

Morris & Co. in Manchester¹

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Although the history of Morris & Co. in London has been reasonably well researched, little has been written about the firm's branch in Manchester. Fiona MacCarthy, in *William Morris: A Life for Our Time* (1994), makes only a fleeting reference to the shop which is based on the research of Charles Harvey and Jon Press in their book *William Morris: Design and Enterprise in Victorian Britain* (1991). MacCarthy states that in 1883, 'Morris & Co. moved into Manchester, hoping to find new customers in the Liberal-artistic circles of the north, renting shops first in John Dalton Street and then in Albert Square, and setting up workshops for cabinet making and upholstery.'² Even Harvey and Press have not added anything significant to their earlier account. In their most recent book, *Art, Enterprise and Ethics: The Life and Works of William Morris* (1996), they merely mention that 'a shop was rented at 34 John Dalton Street in the prosperous central shopping and commercial district around Albert Square' and that additional 'premises were rented shortly afterwards in nearby Brazenose (*sic*) Street for cabinet making and upholstery, and in 1884 the retail side of the business was transferred to Albert Square.'³

Unfortunately, Harvey and Press's statement is probably inaccurate in almost all its details. The reason for this is that they, like all previous commentators, seem to have been unaware of the existence of another Morris & Co. in Manchester. The first reference to this local firm is to be found in a directory entry of 1864 which recorded 'Morris & Co., cabinet makers, 73 Deansgate'. Similar entries appear in the directories for 1865, 1868/69 and 1871/72. However, by 1873 the firm is described as 'Morris & Co., Cabinet makers and upholsterers, 29 John Dalton Street and 19 Mulberry Street, Deansgate', and in 1874 as 'cabinet makers, upholsterers and general house furnishers, 29 John Dalton Street'. This is also how the firm is listed in the directory of 1882 the year before William Morris's company arrived in Manchester.

Little more is known about this Manchester Morris & Co. except that in the directory entry for 1868/69 the firm appears as 'Alfred Morris & Co.' However, it seems to have been a relatively modest business which relied on the patronage of a local clientele, although it took out small advertisements in *The Manchester Guardian* and half-column ones in *The Manchester Courier*. The following example, which appeared in *The Manchester Guardian* in October 1882, can be taken as typical: 'Morris & Co., ... are now offering SPECIAL BARGAINS in all classes of FURNITURE. Purchasers will find this an opportunity seldom to be met with. Inspection invited'.

The Manchester Morris & Co. appears to have experienced problems with premises in 1882. On 2 January 1882 *The Manchester Courier* announced a sale of goods at 'very much reduced prices' as the firm had 'to give up possession of their premises to Messrs. Wrigley & Son by the 1st of March next'. Despite this announcement the firm remained at 29 John Dalton Street until late March. It was not until 1 April 1882 that a further advertisement in the paper stated that Morris & Co. had 'removed to temporary premises in Mulberry St. (opposite St. Mary's Church).' These were

indeed temporary premises as by the 3 June 1882 the firm's advertisement in *The Manchester Courier* bears the address of 34 John Dalton Street.

It was at this point that the London Morris & Co. came into the story. On 15 January 1883 *The Manchester Courier* carried the first of a series of announcements that 'Morris & Company of 449 Oxford Street, London, and Merton Abbey, Surrey, have the honour to announce the OPENING of a NEW SHOWROOM at Manchester, 35 John Dalton Street, where Specimens of all Goods manufactured by them may be seen. 35 JOHN DALTON STREET. Wall Papers, Furniture Prints, Furniture Damasks, Carpets, Cabinet Work, Embroidery.' It is almost certain that the shop opened around this time as on 9 January 1883 Morris wrote to his daughter Jenny that 'The new shop at Manchester ... will be opened next week. Mr. Possingwhite and Mr. Smith will be there together for a few days'.⁴ This would suggest that another announcement made in *The Cabinet Maker and Fine Art Furnisher* on 1 February 1883 that 'Messrs. Morris & Co. are about to open temporary showrooms in John Dalton Street, Manchester, with a view to the establishment of a permanent house of business in that city hereafter', actually appeared after the shop had opened.

What led William Morris to open his shop almost opposite an established local business with the same name – and in the same line of business – is a matter of conjecture. Nor do we know what the Manchester Morris & Co. felt about its new rival. However, it is just possible that the local firm intended to take a slight 'swipe' at its competitor when it altered the top part of its usual advertisement in *The Manchester Courier* on 23 January 1883 to read: 'MORRIS & CO. THE OLD ESTABLISHED CABINET MAKERS, UPHOLSTERERS and COMPLETE HOUSE and OFFICE FURNISHERS.' The advertisement also stated that 'Morris & Co. are now showing a Large Stock of Artistic and Inexpensive FURNITURE suitable for any class [of] house.'

