

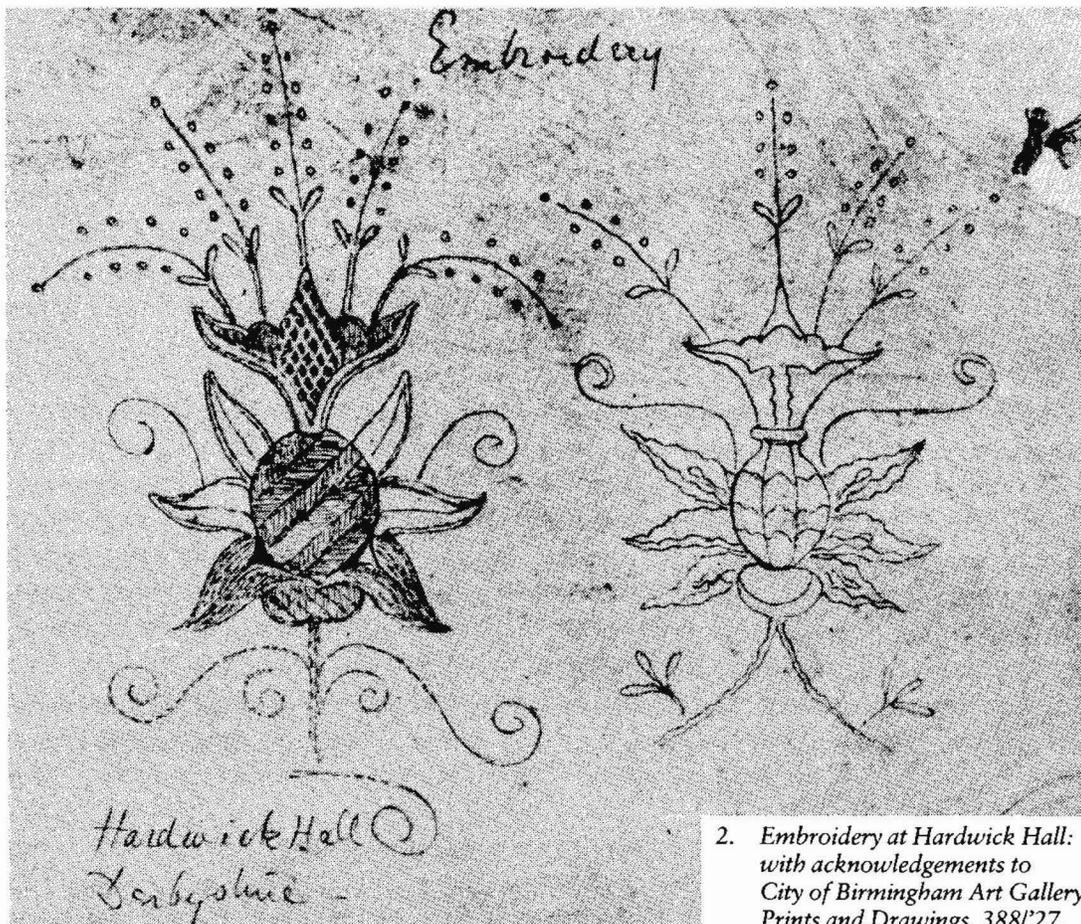
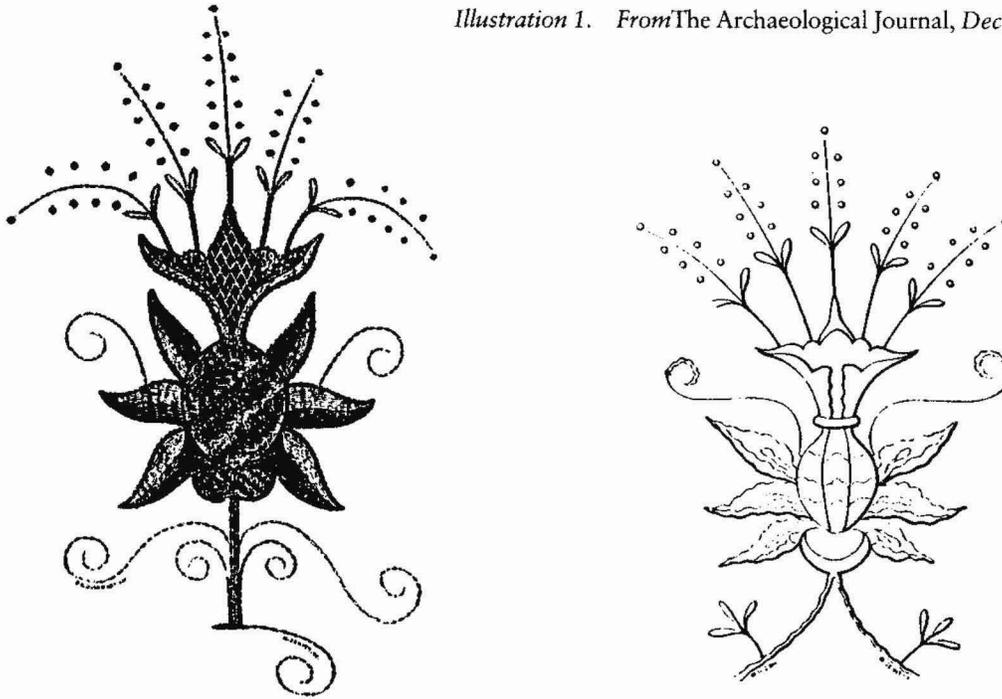
# Morris's beginnings in embroidery

