Red House and Ruskin
by Jacques Migeon

During their tour of northern France and the Valley of the Seine in August and September 1858, Morris, Webb and Faulkner discussed together the plans of the house Morris intended to have built, for settling down after his marriage. It was then agreed that the house would not be in the Italian or French styles so popular at the time, but would owe something to early Gothic architecture, as far as the outside was concerned, at least.

After their return, Philip Webb set to designing the plans of Red House, in close consultation with Morris. The whole set (fourteen sheets) is now in the Department of Prints and Drawings at the Victoria and Albert Museum.\(^1\) Four of the plans are dated: April 1859, and one, June 1859.

It seems that a possible source of inspiration for these designs has been overlooked so far: Ruskin's *Lectures on Architecture and Painting* (1854). This series of four lectures were prepared by Ruskin during a three months' holiday in Scotland, most spent at Glenfinlas, in the summer and autumn of 1853. He delivered them in Edinburgh, under the patronage of the Philosophical Society, in November 1853; they were his first venture in the field of lecturing, and had an enormous success. Ruskin had them published in the Spring of the following year.\(^2\) The preface is dated 16th April, 1854.

Morris had been a reader and admirer of Ruskin since he had read the first two volumes of *Modern Painters*, as Mackail tells us.\(^3\) We also know from Canon Dixon's memories quoted

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\(^1\) E 58–71 1916.

\(^2\) *Lectures on Architecture and Painting* delivered at Edinburgh in November 1853 (Smith, Elder and Co., 1854). All references and quotations in this article are from this edition.

by Mackail that in his Oxford days Morris liked reading aloud Ruskin’s prose to his friends.\(^4\) He bought the Edinburgh Lectures as soon as they were published, and was enthusiastic about them. As usual, he wanted all about him to share his rapture; this we know from Georgiana Burne-Jones’ account in her *Memorials* in which she quotes extensively from her husband’s diary. The painter relates how, one morning, Morris rushed into the room where he was working at Exeter College, Oxford, carrying with him the newly published Edinburgh Lectures: ‘So everything was put aside until he read it all through to me.’\(^5\) The book being 239 pages long, this is a good instance of Morris’ tirelessness, when enthusiastic.

The first two of these lectures are devoted to domestic architecture. Early in the first one a long passage in praise of the Gothic pointed arch ends with the following words:

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\ldots \text{I assert the pointed arch to be one of the forms most fitted for perpetual contemplation by the human mind; that it is one of those which never weary, however often repeated; and that therefore, being both the strongest in structure, and a beautiful form (while the square head is both weak in structure, and an ugly form), we are unwise ever to build in any other.}\]

The beauty of a house also depends very largely upon the shape and material of the roof. Ruskin enlarges upon the practical advantages of the steep gable:

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\ldots \text{this form not only throws off snow and rain most completely, and dries fastest, but obtains the greatest interior space within walls of a given height, removes the heat of the sun most effectually from the upper rooms, and affords most space for ventilation.}\]

A few pages further on, Ruskin advocates the use of a Gothic porch,

walled in on both sides, with its pointed arch entrance and gable roof above. Under that, you can put down your umbrella at your leisure,

\(^4\) *ibid.*, I, pp. 46–7.
\(^6\) Ruskin, *op. cit.*, p. 28.
\(^7\) *ibid.*, p. 36.
and, if you will, stop a moment to talk with your friend as you give him the parting shake of the hand. And if now and then a wayfarer found a moment's rest on a stone seat on each side of it, I believe you would find the insides of your houses not one whit the less comfortable.\(^8\)

Then, there is an apology of bow-windows. No room, he says, will be perfect without one, sustained on a bracket and crowned with a peaked roof.\(^9\)

In the second lecture, concerned with exterior decoration, Ruskin attacks most violently the costly, useless kind of ornament so fashionable at the time, generally placed at the very top of the wall, where it can least be seen. This, he says is 'utterly without meaning'.\(^10\)

These quotations are enough to show Webb and Morris' debt to Ruskin. Every visitor to Red House must have noticed the importance of pointed arches, outside and inside the house, and been struck by the picturesque aspect of the high, steep roof and its various gables: they give the house its characteristic outline. As for the Gothic porch recommended by Ruskin, there are not one, but two: one on the entrance (north) front, one on the south side. And the seat Ruskin would like to see there is, indeed, present at Red House. And the bow-window Ruskin judges indispensable graces the drawing-room on the west side. Webb and Morris observed Ruskin's precepts for exterior decoration quite naturally, finding them most agreeable to their tastes: not the slightest carving is to be seen on the beautiful red brick of the walls, the only 'ornament' being the layout of the bricks themselves, especially the pointed arches over the windows.

There seems little doubt Webb and Morris—both young men at the time of the building—were much influenced by Ruskin's Edinburgh Lectures when they designed Red House. And we must be thankful that this beautiful building Rossetti called 'a poem' rather than a house\(^11\) has survived to this day, a perfect illustration of Ruskin's precepts.

\(^8\) ibid., p. 57.  \(^9\) ibid., p. 58.  \(^10\) ibid., p. 79.  