

The Oratory and St James's Cemetery



The Oratory is the former chapel of St James's Cemetery, a now disused burial ground which occupies the rocky hollow on the east side of Liverpool's Anglican Cathedral. This hollow was originally a quarry and provided the stone from which the Town Hall and other 18th century public buildings in the city were constructed. By the 1820s, however, it was exhausted and a proposal was made to adapt it as a cemetery, Liverpool's only public cemetery at that date being the non-denominational Necropolis at Low Hill, opened in 1825. Sanitary arrangements for burying the dead were an urgent need in the rapidly expanding towns of the early 19th century, and Liverpool was exceptionally early in providing cemeteries to replace its overcrowded churchyards. It is worth saying in this context that the city became a pioneer in many areas of public health care as the century progressed, introducing for example the first public wash houses and employing the first Medical Officer of Health and first district nurses anywhere in the country.

A parliamentary act to establish a managing company for the new St James's Cemetery was obtained in 1826 and the architect John Foster (1786-1846) was appointed to design the necessary buildings and to lay out the ground. Through his imaginative use of a unique site Foster created a cemetery of real dramatic grandeur. He transformed the east wall of the quarry into a sequence of broad ramps lined with catacombs cut into the rock face; these led down to the burial ground itself, laid out with winding paths and planted with trees. On the high ground to the north west, overlooking this sunken area, Foster built the Oratory (foundation stone laid 1827) and a house for the minister (later demolished to make way for the Cathedral), while at the

south west corner he provided a monumental entrance arch and a porter's lodge. The cemetery was opened on 13 January 1829 but Foster designed one more addition to it, the small circular temple which marks the grave of William Huskisson (1770-1830), the Liverpool MP killed at the opening of the Liverpool-Manchester railway.

The purpose of the Oratory was to accommodate funeral services before burials took place in the cemetery, but it was also used as a kind of cenotaph for housing monuments to the deceased, including several works by major 19th century sculptors.

Following the closure of the cemetery in 1936 the Oratory fell into disuse. It was transferred to the Liverpool Cathedral Building Committee, and in 1980 Merseyside County Council assumed responsibility for its care and carried out major repairs. In 1986 it became part of the newly formed National Museums and Galleries on Merseyside. Further important funeral monuments from elsewhere have now been added to the original collection, including some from demolished churches on Merseyside, making the Oratory into a distinguished gallery of 19th century sculpture which complements the Walker Art Gallery's rich holdings. At the same time this small building powerfully evokes the characters and achievements of some of Liverpool's notable citizens from the time of the city's great expansion and prosperity.

The architecture of the Oratory



In adapting the design of an ancient temple to serve as a 19th century church, architects were usually obliged to make compromises for practical reasons. Windows, which are absent in Greek

temple architecture, were needed, and the elaborate furnishings of Christian worship had to be introduced.

Because of the limited function of the Oratory, however, Foster was largely free of these constraints and could design a more or less perfect recreation of a classical temple, furnished only with simple pews and a lectern. Most important, the interior was small enough to be lit by a skylight in the roof, leaving the side walls free of window openings in a truly Greek manner and giving the building a solemn severity appropriate to its purpose.

The roof is stone, another archaeologically correct detail. The internal columns which support the ceiling are of the graceful Ionic order and are closely based on those of the Erechtheion, one of the temples on the Athenian Acropolis. On the exterior, by contrast, the six-columned porticos at either end are of the simpler, more sturdy Doric order, best exemplified in the Parthenon, the most famous of the Acropolis temples.

Indeed in its siting as well as in its design the Oratory seems intended to evoke the Acropolis, and when viewed from the cemetery below it stands dramatically on the edge of a rocky precipice like one of the ruins in Foster's Greek drawings. The effect was appreciated by contemporaries: Gore's Liverpool Directory for 1832 describes the Oratory enthusiastically as being 'in the very spirit and soul of the Greek school such a structure as the traveller of mind might fancy standing alone in all its majesty on some bold promontory of that lovely land'.

The comparison may appear faintly humorous, but to contemporary observers of 19th century Liverpool's power and prosperity, who spoke of the town in the same breath as Carthage and other cities of classical antiquity, the Greek Revival style of Foster's buildings seemed not only convincing but also thoroughly appropriate.

