

ST GREGORY'S CHURCH

KIRKNEWTON, NORTHUMBERLAND

Centenary Window and Sculpture in Memory of Josephine Butler – South Porch (9.8 sq mtrs) 2006

This commission celebrates the life and achievements of Josephine Butler (1828–1906) on the centenary of her death. Butler was a leading campaigner in the 19th and early 20th centuries for social reform for women. Her fight against child prostitution was instrumental in the age of consent being raised from 13 to 16. She was from the North East of England where she spent the last years of her life, and is buried in the churchyard of St Gregory's, Kirknewton.

The artwork consists of a copper sculpture and a stained glass window. The sculpture comprises nine lilies on seven bars or stems entwined with bindweed. The bars (and the lilies that spring from them) progress from the ground to the light of the window. The entanglement of the bars or stems at the base of the sculpture symbolises the social constraints and oppression of women in Josephine Butler's time, as well as the emotional turmoil that Butler experienced as a result of the sudden, accidental death of her young daughter. As Butler decided to dedicate her life to the service of the poor and sick, and the liberation of women, so the bars become untangled and transform into the stems of the lilies.

The lily symbolises hope and salvation through Christ's Resurrection and is also associated with St Catherine of Siena, who dedicated her life to looking after the poor and sick. Josephine wrote a book on St Catherine and, following her example, was motivated by her faith to dedicate her life to the service of the poor, the sick and disadvantaged. Josephine wrote of St Catherine that 'She loved – she prayed – she endured'; this inspirational text is reproduced in the window, in lettering by Charles Smith FRSA.

This project was funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund and by public donations. As part of the project, I engaged a local community group in Northumberland to hear opinions of Josephine Butler using a questionnaire and brainstorming session. I also worked in two schools, Chatton and Millfield, to teach children about stained glass and symbolism in church windows.

