

# TRAILBLAZERS

## William Burges - Architect

by Joanna Davies



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“Burges’s interiors at Cardiff have rarely [been] equalled... his finished works are outstanding monuments to nineteenth century gothic, the suites of rooms he created at Cardiff being amongst the most magnificent that the gothic revival ever achieved.” - Megan Aldrich





## William Burges (1827-1881)

Have you ever spotted the magical turrets of what appears to be a fairytale castle peeping through the ancient woods when travelling on the dreary M4 in South Wales? You may have even visited this amazing building and marvelled at its out of this world architecture. But did you know that Castell Coch's existence and lasting appeal is down to one small, short sighted genius, unkindly nicknamed, 'Ugly Burges'?



William Burges depicted in a cartoon by Hunt Emerson © Architectural Review 2016



Like all geniuses, he was described as many things:

*"Dear Burges, ugly Burges, who designs lovely things ..."*  
- Lady Bute in 1881

*"... A builder bewitched by the Middle Ages."*  
- J Mordaunt Crook, 1981

*"an opium-addicted bachelor Gothicism who  
dressed in medieval costume."*  
- Simon Jenkins, 2003

He may have been all of these things, but today, he is considered one of the most original, creative and talented architect-designers of the 19th century. We in Wales owe him a debt of gratitude for conjuring from his imagination two of our most iconic buildings, Cardiff Castle and Castell Coch. The reason these buildings are so well-known and loved world-wide is because, like William, they are unique, flamboyant and with a definite point of view.

*"I have been brought up in the thirteenth century belief, and in that belief I intend to die."*

- William Burges explaining his vision for Castell Coch in 1874)

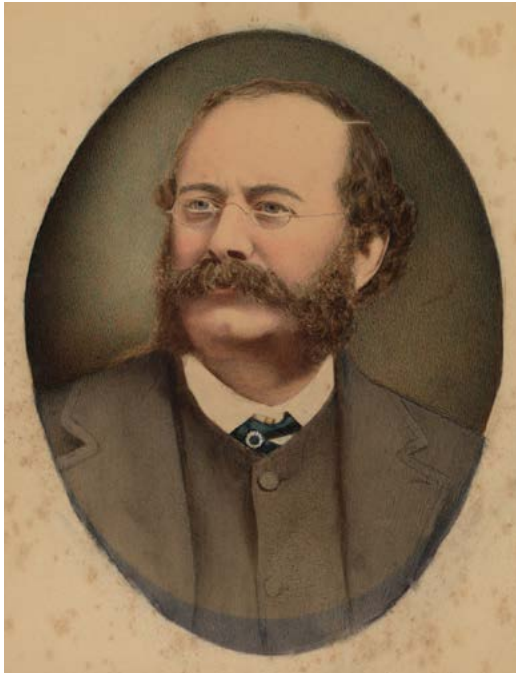


Castell Coch © Crown copyright (2024) Cymru Wales



## The court jester

William or 'Billy' as he was known to his friends was as unusual and quirky as his buildings. He was nicknamed, it was said affectionately, as 'Ugly Burges', to distinguish him from JB 'Pretty' Burges, the painter, who moved in the same circles. It may be because of this nickname, there aren't many photographs of William, as he was sensitive about his appearance.



William Burges circa late 1870s.  
© National Portrait Gallery

A tall tale that circulated at the time said that William was so short sighted that he once mistook a peacock for a man! This may have been a joke by the man himself as William was known to have a great sense of humour and loved dressing up as a court jester and in medieval costumes.

In 1858, the artist Frederick Weekes drew a painting of William as a medieval architect, where he was depicted as being almost wizard like.

Most importantly, he was a great talent and much loved by his friends, many of whom were the movers and shakers of the day. His biographer, J Mordaunt Crook said,

*"His range of friends [covered] the whole gamut of Pre-Raphaelite London."*



William Burges dressed as a court jester c1860  
© National Portrait Gallery



Burges as architect by Frederick Weekes

The famous writer, Oscar Wilde, was an admirer and the great artist, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, even composed a limerick about his old College friend, poking fun at his youthful baby face:

*"There's a babyish party called Burges,  
Who from childhood hardly emerges.  
If you hadn't been told,  
He's disgracefully old,  
You would offer a bull's-eye to Burges."*

The reference to a 'bull's-eye' refers to a boiled stripy sweet, popular with children at the time.

He was also a true eccentric. If you called around to visit William, you would often be greeted by an unexpected sight, as Jaqueline Banerjee explains:

*"Visitors might be greeted at the door by this stocky, near-sighted personage with a parrot on each shoulder. All this helps to explain the extraordinary mix of the precise and the fantastic in Burges's designs, as well as the diversity of his talents, and the eclectic nature of his vision."*

Working with his loyal and talented team of craftsmen, he built a range of incredible buildings including churches, a university, houses and of course, castles. There was no-one like him at the time and there's been no-one like him since.

## Key works

- The Tower House, London, 1875-81
- St Fin Barre Cathedral, Cork, 1863
- Cardiff Castle, 1866-1928
- Castell Coch, south Wales, 1872-91
- Gayhurst House, Bucks, 1858-65
- Knightshayes Court, Devon, 1867-74
- Church of Christ the Consoler, Yorks, 1870-76
- St Mary's, Studley Royal, Yorks, 1870-78
- Park House, Cardiff, 1871-80





