"A Funny Childish Thing":
The Flodden Field Bas Relief
and Redesign of the Library
at Naworth Castle

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"... you are the only real friends we had made of late years, who had entered what your husband one day called our 'magic circle'". Thus wrote Janey Morris to Rosalind Howard in reference to an after-dinner conversation between herself, her husband and the Burne-Joneses during which the Howards were apparently much discussed. The group had first met many years earlier, in 1865, when as newly-weds the Howards had taken up residence in London, with George (1843-1911, later Ninth Earl of Carlisle) determined to establish a career as an artist. From the outset, Howard's professional status was dogged by an enduring ambiguity which hindsight has done little to clarify. He has been variously described as an "amateur painter of some quality", "a dedicated amateur" and "friend and patron to Burne-Jones". His role is usually cast as tangential to his more illustrious associates, although paradoxically his presence at the heart of the second generation Pre-Raphaelites is seldom called into question by contemporary biographers. He is numbered by J Comyns Carr amongst the few "intimate friends" received at the Grange "Sunday after Sunday" along with Morris, Ruskin and Marie Stillman. In such accounts Howard's habitual presence as an intimate placed at the nucleus of the circle is taken for granted, and perhaps for that very reason seldom expanded upon. Such brevity has since been compounded by Howard's self-effacing disposition which has engendered something of an historical elusiveness.

Howard was to make a positive statement of intent by enrolling as a student at both South Kensington's National Art Training School and at Heatherley's in 1866, but meanwhile found himself uncomfortably placed as an aristocrat harbouring sincere artistic ambitions. He made interminable rounds of introductory visits to artists' studios, but appears often to have been somewhat overawed by the experience and in his diffidence failed to forge significant links, instead commissioning several family portraits. It would appear natural to assume, then, that here was a well-connected and enthusiastic amateur hovering tentatively on the sidelines of London's artistic community, with potential as a discerning patron. However, on 8 April 1865, Howard met Edward Burne-Jones and with startling rapidity was thrust to the heart of bohemia. The meeting is recorded innocuously enough in Rosalind Howard's journal: "G goes to Kensington and with Val Prinsep sees B-Jones and Burton's studios," but the following day the
visit was repeated and soon the two met daily. Their rapport was instantly evident, as Georgiana Burne-Jones later recalled: “. . . young, fresh and eager about everything . . . Mr Howard’s gift as a painter of romantic landscape made him welcome in the studio at once.”

Whilst at Cambridge, from 1862 to 1864, Howard had immersed himself in fourteenth century poetry and the writings of Ruskin, Kingsley and Carlyle, seeking to fashion an ideological framework within which his creativity would be released through an inspirational response to nature. His diary records the restless enervation inspired in one excessively susceptible to the effects of natural beauty: “I tried to draw an oak and divers things but could not. The day was too lovely.” He was a dreamer, the soul of undisciplined enthusiasm desperately seeking an enlightened guiding hand, possessing as he did a deep-seated conviction that only art could redeem him from a self-confessed propensity for indolence. His meeting with Burne-Jones was revelatory. A relationship resulted which broadened precipitately into the true companionship born of mutual accord both artistic and personal. There ensued several years of painting, drawing and sketching together as Burne-Jones undertook the role of informal teacher. Following his ‘retreat’ to The Grange in 1867 they continued to meet almost daily, with Howard having unlimited access to his studio. Even after this routine was sacrificed to pressure of work and Howard was continuing his studies instead under Alphonse Legros (on Burne-Jones’s recommendation), the two remained on intimate terms until Burne-Jones’s death. Howard was his confidant regarding the denouement of his affair with Maria Zambaco and was thereafter essential to his emotional well-being, repeatedly acknowledged as a “necessity.” The voluminous correspondence from Burne-Jones to Howard abounds in such passages of unreserved affection as: “Dear child I miss you dreadfully . . . with everyone else I quarrel, if not on all points then at least on some, and with you never . . .” and: “. . . be quite sure, old fellow, your loving friendship is one of the best things I have in life, and never leaves me at all.” Howard’s equable acquiescent nature acted as a balm at times of turmoil, prompting Burne-Jones to write: “I . . . feel the utmost rest in your friendship.”

