

Wonder walls

Olive Maggs paints a portrait of Blackheath church's first lady of art



Sitting in heart of the Surrey Hills in Blackheath, near Guildford is an outstanding example of 19th century Victorian *Arts and Crafts* architecture. Modelled on an Italian wayside chapel – that is, it is shaped in a basilican (oblong) form rather than the more traditional cruciform – the *Church of St Martin's* looks rather ordinary from the outside. However, inside lies a visual masterpiece, where the walls are decorated with unique murals painted by the American born artist Anna Lea Merritt (1844-1930).

The church was conceived by local lay reader, Sir William Roberts-Austen to serve the growing community. It was designed, and then built in 1893, by celebrated architect Harrison Townsend, who designed two of the most important Arts and Crafts buildings in Britain, the *Whitechapel Art Gallery* (1897) and the *Horniman Museum* (1898) in London, as well as many houses around Guildford.

Today, *St Martin's* offers weekly church services and is used for educational purposes. But, its main appeal remains the paintings that have adorned its interior for more than a hundred years.

However the years have taken their toll not only on the fabric of this magnificent church, but also the paintings. And the residents of Blackheath have set up a fundraising appeal to raise the £75,000 needed to make the building more secure as well as protect Merritt's paintings from further deterioration.

A versatile artist and writer, Anna Lea was born in Philadelphia to an affluent Quaker family, but studied art in London under the painter and restorer, Henry Merritt. She later married Henry and spent much of her life in England

achieving an international reputation and winning awards in Philadelphia, Chicago, London and Paris.

She exhibited regularly in both the *Royal Academy of Arts* and the *Salon de Paris* – an outstanding accomplishment for a woman artist at this time. Recognition in England came in 1890 when her painting *Love Locked Out* was purchased by the Chantry Bequest, for the *Tate's* collection. It still hangs there today – the first work by a woman artist to be presented to the nation and all the more remarkable at the time since it depicted a nude.

Her paintings at *St Martin's*, created between 1893 and 1895, represent the new trend in mural painting in the second half of the 19th century. They depict scenes from the life of Christ in light, pale colours interpreting Anna Lea's belief that true religious feelings bring with them cheer and hope. Each of the scenes is in a garden setting reflecting a connection between the artist and the Pre-Raphaelite movement and their interest in nature.

These murals are unique for a number

■ *The Church of St Martin's is hoping to achieve its goal of raising £75,000 to restore and preserve the unique Victorian murals of the celebrated painter Anna Lea Merritt. On raising the money, the intention is repair, restore and clean the murals, carry out necessary works to the Church to help protect the murals and to upgrade the heating and lighting in the church so that the paintings can be properly enjoyed.*

For further details on the appeal call Olive Maggs on (01483) 893336 or email p.maggs01@btinternet.com or call

of reasons. Firstly, they were painted using a new process invented by German scientist Adolph Keim to aid preservation. It involved painting on dry plaster to resist damp.

Groundbreaking in its time, Anna Lea and Roberts-Austen presented a paper on this new technique to the Royal Society of Artists in 1895. It is a method that offers colourfastness that is not knowingly surpassed. In fact, many buildings across Europe decorated using this Keim system are still in excellent condition today. And *St Martin's* is extra special since it is the only known example of this technique still existing today in Britain.

The murals have indeed survived the damp for over 110 years without significant discolouration. Although they are now in need of some restoration and repair, they have remained surprisingly true to their original colours.

In addition, they are the only surviving example of mural work by the celebrated artist Anna Lea Merritt from the end of the 19th century and represent an outstanding achievement for a woman artist at that time. Merritt's work has recently been the focus of renewed interest and attention for her success as a painter of historical, classical, and literary subjects as well as portraits, in a *Tate* Britain exhibition and publication.

The *Church of St Martin's* represents the combined efforts of the enlightened patronage of Sir William Roberts-Austen, the architect Harrison Townsend and the artist Anna Lea Merritt. These three came together to produce something very special which is now part of our Arts and Crafts architecture and our Victorian Pre-Raphaelite painting heritage.