

# Regional Furniture Society

NEWSLETTER



AUTUMN 2014 No. 61

# A Recently Discovered Pair of William Burges Chairs

Much of William Burges's furniture is based on medieval French designs, and some existing pieces in particular, directly follow the designs published in the *Dictionnaire Raisonné du Mobilier Français de L'époque Carolingienne à la Renaissance* (published between 1858 and 1870) by the 19th-century French architect Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc (1814–1879).

However, this pair of rush-seated chairs (Fig. 1), of which a few examples survive, appears to be French decorated by Burges himself in England. The chairs are shaped using a drawknife, leaving an imperfect surface covered with facets. They are also somewhat crudely made from pine. Both features indicate French rather than English construction. Interestingly, many of the examples known today retain a rush seat under later upholstery (presumably an afterthought) as this can be seen in the contemporary photographs. These chairs retain their original rush seats and display evidence of crude upholstery having been removed. From 1875 to 1881, Burges worked on his own home, called Tower House, on Melbury Road, Kensington. The 'Mermaid Bedroom' in Tower House was so called because of the carved stone chimneybreast that featured a mermaid gazing at her reflection in a hand mirror.

The Mermaid and Triton (or the Sea Monsters) (Fig. 2) was a favoured decorative device of William Burges; he not only used it for his earlier Buckingham Street, Westminster, bedroom (Fig. 3) and his Tower House bedroom but also intended it to be used at Knightshayes Court. He was commissioned to build Knightshayes Court, Devon, the family home for Sir John Heathcoat Amory; he was owner of the Heathcoat lace making works in Tiverton.



Fig. 1 (above) One of the pair of rush-seated chairs designed by William Burges

Fig. 2 (right) Detail of one of the backs showing the Mermaid/Sea Monster decoration



Fig. 3 William Burges's bedroom in Buckingham Street Westminster, before his move to Melbury Road

Construction started in 1869 and by 1874 the house was structurally complete.

Along with the building itself Burges designed the complete interior scheme for the house. This scheme included the chimneypiece in the Boudoir, designed with a Mermaid supporting a shelf, identical to the chimneypiece in the Mermaid Bedroom at Tower House. Sadly, however, by 1874 William Burges and Heathcoat Amory were at odds, and none of this scheme was realized. As a result of this Knightshayes was, by 1883, finished by the more conventional decorator, John Dibblee Crace, in a more diluted gothic style. This also means the house today has no Burges designed furniture of its own. The restored 'Burges room' at Knightshayes has been finished according to the original Burges scheme. The room has been re-furnished using Burges-designed pieces on loan from the V&A's collection. As of 2014 this pair has been loaned to the National Trust to complete the Burges room.

*Paul A. Shutler*