

Ernest Gimson's Work In Kelmscott

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Ernest Gimson was a disciple of William Morris, having first encountered him at Leicester Secular Society lectures in 1884. Gimson's father, Josiah, was a prominent member, and Morris would dine at his house after lecturing to the Society. When asked about the young Ernest continuing his architectural training in London, Morris gave Gimson three letters of recommendation but he only had to present one of these, to John Dando Sedding, and obtained a position. At this time Sedding's office was next to Morris & Co. in Oxford Street.

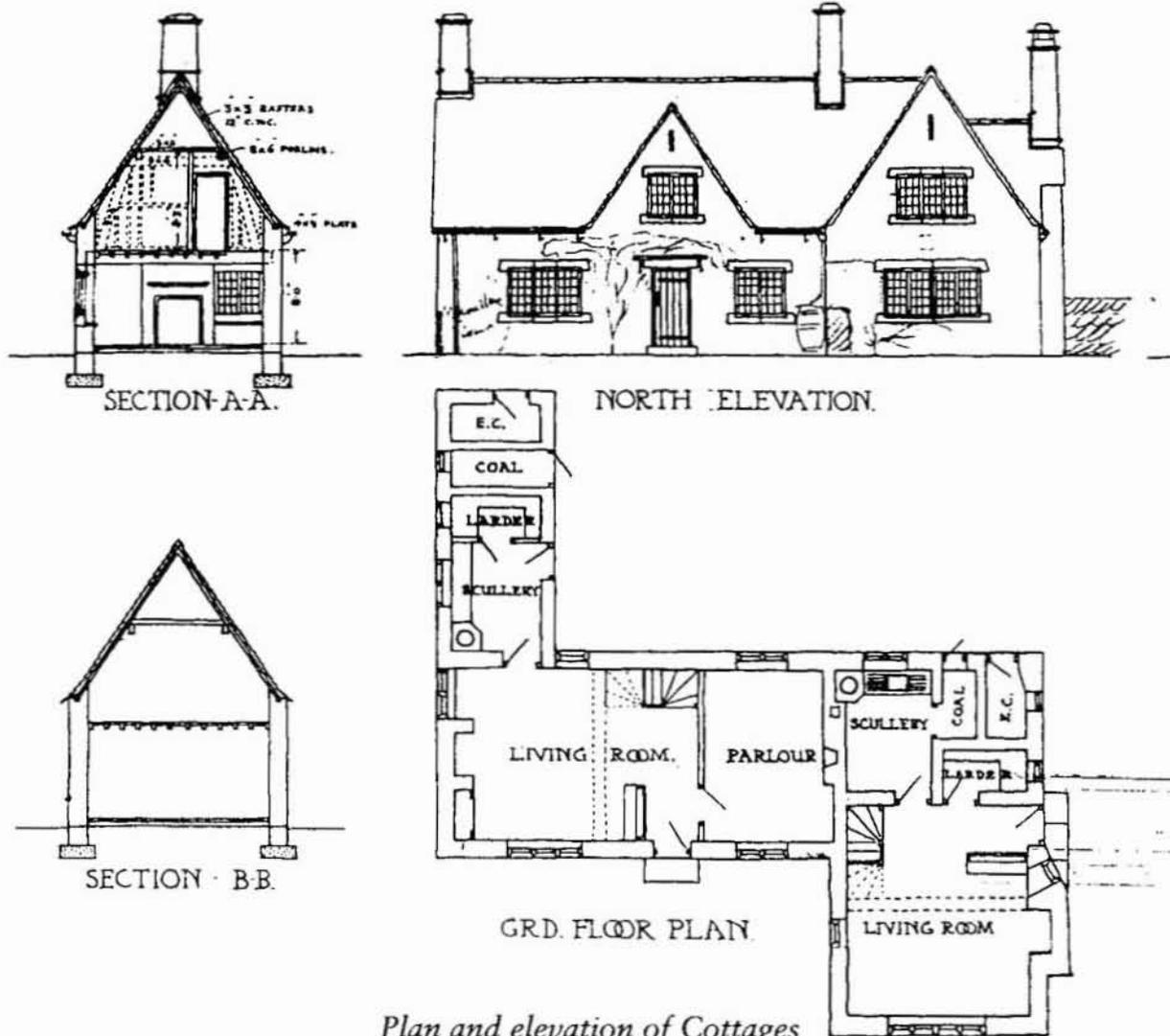
Whilst in London, Gimson became totally committed to the ideals of Morris, often coming into contact with him at SPAB meetings and afterwards at dinner. Such meetings and dinners were a hotbed of discussion between the elders, Morris and Webb, and the eager students, Gimson, the Barnsley brothers, Lethaby, Powell and Schultz.

