

The Story of William Morris and the Red House

The Red House was designed for William Morris by his friend Philip Webb.

William Morris

William Morris was born on the 24 March 1834 at Walthamstow. By the time of his death in 1896 he had been hailed as a genius and had completely altered many people's ideas in the worlds of art and politics.

He was educated at Marlborough College and Exeter College, Oxford. Although he made quite an impression at Marlborough where he was expelled after taking part in a school rebellion, it was at Oxford that Morris began to show signs that he would eventually develop a far greater sphere of influence. There he met Edward Burne-Jones who was to become his lifelong friend and mentor. Together they established 'The Brotherhood', an intellectual society whose aim was to fight 'a crusade and holy war against the age'. Basically, their idea was to preserve all that was good from the past and Morris and Burne-Jones were particularly interested in medieval culture (poetry, literature, architecture etc.). Gradually their ideas and interests brought them into contact with an ever-widening group of like-minded people including Dante Gabriel Rossetti (leader of the Pre-Raphaelite artists), Holman Hunt, John Everett Millais, Benjamin Woodward and Ford Madox Brown.

It was through Rossetti that Morris met his future wife, Jane Burden, in the autumn of 1857. Rossetti discovered her and employed her as an artistic model. Morris fell in love with her almost immediately and they were married on 26 April 1859 in St Michael's Church, Oxford. William was 25 and his wife 19. After a six week honeymoon in Paris, Belgium and on the Rhine, they moved into furnished accommodation in Great Ormond Street and the following year to Aberleigh Lodge near Bexleyheath to await the building of their new house designed by Morris' friend, the architect Philip Webb.

It was after the building of the house and the designing of the interior that Morris and his friends felt experienced enough in the art of interior design to set up in business. So in 1861 the firm of Morris,

Marshall, Faulkner & Co. was established and it quickly grew and prospered as the public came to appreciate the new and innovative designs being produced. The company was simply known as 'The Firm' to many of Morris' friends and customers. The Firm was dissolved in 1875 and the business renamed Morris & Company.

At the same time Morris was also hard at work writing poetry and the first part of *The Earthly Paradise*, his first major work, was published in 1868. In addition to his other activities Morris was also emerging as a major player in the field of socialism. He was converted to socialism in about 1884 when it was not considered fashionable and certainly went through a great deal of social ridicule because of it, not just from the popular press but also from some of his friends as well. However, Morris stuck to his convictions and, although not comfortable speaking publicly, made many public appearances supporting and promoting the socialist cause.

Another of Morris' interests was printing. In 1890 Morris established the Kelmscott Press to try to revive what he considered the art of printing, in its original form. He felt printing had become too formal and mundane and sought to print in a more varied and artistic way, using early illustrated manuscripts as his model.

So, by the last decade of the 19th century William Morris had become a very prominent figure in Victorian society. His extraordinary talent and boundless energy had enabled him to influence an incredible variety of art forms including textiles, printing, architecture, painting, drawing, interior design, literature and poetry. In addition his thoughts and writings on socialism had an enormous impact on the early years of the socialist movement and have continued their influence throughout the 20th century.

On 3 October 1896 William Morris died at Kelmscott House in Hammersmith, aged 62, and was buried in the churchyard at Kelmscott Village. His last words were "I want to get mumbo-jumbo out of the world" and his doctor declared that he had "died a victim to his enthusiasm for spreading the principles of socialism".

The Red House

The plans for the Red House had been discussed by Morris, Philip Webb and Charles Faulkner on a rowing trip down the Seine in 1858.

Morris had met Faulkner at Oxford and Webb at the firm of architects to which Morris had himself been apprenticed. Morris, much affected by what he had seen on holiday, wanted a house "very medieval in spirit", a simple design harking back to the cottages in the Cotswolds rather than the fussy mid-Victorian architecture then in fashion. The contract with Webb was signed in April 1859.

The choice of site caused Morris to visit several areas before buying an orchard and meadow near the village of Upton, close to three or four cottages known as Hogs Hole. Morris liked countryside that was open and fertile with preferably a river or other feature and Upton fitted this almost perfectly. The 1868 Ordnance Survey Map shows that at that time Upton was fairly isolated in the middle of farmland and orchards with the large estates of Danson and Blendon surrounding it. Nearby Bexleyheath was growing slowly with shops, schools and churches just beginning to appear. The house as a whole was described as bringing in "a new era in house building" and Burne-Jones described it as, "the most beautiful place on earth". The garden carried on the theme of the house. There were four closes, fenced with live hedges, wattle or stout trellises each specialising in different flowers or kinds of roses.

It was, however, with the interior decoration that Morris's talent was to show. The decorations were applied directly to the wooden and plaster surfaces. All weekend guests were expected to help and Morris would prick out the pattern in the plaster with a pin to help his less gifted friends. The drawing room ceiling was open to the roof with floral designs on the walls painted by Burne-Jones. He took as his theme scenes from the medieval romance of Sir Degraunt, incorporating William and Jane as Sir Degraunt and his bride, pictures which caused speculation amongst his neighbours. In the centre of the south wall was a vast settle brought from Morris' studio in Red Lion Square and the addition of a loft added by Webb did duty as a Minstrel's gallery and access to the roof. Over the fire-place was another Latin inscription, "Ars Longa Vita Brevis" - "Art is long, life is short". Morris said that this room was "the most beautiful room in England".

