

DAVID HUGHES 1847–1923, CABINET MAKER AND SHIP CARVER OF LIVERPOOL

M. K. Stammers

David Hughes had a varied career which started in cabinet making, graduated to ship carving, diversified into ornamental furniture and finished by passing on his skills to students at the College of Agriculture, Logan, Utah. Sketches and photographs of some of his work, as well as letterheads and an auction catalogue have passed down to his descendants and I am grateful to Mrs Aneesa Shafter Thomas, his great grand-daughter for making copies available, as well as her own genealogical research.

David Hughes was born in Liverpool on 11 December 1847 to parents of Welsh descent. His father, also David, was a cotton porter, a typical calling of the newly arrived in the booming port of Liverpool. The job was characterised by harsh manual labour, heaving bales of raw cotton and paid by the day or half day on a casual basis. David junior had a better start because by the time of the 1861 census he was working as a cabinet maker. It is presumed that he served an apprenticeship. In Liverpool, as in London, cabinet making was considered one of the most skilled and better paying trades. Also as in London it was separate and distinct from carving and gilding. This is clear in the trades section of Gore's *Liverpool Directories*.¹ How Hughes obtained his carving expertise is not certain, given the separation of the two trades. But, two of the larger firms appear under both headings — Dowler and Gradwell and Woods & Co. of 5 and 9–11 Bold Street respectively. Bold Street was Liverpool's equivalent to Bond Street and contained only businesses making and selling luxury goods to the wealthy. It is possible that Hughes served with one or other and at some point during his service demonstrated a talent for carving. He had made the transition by 1868 because his marriage certificate of 1867 records that he was a 'ship carver' aged twenty, living at 20 Kent Street. Ship carving was a sub-branch of the carving and gilding business. Ships had by tradition been equipped with a carved wooden figurehead at the bow, personifying the spirit of the ship. By the mid-nineteenth century subjects tended to be human with a higher proportion of female figures. These ranged from busts to full length sculptures and were usually supported by flat trail boards carved in relief to carry the ship's name and to blend the figure into the lines of the hull. Sterns which carried the name and the port of registry might be ornamented with scroll or ropework in relief. The dining and leisure areas of the accommodation for the officers and first class passengers were often sumptuously fitted in fine quality panelling with carved ornament. By Hughes's time, the tradition was changing with the increasing number of steamers. These tended to have a straight bow instead of the curved 'clipper' bow of the sailing ship and the former did not lend itself to decoration.² Nevertheless, large iron and steel sailing ships continued to be built in large numbers until about 1890. Liverpool had four shipyards building such vessels up to 1894 and Laird's large shipyard was situated on the south bank of the Mersey, at Birkenhead. So there would appear to



1. David Hughes in his woodcarving class, 1911

be a local market for the specialised skills of the shipcarver. Figureheads were often damaged at sea and in dock and their repair was another source of work. However, shipbuilding was notorious for its cyclical nature and any sub-contractor suffered the same upheavals. This is perhaps reflected in Hughes's frequent changes of residence. Between 1874 and 1883 he moved on every year. From 1875 to 1883 and again in 1887 he lived in Everton to the north of the city centre. This may be significant when trying to identify his employers. Gore's *Directories* only list a maximum of three ship-carving firms at any one time in Hughes's time as a journeyman from 1867 to 1890.³ His most likely employers were John and Joseph Hammond of 66 Regent Road. This is because they were the only firm listed as ship and ornamental carvers, and Hughes was certainly proficient in both, in his later years. What is more, in an era when most working men had to walk to work Hughes lived in Everton (except for 1874 and 1879) to the north of the city centre, and within a mile of Regent Road. All the other ship-carving firms worked at addresses to the south, in the neighbourhood of the streets next to the Canning to Queens Dock area, and one might have expected that he would have lived to the south in the suburb of Toxteth.