## Strong foundations



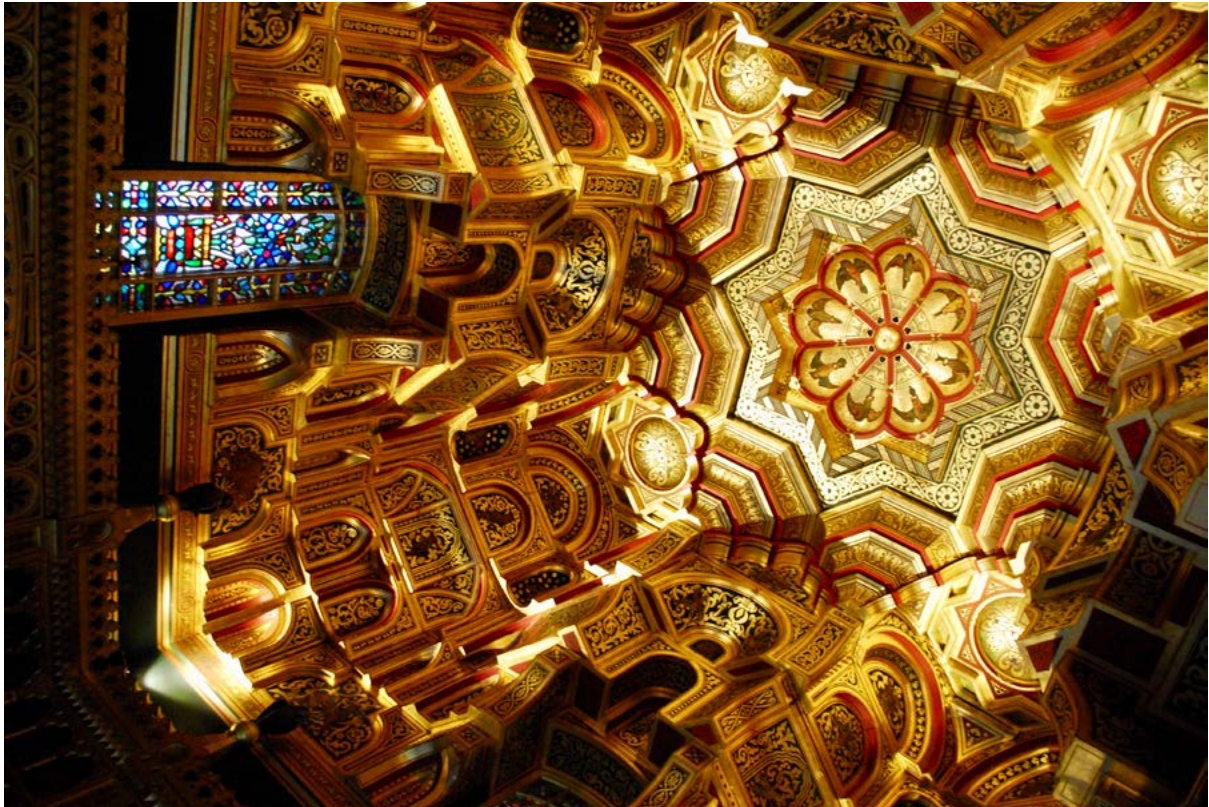
*Castell Coch exterior Madonna and Child wall detail © Graham Bell*

William was lucky to be born to a rich family on the 2 December 1827 near London. His father was a successful marine engineer and it's said that William inherited the equivalent of £10 million pounds today in his youth.

William received his education at King's College School, London, from 1839, where he met fellow student and friend, Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882), who would become a world famous painter and poet. In 1843 William began to study engineering, but left to work in the office of the surveyor Edward Blore at the age of seventeen.

With Blore he had the opportunity to work on the restoration of one of the grandest buildings in the world, Westminster Abbey. His love for medieval architecture was already evident and he knew that this was the career for him. Unfortunately, he didn't last long in this job, as he had a fiery temper and his own ideas about style and fell out with his boss, Blore.

It became apparent that William didn't relish having a boss, or even a partner. After a failed partnership with a fellow architect, he decided to set up practice by himself in London. But William was restless and was keen to learn more about his craft. Between 1849-50 he spent 18 months travelling, using his vast wealth to fund his adventures. Like an eager magpie, he took away ideas from various types of architecture in the great cities of Europe and even ventured to Turkey. He was also busy studying the arts of Japan, India, Scandinavia and North Africa.



*Ceiling detail from The Arab Room inspired by Burges's travels at Cardiff Castle.*  
© Crown copyright (2024) Cymru Wales

He thought all architects should travel stating that it was “absolutely necessary to see how various art problems have been resolved in different ages by different men.” Of course, not all architects had the money to go globe trotting, which was expensive and time consuming during Victorian times.





## The Medieval Magpie

William was particularly influenced by the medieval architecture in Normandy, France as well as Islamic design in Turkey. He loved drawing and copying the medieval monuments he saw on his travels and was keen to incorporate these influences in his work. Some critics felt that his obsession with medieval French architecture confined him somewhat as writer, Paul Davies, explains in the Architectural Review magazine in 2017:

*"William Burges wouldn't budge; resolutely stuck in 13th-century France and studious with it. Believing that French Gothic was the real deal (and that he understood it better than the French did themselves), he took it everywhere and to almost anything. Luckily, he inherited close to £10 million in today's money to indulge himself in this fantasy..."*



The fireplace designed by Burges in Cardiff Castle showing Robert of Normandy behind bars in the castle  
© Crown copyright (2024) Cymru Wales

