

A PATRON'S TASTE: THE GOTHIC FANTASIES OF BUTE AND BURGES

Matthew Williams

Introduction

In 1863, as Wales began to flourish in a coal-powered industrial revolution, a casual introduction between two men resulted in one of the most extraordinary artistic partnerships of Victoria's reign.

One of the men was only eighteen. He was the 3rd Marquess of Bute – a Scots nobleman who had inherited one of the world's richest coalfields (Fig. 1).



*Fig. 1:
The 3rd Marquess
of Bute*

The other was a short, bumbling, somewhat eccentric thirty-eight year-old architect called William Burges. It proved a meeting of minds, a coming together of talent and imagination, and marked the start of a fruitful friendship that produced some of the most fascinating buildings and interiors of the age.

Cardiff Castle

The meeting took place in the Welsh town of Cardiff, which at that time was being transformed by coal and shipping trade. Young Lord Bute owned extensive estates in Wales, including three castles – and here you can see one of them, Cardiff Castle (Fig. 2); an ancient Roman fort that had, over the centuries, been transformed by invaders, and had been owned by various noble families. Over the centuries, the castle had been altered and extended.



Fig. 2: Cardiff Castle

In the eighteenth century, an ancestor of Lord Bute's had married a Welsh heiress, and so that's actually how this Scots family became the owners of considerable Welsh lands.

1st Marquess and Marchioness

The marriage that brought this about, in 1766, was that of John Stuart, the 1st Marquess of Bute. (The diarist Boswell knew John Stuart, and described him as being 'handsome and well-made, with a noble tempestuous air'. Although he also said that John 'never had an original thought in his head'.) Well, Lord Bute had *one* original thought – and that was to marry money. His bride, Charlotte, was known

to society as ‘the rich, ugly Miss Windsor’. A pretty harsh verdict, if the painting of her by Romney is to be believed. But the *rich* part was accurate. She owned a huge amount of what was then rich, Welsh farmland. Landowners in Britain had an advantage. If you owned the land, you also owned whatever minerals lay beneath it (and that was unlike a number of other European countries, where ‘mineral rights’ often belonged to the state). So, ownership of mineral-rich land allowed many British aristocratic landowners to become very rich indeed, and the Welsh lands the Bute family now owned were laden with coal or ‘black gold’. Once the problems of how to get the coal out of the ground, down to a port and shipped all over the world could be solved, the Bute family fortunes would have quite a lift.

2nd Marquess of Bute

It was this couple’s grandson, the 2nd Marquess of Bute, who had the vision and energy to make the little town of Cardiff into ‘The New Liverpool’. He invested huge amounts of money into building a dock, and said that ‘he thought well of his income in the future’. But it was all a risk, and the 2nd Marquess didn’t have a son who would inherit the estate and the result of all his hard work. Then his wife died, and after a few years he re-married a mature lady in her late thirties. It was a big surprise to both of them when, at the age of fifty-four, Lord Bute became a father. There was great rejoicing at the news, and when the baby was six months old, his father brought him to Cardiff Castle. He gave a grand dinner for the great and good of the town, retired to his dressing room and...dropped dead. Celebration turned to ashes, but it left the six-month-old infant as the ‘Richest Baby in Britain’.

So, after confusing you with various marquesses of Bute, we have our great hero, the Lord Bute who became the great architectural patron. But I think that you will find it helpful to know a little bit about this little boy, because more than most British historic houses, the buildings that *this* Lord Bute created are suffused with his personality, his interests and his personal passions.

He had an interesting upbringing. His widowed mother undertook his education, together with her circle of older, intellectual women friends. He was an intelligent boy, and he was encouraged to ask questions and to speak his mind.

Even as a small child, he was fascinated with...well, firstly, history. He loved Cardiff Castle – he’s standing in front of it in one print – and what child wouldn’t? A real medieval castle, with secret passages and a dungeon. And Lord Bute loved history.