In 1890 he set up his own business at 19 Chaloner Street, Queens Dock with his sons David William and Joseph Andrew — two of a family of seven from his first marriage. A surviving letterhead of 1897 described the business as 'ship, figure, cabinet and architectural wood carvers, reproductions of antique furniture a speciality, lessons given in wood carving.' Besides his two sons he also employed an older assistant named Joseph Williams. The three storey premises contained a showroom on the ground floor, and a workshop on the second. According to the auction catalogue of 6 September 1907 when Hughes was selling up to emigrate, the workshop contained four benches with screws, two carvers' benches, four saw stocks, three carvers' hold-fasts, three clamps with extended legs, a treadle grindstone, a hand mortice machine, a wood turning lathe and a circular saw. The last two pieces of machinery were powered by an 11 horsepower Crossley gas engine. The auction catalogue also listed the furniture that Hughes had left unfinished. These included a large panelled chest, a carved settee in sections, a carved wardrobe, a dining room suite of eight chairs all in oak. There were also a number of carved figures including one of Queen Victoria in oak and one of Britannia in pine. The former was likely to have been a ship's figurehead made to celebrate Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee. It may have been a trial piece for his master work — a settee illustrated in *The Architect* and described in the *Shipping Telegraph* (date unknown) as 'a seat of unique design and manufacture intended as a memento of the Diamond Jubilee'. The back was divided into three panels with the larger centre one carved with a portrait of Queen Victoria in relief, surrounded by a laurel wreath with the royal coat of arms below. The side panels were carved with the Star of India to the left and the Royal Standard to the right. Below these were a 4-4-0 express railway locomotive named *Victoria* ('of the latest type') and the Cunard liner *Lucania* completed in 1898. Each panel was flanked by four standing figures: Gladstone, Beaconsfield, Salisbury and Harcourt. They terminated in ogee arches topped by imperial crowns; the panels below the seat were flanked by two figures of Britannia. The centre panel contained a diamond shape with the Queen's head in the centre carved with 'Diamond Jubilee 1837-1897' and on either side were carvings of the battleships

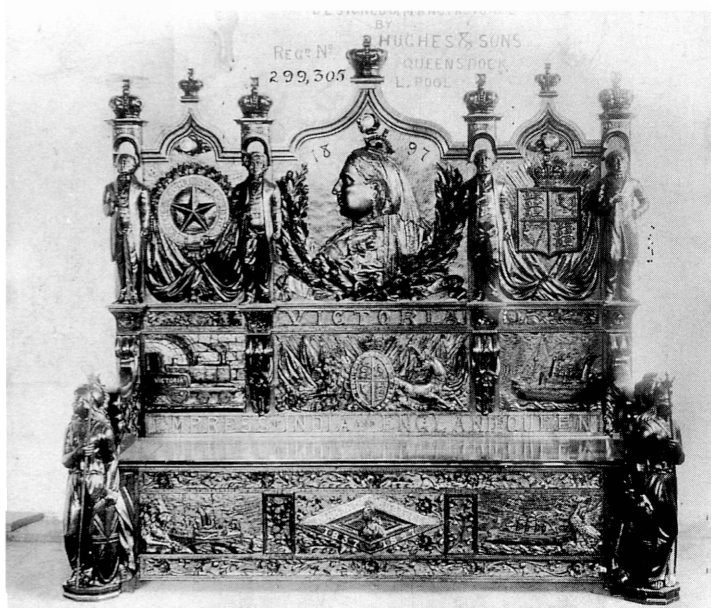
HMS *Mars* and HMS *Terrible*. The latter also incorporated a Liver bird. Side panels showed a bicycle and a motor car and the lifting seat revealed the statistics of the revenue, population and mercantile tonnage of 1837 and 1897. The piece was lit by electric power supplied by four accumulators. The *Shipping Telegraph* concluded that 'this is a most interesting, novel and successful attempt to produce by the art of wooden carving an artistic memento and instructive souvenir of the great progress effected during her reign in all branches of civilised life.' Hughes's note to the editor of *The Architect* of 7 June 1897 mentioned that it had been sold in Liverpool and was now on view in London. It would be interesting to discover if such a tour de force of carving has survived. Such a monumental piece could well have found its way into a museum. It is certainly not at Liverpool nor the Victoria and Albert Museum, but similar pieces such as the massive and similarly elaborate sideboard in the collection of the Gateshead Art Gallery have survived the wave of anti-Victorian feeling earlier this century. Hughes had good reasons for spending so much effort on this piece. He must have seen that ship carving was a declining business. The four surviving Liverpool shipyards completed their last sailing ships in 1894 and all were closed for new building work by the end of 1897. Laird's only built four vessels fitted with figureheads between 1894 and 1906. To make matters worse very few sailing ships were built anywhere after 1895 and many of those that were, were often built with the strictest economy. This meant that a simple abstract billet head was substituted for an elaborately carved and expensive full length human figure. It is therefore not surprising that Hughes hoped to build up his ornamental and reproduction furniture business. He had some grounds for optimism because the fashion for old English furniture was in full spate in the 1890s. Only the wealthy could afford the finely carved originals. Hughes seems to have concentrated on carved oak furniture of the seventeenth century — usually with Flemish influences. This can be seen in the surviving photographs such as those of a sideboard and a dining chair. The antique furniture sold at the 1907 auction was also dated to the seventeenth century. The only other relevant example was a side table in the style of Chippendale which was probably carved after 1907. Collecting fashions moved on; for example G. Owen Wheeler was of the opinion that 'old oak' was for beginners: 'It is a curious fact that almost all collectors commence with a strong penchant for old oak and it is equally certain that a very large majority give it up as their taste becomes more refined. Looked at from the grounds of finance, oak gives much more for money than do woods of the later schools. From a sentimental point of view, the beginner feels that there is something essentially British about the medium'.⁴ In 1902 Hughes and his family moved from their rented house to occupy the first floor flat at his Chaloner Street workshop. This implies that the business was not prospering and this was a way of reducing living expenses. It is not clear when he decided to emigrate, but in 1906 he was received into the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. The unfinished work in the auction sale perhaps suggests that the decision to emigrate to Utah was taken in 1907. He initially lived in Salt Lake City and then moved to Logan where he became a teacher of wood carving at the Utah State Agricultural College. He became famous for his intricate carvings. These included a carved long case clock, and the Utah State Chair of 1917. The latter was an elaborate design with twin eagles forming the arms, cabriole legs with ball and claw feet and the back surmounted by a beehive and an eagle with



