

Barbed-wire comforts

Interiors | 'Enemy aliens' interned on the Isle of

Man in the first world war crafted Charles

Rennie Mackintosh's furniture. By *Kate Youde*

The guest bedroom decor that WJ Bassett-Lowke had commissioned for his Northampton home was so striking that his wife, Florence, worried it might disturb their visitor's sleep. The guest in question, George Bernard Shaw, is said to have replied that she need not worry: he always slept with his eyes shut.

The room at 78 Derrigate, with its bold striped ceiling and rectilinear furniture, was the design of Charles Rennie Mackintosh. Bassett-Lowke, who ran a model engineering company, had enlisted the Scottish architect to transform his Georgian terraced house before he and Florence started married life there in March 1917.

The geometric patterned interiors are often described as "anticipating art deco". "From our perspective looking back, they seem to be ahead of their time," says Joseph Sharples, curator of Mackintosh collections at The Hunterian Museum in Glasgow. "There are elements of those designs which we see much more widely a decade or two later."

The modern look, achieved during wartime labour and material shortages, is remarkable considering that the furniture was made behind barbed wire. A permanent exhibition at the new Centre for World War I Internment in the Isle of Man, which opens to the public on April 3, will highlight how "enemy aliens" confined on the island brought Mackintosh's furniture designs to life.

Following the outbreak of the first world war, the government identified



WJ Bassett-Lowke and his wife Florence — 78 Derrigate

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the Isle of Man, a British crown dependency in the Irish Sea, as an ideal place to hold civilian internees. The first arrivals — men from enemy nations such as Germany, Austria, Hungary and Turkey deemed to be a threat to national security — were held at Cunningham's Holiday Camp in the capital Douglas, but poor conditions prompted a riot. In November 1914 a purpose-built camp opened at Knockaloe, a farm in the village of Patrick which had been



The hall-lounge at 78 Derrigate — 78 Derrigate

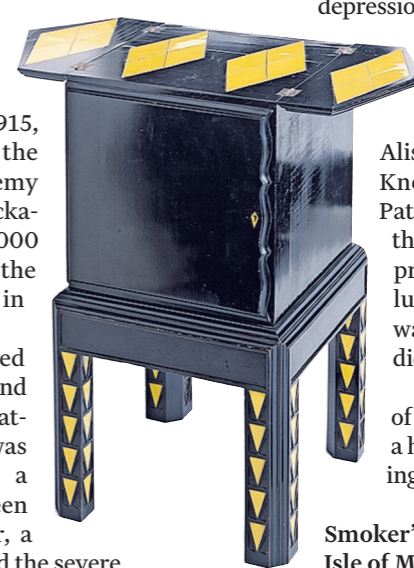


Charles Matt in a workshop, Knockaloe Camp — Manx National Heritage

used for military training.

As anti-German hostility increased following the sinking of the Lusitania passenger ship in May 1915, the government ordered the internment of all male enemy aliens of military age. Knockaloe grew to hold about 23,000 men at its peak, making it the largest internment camp in the British Isles.

The internees were housed in wooden huts in muddy and cold conditions, but the greatest threat to their health was "barbed wire disease", a phrase believed to have been coined by Dr AL Vischer, a camp inspector. It described the severe



depression caused by being imprisoned indefinitely and separated from their families. "People did actually go insane," says Alison Jones, director of the Knockaloe Exhibition and Patrick Community Centre, the charity behind the new project. "They did go to the lunatic asylum here, as it was called then, and they did actually die from it."

Recognising the danger of monotony, James T Baily, a handicrafts teacher working on behalf of the Friends'

Smoker's cabinet made in the Isle of Man — Victoria & Albert Museum.

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The dining room at 78 Deragate, Northampton — 78 Deragate

Emergency Committee, a Quaker organisation, helped internees set up workshops. They crafted decorative objects including vases from cow bones and wooden boxes from packing crates, with the work sent home to their families or sold. German internee Charles Matt, a cabinetmaker who had been foreman of a London factory before the war, ran a furniture workshop.

