The Morris and De Morgan Collections at Wightwick Manor

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Wightwick Manor is a rare survival, one of only a handful of houses in which original Morris furnishings and fittings have remained largely intact. Standen, built almost at the same time and also now a property of the National Trust, is another, although the two are rather different. The original Morris collection at Wightwick has since been greatly enlarged and enriched, and is now very extensive, comprising over 400 items. Nearly every aspect of the work of William Morris and of Morris and Company is represented, with designs by almost every member of the firm. There are wallpapers, printed and woven fabrics, carpets and embroideries, furniture and metalwork, stained glass and tiles, Kelmscott Press and other books, and studies and working drawings for designs. There is as well a large collection of pottery and tiles by William De Morgan.

At Wightwick Manor Morris designs can be seen used as they were originally intended, rather than in isolation in the artificial setting of a museum collection. However, the house is by no means simply the period piece some writers have assumed it to be. The collections have a complex history which owes as much, if not more, to the twentieth century as to the nineteenth. Moreover they were very largely assembled by not one but two generations of the same family.

Wightwick Manor was built for Theodore Mander of the family firm of Mander Brothers, paint and varnish manufacturers of Wolverhampton. His wife, the appropriately named Miss Flora St. Clair Paint, came from Nova Scotia and was the daughter of a member of the Canadian Parliament. Mander Brothers could trace its origins back to 1773, and was an extremely prosperous company with branches all over Europe and North America. Now a public company, Manders still have a large factory in Wolverhampton. Theodore Mander, like other members of his family, was very active in local affairs and became Mayor of Wolverhampton shortly before his death in 1900.

In 1887 the Manders decided to move out into the country and purchased part of the Wightwick Manor estate, three miles from Wolverhampton and the factory. Their new house was built in two stages, the first between 1887 and 1889. It was designed by Edward Ould of the Liverpool partnership of Grayson and Ould; their greatest patron was Lord Lever at Port Sunlight and elsewhere. The first part of the house is a quite conventional design in the picturesque Old English style introduced by Norman Shaw,
with timber framing, tile-hanging and bright red brick, leaded lights and decorative chimneys, and a big battlemented tower. Ould became an expert on timber-framed buildings\(^1\), and the large east wing he added in 1893 is in a rather different spirit. It is a careful recreation of the elaborate timber framed houses of the Midlands and the north west; inside, the Great Parlour is modelled very closely on a mediaeval hall. Stained glass windows for both parts of the house and much of the decoration of the Great Parlour were designed by Charles Kempe.

The quality of materials and craftsmanship throughout is superb, but it would be a mistake to describe Wightwick Manor as an Arts and Crafts house, unlike Philip Webb’s Standen. The deliberate imitation of a style of the past seen at Wightwick, especially in the 1893 wing, was very much against the principles of Arts and Crafts architects such as Webb, Gimson or Voysey. Wightwick also goes against the Arts and Crafts principle of ‘truth to materials’, for the timber framing is almost wholly sham, a skin over a brick structure. Ould was not, as far as is known, associated with the Arts and Crafts movement at all.

Theodore Mander was a man of cultivated tastes, which he expressed in the building of his house. He had read Ruskin: a quotation from *Modern Painters* is carved in the panelling above the Drawing Room fireplace. Morris wallpapers, fabrics, furniture and fittings were used, especially in the 1893 wing. De Morgan tiles were installed in the fireplaces in the principal rooms of the earlier part of the house. Moreover, the furnishing followed William Morris’s practice of mixing his own work with antique furniture, old tapestries, and oriental rugs and porcelain. It is the survival of so much of all this which makes Wightwick Manor of such interest and importance.\(^2\)

However, the house was *not* decorated by Morris and Co. The Manders chose the furnishings themselves, either from the Oxford Street shop or from the catalogues. Morris never visited the house, and the Manders had no connection with him. Many other non-Morris designs were also used, and Morris would probably have disapproved quite strongly of some of them. Wightwick’s great interest is rather that it shows very clearly the influence of Morris’s work and ideas upon prosperous upper-middle-class families — enlightened industrialists such as Theodore Mander or the solicitor J. S. Beale of Standen — and progressive aristocrats like the Howards, who formed the bulk of Morris and Co.’s clients.