2. Figurehead of the sailing ship *Kate Thomas*, launched at Sunderland for William Thomas and Co. of Liverpool in 1885. It is almost certainly based on a living person — possibly the owner's daughter — and is likely to have been a replacement of the original, possibly in 1905



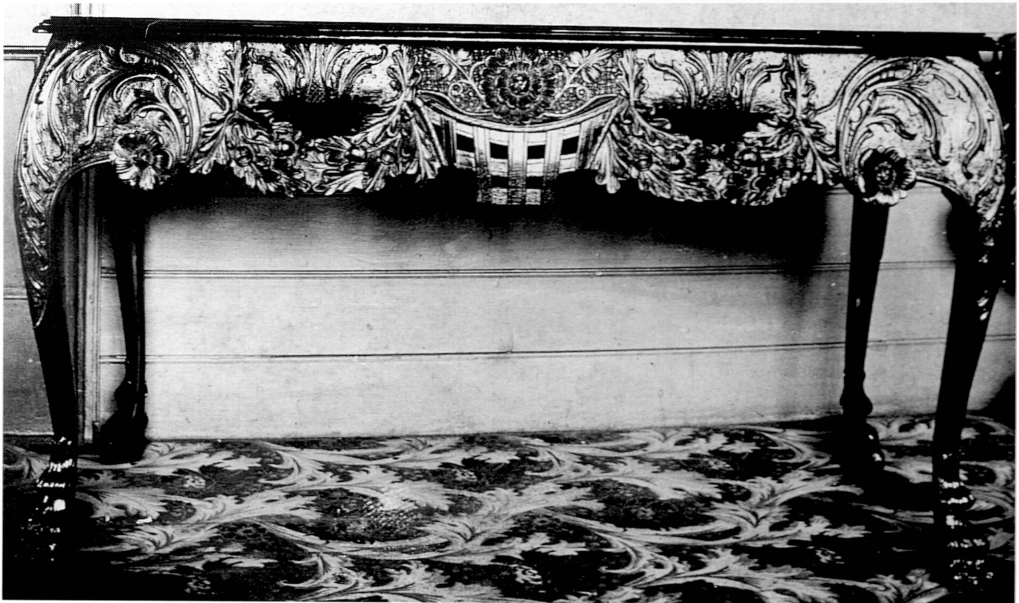
3. Figurehead of the ship *Elmhurst* renamed *Loch Garve* in 1901. Note the elaborate carving of the trail boards which link the figure into the hull of the ship



