

FREDERICK GRIGGS, RA AND CHIPPING CAMPDEN

by Geoffrey Powell

A short time after Frederick Landseer Maur Griggs died in 1938, J S Squire wrote in his *Water Music*, 'It is odd how little he, one of the best etchers and draughtsmen since Durer, is known outside the limited circle of critics and collectors'.¹ This article will discuss, not Griggs' place in history as an artist, but his attempt to preserve and enhance the beauty of the North Cotswolds, and especially Chipping Campden.

The artist's devotion to Chipping Campden was a product of his maturity. His first love was his birthplace, the then small market town of Hitchin in Hertfordshire. In Hitchin he grew up, nearby he was educated, and there his talents as an artist developed and his love of the antique, especially the medieval, was fostered. As his close friend Reginald Hine was to write, 'His heart — like his religion — was staked firmly and far back in the Middle Ages. It was there he found the best craft-work, the beauty, simplicity and piety of life — cities and towns and churches just as they should be'.²

The commission by Sir Frederick Macmillan to illustrate his firm's *Highways and Byways* series about the British countryside provided Griggs with the opportunity of immersing himself in the then unspoilt beauty of the central and southern counties. The task was to last him—and sustain him financially—for the rest of his life. In late 1903, the undertaking brought him to Campden, and it is perhaps a measure of the town's timeless qualities that he chose to make his home there. To another friend—he was an inveterate correspondent³ and his letters are a delight to read—he was to write, 'You really ought to see Campden, which has a better air of antiquity and more personality than any town I know'.⁴ As he put it, he had discovered that 'In summer time and always in fine weather, it's the country — on dull grey days it takes on the air of a small Dickensian town'.⁵ Campden's prosperity had rested upon its role as an entrepot for the collection and export of wool, but during the 15th century this prosperity was to collapse. Instead of selling the raw

material England began to manufacture cloth and in the North Cotswolds the water-power to turn wheels was lacking. So then and later Campden failed to attract industry and it reverted to being a small market town without the resources to build, over the years, more than a succession of modest houses along the length of its High Street. This George Macaulay Trevelyan was to describe as 'The most beautiful street now left in the island',⁶ and this was Campden's, core, together with the perpendicular glories of its St. James's Church, the almshouses built by Sir Baptist Hicks and the ruins of that same entrepreneur's mansion,⁷ all grouped at the High Street's northern end.

For a man who was in the habit of fulminating against the internal-combustion engine and many of the other technical advances that were so to change rural Britain, it was somewhat out of character that Griggs should have arrived in Campden on a noisy Rex motor-tricycle.⁸ A quarter of a century later he was to complain that 'this small town, or large village, where once the birds sang in the streets, what time every man or woman was at work, and where peace and contentment reigned, it is now just a silly pandemonium, where there is neither peace or contentment, nor is there any work done! And it is all due to the Muddy Bloater'.⁹ It was something of a paradox that much of this traffic had, of course, been attracted to the Cotswolds by the *Oxford and the Cotswolds* volume of *Highways and Byways*, illustrated by him.

GRIGGS' SETTLEMENT IN CHIPPING CAMPDEN

In 1904 Griggs again returned for two short visits, and then he came to stay for good, first lodging with C R Ashbee's guildsmen at Braithwaite House. Three years before, Ashbee had brought his Guild of Handicrafts out of the Mile End Road, 150 men, women and children, most of them Cockneys and impelled by Ashbee's vision of working people combining craftsmanship with husbandry in healthy and beautiful surroundings. Although Griggs was to make close friends among Ashbee's craftsmen, at no time was he involved in the organisation or work of the Guild, which was, in any case, to lose its character as a co-operative venture in 1907; a combination of high overheads, cheap competition and trade depression forced it into liquidation and obliged all but a dozen or so of the men to leave and find a living elsewhere.¹⁰

Campden's beauty was under threat, as was the case in so many other similar towns and villages, with the spread of new technologies, the use of brick or tile for building, carried to the nearest station by train and ferried to the site by lorry, and the installation of telephone and electricity wires were disfiguring streets. Ribbon development economised on the new water-mains and drains. Tin-plate and paper for advertisements were cheap.

