

The Landmark Trust

THE MAYOR'S PARLOUR, AT THE MAISON DIEU, DOVE

The Maison Dieu (or House of God) began as a monastery around 1200, offering 'hospitality for all strangers'. The surviving Stone Hall dates from the 13th century, and the lower levels of the tower a century later. After the Reformation closed the monastery, the site was used as a victualling store for the Royal Navy until the early 1830s, when it was acquired by the Board of Ordnance, who demolished parts of the shambling site. In 1834, they sold the remaining structures to Dover Corporation for conversion to use as a town hall, court room and gaol.

After years of delays, from 1859-61 the Stone Hall was restored by architect Ambrose Poynter, assisted by a young William Burges (1827-1881). Burges was an inspired choice for this medieval site. He lived and breathed the styles of the Middle Ages, with a sprinkling of eclectic external influences from the Continent and the Eastern Mediterranean. His biographer J. Mordaunt Crook summed up Burges's role in the Victorian Gothic Revival as 'the most dazzling exponent of the High Victorian Dream. Pugin conceived that dream, but never lived to see it. Rossetti and Burne Jones painted it; Tennyson sang its glories; Ruskin and Morris formulated its philosophy; but only Burges built it'. The Maison Dieu was Burges's only civic commission and takes its place alongside his better-known buildings like Castell Coch and Cardiff Castle.

Poynter's eyesight was failing and by 1865, Burges was retained as chief architect for the Maison Dieu; there was much more to do. There were more delays and false starts on the part of the Dover Corporation, but in 1880, Burges submitted his plans for a law court, a fine assembly hall (the Connaught Hall) and sumptuous new mayoral rooms, working within and around the surviving medieval elements. However, in April 1881, Burges died unexpectedly after catching a chill from a ride in dog cart, before work had begun. Burges's brother-in-law Richard Popplewell Pullan proposed that he and Burges's principal assistant John Chapple take over the brief. Chapple had worked closely with Burges and both he and Pullan were both deeply immersed in Burges's design idiom. They completed Connaught Hall and implemented Burges's other proposals.

The structure and circulation pattern of the Mayor's Parlour suite, including the Minute Rooms on the floor above, are as designed by Burges. It is not clear whether their neo-medieval decorative schemes originate from Burges or Pullan or Chapple, but perhaps their styles were so entwined that this does not matter. The Maison Dieu is a more attenuated version of Burges's rich style, pared down from his artistically peopled interiors for rich personal clients, to a more simple decorative approach, one more attuned to the required mood of civic spaces, as well as to the Corporation's more limited budget.

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Some of the richest interiors at the Maison Dieu are in the Mayor's Parlour. It was never intended as a domestic space, but rather for the Mayor to hold ceremonial council meetings at the round table designed by Pullan, with the circular-backed chairs with their lion-headed arms (now restored). The adjacent Magistrate's Retiring Room with daisies stenciled across its walls formerly led off the Stone Hall beyond, where the court sessions were held (today the Retiring Room is the Landmark kitchen). These rooms were conceived by Burges as the equivalent of privy chambers at a medieval court, for use at moments of civic and judicial ceremony and other important business, dignified by the high coffered ceilings and a tall, hooded stone fireplace.

Burges, Pullan and Chapple's collective transformation of this medieval complex to make it fit for late-Victorian civic use was highly successful, and it became the hub of town life for more than a century. In the 1980s, Dover District Council (DDC) relocated to more modern offices elsewhere. Connaught Hall continued to be used for events, but eventually dilapidation set in. In 2016, planning a major restoration project, DDC approached Landmark for help with a new use for the Mayor's Parlour suite after its restoration, to which we were glad to agree. In 2021, DDC began an £8.5m restoration scheme for Maison Dieu as a whole, assisted by their major grant from the National Lottery Heritage Fund.

In consultation with Landmark, the Mayor's Parlour was restored by DDC as part of this overarching project. A transforming highlight was the painstaking restoration throughout of the 1880s decorative schemes by Arte Conservation on the basis of exploratory areas. Extensive paint trials were carried out to understand the original Burgesian decorative scheme. The trial areas were then covered in special protective Japanese tissue paper to ensure their survival, and the whole was scheme recreated, using stencils as the same technique as in the 1880s, using colours carefully matched to the originals. This leaves the original paint schemes safely intact beneath the layers of later paint. The wooden coffered ceilings were cleaned and regilded.

Many other original features remain in the Mayor's Parlour suite of rooms: the chimney pieces in the Parlour and Magistrates' Retiring Room; tiled floors and some joinery. The men's urinal in the apartment is also original, thoughtfully placed close to the Parlour by Burges. The original council table and chairs (probably designed by Richard Pullan), now form a very grand dining set, on loan from DDC. On the second floor, bedrooms and bathrooms have been created in the generously proportioned the Minute Rooms, where clerks once toiled on the copious minutes required in the running of Dover's civic affairs. The medieval past, both real and imagined, still breathes through the Mayor's Parlour suite's re-purposed spaces, enhanced by this heady overlay from the imagination of the High Victorians.

The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays to pay for their future maintenance. The Mayor's Parlour apartment sleeps up to 6 people. To book the building or any other Landmark property for a holiday, please visit www.landmarktrust.org.uk.