Ray Watkinson

Coming home from the summer tour of the churches of North France with Jones and Fulford, Morris went briefly to Walthamstow to his family, and then to Birmingham for nearly three weeks, where with his companions of the tour, with Cornell Price who had not been able to join them, and the Price family, Dixon, and Wilfred Heeley, most of the Oxford "Set" spent the late August days in talk of poetry and art, of the recent journey and its wonders, of their projected Magazine, discussing its scope, who should write for it and what, whether it should be illustrated: local church visiting, discussion between Crom Price and Morris on "the organisation of Labour", readings of Tennyson and Kingsley, until early in September, when Morris went to Worcester and Malvern to see his mother's relations, and next day, September 10th, to Clay Cross in Derbyshire to stay with his sister Emma and her husband, the Rev. Joseph Oldham. By the end of the month Morris was back in Walthamstow and a fortnight later the friends re-assembled for the new Term in Oxford.

By that time, Morris had broken to his mother the news of his decision not to take Orders, but to be an architect: he has even one particular possible master in mind, Street, the Diocesan Architect of Oxford. In the familiar letter to her, written three weeks later

Illustration 1. From *The Archaeological Journal*, December 1847.



2. Embroidery at Hardwick Hall: with acknowledgements to City of Birmingham Art Gallery, *Prints and Drawings*, 388/27.

from Oxford, he refers to sister Henrietta's disappointment at his decision, yet says nothing of sister Emma's; which in view of the early closeness between the eldest sister and himself seems a little odd. It seems to me that he had already, at Clay Cross, discussed his decision with this favourite sister, and with her husband so that her feelings would be understood. But there are other aspects to this decision and one of these is his understanding of what his chosen profession would require of him. He had already unusual knowledge of architecture, though no practical experience – it should not be forgotten however, that the archaeologists and revivalists had a great interest in construction, and he would not be entirely ignorant of the building side of architecture. But a good Goth needed also to be able to design for furniture, carving, altar-furnishings, embroideries, metal work, stained glass. And I should like to suggest that it was with the study of embroidery, of all these, that his preliminary studies began before he presented himself to Street in January.