Through Burne-Jones Howard was soon introduced to William Morris and Philip Webb; closer relations between them were nurtured over the years. Howard’s relationship with the celebrated reserved and acerbic Webb, which began as one of business, melted before long into a lasting friendship. With Morris there was nurtured “a subtle intertwining of politics and families and wallpapers and art.” Howard’s significance as a patron to Webb, Morris and Burne-Jones reflected his eagerness to endorse their crusade of aesthetic betterment for the nation and in the coming years his active involvement with such bodies as the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings and the National Association for the Advancement of Art and its Application to Industry would further emphasise his own continued concerns. From first to last he turned to Philip Webb for architectural commissions, engaging him in 1867 to design his townhouse at Palace Green in Kensington, a brickbuilt dwelling of controversial design in a locality predominantly stucco. A prominent studio window was incorporated at the front of the building, valiantly declaring Howard’s status as an artist. The decorative schemes at Palace Green were overseen personally by Morris and
Burne-Jones, with the dining room, drawing room and boudoir having particularly painstaking attention to detail lavished upon them.

Howard’s income increased considerably following the death of his father in 1879 and that of his uncle, Lord Lanerton, the following year, allowing him to commission with less restraint than had hitherto been the case (the capital for Palace Green had come from his father). From 1880 extensive redecoration was undertaken at the ancient family seat of Naworth Castle in Cumberland, beloved by Morris as one of England’s most poetical settings. Vast quantities of wallpapers, fabrics and furnishings were ordered from Morris & Co., and Webb was engaged to undertake the remodelling of the library, a space which had formerly acted as the chapel. Having previously refused to be the instrument of architectural intervention elsewhere in the medieval castle he happily undertook to redesign this room, which was amongst those that had been destroyed by fire in 1844 and subsequently restored by Anthony Salvin. In redesigning the library Webb would be endowing a space, already compromised, with his own vision. His design incorporated barrel-vaulting along the fireplace wall, a notional reverberation of the chapel’s architecture before the fire, and a cross-reference to the barrel-vaulting at St Martin’s, which had been completed two years earlier. Galleries were added at either end of the library, with access by two boxed-in spiral staircases with recessed cartouches embellishing the panelling beneath. Effective use was also made of recurrent themes employed in Webb’s work elsewhere at Naworth: pierced fretwork, linenfold panelling and gridlike balustrades, which added a lightness and delicacy offsetting the pervasive spirit of baronial robustness (Plate 5). In addition, a most ambitious work by Burne-Jones was to occupy the 40-foot space above the library fireplace: a triptych of his long-cherished subject The Last Sleep of Arthur in Avalon which had haunted him for years and which he now finally felt compelled to tackle, Howard’s commission providing a timely opportunity for him to do so.

Initially, Burne-Jones was enthusiastic about its progress; as time passed, however, it became clear that the complexity of his conception and the length of time for which the subject had preoccupied him were such that it burgeoned uncontrollably and became instead his magnum opus. As Georgiana Burne-Jones later recalled: “... the idea of it lay deep in Edward’s mind and the scope of it grew until it ceased to suit its original purpose.” Howard’s involvement with the saga of Arthur in Avalon continued for several years; as late as January 1885 it remained nominally his, although Burne-Jones’s inability to reconcile himself to parting with it, even to so close a friend as Howard, had become ever more apparent. He now confessed that he had miscalculated its cost, having already spent “time unmeasurable” on it, and that it was beyond his power to estimate a sum for the finished work. Instead he suggested a new scheme for the space at Naworth: “... treating the same subject but making the figures few and big, life size at least and about six or seven in number – and a background of apple trees only.” His intention was to put aside that version of Arthur in Avalon which he now regarded as his own in order to complete the simpler composition for Howard. However, this second version, which was itself to cost a princely £3000, was never executed; it is to be supposed that Howard was unwilling to divert his friend from a subject which was evidently of profound importance to him for the
sake of its reinterpretation in a lesser form. The wall was hung instead with tapestries.

In 1882, with *Arthur In Avalon* still at an embryonic stage of development, Howard suggested that Burne-Jones consider a second and altogether more lighthearted undertaking. Close examination of their correspondence reveals that *The Battle of Flodden Field* was not envisaged as an alternative to *Arthur in Avalon*, as has previously been supposed, but rather as an additional commission to be undertaken concurrently with the first. It was an idea discussed between them two years earlier and to which they now returned. The resulting commission was for the design of a bas relief to be incorporated into the overmantel of the library fireplace, its subject being the battle of Flodden Field of 1513. Both Howard and Stanley ancestors had played prominent roles in the battle; the panel’s central mounted figure is Sir Thomas Howard, Earl of Surrey, who had been in command of the English army.