The architect, John Foster Jnr



John Foster Junior's 'Huskisson Memorial' in St James's Cemetery below Liverpool's Anglican Cathedral

John Foster Junior was the son of Liverpool Corporation's Surveyor and Architect, and was apprenticed in the London office of the architect Jeffrey Wyatt. Between 1809 and 1816 he travelled through Asia Minor, Italy and Greece in the company of Charles Robert Cockerell (1788 – 1863), experiencing the glories of ancient architecture at first hand.

Cockerell, who was to become one of the foremost neo-classical architects of the 19th century, and who designed the celebrated Liverpool branch of the Bank of England (now the Trustee Savings Bank, Castle Street) as well as completing the interior of St George's Hall, considered Foster 'a most amusing youth' but 'too idle' to be more than a dinner companion.

Certainly Foster got into a number of amorous entanglements during his travels (he finally married a lady from Smyrna) but the use he later made of his years overseas suggests that he was far from idle. He worked closely with Cockerell on the excavation of two major Greek sites, the Temple of Zeus on the island of Aegina and the Temple of Apollo Epicurius at Bassae, and he produced careful drawings which record his impressions. A number of these are now in the Walker Art Gallery.

Foster returned to Liverpool and from 1824 to 1835 he was surveyor to the Corporation in succession to his father. He carried out a remarkable amount of work in his native city, designing seven churches, a vast covered market (the first of its kind in Britain), a new frontage to Lime Street station, and a major programme of civic improvements which gave central Liverpool a network of wide, regular streets.

Most of the work, nearly all of which has been destroyed, was severely Greek in style, bearing witness to the travels of his youth.

The same was true of his masterpiece, the Customs House, an immense domed building (the biggest in Liverpool until St George's Hall surpassed it) which stood at the historic heart of the city. It was bombed in World War II and later demolished.

Foster's qualities as an architect of the Greek Revival can now be best appreciated in the church of St Andrew in Rodney Street, the Huskisson Monument and the Oratory.

The Greek Revival



The Oratory and several of the monuments it contains are products of the artistic movement known as the Greek revival. For most of the 18th century English architecture drew its inspiration from the buildings of Renaissance Italy and ancient Rome, but from about the 1750s features borrowed from other styles - Chinese, Indian and especially medieval Gothic - became popular for their ornamental qualities and romantic associations.

A few adventurous architects chose to follow the example of ancient Greek buildings, which unlike their richly decorated Roman counterparts were typically severe, solemn, and massive. As with the revival of the Gothic style, this new interest in Greek architecture began as a search for novelty but became a scholarly movement based on a rigorous study and firm principles.

Until 1788 the architecture of ancient Greece had been largely unknown to the rest of Europe, but following the publication of the first volume of 'The Antiquities of Athens' by James Stuart and Nicholas Revett in that year, an increasing number of illustrated books dispelled this ignorance. The books fuelled a growing interest, and many architects travelled to Greece to study the ruins of its civilisation for themselves.

Greek art and architecture were reflected in the design of countless houses, churches and commercial and public buildings throughout Britain, as well as in sculpture, furniture and ceramics. Their influence was felt particularly strongly in Liverpool where the Greek Revival coincided with a period of great building activity in the booming port.

Writing in 1858 from his Liverpool viewpoint, the local architect and historian James Picton (1805-89) described the extraordinary impact of the Revival: 'Greek architecture was adopted in all possible and some almost impossible situations. Shop fronts, porticos of dwelling houses, banks, gin palaces - everything was to be modelled from the Parthenon...'

'Agnes Elizabeth Jones', Pietro Tenerani



Accession number Loan736

Like Gibson, who greatly admired him, the Italian Pietro Tenerani was a pupil of Thorvaldsen. It was Gibson's view that 'the works which will consign his name to posterity are chiefly of a religious character'. This monument, one of many overseas commissions executed by Tenerani in his Roman studio, dates from the last year of his life and shows the pure neo-classical style still flourishing well into the second half of the 19th century.

Agnes Jones came to Liverpool at the age of 28 as the first qualified nurse in the country to be appointed to a workhouse, the Brownlow Hill Institute which stood on the site now occupied by the Roman Catholic cathedral. Hitherto, the care of the sick in such establishments had largely been left to their fellow inmates, but at the suggestion of the Liverpool philanthropist William Rathbone (1819-1902), whose initiative had already established the city as the birthplace of district nursing, it was decided to experiment at Brownlow Hill by employing trained nurses.