4. The Diamond Jubilee Settee carved by David Hughes in 1897



5. A cabinet in 'Flemish' style by David Hughes, undated

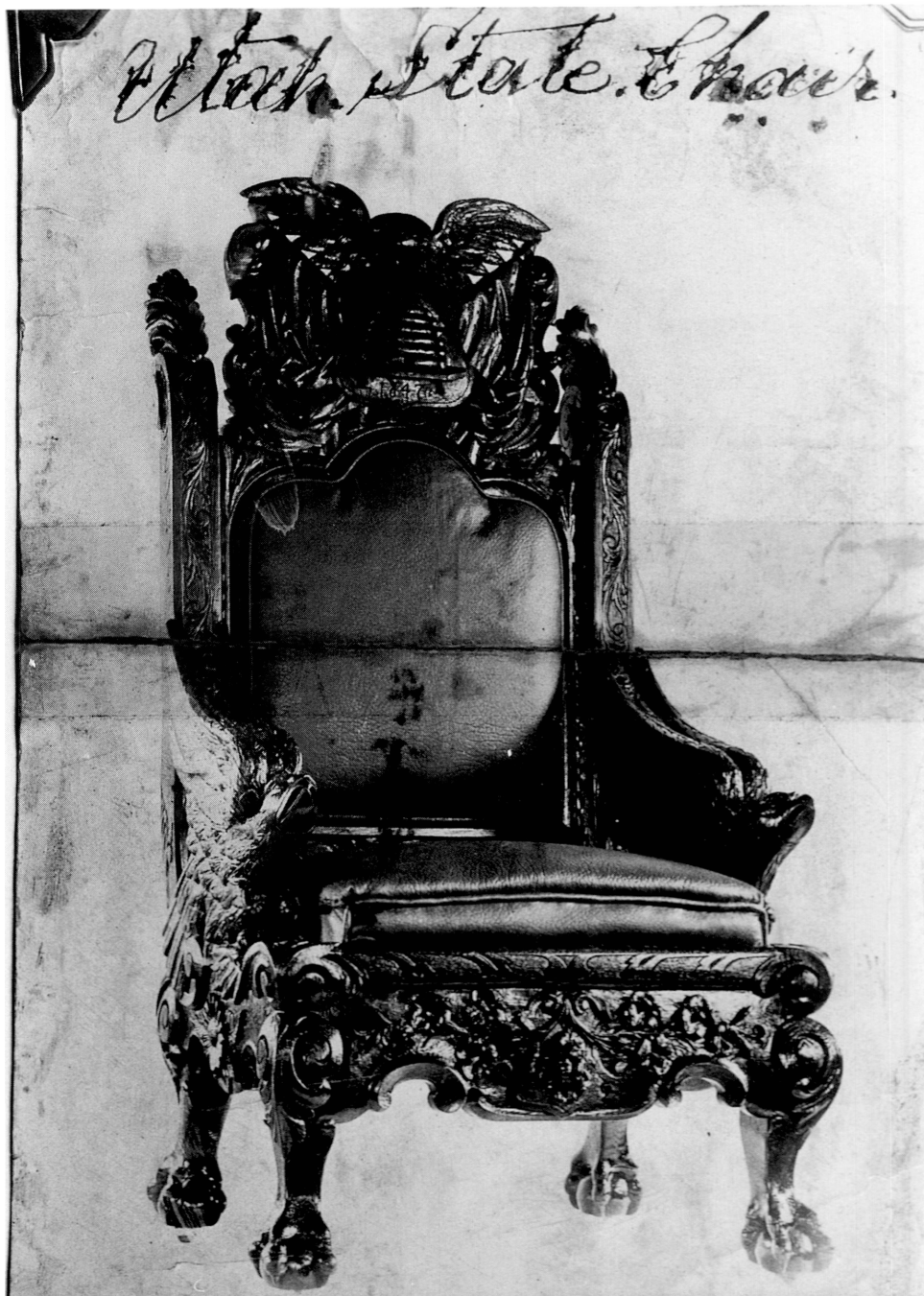


6. Table influenced by Irish eighteenth century carving, 1917



7. Sketch design for the Utah State Chair

outstretched wings. Two design sketches and a photograph of this chair have survived. These show that Hughes changed the design between the sketches and execution. The eagles' heads were horizontal in the sketch and are angled upwards in the finished chair. Similarly, there is one beehive and not two, and much of the abstract relief ornament that covers the back and sides has been drastically changed. Perhaps Hughes's American masterpiece was a sideboard which was a successor to his Diamond Jubilee settee. It is unclear when this was carved, but the figures of Indians and 'frontiersmen' that divide the lower carved panels suggest it is carved at Logan. Unfortunately, the



8. The finished version of the chair which was the property of the Utah State College, Logan, USA

only available illustration is a photocopy and it is not possible to make out the full detail. The three cupboard doors depict scenes of chivalry and are surmounted by three drawers separated by grotesque heads. The upper section is divided into two sets of panels; the three lower ones depict possibly mediaeval or biblical scenes and are separated by standing figures. The four upper ones are abstract strapwork, separated by three caryatids and two turned and carved vase-like columns. Above them is the text 'East West Home's Best' with a massive double cornice.

David Hughes died in 1923. He stands for the many skilled Victorian craftsmen who had to be prepared to turn their skills in several directions in order to make a living. Thanks to the careful preservation of his memory by his descendants and the survival of some of his public furniture, we know a little more about his work than most of his kind.

REFERENCES

1. Gore's *Directories* for Liverpool were published annually during Hughes's time in Liverpool, and contain a useful directory of trades as well as the alphabetical directory.
2. See M. K. Stammers, *Ships' Figureheads*, Princes Risborough, 1983, pp. 23–26.
3. Gore's *Directories* listed ship carvers under carvers and gilders, marking them with an 's'.
4. G. Owen Wheeler, *Old English Furniture of the 17th and 18th Centuries: A Guide for the Collector*, London and New York, 1907, p. 49.