

# Morris & Company in Manchester

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The move to Merton Abbey in 1881 was both gratifying and stressful for William Morris. Countless details required attention as he threw himself into making the venture a success. Once the buildings had been modified and improved, workshops had to be laid out and equipment installed, and extra staff recruited. It was over a year before all the production problems were resolved. At the same time, Morris was designing at a prodigious rate for printed and woven fabrics. Much of his very best work stems from these years, including his first indigo-dyed fabrics, *Rose and Thistle* (1881), *Bird and Anemone* (1881) and *Brother Rabbit* (1882).

Adding to his worries was a more mundane concern: would the move to Merton pay or might it bring financial disaster? It was a major undertaking for a firm like Morris & Co.; precisely how much it cost to convert and renovate the Merton Abbey works is not known, but the investment must have been substantial relative to the existing capital employed by the business. As Morris told Georgie Burne-Jones:

I shall do my best to make it pay so that we may keep it going, though, as I have told you, I can't hide from myself that there is a chance of failure (commercially I mean) in the matter: in which case I must draw in my horns, and try to shuffle out of the whole affair decently, and live thereafter small and certain if possible.<sup>1</sup>

Morris, however, was well aware that commercial success depended on more than design and mastery of technique. From an early stage in his career he had recognised the importance of marketing, and he had no intention now of leaving anything to chance. If Merton was to become a paying proposition, then a big effort had to be made to win favour with the public and stimulate demand. Advertising was the most obvious way forward. Brochures were prepared, describing the main products and services offered by Morris & Co. Exclusiveness, beautiful design and colouring, hand manufacture, the use of high quality materials, and in-house manufacture, were presented as the desirable features of Morris products.

At the same time, attention was given to making Morris products accessible to a larger clientèle. The product range was expanded to meet the needs of the growing numbers of middle-class customers with modest incomes who visited the firm's Oxford Street shop. By the early 1880s, for example, Morris's designs were available for all the principal types of Victorian carpets – Wilton, Axminster, Brussels and Kidderminster – costing anything from £0.27½ to £3.00 a square yard.<sup>2</sup> In 1882, the Oxford Street premises were extended to provide more display space, the former tenants of the first floor being relocated in an adjacent building.<sup>3</sup>

However, the need for customers to visit Oxford Street in order fully to appreciate the Morris style inevitably limited the firm's customer base to the metropolitan élite and the wealthy provincials who regularly travelled to London. Morris was well

aware of this, and while battling to get Merton set up and running smoothly he determined to take steps to increase provincial sales of domestic articles such as carpets, fabrics, wallpapers and furniture.

In 1882, the firm showed its wares at the Fine Art and Industrial Exhibition, held in St. James's Hall, Manchester. In many ways, Manchester was an obvious choice for Morris & Co. It was a wealthy city, and one that had acquired a reputation for patronage of the applied arts. Not surprisingly, Manchester's industrial and mercantile leaders were intent on linking manufacturing and the arts.<sup>4</sup> The *Cabinet Maker and Art Furnisher* commented that:

This interesting exhibition is said by the promoters to be the realisation of an idea that has been growing for some time in local art circles, that the time has arrived when an opportunity should be afforded of showing the public of the North of England what has become possible in the application of art to industry.<sup>5</sup>

The *Architect* added that the Exhibition was "an exceedingly satisfactory illustration of the great progress which England is now making in the direction of extending and expanding this enjoyment of household art", and claimed that "the merits of mere workmanship and price are giving place to those of artistic design".<sup>6</sup>

As well as Morris & Co., many nationally known concerns were represented at the Exhibition. Doulton & Co. and Mintons were both represented in china, terracotta, earthenware and tiles. Wallpaper exhibitors included William Woollams & Co., which showed a wide range of products, and Jeffrey & Co., which featured the work of leading designers like A.H. Mackmurdo, J.D. Sedding, Walter Crane and Kate Faulkner (the sister of Morris's former partner, Charles Faulkner). Thomas Wardle displayed "printed cotton velvets, cretonnes and chintzes, printed silks, silk cloths and gauze, tusser or tussore silks, tusser silk yarns, and a special Eastern department of Indian and other types of designs". There was also a display of embroideries by Mrs. Elizabeth Wardle and her Leek Embroidery Society, with which Morris had close links. Other well-known exhibitors were Gillow & Co., of London, Lancaster and Liverpool, which displayed a mixture of traditionally styled and contemporary furniture, and the well-known Manchester firm of Kendal, Milne & Co., which exhibited cabinet work by its own and other leading designers.<sup>7</sup>