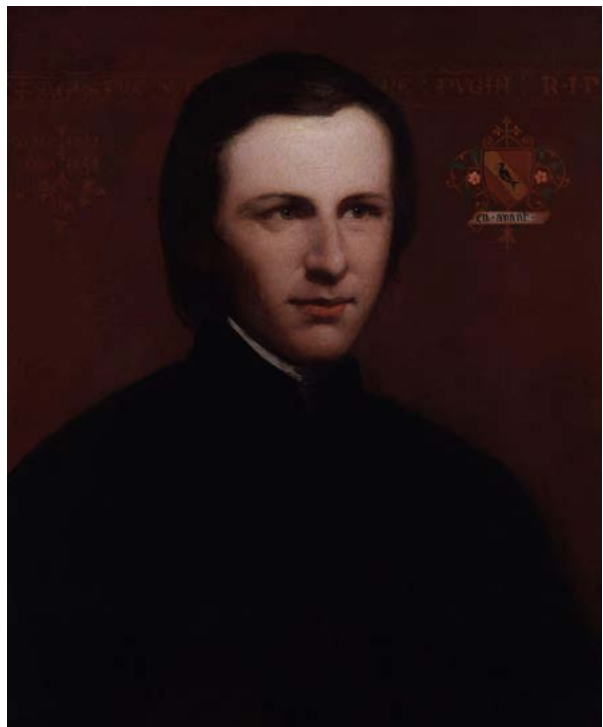


*The gothic grandness of Big Ben*

*DiscoA340, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Common*

He was also deeply influenced by the work of the famous architect, A. W. N. Pugin, (1812-1852). Pugin, who designed Big Ben and the interiors of the Palace of Westminster, was known for his love of the gothic style. He sadly died at a young age due to nervous strain and overwork. Like Pugin, Burges wanted complete control in his architectural commissions and like his hero, he could be obsessive in his pursuit for perfection. As Art Historian, Adrienne Johnson notes, writing about Burges in 2004:

*"Stonework, woodwork,  
metal-work, glasswork  
-- all had to harmonise and  
conform to his own vision."*



*Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin in 1840*  
© National Portrait Gallery





## The Victorian Gothic Revival

*"The only style of common-sense architecture for the future of England, must [therefore] be Gothic architecture..."*

*- Alexander Bersford Hope, leader of the Gothic Revival movement c.1865*

William was fortunate to be working in a period where there was a revival in the 'Gothic' style of architecture. This was the Victorian Age (1837-1901), when Queen Victoria was on the throne which introduced big changes to Britain. Industries and cities grew and there was a demand for a more flamboyant architectural style which emphasised craftsmanship and use of strong materials like stone. Some people however still favoured the less fancy and more 'classic' style of buildings, and turned their noses up at the new Gothic trend.

Some historians think that the popularity of the extravagant Gothic style was a kind of 'escape' from the realities of Victorian Britain to a more pleasing and opulent visual fantasy. Most people in Britain were working class and had to endure a hard life working in the new heavy industries of the time. There would be no fancy castles for them!



*St Pancras Station built in 1868, an example of Victorian Gothic architecture*

© User:Colin / Wikimedia Commons



## Castles in the air

Burges also loved the work of the “Romantic Artists,” who were active at this time such as his old College friend, Rossetti and the group of romantic artists, painters and poets known as the Pre-Raphaelites. This was an exciting era, to quote the great fashionista, Iris Apfel, where ‘more was more and less was a bore!’



*Rossetti's last painting, depicting Joan of Arc (1882).*

But not everyone was a fan of William's extravagant style. By this time he was calling himself rather grandly an ‘art-architect’. He was obsessed with elaborate decoration and had expensive tastes too. His choices of the top craftsmen and an abundance of sculptures, murals, mosaics and stained glass meant big budgets. As a result, not many clients could afford him.

In the 1870s, he was keen to make his mark by transforming St Paul's Cathedral in London. The original architect, the famous Christopher Wren, wasn't fashionable by this time. William was full of great ideas about how he would transform this famous London cathedral with his unique style. But this caused a huge outcry in the press and his plans were dropped.



*St Paul's Cathedral in London .*

This became a recurring theme for William. Many of his designs were never executed or were demolished or changed. He had to compete against other architects to get jobs and failed in getting commissions for many projects. But William's luck would change with two of the most exciting projects of his career, Cardiff Castle and Castell Coch in South Wales.



*The office in William Burges's chambers, 15 Buckingham Street, 1876 © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.*





## Fairy kingdoms and realms of gold

*"Three dimensional passports to fairy kingdoms and realms of gold. In Cardiff Castle we enter a land of dreams." - J Crook*

By the 1860s William had made a name for himself as an expert in Medieval architecture. He'd worked on several restoration projects, restoring grand old buildings to their original glory. Now in his forties, he was working on some important commissions, including a cathedral in Ireland, a country houses, and churches. So it's not suprising that he came to mind when John Patrick Crichton -Stuart, 3rd Marquess of Bute, was looking for an architect who could handle transforming a whole castle for him in Cardiff.

*"The third Marquess of Bute's father had developed the railways and port of Barry, enabling the export of coal from the Welsh valleys, engineered by Burges's father's company. To compound their luxury, the Butes had also married twice into big money and land, so the third marquess was afforded as scholarly and retiring a lifestyle as he might desire. Burges was indulged as somewhat the court jester, the marquess and his wife being seduced by the convinced medievalist and his beautiful things, while fretting over Burges's bills and their own highly improbable bankruptcy."*