Despite the breadth of decorative work undertaken by Burne-Jones for Morris & Co over the years, *Flodden* fell within a small group of commissions from Howard for bas reliefs, which were unusual within his oeuvre. The other two, companion pieces entitled *The Nativity* and *The Entombment*, were begun in 1879 and were both executed, like *Flodden*, by Sir Edgar Boehm. These small panels were incorporated into a memorial plaque erected in memory of Howard’s parents at Lanercost Priory near Brampton; Burne-Jones was pleased by the prospect of having a larger design modelled by Boehm. Although between 1878 and 1888 Burne-Jones made several designs for painted and gilded gesso relief panels, only a handful were actually executed and were works of far shallower relief than *Flodden*, such as the funerary monument for Laura Tennant commissioned in 1885 by Lady Horner (née Frances Graham) for the parish church at Mells.

In his correspondence with Howard during the late 1870s and early 1880s, Burne-Jones referred repeatedly to the difficulties he was encountering in bringing major works to completion, often returning endlessly to unfinished canvases with a sense of hopeless dissatisfaction. His need for the proximity of those upon whom his emotional reliance was founded is self-evident: “... the Annunciation has come to present grief & I have put it by & have only to exhibit that weary weary Laus Veneris & one or two other weary old things of which the world that is not already sickened soon will be ... I wish you were coming back – I wish Morris wasn’t going – I wish most things weren’t as they are.” Such negative self-evaluation was clouded by the blackness of depression and was refuted by his enormous popularity with a public which perceived him as being at the very height of his powers. He had burst upon a wider audience following the *éclat* with which the Grosvenor Gallery had opened in 1877, and his celebrity would not begin to wane for years to come.

Georgiana Burne-Jones was later to recall that 1881 “seemed from its effects to have been more than twelve months in length, and in the end Edward was a distinctly older man.” An increasing mannerism characterised his work, with large-scale paintings of great ambition such as *The Golden Stairs*, first designed in 1872 and completed in 1880, dominating his output. He now began *Arthur in Avalon* which, together with the Flodden Field bas relief, was a precursor to his
paintings of the 1890s signalling a retreat into introspection epitomised once more by medieval subjects, revisiting the subject-matter of his youth which drew on English literary sources. _Flodden_ was the antithesis of most of Burne-Jones’s other work during this period and was undertaken in that spirit of exuberance which seems so often to have eluded him in middle age. Having become ever more concerned with a high degree of finish and elaboration elsewhere, _Flodden_ appears to have been a welcome respite and one which was regarded by both men with a relative lightheartedness. Georgiana Burne-Jones alludes to the commission in her _Memorials_: “Another entry in this year’s list [1882] is: “Designed a panel of Flodden Battle, to be worked out by Boehm . . . Edward enjoyed designing it: the fight was closely imagined . . .”20 (Plate 3). _Flodden_ is surely indebted both in spirit and composition to the battle scenes of Uccello; at the outset of his career in 1857 Burne-Jones had been greatly impressed by the left-hand panel of the triptych _The Rout of San Romano_, which had recently been purchased in Italy for the National Gallery by its Director Sir Charles Eastlake. Howard later cited the reliefs on the sarcophagus of Maximilian I of Innsbruck as a further source for the decorative treatment of a battle scene. In each case the shallow perspective accorded well with Burne-Jones’s ideas on decorative design. He utilised the complex planes and undulations of the hilly landscape to great effect, ranging the clusters of warring forces along them, their pikes echoing the contours of the battlefield and exploiting to the full the dramatic potential of linearity.

_The Battle of Flodden Field_ took several years to complete and was an amalgam of several hands: Burne-Jones designed the figures and overall composition, Philip Webb was called in to assist with designing the horses and to be consulted over the heraldic devices incorporated into the banners of the design, and Howard was to collaborate by devising the colour scheme and assisting Burne-Jones in tinting it. Correspondence between them also suggests that Walter Crane may have had some involvement with the project, as his studio was requisitioned for a while to house it.