Morris attended the opening of the exhibition on 20 October 1882, and spoke at the inaugural luncheon; it was chaired by the Earl of Wilton, who rather unfelicitously referred to him as 'the Archpriest of Aestheticism'.<sup>8</sup> His speech was entitled 'The Progress of Decorative Art in England', and was largely reprinted in the *Architect* and the *Manchester Guardian*.<sup>9</sup> He began by stressing the progress which had been made in the decorative arts in recent years, and recalled the difficulty which he had had when first setting up house twenty-three years ago: "what a rummage there used to be for anything tolerable in the way of hangings, for instance, and what shouts of joy would be raised if we had the luck to dig up some cheapish commonplace manufacture, which, being outside the range of fancy goods, had escaped the general influence of the vacuity of the times". By the early 1880s, he felt that "anyone who chooses can make the interior of his house comely and pleasant without an unreasonable expenditure of time and trouble", and commended "the steady endeavour on the part of the Department for Science and Art to spread artistic education amongst the public in general". However, he went on to question the reality

of the achievement, insisting that much remained to be done in the way of educating the manufacturer and the general public, and stressing the importance of ecological issues. As in all his lectures of the late 1870s and early 1880s, he was essentially concerned with developing his ideas on the necessity of art as part of everyday living, its contribution to human happiness, and the relationship of art to the burning social questions of the day.

The Morris & Co. exhibit included stained glass, carpets, rugs, damasks, tapestries and furniture, and was extensively reviewed in the *Cabinet Maker and Art Furnisher*.<sup>10</sup> The reviewer described the stand as “unquestionably one of the chief features of the hall”, and commented that he was glad that “the skill of the distinguished artificer is no longer to be confined to the West End”. He was particularly interested in the furniture, remarking that “Mr Morris seems generally to adopt Queen Anne lines and mouldings, treating them in a massive and solid manner” – as demonstrated by the illustration of a walnut cabinet shown in Figure 1. “This article has the merit of being unrivalled in the exhibition for the amount of timber used within the same size. I regard it as somewhat incongruous, with its angular cornice, serpentine shelves, and very massive mouldings; but it has an honest character about it that cannot fail to be observed. It stands as a sort of solid protest against many deal-lined, flimsy, gaudily bedizened contemporaries”. Other furniture on display comprised an inlaid mahogany table and examples from the well-known range of rush-seated chairs.



*Figure 1. Walnut Wood Cabinet, by Morris & Co.  
Ray Watkinson says that it shows 'clearly the hand of Philip Webb'.*

The soft furnishings displayed by Morris & Co. were considered to be without equal in the exhibition, “for many of the fabrics are marvels of design and dyeing”. The Hammersmith carpets were especially commended, as being unequalled by Western rivals, and superior “to much modern Oriental rubbish which is imported to meet a fashionable demand”. In this, the reviewer was echoing the views of Morris himself: for in a contemporary brochure, which was widely circulated by the firm, Morris remarked that:

It seems to us... that, for the future, we people of the West must make our own hand-made carpets, if we are to have any worth the labour and money such things cost; and that these, while they should equal the Eastern ones as nearly as may be in materials and durability, should by no means imitate them in design, but show themselves obviously to be the outcome of modern and Western ideas, guided by those principles that underlie all architectural art in common.<sup>11</sup>

The firm also displayed a range of patterns of 2-ply and 3-ply Kidderminsters, Brussels, Wiltons and patent Axminsters, and advertised its willingness “to give estimates and execute carpets of any reasonable size, in design, colouring, and quality, similar to the goods exhibited”. The reviewer, whilst admiring the colouring of the machine-made carpets, was nonetheless disposed to criticise the designs, some of which he regarded as much too obtrusive: “the colours are the perfection of repose, but a few of the patterns are so pronounced that they kill any quieter decorative effects that may happen to be in the vicinity”.

