



Faith and form

Sarah Losh's particular genius was expressed not in the written word but in architecture, and it is in this form that it has been passed down to the present day with increasing appreciation. Of the buildings that she created, it is the church of St. Mary at Wreay that most fully expresses her personality, insights, thoughts and feelings.

To understand her achievements and their motivation, it is therefore with St. Mary's Church that we should start. Built by Sarah in 1842 to replace an existing parish church, the building reveals that she was not following the styles and tastes of her time, of which she would have been fully aware. She was a highly educated and well-read member of a family that drew its wealth from industry, but that had close and wide-ranging contacts with intellectual, artistic and ecclesiastical circles in both the north-west and north-east of England. Planning to build a new parish church, Sarah chose to ignore current ecclesiastical and architectural trends and movements. These were the Evangelical Revival in the Church of England and the contrasting Anglo-Catholic Oxford Movement, which were both exercising powerful influences, expressed theologically and also architecturally. In addition to these, the Gothic Revival, which was more a stylistic than a religious movement, was another powerful influence at the time. Sarah Losh was not influenced by any of these in designing the Church of St. Mary at Wreay.

Instead, Sarah drew upon her own intense personal insights which had been powerfully influenced by her travels on the Continent with her sister Katherine, most particularly in Italy in 1816 and 1817. There she had experienced a rich spiritual tradition that was new to her. Drawing upon these impressions, she designed a church that is Romanesque in style, not the Romanesque of 12th century Norman England, but the much more ancient Romanesque associated with the architecture of the early Church. The interior of St. Mary's Church combines a simple uncluttered rectangular nave with a dramatic apsidal and pillared sanctuary, raised by six steps above the level of the nave and without intervening screen or chancel. Contrary to current tastes, practices and ecclesiastical rules, the focus of this sanctuary is the free-standing altar consisting of a green marble altar slab supported by two bronze eagles, and implicitly westward-facing. Such an altar was explicitly forbidden by the Canon Law of the Church of England which, in the reformed tradition, required a moveable wooden holy table.

This style of altar, and the 12-pillared apse representing Christ and his disciples at the Last Supper, is essentially eucharistic, presupposing that Holy Communion is the primary form of worship. This in spite of the fact that in 1842, when the church was built, Sunday worship consisted of Morning Prayer, Litany, Ante-communion and Evening Prayer, with the Holy Communion celebrated only about four times a year. Sarah Losh will have been fully aware that the architecture of her new church did not conform to this liturgical pattern. However, she was determined to share through architecture the rich spiritual insights that she had gained in her Continental travels. In the event, the substantial liturgical developments that have occurred in the Church of England since her day, have brought the Holy Communion back to a central position in Anglican worship. For this change of emphasis, St. Mary's Church by its architecture makes a bold statement.

Sarah's inspiration was not only backward-looking. She shared the excitement in her day aroused by new discoveries and publications in the field of geology, which shed new light upon the antiquity of planet Earth. Her father collected minerals and fossils, and her family's involvement in industry provided practical expressions of the subject. Recognising the spiritual significance of these discoveries, Sarah demonstrated her breadth of vision by incorporating into her church decorative details drawn from fossils and the freshly appraised natural world.

It was her particular genius that her passionate personality and distinctive insights, which informed all that she undertook, are eloquently expressed to successive generations in architectural terms. Sarah Losh was not just another wealthy benefactor with architectural interests. The inheritance that she has left consists of buildings that convey depths of spiritual insight that can still exercise a powerful influence upon those who view them.

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