He was also interested in ritual, ceremonial and religion. When he was eleven, he and his mother went on a wonderful tour of Europe, visiting theatres, operas, and ballets. They also visited churches of all denominations as well as a synagogue and a mosque. He was fascinated by seeing a Roman Catholic mass, despite the Bute family being Protestant.

But when he was twelve, having already lost his father, little Lord Bute’s mother died. He was utterly bereft.

As if that weren’t enough, he also became the victim of a custody battle between his two guardians, who were contesting as to *whose* control, he – *and his money* – came under. One of his guardians, General Stuart, didn’t like the boy. ‘The thrashing

this child so richly deserves will come too late to do any good,' he said. As a result, Bute became more and more withdrawn. In the end, the custody battle went all the way up to the House of Lords, and the verdict depended on his nationality. Was he a Scotsman? (in which case he came under Scots law) or was he an Englishman? Well, he was found to be a Scotsman, and therefore under Scots law, he came of age – to an extent – at fourteen, rather than the more usual, English twenty-one. He went and lived with Lord Galloway, who had a young family, but the harm was done. The trauma had made the child shy and intensely withdrawn. He retreated into a world of his own – a world of history and of religion and his comfort lay in his friendship with his pets who he felt were, at least, not interested in him because of his money.

All of the things I've mentioned – history, religion, pets, even the importance of being a Scot - were really important to him throughout his life, and references to them all appear in his buildings, and makes them so deeply personal. In 1870, Benjamin Disraeli published the novel *Lothair* – we always think of him as a successful politician, but he was a best-selling author as well. The latter's plot hinges on whether the hero, Lothair, a rich nobleman who was making a fortune from minerals mined on his estates, is going to marry the beautiful girl, or convert to the Roman Catholic Church. The book is in fact a thinly disguised portrait of Lord Bute. Disraeli had married a local Welsh woman, and knew all about Bute (who did of course, have an interest in Roman Catholicism). Truth, in fact, was even stranger than fiction, as I will tell you a bit later.

One of things Lord Bute was passionate about was 'Art' – meaning architecture and design. He'd decided, aged eighteen, to restore and re-build Cardiff Castle. For this he needed a really sympathetic architect, and the architect he chose was the one I told you about... William Burges.

William Burges

Some of you may have heard of Burges, most of you won't have. At the beginning of Victoria's reign is Pugin, who co-designed the Palace of Westminster. At the end of the reign comes William Morris and the Arts and Crafts Movement. In the middle, in the 1860s and 1870s, is William Burges (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3:
William Burges

Short, fat, and a bit of an oddity, Burges was an idealist. He was as passionate about the world of the Middle Ages as Lord Bute was, and, in fact, would build you anything you asked him to – a school, a Church, a country House... provided that it was in French thirteenth-century style, because that was the style he most favoured. French Gothic, with its use of carved stone, stained glass, mosaic, and murals isn't the cheapest style to build, and added to that, Burges was *notorious* for going over budget. His estimate for Cork Cathedral in Ireland was £15,000. His eventual bill was over £100,000. Consequently, he didn't get as many commissions as he would've liked – even at a time when Gothic was the prevailing style in Britain.

Added to that, Burges was an oddball. He *was* extremely short – he’s been described as being ‘quite tiny’ – and could also be short-tempered if he didn’t get his own way. But he was also lovable, talented, and hugely imaginative. One photo shows Burges as an ‘eminent Victorian’, but in fact he was very amusing company and great fun to be with. His passion for anything medieval was his hallmark. There is a picture of him in his twenties, dressed up as a medieval joker – I assume for a party! – and also a recently-discovered letter, written to his aunt when he was only fourteen. He’s written it in the style of a medieval manuscript, with gothic script and illuminated letters.

Burges called himself an ‘Art-Architect’, meaning he was as interested in the design of the *inside* of his buildings, as much as the *outside*. He was the complete designer, undertaking all of the interior decoration himself – the murals, stained glass, textiles, metalwork and ceramics were all to his design. Rather like Robert Adam, a century before, was designing houses *and* interiors in neo-classical taste, Burges was doing the same for Gothic Revival. Initially, Burges was known as a restorer of ancient churches, but he did receive a domestic commission in the 1860s.

