

William Morris and the National Curriculum

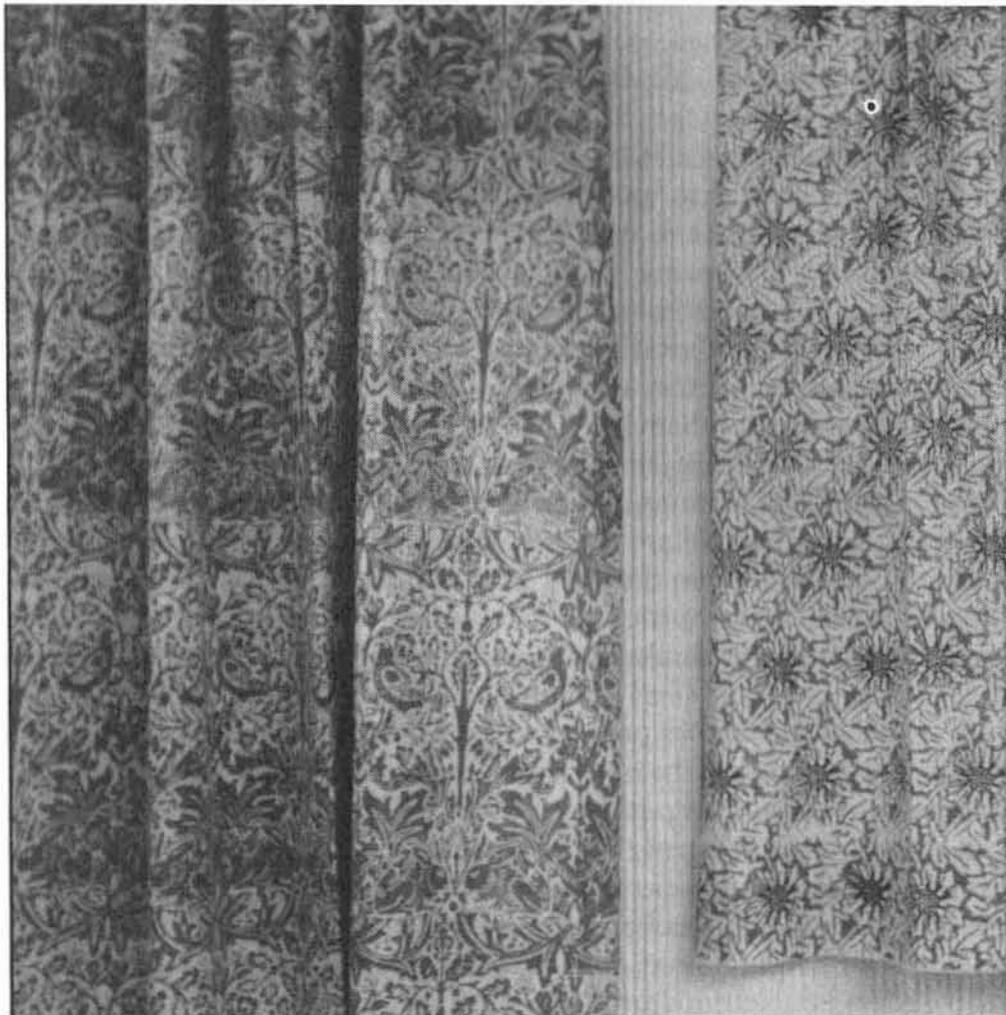
Ann and John Kay

The building that was the village school at Kelmscott in Oxfordshire lies just across the road from the churchyard in which Morris's gravestone can be found. By the end of the 1950s, the number of children in the school had fallen to fifteen and the school was about to close. The children were due to transfer to the school at Langford, a village nearby. David Evans, its head teacher, decided to visit Kelmscott to learn something of their background, so that he might be better equipped to make them feel at home in their new school. In the village he discovered Kelmscott Manor and William Morris of whom he, a mathematician by training, knew very little at that time. But as a good teacher he soon came to realise what a valuable resource Morris could be for his school.