*- Paul Davies*



*John Patrick Crichton -Stuart, 3rd Marquess of Bute  
(1847-1900).*

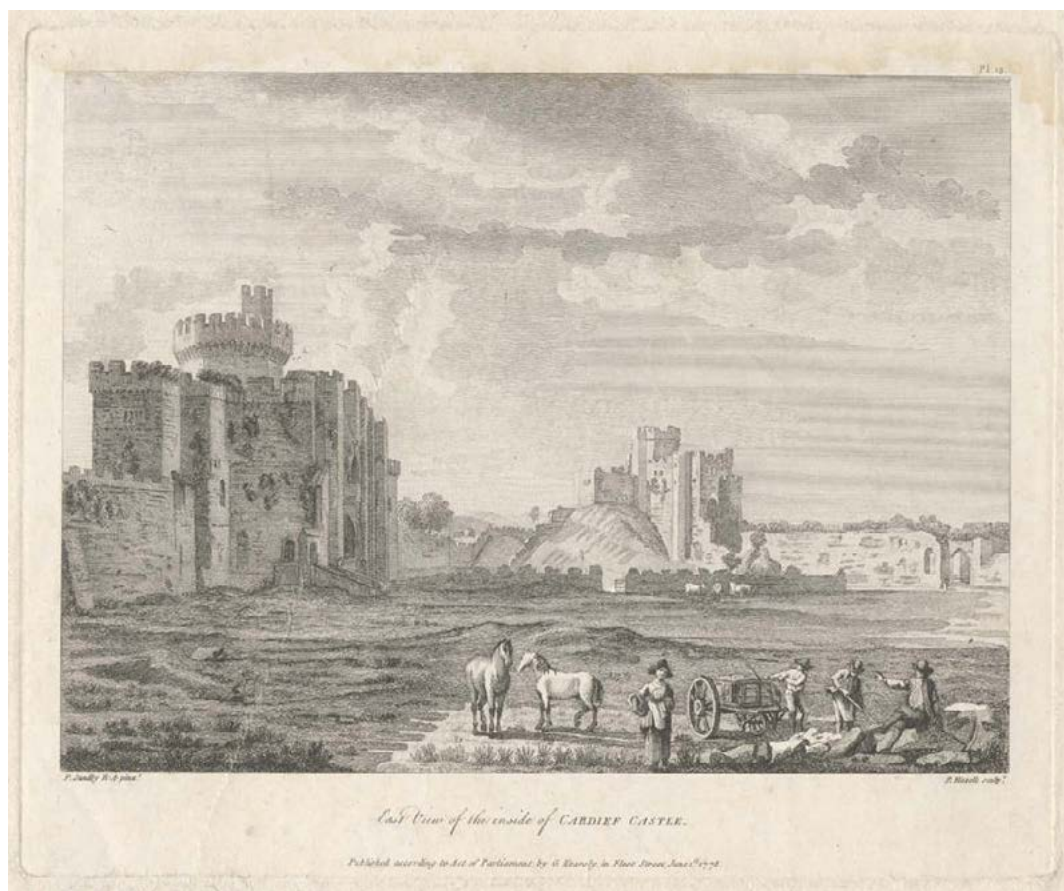


## Burges and Bute - the perfect pairing

In 1865, William was 38 and the then teenaged Marquess of Bute was a dream client. Theirs was a partnership that lasted 16 years and transformed Cardiff Castle and Castell Coch into "Neo Gothic dream palaces." Bute was one of the richest men of his day. He wanted Cardiff Castle, which had passed by marriage to his family, completely revamped. Just like William, the Marquess of Bute loved travel, glamour and the Middle Ages. They were the perfect pairing.

The Castle was an important archaeological site. It had started its life in the 1st century AD as a Roman fort. By the 11th century, the Normans constructed the Keep that still stands on the Castle Green to this day. Then the medieval Lords of Glamorgan began work on the House during the 15th century. Fast forward to the 19th century, when the stars aligned and Bute and Burges met, leading to the creation of the dramatic Castle buildings and interiors we can see today.

Not everyone was impressed with inviting the flamboyant William to work on the Cardiff landmark. One antiquary was horrified and said, 'We shall soon have the old place ruined...' However, William took the approach that Architecture should be prioritised over Archaeology for the sake of progress. Remember that 'Cadw' didn't exist in the 19th century so there was no-one to protect the archaeological integrity of these sites. The plans to 'restore' Cardiff Castle were first drawn up in 1865, and continued for the rest of William's life and beyond.



*An engraving of Cardiff Castle in the early 18th century © People's Collection Wales.*



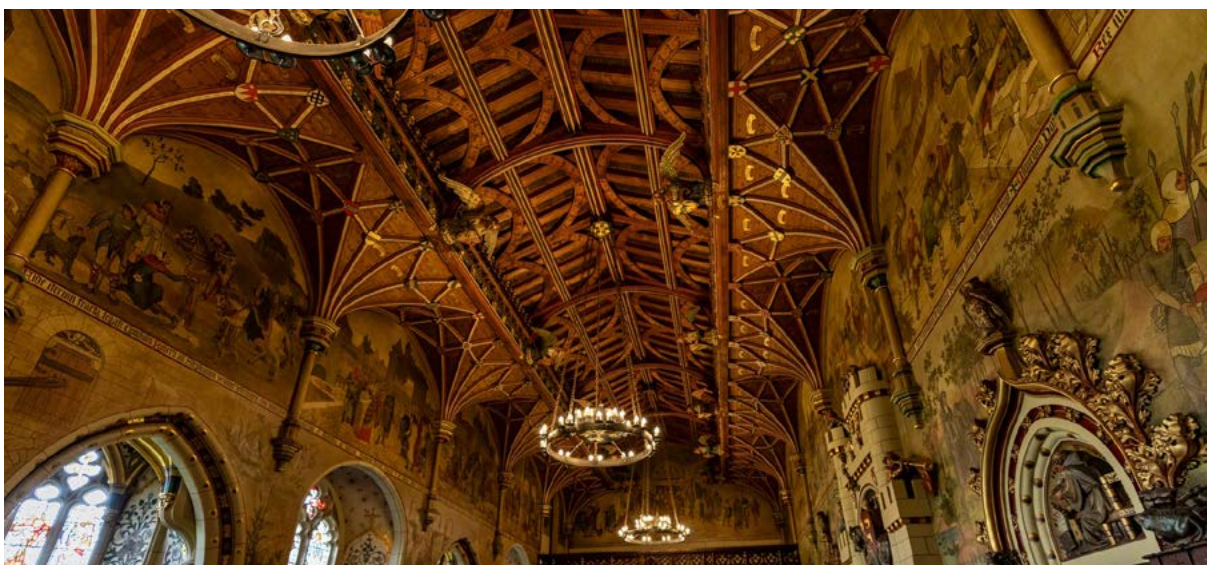
Lord Bute was as fond of fantasy interiors as William. The rooms aren't the most practical but are breathtaking in appearance.