Gimson grew restless with city life and after a brief spell of touring Europe, he moved around the Midlands and the South. Finally he settled in the Cotswolds with Ernest and Sidney Barnsley and they each built houses for themselves in Sapperton. There, Gimson continued to design buildings, primarily houses, but also practised other crafts and ran furniture-making workshops with the Barnsleys. He continued to be an active SPAB member, reporting on local buildings in need of attention.¹

When May Morris decided to build a pair of cottages in memory of her mother in 1914, Gimson was an obvious choice as architect. May, two years Gimson's senior, was a member of the SPAB and the Arts & Crafts Exhibition Society committees. She therefore knew Gimson's views on the vernacular to be consistent with her late father's, and at the 1916 Arts & Crafts Exhibition a bed designed by Gimson was hung with decorations by May Morris and friends.

Very few of Gimson's drawings for the cottages survive; however, one dated 20th June 1914, proves, by the fact that the date stone is of the same year, that they were designed just prior to construction.² This plan shows the gabled cottage set at an angle to the other, with the outhouses of that one also set at an angle. This is a familiar plan arrangement of Gimson's earlier work, not unlike Stoneywell Cottage in Leicestershire. Another (undated) plan shows the pair of cottages as built, but sited two fields closer to the manor. The cottages closely follow the Cotswold tradition and show no pretence. It is primarily their quality of construction which sets them apart from those with vernacular precedents which were often put up to house labourers at minimal cost to the landowner. The low, self-effacing appearance of these cottages emphasises the Victorian assertiveness of the adjacent pair, built in 1902 by Philip Webb at Jane Morris's expense.

The layout of each cottage is unexceptional. The one towards the road has a living room at the front, entered directly from outside, the hearth being protected by a settle. An oblique window by the side of the hearth towards the door helps to create an



Plan and elevation of Cottages

inglenook effect. Prominent location of the chimney-breast by the door was a familiar Arts & Crafts device for emphasising homeliness. Towards the rear are scullery and larder, with coalhouse and earth closet entered from outside, at the back of the house. The living room faces north towards the road, and the earth closet faces south – an Edwardian formalism rather than a design for more pleasant living. Up a winding stair off the living room are three bedrooms, which have sloping ceilings to follow the pitch of the roof as the low eaves mean that headroom is limited. All structural timbers are left visible and whitewashed.

The other cottage has a parlour as well as a living room, the front door and staircase being placed between these two rooms. The scullery and larder are off the living room, again with coalhouse and earth closet accessible from the outside. Here the parlour has windows in the north and south walls, and the living room has an east-facing window as well. Once more a settle shields the living room from any draughts from the door; the three bedrooms are also built mostly within the roofspace. Although this cottage was used as a schoolroom for some time³ it was always shown on Gimson's drawings as a cottage – the educational use was possibly permitted after it was built, to fulfil a new need.

Construction was supervised by Walter Gissing, son of the novelist George Gissing. Walter Gissing had been Gimson's pupil for a year; he was later killed in the Great

War. After training with Gimson, Gissing worked for William Weir, another SPAB member. At around this time Weir was repairing Tattershall Castle in Lincolnshire for Lord Curzon, for which task Gimson's workshops supplied much of the structural timber, including a complete bridge over the moat, and Gissing returned from that job to work for Gimson at Kelmscott.⁴

Gimson must have been asked by May Morris to design the Memorial Hall not long after he had produced designs for the cottages. As he died in 1919 after a long illness, May Morris must have had the village hall in mind well before then. Whether this was intended, at that stage, as a memorial to her father or whether it was primarily to enhance the social life and well-being of the villagers is not known, but by the time she was organising the fund-raising in 1928, May Morris was aiming to have it built by 1934, the centenary of her father's birth. The land was donated by Lord Faringdon, a local landowner, who died before the project reached fruition.