Before the Town and Country Planning Act of 1947, little effective legislation existed to protect what today is known as the 'environment' and everything depended upon public opinion, voluntary effort and persuasion. In the 1920s unemployment was rife, cottages (even when available) usually insanitary and wages inadequate. Small shopkeepers were finding it hard to scrape a living; landowners were selling off their uneconomic estates. In such circumstances it was hardly surprising that proposals for building council houses in a more expensive style, and merely for aesthetic reasons, aroused opposition, as did criticism of work-providing building developments. This was especially so when the opposition came from an 'incomer' such as Frederick Griggs.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPROVEMENTS

The credit for Campden's underground telephone and electricity cables lies with Griggs, one of his earliest



Frederick Griggs, RA

successes. In 1923, his growing fame as an artist was such that he possessed the influence to persuade the Post Office to carry their lines underground,¹¹ a remarkable feat in the climate of the time. He also managed to have grey paint substituted for the normal scarlet on the public call-box. Five years later he was to win a similar victory when the Shropshire, Worcestershire and Staffordshire Electric Company brought power to the town.¹² Twice again in the future he was to prevent cables being run across roofs of houses.¹³ Small street lanterns, remembered as producing a jewel-like effect at night, were also designed by Griggs, but when electricity replaced gas for street lighting, these lamps all went to the scrap-yard.¹⁴

Another danger threatening the High Street in the first half of the present century was the disintegration of the old buildings. Trained as an architect for two years¹⁵ before he decided to earn his living from his art, he was, in Campden, able to put his skills to sound use, collaborating with Ernest Gimson and entering into a loose form of partnership with his close friend, Norman Jewson, Gimson's pupil.¹⁶ When Griggs arrived in Campden, Ashbee had already begun the work of repairing a number of the more broken-down houses and cottages for the use of his guildsmen (some rented from Lord Gainsborough,¹⁷ the major local landowner), and Griggs was able to continue the task, so saving further buildings from rotting away and their eventual replacement by houses and shops in the style of the 1920s and 1930s. At one time even a cinema was proposed for the High Street, but then the young people needed entertainment to prevent their drifting into the cities.

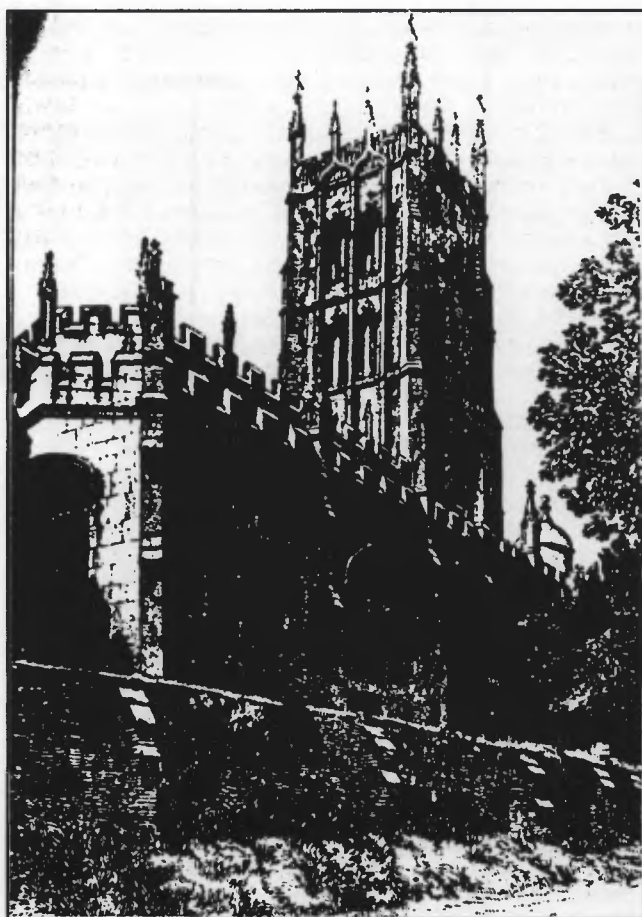
The present appearance of Miles and Westcote Houses, of the Caminetto restaurant, and of Keeley's store is due to Griggs, all in their various ways superbly restored.¹⁸ He advised the owner of the famous 14th century Grevel House on the replacement of poor work (as did Lutyens); the project excited Griggs, but the outcome is uncertain.¹⁹ Further afield, he designed Porchester Cottage in Westington, Court Piece at

