Laxey Mill: Ruskin’s Parallel to Merton Abbey

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In the opening chapter of *Praeterita* John Ruskin suggests that he was well educated in art by “worshipful pilgrimages” with his upwardly aspiring mother and father to the castles of kings and the houses of nobility. For all that, however, his real sense of perfection was realized by the age of four in his hours of play near the backyard doorway of his aunt’s shop and bakehouse in Croydon. These childhood moments of the 1820s fixed his tastes forever, he concludes, “to things modest, humble, and pure in peace, under the low red roofs of Croydon, and by the cress-set rivulets in which the sand danced and minnows darted above the Springs of Wandel.”

It is only partly coincidental that in 1881, by the shores of the Wandle, William Morris located the Merton Abbey textile and glass works that was to be among the best embodiments of Ruskin’s theories of art, work, and economics. A reviewer for the *Spectator* wrote in November 1883, “Here, at last, can we see some practical outcome of the principles of which Mr. Ruskin is the prominant teacher.” Ruskin was at the same time, however, helping to bring into fruition his own “practical outcome of . . . principles”: a textile works by waters distant from the Wandle, the convergence of the Glen Roy and Laxey Rivers in the village of Laxey, Isle of Man. Laxey Mill is an important instance, among several, of Ruskin’s own successes in the practical application of his principles. While Merton Abbey is also a good example of Ruskin’s ideas put to work, its difference from St. George’s Mill at Laxey is also a good indication of the conservative qualities in Ruskin that ultimately set Morris apart from him.

Laxey Mill had some of its origins in Lancashire. Its manager, Egbert Rydings, worked as a silk weaver there but retired to the Isle of Man in the late 1860s. Rydings read Ruskin’s *Munera Pulveris* and began using Ruskin’s principles of simplified living as a guide; he became a correspondent with Ruskin in 1875. In 1876 he wrote from his home at Laxey on the Isle of Man to correct the figures of the February 1876 *Fors* account of Ruskin’s personal expenses. He went on to write that all the cloth in the Rydings household had been homespun, explaining “We have now linen sheets in wear, not a hole or a tear in them, that were spun by my wife’s mother, – and she, poor body, has been dead twenty-eight or twenty-nine years, – the flax grown on their own farm.” Rydings blamed the durability of good homespun for the death of the cottage spinning trade on Man. “‘Manks-made dresses,’” he explained, “last too long, and therefore do not give the young women a chance of having four or five new dresses in the year.” Ruskin welcomed this confirmation of his belief in the superiority of hand labor and was no doubt pleased to hear an echo, too, of his belief that the erasure of the spinner’s art had trivialized and degraded the tastes of young women. Rydings
was invited for a week’s stay at Brantwood and became a Companion of the Guild. Ruskin rewarded his book-keeping care by making him the Guild’s accountant, with William Walker. He rewarded Rydings’ concern for the Manx homespun industry by encouraging him to establish a mill there for homespun yarns and fabrics.

E.T. Cook calls the record of the St. George’s Guild “a study in Utopia, and, in part, a record of things actually done.” By 1881 through the Guild of St. George Ruskin had attempted to clean up the streets of St. Giles, to sell good tea at a fair price in the poorer precincts of Paddington Street, and “At Carshalton, in Surrey,” to salvage “one of the springs of the Wandel, and mak[e] it pleasantly habitable by trout.” More successfully, he established the St. George’s Museum in Sheffield for the use and edification of workers. In the December 1876 letter of Fors Ruskin had told his readers that he was “very anxious to support, with a view to the determination of a standard of material in dress, the wool manufacture among the old-fashioned cottagers of the Isle of Man.” With an immediate payment of £25 Ruskin helped Rydings begin educational work in the arts of hand spinning and weaving, and through a later loan from the Guild he enabled Rydings to start a mill at Laxey, “the first venture of ‘St. George’s Guild’ as manufacturers.”

