

RFS Carlisle Conference

30 June–3 July 2016

Thursday 30 June St Mary's Church, Wreay

Those of us who had read *The Pinecone*, Jenny Uglow's wonderful story of Sarah Losh, were especially eager for our visit to St Mary's, Wreay. The churchwarden, Raymond Whittaker, a retired architect, drew our attention to the extraordinary details of the decoration and its symbolism, and was endlessly patient in answering our many questions, took us around the complex of buildings.

Sarah Losh and her sister, Katherine, were the highly educated daughters of an old Cumberland family, wealthy from late 18th-century industrial developments on

Tyneside. The death of their parents left them independent in their twenties and they made the most of opportunities to travel and to develop their scientific and antiquarian interests. Sarah was especially artistic – a competent modeler and sculptor in both clay and wood.

The death of Katherine in 1835 spurred Sarah, first to create a memorial chapel for her beloved sister and, later, between 1840 and 1842, to rebuild the decaying St Mary's church. She funded, designed and project-managed the new building herself, helped by the local mason, William Hindson. She based the design of the façade on the church of San Michele in Pavia. Inside, however, Sarah's decorations, representing new life and resurrection, were



Fig. 1 Detail of one of the church windows showing a variation on the pinecone decoration



Fig. 2 (right) Detail of the altar and a contemporary local carpet behind

Fig. 3 (below right) Exterior view of St Mary's, Wreay

her own, based on early myths and a wealth of natural phenomena – flowers, insects, fossils, ferns and shells – instead of more obvious Christian symbolism. Her use of unusual materials such as alabaster (for the fossil windows in the apse, the altar candlesticks and the font), and locally sourced bog oak for the carving of the pulpit and lectern, are also distinctive.

A close family friend, William Thain, killed by an arrow in Afghanistan in 1842, had sent a cone from a 'Kelat' pine to Sarah, shortly before he died; she grew a tree from it, and the pinecone, as a symbol of new life and resurrection, is to be seen in many parts of the church; arrows (symbols of death) appear on the outside doors.

As well as studying every aspect of this extraordinary church, we looked at the mortuary chapel dedicated to Sarah's sister, Katherine. This was modelled on St Piran's Oratory which had been rediscovered in 1835, buried in the sand at Perranporth on the north Cornish coast. Other buildings provided by the Losh sisters are close to Wreay Church: the village school, the schoolmaster's 'Pompeian' cottage and, in the churchyard, Sarah's copy of the 8th-century Bewcastle Cross, which she helped to carve.

While we were there, the children came out of the school to play, their lively noise echoing through the history of this very special place.

Noël Riley