Burges’s bulidings

Knightshayes Court in Devon is Burges’s only country house, and, since 1971, has been owned by The National Trust. But having built the structure, Burges was sacked before he could begin in earnest on the decoration inside. You can see in his design ideas how elaborate (and probably very expensive) they were to be. His client was probably frightened by the escalating costs and so poor Burges was given the push. Gothic is an uncompromising style, and even in the mid-nineteenth century, it wasn’t to everybody’s taste. Churches, of course, were thought the most appropriate place for the style. The National Trust holds one Burges church, at Studley Royal in Yorkshire. There is another church by him nearby, and both were commissioned for private estates and built in memory of the same person – a young nobleman who was murdered by brigands in 1870. The churches were both very extravagantly built with no expense spared. Burges designed all the stained glass, murals and mosaics himself, and then handed the designs over to a team of trusted craftsmen who would make each piece. He used the same craftsmen, time after time, and there is a standard of high quality throughout Burges’s work.

Although commissions like this were agreeable, they were few and far between. Burges wasn’t to everybody’s taste – or pocket. What Burges *really* needed was a hugely rich client, with bottomless pockets, as obsessed with the world of the Middle Ages as he was himself, who perhaps...might commission him to rebuild a medieval castle? *Enter* the dream client. The eighteen-year-old Lord Bute, young, intelligent, scholarly, enthusiastic, and more to the point, rich. In 1865, Bute asked Burges to produce a design for the restoration of one of the castle walls. Burges produced his report a few months later, having added a feature to the wall – a clock tower. Burges had designed a huge, seven-storey clock tower for Lord Bute, looking as if it might have come from Renaissance Italy, and complete with painted statues, heraldry, and gilding. It was to be a feudal extravaganza in the middle of the modern industrial town of Cardiff.

A highly individual vision of the medieval world for the most individual of clients. If the proposals for the *exterior* of the tower were extraordinary, the interiors were to be even more so.

Summer smoking room (W/C by Axel Haig)

This summer smoking room at the top of the tower, looks like a fantasy, but it was pretty much built to this design (Fig. 4).

The decorative themes come from astrology and astronomy, from Herodotus and Homer, and gives the iconography of this and other rooms in the tower a surprising depth of thought. Burges's talent as a designer can be seen here in his comprehensive medieval vision – the textiles, the furniture, and the wall decoration are all his, and although this design caused a sensation at the Royal Academy Exhibition of 1870, by then the room and its contents were well on the way to becoming a reality.



Fig. 4: Summer Smoking Room, Cardiff Castle

Burges also made some wonderful silver and jewellery for Lord Bute, nearly all designed for the rooms of Cardiff Castle. His jewellers revived medieval techniques of enamelling and setting with cabochon stones, and created some of the most original designs of the nineteenth century. I especially love a cruet, made for Bute in 1877, which has two medieval figures carrying salt, pepper, and mustard, all made in silver-gilt and enamels. The figures of a knight and a jester are poking their tongues out at one another. As with so much of Burges's design, there is a joy and a zest in the creative process that is most beguiling.

His design for the winter smoking room in the tower was equally strange – but the same ethos applies...one's eye isn't allowed to rest. It is carried from surface to surface, each alive with decoration. The reality is just as good as the design. The designs look serious, but puns and jokes abound in the carvings and paintings. The interior was meant to be fun. But it was expensively done – what looks like painted wood is usually carved stone and what looks to be gold paint is gold leaf.

It was intended to be an *accurate* reconstruction of an interior of the thirteenth century. *Is it?* – Well, yes and no. Medieval castles didn't have bare stone walls, as Hollywood films would have us believe. The walls would have been insulated against the cold with plaster, and that plaster surface was often decorated. But of course, there's hardly any evidence for this, as virtually none of it survives. But Burges knew that medieval walls were painted with murals and that medieval rooms 'spoke and told a story'. But of course, *no* medieval castle was as gilded as those of Burges. What we have at Cardiff Castle is a romanticized Victorian vision of the past, in that Burges didn't quite know where to stop the gilding. As his friend Oscar Wilde said, 'If a thing's worth doing, it's worth doing to excess.' And yet...Burges wasn't so far off the mark either. There is a photo of a Burges interior of the 1860s which resembles a room in the Tower of London – a modern reconstruction of the medieval past. In this case, he was getting it almost right.