The mill originated with Rydings’ observation that the hand-production of cloth of the traditional Manx sort was dying out due to the competition of more cheaply produced, less lasting, and less traditional products. To the retired silk-weaver, the situation seemed right for the application of Ruskin’s principles. There was a long tradition of home cloth manufacture on Man that was still practiced by older women, though it was no longer being passed on to the young. There was an established wool industry on the island (largely, by the 1880s, reliant upon modern white-wooled breeds, but still able to provide the soft to dark brown wool of the ancient Manx Loghtan breed of sheep). There was a supply of female labor. Though men and older boys were hired for work in the lead mines of the Great Laxey Mining Company, there was little suitable work for women in the mines, and therefore an opportunity to put them to work at the spinning and weaving Ruskin favored as the occupation for women’s hands. Finally, there was a good source of water power in the local streams.

In letter 67 of Fors, at the same time he was placing Rydings in his role as accountant, Ruskin stated that the first requirement for a Companion of St. George was honesty. Honesty is the keynote in almost all of Ruskin’s published thinking about the mill. In setting up Laxey Mill Ruskin put forward as the fundamental rules:

that all materials used in the manufacture must be of the best and purest, and that the goods when made were to be as perfect as fingers could make them; an open market to all; if a girl wanted a new frock, or a young man cloth for a new suit of clothes, they should be able to buy direct from the mill, and have the Guild’s guarantee that they were getting honest woollen cloth.

To these Ruskin added a characteristic final rule: “No credit . . . this will save sleepless nights.” The “honesty” of the cloth was matched by the honesty of the building in which it was produced. Rydings rebuilt the old corn mill that had been
on the site into a larger woolen mill of Manx slate. The three stories are well
punctuated by both side windows and skylights, but the building is a simple
rectangular block with a narrow slope to the roof and no eaves. Ruskin slyly
wrote, beneath the first sketch of the building Rydings brought him, “First
achievement of the St. George’s Company in Romantic achtecture.”

The honesty of the mill was realized in several ways. First, its farm suppliers
were paid, preferably, not in cash but in processed wool or cloth. The “Ruskin
Homespuns” for which the mill became most famous were undyed woolen cloths
fulled into a uniform colored felt made in several weights, the lighter generally
being used in women’s clothing, the heavier for men’s wear. The color of this
cloth, called keir in Manx, ranged from light to dark depending on the blend of
white or native dark wool woven into the fabric. As he was helping Rydings get
started with the educational work that preceded the construction of the mill,
Ruskin bragged that this cloth would become “one of the standards of value in
St. George’s currency.” The mill building housed a shop for the sale of its
wool, yarn, and fabric, and also sold mail orders. In addition to its famous
homespuns it also produced flannels, blankets, and hosiery. The flannels were
both white and dyed. Ruskin said in his 1881 “Master’s Report” that Rydings
was “acquainting himself with the honest and safe practices of dyeing no less than
of spinning.”

The second and third principles of the St. George’s Guild Ruskin put forward in
letter 67 were working with one’s own hands, and spending any time beyond the
labor it took to earn one’s daily bread in cultivating the soul. Rydings, the retired
silk weaver, served as manager of St. George’s Mill. Prior to the establishment of
the mill, he had already begun a class in Laxey where older women from the area
taught spinning and where a weaver from Glen Roy set up his loom to teach
weaving. Under Rydings’ encouragement the older and younger generations were
reunited in the practice of these traditional arts. Because of the nature of trade the
Laxey Mill workers were placed in closer contact with farmers. According to
Mona Douglas, one of the leaders in the Manx cultural revival in this century, the
Laxey Mill workers, in turn, helped their suppliers with farm work during the
peak season. The hours at the mill also allowed them time to garden, fish, and
take part in evenings of country dancing and storytelling. Though Ruskin’s
carefully cultivated Sheffield Museum suggests that the Master had higher-minded
pursuits as part of his ideal for leisure activity, the Laxey Mill and its mode of
operation added to the health and happiness of its Manx community. Traditional
resources and arts were at the core of this the social and economic rejuvenation
the mill fostered.

