

The Journal of the William Morris Society

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The William Morris Society was founded in September 1955. The constitution stated that one of its objects was 'to improve and diffuse knowledge of the life, work and influences of William Morris'. Its originators recognised from the outset that, with a widely scattered membership, publications were essential if they were to achieve this aim. The organisation was, and has remained, London-based, and the bulk of lectures and seminars have been held in the capital. Thus members living in other parts of the country could only receive value for their subscriptions via the printed word. A shortage of funds, however, meant that other than the occasional *Newsletter* and the *Annual Report*, publications were few and far between in the early years. The Society relied on the generosity of printing schools and colleges, and its work was not high on their list of priorities. Thus the first Society publication, Robin Page Arnot's *Bernard Shaw and William Morris*, did not appear until late 1957 and was distributed to members with the 3rd *Annual Report* in April 1958. It was a real concern for the Society's committee that members were receiving little in return for their subscriptions at that time. Those outside London were virtually disenfranchised, while the growing American membership had received nothing at all for their dues.

The then secretary, Ronald Briggs, who was to serve the Society for twenty five years, continually emphasised the need to give priority to publications over lectures, in order to be fair to the whole membership. He argued that the bulk of the membership was unable to attend lectures, visits or business meetings, and that publications were the only reward for their subscriptions. Moreover, he hoped that published material would attract corporate members, who paid higher subscriptions, tended to be more reliable with their payments, and were able to attract more publicity for the Society. By 1960, however, after five years in existence, there had only been five publications, one of which was an exhibition catalogue, and one a guide to Red House. The idea of a regular periodical, a journal, therefore seemed an obvious and attractive means of achieving the Society's

objective and of giving members some return for their subscription.

A Society journal was first suggested by John Purkis, a future secretary of the Society, at a committee meeting in December 1960. Briggs, however, urged caution. The Society lacked funds for printing, he said, and regular publication could not be guaranteed. Purkis persisted, writing to Briggs on 31 December to push the idea, but he was not to be persuaded. 'This is not the time to take such a risk', he argued. They would need to sell advertising space to make the venture financially viable and that was 'back-breaking and troublesome work'.¹ Yet within months he had changed his mind, his reservations countered by his recognition of the need for regular publications if the Society's membership was to be maintained and expanded. An appeal for funds to launch the *Journal* produced sufficient capital to pay for the first issue. The leading contributor was Briggs himself, who donated the fee he received for an article on Morris & Company in the *Sunday Telegraph*. John Lewis & Company also gave a sizeable donation. Michael Katanka, the radical bookseller, presented the proceeds of a book sale and other contributors were the Society's president Sir Sydney Cockerell, its treasurer Freeman Bass, Walter Spradbury, Sir Thomas Barlow, Walter Gunz, and Halcrow Verstage, the secretary of the Kelmscott Fellowship. Sandersons agreed to take an advertisement on the back cover, whilst the Bowater Paper Corporation provided sufficient paper for the first three issues. Grosvenor, Chater and Company donated the cover paper, and other firms provided the plates and the type.

The first problem was what to call the new publication. Briggs suggested 'The Bridge' because he saw the *Journal* as a means of spanning the distance between members. John Purkis offered 'The Commonweal Revived', and founder member John Kay 'The New Commonweal'. Although Briggs thought it rather colourless, *The Journal of the William Morris Society* was eventually agreed upon as a temporary expedient whilst the members were asked for alternatives.² The next bone of contention arose over editorial control. Some favoured a sub-committee, but Briggs felt that production of the *Journal* was an administrative matter, 'a matter of machinery for which he was responsible'. The only policy which should govern the *Journal*, he said, was that it should be a 'means by which those interested in Morris could express their views to one another'. When a sub-committee was appointed he was clearly unhappy and continued to voice his concerns: 'What mattered was to bring it to life. If the opportunity was lost through excessive deliberation and discussion the whole future of the Society could be endangered'.³ Eventually it was agreed that he should be editor, with the final say on all matters, and that he would report to the committee twice a year. The final issue to be resolved before publication was the cover price. It was important not to invalidate the Society's position as an educational charity and therefore it was agreed to establish a distinct *Journal* fund, separate from the

Society's main account. Members would be charged five shillings per annum for what was intended to be a bi-annual publication, and non-members five shillings per copy. Corporate members would receive it free of charge.