By the end of the next year the school at Langford, and its rather dull cream-and-brown tiled building, had been transformed. A report in the *Times Educational Supplement* described the remarkable effect which exposure to Morris and his work had upon the children, aged between 5 and 11:

When they were shown examples of Morris fabrics, the older children wanted to try and make these fascinating patterns themselves. They traced them, examined the repeats, made designs using bird and flower motifs, and began to cut them in lino . . . The whole senior class gradually became absorbed in working on 'Brer Rabbit' – an exact copy of a Morris design in one large lino block. The great day finally came when the design was printed – on the tail of one of Mr. Evans' old shirts. Eventually a piece large enough to cover a single bed was produced.¹

The children then went on to make their own original designs, and the quality of this work – by ten-year-olds – can be seen, albeit in black and white, in the illustration below. The work was displayed at a meeting of the William Morris Society held in London in 1964 and addressed by David Evans and Robin Tanner, an HMI in Oxfordshire and a Morris enthusiast himself. They made it clear that it was not just in craft and design skills that the children learnt from Morris. Their creative writing increased in length and became more imaginative. A feeling for aspects of history was imparted. Applied science flourished – the younger children gathered roots, barks and raw wool from the hedges; on an old paraffin stove in the corner of the classroom they dyed the wool into rich natural shades. They composed, illustrated, laid out and bound their own manuscript books, and in this process mathematics (as any printer will know) was only one of the subjects put to practical use.



The *TES* article mentioned above quoted comments by Robin Tanner in which he put his finger on the essence of this remarkable educational achievement:

These children are not fancy medievalists. What they have caught from this man Morris is a sense of quality. They have discovered a feeling of competence. Their intellects are sharpened, but they learn through their senses and their feelings. And not one of them is unsuccessful.

What had been achieved at Langford School was not just once-off; it was repeatable. Encouraged by Robin Tanner it spread through Oxfordshire and, via HMI courses, to other parts of the country. An account of this is given in Chapter 9 of Tanner's autobiography *Double Harness*². Many of the 'graduates' of Langford school at that time live in West Oxfordshire today and still remember their encounter with Morris. This became apparent during the project which the William Morris Society and the Council for the Protection of Rural England organised in the countryside round Kelmscott in 1990, to mark the centenary of Morris's *News from Nowhere*³. In this community arts project⁴ Sue Rangeley, an experienced craft-worker in textiles, held a series of workshops in the village hall at Kelmscott attended by local people though, sadly, no man could be coaxed to join the group. Diffident at first ("Oh, I couldn't do that sort of thing" when Sue showed examples of her own work), by the end of the summer the group had designed and made a remarkable 'triptych' – three panels 30" by 58" high inspired by the flora, fauna and buildings of the village and its surroundings. The techniques used included hand embroidery, machine quilting, appliqué, hand and air-brushed painting. The triptych has been shown in Kelmscott, Oxford, other parts of the county and in London. All who took part had a great sense of achievement. Art was indeed the product of 'joy in labour'.

In parallel with the workshops in Kelmscott, Sue Rangeley worked with three primary schools in the area and with a 6th Form group in the Burford School and Community College. Following visits to Kelmscott all four schools produced outstanding imaginative work, which in two cases were quilts to which all the children contributed in the best collaborative tradition of quilt-making. On a different tack, but likewise inspired by Morris, a group of eight-year-olds in the school at Aston Bampton had worked on the theme of 'Change' – writing, drawing and making models which contrasted life in the farming community in Morris's day with life today, identifying good and bad features in each. Another school project carried out in 1990 in collaboration with the William Morris Society took place at a primary school in Hammersmith, with help from the local urban Studies Centre. Here the seven-year-old children looked at their journey to school, and how it might be made easier; that is, they were encouraged to think that they did not have to accept the world as they found it.

'Change' is one of the themes proposed in the National Curriculum document on History. These documents⁵ are having far-reaching effects on the content and methods of teaching in primary and secondary schools in this country. They set out, subject by subject, statutory requirements in terms of attainment targets and programmes of study through the various stages of compulsory education from 5 to 16.

At first sight it might be thought that the ethos of the Kelmscott projects described above and that of the National Curriculum are poles apart: the first a creative flowering based on local initiative, the other an imposition from above of a straitjacket

restricting enterprise by schools and individual teachers. Much of course will depend on the size of classes, the skill of individual teachers and the extent of other resources available to the school. Nevertheless, while the quality of the subject documents varies, many teachers are coming to feel that the National Curriculum offers opportunities for teaching in a coherent and structured way, with sufficient options being available to allow schools to plan their work to suit their own needs. (However, the additional work load being imposed on teachers by the requirements in the 1988 Education Act for the extensive assessment of pupils is quite another matter.)