A number of rooms were hung with Morris wallpapers or fabrics. The decoration of the Drawing Room follows Morris and Co.’s own practice of using a panelled dado with a Morris pattern above and a moulded plaster frieze and ceiling. The hangings of Dove and Rose wool and silk by Morris were installed about 1893. Beneath them is May Morris’s Horn Poppy wallpaper, probably hung when the room was first completed in 1888 or 1889, and only discovered when the house was being rewired in 1981. The Great Parlour has hangings of Diagonal Trail woven wool designed by J. H. Dearle about 1893, the year the room was built. Linda Parry has stated that “it is likely that this is the first time that this woven textile was used as part of a furnishing scheme”.\(^3\) There is also a small amount of original Acanthus wallpaper.

Three bedrooms in the 1893 wing were named after the Morris design used. The Honeysuckle Room has hangings from skirting to picture rail of Honeysuckle printed
cotton, still in excellent condition. The Acanthus Room retains its original Morris paper; that in the Daisy room has been renewed, but is nevertheless a Morris and Co. printing. The original Larkspur wallpaper remains in the Library, though Willow Boughs on the Visitors’ Staircase and Pomegranate in the Pomegranate Passage may be replacements. A few other Morris wallpapers have been lost.

Morris fabrics were also used for some curtains and upholstery. The Great Parlour bay window has curtains of Tulip and Rose woven wool which are almost certainly original. The Indian Bird Room had bed hangings of Kennet printed cotton, and remnants of other curtains survive. Numerous pieces of Morris and Co. upholstered furniture were covered in a variety of fabrics; some are upholstered in Bird woven wool, while a Sunbury armchair has Strawberry Thief cotton which may well be original. The window seats in the Entrance Hall and Billiard Room inglenook are covered in Peacock and Dragon. Other Morris fabrics have been renewed or replaced: the Indian Bird Room bed hangings are now of Wey printed velveteen. Some Morris Kidderminster weave carpeting formed part of the original furnishings. A fragment of Daisy (also known as Grass) found during rewiring may have been part of a stair carpet. Another small piece in a different colourway is on the wall in the screens passage at the end of the Great Parlour. A fringed rug of the Artichoke pattern has unfortunately long since disappeared.

Morris and Co. supplied a certain amount of furniture for Wightwick. There are three Sunbury armchairs and a large sofa of a similar design. Several Manchester armchairs, visible in photographs of the rooms, are no longer in the house. A rush-seated armchair is from the firm’s ladder-back range, and there is also a Hampton Court rush-seated mahogany armchair. A number of rush-seated ladderback single chairs are probably Morris, but unfortunately there are considerable difficulties in attempting to conclusively identify the firm’s furniture. Few pieces were marked, and by no means all of them were illustrated in the catalogues. Sadly, Morris furniture has not yet received the attention it deserves and, in the absence of detailed research, attributions can at best be only tentative. Other pieces which may well be from Morris and Co. include two Queen Anne-style mahogany armchairs with shepherd’s crook arms, oval seats and upholstered spoon backs, and x-shaped stretchers. A set of eighteen early Georgian-style mahogany dining chairs with vase splats are similar but not identical to examples in the catalogue ‘Specimens of Upholstered Furniture’, as is a late eighteenth century-style sofa in the Library. It is worth noting that virtually all the Morris furniture purchased for Wightwick came from the firm’s ranges based on eighteenth century prototypes; there were no Sussex chairs.

