

Morris at Alphington – Or Alfington?

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Biographers of William Morris have followed Mackail in recording that in the summer of 1852, as part of his preparations for going to Oxford, he spent some six weeks with his private tutor, the Reverend F. B. Guy, in the village of Alphington in Devon. Fiona MacCarthy tells us that ‘Morris enjoyed the six weeks . . . in Alphington, a village near Ottery St Mary in Devon’ (*William Morris: A Life for Our Time*, Faber 1994, p. 49), and goes on to quote briefly from a letter Morris wrote in 1867 to a friend who had been teaching at the grammar school in Ottery St Mary. The letter includes the following passage:

I know Ottery well as I lived at a little place called Alphington with a person who was coaching me for 6 weeks in the year before I came up to Oxford: I remember going to see the then Vicar . . . , and going to see the queer ante-dated old church, which is certainly one of the most remarkable & beautiful ones in England.

(Norman Kelvin (ed.), *The Collected Letters of William Morris*, vol. I, (Princeton, 1984, p. 53).

This seems perfectly reasonable – except that someone like myself who happens to live in Exeter is aware of Alphington now as a village suburb of the city of Exeter, to which city no reference is made in Morris’s letter and which, as far as I know, Morris never visited. And there *is* a village near Ottery St Mary now called Alfington. Morris’s spelling was never very reliable and the two names are similar. Moreover, their spelling has varied widely over time, as is clear from the entries for the two places in *The Place Names of Devon* by J. E. B. Gover *et al.* (Cambridge, Part II, 1943) 422 [Wonford Hundred], and 604 [Ottery St. Mary Hundred]). It therefore seems to me that it was at *this* Alfington that Morris stayed with F. B. Guy in 1852.

Of course, there is no great significance in this minor fact. But it is interesting to speculate on what Morris might have seen on his visit. For William Butterfield (born 1814) had just been active in the area in one of his earliest independent commissions, and built a striking group consisting of church, parsonage, and school – in Alfington; according to Bridget Cherry and Nikolaus Pevsner in the revised *Buildings of England* volume *Devon* (Penguin, 1989), p. 126, the work was all completed by 1851. The church is described as ‘Roughcast brick in an unadorned E.E.’, as indeed it modestly is. More interesting is the comment on the adjacent buildings: ‘Brick with half-timbering and tile-hanging; inventively varied gables. Some Gothic elements, but the whole remarkable in its anticipation of the English vernacular revival of twenty years later.’ What a pity that we do not know the response of the young Morris to these buildings! Or indeed to Butterfield’s

work on the medieval church in Ottery, where, as Cherry and Pevsner tell us, Butterfield was employed by the new Diocesan Architectural Association to carry out a 'general restoration' of the church, completed in 1850 (at the expense of the Coleridge family, like the work at Alfington). Morris's 1867 letter was written a decade before the founding of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings!

NB: This article first appeared in *Notes and Queries*, Vol. 244 of the continuous series [New Series, Vol. 46], No. 4, December 1999, p. 482. We are grateful to the editor for permission to reprint it. Thanks also to the Oxford University Press.