

Wreay Church Visit 11th June

A dozen members of the group enjoyed a most informative visit to St Mary's Church Wreay a on a pleasant June evening. We were able to enjoy a walk around the outside before being surprised and amazed as we walked into the church. There we were greeted by Raymond Whittaker, whose knowledge and love of the church quickly became apparent.

Raymond began by telling us about Sarah Losh the creator and architect of the church. The church was built 1840-42 by local craftsmen paid for by Sarah Losh.

Sarah, born in 1785, was the daughter of a forward thinking industrialist and a member of a prominent local family who mixed with leading thinkers of the day including Wordsworth and George Stephenson. Sarah was well educated studying both arts and science and with her sister Katherine went on the Grand Tour to France, Germany and Italy in 1817. It was on this tour that her interest in architecture developed. Earlier, in 1814 her father had died and Sarah and Katherine inherited the family estate and its industrial interests in the north east. Neither of the sisters married. The church is in part a memorial to Katherine who died at the age of 45 in 1835.

There had been a church at Wreay for 700 years but by 1840 it was in a state of disrepair and after some negotiation building started on land gifted by Sarah. The building is in the form of a Roman basilica, a rectangular nave and semi-circular apse surrounded by an arcade of fourteen pillars which form 13 seats for Jesus and his disciples.

Throughout his talk Raymond pointed out many of the features of interest including carvings, statues, windows, and the pulpit (an archaeological feature) carved from a 3000 year old bog oak. Recurring themes of life and death and light and darkness are everywhere. The theme of death is most evident in the arrows which are, symbols of death and which recalled the death of a family friend killed by an arrow in the Afghan war of 1840. They are seen most prominently in the entrance door. The theme of life is shown by pine cones, an ancient symbol of fertility and regeneration. These are found as door handles and elsewhere. The other theme of light and dark is evidenced by two archangels, symbols of light which stand on brackets carved with images of bats and a dragon, symbols of darkness. This theme is seen again in shelf supports in the form of a cockerel and an owl representing day and night day.

There are 84 windows and those in the nave incorporate what may be fragments of medieval glass again the theme of regeneration.

We enjoyed time to walk around and examine the many features and to ask questions of our guide before going outside to visit the mausoleum. On the outside this appears a rough-hewn building but as we entered there was an immediate contrast when we saw a beautiful statue of Katherine, sculpted for a sketch by Sarah.

We were all intrigued by the gargoyles and in particular by a dragon which acted as a chimney for the original heating stove. When this was alight the dragon looked as though he was breathing fire.

Our guide had made the visit special and was warmly thanked.

It is impossible to fully describe the details of this unique church and I would recommend a visit.