The metalwork at Wightwick presents even more difficult problems of identification, although some of it was undoubtedly supplied by Morris and Co. The house was lit by electricity from the start, and several light fittings by W.A.S. Benson were used; these have his stamp. Although not in their original positions, they are still in use. The Great Parlour, on the other hand, retains all its original fittings: the simple wall brackets were designed by George Jack, and two large seventeenth century-style brass chandeliers are by Benson. Other items are much more problematical. The fireplaces in the Entrance Hall, Great Parlour and Billiard Room have wrought iron fire baskets and andirons with pierced brass ornament which could well be from Morris and Co.
The ornamented copper hoods in the Entrance Hall and Billiard Room may also have been supplied by the firm, but in the absence of any marks or documentation it is impossible to be certain.

In the earlier part of the house five fireplaces have a wide variety of De Morgan tiles. In the Drawing Room fourteen of his characteristic birds and beasts in green alternate with the Small B design, and there are seven more in red lustre, alternating with Rose and Scroll, in the Boudoir. The Entrance Hall inglenook, in contrast, has plain green narrow tiles set herring-bone fashion. The Morning Room has the Rose pattern, and Bedroom No. 1 has Leaf and Berry. De Morgan also manufactured tiles designed by Morris. A set of Tulip and Trellis tiles made at De Morgan’s Merton Abbey factory, at present set into a table, come from a washstand in the house. In the 1893 wing Dutch tiles were used in a number of rooms, and some of these may have been supplied by Morris and Company. The Billiard Room inglenook has a large number of Dutch tiles hand-painted with a design closely resembling the Daisy wallpaper.

The decoration of Wightwick Manor was by no means advanced for its date, compared for instance with E. W. Godwin’s interiors such as his white and grey room for Oscar Wilde of 1884. Rather, it reflected something of the style of interior evolved by Morris and Company by the mid 1870s, with a wealth of colours and patterns producing a rich, eclectic and complex effect. It is also markedly different from the later Morris style which can be seen at Standen, decorated under Webb’s supervision, where a considerable amount of white paint and coloured woodwork are used to create rather lighter and simpler rooms.

Theodore Mander died prematurely in 1900, and Wightwick Manor passed to his son, Sir Geoffrey. In 1937 he offered the house to the National Trust to ensure its preservation: the survival of much of the original Morris work was a major factor in the Trust’s decision to accept it. The Morris and De Morgan collections have since been greatly enriched, very largely by Sir Geoffrey and Lady Mander; many of the most interesting and important items were acquired by them. The National Trust have made some additions, and a number of individuals and museums have given or loaned a variety of items. Lady Mander has also formed much of the important collection of Pre-Raphaelite and other Victorian pictures, and an extensive library of books on the period.

Sir Geoffrey and Lady Mander introduced additional Morris wallpapers, and renewed others: Pimpernel in the Billiard Room, Daisy and Trellis in a corridor, Rose, Lily, Dearle’s Leicester in the Morning Room, and Michaelmas Daisy. All these are Morris and Company prints from the original blocks. When May Morris visited Wightwick in 1938 she was shown the Trellis paper, and was most indignant at the suggestion that the birds in the design were drawn by Philip Webb, saying that her father was quite capable of drawing them himself! The Sunflower paper now in the kitchen corridor is again an original Morris and Co. print; it came from Bantock House Museum, and was presented in 1982. Many other wallpaper designs are also represented in the collection, ranging from tiny fragments to entire rolls. Altogether there are 34 wallpapers and two ceiling papers by Morris, seventeen by Dearle, three by May Morris and four by other members of the firm.
Many Morris fabrics have also been added. Curtains of Flower Garden wool and silk for the Drawing Room (since re-used as upholstery) and of Bird and Vine woven wool for the Library were purchased. A quantity of Tulip printed cotton used on window seat cushions in the Drawing Room and on an ottoman elsewhere was acquired from Holman Hunt’s daughter Mrs Joseph in the 1930s, and the Oak Room curtains of Cray cotton were bought from Morris and Company in 1938. Other fabrics have been presented, notably some woven woollens: there are Peacock and Dragon curtains in the Dining and Morning Rooms, Bird in the Billiard and Oak Rooms, and Tulip and Rose in the Billiard Room. A pair of Eyebright cotton curtains were made up from fabric given in 1980. Numerous other fabrics range from small samples to cushion covers etc. The collection now comprises eighteen printed patterns and eight woven designs by Morris, and two prints and five woven fabrics by Dearle.