The panel was accordingly modelled and cast. However, a significant proportion of 1882 was taken up with re-modelling. Burne-Jones’s studio assistant Osmund Weeks worked at _Flodden_ under his supervision, Burne-Jones having complained that Boehm “had done divers things he should not have done”21 and failed to follow the design accurately when modelling it. Consequently, Weeks was employed in removing the details and figures included by Boehm to which he objected. By the end of the year Burne-Jones was cautiously optimistic about the outcome, commenting that it “slowly grows hopeful”, although there remained extensive reworking still to be done: “Weekes [sic] is at it 3 or 4 days a week – he has carved new spear shafts, he has remodelled the king – I made new drawings for it. He has cast out the archers bodily and made a new relief of that part from a careful drawing I made . . .”22 Progress was, however, lamentably slow. There is little mention of _Flodden_ for a further two years and it joined _Arthur in Avalon_ in remaining unfinished. In 1884 Georgiana Burne-Jones wrote to Howard assuring him that: “. . . your pictures take their turn with others and are not forgotten.”23 In a second letter of similar date, Burne-Jones himself reported that _Flodden_ was indeed prospering: “Webb24 has worked most days for the last month at it and I
go in every other day and ordain and obliterate.” He was hopeful that it would be in its place at Naworth by Christmas. This, however, was not to be, and early in 1885 Burne-Jones requested that Howard now work at the panel with him in order to bring it to completion. It required, in his words, “our master hands”, the lion’s share of the remodelling thus far having been carried out by Weeks. A further setback occurred when Burne-Jones suffered an attack of shingles which left him weakened for several months. He wrote to Howard averring that following his illness he was now reconciled to the probability that he would be unable to complete Flodden in the near future and the decision was taken to send it to Naworth unfinished. He added that it appeared “a funny childish thing but surely that was our earnest desire, wasn’t it?”, tacitly acknowledging that it owed its inspiration to nostalgic indulgence. The two were never to work on it together as they had hoped.

Despite his expressions of satisfaction with the panel as it neared completion, Burne-Jones was concerned that Boehm would be less than enthusiastic if he were to see it again once it were tinted, as the process had shown up various defects in the modelling which had been less evident before. The surface was very uneven and pitted in places. In addition, the serried spears behind the central mounted figure and those to the extreme left of the composition seem inappropriately thick and uncertainly executed, appearing heavy and ineffectual beside their more slender counterparts. The bowmen are more prominent than those of either the original cartoon or Boehm’s mould and the disposition of foreground figures is also significantly different.

When the panel was finally ready for transportation, Burne-Jones requested that Boehm recommend his usual man to pack and remove it, adding with that air of exaggerated drama so often his wont: “... but ask him so that he may not want to see it else I shall have another enemy in life and so will you.” The remaining faces and ornaments he initially planned to complete when next he visited Naworth but, worn down by illness, he later wrote: “This is vile of me, but I am demoralised by overwork – half killed with so many things on my feeble mind . . . you will touch up Flodden in situ won’t you – finishing the banners, tipping objects with beautiful touches.” Howard did complete tinting the panel himself, but to what extent the colouring as it now appears is due to him must remain forever uncertain. The choice of colours was his, however, and the vivid gilded sunset, contrasting so strangely in its luminescence with the verdure of the summer hills which constitute the skyline, accords well with the Etruscan predilection for landscape imbibed with the peculiarly atmospheric qualities of dawn and dusk (Plate 4).

Burne-Jones advised that a copy of the panel be made “in case of accidents”. This cast, taken by Matthew Webb direct from Boehm’s clay mould (Plate 6), provides an invaluable comparison with the Naworth version, confirming that Boehm had indeed exercised considerable license in executing the relief. It is somewhat more pedestrian and schematically far less dramatic, lacking as it does the cartoon’s decorative clarity and elegance of line in favour of a more vigorous homogeneity. Boehm had sought to distinguish between the combatants by detailing both facial expression and type; such detail was effaced by Burne-Jones to be replaced with an indistinguishable generic type suggestive of the anonymity
of war and in which individuality was rendered subservient to the dynamics of the design.