Lord Bute's Clock Tower was finished in 1874. It's really a series of bachelor rooms, one above the other, but before it neared completion, Bute ceased to be a bachelor. In 1872, he became engaged. Do you remember I said that the plot of Disraeli's book *Lothair* turned on whether the hero was going to marry the beautiful girl or convert to Roman Catholicism? Well the *real* Lothair – Lord Bute – did both. At the age of twenty one, he converted to the Roman Catholic faith (amid quite some scandal). And at twenty-four, he became engaged to this girl – Gwendolen Fitzalan-Howard, grand-daughter of the Duke of Norfolk, and a member of the grandest Catholic family in England. So, *he* was allying himself to an ancient Catholic dynasty, and *she* was marrying a tall, good-looking marquess and one of the richest men in the kingdom.

In fact, it was a love match. I've always said that one of the best things about my job has always been the privileged access to these people's letters. They cease to be historic figures in funny clothes in faded photos or gilded frames and start to become flesh and blood. Bute wrote to Gwen when they were engaged, 'guess, dearest, where we will spend our honeymoon?'. She must have thought of his castles in Scotland and his yacht on the Mediterranean, before being told that they were to honeymoon in *wet* Wales...in March...and with builder's swarming all over his castle.

Her reaction was so human and understandable: 'How warm will your castle be?'. His reply was meant to be re-assuring: 'Pray don't imagine my dear, we will be living in the reign of Edward III. All is done with the greatest comfort', which was, to my mind, a big fat lie. Lord Bute's ideas of comfort are not ours. The bath installed in the clock tower is proof. It's a Roman sarcophagus, converted by Burges into a bathtub, and set into a tiny space lined with alabaster. It's chilly in July, let alone March.

The honeymoon was a great success. Lady Bute wrote to her unmarried sister Angela: 'I know I should not write to you of such things [Angela was 16 and unmarried], but Dr. Johnson would have to think of a new word for happiness.' Lady Gwen also loved her husband's architect William Burges: 'Isn't he a duck?', she wrote. And by 1874, Burges was allowed to try his hand on transforming the rest of the castle. The clock tower dominated the main street of Cardiff but made the rest of the castle look too small, so now Burges was to transform it all. Cardiff Castle is a flat site, and Bute wanted to give it an interesting silhouette, with a series of rooms built upwards in towers of different shapes and sizes. In the next ten years later, additional rooms were needed of course, for the family and their guests.

But I don't want you to think that this is where Lord and Lady Bute lived all year around. In fact, with all their other houses to choose from, they only spent about six weeks of every year in Cardiff Castle. Victorian households of this social class tended to have larger numbers of servants and most of the servants travelled with the family as they moved between their other houses, but a skeleton staff of about five stayed at Cardiff Castle – there is a picture of them in 1891, showing a happy, smiling bunch...they haven't changed very much!

You also needed additional rooms for your children, and the Butes had four children – Lord Dumfries, Lord Colum, Lord Ninian, and Lady Margaret. For the children, Burges designed a new day nursery. Usually, Victorian nurseries were

converted bedrooms, but Bute's much-loved children had their own, intensely personal space, purposely designed with a ceramic frieze showing characters from children's fairy stories. The medieval theme even reaches the nursery – with the painted figures all dressed in medieval costume.

Because most of the rooms in the castle are in towers, they're small and accessible only by climbing awkward draughty spiral staircases, or around poky difficult corners. But in a way, that was the point... Lord Bute, one of Britain's richest men, was enjoying playing medieval house here at Cardiff Castle. His banqueting hall dates from 1875, and was not only the biggest room in the castle, but was an evocation of a medieval great hall. With a hammer-beam roof copied from a medieval church, and its walls covered in murals telling the medieval history of the castle, this was the room where Bute would entertain his house-parties of guests. From a carved, wooden minstrel's gallery, Bute's guests would be serenaded by Welsh singing and harp-playing, all adding to the feudal atmosphere.

