



c. 1866

# Thomas Armstrong C.B. b. 1832 Manchester, d. 1911 Abbots Langley

A strong supporter of the Arts and Crafts Movement, Thomas Armstrong moved in influential circles and enjoyed the friendship of many famous artists and patrons of the late 19th Century. His knowledge, administrative skills and contacts made him an excellent choice as Director for Art at South Kensington (now the V&A).

Thomas was a respected artist and exhibited at the leading galleries in London and across Europe. He received many commissions as an interior designer. And he designed memorials for friends and family, a feature being his choice of wood and metal as materials.

He supported and promoted the careers of many young artists and was made Companion of the Order of the Bath (C.B.) for his services to education in the arts.

Thomas Armstrong lived in The Abbot's House from 1890 until his death in 1911. His widow continued to live there until 1943.



*A Street Scene in Algiers, 1858*



*The Flight into Egypt*

## The Young Thomas Armstrong - 1

- Thomas Armstrong was born 19<sup>th</sup> October 1832 in Fallowfield, Manchester. He was the eldest son of Thomas and Sarah Armstrong, prosperous middle class people connected with the cotton industry
- The Armstrong family belonged to the Border country and came originally from Newcastle
- Sarah's family (Evans) lived at Staleybank, Ashton-under-Lyme
- Thomas was educated at a private school at Tarvin in Cheshire
- He spent many of his holidays at Staleybank, his aunts' old-fashioned country house
- Staleybank contained many beautiful specimens of china, fine linen and silver left by Mrs Armstrong's great-uncle, the Prebend and Archdeacon on Worcester

## The Young Thomas Armstrong - 2

- His holiday visits to Staleybank undoubtedly instilled an appreciation of beauty in the young Thomas
- Nevertheless, he was full of pranks. An entry in a diary kept by one of his aunts at Staleybank reads: "*Tom is a clever boy, but is a very naughty one.*"
- In the attic were many costumes of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century which in later years Armstrong used in his pictures
- On leaving school, Thomas worked for Openshaws, a business house in Manchester
- Thomas attended art classes and in 1852 exhibited two works at the Royal Manchester Institution
- After a year his employer advised him to follow his inclination for a career in art and made him a gift of money to start on that path, recommending Paris as the place to study

## The making of many friends and a career - 1

- Thomas Armstrong moved to Paris in 1853 to study with Ary Scheffer. There he met many artists – Poynter, Lamont, Whistler, du Maurier – who would remain lifelong friends
- In 1855 he spent some months in Antwerp studying in the Royal Academy under van Lierus before returning home
- After a year working in Manchester he returned to Paris in 1856
- The Bohemian lifestyle of Armstrong and his friends in Paris was described by George du Maurier in his novel *Trilby* (1894) in which Armstrong appears as the character Taffy
- In 1858 he went to Algiers with his uncle and other relatives, where he made an impression at society gatherings and balls at Government House

# Thomas Armstrong C.B.

## The making of many friends and a career - 2

- In 1859-60 he spent some time in Dusseldorf with du Maurier
- In 1861 he moved to London and took rooms in Great Russell Street, Bloomsbury. Here he was reunited with many of his old Paris friends and where he formed new friendships with such as Burne-Jones, William Morris, Maddox-Brown, George Howard (later 9<sup>th</sup> Earl of Carlisle), Millais, and architect William Nesfield
- A talented interior designer, Armstrong collaborated in various decorative schemes with George Aitchison, architect, professor and R.A. – most notably at 52 Prince's Gate: *The walls were gilded after a slightly indented pattern had been impressed on them. The frieze was designed by Leighton, and the dado consisted of panels with inlaid designs of ivory, ebony, and mother-of-pearl. Two large pictures let into the wall were painted by Armstrong, and combined the most delicate effects of colour with strength of rendering*

