 2002, and marked its transformation into a building that contains modern office space in its lower level and preserves the vast upper areas, particularly the former nave, as a multi-purpose venue. It is this upper area which is defined in the central part of the building’s new name, for it contains a unique cycle of mural paintings by the artist Phoebe Anna Traquair, painted during the years 1899 to 1901. Standing on a gentle slope at the eastern edge of Edinburgh’s classical New Town at the junction of East London Street and Mansfield Place, the building in its entirety has now been converted into the national headquarters of the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations.

However, those who knew the building before the 1950s will remember it as the Catholic Apostolic Church, and then, sadly, as ‘the former Apostolic Church’. It was to house a rapidly growing congregation of that nineteenth-century revivalist, millenarian movement that the erection of this great building was begun in 1873. The Catholic Apostolic Church, whose heyday coincided almost exactly with the reign of Queen Victoria, had its origins in the charismatic fervour of the Scottish preacher Edward Irving and the congregation that he served in London in the early 1800s. Although sometimes referred to as ‘Irvingites’, Irving had in fact died before the new body had taken its final form. It gained much of its original strength from prophetic utterances, often by quite humble members of society. A particular portent of things to come was seen in the godlessness that followed the French Revolution – ‘the first shock of the last earthquake’. This was perceived as an announcement of the imminent return of Christ, when he would ‘set up his kingdom in the earth’ and rule with his twelve ‘restored apostles’. These apostles had all received their calls by the middle of 1835, with Henry Drummond, a wealthy member of parliament, given responsibility for Scotland.

Although its beliefs presented problems for the established churches, the Catholic Apostolic Church drew on what it regarded as the positive aspects of both the Catholic and the reformed traditions, including Eastern Orthodox practices, and it gathered its congregations from the major churches throughout Britain. Its theology determined a four-fold form of ministry. At the top of the hierarchy were the twelve restored apostles who ruled in Christ’s name, prescribed the forms of worship and ordained the other degrees of ministry: the prophets, the evangelists who preached the Gospel, and those who cared for the flocks of the local churches, who were termed chief pastors or angels. Despite this hierarchical form, the Church was essentially democratic in that the qualities represented by this structure were expected to be found in varying degrees in all of its members.

With an expectation of a ‘speedy coming of the Lord’, the Church grew rapidly, firstly in Britain and then in northern Germany, and by the 1880s there were congregations in many places throughout the world. The congregation in Edinburgh built its first church on the west side of Broughton Street, a small classical building of the mid-1840s that still stands. This proved to be too small, and by 1873 the congregation had begun to erect a much larger building a few hundred yards down the hill to the north, the subject of this guidebook. The foundation stone was laid on 22 November of that year, with over 2,000 attending the service of dedication.
The South Chancel Aisle or Chapel

On the chancel arch Traquair had interpreted the formal programme set by the Church, her saturated colours echoing those of the rich vestments worn by the priests below.

More intimate in scale, the two side aisles offered a greater freedom for personal expression and each section has its own style and identity. The agreed text to be depicted here was the Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins (Matthew 25: 1–10), a text which illustrated the awakening of the spirit and the drama of spiritual life. This was a theme already expressed in the Transfiguration window. Traquair illustrated the parable as a symbolic journey towards resolution (through Christ’s Redemption) on the walls of both aisles, culminating on the west wall of the north aisle.

Traquair had visited Italy in 1889 and 1894. The art of Botticelli and increasingly Fra Angelico inspired a lighter palette and delicate approach to decorative detail. The colour tonalities also relate to the Minton encaustic floor tiles in place before she started. The landscapes in each scene are personal. The Wicklow Hills of the artist’s homeland, seen in the first scene, are soon replaced by the Border hills of her adopted country.

Below the panels a rich, gilded border frieze is set with medallions which illustrate comparable scenes from the life of Christ: The Annunciation (where the Leaderfoot railway viaduct, a popular motif with the artist, is clearly visible in the background), The Entombment, The Three Marys at the Empty Tomb, Christ appearing to the Sleeping Disciples, and Doubting Thomas, all illustrating steps in spiritual awakening.

Above the panels, The Tower of Habakkuk illustrates the expectation of the second coming of Christ.

The upper walls and ceiling of the main section of the chapel illustrate the Garden of Heaven with angels tending its flowers and fruit. These were painted after the walls. When Traquair painted here, the lines of the ceiling wood panels would not have been visible. The lightness of touch contrasts with the dense decoration of the lower walls. Very few preliminary sketches for any part have survived, and Traquair worked freehand and intuitively. She used gold and ‘silver’ (aluminium) leaf and, in a few details, bold, almost post-impressionist colours to give her work a contemporary feeling. The east ceiling above the Transfiguration window illustrates the six days of Creation (Psalm 148), with six red-winged seraphim placed against horizontal bands, one illustrating each day. Lettering was reintroduced here.
In approaching the project the owners of the building, the Mansfield Traquair Trust, hoped that the paintings could be restored as well as conserved. The aim was to display the interior as closely as possible to its original brilliant appearance. Thus, missing areas were to be recreated with the help of photographic evidence from the 1980s, damaged surfaces repaired, missing sections of gilded raised work replaced and regilded where necessary and the surfaces given back their original satin sheen.

The project took two years, from 2003 to 2005. It was led by myself, then Senior Conservator with Historic Scotland’s Conservation Centre, seconded to the Trust with Ailsa Murray. We managed the programme together and were responsible for planning and implementing the conservation work, including Health and Safety issues, and running a training programme for three interns and placements for other students from all over Europe.

The work was in two phases. The first was a trial period in which the various methods and materials needed in the conservation of the murals were tested. Information from this first phase allowed prediction of the timescale and cost of the second phase, the main project.

The south chapel was chosen as the ideal area in which to carry out the first phase because in many ways it is a miniature of the church, with the paintings on its walls and ceiling presenting many of the technical problems likely to be encountered. We decided to use traditional materials wherever possible, to accord with Phoebe Anna Traquair’s work and to increase the interns’ and students’ understanding of different methods and techniques (and of the artist’s in particular). Another important decision was to use the least toxic materials, even if this took longer.

Traquair must have done preparatory sketches both for the Catholic Apostolic congregation and to help in the planning of the compositions, but very few of these have survived. The conservators found faint traces of a geometric grid on the west wall and of tiny sketches elsewhere. The overall impression is of an artist who planned and prepared with great care.

Below Work in progress in the chapel. The loose plaster and paint had to be secured before the acid-free tissue paper – which was applied to hold weak paint in place – could be removed.

Opposite Conservator applying a layer of size to small losses on north aisle wall, in preparation for gilding.