William De Morgan at Merton Abbey

Judith Goodman

William De Morgan's biographers, as well as those of William Morris, have assumed that when the latter moved his workshops to Merton Abbey, De Morgan set up his own buildings on the same site,¹ next door,² or at least very close by.³ Indeed, that was the avowed intention of the two friends when they embarked on their quest for the 'fictionary'. We know exactly where Morris established himself, though all trace of his premises has gone, the site now being represented by Trellis House flats on the left bank of the Wandle and Sainsbury's Savacentre on the right. But where was De Morgan? As a local historian in Merton I have from time to time found myself speculating about the exact location of his site here, for he does not appear in Merton directories of the period, or anywhere else in the records of Merton that I have consulted.

De Morgan himself was not helpful to the future historian. His statement: 'In 1881–2 I took a piece of land at Merton Abbey'⁴ does not take one very far. May Morris, in the Dictionary of National Biography entry for De Morgan, only says that he 'followed his friend [Morris] to Merton Abbey'.⁵

From Kelly's Directory of Wimbledon, Merton, Mitcham, Sutton & District for 1892. By this date De Morgan had left Colliers Wood. This entry makes clear that there was access to the potteries between the two rows of cottages that made up Walnut Tree Palace

(Courtesey Merton Library & Heritage Services).
From the Ordnance Survey map of 1898, scale 1:2500
(Courtesy Merton Library & Heritage Services)

Merton Abbey Station
Stone Cottage, Colliers Wood, from a photograph of a pen-and-ink drawing probably by Hubert Williams. Location of original not known, but copies are held at Wandsworth Museum, Lambeth Archives and Surrey History Centre, Woking. Date unknown.

However, Mackail specifically states that the plan of ‘joint, or even contiguous, factories never fully took effect’ [my italics]. And it is clear, from the well-known report in *The Spectator*, that the two workshop sites were separated by a little distance. ‘Turning out of the garden [of the Morris site] again’, it says, ‘a few minutes along the high road brings us to the building where Mr. De Morgan’s pottery is already manufactured, though the whole building is not yet finished’.

Until now I had tended, despite Mackail, to believe that De Morgan must have taken over the disused copper-mills, alongside and to the east of the Morris site, and fronting the ‘high road’, that is Merton High Street. Copper milling had ceased in the 1860s and the site had briefly become a flock mill, but from the early 1880s until the mid-1890s, when it became a paper-mill, it seems to have stood empty. My only reservation about this site is that it was barely one minute, let alone ‘a few minutes’, walk from Morris’s premises.

Local historians are often deplorably reluctant to step out of their own territory, and I have now learnt the folly of such timidity. It was when pursuing a completely unrelated enquiry in the (to me) unfamiliar pages of the Mitcham commercial section of *Kelly’s Directory* of 1884 that I was startled to stumble there upon William De Morgan – listed as at ‘Stone Cottage Pottery, Singlegate, Merton Road’.

Stone Cottage was a small one-storey building which may have been constructed in part from remains of Merton’s medieval priory (‘abbey’ is a misnomer, endorsed
only by long usage). It is believed to have served as the local tollgate house for the Surrey Iron Railway (1803–46). The pantiled roof is known to have collapsed in 1838, but presumably it was repaired subsequently, and at the time of the 1881 census the cottage was occupied by a farm labourer. The ‘Singlegate’ in Stone Cottage’s address refers not to this gate but to the turnpike gate which had barred the road here until 1870, and was known thus to distinguish it from Merton Double Gates three-quarters of a mile further on.

De Morgan seems to have taken Stone Cottage, which may have served as the office, and a piece of land which lay behind both it and the neighbouring cottages called Walnut Tree Place. There was access to this land between the cottages, and it must have been here that he constructed his workshop and built a kiln – the ‘magnificent basement’ that became ‘a skyscraper’. In William Bale’s words, this kiln was ‘in and on the ground, right in the centre of the building – the chimney shaft quite a splendid idea, but unfortunately it was built over the centre of the kiln, and the weight of the shaft was enormous . . . [I]f it fell it would take the whole of the building with it’.

The site, which was about a third of a mile (five or six minutes walk) from Morris’s site, and on the other side of the River Wandle, lay entirely in the Colliers Wood part of Mitcham. It was on the north-west side of Merton Road. On its west, between it and the Wandle, were meadows; on the east the boundary was Byegrove Road. Behind the site, on what had recently been fields, was a new street of small terraced houses, Bailey Road.

From 1884 De Morgan was becoming increasingly anxious about his health, and finding the journey to his workshop an ever greater strain. In 1888 he set up his Sands End factory in Fulham, and early in the following year he finally moved out of his Merton Road site. Entries under his name in local directories continue until 1892, but such records notoriously lag behind events.

In the 1890s Merton Road was renamed Colliers Wood High Street. The works site was taken over late in that decade by Walter Mays, as the Abbey Cork Mills. Maps of the area in subsequent years, show new buildings, covering more and more of the site. (Mays would have demolished the dangerous chimney promptly!) By the late 1950s Stone Cottage had gone, replaced by part of a motor company’s premises. Today its site lies beneath the forecourt of Colliers Wood Service Station. The cork works site at the rear was redeveloped in the mid-1960s. Here stands Newborough House, named to mark the creation in 1965 of the new London Borough of Merton. It would be good to see it bearing a plaque celebrating De Morgan’s association with the site.

As to why De Morgan called his works Merton Abbey, one can only speculate. He must have known that he was in Mitcham – he would have paid rates to Mitcham, after all. However, that part of Mitcham then received its mail through the Merton Post Office. The whole area by the Wandle where the parishes of Merton, Mitcham and Wimbledon met was in any case generally spoken of as Merton. Moreover, the name Merton Abbey would have reaffirmed the friendly collaboration with Morris, whose workshops were at Merton Abbey. And would William De Morgan’s Mitcham Works, or Colliers Wood Works, have sounded as euphonious as the Merton Abbey Works? Possibly not.
NOTES

1 For example, David Saxby *William Morris at Merton*, (Museum of London Archaeology Service and London Borough of Merton 1995), who plumps for a location in the middle of the Morris’s site. Comparison of the 1:2500 Ordnance Survey maps for 1865 and 1895 shows no new buildings at the spot suggested.


7 *The Spectator*, 24 November 1883, p. 46.

8 Copies of local directories are held at Merton Local Studies Centre, Morden Library, Civic Centre, London Road, Morden, Surrey SM4 5DX.


11 De Morgan’s words and William Bale’s account are both quoted in *William De Morgan and his Wife*, op. cit., p. 128.

12 Quoted in *Rare Spirit: A Life of William Frend De Morgan*, op. cit., p. 68.

13 OS maps scales 1:2500 and 1:1250, of various dates, held at Merton Local Studies Centre (see above).