William Morris, Warington Taylor and the firm, 1865–1875

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There were many important differences between the Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Company of the early 1860’s and the firm of Morris & Company established in 1875. The structure of the business was quite different; the reorganization of the firm under the sole ownership of William Morris reflected his growing responsibility for its work and the gradual withdrawal from active participation of several of the original partners. The firm had also recognised and responded to the lessons of the 1860s, and showed a much greater awareness of business practice and of the potential market. In addition to its ecclesiastical work and ‘prestige projects’ for the very rich, Morris & Company began to develop a wider market—furnishing the homes of the prosperous middle classes. This meant moving beyond the artistic circle which had heretofore generated much of the firm’s commission work and establishing a reputation with the general public. It also meant the creation of a wider product range based upon repeatable designs and a complete interior decorating service. This new direction was highly successful, and the firm’s turnover and profits rose sharply. Whilst William Morris’s private income from Devon Great Consols only once exceeded £800, his disposable income from the firm rose from about £300 in 1870 to £1,800 per annum in the early 1880’s and to an average of £4,274 in the early 1890’s.

Conventionally, the reorganisation of the firm and its establishment on a sound financial footing has been seen as the work of George Warington Taylor, who was manager of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Company from March 1865 until his death in February 1870. Peter Faulkner has commented that ‘It was thanks to Taylor that the firm got on to the stable financial footing which was the basis of Morris’s own subsequent prosperity’.1 Similarly, Philip Henderson stated that ‘It was largely due to Warington Taylor’s constant nagging that Morris gradually learned more business-like methods and that the firm began to prosper’.2

Such views are largely based on the work of Mackail and upon a series of letters which Warington Taylor wrote to Webb and Rossetti, and which are now in the Victoria and Albert Museum. Mackail noted that ‘To Mr George Wearington Taylor (sic), . . . it was mainly due that the business became organised and prosperous. . . . The intermittent supervision which was all that Faulkner had been able to give to the accounts of the firm since the Easter of 1864 was now replaced by the continuous care of a man who was not only a master of figures, but an expert in business methods’.3
The letters to Webb and Rossetti are a particularly important source of evidence, and in them Taylor complained of frequent delays in completing projects, lack of attention to pricing policies, and other failings. Such problems were blamed on the partners’ irresponsibility and lack of business sense, and this view has been widely accepted by historians.

However, it is our belief that Warington Taylor was far less important to the placing of the firm on the road to prosperity than is conventionally held. Although his biography of Morris is a tour de force, Mackail was not a businessman, and his judgements about business affairs are open to question. There is no evidence to suggest that Taylor had any training or experience in business methods, and given his background—Eton and the army—it seems highly unlikely. A lack of formal training, however, does not mean that Taylor was lacking in organisational abilities, and his role as organiser was his most important contribution to the development of the firm. As Georgiana Burne-Jones wrote, ‘Within a few weeks of his appointment the rumour spread among us that he was keeping the accounts of the firm like a dragon, attending to the orders of customers, and actually getting Morris to work at one thing at a time’.4 Warington Taylor was able to organise the work flow in a more efficient manner and tried to encourage the partners to meet deadlines. He also did his best to reduce expenses and hold production costs and design fees down to realistic levels. Morris’s personal expenses were singled out for comment, and Edward Burne Jones’s account book included a sour note that his design fee for ‘Six angels with kids’, ‘I regret to say was questioned by W. Taylor’.5

These were necessary and important tasks, and, as Sydney Cockerell noted, Morris and Webb always spoke gratefully of Warington Taylor.6 But Taylor was only able to give the firm the ‘continuous care’ it needed for a very short time; his health was undermined by tuberculosis, and as early as 1866 he was obliged to retire to Hastings. Although he remained manager, and continued to offer a vigorous commentary on the firm’s affairs through his letters to the partners, it is difficult to see how a firm like Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Company could be effectively managed from a distance.

Moreover, the organisational work undertaken by Warington Taylor is a fairly narrow interpretation of the managerial function, and there were important aspects of the firm’s work in which he played no part. Commissions, for example, were obtained by the partners; Rossetti’s contacts were particularly important, and his greatest coup was the commission to decorate St. James’s Palace. The task of visiting potential customers and advising about decorative projects was largely undertaken by William Morris in this period.

The role played by Warington Taylor, therefore, was a more limited one than that attributed to him by many historians. It must be remembered that the greater prosperity which the firm enjoyed after the early 1870’s was not simply the result of organisational improvements; it was also due to a much more fundamental transformation of the product range and a move into secular markets which presented better opportunities for sustained growth and higher profitability.

