

THE FRIENDS OF  
ST MARY'S CHURCH, WREAY

**Notes For Teachers 2: Who was Sarah Losh? A brief introduction**



**1786 -1853**

Sarah's life story, personality and wide ranging interests are at the heart of St Mary's Church in Wreay and the landscape that she created in the village. An exceptional woman in any era, she is remarkable for the times in which she lived.

Born on January 1<sup>st</sup> 1786 in the country house of Woodside on the outskirts of the little village of Wreay near Carlisle in Cumberland, Sarah was the eldest daughter of John and Isabella Losh. Her family were wealthy landowners with her father a keen agriculturist and his younger brothers- enterprising lawyers, industrialists and business men. Sarah's privileged background and inherited wealth are key factors in her ability to go her own way but her determined personality and lively intelligence definitely played a part! It is helpful to think of her as a Jane Austen heroine rather than a stuffy Victorian.

Her younger sister Katharine was born three years later and was to become her best friend and ally. She also had a younger brother Joseph who was born with an unspecified learning difficulty or special need. Her father realised that "poor Joe" would not be able to administer the estate and his business interests so he invested thought and energy in the education of his daughters. He may well have also been influenced by his brother James, a lawyer in Newcastle and a progressive liberal thinker, who was interested in the rights and education of women. Sarah and Katharine went to school in Bristol and London and Sarah's school reports show her to be very bright, fluent in several languages and talented in mathematics.

Isabella died when Sarah was 14 and she returned home to take over the reins of the household with the support of her redoubtable Aunt Margaret. She filled her life with activity and attended the balls and social events in Carlisle as well as regularly visiting her cousins in Newcastle. Around her own dining room table, she would have heard debates about the French Revolution, the abolition of slavery and the need for wider suffrage – all powerful movements supported by her Uncle James. She would have met George Stephenson, visiting the family to develop the idea of railway tracks made from iron smelted in the family ironworks in Newcastle. She would also know William Wordsworth very well as he was a school friend of her younger uncles. A younger friend at this time was William Thain who had come over to Wreay from Newcastle where his father was a factory manager for the family and would grow up to become a soldier, fighting at the Battle of Waterloo when he was 17 years old.

Sarah's father John died when she was 28, leaving his estates and shareholdings to his two daughters who were now very wealthy. Sarah became a good hostess and managed the estates carefully, planting hundreds of trees along roadsides and fields. They set about refurbishing Woodside. In 1817, the sisters leapt at the first opportunity to visit Europe after the Napoleonic wars. They set off with their aunt and uncle and travelled through France, Switzerland and down into Italy. This was probably one of the most important experiences in Sarah's life and she wrote seven volumes of travel notes – now sadly lost with only fragments remaining. She was fascinated by the Italian architecture she saw on her travels and was very impressed by the classical buildings in Rome with her visit to the recently started excavation in Pompeii her most thrilling experience. She brought her journals and sketch books back to England and ordered books and magazines about architecture and archaeology to fill her library. She also became fascinated with the recent discoveries of fossil life and its suggestions about prehistory.

By 1832, Sarah and Katharine were building schools and a school master's house and they began to talk about building a memorial to their parents – the first being a copy of the Bewcastle Cross, recently rediscovered which they put up in the churchyard at Wreay, changing one side to commemorate their father and mother. They were planning to rebuild the little church at Wreay when, in 1837, tragedy struck. Katharine was suddenly taken ill and died. Sarah must have been devastated to lose her closest friend who had shared in everything she did. However, this grief led to a renewed determination to rebuild the church in memory of her parents but, most importantly, Katharine and to fill it with her belief in new life, the beauty of nature and hope in resurrection.

Sarah obtained permission from the Bishop of Carlisle to rebuild the church, paying for it, designing it and project managing it under the condition that there was no interference from the diocese. The building work started in January 1841 and was completed by November 1842. Sarah used local builders and craftsmen to achieve her unique design based on the Italian churches she had seen, even carving parts of it herself and supervising

everything. The church bursts with symbolism and beauty and still stands in memory of her extraordinary vision.

Sarah continued to live at Woodside, walking to Wreay most days. She was loved and respected by the villagers and those workers in Carlisle whom she supported in difficult times. She always had cousins, nieces and nephews visiting Woodside which was a busy, happy place. Sarah died in 1853 at the age of 67 after a full and distinguished life.