Combe, and the priest's house in St. Katherine's Square in collaboration with Guy Pemberton.²⁰ In 1934 he was to collaborate with Jewson on modernising Campden House in Combe (not to be confused with Baptist Hicks' Campden House in the town), during the course of which many of the heavy Victorian accretions were removed.²¹ Many other examples of his work exist in or near the High Street. If the need were pressing, Griggs is known to have designed and superintended rescue work without fee, something he could ill afford to do;²² in 1926 he signed a cheque for £94 to save what he described to his life-long friend, the poet and artist Russell Alexander, as 'the jolly old corner' near Miles House, but he was saddened at being accused of having done it for 'pecuniary gain'.²³ Both Ashbee and Griggs were fine architects and both used local stone and slate, insisting upon the highest standards of craftsmanship. The result is that a discerning or a knowledgeable eye is needed to decide what work the two men did in the town — or in fact, to judge just who did what.

Griggs' major architectural achievement was, however, to be his own Dover's House (now known as Dover's Court) in Leysbourne, built when the sober Georgian House he had leased in 1905 in the High Street became too small for his rapidly growing family. Work on this new house continued until his death in 1938, and even then it was unfinished.²⁴ Griggs used for the work local craftsman, of whom there was no shortage, employing them as direct labour and providing them with rough sketches rather than detailed plans. He used local materials, and he apologised when the stone had to be brought from a quarry 15 miles distant.²⁵ If anything fell in any degree short of the standard he set, ruthlessly he would have it pulled down.²⁶ His friend, Edward Shanks was to write that Griggs was in the direct descent of William Morris, believing that beauty is essential in daily life and that the first requisite of beauty is honest craftsmanship.²⁷ Griggs was, in effect, creating for himself in stone and wood one of the medieval visions so often depicted in his etchings. It was also a challenge. A year after the work began, Sir Gordon Russell wrote to him, 'I feel strongly that the best way to tackle the wretched stuff that is going up in the Cotswolds is to build something better'.²⁸ Dover's House was to be an example of proper craftsmanship and design.

Griggs moved his printing-press into the half-built house in March 1930 and his family followed in the following October. It was damp and draughty — even the doors had yet to be hung — and Griggs correctly foresaw that 'it would never be really finished'.²⁹ Already he was discouraged, writing to Russell that 'all joy is gone', complaining of the 'bungling and mangling of every finished job'.³⁰ He had built the fine boundary wall before the house, realising that if he left it to the end he would have no money left to pay for it.³¹ He grew to describe the house as 'Griggs' Folly',³² and although he found much happiness there among his family and friends, worries about its ruinous cost undermined his health and interfered with his work.

Griggs did more for the High Street than merely rescue derelict buildings. In 1932 he fought the County Council to preserve the grass verges.³³ He designed wrought iron signs for shops, some fine examples of which have survived.³⁴ The war memorial to the fallen of 1914-18 is also his work, and he landscaped the lawns, gates and stone walls between the market hall and the town hall, upon which this memorial stands. Religious prejudice was rife in 1919, and seven years before Griggs had been received into the Roman Catholic Church. To some local people it was an affront that a so-called Papist should design the town's memorial, and Griggs was to grieve that 'To religion and politics as disturbers of public and private peace we must now add war memorials'.³⁵ The row was to continue for



The Church Tower, an etching by Griggs

eighteen months, the wounds festered for years, but in the end a 75 to 5 vote in his favour was cast at a disputatious town meeting, convened by his opponents. His talents were much in demand elsewhere in the Cotswolds: among others, the memorials at Broadway, Snowhill, Chedworth, Painswick and Winchcombe are all his work.³⁶

The peal of eight bells in St James's Church was one of Griggs' great joys, one of the reasons which persuaded him to make his house in Campden.³⁷ On being received into the Catholic Church, Griggs took the baptismal name of Maur and he presented to St Katherine's Church a new bell, named Maurus. The day following his baptism he rang a triumphant Angelus upon it.³⁸ His love for bells is perhaps reflected in the famous annual feast he gave for the St James's bell-ringers at the Lygon Arms. Griggs was a convivial man, and however much many of his activities may have been disliked locally, individuals from all classes enjoyed his company.