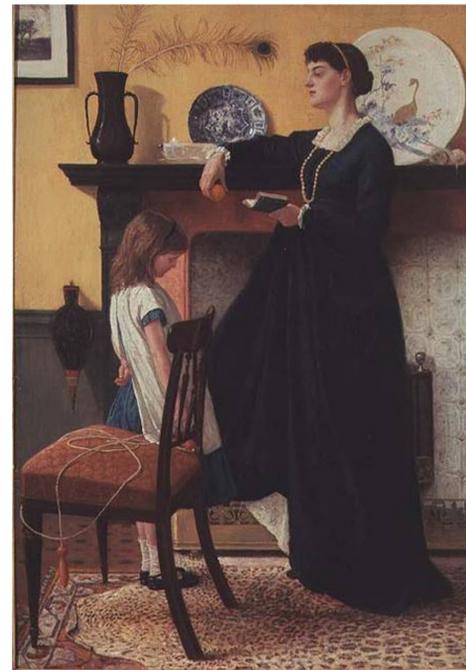


Haytime – a study 1869



Haytime - 1869

<http://www.vandaprints.com/image/414545/the-hay-field-by-thomas-armstrong>



The Lesson 1867

*A note from Burne-Jones, dated August, 1864, thanks Armstrong for the material benefit in "the promptest of cheques," of an introduction to Mr Tong, he and his wife being liberal patrons of his work, and also of that of other rising artists.*

*This is an early instance of what was throughout Armstrong's life so marked and lovable a characteristic – his untiring and willing service on behalf of his friends. No effort was spared, nothing was a trouble where a comrade could be helped; **he had a genius for friendship.***

*Quoted from "A Memoir", p.17*

- In 1865 Armstrong was living at 47 London Street, Fitzroy Square
- He exhibited at the Royal Academy for the first time that summer
- In 1866 he spent the early summer in lodgings at a watchmaker's in Henley-on-Thames.

*To the same house came Major and Mrs Brine, just returned from India, with their two children, a maid, and a black Persian cat. The last-mentioned member of the party was the means of an introduction, for she was found one day eating Armstrong's evening chop, and the consequent apologies started a lifelong intimacy. The little girl, who fifteen years later became his wife, a particularly shy child, was nevertheless soon his fast friend, and when taken one day to be photographed entirely declined to be posed unless held closely by him.* Quoted from "A Memoir, p.26



Alicia Brine  
(1858-1943)  
later to become Thomas  
Armstrong's wife

*Reproduced by kind permission of  
Philip Richards, grandson of sculptor  
Newbury Trent*

## "A poor tribute to a nearly life-long friendship" by Gertrude Jekyll

*During the time between (and including) the years 1871-1877 I often met Mr. Armstrong. Problems of colour and design as applied to needlework greatly interested me, and no doubt, owing to the influence of William Morris, it was becoming possible to obtain a better choice of coloured material to work upon and to work with. Some needlework of mine had been in one of the international exhibitions, and had been seen by Leighton, who was then unknown to me. Greatly to my pride and gratification he had asked me through a common friend to do some embroidery for him. It was probably some of this that I first showed to Mr. Armstrong. He had numbers of friends in the world of fine art, and through him many commissions for needlework came to me. I was conscious of learning much from his finely developed sense of colour, and was greatly cheered and encouraged by his always ready helpfulness and sympathy.* Extract from "A Memoir, pp.38&39

- In 1869 Armstrong moved to 121 Charlotte Street, Fitzroy Square
- In 1870 Randolph Caldecott came to London with a letter of introduction to Armstrong. This was the start of a close friendship
- Armstrong visited Italy in 1872 – his brother then living in Milan: this journey included the first of numberless visits to Mentone
- In 1874 he was commissioned to decorate the dining room at Bank Hall, Chapel-en-le-Frith in Derbyshire – Caldecott painted the birds!

- In 1875 he worked with Gertrude Jekyll on embroidery and experimented with the dying of materials
- Armstrong was an active member of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings from soon after it was established in 1877
- In April 1881, Armstrong married Alicia (Alice) Brine.
- Later that year he was appointed as Director for Art, South Kensington Museum, and in 1882 moved to 14 Sheffield Gardens