*Cardiff Castle exterior in all its glory in 2023  
by Pete Rigby, CC BY-SA 2.0 via Wikimedia Commons*

William was also keen that the outside of the castle impressed passers by. His plans included a series of impressive towers of varying shapes and sizes. This meant that the eye was constantly moving up and down, making it a more interesting building visually. It was, in Mordaunt Crook's words, 'a veritable skyscraper among palaces.'

Burges and Bute were inspired by all kinds of influences. From trompe l'oeil, (a French term for paintings that "deceive the eye"), to grotesques, to mythical beasts. This was full on Victorian bling!



*The banqueting room ceiling at Cardiff Castle © Crown Copyright Cymru Wales*

'The Arab Room' was inspired by Arabian architecture in Sicily and the ceiling is covered with gold leaf. This was an expensive material and typical of Burges and Bute whose mantra was spend spend, spend! They wanted to impress and William demolished some of the smaller rooms to create a more striking space, like in the Banqueting Hall.

However, he did respect this 15th century room's historical importance and planned its restoration carefully. Lord Bute also asked local historians for their advice and set up 'Bute workshops' which employed the best Welsh craftsmen. Without these experts in their craft, William's vision for his buildings wouldn't have succeeded.

As Andrew Renton explains:

*"At Cardiff Castle, given free rein by his wealthy patron, Burges's imagination created one of the great masterpieces of Victorian architecture. The exteriors of this uninhibited architectural fantasy were inspired by French mediaeval castles, while the interiors are alive with coloured carvings, panelled walls and painted ceilings."*



Cardiff Castle Clock Tower © Crown Copyright Cymru Wales.

The first part of the plan was the Clock Tower. Although it wouldn't be used often, it was chock full of decoration. It created a sensation when William revealed his design at the Royal Academy in 1870. 'Time' was its theme, with astronomy and the stars used to jaw-dropping effect.





*Design for Summer Smoking Room, Cardiff Castle, William Burges, Axel Haig (c.1870) © Museum Wales*

The galleried Summer Smoking Room is also considered one of the best examples of William's work. This used the Universe as its theme and the floor had brightly painted tiles with the symbols of the Zodiac. This is where Lord Bute would entertain his male guests over a cigar or two.

William had some favourite themes that would crop up time and time again in his work. For example, if you look carefully, you'll see William's favourite birds, parakeets,

also known as 'love-birds' appearing in various ways in the smoking room. The 'love' theme is carried through the sculpted figure of 'Amor' on the chimney hood and painted in the small painted circles or 'roundels' on the walls too.

The love theme was chosen to paid tribute to Lord and Lady Bute. The couple had married in 1872 and went on to have four children. William even designed a Nursery especially for them. When he died in 1881, his work on Cardiff Castle was continued by his former assistant, the talented architect, William Frame. Frame ensured William's designs for the iconic Animal Wall were finished in 1892.



*The completed smoking room at Cardiff Castle .*



*A lion from the Animal Wall at Cardiff Castle with the Clock Tower in the background*  
© Crown Copyright Cymru Wales

The 3rd Marquess died in middle age in 1900 at the age of 53, just like his friend, William. Bute's son, the 4th Marquess, continued to restore Cardiff Castle and began work restoring Caerphilly Castle, another Bute building. Luckily, Cardiff Castle survived the Second World War bombings intact. In 1947, the Castle was given to the people of Cardiff by the 5th Marquess of Bute, with news reports at the time commenting that it was "no longer Cardiff Castle but Cardiff's Castle".

Today, the Castle is one of Wales's leading heritage attractions, with tourists visiting from all over the world. If you live or work in Cardiff, you can have your very own 'key to the castle' for three years, where you can marvel at William's creations for free.





## Castell Coch - the fairytale castle



Castell Coch © Crown Copyright Cymru Wales

*"Recreating from a heap of rubble a fairy-tale castle which seems almost to have materialised from the margins of a medieval manuscript." - J Mordaunt Crook*

*"The distant view, of unequal drum towers rising under candlesnuffer roofs from the wooded hillside, is irresistibly appealing. Here the castle of romantic dreams is given substance." - John Newman*

Cadw has the honour of looking after one of the most magical buildings in Wales, Castell Coch, (The Red Castle). Many experts believe that this is William's most beautiful building and it's regularly voted by the public as its favourite building in Wales. Dominating the landscape and surrounded by woodland, Castell Coch seems to belong in another, more magical world. It was originally a medieval fortress, but by the 19th century was in complete ruin.

The castle ruin was on Lord Bute's land. He asked William to report on its state and to make recommendations what should be done with it. Burges suggested that they either make some repairs or do a complete overhaul. Lord Bute approved revamping the castle, thinking it could be a suitable place for the Butes to spend some time during the summer months.



Image of the ruined castle from Castell Coch.com website

William explained the thought process behind the decision to rebuild Castell Coch to the Architect Magazine in 1874. It's clear he thought that project was a sign of great progress and had no worries about the archaeological importance of the site:

*"The complete reconstruction of this fortress is suggested by the noble owner of the ruins on purely sentimental ground, since no alteration of the original plan is proposed. The example thus set by the Marquis might be conveniently followed by others who have more extensive national ruins in their possession – ruins particularly like those of Castle Coch, which are more useful to the antiquary than the archaeologist, and the entire destruction of which might be effected without serious loss to art... ..cannot fail to be an element of progress in the career of modern architecture."*