However, it is clear from the advertisement in *The Cabinet Maker and Fine Art Furnisher* of 1 February 1883 that William Morris regarded the shop at 35 John Dalton Street as temporary premises. This is confirmed by an announcement in *The British Architect* on 16 February 1883 for the 'SCOTTISH PROVIDENT BUILDINGS MANCHESTER', which were then in the course of construction. Accompanying the announcement was an artist's impression of the new building at the corner of Albert Square and Brazennose Street, which clearly depicted Morris & Co. occupying two of the shops (although it is likely that they only took one in the end). Exactly when the firm moved from John Dalton Street to Albert Square is unclear. However, the 1884 directory – whose 'Preface' is dated December 1883 – records 'Morris & Co., art decorators, art furniture manufacturers & designers, 106 Albert Square, and 449 Oxford Street, London.' This suggests that they only occupied the premises at 35 John Dalton Street for a few months.

At this point the story becomes rather complicated. We know that the original Manchester Morris & Co. remained at 34 John Dalton Street until August 1883 as their usual advertisements were published in *The Manchester Courier* up until 10 August 1883. Thereafter, they no longer appeared. However, the 1884 directory also contains an entry for 'Morris & Co., cabinet makers, 25 Brazennose Street'. As there is no reference to these premises in the entry for the London Morris & Co., we can only assume that the Manchester firm moved to 25 Brazennose Street after leaving 34 John Dalton Street.

Just what work was carried on at 25 Brazennose Street remains a mystery. Although the entry appears in the alphabetical section of the 1884 directory there is no reference

to the firm in either the classified trade section or the street section. 25 Brazenose Street is described in the directory as 'Brazenose Chambers' and was occupied by several other businesses. In 1887 there were Darbyshire & Smith (architects), Waterhouse & Co. (bleachers), Charles Jackson (a surveyor) and the Manchester Academy of Fine Arts. This would seem to suggest that the premises were used by Morris & Co. as offices rather than for manufacturing or as showrooms. Following the entry in the 1887 directory there is no further reference to the Manchester Morris & Co. which suggests it ceased trading around this time.

As far as the fate of William Morris's shop in Manchester is concerned, we can be more specific. The only reference to the Albert Square premises appears in the directory for 1884. This suggests that the shop had a very short-lived existence and ceased trading during 1884. At some point after the shop closed William Morris appointed Kendal, Milne & Co. as his agents in Manchester. This is confirmed by the Official Catalogue for the Royal Jubilee Exhibition in Manchester in 1887. At this exhibition William Morris was one of the exhibitors and the Catalogue contains the following entry: 'Morris & Co., 449 Oxford Street, London, W.; works, Merton Abbey, Surrey; Manchester agents, Kendal, Milne & Co. Arras Tapestry. Hand-made carpets. Brussels and Wilton Carpets. Wall Papers. Printed Furniture Cottons. Curtain Materials. Silk Damasks. Cabinet Work. Embroideries.' The fact that there is no mention of Brazenose Street, even though an entry for Morris & Co. appeared in the 1887 directory, would seem to offer further confirmation that the two firms were independent and that it was the Manchester firm which occupied the address. Unfortunately, it has proved impossible so far to establish for how long Kendal, Milne & Co. served as William Morris's agents in Manchester.

It is obvious that a lot more research needs to be undertaken before we have a complete account of William Morris's retailing experiment in Manchester. However, we hope that our findings prove beyond reasonable doubt that there were two firms trading as Morris & Co. in Manchester in the mid-1880s. The first was a local firm that traded from c.1864 to c.1887. The second was William Morris's company which briefly occupied premises at 35 John Dalton Street and later 106 Albert Square between 1883 and 1884, before transferring its business to the agents Kendal, Milne & Co. We very much hope these findings will encourage further research into Morris & Co.'s activities in Manchester.

NOTES

- ¹ This article is based on research undertaken by David Taylor for the Manchester Central Library's William Morris commemorative exhibition which took place in the autumn of 1996.
- ² Fiona MacCarthy, *William Morris: A Life for Our Time*, (London: Faber & Faber 1994), p. 452.
- ³ Charles Harvey and John Press, *Art, Enterprise and Ethics: The Life and Works of William Morris*, (London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd 1996), p. 56. This is also the account given in Edmund and Ruth Frow's *William Morris in Manchester and Salford*, (Salford: Working Class Movement Library 1996), p. 5.
- ⁴ Norman Kelvin (ed.), *The Collected Letters of William Morris*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1984-1996), II, Letter 838, 9 January 1883, p. 149.