

 THE FRIENDS OF
ST MARY'S CHURCH, WREAY 

Teachers Notes 6: Sarah and the Fossils



One of the most striking things that visitors notice when visiting St Mary's Church in Wreay is the inclusion of fossils and prehistoric creatures – not something usually seen in a Victorian church.

This is another sign of Sarah's enquiring mind and fascination with the recent discoveries and writings by geologists and scientists that would eventually lead to the publication of : "On The Origin of Species" by Charles Darwin in 1859. The carvings in St Mary's were created in 1841 -2 so predate Darwin's publication by nineteen years. It must be remembered, also, that Sarah died in 1853 so her work is founded on over half a century of thinking and writing before the tumult and crisis of faith that was to follow Darwin's conclusions. We can only wonder what she would have made of his ideas.

The ammonites around the windows, the plant fossil windows, the cyclad pulpit and even the "emblematical monsters" used instead of gargoyles are most likely to be part of Sarah's joyous celebration of God's creation that we find everywhere we look inside and outside the building.

It was fashionable in the first half of the 19th century for ladies to be interested in geology and the latest thinking and discoveries would have been part of the lively discussion around the dinner table. There were also some very influential amateur lady geologists as well as the famous Mary Anning. Sarah would have seen evidence of fossils all her life – her father collected them and plant fossils were emerging from the shale rock of the family's Northumbrian coal mines. The prehistoric bog oak for the pulpit came from Wragmire Moss only a mile away from the church.

Whilst she was reading the same scientific books as young Charles Darwin as he set out on his voyage on The Beagle, her greatest influence may well have been William Paley –

Archdeacon of Carlisle Cathedral and close family friend – who taught a generation to look at the natural world for evidence of a creator. His argument from design: “The watch must have a watch maker” was very popular and reassuring but, of course, hotly contested by many natural scientists who asked, “Who made the watchmaker?” In William Paley’s view, the undoubted evidence that the world was much older than previously thought and that there had been thousands of years of creatures on earth now extinct, showed that creation had been on a timescale appropriate to an infinite God. There had been previous periods of creation that had not been perfect and thus there had been mass extinctions. Adaptation in creatures was evidence of the Creator’s experimentation as a wonderful designer.

So it is most likely that Sarah would have carved glorious fossil windows out of alabaster to let the light of God’s created world into her church rather than as a challenge to his existence.