## French Gothic and Welsh Fantasy

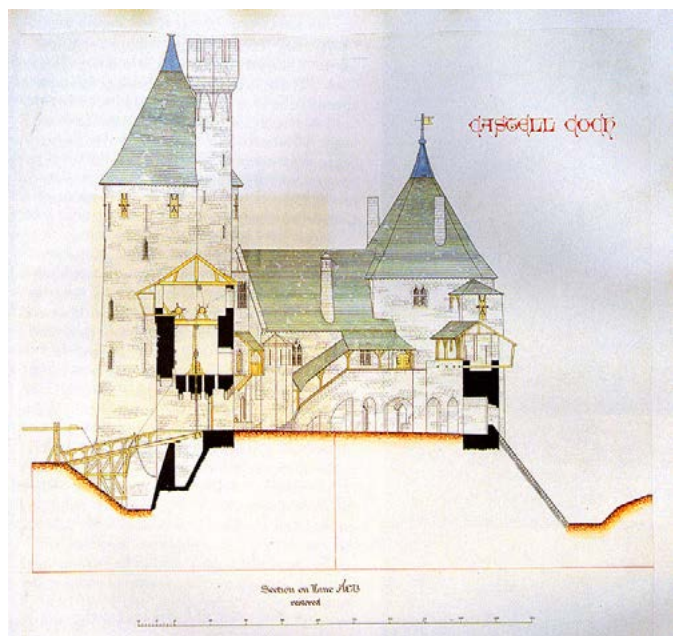
Work began in 1875 and William really went to town! A fully working drawbridge and portcullis were built. He did look at other Welsh castles for inspiration, but his main influence was French Gothic architecture. He was particularly influenced by a restorer of French medieval buildings, Viollet-le-Duc. He was also inspired by the 13th century Swiss Castle of Chillon on Lake Geneva in Switzerland.



Chillon Castle, Switzerland

It's quite amusing when writing in the Architect Magazine in 1874, William downplays his restoration work inside Castell Coch, referring to adding a "little more ornament":

*"I must plead guilty to the fact that the rest of the tower is a pure conjectural restoration. As it is evident that what remains is of later date than the kitchen tower, I have ventured to indulge in a little more ornament. Should any actual restoration ever take place, it is this tower that I should propose for the occupation of the lord and lady of the castle."*

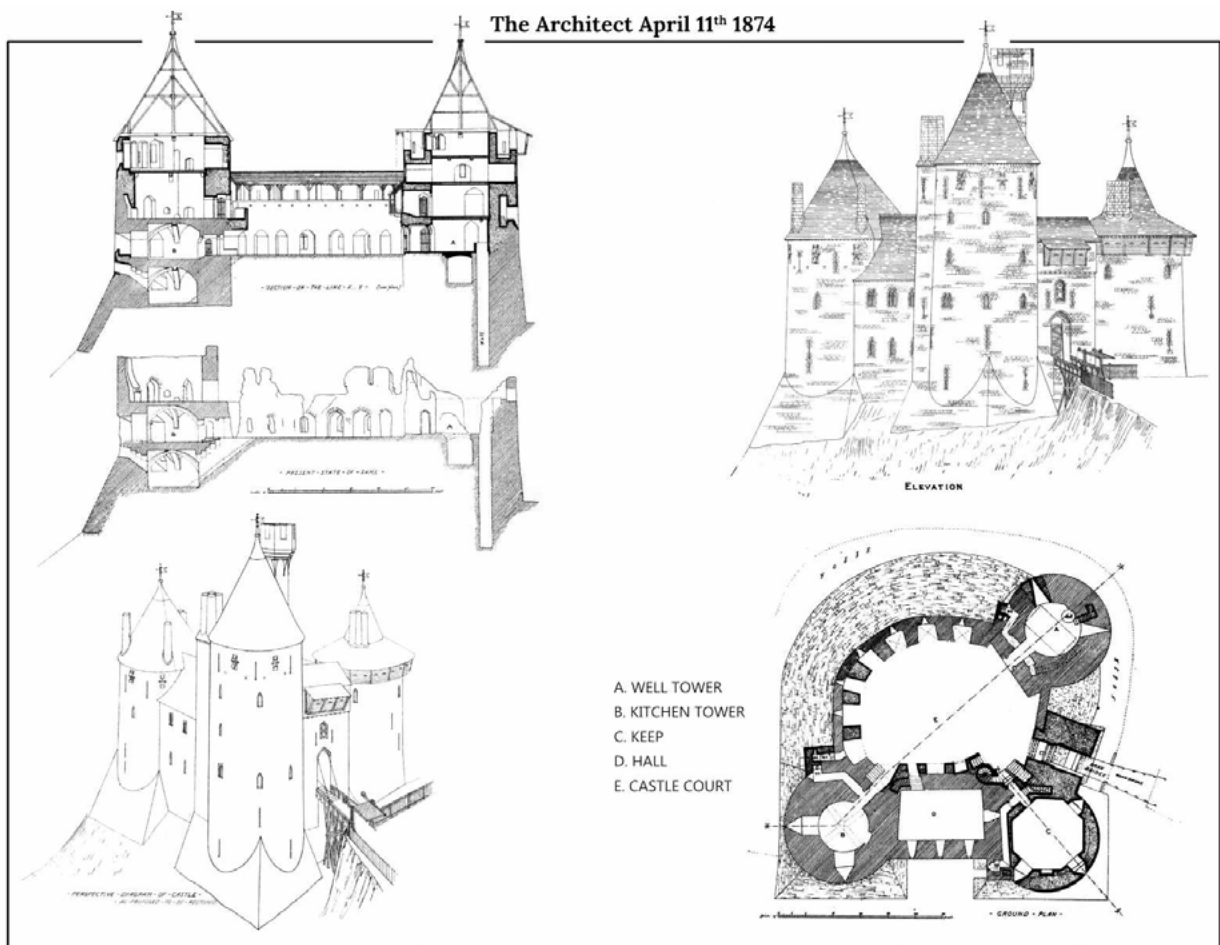


One of Burges's drawings of the North section of the castle  
© Cardiff Council





One of Burges's 'little ornaments' – a jaw-dropping ceiling interior in Castell Coch  
 © Crown copyright (2024) Cymru Wales



CASTELL COCH

PROPOSED RECONSTRUCTION OF CASTLE COCH GLAMORGAN  
 W. BURGESS - ARCHITECT

CASTELLCOCH.COM

Plans from 'The Architect' magazine © Castell Coch website



Money was no object, thanks to Lord Bute's enthusiasm for William's vision. The gatehouse was rebuilt, the towers were raised, with copper-gilt weathervanes. He even added a walkway around the castle and a timber fighting gallery. The central heating, flushing toilets and 'bell pulls' to summon servants weren't quite so medieval however!



