

The font

The font is one of the finest works of art in St Mary's. Sarah's biographer, Henry Lonsdale, records that it is 'constructed of native alabaster, partly carved by Miss Losh herself, and presenting the zigzag moulding of the English Norman at the top, and curious Grecian fluting at the bottom, in excellent workmanship.'

Between zigzag and fluting are ten finely carved panels. Each panel is different, some flat and formal, others naturalistic and precisely observed: the curving spores of a fern, water lilies and lotus flowers, a butterfly above a leaf, hairy ears of wheat and barley, a hovering dragonfly, a curling grapevine, a pomegranate, a feathery dove with an olive leaf.

Sarah worked with her cousin, William Septimus Losh, on the carving of the font. The first stage was to make a clay model to work out the form and then mark up the details. It was cut from a single block of alabaster with tapering sides and a wide brim and a concave centre to take a metal basin. Alabaster was not hard to carve, but it scratched easily and could bruise if hit too hard. First they dampened the stone to show fault lines that might help to direct their design, then they roughed it out, drawing straight onto the stone. The block was placed on bags filled with sand, to dull vibrations and prevent breaks. Then they took up chisel and mallet to remove large pieces to make the relief, before taking up the claw – a wide headed toothed chisel – sliding it along the grain and shaping the outline. It was hard, long and dusty work. Details were formed with thin chisels, points and files. The next process was sanding it, wetting the stone and wiping away the paste from the mix of dust and water. Finally, when it was dry, they smoothed on a clear wax and buffed it with a cloth.

William did most of the work on the cover, creating a pond with mirrored glass set in a metal frame that sits within the rim of the alabaster bowl. The mirror surface holds alabaster water lily leaves and buds.

The whole is a masterpiece of observation and design, drawing upon natural forms to celebrate the act of welcoming a child as they begin their new life in the Church. It is placed at the rear of the church, to the right as you enter, reflecting the theological position that baptism is required in order for 'entrance' into the Church. Baptism is the symbolic door by which babies join the body of the Church, and so it makes sense to place the font at the physical door of the nave. Sarah's design further emphasises the theme of new life, with many of the designs symbolic of rebirth.

The font rests upon a plain square stone block set upon a three stepped base. Popular story recalls that when the font was lifted the mark of the Hindsons, the church's stonemasons, was found on its base. Perhaps the font is also symbolic of the happy union of the Losh and Hindson families that created the extraordinary church of St Mary's.