

 THE FRIENDS OF
ST MARY'S CHURCH, WREAY 

Teachers Notes 3: Building the church



Sarah based the design of her church on the northern Italian churches she had seen on her grand tour of Europe. It is influenced by the earliest forms of Christian buildings, themselves derived from the Roman basilicas (law courts) with the rounded chancel end containing the altar and “seats” for Jesus and the disciples.

The scale of the building and simple arches would have appealed to Sarah as it would be possible to plan and build it with local labour. It was a big contrast to the high gothic spires of fashionable Victorian churches at that time. There is neither spire nor tower on this church.

The materials were nearly all local within a cart ride of the village. She used local sandstone and wood with unusual bog oak (fossilised wood) dug up from the moss nearby. Sarah also used alabaster for some of the carving that she did herself, for example the font. Alabaster is soft to carve and then is heated up to make it hard. The windows, looking like patchwork stained glass, were made to Sarah’s design from glass offcuts supplied by William Wales in Newcastle. He was working on gothic style windows for other churches so the glass fragments look medieval but are actually early Victorian.

Sarah used local builders and craftsmen to make the church. Farmers and landworkers gave her free time to clear the site of the old church and make the foundations. A local builder William Hindson and his sons took on the build with at least two of the family studying sculpture at the art college then in Tullie House so that they could follow Sarah’s ideas to carve all the stone creatures and plants that she wanted. Her gardener carved the big oak door surround with the story of the caterpillar from Jonah in the Old Testament. A woodworker from Dalston carved the lecterns, angels and the pulpit.

We still have copies of the accounts for the building. These show that the total cost of the new church was £1,088 10s 4d – value for money even then.