

# Charles Gere and William Morris

## Edmund Penning-Rowsell

For most people interested in William Morris, Charles M. Gere is best known for the often-reproduced illustration in the Kelmscott Press edition of *News from Nowhere* of the main front of Kelmscott Manor with the path, flanked by standard roses, leading up to the entrance door. It is signed by initials discreetly placed below a bush on the right.

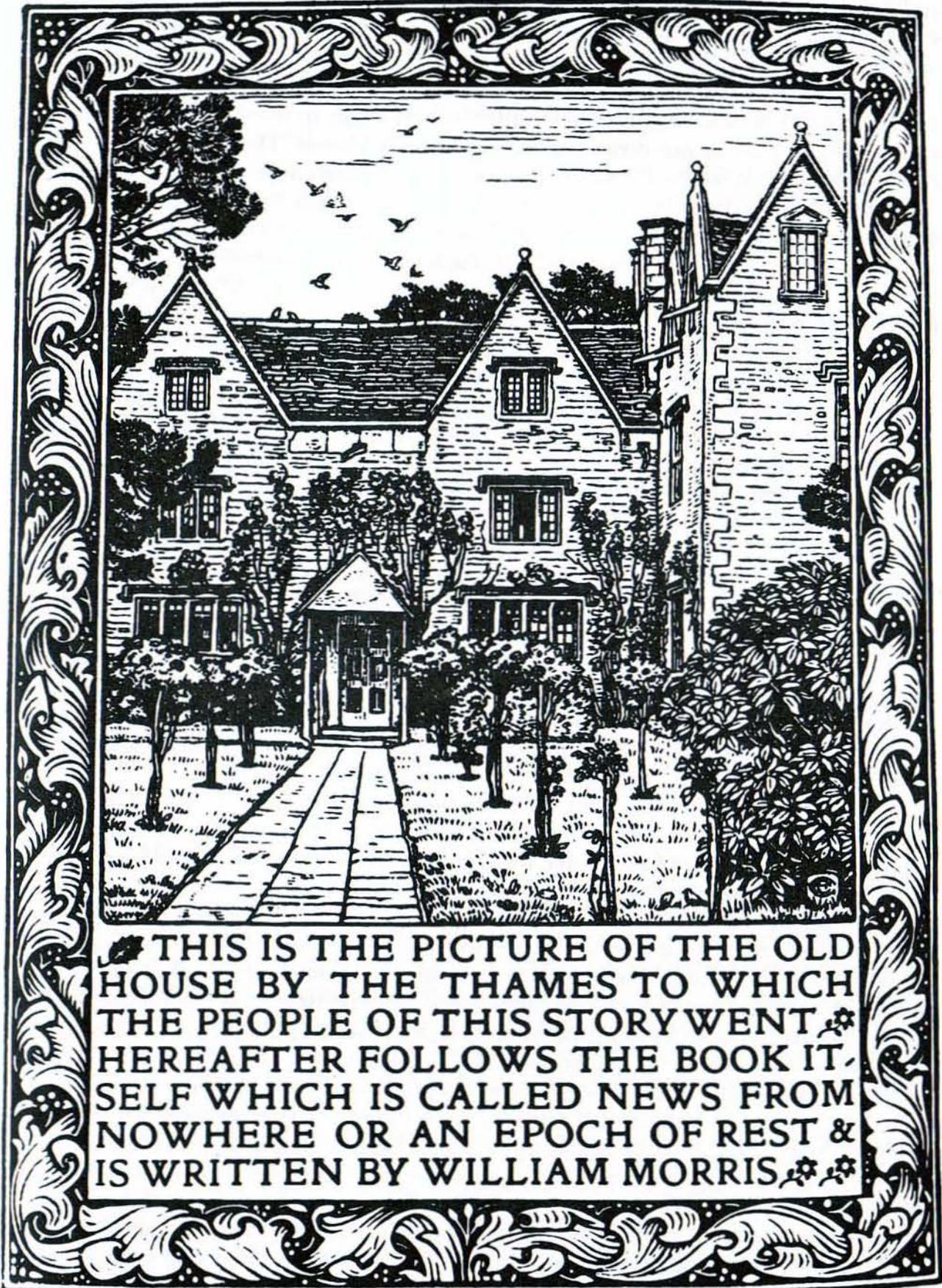
This woodcut, engraved by W.H. Hooper from Gere's design, was executed at the beginning of the artist's career, which led to his being elected as a Royal Academician, whose most celebrated work was the illustration of the Ashendene Press *Dante*, the folio that was the most celebrated production of St. John Hornby's private press, as the *Chaucer* was of the Kelmscott and *The English Bible* of the Doves.

Early in 1953 I learnt that Charles Gere was living in Painswick, Gloucestershire with his sister Margaret, and I arranged to visit him with Graeme Shankland, the founding honorary secretary of the then embryonic William Morris Society. This was on Saturday the 28th March, and on the way from my home in Hinton Parva on the Icknield Way near Swindon we went into the church at Inglesham that Morris often visited and loved. Charles Gere, then 83, lived in a charming stone house in Painswick with a fine view of the valley and hillside opposite.

He had laid out on a table a selection of works that he had illustrated, including the Ashendene *Dante* and the Kelmscott *News from Nowhere*. I had recently acquired the copy that Morris had given to Georgie Burne-Jones on his birthday, 24th March 1893, the date of publication. (My copy had come from the sale the previous year at Sotheby's by Mrs. J.W. Mackail of all the copies that Morris had presented to Georgie, her mother.) Interested, therefore, to see the date on which Charles Gere had been given his copy by Morris, I picked it up, and found it dated 28th March 1893 — exactly sixty years to the day before our visit.

