

# Another Visit to Merton Abbey

Jan Marsh

'If the ghosts of the dead monks of Merton ever return to their old haunts among the avenue of elms and the ivied walls where once their famous monastery formed a centre of spiritual activity, they will be glad to see that at least one little corner of their world has escaped the destroying and renovating hand of time.' Thus opens an article in the *Pall Mall Gazette* for 28 November 1888, describing a visit to Morris & Co. by an unnamed reporter. 'Nobody, walking along the busy Merton High-road, with its small shops and stores, where noisy urchins play all day long in front of the cottages, at the doors of which, country fashion, the mothers gossip with their babies in their arms, would imagine that from behind the unobtrusive two-storied stone building bearing the name of W. Morris and Co. on its front, go forth into the world some of the greatest triumphs of modern decorative art.'

Rather whimsically entitled 'The Poetry of House Decoration', this continues in the same vein, showing how Morris & Co. products were perceived by the general public – or at least by one poorly-informed journalist, surprised to find that tapestries, 'painted windows, beautiful brocades, charming chintzes, wall-papers, rugs and carpets issued from one series of low wooden buildings, never more than two-stories high, standing about in a large garden like so many toys which a child has placed into the green wilderness some long, long time ago.' The windows of 'this old world factory' looked out onto gnarled trees, still showing a few autumn leaves and berries, and flower-beds still gay with pansies and marigolds. How idyllic this factory must be in summer, 'which is so strangely fair even on a dark November day!'

The visitor pretended no understanding of the production processes, affecting to believe that the fabrics, papers and glass appeared almost by magic, and William Morris was not present that day, so the account is limited in respect of the new information it supplies on the work of Merton Abbey. Introduced to one 'grey-haired weaver', trained in Spitalfields, who had been with the Firm for 'many years past', the reporter asked crassly 'And how long does it take to learn your craft?' The weaver, no doubt accustomed to such ignorance, replied kindly: "Seven years used to be the term of apprenticeship ... but I have been at it for nearly fifty and I am still learning; there is always something new to be learned, as often as a new piece is put on the loom."

They merely looked at the carpet room, staffed largely by women, on the grounds that the work was 'mostly mechanical', noting only that female labour, being less skilled, was not employed elsewhere in the works.

Moving upstairs, the reporter and his unnamed guide entered the glass painting shop, a long, whitewashed, well-windowed room, divided by curtains old gold in colour into compartments for each glass painter. 'Here they may be seen, seated at their easels, with, perchance, one of Mr. Burne-Jones's drawings beside them ... doing their delicate work before it goes into another hand, where the pieces of glass are joined by thin lines of lead.' More interesting – to this visitor at least – were the plants and flowers in pots and boxes on the window sills, an issue of *Commonweal* lying on the bench under a pane of coloured glass, and the – sadly unidentified – illustrations

from a comic paper pinned to the door post. Could this have been 'The Attitude of the Police', the political cartoon circulated in 1886 after Morris's arrest at Dod Street, showing him with a banner emblazoned 'The Earthly Paradox'?

The foreman of the glass shop 'in this rambling, delightful place where everything is quaint and striking' was George Campfield, seen by the visitor as an old man with flowing white hair, wearing a long blue smock-frock, 'daintily embroidered' around neck and yoke, and holding his mahl-stick and palette. Later, foreman and journalist travelled some way together in the train, the latter quizzing Campfield about his memories of the famed Pre-Raphaelites, 'as they appeared to him when many years ago they first formed the bond which has since joined their names for ever in the world of art.' In doing so, Campfield described his own early career.

Mr. Campfield had gone through the severe school at Spitalfields, but the silk weaving industry shrank before the appearance of the power-loom; he was ambitious to do better, and eagerly grasped the opportunity of becoming a pupil at Mr. Ruskin's College for Working Men. "Then you have been taught drawing by Mr. Ruskin himself?" I asked Mr. Campfield. "Yes, and no. I went to his class and had drawn a fig-leaf from a plaster-cast one evening, shortly after I joined, the master came, and holding up my drawing, said 'Who has done this?' I was pointed out to him, and he said 'I cannot teach you more than this; you must now study under another master.'"

Then he knew Rossetti personally? asked the pressman who, we may infer, was more interested in Art than manufacturing. 'I did indeed', replied Campfield. 'He was a "laughing" gentleman, always pleasant, always had a kind word for everyone, and many and many a time has he come and told me of his private affairs. In fact, he was just like a brother to me.'

Returning to the quaint factory, the final visit was to the '*sanctum sanctorum*' or tapestry workshop, partitioned off from that of the glass-painters.

Along one of its walls run shelves all covered with innumerable skeins of wool, forming one mass of lovely colour. In front of these stand, side by side, three curious, large looms, behind which, like the grave maidens of old who hold the threads of human life, the workers are seated who with their deft fingers manipulate the mass of threads used in the weaving of the art tapestry for which the works are rightly renowned. The tapestry is woven from the back, a part of the surface being only seen by the artist in a small looking-glass hung up just opposite to where he makes the chaos of bobbins fly rapidly and unerringly through the warp, on which the chief outlines of the pattern are traced in Indian ink. On the floor behind him lies the shaded drawing from which he works, the colours being chosen either by the worker himself or by the superintendent of the room, who also works the face, hands, or any other part of the human body which may be visible, and which are the most difficult part of the work. It is very interesting to watch the slow progress of some leaf or flower in the design, which slowly, gradually shapes itself under the artist's fingers with all the beauty of a perfect work of the artists's brush.

'Much more of interest might be said about the old factory', concludes our reporter, who sadly occupied much of his allotted space with inconsequential musings about the ghostly monks, the High street housewives and the rippling noise of the never-

changing Wandle. Nevertheless, even his uninformed observations offer a brief glimpse of work in progress at Merton Abbey on an average day at this unpretentious works employing 'some sixty or seventy workmen and a little band of women', whose skill produced the range of decorative art for which Morris & Co. was renowned. Though the monks might frown that all was due to 'a Socialist leader of the purest water', they would rejoice at the results.