

A glimpse of Morris at work

We are indebted for this short extract from his grandmother's reminiscences to Mr. Rupert Shephard, one of some fifty members and friends of P E N who came to a joint talk on Morris given by Martin Shuttleworth and Ray Watkinson and chaired by Penelope Fitzgerald. Elizabeth Hickson was born in 1862, and this occasion seems to date from the days of the Firm in Queen Square. Her father, Joseph Beck, was a member of the Society of Friends; was a maker of optical instruments, held many offices in the City of London, and was an early collector, like Rossetti, of Japanese ceramics.

On one (other) occasion I went across London for my Father. I knew nothing of the circumstances but that my father knew and visited Rossetti in his last sad years, I was aware of. He was profoundly interested in the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and knew several of them, and he once said that an important letter must reach the hands of William Morris. I offered to take it and to my surprise he accepted my offer, but said, 'No one must have this letter but William Morris himself. If you can't see him, bring it back to me'. That it had to do with Rossetti I vaguely imagined. I went as directed and found the shop that the Pre-Raphaelites had started for the sale of Art wallpapers etc. A man in his shirt-sleeves engaged in mixing paints came when I entered the shop, and asked me what I wanted. 'Mr. William Morris', I said. 'I am he', he replied. I then delivered my letter and left. A bearded kindly face smiled on me. I have often wondered what it was all about and why my father allowed me—a very young girl—to take that obviously important letter and go across London of which he strongly disapproved for a young girl.