A letter from the Society to members on 12 January 1962 announced the forthcoming first issue, which was published on 20 January. 'People interested in the life, work and times of William Morris may be found in many parts of the world', said Briggs. 'The Journal provides these with a bridge by which they may communicate with one another; it constitutes a focus for ideas about Morris and his relevance to current problems, and a record of contemporary study of him'. In his Introduction, the president, Sir Sydney Cockerell, recalled his friendship with Morris, whilst all articles in this first issue were written by members. Alfred Fairbank contributed one on 'William Morris and Calligraphy'; A.C. Sewter wrote on 'Morris and Company's Stained Glass'. An American member, E.E. Stokes junior, reflected upon 'William Morris and Bernard Shaw' whilst another, Loyd Haberley, one-time controller of the Gregynog Press, recalled lying on the Oxford Union floor in his student days looking up at 'colourful William Morris, alive enough up there in the painted ceiling which was his earliest complete expression. Liking it was my first way of saying that William Morris is an easy one for the fortunate to know'.⁴ Briggs himself wrote a short piece on 'Morris and Trafalgar Square', recalling the events of 'Bloody Sunday', 13 November 1887. Finally Hugh Bushell, one of four members of the Society who had retraced Morris's route through Iceland in 1871, wrote a brief account of their adventure, with some reflections upon Morris's fascination with that country.

One further contribution came in the form of a letter from John Purkis. Members had been invited to write on the theme of 'What I expect of the William Morris Society'. He warned against 'mere historiography', urged more activity of a contemporary relevance, and suggested that the Society became a pressure group on cultural matters. Purkis also warned against the curse of 'fragmentation', fearing that Morris might become 'a corpse for the PhD students to devour'. The Society must aim to assert Morris 'the whole man', he said. One affronted PhD student, Roberta Buchanan, replied to defend her work, but on the main issue she agreed with Purkis. 'MUST we have this ostentatious licking of a dead man's boots with one eye cocked upon the living?' she asked. She urged that there be less of 'the sickly and silly triviality in some of the pages of The Journal and more of those "bigger issues" which Mr. Purkis hints at in his letter'. This lively exchange attracted a response from W.E. Fredeman, the distinguished Pre-Raphaelite scholar, who suggested that 'In order to see the whole man it is often essential to have an intimate familiarity with the separate components – frequently with the trivialities – of his wholeness'. The discussion foreshadowed later debates about the role and content of the *Journal* and indeed the Society itself.⁵

This first issue was attractively produced, a thirty two page demy octavo book-

let in a green cover, and Briggs had been insistent that the Society subscribe to Morris's high typographical standards. The articles were brief yet scholarly, attractive both to the general reader and to the academic, and they certainly covered the range of Morris's activities, thus fulfilling Purkis's plea to address 'the whole man'. The editor certainly nurtured high expectations of the *Journal*. 'I feel that the Society has entered upon a new phase and its position is more secure', he wrote to Cockerell. 'The American libraries should be good for many subscriptions and the task of keeping the membership afloat will, I hope, be easier.'⁶

It was not only US libraries which Briggs hoped to attract. Complimentary copies were sent to over four hundred UK and overseas libraries, and to sixty two UK Chief Education Officers. Members received the first issue free of charge, partly to promote subscriptions, but also as a thank you for their patience and support. One can only marvel at such largesse on the part of a cash-strapped organisation, but early signs were promising. Initial subscriptions totalled one hundred and twenty, and by the end of the year corporate subscriptions had risen to seventy eight. At a committee meeting in March Briggs reported that the Society had enough money in hand to pay for the next four issues, although he warned that five hundred subscribers were needed in order to make the *Journal* independent of advertising.