*The walkway around the castle*  
© Crown copyright (2024) Cymru Wales

William even made sure that Lady Bute had her own exquisite bedroom. Set beneath a magnificent mirrored dome, it was definitely designed to impress. Sadly, the family only made occasional trips to the Castle and the bedroom went mainly unused.



*Lady Bute's bedroom with furniture added by John Chapple a decade after Burges's death*  
© Crown copyright (2024) Cymru Wales



One of the most striking rooms is the Drawing Room. Here William combined the themes of nature and the fragility of life. The 'three fates', a trio of Greek Goddesses who spin, measure and cut the thread of life, are given a prominent spot above the fireplace. There is also a wonderful mural showing animals from twenty four of Aesop's Fables. Carved wooden lizards, birds and other wildlife can be seen in the doorways.



*The three fates above the fireplace in the Castell Coch Drawing Room*  
© Crown Copyright



Castell Coch is sometimes referred to as a folly, which is defined as a 'costly ornamental building with no practical purpose.' Most experts agree that this is not the case as it did have a function or purpose as a home, (even if rarely used), for the Bute family. You can also argue that restoring a medieval castle was in itself a useful act.

*One of the animal murals inspired by Aesop's Fables in Castell Coch*  
© Crown copyright (2024) Cymru Wales



Sadly William Burges died before he could complete Castell Coch. He did leave his assistants detailed plans on how to complete the work, with furnishings and murals added up to ten years after his death. However, it's said that Lord Bute's tastes were allowed even more free rein without Burges's guiding hand as Robert Davies points out in 2017:

*"The decor of Castell Coch, completed by Burges's numerous assistants after his death, is definitely eclectic, but this perhaps reflects the increasing influence of the client rather than Burges himself."*



Castell Coch © Crown copyright (2024) Cymru Wales



## The unknown Burges building in Cardiff

*"Perhaps the most important 19th century house in Wales." (Cadw)*

Did you know that there was a third building designed by William Burges in Cardiff? If you walk along Park Place, which is near the National Museum, you'll spot it straight away! It stands out like a Burges peacock, beautiful in its gothic design and built for the Chief Engineer of the Bute Docks and onetime Mayor of Cardiff, John McConnochie, in 1874. Like his boss, the Marquess of Bute, John was also fond of luxury and quirky curios. An inventory of his belongings included a revolving library chair and even a suit of armour!



20 Park Place, Cardiff  
Tony Hisgett, CC BY 2.0, via Wikimedia Commons



According to Mordaunt Crook, William made a significant 'mistake' in the plans for the entrance to the house. As you walk in, the first thing you see is the underside of the huge staircase! William made sure that he didn't repeat the same mistake in his own house which he built later, which had a very similar design apart from this unusual blunder. The house became well-known and people tried to imitate its style in Cardiff and beyond. John B Hilling in his book, 'Architecture of Wales' (2018), noted that the building "revolutionised Cardiff's domestic architecture".

The house at 20 Park Place, (known later as 'Park House'), has a chequered history. In the 1970s the Western Mail reported the

*"Sad Puzzle of No 20, Park Place".*

By 1975, the Vale of Glamorgan Council had taken over ownership of the building and it was left empty. The newspaper described the once beautiful building as being neglected,

*"Windows are broken and cracked, dust and dirt begins to accumulate, the future looks bleak..."*

Fortunately, 20 Park Place survived, was sold to private buyers, and until recently, was a restaurant. The house is now protected and listed by Cadw as a Grade 1 property, which means its architecture can't be changed without permission. Now a private home, the sale of this beautiful building was handled by the estate agents for the well-off, Savills, for an unknown sum.



## Arts and Crafts and the beauty of things

*"If their work can hardly be called cheap; it is certainly not dear, when we consider that it speaks and tells a story, which assuredly cannot be said of most modern furniture." - William Burges, describing the work of Arts and Crafts pioneers William Morris and Company in 1875.*



*An elephant teapot designed by William Burges  
© People's Collection Wales.*

As well as buildings, William was also obsessed with the beauty of 'things'. He believed the future of architecture lay in beautiful and often quirky designs for furniture, stained glass, ceramics and metalwork. His quirky elephant teapot (left) shows his sense of humour often shone through in his designs for these objects. Even a slop basin designed by Burges had to be stylish!



*Slop basin, teapot and caddy, from William Burges's collection © People's Collection Wales.*





A headboard designed by William Burges © People's Collection Wales

This made him a key influence on the Arts and Crafts movement. This was a movement that became popular in the late 19th century and could be said to be a direct reaction to the "over industrialisation" and mass-making of the period. The Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society founded in London in 1887 wanted the public to respect the work of crafts people and artists. William Morris, is the most famous designer who championed this movement.

*"Burges... sought to control every aspect of his architectural commissions, designing elaborate decorative schemes in wood, stone, metal, paint and marble to adorn the interiors and exteriors of his buildings."* - The Arts and Crafts Home



## The famous Tulip vases



One of the Tulip vases designed by Burges  
© Museum Wales

One of William's most valuable "things" is the Tulip vase. This is no ordinary vase, as Andrew Renton, Head of Design Collectibles at Museum Wales, explains:

*"Amgueddfa Cymru has in its collections a remarkable pottery vase designed by William Burges (1827-1881) for the Summer Smoking Room at Cardiff Castle... This vase is among the most important examples of Victorian design with a Welsh connection. It was created as part of one of the pre-eminent architectural and decorative commissions of the nineteenth century, and certainly the most significant in Wales."*

The set of four vases was removed from Cardiff Castle by August 1948, after the Castle had been presented to the City of Cardiff in 1947. Two were bought by poet John Betjeman, who

in 1965 gave them to Charles Handley-Read, whose thank-you note read, "I am near to bursting with gratitude and delight." Fortunately, Museum Wales managed to raise grant money to buy one vase back.