Bassett-Lowke, who probably found out about the workshop through his Quaker wife, arranged for his Mackintosh-designed furniture and, later, pieces for friends to be made in the camp. An early member of the Design and Industries Association, founded in 1915 to encourage good design, he admired German manufacturing. Apart from the appeal of

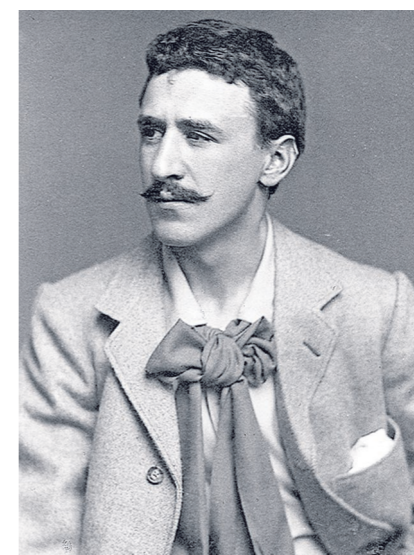
'This was one last flowering of his talent in terms of architecture and design'

skilled internees Bassett-Lowke might also have benefited from "cheap labour", says Rob Kendall, chair of the Friends of 78 Deragate. The internees were paid for their work, but it is not known how much.

Pieces made at Knockaloe for 78 Deragate included oak furniture for the guest bedroom, decorated with blue and black squares, and black furniture for the hall-lounge. The pieces are "quite sturdy and strong" and "of probably



Internees in Knockaloe Camp's furniture-making workshop — Manx National Heritage



Charles Rennie Mackintosh — Alamy

higher quality" than some of Mackintosh's other designs, says Sharples. A camp pass in Bassett-Lowke's name dated August 15 1916 suggests he visited Knockaloe to check on progress. He also sent photographs to Matt showing the finished furniture in the house.

Only three pieces made by the internees — two chairs and a lamp stand — remain at the Grade II*-listed 78 Deragate, which displays replicas of other items.

The Hunterian owns the original guest bedroom suite and displays it in a reconstruction of the room — the last complete room Mackintosh designed. "This emphasis on square, rectilinear shapes and very bold, quite startling pattern is something relatively new in Mackintosh's work," says Sharples, "and quite different from the earlier white interiors with their organic design which people will be familiar with from things like the Willow Tea Rooms and earlier domestic designs for his own flat in Glasgow."

The Victoria and Albert Museum in London owns 13 Mackintosh pieces made in Knockaloe. An ebonised wood smoker's cabinet for 78 Deragate's hallway is "one of the earliest pieces of furniture that we know of that uses plastic as inlay", says Johanna Agerman Ross, curator of 20th-century and contemporary furniture and product design at the V&A. It features yellow diamonds and triangles made from Eri-noid, a plastic Bassett-Lowke introduced to Mackintosh.

The 78 Deragate commission came at a difficult time in Mackintosh's career. Like Bassett-Lowke, he drew inspiration from continental designers and had

enjoyed a "two-way flow of influence", says Sharples, with contacts in Germany and Austria. After his work fell out of favour in Glasgow, Mackintosh and his wife, Margaret, went to Walberswick in Suffolk for an extended holiday. "It was while they were there in 1914 that it seems he was suspected of being a spy because of his continental connections," says Sharples. Letters from Germany and Austria had raised suspicions when the military raided his cottage.

He moved to London to try and clear his name. "That's the irony about the work . . . being made by German internees, because the very reason Mackintosh was in London is because he was considered to be not trustworthy enough," says Kendall.

The house on Deragate was to be a "great final episode" in the Scot's career, says Sharples. "This was one last flowering of his talent in terms of architecture and design, and it showed him still to be highly creative, highly individual. He created these really memorable interiors and furnished them with these extraordinary pieces."


The Centre for World War I Internment opens to the public on April 5. knockaloe.im

Spy fever

The opening of the Centre for World War I Internment marks the centenary of internees leaving Knockaloe in 1919. Housed in a converted Victorian schoolhouse, which was used for internment camp inquests and court cases, the centre on the Isle of Man will feature a permanent exhibition on life as an internee and a searchable database of records for civilian internees held across the British Isles during the conflict.


A bronze statue of a Mackintosh-designed wooden stool made by internees for 78 Deragate will be the centrepiece of a Garden of Barbed Wire on the site of the former camp. "Spy Fever" formed part of Israeli artist Tom Krasny's Master of Fine Arts degree show at Glasgow School of Art in 2017. "There is something weirdly resembling a cage [about the stool] which obviously speaks about the circumstances of these people who are highly limited in mobility and monitored," she says.

Kate Youde




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