

The Lions at the Fitzwilliam Museum- Celebrating 200 Years

Since the very early years of the Fitzwilliam Museum's existence four stone lions have been positioned outside the museum, two at the north steps and two at the south steps. In 2016 the Fitzwilliam Museum is celebrating 200 years since Richard, VII Viscount Fitzwilliam of Merrion, bestowed his library and collection of art to the University of Cambridge, as well as £100,000 to construct a building that would house them. His aim was to further "the Increase of Learning and other great Objects of that Noble Foundation".

It was not until 1835, after a process of discussion and land acquisition, that the Syndicate overseeing the project selected an architect who would design the building. After advertising the tender in the newspapers the Syndicate selected George Basevi (1794 – 1845), a London-born architect, from a group of 27 architects who had sent in plans to be considered. Two years later, on the 4th November 1837, the the Vice-Chancellor, Gilbert Ainslie, laid the foundation stone of the Fitzwilliam Museum, below where the northern lions rest.

In that same year the sculptor William Grinsell Nicholl (1796-1871) became involved in the task of creating those monumental lions that overlook Trumpington Street, when he was commissioned to realise Basevi's architectural vision. Nicholl had started work that year carving decorative details of Basevi's designs for the museum, working on the Corinthian columns and the decorative aspects of the façade. Then in 1839 he sculpted the four iconic lions that guard the south and north steps to the Fitzwilliam Museum's portico entrance.