The wall decoration, which was, of course, designed by Burges, was actually painted on canvas by his friend, the artist Horatio Lonsdale (who incidentally, also designed mosaic decoration at the Garfield Memorial in Cleveland in the 1880s). Each room at Cardiff Castle has a decorative theme, and many of these are biblical – reflecting Bute's Catholicism, of course. Bute's own bedroom, which is another comparatively small space, has a theme of St John the evangelist – it also has a ceiling with 190 mirrors set into it... although I'd stress that the mirrors are for decoration not for any erotic purposes!

Some of the interiors are not only small, but it's difficult to see what their purpose was. The 'Arab Room' was started in 1880. It's wonderfully extravagant, with a decorated ceiling inspired by medieval Sicily, all covered with pure gold leaf. But what was it used for? The truth is, that both Lord Bute and William Burges didn't really care too much about practicality, they just loved the creative process. It made the job of coming to Cardiff, where Lord Bute's advisors would be asking him to boring business meetings that he didn't understand, much jollier. He could help plan decoration, and, of course, rooms like this were quite unique. Guests to the castle were enchanted by something so completely different... the house of yet another rich man, but instead of huge spaces and double doors everywhere, at Cardiff Castle you went into tiny, jewel-like rooms.

Lord Bute's tiny chapel is another example. It's really only large enough for the Marquess and Marchioness, and perhaps just their children. This was once the dressing room that Lord Bute's father had died in, and so the walls are covered with murals illustrating resurrection and the hope of eternal life. Lord Bute's sitting room also has a religious theme, with the painted frieze showing the life of an early Christian Irish Saint. The ideas for the rooms seem to have come both from Lord Bute and from William Burges. It's almost as if 'Bute loaded the barrel with ideas and then Burges fired the gun'.

For instance, the roof garden, at the top of yet another tower, is based on the idea of a Roman Villa at Pompeii, which the Butes had visited with Burges – an open courtyard, with a covered walkway around it, but instead of a central well, as you would find at Pompeii, Burges introduces a medieval-style Bronze fountain and a statue of the Madonna and child. The walls are covered with tiles, showing

scenes from the life of Elijah, and the script beneath it is in Hebrew, which Lord Bute was learning in the year the room was being built, 1875. Bute was very supportive of other religions, such as Judaism, and he gave land for synagogues to be built in the area.

The top rooms of each of the towers at the castle seem to be a secret little world for Bute's own private pleasure. The inside of one spire at the top of yet another tower blazes with colour – in heraldry and stained glass, and yet it's awkward to get to. You have to make a real effort to discover some of these private spaces, but it's always worthwhile when you get there.

The castle is all about visual delight, and the small intimate spaces *make* you notice everything. Burges suffered from bad eyesight, and I always think he worked better designing a small space rather than a large one. Like one little staircase, with its intense, colourful decoration, and I love that there is a velvet-covered handrail, which helps stimulate yet another sense as you move around the castle. The decoration of this space includes lots of naturalistic detail, including rabbits, mice, and even a carved crocodile – all hark back to Bute's love of animals when he was a child. Bronze beavers on the roof garden fountain, and carved stone monkeys in the library, who play with the books of knowledge. (I've always wondered if Bute is making a pun on Darwinism?) Animals in all media – stained glass, stone carving, or in marquetry. As you can imagine, all this took a long time. But Bute said that he was 'never in a hurry to finish what was his chief pleasure'.

The small dining room, for instance, took a number of years to complete. First came drawings and sketches for the initial design, then a scale model of the room, and sometimes, even full-size models of furnishings to make sure that Bute had exactly what he wanted. The huge chimneypiece in this room for instance, began as a casual sketch, but gradually was refined and altered and finally became reality in stone. Once installed in the room, it was then painted and gilded. It was all very gradual, and of course, all very expensive. We've only a few individual costs, so I can't tell you exact amounts, I'm afraid.

