The Leicester Arch and the Temple of Janus

Walking through Victoria Park one is constantly aware of the robust and yet elegantly proportioned presence of the Leicester Arch of Remembrance. However, few realise the complex subtlety and symbolism with which its architect Sir Edwin Lutyens graced its form, nor are many aware of the spectacular natural event that takes place at its heart every 11th of November, long before the crowds arrive for the Armistice Day service.

Sir Edwin Lutyens was one of the foremost English architects of his day and was the creator of the Cenotaph in Whitehall and the Great War memorials in France and Belgium. In early 1919 he was invited by Leicester City Council’s Memorial Committee, under the patronage of the Duke of Rutland, to design a monument to commemorate the men of the city and county of Leicester who died in the Great War. Originally a site in the Town Hall Square was proposed for the monument but later this was changed to the present site in Victoria Park.

For Lutyens, the architectural challenge was to express in stone the profound sense of loss the nation felt and to do so with a special reverence and dignity. He was a master of the use of English neo-classicism which he had developed into a stripped and elemental style of his own. He was also a philosopher and a mystic and required that this building embody a poetic expression of fundamental truths of life and death while remaining fundamentally pantheist. To this end he turned to antiquity, and just as he had adopted the ancient Greek idea of the catafalque (a bier on which the honoured dead were laid) for the Cenotaph in London, so for Leicester he turned to the temples of Rome and in particular one of the oldest, smallest and most curious, the temple of Janus.

Janus was one of the most important and oldest gods of Roman mythology and was originally known as the god of night and day, but came to represent beginnings, endings and transitions, doorways, gates and passages, and he was considered to be the doorkeeper of heaven and hell. He is characterised as having a head with two opposed faces looking both forwards and backwards. His temple, which no longer exists, was described by the Byzantine historian Procopius as being erected in the Forum Olitorium in 260BC and as a roofless ‘gateway’ just large enough to contain a five cubit high bronze statue of Janus in its centre, with arched doorways at each end facing east and west to which the two faces of the god looked. The brass doors were opened in times of war and closed in times of peace, the latter condition only occurring for three short
periods during the history of Rome. The dimensions of the temple and those of its doorways were carefully designed to ensure that the two faced god could ‘see’ sunrise and sunset over Rome on every day of the year. To achieve this, the priests of the temple used a simple geometrical figure called a ‘Solstitial Rectangle’ to predict where the northernmost and southernmost sunrises and sunsets would be on the horizon at the latitude of the proposed building. The gateposts of the temple were then precisely aligned during construction so that from where the figure of the god sat the sun would appear to touch the gateposts on the winter and summer solstices.

This original temple of Janus was moved and later demolished, as were subsequent replacements. However a gateway building was constructed around c. 356 AD as a commemorative arch to Constantine I (c. AD 306-337) who oversaw the transition of the Roman Empire from Pagan polytheism to Christian monotheism. At this time of change, the old gods of Rome still had a powerful hold over the people of the city and the arch, because of its form, was reputedly associated with, or secretly dedicated to, Janus Quadrifrons (meaning ‘four faces’) a more complex expression of the two faced Roman god. Lutyens saw this arch during a visit to Rome in October 1909 and its dedicatory significance and the history of its predecessor would not have been lost on him.

The association with transition between this life and the next, of endings and beginnings, the martial opening of the doors in times of war, closing in times of peace and the legitimacy conferred by antiquity would have been compellingly attractive to an architect of Lutyens’ creative sensibilities and it was to these two precedents of the gateway temple and the quadrifrons arch that Lutyens returned for the idea of the Leicester Arch.

And just as the priests of Janus built solar alignments into their temple so Lutyens gave a secret solar alignment to the Leicester Arch. The major axis of the arch (along Peace Walk and Lancaster Road) is precisely aligned with the direction of sunrise on Armistice Day. When the arch was completed in 1926, the first rays of the rising sun on the 11th November would have shone straight down the main axis casting an elongated shadow of the east arch on to the floor of the monument and beyond, and would also have shone directly through the two opposed openings in the attic storey of the East and West façades. This effect can only occur where there is a reasonably distant horizon and no obstructions in between, as on the raised plateau at the edge of Victoria Park. Had the memorial been built in the Town Hall square as originally proposed, this solar alignment would not have been possible.

Here then, Lutyens embodied the memory of those who died in an elegant, contemporary memorial grounded forever in the timeless and enduring cycles of the seasons and in doing so drew on an ancient and curious architectural tradition laden with meaning. As a result we have one of the finest war memorials in the world which reveals one of its secrets for only a few minutes at a special time every year.