Agnes Jones took charge and brought immense improvements to the Institute, her achievements being described in these terms by Florence Nightingale: 'In less than three years she had reduced one of the most disorderly hospital populations in the world to something like Christian discipline, such as the police themselves wondered at. She had led, so as to be of one mind and heart with her, some fifty nurses and probationers. She had converted a Vestry to the conviction as well as the humanity of nursing pauper sick by trained nurses, the first instance of its kind in England. She had disarmed all opposition, so that Roman Catholic and Unitarian, High Church and Low Church, all literally rose up and called her blessed.'

In 1868, at the age of 35, she died from typhus contracted through her work. Her achievements, however, were of lasting value, and the infirmaries of Victorian workhouses where humane, professional care of the sick was provided, pioneered by Agnes Jones in Liverpool and widely imitated, gradually developed into the free hospitals from which the modern National Health Service was created.

The monument represents the Angel of the Resurrection, seated and holding a trumpet, which accords with references to the Resurrection in the inscriptions on the base, composed by Florence Nightingale and the Bishop of Derry. The statue stood originally in the chapel of the Brownlow Hill Institute but was removed to the chapel of Walton Hospital when the Institute was demolished. In 1989 it was transferred to the Oratory.

'Mrs Emily Robinson', John Gibson



Accession number WAG9847

Mrs Robinson was the daughter of a cultured Liverpool family, the d'Auguilars, and exerted a strong influence on Gibson's early development as a sculptor. He was captivated by her character and beauty, and she was a sensitive critic of his work who helped to cultivate his mind by conversation and literature.

He erected this monument at his own expense, aiming to capture in it what he called 'her beautiful Greek profile'. Its design is closely modelled on ancient Greek tombstones known as stelai, which were often carved in relief with a seated figure seen in profile.

'Henry Park'



Accession number WAG9841

Henry Park, one of Liverpool's notable medical men, entered the Liverpool Infirmary as a fourteen year old apprentice in 1758 or 1759. After completing his training in London and France he returned to his native town and was appointed surgeon to the Infirmary at the age of 22.

He held the post until 1798 and lived for many years at a house he built for himself in Bold Street. He is celebrated chiefly for pioneering an operation by which diseased knee and elbow joints could be cut out and the bones rejoined, avoiding the need for amputation. His account of the process was published in 1783 and translated into French and Italian, and the operation was later described as one of the greatest surgical triumphs of the time.

Park assembled an important medical library which eventually came to be housed in the Medical Institution at the corner of Hope Street and Mount Pleasant.

The inverted torches on each side of the inscription are symbols of Death, derived from classical tomb sculpture.

'John Foster' memorial tablet



The architect of the Oratory is commemorated by a simple slab of polished red granite. The inscription records how 'on his return from long and arduous travels in the pursuit of his art' a different picture from that painted by Cockerell, '...he... enriched his native town with the fruits of his genius, industry and integrity'.

'John Gore', William Spence



Accession number WAG9844

William Spence was a near contemporary of John Gibson, with whom he worked at Messrs. Franceys. Spence went on to become a partner in the firm, and though he stayed in Liverpool he was able to send his son Benjamin (1822-66) to study and practise as a sculptor in Rome, following in Gibson's footsteps.

The John Gore commemorated here was the grandson of another John Gore, founder of the Liverpool newspaper 'Gore's Advertiser', first issued in 1765, and publisher of the first Liverpool Directory in 1766. The monument represents a maiden grieving at an urn. Gore's name is inscribed on the pedestal and an inverted torch leans against it.

'John Rhodes', Sir Francis Chantrey



Accession number WAG9839

Like the nearby monument to [John Thomson](#), this memorial comes from the now demolished Northgate End Unitarian Chapel in Halifax.

'John Thomson', Sir William Chantrey



Accession number WAG98440

Formerly in the Northgate End Unitarian Chapel, Halifax, this monument was acquired for the Oratory in 1981 following the demolition of the chapel in the previous year.

John Thomson served as a doctor in Halifax for nine years and established a dispensary there which was the origin of the Halifax Infirmary. Below his portrait is carved a staff entwined with a snake, the symbol of Aesculapius the Greek god of medicine.

'Henry Faithwaite Leigh, George Leigh and Catherine Pulford', William Spence



Accession number WAG8776

Henry Faithwaite Leigh's epitaph records his involvement in the founding of St Nicholas's Catholic chapel (the original location of the monument) and its adjoining school. The design of the memorial is quite simple: a relief carving of an urn bearing Leigh's coat of arms, set against a background of grey marble.