But undoubtedly, John and Gwendolen Bute poured their enthusiasm into this joint project. And it wasn't their only scheme. A few miles from Cardiff, in a picturesque position on a wooded mountainside, stood a ruined, ancient castle. The Red Castle (or Castell Coch, which is its Welsh name) had been ruined for centuries, but was once a medieval stronghold. William Burges was asked to look at the site and decide what, if anything, could be done with it. After a while he produced a report, which suggested that Lord Bute could of course, leave it as it was – or at least stop it falling down any further, *or*,

You could [...] my Lord [...] turn it into a complete castle of the C13th, authentic in every way, with a working drawbridge, a working portcullis and accurately reconstructed defences on the re-built tower [...] all for your occasional occupation during the summer[.]

Burges sold Bute the idea as a sort-of archaeological reconstruction. Of all the architects in Britain, Burges was probably the ideal man for the job. There was only one other who would have relished the job, but he lived across the water in France.

The French architect Viollet-le-Duc was another medieval scholar, who had produced a dictionary of medieval designs, that basically showed you *how* to build a medieval castle. Burges loved Viollet's designs and his work at Castell Coch is very, very similar. In fact, Viollet-le-Duc had his own restoration project – in France, and undertaken for Napoleon III and the Empress Eugenie, a few years before work began on Castell Coch. The 1860s and 1870s were a time when there was a nostalgia throughout aristocratic Europe for the medieval world. In Bavaria, King Ludwig II was restoring Neuschwanstein from a ruin, and this couple commissioned Viollet-le-Duc to transform the ruined chateau at Pierrefonds.

So, the work Burges was doing in Wales was part of a wider European movement. Although Castell Coch was far more modest, it was just as romantic as Pierrefonds, and between 1875 and 1879, it was transformed from a ruined heap of stones into a dream castle. It looks more German, or even French, than British, partly, I think, due to some wonderful conical roofs, which Burges would tell you, were completely authentic – and he would point you to medieval manuscripts for proof. In fact, they're *not* authentic, but they look wonderful, and you can't argue with that. But Burges's idea of the castle being an occasional summer residence for the Butes was really a sales ploy. The Butes had no real use for it, but the real incentive for Lord Bute was the sheer fun of building it.

In his letter to Lord Bute, Burges wrote that 'Inside the castle, I have ventured to indulge in a little more ornament'! He had indeed! Castell Coch is truly a folly, the rooms were only used for picnics or jolly excursions of visitors coming out with the Butes from Cardiff Castle, who would take luncheon in this medieval hall, all decorated by Lonsdale to Burges's designs. The castle was all splendidly impractical – built entirely for effect. No stables for your horses, and only two flushing lavatories in the whole place. But, it did have central heating, and it's one of Lord Bute's oddities that despite all this medieval splendour – he installed modern inventions. The hall led you into another splendid interior. The drawing room is double height, and has a theme of the cycle of life. The three ancient Greek fates are carved in stone on the chimneypiece, whilst various animals gamble over the painted walls. Above is a carved and painted stone vault, with a sun in the middle; its rays are made of carved and painted butterflies, and the birds of the air and the stars make up the rest of the fantastic decoration. It's all very reminiscent of the Empresses room at Pierrefonds, although I think Burges's work has more wit, and more delight. Pierrefonds takes itself a bit too seriously, Ludwig II's Neuschwanstein even more so. When walking around Ludwig's Germanic Schloss, you can't seem to get the sound of Wagner out of your head, but with Burges at Castell Coch, you seem to hear Gilbert and Sullivan operettas in every light-hearted interior.

Lady Bute's bedroom at Castell Coch looks as if it might be home to the Lady of Shallot. Even to romantic Victorian eyes, this was incredible stuff, with its bed with crystal bed knobs and its ceiling dome decorated with monkeys, pomegranates and grape vines. Grape vines were especially appropriate, because if you looked out of the windows, the slopes beneath the castle were laid out with a vineyard, making it look more like a Rhineland castle than ever.