The second issue was delayed when it was decided to make it a commemorative publication in honour of Sir Sydney Cockerell, who died on 1 May 1962. It was not published until March 1963. Thereafter, the initial optimism dissipated, as publication was beset with difficulties. The four issues comprising the first volume were not completed until the summer of 1964, and there was then a two-year hiatus, owing to technical difficulties in setting quoted material and the footnotes. Eventually, because subscriptions had not been taken out in the desired or necessary numbers, money was transferred from elsewhere in the Society's budget to purchase the necessary equipment. The *Minutes* for 10 October 1963 recorded that even some members of the committee did not subscribe, and the *Annual Report* for the same year noted that the Society was reliant on donations to continue the venture.

The first issue of Volume II finally appeared in Spring 1966, with forty pages instead of thirty two, 'to make up some of the lost ground', and Briggs admitted that corporate members had been 'very tolerant'.⁷ There were at that time 292 individual subscribers in the UK, and 218 overseas, meaning that 185 members did not subscribe. Rising printing costs exacerbated the problems, and in 1966 Sandersons withdrew their advertising, presumably because of the irregular publication and the failure to increase the readership. There was another two-year delay before Vol. II, No.2 appeared, in the summer of 1968, with Vol. II, No. 3 following during Winter of the same year.

There was some criticism of Briggs on the committee, with suggestions that

he had taken on too much in combining the editorial role with his work as secretary. He would have none of it. The poor subscription rate was one reason for the delays, he said, whilst the printers worked at cost and therefore the *Journal* was not their first priority. He set the headings himself in order to save money, and to be able to say that the Society had had a hand in the printing. Indeed, he said, the *Journal* could be argued to have subsidised the Society because of its attraction to corporate members. Eventually the committee agreed to raise the subscription to ten shillings after Volume II was completed. But even this did not occur without further mishap. Volume II, No. 4 was mistakenly printed on art paper, and could not be distributed, as it was not uniform with previous issues. It was reprinted and finally published in January 1971. Thus subscribers, who had been promised two issues per year, had actually only received eight issues in ten years. There was some compensation, however, in the range and depth of the content, which continued the precedent set in the first issue. Volume I, No.4 introduced the recently opened archive of Rossetti's letters to Jane Morris, held at the British Museum, and also contained W.E. Fredeman's 'selective bibliography' of publications about William Morris and His Circle 1960-62 (see Note 5). The initial issue of Volume II included the first book reviews, and a further instalment of Fredeman's bibliography, this time covering 1963-65. In other issues (Vol. I, No.3 and Vol. II, No.2), readers were given an insight into the Charles Fairfax Murray archive at the University of Texas, which contained numerous letters to and from Morris.

The *Annual Report* for 1971 summed up the problem facing the Society if it wished to continue the *Journal*: 'The difficulties of producing the Journal will be apparent when it is considered that the cost of production is now more than three times what it was when the first issue was published in 1961, whereas the subscription is only twice the original figure'. However, it also demonstrated a somewhat cavalier attitude to finances on the part of the secretary: 'The Journal is a vital part of the Society's work', said Briggs, 'and one which brings it to the attention of a wider audience. No lowering of standards can, therefore, be allowed'.⁸ It is perhaps not surprising therefore that a further four years elapsed before the publication of the first issue of Volume III.

There were, however, other factors at play, not least the Society's acquisition in 1970 of Kelmscott House, and the subsequent establishment there of the William Morris Centre. The House became the focus of the Society's attention during the 1970s, and absorbed most of the secretary's time and much of its finances. Many other activities were curtailed. As Harold Smith, a founder member of the Society, later remarked 'When I remember the meetings of early years and the publications sent to members there can be no comparison'.⁹ The *Annual Report* became a much abbreviated production, and the *Journal* appeared even more spasmodically than previously. The first issue of Volume III was published in

Spring 1974, and the second did not appear until Summer 1976.