Only three of Gimson's sketches for the Memorial Hall appear to have survived⁵ and all are freehand drawings for the final design. No doubt there would have been preliminary designs, but these are now lost. May Morris used the plan and main elevation of Gimson's drawings in her leaflet sent to prospective subscribers. It would appear that there was no shortage of people willing to donate for the building, as the list included with the leaflet⁶ mentions George Bernard Shaw, Rudyard Kipling, four Lords, architects and academics, amongst others. With respect to her fund-raising efforts in the US, May Morris received considerable help from Harold Peirce and his wife, who had befriended her on a US lecture tour. In March 1928 Peirce requested 550 copies of her leaflet⁷ to distribute among members of the Grolier Club in New York, where an exhibition of William Morris's work had recently been held. May was also impressed by the large number of small donations from students in Britain.

Gimson would have been familiar with Sapperton village hall, designed by Ernest Barnsley⁸ with construction supervised by Norman Jewson, of 1912. That was L-shaped on plan, the hall occupying the long arm running north/south. At the north end was a raised stage, with boiler and storage underneath. To the west of that was the entrance in the crook of the L, with staircase opposite and games room in the short arm of the L and a reading room above. Access was over a small area of turf and paving set slightly back from the road.

Gimson's plan follows the same description, with the addition of a passage running along the side of the hall from the entrance in the crook of the L to give access to the hall at both ends. Both plans have halls the same length of forty-four feet. The only two differences between the two is that Barnsley sites a WC at the end of the hall in an unfortunately prominent location, whilst Gimson's are located on the outside angle of the L, across two yards, one for men, the other for women. Gimson also shows a bicycle store by the road.

The elevations of the two halls are quite different. While Barnsley shows his preference for tall gable windows set against a pitched roof at regular intervals, Gimson's Kelmscott village hall is more asymmetrical. The two-storey portion fronting the road is left windowless, with a massive chimney up the middle of the gable. The passage along the side of the hall has symmetrically placed windows either side of the main entrance, terminated by a small gable rising only half-way up the main roof. The south elevation to the hall has a gable with only three narrow slot windows, reminiscent of barn ventilators, whilst the west elevation is different again.

Here the eaves continue uninterrupted, below which are five windows of four different sizes. The north elevation, of the WCs, was to be shrouded by trees and shrubs.

Construction was intended to be of local stone for walls and roof, with the hall roof structure open to view. All windows were glazed with small leaded panes. The timber used was no doubt intended to be oak for structural members, with oak, elm or chestnut for joinery. The fence adjacent to the road was to be made of large flat stone slabs set vertically into the ground with iron restraining posts and ties where necessary. Gimson had included such a fence at the cottages and repeated it here. This was a local method of forming an enclosure, most common in pig-sty construction, as the pigs could not gradually work at the mortar joints, as with a conventional wall, and break it down.⁹ Little else can be deduced from Gimson's extant drawings or May Morris's publicity except that the anticipated cost of construction was about four thousand pounds.