'The Nicholson Family'



Chantrey was the most popular and successful of 19th century British sculptors, admired both for his portrait busts and his monuments. He believed in studying directly from nature rather than from ancient Greek and Roman sculpture, and his treatment of flesh, hair and clothing is often strikingly naturalistic.

William Nicholson (died 1832) lived in Springfield House in Everton, at a time when that district was still an area of prosperous mansions and villas. He is shown leaning against an urn, mourning the death of his six children.

The suggestion of deep sorrow in the man's pose is made more touching by the fact that his face is hidden, but in this Chantrey was perhaps making a virtue of necessity: Nicholson himself died in June 1832, only four months after ordering his children's monument, and the sculptor may well have missed the opportunity to record his features from life.

At first sight the kneeling female figure might be taken for William's wife, Hannah, but in view of her youth and her idealised features she is more probably a symbolic representation of 'Grief' or 'Resignation'. Chantrey reproduced exactly the same figure on his monument to Sir Richard Bickerton (also dated 1834) in Bath Abbey; such duplication was not an uncommon practice at this date. Here the figure holds a broken lily, a popular emblem on 19th century monuments, signifying youthful innocence cut off in the bloom of life.

'Rev Ralph Nicholson and his wife Catherine'



Sir Francis Chantrey

Accession number WAG9845

This plaque to the parents of William Nicholson was commissioned and executed at the same time as Chantrey's larger Nicholson monument which stands nearby. It consists of a medallion with overlapping profile portraits of husband and wife, carved to appear as if suspended by a ribbon from the tablet bearing the inscription. Chantrey charged £1000 for carving the two Nicholson monuments, and a further £24 10s for transporting them to Liverpool and fixing them in place.

Ralph Nicholson owned lands at Chadkirk near Stockport, but he never lived there and passed much of his life at Didcot in Berkshire, where he was rector between 1768 and 1793. Shortly before his death he moved to Liverpool.

Catherine Nicholson was one of the ten children of Charles Roe of Macclesfield (1715-81), a prominent industrialist in the fields of silk spinning and copper smelting who developed strong links with Liverpool when he built a smelting plant by the dockside in 1767. Roe's company also ran a Liverpool warehouse supplying metal trade goods to West African slavers.

'Rt Rev Thomas Penswick', Peter Turnerelli



Accession number WAG8774

Thomas Penswick was the first priest of St Nicholas's Roman Catholic chapel. He was also Vicar Apostolic of the Northern Region (before the restoration of its hierarchy in 1850, the Catholic Church in England was divided into districts governed by Vicars Apostolic) and titular bishop of Europum. Penswick's mitre and crozier appear at the top of the monument, and below them a female stands by an altar bearing various attributes of the Christian faith.

Peter Turnerelli was the Irish-born son of an Italian political refugee. After studying in a Catholic seminary he moved to London and trained there as a sculptor. He became Sculptor-in-Ordinary to the Royal family, and his large output includes many portraits of Royalty and the Peerage. His work is of uneven quality, and it is fair to say that this example is of more historical than artistic interest.

'William Earle', John Gibson



Accession number WAG9843

John Gibson came to Liverpool as a young boy from Conway and eventually entered the workshop of Messrs. Franceys the town's leading monumental masons and sculptors. With financial help from Liverpool friends he settled in Rome in 1817, studying first in the studio of Canova and then in that of Thorvaldsen, the two greatest exponents of the neo-classical style.

He quickly became the leading sculptor of the British colony in Rome, enjoying the patronage of Queen Victoria, noble collectors such as the Duke of Devonshire and particularly of the Liverpool merchant families. Unlike Chantrey he dedicated his life to following with an unswerving, almost naive loyalty the principles of Greek art.

Born of a wealthy Liverpool family, William Earle spent much of life in Italy and died in Rome at the age of eighty. Several pictures from his collection are now in the Walker Art Gallery.

Gibson shows him lost in thought about a passage he has just read in the book which he holds, presumably a bible, and the sculptor has dressed him in a cloak which hides any conspicuously modern features of his costume: it was Gibson's view that 'the human figure concealed under frock coat and trowsers is not a fit subject for sculpture'.

'William Ewart', Joseph Gott



Accession number WAG9846

Joseph Gott was the Yorkshire counterpart of John Gibson. Like Gibson, he spent most of his working life in Rome and found his most sympathetic patrons among the merchants and industrialists to the north of England.