From this issue onwards, the *Journal*, hitherto produced by letterpress, was printed by offset litho from camera copy in order to save money, a marked departure from Ronald Briggs's previous insistence on the maintenance of high quality productions. Even so, members only received a further three issues during the next four years, making a total of five during the decade. One event of considerable interest occurred in April 1977, when members were invited to reply to a questionnaire from the Society which aimed to 'ascertain the nature of the Society's existing support, the particular interests of its members, and what ideas they might have for the Society's future developments'.¹⁰ Some 320 of the 920 members responded, 27% of whom reported that they did not subscribe to the *Journal*, almost half because it was too expensive, and a third because it did not cover their interests. Whilst it is difficult to ascertain exactly what they meant by the latter statement, there is evidence to suggest that they felt that insufficient attention was paid to Morris's political activities. The Society had a long-standing policy of steering clear of political debate or affiliations and this was reflected in its publications.

Establishment of the William Morris Centre at Kelmscott House diverted much of the Society's energy away from everyday affairs, and also caused considerable financial outlay which it simply could not afford. Matters came to a head in November 1979, when the Society was forced to close the Centre and, later, put the lease of the house up for sale. There was also upheaval on the committee, with Ronald Briggs and other long-standing members resigning.

One of the first decisions of the committee which took office in May 1980 was that members should receive the *Journal* as part of their subscription rather than paying an additional amount. The next year, 1981, marked the twentieth anniversary of its appearance, and in that year the Society finally achieved its aim of publishing two issues annually, although this was not achieved without problems, the *Annual Report* noting that there were 'too many blemishes and some actual errors'.¹¹ This was not surprising given that the new editor, Geoffrey Bensusan, had undertaken the editing and publication almost single-handed. He resigned after overseeing the first three issues of Volume IV, to be succeeded by Ray Watkinson.

Volume V, No.3, in the summer of 1983, saw the introduction of what was to become a regular feature; David and Sheila Latham's biennial bibliography of publications about Morris, an invaluable tool for members and scholars generally. The first covered the period 1979 – 80. In 1984, to celebrate the 150th anniversary of William Morris's birth, a special double number of the *Journal* was published. As Ray Watkinson said in his editorial note, 'to cater for the whole range of interests that bring people to Morris is far from easy',¹² but the special edition made every effort to do that, covering Morris's politics, literature, archi-

ture and design, and his journeys to Iceland.

The 25th anniversary of the first appearance of the *Journal* took place in 1986. The Winter issue of 1985-6 (Volume VI, No.4), was only the twenty fourth actual edition, yet eleven had been published since 1981, compared to fourteen during the first twenty years, a measure of the progress being made by the Society. The first issue of Volume VII, in October 1986, was a double number, in order to facilitate a change in the timing of publication aimed at bringing the accounts more neatly into the financial year. Henceforward the *Journal* was to appear in April and October each year, a spring-autumn sequence rather than a winter-summer one. That issue was the last to be edited by Ray Watkinson, and the April 1987 number saw Peter Faulkner installed as editor.

There was some debate at this time about the nature and content of the *Journal*, amidst fears that it was becoming too academic. At the 1984 AGM, Ray Watkinson emphasised the need for 'scholarship' rather than academic respectability. Uppermost in his mind, he said, was the need to cater for 'all sorts and conditions of men and women'. The catholicity of Morris's interests caused a 'special problem' for the *Journal*, said the then secretary Richard Smith, in the *Annual Report* for 1985. To cater for all members' interests in such a small-scale publication was difficult, and could only be done over a sequence of issues. Nonetheless, he said, the Society must ensure that this was done, whilst also doing justice to Morris, otherwise it would not attract new members.¹³

Concerns of this nature have resurfaced from time to time, and are very real. On the one hand, if the *Journal* is to continue to be placed in university and other academic libraries, it must meet the increasingly rigorous academic standards required, and it is vital for the Society that its corporate members continue to subscribe. Yet the *Journal* must also cater for the hundreds of members for whom publications are the only reward for their subscriptions. During recent years one solution has been to increase the scope of the *Newsletter*, which now publishes many of the shorter articles which would once have found their way into the *Journal*.