# Thomas Armstrong C.B.



Girl feeding pigeons

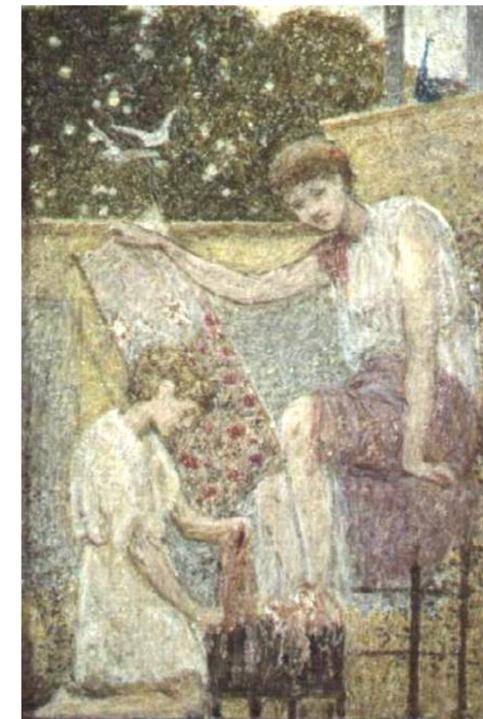
1874

One of three sketch for decoration of Bank Hall, Chapel-en-le-Frith



The Goldfish Bowl – 1874-75

One of three sketch for decoration of Bank Hall

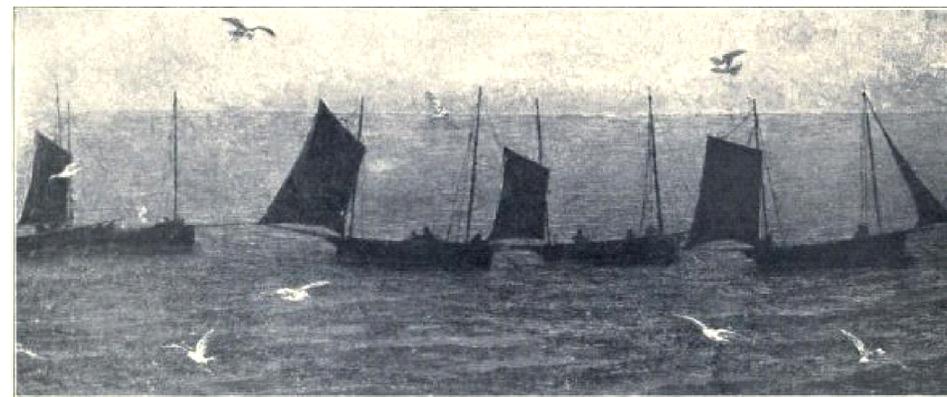


Girl holding embroidery

1874-75

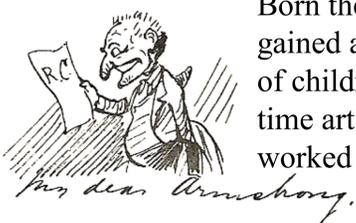
One of three sketch for decoration of Bank Hall, Chapel-en-le-Frith

Sunset at Sea 1875  
Now at The Abbot's House  
Taken from "A Memoir", p.36



## Randolph Caldecott (1846 – 1886)

Born the son of a shopkeeper in Chester, Caldecott gained an international reputation as an illustrator of children's books. However, his career as a full-time artist started only in his mid-twenties, having worked as a bank clerk from the age of fifteen.



In May 1870 he spent some time in London and met Thomas Armstrong who, though his older by fourteen years, was to become his closest friend. Later that year some drawings he left with Armstrong were shown to the editor of *London Society* magazine. These were accepted and appeared in issues throughout 1871. For them Caldecott was paid £30, as much as a quarter's salary paid him by the bank. This was sufficient encouragement for him to quit Manchester for London.



Information from "Yours Pictorially – Illustrated letters of Randolph Caldecott"



Music  
Now at Fox Pitt, West Farleigh

1871



Girl holding embroidery

1874-75

Bank Hall,  
Chapel-en-le-Frith  
Taken from "A Memoir", p.36

One of the three Decorative Pictures painted for the Dining Room at Bank Hall

# Thomas Armstrong C.B.

## Director for Art at South Kensington Museum 1881-1898

- Responsible for organization of art education throughout Britain
- Visited Paris: impressed by the support given by the State for art schools and education. Initiated a scheme to send scholars to Paris
- Ambrose George, Thomas and Alice's only child, born in 1883. George Howard (9<sup>th</sup> Earl of Carlisle) was one of three sponsors
- Arts and Crafts Society formed in 1884
- Armstrong was instrumental in starting three-week summer courses for provincial teachers at the National Art Training School
- In 1887 Armstrong delivered the address "The condition of Applied Art in England, and the education of the Art Workman" before the Society of Arts for which he received the Silver Medal
- In 1889 he delivered an address at the Guildhall at Cambridge, in which he encourages the State to give aid to art education