He described staying both at Kelmscott Manor and Kelmscott House. Morris's hair, he said, was almost white at the end, and so was Mrs. Morris's, who was "very reserved", although he got on well with her and stayed with her to draw her portrait in 1901. He asserted quite plainly that "she had given her affections to Rossetti", a fact not commonly known until the publication in 1949 of Professor Oswald Doughty's life of Rossetti, *A Victorian Romantic*. He showed us the very delicate little picture. (Where is it now?)

He recalled staying at Kelmscott House in a small room adjoining Morris's study, and hearing him writing with quill pens which he would throw down as they became blunted. When Jenny had one of her epileptic fits Morris would soothe her with his hand on her shoulder and she would recover. Morris was always one for a trip or an outing, and at Gere's suggestion they visited the Beauchamp Chapel in Warwick parish church. When the verger unlocked the door, Morris strode in and was struck dumb by the sight; he exclaimed "What beauty!" and stood barring the entry for several minutes. Once he was taking Gere up the river "on a penny



THIS IS THE PICTURE OF THE OLD HOUSE BY THE THAMES TO WHICH THE PEOPLE OF THIS STORY WENT. HEREAFTER FOLLOWS THE BOOK ITSELF WHICH IS CALLED NEWS FROM NOWHERE OR AN EPOCH OF REST & IS WRITTEN BY WILLIAM MORRIS.

steamer” to see the place he got his vellum from. The steamer stuck on the mud, and Morris was as delighted as a boy, and burst out, “We’re shipwrecked, we’re shipwrecked.” Very prolific with his writing, he was always ready to break off and turn to something else.

Gere, who looked remarkably trim for his age, showed us the Ashendene *Dante* and some other books. Soon after my return home I wrote to thank him for the visit and to suggest that he put down his recollections of Morris. These arrived shortly afterwards, written out by his sister, and they are appended here:

“When I first went to the Birmingham School of Art, it was then entering a period of prosperity under Edward R. Taylor and the inspiring tuition of Arthur J. Gaskin, whose work took the form very largely of black-and-white illustrations.

An important event for the School was the coming of William Morris to give the prizes. The acquaintance he thus made with the students and their work led to his asking Gaskin and myself to undertake some of the illustrations for his books of the Kelmscott Press which were then being brought out. Morris died before these were completed. Gaskin provided *The Shepherdes Calender* with twelve full-page illustrations; one of mine only was used, as the frontispiece of the Kelmscott edition of *News from Nowhere*.

Morris mapped out a cycle tour for Gaskin and myself. We went through Broadway and the Colne Valley. The Cotswolds were then a lovely, unspoiled agricultural land where you could still see men using the breast plough. I remember an old man wearing a smock frock and a rough silk hat standing in his cottage door: they used then to wear silk hats, not brushed, but furry and fuzzy all over. We had lunch at Kelmscott where Morris had just come ashore in his punt after a morning’s fishing for gudgeon. Mrs. Morris was there looking very splendid, and the two daughters May and Jenny.

After this I often stayed with the Morrises at Kelmscott Manor or at Kelmscott House, Hammersmith, during the progress of the drawing of Kelmscott Manor and a number of illustrations designed for *The House of the Wolfings*.

At Kelmscott Manor I slept in the little powder closet which opens from the Tapestry Room. Morris used to bring me in a can of hot water in the morning. He used to tumble out of bed, have his tub, slip into his blue shirt and blue suit, thrust a brush — or maybe only his hands — through his curly hair and beard — all the work of a few moments — and he was ready for the day’s adventure.

Morris liked everything solid and large; the wash basins and jugs were of massive proportions in earthenware; his tea cup and porridge bowl the same. He liked his bread in solid chunks: on one occasion I cut some bread at breakfast far too thin for his taste. A moment later he arrived and with a shout of disgust roared out, “Who cut this bread?” Walks with Morris in the country around were always a treat and an education. It was on one of these walks that he said: “You must enjoy a work of art in your stomach.”

In my early days I made myself a studio at Warwick in a little bye-way known as Bridgend opposite the Castle across the river. I had often talked to Morris about Warwick’s treasured possession, the Beauchamp Chapel, so one day he came down on purpose to see it, also visiting my studio. The verger, doubtless bored by my frequent visits, was in the habit of opening the great door only wide enough for me to step inside; on this occasion however he drew it back to its full extent against the wall. Morris, absolutely transfixed by the absolute beauty of the interior and the

tomb, chose an immediate viewpoint with his back against the door, thus imprisoning the verger who had, I remember, some difficulty in extricating himself.

In London I slept in a little room approached by a step-ladder from Morris's study. It was over the room in which the Socialists held their meetings, which often kept me awake till a late hour. After supper Morris would generally play a game of draughts with his wife; if she beat him several times he would stop playing and sweep the draughts from the board.

After the game Morris went down to his study and I would go to bed, hearing the squeak of his quill pen — he kept a dozen or so ready cut — as he drove it through a new poem late into the night. In the morning I saw the pages of his splendid script lying there on the table.

I believe that when Morris first set up house in London the servants mealed with the family in accordance with socialist ideas: but this practice had come to an end when I stayed there.”

*Charles Gere.* Born Birmingham 1869. Trained at Birmingham School of Art. A.R.A. 1934, R.A. 1939. Settled in Painswick 1944, living with his half-sister, Margaret. Died Painswick 1957.