Over the years the beauty of St Katherine's was to be further enhanced by examples of Griggs' work. They are an indication of the wide range of materials in which he designed and include a silver chalice, candle-sconces, the pulpit, vestment cupboard, copes and a chasuble. The Calvary in the nearby burial ground that keeps vigil over his grave is also his work.³⁹

PERIPHERAL CHANGES

Griggs was concerned with the appearance of the outskirts of Campden as well as its centre. Reported at great length in *The Times* was the battle he fought in 1931 against a proposal to use red brick for eight council houses in Station Road. The difference in cost between building in stone and in brick was £80 for each house, a considerable sum, 20% of the total, and an additional burden on the rates at a time of major financial stringency. Griggs succeeded in arranging a compromise:

the houses would have stone quoins and the brickwork rough-cast and lime washed, so reducing the extra total cost to £428, £200 of which was paid by the Campden Trust (of which more later) and the rest by individual wellwishers, the largest sum of £200 being found by Sir Stafford Cripps.⁴⁰ Some members of the Rural District Council were reluctant to agree to the compromise. If Campden were to be made 'a show place and a precedent',⁴¹ they complained, Campden should pay for it and the rest of the area should not have to contribute towards Campden's special requirements. A precedent was set. Most of Campden's later council houses have been built of stone and in excellent design, noteworthy being the award-winning Littleworth Estate.

One of Griggs' outstanding feats was his rescue of Dover's Hill, standing above Campden. In 1926 its owner had been obliged to sell by auction this famous landmark with its associations with the 17th century Dover's Games.⁴² A roadhouse was suggested as a suitable use for the site, and suitable it would have been with its magnificent views across to Bredon, the Malverns and the Welsh mountains. An attempt to raise the money before the sale produced only £700, so Griggs decided to risk everything he possessed and buy the hill himself. His bid of £4,400 for the 178 acres was successful. After the sale, a letter from the National Trust in *The Times* appealed for the money, and a long article in the same edition referred to 'the amazing courage and generosity of the promoter of the scheme'.⁴³ Stimulated though Griggs was by the scheme it was an intensely worrying time. The hoped-for support was slow in coming and two days before Christmas Griggs was obliged to write a personal cheque for £2,000.⁴⁴ Eventually, however, wealthy friends came to the rescue and the money was raised, Trevelyan finding the final balance of £1,700. The victory produced widespread pleasure in the national as well as the local press, but the people of Campden showed little gratitude.

A further and similar coup followed in 1934. For several years development had threatened the Coneygree, a sweeping stretch of ridge-and-furrow which over the years has provided the background to countless drawings, paintings and photographs of St James's Church and the ruins of Baptist Hicks' house.⁴⁵ Griggs was largely responsible for arranging for the Campden Trust to buy the land for £1,500; handed over to the National Trust, it was safe for ever.⁴⁶

THE CAMPDEN SOCIETY

Griggs founded the original Campden Society in 1924, its aims being the protection of the beauty and character of the town of Campden and its neighbourhood, the preservation of its ancient crafts and traditions, and the promotion of the best interests of its local arts and crafts.⁴⁷ Except for laying on a number of exhibitions of local work, it was not a success. Griggs was not consulted on major issues and he found his involvement 'difficult and bothersome' and it brought him only frustration and exasperation. In 1927, he resigned, disgusted.⁴⁸ The politics of it all remain hidden, but one suspects that he may have been a little high-handed in his treatment of fellow-members.

When he resigned from the Campden Society Griggs realised that some other body was needed to protect the town. The consequence was that, in 1929, he was largely instrumental in founding the Campden Trust.⁴⁹ Funds were initially provided by a member of the Cadbury family and were controlled by a small committee of influential people with whom Griggs could work happily. One of the trust's major activities was to buy derelict and threatened buildings, rehabilitate them, and then sell them. The first building to be tackled was the Plough Inn which Griggs had already bought to prevent its destruction.⁵⁰ Both Griggs and Jewson in turn became chairmen, but one of the trust's major achievements, ranking with its purchase of the

