William Morris at St. James’s Palace: a sequel

by John Y. Le Bourgeois

In 1947 Charles Mitchell wrote an excellent short article on ‘William Morris at St James’s Palace’ in which he presented some interesting material gathered from the Office of Works papers concerning this important phase of Morris’ decorative work. Mr Mitchell rightly lamented, however, that the Office of Works papers did not disclose ‘what we should most like to know’, namely, how such a small and young firm as Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co. obtained their initial commission to

redecorate the Armoury and Tapestry Room in 1865. As Philip Henderson has pointed out in his recent biography of Morris, the question has since remained ‘something of a mystery’.2

The answer to the mystery throws an interesting light on the spontaneous manner in which the commission came about. In 1865 the First Commissioner of Public Works was William Cowper, a stepson of Lord Palmerston and a man with a keen interest in the arts. He and his wife were also close friends of Ruskin, and it was possibly through Ruskin that the First Commissioner made the acquaintance of Rossetti around the spring of 1865. The meeting between Rossetti and the Cowpers, who later became Lord and Lady Mount-Temple, quickly developed into a deep and lasting friendship. More importantly for the Morris firm, it resulted in the commission at St James’s Palace. In her Memorials3 of her husband which she had printed for private circulation in 1890, Lady Mount-Temple left an amusing account of how she and her husband were made aware of the work of ‘the Firm’.

Another thing he did that I recall with pleasure [wrote Lady Mount-Temple of her husband]: when some rooms in the old Palace of St James’ had to be done up, instead of putting them into the hands of some fashionable upholsterer, as had been done before, he persuaded that great Reformer in Art, William Morris, to undertake the work. At that time our taste was what would now be considered atrocious, although we were quite satisfied with ourselves. You remember our dear little house in Curzon Street; when we furnished it, nothing would please me but watered paper on the walls, garlands of roses tied with blue bows! glazed chintzes with bunches of roses, so natural they looked, I thought, as if they had just been gathered [between you and me, I still think it was very pretty], and most lovely ornaments we had in perfect harmony, gilt pelicans or swans as candlesticks, Minton’s imitation of Sevres, and girt bows everywhere. One day Mr Rossetti was dining alone with us, and instead of admiring my room and decorations, as I expected, he evidently could hardly sit at ease with them. I began then to ask him if it were possible to suggest improvements! ‘Well,’ he said, frankly, ‘I should begin by burning everything you have got!’ I think I may be pleased with our humility, that after this insult, when our staircase needed renovation, we asked his firm to do it for us! A Morris paper was hung on the walls, and a lovely little bit of glass by Burne-Jones filled the staircase window.

Now our taste was attacked on the other side, and all our candid


3 [Georgina Cowper-Temple], Memorials (Printed for Private Circulation: 1890), pp. 64-5. A copy of the volume can be found in the British Museum.
relations and friends intimated that they thought we had made our pretty little house hideous! Somehow, we got to like it more and more, and now I think nearly all people confess that they owe a deep debt to the Morris and Company firm, for having saved them from trampling roses under foot, and sitting on shepherdesses, or birds and butterflies, from vulgar ornaments and other atrocities in taste, and for having their homes homely and beautiful.

Lady Mount-Temple did not record when the crucially important dinner conversation took place, but by the end of the summer of 1865 both the Cowpers’ personal commission and the St James’s Palace order were well in hand. In a letter dated ‘16 Cheyne Walk, Chelsea, 4 September, 1865’, Rossetti wrote to the First Commissioner praising the unrivalled quality of the Morris stained glass:

Dear Mr Cowper,

Thanks for your kind letter of the other day. It is my conviction that, in spite of the lower price of the Munich glass and the competent execution of Kaulbach’s design, the whole would bear no comparison, in beauty of the right kind for the purpose, and consequently in real return for outlay, with such a window as Morris would furnish. Kaulbach’s would be a work of general merit, Morris’s of special genius for this class of Art. Mr Webb will be very glad to hear from you about the drinking fountain when the time comes. Any work, large or small, he would do nobly.

Six weeks later the Athenaeum, in its October 15th issue, announced to the world the firm’s newly-won public commissions:

Messrs. Morris, Marshall & Faulkener [sic] have been intrusted by the First Commissioner of Public Works with the re-decoration of one of the principal rooms in St James’s Palace, with a view, we believe, to a future improvement of the whole building in the same manner and by the same hands. Mr Cowper, being desirous of obtaining aid of the highest class in such works, has also commissioned the firm above named to design and make two drinking-fountains, which will be placed in prominent positions in London.

Whether, as the Athenaeum article suggested, the First Commissioner actually intended to grant further orders to the firm for other work at the palace, remains a moot question. For, in 1866 the Russell-Gladstone government was defeated over the issue of electoral reform, and William Cowper lost his post. But the work that began in the fall of 1865 continued despite the changes of political fortune, and was eventually completed by January, 1867.