During its early days the *Journal* was still able to make direct links with Morris and his circle via reminiscences from contemporaries or near contemporaries, and then with May Morris. Such articles were more anecdotal and all articles tended to be shorter. It has expanded considerably since then, providing more scholarly articles, regular book reviews, and features such as the biennial annotated bibliographies of publications by or about William Morris. These bibliographies, meticulously arranged by David and Sheila Latham, are an invaluable guide to Morris's work, covering books, pamphlets, articles, exhibition catalogues and dissertations. In their own words, 'the subject categories and author index will save the impatient specialist from needing to browse through descriptions of woven tapestries in search of critiques of "The Haystack in the floods"'.¹⁵ A

special edition of the *Journal*, in 1998, to mark the centenary of the death of Edward Burne-Jones, was the first to carry colour illustrations, and the Autumn 1999 issue the first to exceed one hundred pages. The Spring 2001 issue was the last to be edited by Nicholas Salmon, who had been editor since the Autumn of 1996. His leaving gift was a catalogue of articles 1961-2000.

Salmon's successor was Rosie Miles, the first female editor, who brought both enthusiasm and a new and professional approach to the role. One of her major concerns was the fact that very few university or college libraries in the UK subscribed to the *Journal*, and her first action was to institute an Editorial Advisory Board, which included many distinguished figures in the world of Morris research and scholarship. The *Journal* thus became a refereed publication, which she hoped would make it more attractive to academic institutions here. For similar reasons she proposed a change of title, and the Winter 2002 issue bore for the first time the masthead *The Journal of William Morris Studies*. A special issue in Summer 2004, dedicated to 'William Morris and the Book Arts', ran to 192 pages and was fully illustrated. For the Winter issue of that year a new, slightly larger, and very elegant format was adopted, designed by David Gorman. The paper size was increased to Royal Octavo, in order to reduce the number of pages, and the *Journal* was now perfect bound with a spine, rather than saddle stitched and stapled as previously. Miles proposed a norm of ninety six pages for future issues, but in her view there was insufficient material of suitable standard for Summer 2005 so a double Summer-Winter issue was published in order to celebrate the Society's 50th anniversary.

In the new higher education world of Research Exercises, and increased pressure on academics to publish, development of the *Journal* in this direction was probably inevitable, but it has raised some concerns amongst the membership. A number whom I surveyed felt that it had become too 'academic and obscure'. 'A bit over my head', said one, 'a little heavy' another. Most, however, praised the *Newsletter*, both for its design and for the breadth of its coverage and, as suggested above, this has gone some considerable way towards achieving a balance between academia and readability.

The *Journal* reached its 60th edition in 2004, providing an impressive resource for all students of Morris. A survey of its contents to that date reveals that, whilst Morris's literary output has received the most attention, all aspects of his work has been covered fairly comprehensively. There have been over ninety articles on his writings, eighty surveying various aspects of his life, sixty seven on his politics, and sixty one on his artistic activities. The founders of the Society, in their letter to *The Times* on 13 September 1955, argued that, whilst a number of organisations existed which examined particular aspects of Morris's work, 'there exists no society whose aim it is to extend the knowledge of the man as painter, embroiderer, weaver, carver, calligrapher, wood engraver, printer, writer, and socialist'.

Through the pages of the *Journal* the Society has certainly covered the full range of Morris's activities, presenting the 'whole man' to its readers. The Summer 2007 issue, a special number devoted to 'Teaching Morris', was Rosie Miles's last as editor. As she said in her editorial, 'there are very few figures indeed who can inspire the sweep and diversity of subjects on which this *Journal* routinely publishes'.¹⁵ That in itself was embodied in the transfer of the Editorship from an English Studies lecturer to an Environmental Scientist, Patrick O'Sullivan.