Woman with lilies  
1876

Painted for Eustace Smith M.P. at  
54 Prince's Gate, London  
- later at the Laing Art Gallery,  
Newcastle-upon-Tyne

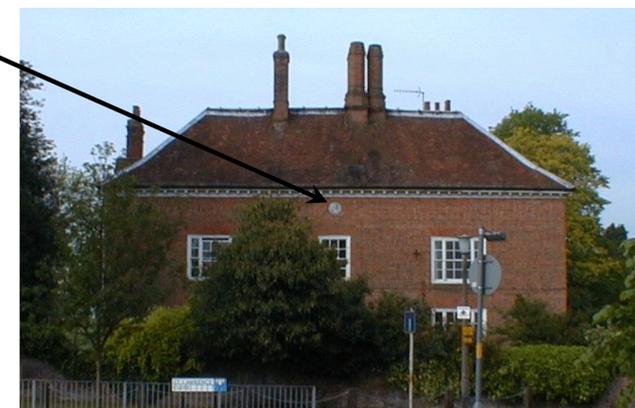
## The purchase of The Abbots House - 1890

*It had undoubtedly belonged in the old days to the Abbot of St Albans, together with some monastic buildings which have long since disappeared, but foundations of which are still occasionally unearthed when alterations are made in the grounds.*

*As far back as the time of Edward the Confessor the great tithes of the parish had been granted to the Abbot of St Albans as a provision for the clothing of the brothers, and this house and its predecessor were both most probably used by the Abbot or his agent when collecting his dues. The old inhabitants of the village still speak of the top floor, now divided into attics, as "the monks' storehouse". After the Reformation it became a farmhouse, and early in the eighteenth century was altered to its present state. In a round space below a cornice in front of the house Armstrong placed a relief, the profile bust of an abbot, his hand raised in the act of blessing, the features being those of Dr. Festing, then Bishop of St Albans, brother of his colleague, Major-General Festing.* From "A Memoir", p.87

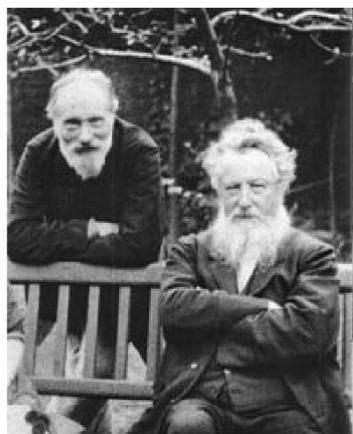
## The Abbots House

The profile bust of an abbot, the features being those of Dr Festing, Bishop of St Albans



Thomas  
Armstrong  
c. 1891

Edward Burne-Jones  
and William Morris  
1890



The Fountain  
Now at The Mynde Park



The Fisherman and Maiden  
Now at Castle Howard

1880



The Marble Bench  
Now at South Lytchet Mansr

## A gift to the Pope

*In the neighbourhood of the Abbots House is Breakspear's Farm, where Adrian IV., Nicholas Breakspear (died 1159), the only English Pope, was born. This afforded Armstrong an opportunity of carrying out one of the gracious little acts in which he delighted, and he had a watercolour sketch made of the view from the farm, which was presented by Monsignor Stonor to Leo XIII., who hung it in his private apartments.* From "A Memoir", p.87



THE HOLY WELL. BREAKSPEAR'S FARM. ABBOT'S LANDSLEY, HANTS.



Grave of George Du Maurier  
Grandfather of Daphne Du Maurier  
Church Row, Hampstead



Headboard slotted and pegged into supporting Celtic crosses.  
c1896. By **Thomas Armstrong**. Timber. Board inscribed on south side to memory of George Busson du Maurier and with a quotation from Trilby, his most successful novel, "A little trust that, when we die, we reap our sowing - and so, goodbye!"; on north side to wife, Emma; top capped with copper having a fishscale tile design. Carved Celtic crosses partially capped with copper and having further inscriptions on copper plaques. Set into stone base with paved stone surround. HISTORICAL NOTE: George du Maurier was a cartoonist for Punch magazine and novelist who lived in Hampstead 1870-1895.