Thus on closer inspection the documents on Art and Technology seem to allow, even to welcome, projects of the kind pioneered by Robin Tanner. The former document says that 'art' should be interpreted to mean 'art, craft and design'. One of the first of the attainment targets, for children normally 5–7 years old, is that pupils should be able to "represent in visual form what they observe, remember and imagine". Morris himself believed that all children should learn to draw with the same fluency that they learn to read and write. Another target in the same set is that pupils should begin to make connections between their own work and that of other artists; the example given being that they should "compare the way they use colour in their own drawings and paintings of flowers with the work of other artists, eg William Morris and Vincent van Gogh". One must regret, however, that this is the only reference to Morris in any of these three documents.

The document on Technology is orientated towards 'hands-on' project work. From the earliest stages pupils are encouraged to identify a practical need, design something to meet that need, make whatever it is, and then evaluate it in use. The examples of projects which are suggested range from, for the youngest children, reorganising the home corner in their classroom so that toys can be stored more easily, to, for the oldest, designing buildings for earthquake zones (one imagines that scale models and simulated earthquakes are acceptable here!) Pupils are expected to work both individually and in groups, and to use a wide variety of materials and techniques according to the needs of the design problem. Properly applied this should help to foster in children what Morris called "a liking for making materials serve one's turn". A far cry from being handed a blue print for a pipe rack by your Woodwork master and being told to get on with it.

It is perhaps surprising that neither document suggests making a positive link between the programmes of study for Art and Technology. The document on History does say that pupils should be given the opportunity to explore links between history and other subjects. Other NCC circulars⁶ provide guidance on 'cross-curricular themes' but the holistic approach at the heart of Robin Tanner's Morrisian projects has yet to appear in the National Curriculum. Nevertheless it is what teachers today are required to work with, or within, and to help them there seems to be room for an input based on Morris's life and work.

It is not easy to put shortly the central purpose of a life as many-sided as Morris's but one could say the nub of it was that he hoped to give people the opportunity to lead full and satisfying lives, in which they could enjoy art in all its forms and could themselves have the satisfaction of realising what he believed was an innate creative ability. Further, he was concerned, as Roger Simon has put it, "precisely with changing human relations, with the creation of fellowship and a sense of community"⁷. Morris did not think this was possible in the capitalist Britain in which he lived. His *News*

from Nowhere presents a picture of a decentralised, self-managed society in which industrial pollution, wasteful competition, bureaucracy, poverty and class privilege have all disappeared; a society where work is honoured and a pleasure, where the machine has become our servant, not our master, and where the counting-house is no longer the measure of all things.

Morris's writings on these themes, his achievements in art, craft and design, the evidence of his political ideas and practical involvement in the socialist movement of his day, his skill as a storyteller, what we now know of his personal life – taken together these offer a rich and varied resource for education in all its forms⁸. To make this more readily available to schools and elsewhere could be a major contribution by the William Morris Society to mark in a forward-looking way the centenary of Morris's death which falls in 1996.

Members of the Society who would like to take a hand in this are invited to write to the Society at Kelmscott House.

NOTES

- ¹ Published in the issue of *Times Educational Supplement* dated 23rd July 1965.
- ² Robin Tanner, *Double Harness*, Impact Books, 1987, pp. 153–169.
- ³ William Morris Society and CPRE, '*News from Nowhere*' and the *English Countryside*', William Morris Society, 1990.
- ⁴ Sue Rangeley and Richard Speed, *Embroidery in Kelmscott*, William Morris Society, 1991. The project was sponsored by the Ernest Cook Trust and Southern Arts.
- ⁵ Department of Education and Science (now Department for Education) These documents cover all the foundation subjects; examples mentioned here are:
 - Technology in the National Curriculum, HMSO, 1990
 - History in the National Curriculum (England), HMSO, 1991
 - Art in the National Curriculum, HMSO, 1992.These are now being revised.
- ⁶ Available from National Curriculum Council, Newcombe House, 45 Notting Hill Gate, London W11 3JB.
- ⁷ Roger Simon *William Morris Now – Socialism by Design*, CPGB, 1984, p.26.
- ⁸ The National Curriculum is concerned with education in schools; further and adult education are outside its scope. But material prepared for use in schools could also be of value in education for adults. For work at degree level a different form of presentation would be necessary.