The colourful vase is considered an excellent example of the influences of the Art and Crafts movement as described by Andrew Renton. He also notes that it shows the games Burges and Bute played with each other. A kind of 'oneupmanship' in how many influences they could throw in their objects and buildings!

Paul Davies speculated that William, a life-long bachelor, used his obsession for objects as a substitute for human connection: "He protected himself with objects; other intimacies seem irrelevant." It's tempting in the 21st century to overanalyse the actions of historical figures. But it's true that William was obsessive in the pursuit of beauty and perfection in his work.





## A rock star home

We've seen how William designed homes for the Butes and others, but what about his own house? It doesn't disappoint! His 'Tower House' was described as 'massive, learned, glittering, amazing' by architect, WR Lethaby. The rock star, Jimmy Page, who was in the famous band, Led Zeppelin, bought the house at the age of 28 in 1973.

In 2018, he got into a planning dispute with a famous neighbour, the pop star, Robbie Williams, who wanted permission to start building works on his house. Page explained to The Guardian at the time:

*"I knew what a Grade I-listed building was and what a privilege it was to live in something like this... Tower House is extraordinary... those amazing mosaic floors which any vibration could impact on. It's one of the great hidden interiors of London. This house is coming from Burges's own soul, his own heart. It's pure, undiluted Burges. Someone [talking about the building works] needs to wake up and realise the importance of this building."*



Burges's home, Tower House, London

Sadly, William didn't get a chance to enjoy his stunning home for long. While visiting Cardiff in 1881, he took a long ride in a horse-drawn carriage. He caught a chill, which left him half-paralysed. Three weeks later on 20 April 1881, he died in his 'Red Bed' at the Tower House aged only 53. Among his last visitors were Oscar Wilde and the great artist, James Whistler. He was buried in the tomb he designed for his mother at West Norwood, London.



Image showing Burges's bedroom at the Tower House from 'The House of William Burges ARA' (Edited by RP Pullan), 1885.

It's said that William's fondness for the drug opium, which he encountered on a trip to Constantinople, according to his biographer, Crook, had contributed towards his death. The 'Dictionary of Scottish Architects' even stated with certainty that his early death was brought about

*"at least partly as a result of his bachelor lifestyle of smoking both tobacco and opium."*

Some critics have even speculated that being under the influence of opium contributed to his fantastical designs!

His friends and colleagues were devastated. John Starling Chapple, Burges's faithful assistant for more than 20 years, wrote,

*"I have hardly got to realise my lonely position yet. He was almost all the world to me."*





## The Forgotten Genius

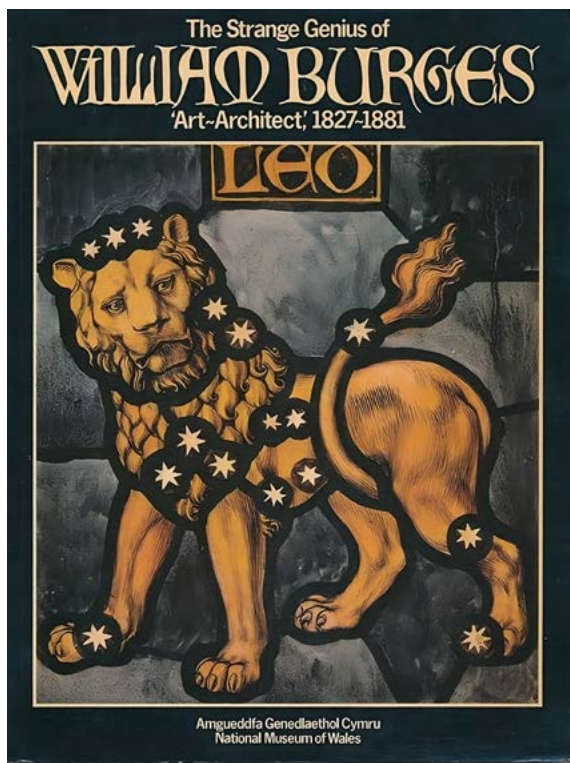
By the early 1900s, Gothic architecture was no longer popular and considered 'old fashioned' and over the top. Many owners of William's buildings altered them. His jewellery and stained glass were discarded and his furniture given away.

One of the only people to champion him after his death was his brother-in-law, Richard Popplewell Pullan. An illustrator and archaeologist, he was married to William's sister. They inherited and lived in The Tower House and Pullan published collections of Burges's designs, including *Architectural Designs of William Burges* (1883) and *The House of William Burges* (1886). In his introduction to the second book, he writes that he hopes the work

*"would be warmly welcomed and thoroughly appreciated, not only by his professional brethren, but by all men of educated taste in Europe and America."*



## The cult of Billy Burges



*The Strange Genius* exhibition book 1981  
© Museum Wales

It would take over a hundred years before William's talents were again appreciated. The National Museum of Wales and the V&A Museum marked the centenary of his death, with the 'Strange Genius' joint exhibition in 1981.

Suddenly 'Billy' Burges was becoming a 'cult' among Victorian enthusiasts. People started collecting his works again. You can still find these objects for sale online. But these days, a single 'Zodiac' ceramic tile designed by Burges sells for £500 at the most exclusive auction houses.

We in Wales can remember William at the peak of his powers, through the wonderful buildings he created with the best craftsmen and the support of a passionate patron. These buildings are still cherished and protected, which would have pleased him:

*"The great questions will then be, first, is this work beautiful and, secondly, have those to whom it was entrusted, done it with all their heart and all their ability?" - William Burges*