Coneygree, occurred four years after Griggs' death. A focal point in the High Street is the 17th century butter and cheese market, built by Baptist Hicks. In 1942 the trust was to buy it and transfer its freehold to the National Trust. There was at that time a distant threat that the building might be demolished and its stone exported to the United States for re-erection there.⁵¹

GRIGGS IN RETROSPECT

In 1968, Sir Gordon Russell remarked in his autobiography that Frederick Griggs 'loved Campden with a passionate devotion' and that he thought that 'today few people living there realize how much they owe to him'.⁵² His tangible successes are there for all to see: Dover's Hill and the Coneygree to be enjoyed by all; the grass verges of the High Street and the absence of tendrils of cables; the restoration work so harmoniously completed that it goes unnoticed; and so much more. But working through the Campden Society and the Campden Trust, by unceasing argument and propaganda, and above all by his personal example of whole-hearted generosity, Griggs spread ideas locally that took root: the need for open spaces; the importance of proper design, materials and workmanship (even for local authority buildings); the value of tradition; the need to preserve the best of the past.

As an enthusiastic supporter both of the Council for the Preservation of Rural England and the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, and as a president of the Art Workers' Guild, Griggs was involved nationally as well as locally in the cause of providing decent surroundings for ordinary people to live in. Deeply influenced as he had been by the writings of Ruskin and Morris, it is not easy to establish the extent to which he was himself an innovator and how much he owed to his contemporaries, especially W R Lethaby, whose compelling essays were first published in book form in 1922. Among his extensive correspondence no letters between the two men exist nor have any references to Lethaby been found, but Griggs widow, sixty years later, remembers her husband handing her Lethaby's book to read, These words, from the essay *Architecture as Form in Civilization*, must surely have impressed Griggs:

We need a movement in the common mind, a longing to mitigate the vulgarity and anarchy of our streets, and the smothering of the frontages with vile advertisements, a desire to clean the streets better, to renew blistered plaster. Some order must be brought into the arrangement of the untidy festoons of telegraph and telephone wires hitched up to chimneys and parapets... Every town should set up an advisory committee to its betterment. We must try to bring back the idea of town personality and town worship...⁵³

Griggs forecast that 'People will at last realize that Mammon has robbed them . . . of their rightful heritage'.⁵⁴ Perhaps today this may be starting to happen. Much of what Griggs fought for has been destroyed since his death, but far less than would have been but for the values he managed to inculcate into others.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Unpublished Material

F L Griggs: Correspondence in Ashmolean Museum
Photographs and papers in possession of Mrs Nina Griggs.
Minutes of the Campden Trust.

Published Material

Francis Adams Comstock, *A Gothic Vision: F L Griggs and his Work*. (Boston Public Library and Ashmolean Museum, 1966) Alan Crawford, *C R Ashbee: Architect, Designer and Romantic Socialist*. (Yale University Press, 1985) F L Griggs, *Campden* (Shakespeare Head Press, 1940) Reginald L Hine, *The Life and Art-Work of F L Griggs*. RA. (Dent, 1951) Norman Jewson, *By Chance I Did Rove* (Privately printed, 1973) W R Lethaby, *Form in Civilization: Collected papers on Art and Labour* (Oxford University Press, 1922) Fiona MacCarthy, *The Simple Life: C R Ashbee in the Cotswolds* (Lund Humphries, 1981). Geoffrey Powell, *The Book of Campden* (Barracuda Books, 1982) Gordon Russell, *Designer Trade*. (Allen & Unwin, 1968) Christopher Whitfield, *A History of Chipping Campden* (Shakespeare Head Press, 1958).

Interviews

I am especially grateful to the late Mrs Nina Griggs for all the help and information about her husband she gave me. Also I must thank the following for searching their memories for information about Frederick Griggs: Mr F Coldicott, Mrs H Hart and Mrs Robertson.

NOTES

Except where otherwise stated, letters quoted are in the Ashmolean Museum, I am grateful to the Museum and the late Mrs Nina Griggs for permission to use and to quote, and to the staff of the Ashmolean, and especially to Mr Ian Lowe and to Mrs Margaret Corsham, for their help in making the records available to me. When quoting from these letters, the abbreviations FLG and RA are used for Frederick Griggs and Russell Alexander. Works listed in the bibliography are referred to in the notes by the author's name.