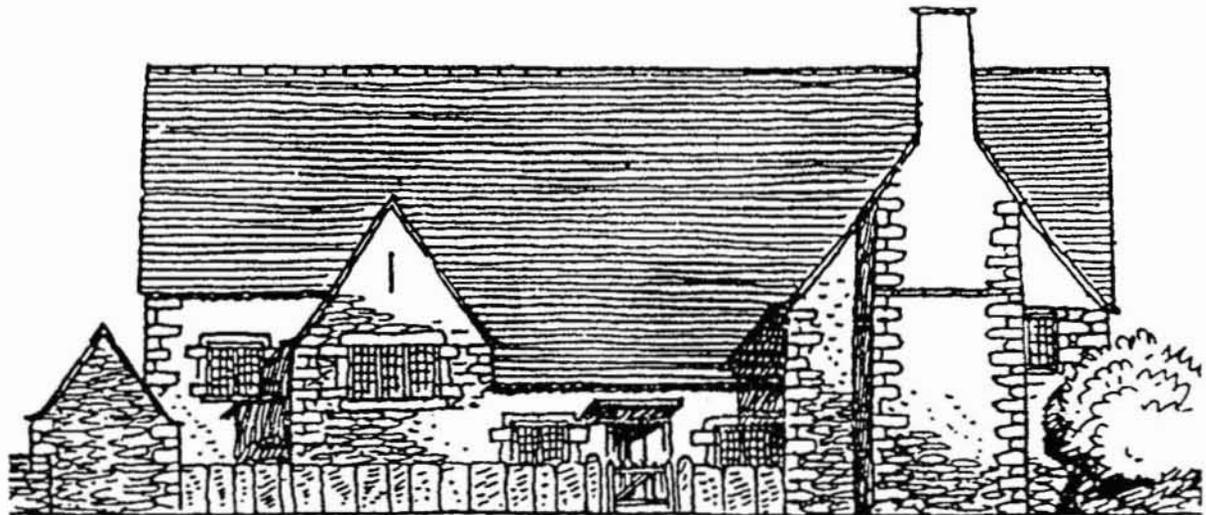
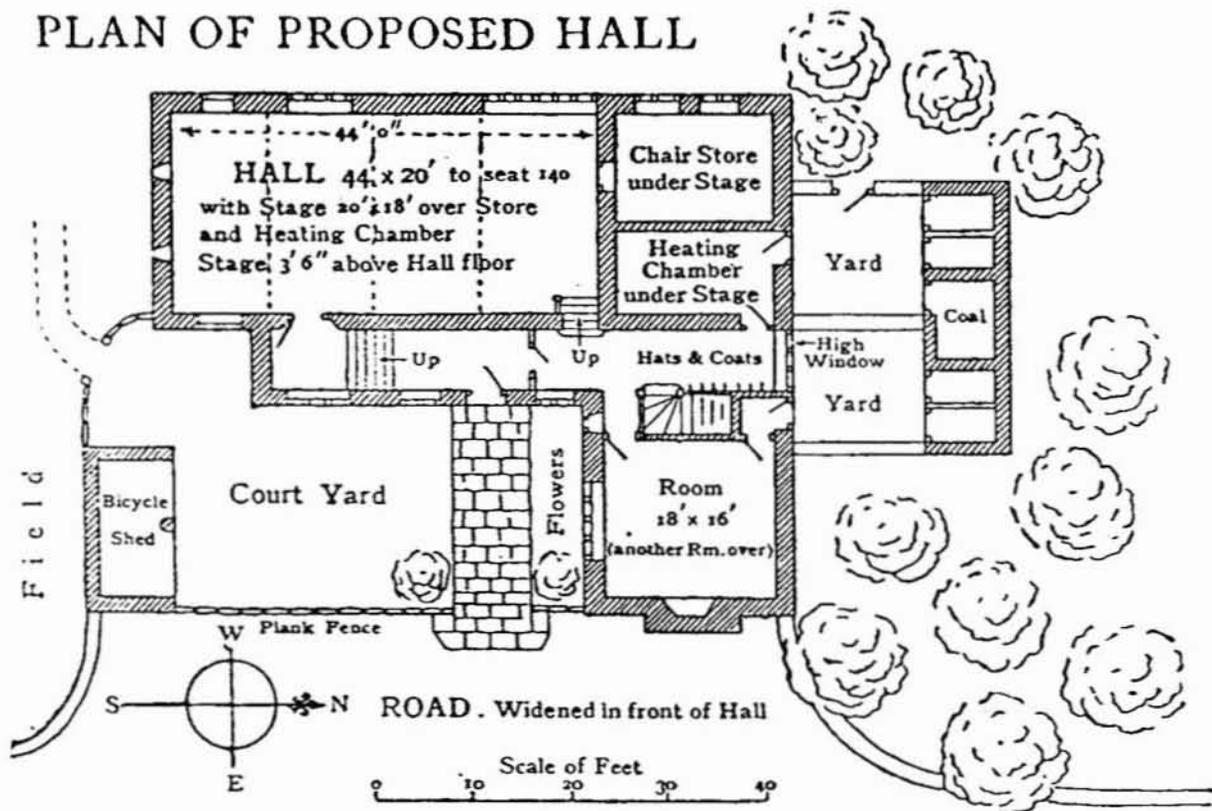
After Gimson's death, May Morris continued with her project, and the job of site supervision was taken on by Jewson. As well as having experience on the Sapperton village hall, Jewson, a pupil of Gimson, lived in Sapperton, married to Ernest Barnsley's daughter. He introduced some changes to Gimson's design, which was probably a dozen years old by the time of execution.

The main difference was that Jewson did away with the passage along the side of the building which had allowed access to front and rear of the hall. Access was now only possible at the front, just inside the main entrance, although a pair of doors in the corner of the hall opened directly to the outside. The large chimney on the east gable facing the road was done away with and a window let into the gable at high level, a smaller chimney being located on the north side of that wing. Also, the bicycle shed was removed. Instead the yards between main building and toilets were roofed over and became a cycle store. This gave a more varied roofline on the north end, but weakened the original conception, especially when combined with the chimney compromise on the east elevation.

