

OCTOBER MEETING

— First Speaker —

William Burges

A talk by Peter David Gilchrist

Reported by Alan Lee

Born in 1827 and educated at King's College School, William 'Billy' Burges was one of the most imaginative designers of the 19th century. He called himself an 'Art-Architect' and oversaw the building of cathedrals, castles and houses, including their interiors, decorations and furnishings. Many regarded him as an eccentric. He travelled widely abroad, mainly throughout Europe, spending months sketching and drawing to enhance his skill and knowledge.

Aged 16 he left college in 1844 and spent 5 years with Edward Blore, then moved to the offices of Matthew Digby Wyatt. He worked with Wyatt on the Medieval Court for The Great Exhibition of 1851. In 1856 Burges, now 28, established his own architectural practice off The Strand in London.

In 1834 Dover Town Council purchased the ancient Maison Dieu, much being derelict. After ten years of failed fundraising they took out a loan and appointed Ambrose Poynter to prepare designs to restore the Stone Hall. Due to his failing eyesight he asked Burges to oversee the work. In 1859 he prepared 40 working drawings from Poynter's designs. Burges created the grotesque animals around the doorways. On the stone lintel around the walls he placed the many shields, with their coats of



William Burges Portrait

arms, of many former Lords Warden. The work, completed in 1861, cost the council about £6,000, some £2,500 over budget. Poynter was paid £15 for his work and Burges £69; he later designed the Council Chamber, added in 1867.

His first important commission was to build St. Fin Barre's Anglican Cathedral in Cork (1863-70), a compact impressive building in the French Gothic style with three spires.

After coming of age in 1868 the 3rd Marquess of Bute, one of the world's wealthiest men, commissioned Burges to redesign Cardiff Castle, acquired by the family in the middle of the 18th century. The 150-foot high Clock Tower, designed by Burges, contained Lord Bute's bizarre "bachelor pad", comprising a bedroom, a servant's room and the summer and winter smoking rooms. Burges's interior designs of the castle have attracted wide praise including being called "the most magnificent that the gothic revival ever achieved".

In his designs Burges often included whimsical touches. In the library, around the doorway, one monkey steals an apple from the Tree of Knowledge while two more grab the Book of Truth. Around the fireplace Moses sits surrounded by figures representing ancient languages. Lord Bute

is portrayed studying Celtic runes. At Castell Coch Burges, included a monkey wearing spectacles and a frog holding a bottle of cough-mixture (for the frog in its throat!).

He built Park House for John McConnochie, Chief Engineer to the Bute Docks, considered as "perhaps the most important 19th century house in Wales."

In the 1870's Burges's two finest gothic churches were undertaken the Church of Christ the Consoler at Skelton-on-Ure, and St Mary's at Studley Royal. Both were built as memorial churches for the Marquess Ripon's brother-in-law, Frederick Vyner, murdered by Greek bandits in 1870.

Burges only ever built three major houses as well as Tower House for his residence in Kensington, designing all the elaborate decoration and furniture. It was here where, aged 53, he died. It is thought that his early death was brought about partly as a result of smoking both tobacco and opium, which may have reinforced the dreamier elements of his design.

Burges' most important final work was again in Dover. The town council

approached him to provide designs and quotations, for the Maison Dieu, court meeting rooms, mayoral and official offices, and a police station. He designed the project and work began in 1881. The majority of the works were completed after he died in May of that year. The original estimate was £17,115, or about £1.7million in today's money. Once again the council had to raise a loan for the project and the works went ahead despite opposition from a number of councillors and townsfolk.

More money had to be raised to complete the decoration of the interior of the building. Burges's design was a riot of colour and gilding. The walls and particularly the ceiling were covered in brightly coloured floral designs in blue, red and gold with birds dotted amongst the foliage. At the back of the hall (now hidden behind the organ) was a large decorated gothic arch and balcony with a sculpted image of St. Martin of Tours. The Kentish Gazette described the decoration as 'the most beautiful that Mr. Burges has done' which the Dover Express called it 'a trifle gaudy'. The building was formally opened in 1883 by Prince Arthur, Duke of Connaught. The large assembly room was named the Connaught Hall. Until 1924 the hall was redecorated about every 15 years, in the original style.

By the 1940's, owing to the expense of re-decoration only some of the original decoration remained. By the early 1950's the remainder was either painted over or removed,

Research shows that part of the original works survive beneath the paint and wallpaper. It is hoped that part of these decorations can be uncovered and restored for all to see.



Dover Maison Dieu Connaught Hall