His opinion of the textiles, wallpapers, tiles and stained glass on display was more uniformly favourable:

Wall-hangings, portières, altar-cloths, and the like, both in picture-work and ornamental design, are executed on their own premises, and designs for embroidery and finished specimens are shown, some of them being of great beauty. The silks and worsteds are dyed by the firm ... In printed cotton goods the greater number of furniture prints, including printed cotton velvets for curtains and covers, are extremely commendable. Tiles and paper-hangings of admirable design make up an exhibit of unusual excellence. In figured woven stuffs a great variety is shown in silk, silk and wool, worsted, and cotton, fit for coverings and curtains. They certainly “make no pretence of being what they are not”. The same may be said of an excellent series of furniture velvets and cloths, broad-cloth and serge. The colours are carefully chosen to harmonise with the styles of decoration. The firm are ready to make up all curtains, &c., ordered from them, and upholster furniture generally. Painted glass is well represented by various examples executed for windows in churches and other buildings. Mr Burne Jones entrusts Messrs. Morris only with the execution of his cartoons for painted glass, and the beautiful specimens shown are from his designs.

As a result of the critical acclaim with which the firm’s products were greeted, Morris decided to acquire premises in Manchester. A shop was rented at 34 John Dalton Street, in the prosperous central shopping and commercial district around Albert Square, and in January 1883 Morris & Co. opened for business as ‘cabinet makers, upholsterers and general house furnishers’. One of the Smith brothers, Morris’s business managers at Oxford Street, was responsible for overseeing the Manchester operation. Additional premises were rented shortly afterwards in nearby Brazenose Street for cabinet-making and upholstery, and in 1884 the retail side of the business was transferred to Albert Square where the firm traded as ‘Art Decorators, Art Furnishers, Manufacturers and Designers’.<sup>12</sup> By 1887, though, when the firm exhibited at the Jubilee Exhibition at Old Trafford, the shop had closed, and Morris & Co. was now represented in the city by Kendal Milne & Co.<sup>13</sup>

At present nothing more is known about Morris & Co.’s retailing and manufacturing activities in Manchester, and one can only guess at the reason why

the shop was closed down. Its demise may well have been due to the fact that the firm was far more profitable in the late 1880s than it had been at the beginning of the decade. The Smiths were fully employed in London – and were shortly to be admitted into partnership<sup>14</sup> – and Morris's concerns about his income had receded to the point where the Manchester shop had become an unnecessary distraction. Evidently, though, much remains to be learned about the Morris enterprise.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> N. Kelvin, *The Collected Letters of William Morris*, Vol.II (Princeton, NJ, 1987), p.121, to Georgiana Burne-Jones, 23 Aug. 1882.
- <sup>2</sup> Victoria & Albert Museum, Box I.276.A; Box III 86 KK (xiv), Morris & Co. invoice to A.A. Ionides, March 1880; O. Fairclough and E. Leary, *Textiles by William Morris and Morris & Co., 1861–1940*, p.49; L. Parry, *William Morris Textiles* (1983), p.84.
- <sup>3</sup> *Cabinet Maker and Art Furnisher*, Vol. 3 (1882/83), p.160.
- <sup>4</sup> See J.H.G. Archer (ed.), *Art and Architecture in Victorian Manchester* (Manchester, 1985).
- <sup>5</sup> *Cabinet Maker and Art Furnisher*, Vol.3 (1882/83), p.99.
- <sup>6</sup> 'The Progress of Furniture Exhibitions', *Architect*, 4 Nov. 1882, p.275.
- <sup>7</sup> *Cabinet Maker and Art Furnisher*, Vol.3 (1882/83), p.99.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p.83.
- <sup>9</sup> Published as 'Mr William Morris on Art Matters', *Manchester Guardian*, 21 Oct. 1882; and as 'Mr William Morris on English Decorative Art', *Architect*, 28 Oct. 1882, pp.262–3. Also see E.D. LeMire, *The Unpublished Lectures of William Morris* (Detroit, Michigan, 1969), p.238.
- <sup>10</sup> *Cabinet Maker and Art Furnisher*, Vol. 3 (1882/83), pp.83–4, 99.
- <sup>11</sup> Victoria & Albert Museum, Box I.276.A, Morris & Co., brochure, 1882.
- <sup>12</sup> *Slater's Manchester and Salford Directory* (Manchester, 1883–86); *Kelly's Directory of Manchester and Suburbs* (1887); Kelvin, *Letters*, Vol. II, p.149, to Jenny Morris, 9 Jan. 1883; *Cabinet Maker and Art Furnisher*, Vol.3 (1882/83), p.160.
- <sup>13</sup> *Catalogue of the Royal Jubilee Exhibition* (Manchester, 1887).
- <sup>14</sup> Public Record Office, IR59/173, Morris & Co., Articles of Partnership, 19 March 1890.