William Ewart, the son of a Scottish minister from Dumfries, settled in Liverpool and became a prosperous merchant. He gave his name to William Ewart Gladstone, the Liverpool-born Prime Minister, whose father was a close friend. It seems that his commission for his monument came to Joseph Gott in 1827 through a family connection: Margaret Ewart, William's daughter, was married to the son of Benjamin Gott, a great Leeds woollen manufacturer and the sculptor's second cousin. The preparation of models and agreement of a design took until 1832, but the marble was then completed within the year.

Unlike Gibson's reliefs of seated figures with their classical draperies and restrained, formal poses Ewart is presented naturalistically. He sits cross-legged and comfortable in an arm chair, and rather than seeming rapt in meditation he looks out at the viewer, eagerly expounding something from the paper he holds.

Naturalism and informality are most obvious in the treatment of his dress: the buttons and creases of his coat, the wrinkled stockings and the dangling slipper. The right hand seems originally to have held a pair of spectacles.

'William and George Hetherington', George Lewis of Cheltenham



Accession number WAG8984

Along with the Stevenson monument this comes from the demolished church of St Mary's, Birkenhead. St Mary's was built beside the ruins of Birkenhead Priory, hence the inscription which refers to the deceased being buried in 'the Abbey chapel yard adjoining this church'.

William and George Hetherington were the sons of William Hetherington, owner of the Birkenhead Ferry and the Ferry Hotel. Both died of consumption and their mother, already a widow, erected this monument. Her second husband lived in Cheltenham, which explains the use of the most prolific firm of sculptors in that town.

Above the inscription a grieving maiden is shown leaning against a broken column and pointing towards two fragments which have toppled from it. The broken column came to be used on countless 19th century monuments as a general symbol of death, but here it retains its original precise meaning, the breaking off of a family's line of descent by the death of its only children.

'William Hammerton', John Gibson



Accession number WAG9842

William Hammerton bequeathed money to the Bluecoat Hospital, the School for the Blind and other charitable institutions in Liverpool, and lived close to the Oratory in prestigious Rodney Street.

His monument shows a needy mother and her children being given food by a young man, but if this figure is intended to be Hammerton himself then it is a highly idealised portrait of the sixty-three year old philanthropist. Two 19th century engravings of the sculpture were published under the title 'Charity', and the monument is probably intended as a general illustration of this virtue rather than a portrait of the deceased.

Gibson's treatment of this potentially sentimental subject is noticeably severe: the mother's face is haggard, the man looks purposeful rather than openly compassionate and the classical dress of the figures adds gravity to the scene. The plain background and simple Grecian pediment above provide an appropriate setting for such a composition.

All this is in marked contrast to Macbride's treatment of the similar sickbed scene on his monument to Dr Stevenson of about twenty years later. The change from Greek Revival restraint to Victorian sentiment is unmistakable.

'Dr William Stevenson', John Alexander Patterson MacBride



Accession number WAG8985

MacBride trained first under William Spence and then in London before returning to Liverpool around 1846. He was a supporter of the Pre-Raphaelites, and while serving as secretary of the Liverpool Academy he voted for the award of its 1851 prize to William Holman Hunt.

Dr William Stevenson, who had served in the Peninsular War in his youth, was the first medical man to settle in Birkenhead, well before it expanded into a thriving industrial town in the 1820s. This monument was originally set up in St Mary's Church, Birkenhead, but was removed to the Oratory when the greater part of the church was demolished in 1977.

Within its elaborate gothic frame (appropriate to the architecture of St Mary's) the relief carving of Stevenson taking a sick woman's pulse combines an odd mixture of historical styles: 19th century dress for the doctor, vaguely antique draperies for the women, an almost baroque twist to the patient's pose, and a Grecian lamp in the background.

'William White'



Accession number WAG8775

This monument comes from St Nicholas's Roman Catholic church which formerly stood in Hawke Street behind the Adelphi Hotel. The church, or chapel as it was then called, was completed in 1812 and later became Liverpool's Catholic Pro-Cathedral, but having been made redundant by the completion of the Metropolitan Cathedral of Christ the King it was finally demolished in 1973. This and the following two monuments were acquired for the Oratory in that year.

William White served as a priest at St Nicholas's and his Latin epitaph may be translated as follows: 'His Catholic fellow citizens erected this memorial to William White the hard-working, watchful and pious priest and minister of his ancestral faith in this church. He lived for forty years and died on 4 November 1832. May he rest in God'.