Warington Taylor’s business letters to Webb and Rossetti show that he recognised the need to establish Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Company on a more permanent and
more prosperous basis, but his ideas on how this should be achieved also reveal a limited commercial knowledge and imagination. For example, he noted that the profit on stained glass work was inadequate, and advocated higher prices. 'We do about £2,300 worth of windows in a year—roughly stated, twenty windows, all sizes. Considering this to be the quantity of work done, nothing but the highest prices can pay. This amount of work we shall always get; therefore it is only loss of time to do cheap work.' This shows a lack of awareness of the competitiveness of the market; Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Company was facing strong competition in the later 1860's in terms of both price and style. Although a premium could be charged for high quality design work, there were limits; and the evidence suggests that the firm's prices were already higher than some of their rivals'. Whilst Warington Taylor was insisting that the firm should never charge less than the equivalent of £2.50 or £3.00 per square foot for its stained glass, plus the charge for design work by Morris, Webb and Burne Jones, Clement Heaton of Heaton, Butler & Bayne noted in 1865 that the best English stained glass was costing the equivalent of £1.50 to £2.00 per square foot. Moreover, the firm's increasingly pictorial style was falling out of favour with the architects of the Gothic Revival, who were preferring the work of firms like Clayton & Bell and Burlison & Grylls. The demand for Morris stained glass was by no means as assured as Warington Taylor believed; the number of commissions in the late 1860's in fact fell sharply.

It is also interesting to note how Warington Taylor proposed to maintain and expand the firm's output; his solution was to pressurise Morris, Burne Jones and Webb to keep up the supply of designs. He told Rossetti in 1867 that 'Morris and Ned will do no work except by driving and you must keep up the supply of designs. Every design less that we get is so much less window'. In expressing such a view, Taylor was reflecting the emphasis on the uniqueness of the product which was characteristic of the early years of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Company. But there is no awareness of the possibilities for serial production or the use of outside manufacturers—factors which were to play a major part in the firm's increasing prosperity after 1870.

Nor is there any sign of a search for new markets as a means of generating a higher and more reliable turnover. Indeed, Henderson has noted that Warington Taylor would have liked to restrict production to stained glass. He saw few opportunities in the secular market and believed that there was no point in producing more designs for wallpapers.

It is therefore difficult for a variety of reasons to establish a direct link between the work of Warington Taylor and the emergence of a well-established and increasingly prosperous firm in the 1870's and after. The upswing in turnover and profits can be accurately dated to 1871–4, whilst in the later 1860's (when Taylor's influence was greatest), the volume of ecclesiastical and secular work was declining.

This poses a new question: if the transformation of the firm was not primarily due to the work of Warington Taylor, how is it to be explained? We believe that the explanation lies rather with the increasingly important role played by William Morris himself. Morris was obliged to secure his own financial position—the decline in his Devon Great Consols dividends had become serious by 1869–70—and in the early 1870's, for the first time, he gave the firm his full attention. In addition to his design
work, Morris had begun to think more commercially, to investigate a wide range of production processes, and develop the notion of a complete interior decorating service based upon a distinctive ‘house style’. The creation of a unified house style has since become a familiar element in interior decorating—Liberty, Habitat and Laura Ashley are three examples which come immediately to mind—but it was a new development in the 1870’s, and signalled Morris’s emergence as an accomplished entrepreneur. William Morris was not a careless or woolly-minded businessman; he was a man of powerful intellect and drive, and well understood the rules of capitalist enterprise.

NOTES

6 Box 86, ss. 57. Victoria and Albert Museum.
7 *The Builder* (1865), p. 139.
10 Henderson, loc. cit.

Fred Cobb’s diary entries for September 13 and 14 1866 (reproduced on page 40) refer to walking to the bottom of the mine by ladders and coming up by ‘the man engine’. Ladders were normal even in the very deep Cornish mines: in Wheal Maria, the depth was three hundred feet more than Cobb’s suggested 1400, and an enormous burden was added to the day by this laborious access. The man engine was a primitive lift, worked by the beam of the pumping engine: only recently invented—in 1861 only two mines had installed them—it must have been very new in the DGC mine.
13 THURSDAY [956-109] — 9th Month 1866

Diary of Fred E. Cobb of 141 Adelaide Road N.W. who came of age Monday 16 April 1866.

Went to Devon Great Consols mine and had an interesting view over the whole of the surface works. Spent the evening at the hotel writing letters. While on the mine estate, had a ride on the engine down to the end of the line and went on to the Scraggle Rocks from which there is a fine view. Walked about 4 miles towards Hampsey before ten. Drove walked about 12 miles. Tot. 129.

14 FRIDAY [257-108]

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Walked to the mine again (went down to the bottom (1400 odd feet) on ladders, ascending by the main engine. In the afternoon went out to Redford by train, and saw the waterfall. All three fell down at different times, and set to work to make somewhat dirty condition. In the evening dined at Croft's Bridgman. I went out for about half an hour to walk. Drunk 12m. Totals 141m.