The vineyard at Castle Coch was, in fact, the only working vineyard in Britain in the nineteenth century. As far as the British were concerned, wine came from France...or at worst, from Germany. Wine hadn't been made in Britain for centuries...not since the Middle Ages in fact, when the climate was slightly warmer. But Lord Bute had read about medieval vineyards, and thought, 'if they did it then, why can't we make British wine in 1875?'. So, he sent his Scots gardener, Mr Pettigrew, off to Chateau Latour, and Chateau Lafite, with letters of introduction (but not a word of French), to ask 'how they did it?' Well, despite the French thinking that the idea of British wine was hilarious, Mr Pettigrew came back with 2000 wines and, by 1877, wine-making was in progress. The Butes loved it. They invited guests to 'come to Wales for the Vindemmia', where they could watch wine being made. It was all part of the medieval experience! The vineyard ran for over fifty years, but today, sadly, it's covered by a golf course!

Castell Coch is quite unlike anything else in Britain – its decoration deeply personal to Lord Bute. A 'Tortoise and The Hare' decoration may well be inspired by Aesop's fables, but one can't help remembering that the soft-hearted Lord Bute refused to have hares or rabbits trapped or hunted on his land. A carved hedgehog on his bedroom fireplace is again personal. When he was a child, his pet hedgehog escaped up his bedroom chimney. Surely this is a nostalgic reminder, and there must be many, many more, all brought into life by William Burges.

The legacy of Bute and Burges

William Burges died in 1881, before he'd completed Castell Coch, aged only fifty-four. His friend and client Lord Bute followed him to the grave in 1900, aged fifty-three. These men may not have made old bones, but their artistic legacy is remarkable. Cardiff Castle is now regarded as a building of international significance, but the Bute family continued to use it for those few weeks a year, for garden parties and such, right through the 1920s and 1930s. Even in 1928, when the family and servants moved between their other houses, there were still house parties at Cardiff Castle. They would charter a railway train, and travel with their servants and their silver...like some latter-day medieval retinue. But higher taxation and the Second World War meant that such a life was impractical and unsustainable. In 1947, the grandson of the 3rd Marquess gave the castle away – as a gift – to the people of the city of Cardiff, who retain it to this day. Don't be too sorry for the Bute family. The family still had their main seat – Mount Stuart, on The Isle of Bute, off the west coast of Scotland.

An extraordinary and vast house, Mount Stuart *wasn't* designed by William Burges, but his spirit abounds there. It cost Lord Bute some £600,000 to re-build in the 1880s. It's been described as looking like 'a head-on collision between the Taj Mahal and a Victorian railway hotel!'. Inside, it glitters with marbles, colour, and gilding. All of Bute's interests – astrology, religion, and so on – re-appear in the decoration of this amazing house, which is one of the least-known of British country houses...but it's another lecture in itself, so I won't get carried away. Except perhaps, to discuss the one bit of Burges at Mount Stuart.

There is a chapel built by Burges in 1877 at Mount Stuart. Today it has an added modern feature in the shape of the mirrored floor, which startles the visitor, especially as you pause on the threshold of the chapel. The mirror distorts your senses, and so to enter, you have to make 'a leap of faith' – it's a clever modern twist. Mind you, it has its disadvantages. At the reception to open the chapel and its new floor, with guests all done up in their finery, it was a bit of a shock to the many Scotsmen who were wearing their best kilts to have to walk on it! I bet William Burges would have loved the joke. His brand of humour is now highly appreciated once again. But for most of my lifetime, Burges's architecture was regarded in Britain as a bad joke – Victorian and hideous. A Burges chimneypiece couldn't find a single buyer when offered to the market in 1919 and was left to disintegrate in a backyard, while a rare Burges vase, designed for Cardiff Castle, sold recently for £225,000.

I hope you've enjoyed this romp with William Burges and Lord Bute. If you can't manage to get to Cardiff Castle, then it's been an enormous pleasure for me to bring this Welsh Victorian Camelot to you.