Webb's design for the Red House owed as much to his master, G E Street, as to his own work. However, following the success of the house, Webb was able to set up on his own. The design caused the least number of trees to be cut down and it was said that apple trees

tended to drop their fruit inside the house through the open windows. The house was built of deep red brick laid in the English bond. It had two storeys and was L-shaped. The roof was steep with tall chimney stacks surrounded by a weather vane incorporating Morris' initials and a horse's head.

Bell Scott in his "Reminiscences" says that, "The only thing you saw from a distance was an immense red-tiled steep and high roof". The only reference we have to the builder is in Frank Buckland's "Bexleyheath", which states, "The house was very well built by William Kent". We do not know where the distinctive red bricks came from. Over the front door was the Latin inscription, "Dominus Custodiet Exitum Tuum et Introitum Tuum" - "God preserve your going out and your coming in".

In the halls were cupboards painted by Burne-Jones with scenes from the Nibelungen with stained glass by Morris and Burne-Jones. Dark red tiles covered the floor. The walls of the principal bedroom were hung with embroidered serge, a craft Morris taught his wife. The result was a work of art as well as a dwelling and it was universally admired by his friends, as Rossetti mentioned to Charles Eliot Norton, "I wish you could see the home which Morris has built for himself in Kent. It is a most noble work in every way and more a poem than a home".

Morris had visions of adding wings for the accommodation of the Burne-Jones family but moved to Oxford before this could be done; in fact, he never again built a home. However, it has been said that it was from this point, after the experience of decorating the interior of the Red House that Morris' career as a designer really began.

Life in Bexleyheath

Once Morris was settled in Bexleyheath he delighted in entertaining. His friends would arrive at Abbey Wood Station and drive the three miles in a wagonette through the North Kent countryside "the rose-hung lanes of woody Kent". The wagonette, designed by Webb, had been built in Bexley after the style of an old fashioned market cart and was used for jaunts into the countryside. The weekends were used for decorating the house and for fun and games, bowls in the garden and bear fights among the men. Morris was the perfect host, coming up

from his cellars with arms full of wine bottles. At night they would play hide and seek or gather around the piano to sing old English songs. The neighbouring people treated Morris and his friends with suspicion. Laura Hain Friswell, in a book about her father, James Hain Friswell, writes of the attitudes of the inhabitants of Bexleyheath:

"Their ideas of artists, authors and actors were of the most crude kind; they seemed to have the old-fashioned notion that they were 'vagabonds'. Like most of those who live in a narrow sphere, they understood little outside it, and they told some preposterous stories and made some wonderful statements. I remember one of the autocrats of the Heath calling and making some astounding statements about William Morris, who had built a house in the place. His chief offence appeared to be having tea parties on Sundays. I was generally silent, but on this occasion I was roused, and was soon in dire disgrace for taking up the cudgels on his behalf; I said plainly, I thought Bexley Heath should be proud that such a man as the author of "The Earthly Paradise" had lived there. I was promptly told "little girls should be seen and not heard"; this was adding insult to injury, for I was by no means a little girl. I can remember well my father's amused smile, which grew into a laugh, when the lady asserted that she "had heard, and felt sure it must be true, that Mrs Morris had been in a circus; no one could ride and manage a horse so beautifully but a performer". My father explained that this rumour was quite false, there was absolutely no truth in it; but the autocrat refused to be convinced and said, "That was not the worst; the man was quite a heathen; for it was well known down there that he was married in his drawing-room, the ceremony being of a most curious character and afterwards he had it painted upon the wall".

Morris did not seem to make much more of an impression on the area than this and the only documentary evidence is the 1861 census which lists for the Red House:

William Morris, aged 27 - Artist Painter, BA, born Walthamstow.

Jane Morris, aged 21, born Oxford.

Algernon Swinburne, aged 24 - Student, Oxford, born London.

Thomas Reynolds, aged 25 - Groom to head of family, born Woodford.

Jane Chapman, aged 27 - Housemaid, born Faversham.

Charlotte Cooper, aged 28 - Cook (Domestic), born Somerset.

Elizabeth Reynolds, aged 31 - Nurse (Private), born Leyton.

Jane Alice Morris, aged 3 months, born Bexley.
Morris' daughter, although Christened Jane Alice, was known as Jenny.

After the Red House

Whilst Morris enjoyed his house in Bexleyheath, "The Firm" was growing rapidly. The original members were Morris, Marshall and Faulkner, plus Rossetti, Ford Madox Brown and Webb. The workshops and offices were at 8 Red Lion Square and a circular describes the firm as "Fine Art Workmen in Painting, Carving and Furniture, and the metals". Then, on 25 March 1862, a second daughter, May, was born and Morris became busier as more commissions were received, his first wallpaper being printed in 1864. Morris found the travelling from Upton to London expensive and a strain so plans were made to move the workshops to the Red House. However, finances dictated that it was not to be. Finally in November 1865, the Morris family moved to Queen Square. His dream of creating a medieval world was gone from him forever, he never again visited the Red House.

The Red House has been used as a residence ever since Morris left and still contains much of the original decoration. A few years ago a blue plaque was erected on the house to commemorate its association with William Morris.

The National Trust purchased the house in 2003 and the house is open to the public - see: www.nationaltrust.org.uk/red-house