It is no coincidence that Ruskin would use St. George’s Guild money to begin a
woolen mill at the same time Morris was expanding his own production of
textiles. Morris made no secret of his indebtedness to Ruskin. He admonished an
1882 correspondent who had praised Hopes and Fears for Art above the work of
Ruskin:

I do not like . . . to be praised at the expense of Ruskin, who you must
remember is the first comer, the inventor; and I believe we all of us owe a hope
that still clings to us, and a chance of expressing that hope to his insight.
As “first comer” and “inventor” Ruskin had articulated for Morris the college undergraduate a theory that explained his preference for the medieval over most things modern. In “The Nature of Gothic” Ruskin showed how the free workman’s life produced great art. In the savageness of gothic art Ruskin saw Christian theology in practice: a theology that believed at once in both the imperfection and the dignity of the individual soul. “You must either make a tool of the creature,” Ruskin wrote, “or a man of him. You cannot make both” (177). Modern art, in trading the savageness of gothic for smooth perfection, had turned the worker into a slave, preferring “mean victory to honourable defeat” (177). In praising the naturalism of gothic art, Ruskin again saw a freedom at work in the carver’s hand, representation “unconstrained by artistical laws” (191). Ruskin picked out, in particular, the gothic depiction of vegetable forms. Studying vegetation, the gothic carver, Ruskin wrote, “put more of nature into his work, until at last it was all true, retaining, nevertheless, every valuable character of the original well-disciplined and designed arrangement” (192).

Though John Ruskin was born 15 years before William Morris, and made his impression on the younger man through his published writings while Morris was an undergraduate, the two were near contemporaries in the application of their social and artistic theories. Ruskin’s effort to let the Shea brothers have free say in their carving work on the University Museum predated Morris’s holiday of participation in the painting of the Oxford Union murals by only two years. The conjunction in timing of the Merton Abbey works with St. George’s Mill in Laxey was but one in a series of such parallels.

In origin the two men weren’t so far apart, and neither were their goals. Each grew up in the green spaces at the fringe of London, beneficiaries of the rising mercantile success of their fathers. Though his earlier memories returned to a backyard spring in Croydon, Ruskin lived from the age of four in the “leafy seclusion” of Herne Hill. Morris grew up in “the suburban village on the edge of Epping Forest . . . a pleasant place” at Elm House and Woodford Hall. Each developed early an intuitive love of old buildings and growing things which was wedded to their sense of joy in childhood leisure, and which they came to believe could be wedded to a joy in labor. Ruskin believed that proper political economy would rejuvenate the air, the earth, and the waters: “You might have the rivers of England as pure as the crystal of the rock; beautiful in falls, in lakes, in living pools; so full of fish that you might take them out with your hands instead of nets.” He put this belief in practice when cleaning up the Wandle spring in Carshalton, and stressed the importance of the “natural force” of water in justifying the building of a mill on the Laxey River. As Morris was putting Merton Abbey into full production he shared as much glee in the improvement the grounds made to the banks of the Wandle as he did in the strict business accomplishments of the place, writing to Ruskin in 1883:

I need not say that I should be very glad to see you at our place at Merton Abbey: though I fear it would be a grief to you to see the banks of the pretty Wandle so beset with the horrors of the Jerry-builders: there is still some beauty left about the place however, and the stream itself is not much befouled: I am
doing my best to keep the place decent, and can do so in the seven acres our
works command; but as to the rest can do but little.\textsuperscript{21}

The tone of the letter is conspiratorial, the younger man knowing intuitively that
his hatred of jerry-built sprawl and the industrial destruction of the environment
is an echo of the feelings of his correspondent.

Ruskin’s woolen mill was a better application of his taste for simplicity than
was Morris’s Merton Abbey works. It embodied those “things modest, humble,
and pure in peace” that had made a profound impression on the young Ruskin’s
imagination. The mill’s village location, the simplicity of its signature product, and
the weaver origins of its manager all are in keeping with Ruskin’s stress on nature,
honesty, and the importance of elevating the spirit and the station of the
workman. When Egbert Rydings later published his reminiscence of a visit to
Ruskin in the Lake District, he stressed the quiet of Ruskin’s seclusion, the
pleasure he took in Brantwood’s natural location, the pride he took in the labor he
had shared in improving the site, and the tender familiarity Ruskin’s servants
showed to their master.\textsuperscript{22} It is clear that Rydings had emulated these qualities in
putting St. George ideas and capital to work in Laxey.