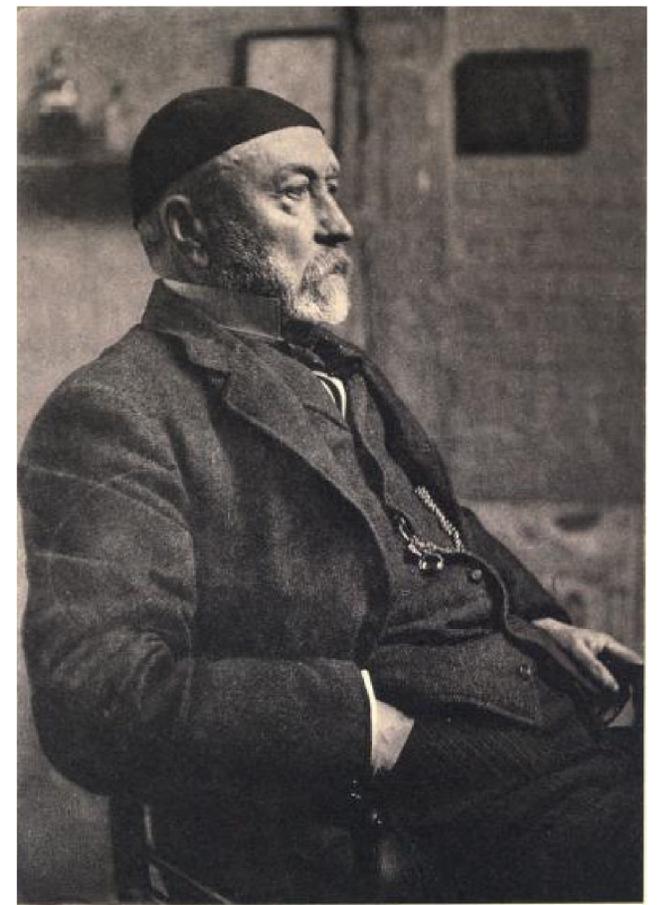


Memorial to  
Frederick Armstrong  
(brother of Thomas)

*"Here lie the ashes of Frederick Armstrong, his Majesty's Consul in Lombardy and for many years a resident of Milan in the Kingdom of Italy. He was born in Manchester & died in London on VI October MDCCCII aged LVI"*

## Changes and losses

- In 1892 a severe epidemic of influenza attacked the whole family at Sheffield Gardens in Kensington. Ambrose was so ill that he gave up school and spent much of the year with his mother at the Abbots House in Abbots Langley
- To escape the winter weather Ambrose and his mother were taken to Algiers where friends were staying
- Ambrose died in April 1894 and was buried in Abbots Langley. Thomas later created a memorial to Ambrose which remains in the north aisle of St Lawrence Church, Abbots Langley
- 1896 saw the deaths of many long-standing friends – Leighton, Middleton, Sir John Millais, George du Maurier and William Morris
- In 1898 Armstrong's career was recognised when he was made a Companion of the Order of the Bath (C.B.). The investiture by Queen Victoria took place at Windsor Castle in July. He retired in October, sold his London house and finally moved to Abbots House



*T. Armstrong*

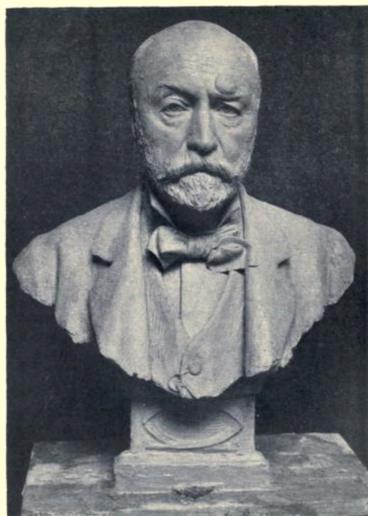


Mural Monument in Abbots Langley Church



Thomas Armstrong C.B.  
1832-1911

Bronze, on green marble base  
David McGill 1904  
(V&A)



Bust modelled by David McGill in 1904  
Afterwards cast in Bronze and exhibited at the Royal Academy