Howard envisaged the library at Naworth as an integrated interior *par excellence* as had been the case with Palace Green; carpeting was required, and naturally it was Morris to whom he turned. Carpet production was a new branch of Morris & Co’s activities in 1881 when Howard made the commission; not until the following year did Morris announce his first exhibition of carpets and offer their design and production for inclusion in the Company’s prospectus. Morris’s initial explorations into traditional carpet weaving methods had begun in 1877 and, having assimilated sufficient technical know-how with characteristic avidity, by 1878 he had produced his first hand-knotted rugs. Howard, ever supportive of Morris’s forays into the experimental, had purchased these, paying £10 for one and £6 and 15 shillings for two others. For the Naworth carpet Morris prepared three designs; that selected by Howard had a broad border incorporating a heraldic motto and a central motif of a vase of flowers. Morris drew the entire design out on point-paper himself, a process which took an entire month. Measuring an impressive 31’3” x 15’, the Vase of Flowers carpet engendered some technical complications, and Morris confessed to “huffing and blowing over it rather”, finding its sheer scale something of a challenge. On its completion, he wrote to Howard, declaring: “it looks very well, I think . . . it weighs about a ton I fancy.”

Though destined never to display its proposed crowning glory, *The Last Sleep of Arthur in Avalon*, the library at Naworth was nevertheless an interior of great distinction. Howard had recognised the potential for a stunning decorative scheme which afforded a further opportunity to encapsulate the combined creative energies of Webb, Morris and Burne-Jones, and in his characteristically unobtrusive way had been an active collaborator in its creation. His self-portrait, painted at San Remo in 1875, still hangs there, inscribed with a poignant adaptation of the Howard motto ‘Volo non Valeo’, which typifies that contrasting ambivalence towards his own talents which he never succeeded in overriding: ‘Volo non Valeo quia Nequeo quod Desidero’ – ‘I do not wish for strength because I am unable to achieve that which I long for.’

NOTES

1 Castle Howard Archive, J22/55. 1878.
4 Figures such as GF Watts, Thomas Woolner and Edward Poynter were already acquaintances of Rosalind Howard’s elder sister Blanche Airlie, a frequent
visitor to Little Holland House, and it is probable that many of Howard's introductions were engineered by her. In one day alone he was introduced to Watts, Richard Doyle, Valentine Prinsep and Robert Browning.

Castle Howard Archive, J23/102. 8 April 1865.

Georgina Burne-Jones, *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones* (London: Macmillan 1904), Vol. I, p. 303. Georgie's recollection was in fact coloured by hindsight; in 1865 Howard was painting predominantly proto-historical figure subjects. Only after the influence of Giovanni Costa (1830–1903) significantly increased during the early 1870s did he turn exclusively to landscape.

Castle Howard Archive, J22/112/2. March 1862.

Castle Howard Archive, J22/27. Undated letter, post 1879.

Castle Howard Archive, J22/27. January 1876.


Besides 1 Palace Green these included three buildings at Brampton in Cumbria during the 1870s: St Martin's parish church, Four Gables and Green Lane House, as well as numerous minor commissions.

Rosalind Howard's account book for 1880 records that six rooms were papered with Morris & Company wallpapers; these are listed as her "rose paper", "green pomegranate", "red apple", "green daisy", "blue mallow" and "chrysanthemum". Substantial orders for furniture, textiles and wallpapers for Naworth continued well into the 1880s. Castle Howard Archive, J23/105/14.


Castle Howard Archive, J22/27. 8 January 1885. The sketch for this version is in the National Museum of Wales.

Howard's wife Rosalind was a member of the prominent Cheshire family, the Stanleys of Alderley. Her forebear Sir Edward Stanley had led the Lancashire and Cheshire Archers during the battle.

Sir Joseph Edgar Boehm, RA (1834–1890), Sculptor in Ordinary to Queen Victoria and a regular exhibitor at the Grosvenor Gallery.

Castle Howard Archive, J22/27. Undated letter, 1878. The Howards were wintering in Italy where Morris and his family were shortly to join them.


Ibid. Vol II, p. 120.


Castle Howard Archive, J22/27/ Undated letter, 1882. The mortally wounded James IV of Scotland is the figure to the right of the composition, sinking to the ground in the midst of the foreground fray still clutching his sword.

Castle Howard Archive, J22/27. 9 October 1884.

Matthew Webb, who acted as occasional studio assistant to Burne-Jones from 1877.

Castle Howard Archive, J22/27. 1884.
26 Castle Howard Archive, J22/27. Undated letter, 1885.
27 Along with his mentor Giovanni Costa (1826–1903), Howard helped to found
the Etruscan School of painting, a group of artists concerned with expressing,
through empathetic intimacy, the latent sentiment of landscape.
28 Quoted in William Morris: A Life for our Time, op. cit., p. 337.
29 Philip Henderson (ed.), The Letters of William Morris (London: Longmans