Perhaps the most important of all the textiles now in the collection are three fine hand-knotted Morris carpets. In the Honeysuckle Room is a square Hammersmith fringed rug of the Small Barr design by Morris or Dearle. This was shown in the Morris Textiles exhibition at Birmingham Art Gallery in 1980. However the catalogue entry (C 20) incorrectly states that it was “probably made c. 1893 for the Honeysuckle bedroom”; it was in fact purchased by the National Trust in 1952. Two much larger carpets were bought by Sir Geoffrey Mander in 1961. In the Dining Room a carpet about 15 feet by 13 feet has the McCulloch border first designed by Dearle c. 1900–1902 for the Australian George McCulloch, for his house 184 Queens Gate, London. The carpet in the Oak Room, about 15 feet square and of an unnamed pattern is
particularly fine; it was designed by Morris or Dearle. A large fringed rug of Tulip and Lily Kidderminster weave designed by Morris about 1875 was a gift to the house.

A number of embroideries have been added to the collection since 1937. Some, designed and worked by May Morris, were purchased at the Kelmscott Manor sale in 1939. A set of bed hangings in the Acanthus Room have a design of trellis and flowers in wools on linen, embroidered in 1916 for the Burlington House Exhibition. A pair of sleeves worked in silks on linen are in the Indian Bird Room.

A cushion in the Drawing Room is embroidered in silks with the Olive and Rose design, probably by Dearle. This was worked by Mrs (later Lady) Thomas Wardle, founder of the Leek Embroidery Society, in 1879. Her husband worked with Morris on his dyeing experiments, dyed yarns and printed many of the early Morris fabrics at his dyeworks in Leek. It was presented to Wightwick in 1948. A panel of the Flowerpot design by Morris, currently made up into a firescreen, has an interesting provenance. It was lent in 1980 by the late Mrs Margaret Masterson; the embroidery in silks on linen was worked by her mother, Fanny Isobel Wright in 1900. Fanny and her sister Ellen Mary were trained by and worked for Morris and Company as embroideresses.

The only type of Morris textile not in the Wightwick collection is tapestry; instead, a number of seventeenth century Flemish verdure tapestries were used in the Entrance Hall. However, there is the original design of 1884 for the Pomona tapestry, now in the Whitworth Art Gallery. In bodycolour on paper, this has a figure by Burne-Jones and background by Morris; it was bought by the National Trust in 1943.

Wightwick now has a representative selection of Morris and Co. stained glass. In the Library are windows of Milton by Ford Madox Brown and Horace by Burne-Jones, made in the 1870s. These were purchased in 1947, and are believed to have originally been supplied for the Wardles’ house in Leek. From the same house came nine panels of painted flower quarries, probably designed by William Morris, set into a window in the Billiard Room. Two separate panels of Homer and Chaucer designed by Burne-Jones about 1863 are from a house in Hampstead; Rossetti was probably the model for Chaucer. In the Entrance Hall are two small panels of figures with musical instruments by Morris of the 1870s or 1880s; they came to Wightwick in the 1940s. There are also a set of mounted designs in bodycolour on paper and other framed designs in differing media for windows of various dates by Morris, Burne-Jones, Rossetti and Madox Brown. They include designs for Manchester College Chapel, Oxford, and Jesus College Chapel, Cambridge.

