

William Morris and his Legacy

Background Notes

Mary Greensted - 13 February 2013



William Morris 1877



WAHG

Winchester Art History Group

www.wahg.org.uk

William Morris - significant dates

- 1834 Born in Walthamstow
- 1853 To Exeter College, Oxford University
- 1855 Decided to train as an architect – articulated to G E Street
- 1856 Moved to London to take up painting with Edward Burne-Jones
- 1859 Married Jane Burden: Philip Webb designed Red House for William and Jane Morris
- 1861 Formation of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Company
- 1868 First volume of Morris's *The Earthly Paradise* published
- 1871 Morris and Rossetti jointly leased Kelmscott Manor, near Lechlade
- 1875 The firm was reconstituted as Morris & Company: Morris began experimenting with dyeing and silk weaving
- 1877 Morris & Co showrooms in Oxford Street opened: Morris founded the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings
- 1878 Moved to Kelmscott House, The Mall, Hammersmith
- 1880 Set up Merton Abbey works on the River Wandle, south London
- 1883 Joined the Democratic Federation
- 1889 Morris started making his own type designs. He developed three typefaces: the Golden, Troy and Chaucer
- 1891 Morris set up Kelmscott Press: *News from Nowhere* published
- 1896 Morris died in London, he was buried at Kelmscott

William Morris and his legacy

William Morris, born in 1834, was one of the towering figures of 19th-century Britain.

In his day he was best known as a poet. He was offered – but turned down – the post of poet laureate following the death of Alfred Lord Tennyson in 1892.

He was a writer and his books, mainly utopian romances such as *The Earthly Paradise* and *News from Nowhere*, were widely read by his contemporaries and the younger generation.

He was a craftsman, taking up a variety of crafts including textile dyeing, tapestry weaving and book printing. He became enough of an expert in many crafts to produce good work and teach others by example.

He was a businessman, setting up and developing one of the most successful interior design companies of his day. Morris & Company survived until 1940.

He was a designer – particularly a two-dimensional designer of textiles and wallpapers that remain in production and are still very popular today.

He was a leading figure in the development of the socialist movement in Britain whose writings and example have inspired a variety of figures including Clement Atlee, Tony Benn, Barbara Castle and Tony Blair.

He was an early proponent of conservation founding the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings in 1877.

He has been claimed as an early environmentalist – his love of nature involved him and his followers in pressure groups such as the Council for the Preservation of Rural England and the National Trust. He wrote: 'It is idle to talk about popularising art, if you are not prepared to popularise reverence for nature'.

On his death in 1896 his doctor declared that he died of being William Morris – because of the extent and range of his activities.

William Morris: A beautiful House

If I were asked to say what is at once the most important production of Art and the thing most to be longed for, I should answer, A beautiful House;
William Morris about 1892

William Morris grew up in and lived in a number of houses in Walthamstow and the Epping Forest, London, and the Cotswolds. They were influential in different ways and reflected aspects of Morris's work and ideas.

1848-56 Water House, Walthamstow

Deep green water fill'd the moat ... there was a boat/of carven wood, with hangings green/about the stern
William Morris 'Golden Wings' 1858

Morris's father died in 1848 when he was fourteen; his mother moved the family from the impressive Woodford Hall on the edge of Epping Forest to the smaller Water House in Walthamstow, then a handsome suburban village near London. The house was set in extensive grounds with a moat and island. The house is now the William Morris Gallery

www.wmgallery.org.uk



William Morris 1857

1856-59 17 Red Lion Square, Bloomsbury, London

Topsy and I live together in the quaintest room in all London ...

Edward Burne-Jones

In August 1856 Morris moved to London. The architect G E Street had moved his offices from Oxford to London and Morris was able to continue working for Street and developing his painting. He was also able to live with his closest friend Edward Burne-Jones and try his hand at various arts and crafts – modelling from clay, carving in wood and stone, and embroidery.

1859-65 Red House, Bexleyheath, Kent

More a poem than a house ...

Dante Gabriel Rossetti

Morris's friend and colleague from Street's office designed Red House for Morris following his marriage to Jane Burden. The working community of artists and craftsmen and their hands-on approach to the decoration of the house led to the development of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner and Co. The house is now owned by the National Trust

www.nationaltrust.org.uk/main/w-redhouse

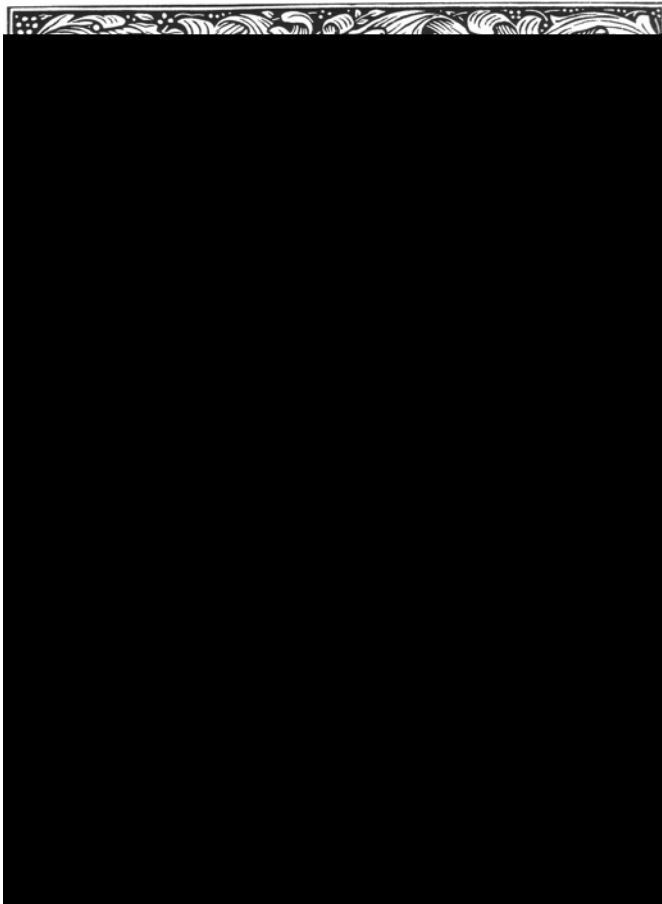


William Morris 1870s

1871-96 Kelmscott Manor, near Lechlade, Gloucestershire

The old house grown up out of the soil and the lives of those who lived in it
William Morris

Morris and Dante Gabriel Rossetti leased Kelmscott Manor in 1871 as a summer house to provide the Morris family, especially the children, with a more healthy and pleasant environment than their London accommodation 'above the shop' in Bloomsbury. It also provided a secluded space for Rossetti and Jane Morris to work out their love affair. The house itself, the countryside and traditional buildings had a tremendous impact on Morris's work. The house is now owned by the Society of Antiquaries and occasionally opened to the public www.kelmscottmanor.org.uk



Kelmscott Manor as the frontispiece of *News from Nowhere*

1878-96 Kelmscott House, Hammersmith, London

...a convenient and seemly shelter from the weather, a place to keep books and pretty things in

William Morris

This move from Bloomsbury reflected the increasing success of Morris's firm, and the health issues that dogged the couple. Morris loved the adjacent Thames and the link it provided with Kelmscott Manor. This part of Hammersmith became something of a craft community. The basement and coach house are now the headquarters of the William Morris Society

www.williammorrisociety.org



William Morris 1896



The staircase at Red House