In his first editorial, he reinforced Miles's view. 'One of the great strengths of *JWMS*, to my mind', he wrote, 'is its eclectic subject matter, which clearly reflects Morris's own enormous range of interests'. He also suggested that 'with the recent onset of widespread greening, the life, work and ideas of William Morris have never been more relevant than they are today'. Morris, he suggested, invented the idea of alternative technology, identified the key role of Work, and of 'local production for local need', observed and correctly identified the effects of the globalisation of capital, and he also examined in some detail the ways in which the problem of economic scarcity can be overcome. Morris's vision, he argued, of an ecological society 'both green, democratic and free', possesses enormous resonance today.¹⁶

The authors of the original letter to *The Times* had suggested that the Society should 'provide a forum for the exchange of ideas on his contemporary influence over the whole range of his artistic and political activities', but this is one area where the *Journal* has perhaps been less successful. The Spring 1990 issue contained an article by Helen Timo entitled 'News from Somewhere: The relevance of William Morris's Thought in 1990', and another by O'Sullivan himself on 'Morris and Ecology'. A special issue in Autumn 1994 discussed Morris and Education, and contained much of relevance to the modern educationalist. Otherwise one searches in vain for direct attempts to assess Morris's work or thought in relation to contemporary concerns. This increased emphasis upon Morris's contemporary influence and relevance is, therefore, a welcome one.

The *Journal* of the William Morris Society has made a major contribution to the work of the Society helping, in the words of Ronald Briggs, 'to keep the Morris flame alive'.¹⁷ For half a century it has sustained and increased knowledge and interest in his life, work and activities. The Society and its members owe a debt of gratitude to the editors for their unceasing labours on its behalf. Jan Marsh has written thus of the Society, but her comment might equally apply to the *Journal*: 'It takes members to new places, shares discoveries and deepens our understanding of a most remarkable man, his artistic and political networks, and his vision of "how we might live", which remains perennially inspiring'.¹⁸

NOTES

1. Letter from Ronald Briggs to John Purkis, 21 January 1961.
2. *Minutes*, Committee of the William Morris Society, 15 June 1961 (Afterwards *Minutes*); *Minutes*, 3 August 1961.
3. *Minutes* 15 June 1961.
4. Loyd Haberly, 'By His Works', *Journal of the William Morris Society*, Vol. I, No. 1, 1961, p. 20. (Afterwards *JWMS*)
5. John Purkis, 'Correspondence: What I expect of the William Morris Society', *ibid.* pp. 20 – 21; Roberta Buchanan, 'Correspondence: What I expect of the William Morris Society', *JWMS*, Vol. I, No. 3, 1963, pp. 30 – 31; William E. Fredeman, 'William Morris and his circle: a selective bibliography of publications, 1960-62', *JWMS*, Vol. I, No. 4, 1964, p. 23.
6. Letter, Ronald Briggs to Sir Sydney Cockerell, 29 January 1962.
7. *Minutes*, 28 July 1966.
8. William Morris Society *Annual Report* 1971, p. 7. (Afterwards *Annual Report*)
9. Letter, Harold Smith to Teresa Newman, 9 January 1980.
10. A copy of this questionnaire is kept in the Society's archive at Kelmscott House.
11. *Annual Report*, 1981, p.8.
12. Ray Watkinson, 'Editorial Note', *JWMS*, Vol. V, No. 4, 1984, p. 2.
13. *Annual Reports*, 1984, p. 12; 1985, p. 7.
14. *JWMS* Vol. XIV, No.4 (Summer 2004), Insert, p. II.
15. 'Editorial', *JWMS*, Vol. XVII, No. 2, (Summer 2007), p. 3.
16. 'Editorial', *JWMS*, Vol. XVII, No. 3 (Winter 2007), p. 7, p. 6.
17. Interview with Ronald Briggs, 10 April 2006.
18. Jan Marsh, Foreword to Martin Crick, *The History of the William Morris Society 1955-2005*, London: William Morris Society (forthcoming).