On Saturday the fifth of August he and Jones and Fulford had arrived in Bayeux from Caen: they spent the Sunday partly in visiting the Cathedral though as it was under repair they were not very satisfied – and partly in studying, in the Town Hall, the famous Tapestry, displayed under glass around two walls of the hall where it had been shown for the last thirty years. Morris's comment on this when writing home and telling his Mother of this visit, was remarkably brief: "The Tapestry is very quaint and rude and very interesting." But it would be strange if he had not dwelled long on it, both as the major historic document that it is, and as the almost unique example it also is of very early mediaeval embroidery – of a type which survived in Iceland for another five or six centuries, and seems to have been peculiar to Northern Europe. His mind had already been made up to become an architect: the tapestry would be as important to him as the arches and mouldings and windows of the cathedral. When, a little more than a month later, he was talking with Emma about his intentions and the work it would involve, embroidery would be something with which she was no doubt very familiar, not just because like any other nineteenth century girl she had learned embroidery, but because it was a craft of particular importance to the wife of a High Anglican clergyman. She took Morris to see the sights of the Peak – fine churches such as Youlgreave and Ashbourne; fine houses such as Haddon Hall and Hardwick Hall, "more glass than wall" – built in Elizabeth's reign by the famous Bess of Hardwick, "building Bess". We know that Morris was taken to these great houses from two later references: one, when on his first visit to Tom Wardle in 1875, to study practical dyeing with him, they took a two-day holiday and visited Haddon Hall which he remembered from the earlier visit:<sup>1</sup> and secondly, in a letter to his daughter Jenny about a year later, who was then staying at Clay Cross with Aunt Emma, he is pleased that she has been to see Hardwick, remarking that it must be twenty years since he first visited it [–twenty two, in fact].<sup>2</sup> Now though in that letter he says that Haddon Hall is the finest building in those parts – older than Bess's Hardwick, and with romantic associations drawn from Scott – he would have seen, and Jenny in her turn would see, some remarkable things in Hardwick: the coloured pargetting, high up to the ceiling: the great hangings below, that had been installed by Bess: but also, the samplers, the framed embroideries – some from Bess's own hand, collected for the instruction of her maids and sewing women.

Among these were typical motifs such as survived from the Middle Ages, and continued in use for generations – motifs as often to be seen in painted as in embroidered

decorations. One of these in particular Morris knew. He may have encountered it before he saw it for real, in an interesting article in the *Archaeological Journal* of December 1847, where it appears as an illustration, engraved on wood by Orlando Jewitt of Oxford, and displayed with other variants in the article by the Rev. Charles Henry Hartshorne on English Mediaeval Embroidery.<sup>3</sup> Morris, at Marlborough, in the library of his tutor Guy, or elsewhere, could well have seen and read the article. We know that he knew of the motif because there is in the Collection of Prints and Drawings in Birmingham, a tracing of this motif<sup>4</sup> and another, which appear, exactly identical in the *Archaeological Journal*, on facing pages: exactly identical except that the tracing is about a fifth larger, and the two drawings are close together: but in every detail identical. This tracing is inscribed in Morris's hand "Embroidery ... Hardwick Hall." Who made the tracing, how Morris came by it, we do not know.

But we do know from Jane's record that it was in 1855 that he began to work on embroidery, "before he knew me". He did not know her, of course, until October 1857. But in the following year he began the one easel painting that survives, the familiar *La Belle Iseult*. In this, embroidered hangings are important. One hangs against the wall, seen between the bed-curtains: it is a variant on that earliest embroidery from Morris's hand, the *IF I CAN* which is at Kelmscott Manor, that hung in Red House at the very beginning, and went with the family where ever they moved to. This, we know, derives from an illustration in a French copy of Froissart in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris: of this Lethaby was told by Webb, who must have seen it worked on, as also he had seen the painting made in Red Lion Square. But there is another very positive hanging to be seen in the painting: it covers and falls from the dressing table at which Iseult stands, sad and dreaming: and it repeats a pomegranate motif clearly derived from this same source as the Hardwick Hall pomegranate motif, shown by Hartshorne, and traced by whatever hand we see in Birmingham. This hanging has clearly been painted from an actual, worked embroidery: its appearance shows this, and we know that Morris said of his own painting, that he could only paint from what was before him. There was then, early, another embroidery now lost. Now which piece takes precedence we cannot know: the Froissart illustration from which the *IF I CAN* motifs come, was known to Morris before he went to Oxford, but it must have been begun before the painting was begun: though what appears behind the bed is not identical with the existing embroidery: it is rather more like the illustration. But he would have seen the pomegranate motif at Hardwick, and could well have seen it much earlier in reproduction. What more likely than that, back in Oxford, with Hardwick fresh in mind, an actual embroidery, not a picture, he set to work, having been shown something of the craft by Emma, on his own variant on that motif? It must certainly have existed before he painted Janey as Iseult.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> N. Kelvin, ed., *Collected Letters* Vol. I (1984) 260; letters 280 and 281.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.* 377; letter 409

<sup>3</sup> See Illustration 1.

<sup>4</sup> See Illustration 2.