

Re awakening

Langlands & Bell

The Burges Chapel, Mount Stuart

One of the great surprises of Mount Stuart is a small private Chapel, never before opened to the public, that lurks behind the demure, harled façade of the eighteenth-century service wing. Here, in 1873, the 3rd Marquess of Bute commissioned the architect, William Burges, to create a tiny basilica for his private devotions. A survivor of the terrible fire that destroyed most of the house in 1877, it is William Burges's only architectural work at Mount Stuart.

John Patrick Crichton-Stuart, 3rd Marquess of Bute, was born in 1847 and inherited the Bute titles, estates and vast fortune on the premature death of his father the following year. A sensitive, scholarly and rather reclusive man, the 3rd Marquess converted to Roman Catholicism in 1868. As well as being devout, Lord Bute was fascinated with the history and ritual of the early Church, and his commission to Burges for the Chapel was probably made shortly after his return from an extensive tour of Italy and the Holy Land in 1869-70. He met William Burges in 1865, and the two shared a common enthusiasm for reviving the glories of Byzantine and Medieval architecture.

The Chapel Burges created at Mount Stuart was conceived as a private oratory for the deeply religious, and - in later years, largely nocturnal – Lord Bute. Burges ingeniously fitted up what had probably been two floors of servants bedrooms, into a diminutive double-height early-Christian basilica, its pitched-roofed 'nave' supported by ten slender columns, around which runs a diminutive ambulatory. The style adopted is Byzantine – which the architect had studied first-hand in Italy and in Constantinople - but instead of the rich marbles and mosaic of San Marco or Monreale, everything in the Mount Stuart Chapel is economically achieved with painted and gilded wood or plaster. The relatively modest materials are in their own right unusual to both Bute and Burges – who usually delighted in costly marbles – but the Chapel was built at the height of a financial crisis which affected Lord Bute's income in 1874-75. It may also be that this simplicity was thought appropriate for such a private, hermetic chapel, hidden away like some recusant place of worship in the attics of the service wing of the house. Thus, the columns of the Chapel are of scagliola, a type of plaster imitating marble – in this case *Verd Antique* – while the capitals are gilded wood, picked out with scarlet - no two being alike. The columned screens were probably inspired by the arcaded nave of San Apollinaire at Ravenna, where Burges borrowed the idea of using the wall above the columns for depictions of saints processing towards the altar. Lord Bute himself devised the iconography of the frieze; female saints being depicted on the west side of the Chapel, male saints on the other. The inscriptions that run around the Chapel were taken from the Books of Genesis and Revelation. The focus of the Chapel is the gilded wood altar at its southern end, above which a mural depicts Christ enthroned in Majesty, surrounded by the Virgin Mary, the Apostles, and other saints. This was also to Lord Bute's own design, with gilded *nimbi* around the heads of the principal figures being raised in high relief and enriched with glass 'jewels'. The gilded candlesticks and symbolic deer drinking from the waters that flow from the base of Christ's throne were added later, on Bute's orders, using local roe deer as models. In addition to the painted murals, almost

every surface in the upper part of the Chapel is covered with elaborate painted and gilded decoration; arabesques with stylised birds combined with simple diapers on the rafters, while the friezes below incorporate chimera-like bird-beasts confronting each other amidst foliage. The outermost walls of the ambulatory are wainscoted with figured oak, divided up with fluted pilasters enriched with gilding.

The Mount Stuart Chapel is not – as has been claimed – a copy of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem - one of Christendom’s holiest shrines, where, in the year 325, the Empress Dowager Helena had been shown the tomb of Christ and vowed to build ‘a basilica more beautiful than any on earth’. It is actually a reliquary commemorating the 3rd Marquess of Bute’s first pilgrimage to the Holy Land in 1865. Thus, the gilded altar stands on a base painted with maps of Palestine, and encloses a frame containing tiny fragments of stone collected by Lord Bute from the Holy Places he visited – including the Church of the Holy Sepulchre - together with a garland of dried flowers gathered from the Garden of Gethsemene. Whilst in Palestine, Bute walked to Bethlehem in the company of a Franciscan friar; the mother-of pearl settings of the relics are characteristic of those made by Franciscan monks in Bethlehem so they were possibly commissioned on this pilgrimage. Lord Bute also acquired an elaborately carved mother-of-pearl crucifix, which he may have intended to stand on the altar. Bute evidently regarded his pilgrimage to the Holy Land as one of the most important events in his life - his will directed that his heart be taken to Jerusalem and buried on the Mount of Olives - so the Chapel he created to commemorate it takes on an autobiographical character and significance. Here Bute’s first child, Margaret, was baptised on Christmas Day, 1875, while around the walls he hung the framed icons he had brought back from his trip to Russia in 1868. The Chapel and the wing that contained it escaped unharmed during the great fire that destroyed most of Mount Stuart in 1877, but it was doubtless its sentimental importance that ensured its survival during the rebuilding of the house as a great prickly palace of red sandstone between 1879 and 1884. Indeed, Burges’s Chapel was piously preserved, and it was later carefully connected to the new house chapel - a soaring edifice in gleaming white marble erected to the designs of Burges’s successor, Robert Rowand Anderson, from 1896 - via a ‘bridge’ at first-floor level.

Langlands and Bell’s intervention in the Burges Chapel – which has enabled it to be shown to the public for the first time – concentrates appropriately on the bare, probably unfinished, floor of the room. The artists witty and simple masterstroke of covering the floorboards with looking glass has the effect of doubling through reflection the richly decorated Chapel above. It is like entering some bejewelled reliquary casket - an appropriate metaphor given the Chapel’s role as a relic chamber - the exploration of the theme of reflections echoes both William Burges’s own fascination with, and extensive use of, mirrors and polished stones, and metaphorically recalls Bute’s quest to reflect an idealised vision of the Holy Land on the Island of Bute.