The collection is also rich in books, pamphlets, letters, photographs and other documents. The Library is typical of its owner and period, with the classics, books of sermons and the eminent writers of the day well represented, but Theodore Mander, rather less typically, also bought several volumes of the Kelmscott Press: Morris’s Poems by the Way and News from Nowhere and Thomas More’s Utopia have his bookplate. Much more has since been added. There are copies of Rossetti’s Ballads and Narrative Poems, Tennyson’s Maud, Gothic Architecture and Volume 1 of Child Christopher and Goldilind the Fair by Morris, and also the 1958 facsimile of the Kelmscott Chaucer. There are trial and title pages and woodcuts, the Kelmscott Press
book list and colophon and designs by Morris for initial letters and borders for the Press. A number of these were presented by Sir Sidney Cockerell. Other books include the 1891 edition of *The Earthly Paradise* with a binding designed by Morris, and the Chiswick Press 1903 edition, in Golden type, of Morris’s contributions to *The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*. There are also numerous political and other pamphlets by Morris, and the May Morris edition of *The Collected Works of William Morris* is in the Library. An extensive collection of books on Morris and the Pre-Raphaelites is growing all the time.

Other acquisitions have been many and various. Two brass and copper chandeliers made by Benson for Holman Hunt came from Mrs Joseph. Eight Sussex chairs of various types and a settee, formerly the property of Violet Hunt, were purchased in 1948. A Rossetti chair is thought to have come from Rossetti’s own collection. A wicker armchair which belonged to Jane Morris comes from Kelmscott Manor and was taken there by Rossetti from his house, 16 Cheyne Walk; it was loaned by the Ashmolean Museum. There are three watercolours by May Morris and an oil by Marie Spartali Stillman of Kelmscott Manor. A portrait of William Morris by Cosmo Rowe hangs in the Entrance Hall, and one of the most interesting recent additions to the collection is an album of sketches by George Howard which include several of Morris.

An extensive collection of De Morgan work has also been built up, partly by generous gifts from Mrs Pilkington, a member of Evelyn De Morgan’s family. A large number of tiles illustrate almost every type of design in every size De Morgan produced, with examples from all of his factories. There are many painted in enamel colours, others in lustre and some with designs moulded in relief. There are birds and beasts, flowers and foliage, a few of the so-called ‘Persian’ patterns, ship designs, border tiles and plain tiles, and complete panels. If the tiles set in fireplaces are included there is a total of 43 designs, four plain glazes and a plain lustre, and four panels. A panel in red lustre is painted with ships in full sail. An arched panel with an elaborate scene of three ships in full sail and an Italian town behind and two panels of swimming fish are from the drawing room fireplace of *The Castle*, Woolacombe, Devon.

There are also some excellent pieces of De Morgan pottery. Three of them are original to the house. They are all painted in enamel colours: a large jar is decorated with dolphins, in vivid turquoise and green, and a smaller example with handles has a design of lizards and flowers. A bottle vase from the Sands End factory has a feather design painted by Joe Juster. Lustreware is represented by a large ruby dish finely painted with an antelope and a tree, and by three plates decorated by Charles Passenger. One of them, in red and gold lustre and orange enamel, was presented by Mrs Pilkington in 1968; the others were acquired by the National Trust. Wightwick is also fortunate in having one of the few surviving pictures by De Morgan, an unfinished watercolour of Moses in the Bulrushes.

The Morris and De Morgan collections at Wightwick Manor are perhaps among the largest in existence. The importance of the contribution made by Sir Geoffrey and Lady Mander to their development has not really been fully appreciated, and cannot be over-emphasised. They replaced things which had been lost with others of equal or
greater quality, and added many of the most interesting and important items now in the house. It is an interesting point to bear in mind that both they and the National Trust recognised Wightwick's importance and took steps to ensure its preservation when the house was less than fifty years old, and at a time when most aspects of the Victorian period were viewed with distaste. At the same time the danger of turning the house into a museum has been avoided; the overall effect of the original Morris-inspired interior has not been lost but greatly enhanced. The fact that the collection is still growing and developing makes it all the more interesting.

NOTES

2 Many of the rooms were photographed shortly after the house was complete and this provides an invaluable source of information on what was in the collection at that time.

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*Please note that the mention of any room or item in this article does not mean that access to it can be granted: as much of the collection as possible is shown to visitors, but some items are too fragile, and some rooms are still in private use and not open to visitors under any circumstances.*