There were other changes, mainly to the windows. The pair of windows onto the stage was replaced by one large one, with a slightly smaller one let into the store below. This looks curious facing onto pasture – a grille had to be added to protect it from inquisitive livestock. Label mouldings were provided over all windows. Although Gimson's drawings show dressed stone for windows and doors, it is unlikely that he would have provided labels; such ornamentation verges on the fashionable Tudorbethan rather than showing restraint. Label mountings do not occur anywhere else on Gimson's Cotswold work. Finally, the front fence was moved nearer to the road, detached from the building to allow access round the front for the bicycles. All of these changes, when taken together, bring Kelmscott village hall closer in appearance to the one in Sapperton, yet through them some of the vitality of Gimson's original proposal is lost. Maybe these changes were seen as a way of reducing costs without significantly altering the use of the hall.

The stone for the coursed rubble walls came from Sir Stafford Cripps's quarry at Filkins – probably the last stone to be dug there for a new building.¹⁰ However, internal walls and the inner skin of the external walls were built of brick – a commercial decision which Gimson had himself made in later life with respect to some of the cottages he designed. The roof was covered in Stonesfield slates; the timber used was felled locally; the ironwork was made by John Print of Langford. Internally, the hall

PLAN OF PROPOSED HALL



EAST ELEVATION OF PROPOSED HALL

Plan and east elevation of the Memorial Hall as designed and drawn by Ernest Gimson

was left open to the roof and the timbers were whitewashed. A dado was provided to protect the walls and maintain appearances. The panel joints of this were expressed in typical Gimson fashion, with large handmade nails left visible. The hall was built by King of Lechlade.

Kelmscott Memorial Hall was officially opened by George Bernard Shaw on Saturday 20th October 1934.¹¹ A large crowd gathered, with villagers being given preferential treatment. Mr. Hobbs, the new chairman of the Memorial Hall committee, took charge of the proceedings. When the Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald arrived unexpectedly, his progress was hindered by the sheer size of the crowd, with the result that he was half an hour late and missed Shaw's speech. MacDonald proclaimed: "This hall is just the sort of thing that Morris would have liked to have founded. It will not only be a local place, it will be a centre, a point, for world pilgrimage. I am glad to be here and feel the spirit of Morris."¹² Others attending included Dr. Mackail, Morris's biographer, and Sir William Rothenstein, the painter.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Norah Gillow, Keeper of the William Morris Gallery, Walthamstow, for supplying copies of original documents, and for permission to reproduce the plan from May Morris's leaflet, to Mrs. Ann Eavis for allowing access to the Memorial Hall, to Miss Harper for allowing access to the cottages, and to Cheltenham Borough Council for permission to reproduce Gimson's plan for the cottages.

NOTES

- ¹ M. Comino, *Gimson and the Barnsleys*, Evans, 1980, has much general biographical information on Gimson.
- ² "JM built by MM 1914" in a lozenge on the outside of the chimney breast.
- ³ See Marjorie Breakspeare, 'My Memories of Kelmscott', in *Journal of the William Morris Society*, Vol. V, No. 3 (Summer 1983), 9-10.
- ⁴ Gissing. Some information from *Gimson and the Barnsleys*, some from Lethaby & Griggs, *Ernest Gimson - His Life and Works*, Stratford, 1924, and events pieced together by the author. Any biographical information on Walter Gissing would be gratefully received via the Editor.
- ⁵ All now in the collections of Cheltenham Art Gallery & Museum, where they are catalogued as a house.
- ⁶ In the collection of the William Morris Gallery, Walthamstow.
- ⁷ Unpublished letter from Harold Peirce to May Morris 7th May, 1928 in the collection of the William Morris Gallery, Walthamstow.
- ⁸ Often wrongly attributed to Ernest Gimson.
- ⁹ Freda Derrick, *Cotswold Stone*, London, 1948, p.56
- ¹⁰ Ibid p.55
- ¹¹ *The Times*, Monday 22nd October, 1934, in the collection of the William Morris Gallery, Walthamstow.
- ¹² *Oxford Mail*, October, 1934, in the collection of the William Morris Gallery, Walthamstow.
- ¹³ Author in correspondence with Davina Wynne-Jones of Arlington Mill Museum.