1. Quoted by Comstock, 1.
2. Hine, 226-7. Also by Sir Hugh Walpole in his introduction to the Cheltenham exhibition of Griggs' work in Feb/Mar 1939.
3. The Ashmolean holds some 2000 letters written by Griggs.
4. FLG to Charles Broad, 12 Aug 1905.
5. FLG to RA, 13 Sept 1910. The description is still valid.
6. G M Trevelyan, *English Social History* (Longmans, 1942) 35.
7. For information on Sir Baptist Hicks, see Powell & Whitfield,
8. Whitfield, 245.
9. FLG to RA, 12 June 1930.
10. For Ashbee and the Guild of Handicrafts see Crawford & MacCarthy.
11. Whitfield, 252.
12. *ibid.* 257-8.
13. Gloucestershire Branch CPRE, to FLG, 25 Oct 1934 and to Shropshire, Worcestershire and Staffordshire Electric Company, 19 Nov 1935.
14. Letter to author from W B Adam in archives of Campden & District Historical & Archaeological Society.
15. Comstock, 8.
16. Jewson, 30; FLG to RA, 10 Nov 1917.
17. MacCarthy, 45.
18. Comstock, 322, and photographs in possession of Mrs Nina Griggs.
19. FLG to RA, 25 Aug 1934.
20. Whitfield, 263.
21. FLG to RA, 25 Aug 1934.
22. Quoted Comstock, 2.
23. FLG to RA, 23 Dec 1926.
24. Comstock, 23-26; information to author from Mr H Hart and Mr F Coldicott.
25. Comstock, 23-26.
26. Information from Mr F Coldicott.
27. Comstock, 250-251, quoting Edwin Shanks, *My England*.
28. Gordon Russell to FLG, 16 Feb 1928.
29. *ibid.* 18 Oct 1930.
30. *ibid.* 30 Sept 1930.
31. Comstock, 25.
32. *ibid.* 28.
33. FLG to RA, 23 May 1932; Comstock, 24. Regularly suggestions are still made for asphaltting them over for car parking.
34. Hine, 226; Comstock, 316-317. His work has set a standard which acts as a reproach to some shoddy recent work.
35. FLG to Harry Shelvoke, 14 May 1920.
36. FLG to RA, 8 June 1919, 22 Dec 1925, 9 Oct 1919; Comstock, 322.
37. Hine, 229.
38. Comstock, 13.
39. FLG to RA, 26 Dec 1914; Comstock, 315-7; photographs in possession of Mrs N Griggs.
40. *The Times*, 18 Aug 1931; *Four Shires Advertiser*, 15 Aug 1931; Lord Dulverton to FLG, 25 May 1931; FLG to Clerk, Campden Rural District Council, 18 Aug 1931; Campden Trust Minutes, 17 June 1931.
41. *The Times*, 18 Aug 1931.
42. Whitfield, 256.
43. *The Times*, 16 June 1926, letter from National Trust and article; FLG to RA, Good Friday 1926, 15 June 1926, 27 Nov 1926, 21 May 1926, 28 Oct 1926, 23 Dec 1926, 30 May 1926.
44. FLG to RA, 23 Dec 1926.
45. *ibid.* 31 Jan 1927.
46. Campden Trust Minutes, 21 Jan 1933 and 20 Sept 1933.
47. Whitfield, 255. The Society collapsed during the war years, but it was a marker for the future. In 1970, an entirely new Campden Society was formed which has done much to protect and improve the town and its surroundings.
48. FLG to RA 1 April 1927, 22 Dec 1925, 10 Mar 1926, Easter Sunday 1925, 4 Mar 1926 and 3 Mar 1927.
49. FLG to RA, 1 July 1928 and 16 April 1929.
50. Campden Trust Minutes, 16 April 1929.
51. Whitfield, 266.
52. Russell, 36. Seventeen years later the comment was truer still. Realising this, the Campden Society decided to organise, in October 1985, a tribute to Griggs with talks on various aspects of his life and what was to be the most comprehensive exhibition of his work yet mounted. His widow, Mrs Nina Griggs was present to watch her eldest daughter unveil a memorial plaque to her husband.
53. Lethaby, 15.
54. FLG to RA, 12 Feb 1924.

April 1988



*The War Memorial, Chipping Campden,
designed by Griggs*

[Image from front cover]