## Newbury Abbot Trent (1885 – 1953)

*Some drawings sent from the West Ham School of Art attracted Armstrong's attention as being the work of a boy of nine. Their excellence was so marked that he had special enquiries made about them, which resulted in his sending for the boy. As a consequence he arranged that Newbury Trent should come as often as possible on Saturday afternoons to draw at the Museum from objects chosen by Armstrong himself. This is an instance of the extreme care and solicitude that he showed when a promising student came under his notice. The interest in this case became a personal one on both his and Mrs. Armstrong's part, for the boy was invited every year to spend large parts of his holidays at The Abbots House, and the utmost help was given in fostering his natural gifts. Their kindly interest was justified by his success, for he took prizes every year he was at the Training School and at nineteen was a Royal Exhibitioner.* From "A Memoir, p.91



The Peace Statue, Brighton:  
Designed by Newbury Trent, it stands some 30ft tall and is a memorial to Edward VII

After Armstrong's death Newbury Trent spent much time at the Abbots House with Alicia. He married in December 1911 and on the birth of a daughter in 1914, Alicia agreed to be the godmother; Alicia Armstrong thenceforth became known in the Trent family as Madrina - the Italian word for godmother!

The family were often invited to Abbots House as guests of Madrina, particularly in the early 1940s as evacuees from the bombing in London. When their house in Chelsea was damaged, all their furniture was removed to the Barn for safekeeping. On Madrina's death on 1943 Trent inherited all Armstrong's artistic material, including much relating to Caldecott, a large painting by Thomas Armstrong of a railway viaduct in Berkshire and a charming portrait by Armstrong of a very young Alicia Brine (aged about eight) in the branches of an apple tree.

Information provided by Philip Richards, Newbury Trent's grandson

## Obituary of Thomas Armstrong, CB

Thomas Armstrong was an artist and Royal Academician, who in 1881 was appointed Director for Art in the Department of Science and Art (later the Royal College of Art).

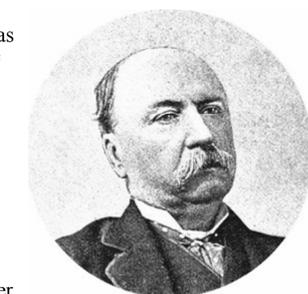
From *The Times*, 25 April 1911

The death took place on Saturday at his residence at Abbots Langley, Hertfordshire of Mr Thomas Armstrong, CB.

Mr Armstrong was the eldest son of the late Mr Thomas Armstrong of Fallowfield, Manchester and was born in 1832. He was a pupil of Ary Scheffer and in 1853 went to study art in Paris where Du Maurier, Whistler and Sir Edward Poynter were among his associates. He lived in Algiers in 1858 and 1859 and in the following year worked with Du Maurier in Dusseldorf. He exhibited in the Royal Academy from 1865 to 1877 and for the four following years at the Grosvenor Gallery. In 1881 he was appointed Director for Art in the Department of Science and Art, retaining this office until 1898. He was made a CB in the latter year. Among his paintings were 'Feeding Pigeons', 'A Girl Holding an Embroidery Frame', 'The Harbour Bar at Teignmouth' and 'The Riviera of Genoa in Spring'. He married in 1881 Alice Mary, daughter of Colonel J J Brine of Torquay.

The funeral will take place at Abbots Langley at 3:15 pm tomorrow.

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Wood-engraved portrait of Thomas Armstrong, from 'Art Journal Illustrated', p.271, 1891. NAL pressmark PP.6.B



The Armstrong Family grave:  
grave-board designed by Thomas Armstrong

## Acknowledgements

- We are grateful to Gwen Reichert, President of the Randolph Caldecott Society of America, who has delivered three lectures on Armstrong and did much of the research for this display
- Thanks to Mr Philip Richards for providing a copy of the Armstrong painting of the young Alicia Brine and for information about his grandfather, Newbury Trent
- "Thomas Armstrong, C.B. A Memoir 1832-1911", ed. L.M.Lamont. Published by Martin Secker, London, 1912
- Victoria and Albert Museum
- "Yours Pictorially: illustrated letters of Randolph Caldecott", ed. Michael Hutchins. Published by Frederick Warne & Co, London, 1976
- And particular thanks to Sue and Peter Tomson for allowing the Society to use the Abbots House Barn for this display