St. George’s Mill at Laxey also characteristically shows the distance that
Ruskin, as “Master” kept from his projects. The ideas, the encouragement, and
the capital were funneled through Ruskin, but the labor, the investment of time
and spirit, and the daily management of the mill were very much the work of
Rydings. Ruskin never actually visited Laxey, and the building and establishment
of the mill came at a point in Ruskin’s life where his emotional condition would
not have permitted continued supervision of the project. This distance from
the actual work of an experiment in social reform ultimately marks Ruskin’s
difference from his disciple Morris.

The shortcomings and the contradictions of Morris’ practice have been
discussed well by Peter Floud and by Charles Harvey and Jon Press. Some of
these, such as the production workers’ lack of participation in the work of design,
are especially true to the pictorial and pattern works done by the Morris firm. The
ultimate difference in wage and position between master and worker, on the other
hand, mark Morris’ similarity to what Ruskin did at Laxey\textsuperscript{23}. But Morris’ genius
ultimately showed itself best in cooperative efforts, and these ultimately showed a
sense of innovation that is rare in Ruskin. Morris was intimately acquainted with
all levels of production and management at Merton Abbey. Morris up to his
elbows in indigo dye, having his photo taken in his worker’s blouse, was working
innovatively to revive a lost traditional art of indigo discharge. In this research he
put himself at the cutting edge of the day-to-day work of the Firm. In designing
patterns that would put the discharge process to work he was, again, reliant on
the wisdom and precedent of tradition, yet his designs mixed naturalism and bold
freedom of pattern in a way that still proves distinctive. Finally, as Harvey and
Press have also argued, Morris saw in the very failures of applied theory at
Merton Abbey a way to push the revolution forward. While he could say that his
essay “Art and Socialism” had “plenty of Ruskinism in it,” he also knew that
Ruskin was “not a socialist, that is not a practical one.”\textsuperscript{24} Morris joined the
Democratic Federation in January 1883, not long after establishing the works at
Merton Abbey. The later part of the eighties would find Morris regularly addressing gatherings of workers across England to recruit them to the cause of universal socialism. Morris carried his practice of Ruskin’s ideas about art and society beyond practice in art to the field of active politics. Ruskin did, throughout his career, put his ideas into practice, but he did so with less of his total energy, less direct involvement, and, ultimately, with less innovation than his disciple William Morris.

NOTES
3 Cook and Wedderburn, Works, 28: 586.
4 Cook and Wedderburn, Works, 28: 585.
6 Cook and Wedderburn, Works, 28: 204.
7 Cook and Wedderburn, Works, 28: 768.
9 Here it should be noted that Ruskin believed, and stated in his 1882 report, that “frequently infirm and aged women were obliged to leave their cottages and their spinning-wheel to work in the mines.” (Works 30: 48) In contradiction of this, census returns for 1881, the year the mill began operation, show only one woman working in the fairly extensive mining industry on the Isle of Man (letter from Dr. L. S. Garrad, Assistant Keeper, The Manx Museum and National Trust, to the author, 3 February 1995).
10 Laxey was, in fact, the home of the world’s largest water wheel, erected in 1854 to operate the pump that emptied the Laxey mine of the water that flowed past the St. George’s Mill.
11 Rydings 221.
12 Rydings 221.
14 Cook and Wedderburn, Works, 28: 768.
15 Cook and Wedderburn, Works, 30: 41. According to L. S. Garrad of the Manx Museum, evidence suggests that in the red flannel, at least, Rydings used a synthetic color.
22 Rydings, ‘Some Reminiscences.’
24 *Letters*, 2: 452 and 2: 305.