Morris & Co. in a Baroque Setting

Eeyan Hartley

Sir John Vanbrugh's baroque masterpiece Castle Howard is perhaps as unlikely a setting for the work of the leading exponent of the Arts and Crafts Movement, William Morris, as can be imagined, yet that was once the case. Old photographs and account books reveal a house that has almost disappeared and one which is some instances is hard to recognize. The ravages of two world wars, the occupation of a girls' school and recent restoration have resulted in much late-Victorian decoration being rejected in favour of revealing the eighteenth-century character of the house.

George and Rosalind Howard, the future 9th Earl and Countess of Carlisle, were, in the early idyllic years after their marriage in 1864, a perfect aesthetic couple: he a talented amateur artist, she “unbecrinolined” and radical in outlook. When they decided to build a new London home it was natural that they should be influenced by their artistic friends, William Morris and Frederick Leighton, who had both used their artistic vision to create extraordinary houses; Red House at Bexleyheath, built between 1859 and 60, and Leighton House in Kensington, completed in 1864.

The Howards employed Morris's friend and colleague Philip Webb to design for them a controversial new house of red brick with an asymmetrical frontage at No 1, Palace Green, Kensington. Completed in 1870, it was decorated throughout with Morris wallpapers and fabrics, Edward Burne-Jones being commissioned to paint a frieze depicting the legend of Cupid and Psyche for the dining room. There can have been little exaggeration by The Studio magazine when it described the interiors as glowing “like the page of an illuminated missal”.

Whilst it was not surprising that their newly built home should happily accommodate Morris designs, Castle Howard would provide a more unusual setting. George and Rosalind Howard's first recorded visit to “Morris and Webb's furniture place in Queen Square” was on 3rd November 1866 and it was doubtless the young couple's influence on George's aunt and uncle, Lord & Lady Lanerton who lived at
Castle Howard, that led to Morris & Company receiving the commission for the stained glass windows in the Private Chapel in 1871. Rosalind wrote to her mother that “The Chapel is the one great interest the Lanertons have” and its re-ordering was lavish. The architect R.J. Johnson was employed to drop the level of the floor and C.E. Kempe advised on the rich polychromatic decoration which overlaid the mid-eighteenth-century pillars and plasterwork. The chief glory of the chapel would be the windows; these were installed on hinged panels so that extra light could be admitted – a suggestion of Philip Webb who was anxious not to disrupt the exterior appearance of the house.

Philip Webb designed architectural frames incorporating the four evangelists’ symbols to surround the centre panels by Edward Burne-Jones. Whilst three of the subjects for these centre panels had been decided – the Annunciation, the Nativity and the Adoration of the Magi – the fourth panel proved more problematical, both the Transfiguration and the Presentation in the Temple being suggested before the final choice of the Flight into Egypt. As the size of the centre panels was increased at Lord Lanerton’s request, the cost of the windows rose to a final figure of £737.00.

The first Morris and Company wallpapers at Castle Howard were bought by the Lanertons; the original bills still survive. In 1872 the patterns dark blue Indian, dark Daisy, dark Fruit and blue Fruit were bought; the following year dark blue Queen Anne and Jasmine and the year after yellow Diaper and light Daisy. The last bill, dated January 14th 1878, was for 7 pieces of Indian wallpaper at a cost of £1.18s.6d. Sadly it is not known where these papers were used.

Castle Howard was to occupy an ambivalent place in Rosalind Howard’s affections; she preferred her London home and her husband’s other ancestral seat, the medieval Naworth Castle in Cumberland. Regarding Castle Howard as over-decorated and over-luxurious, she nevertheless embarked upon her own programme of redecoration after Lord Lanerton’s death in 1879. However her first purchases from Morris & Co. were originally destined not for the house itself but for the Castle Howard Inn. The Inn had been built within the park in the mid-eighteenth century to accommodate visitors; Rosalind was to transform it into a Guest House for poor women who were “tired, weak or worn-out through illness, poverty, hard-work or anxiety of mind.” Accordingly many Morris wallpapers were ordered in 1881; blue Venetian, Larkspur, Lily, blue Mallow, Chrysanthemum, Trellis and light and green Daisy, to decorate the Inn. Chintzes were also bought, presumably for curtaining; these included Snakeshead, Marigold, and Indian Diaper, but Rosalind’s generosity tended to be of a self-serving kind and a later note reveals: “Chintzes from Morris bought for the Guest house, but to be used in the house.” The first fabrics bought with the house specifically in mind were revival designs based on historical precedents: Small Stem, an 1830s design adopted by Morris, of which 53 yds were bought at 5s/8d a yard, and “red stamped velvet”, probably Utrecht Velvet, an embossed mohair plush inspired by 17th-century furnishing velvets. Of this she purchased 29 1/4 yds for £17.11s.0d, some of which was used to cover a pair of sofas (since sold from Castle Howard in November 1991).

The evidence for this enthusiastic patronage of Morris & Company comes from Rosalind Howard’s detailed annual account books which carefully recorded her purchases. In 1882 she bought 36 Sussex chairs at 7 shillings each for Castle Howard, also 12 Sussex round-seated at 10s/6d and 6 Sussex armchairs at 9s/9d. Any suspicion
that Rosalind was hankering for the simple life has to be offset by the setting she had created for these chairs. In 1882 a new Dining Room at Castle Howard was made by throwing three rooms into one, the walls covered with gold Japanese leather paper (designed to imitate embossed leather hangings produced in Spain and Holland in the 16th and 17th centuries) and fireplaces aglow with De Morgan tiles; here the Sussex chairs were mingled with the Chippendale to curious effect. Other activity in 1882 included buying 54 yds of “red roman satin” with which to hang the walls of one of the State Rooms. For her own sitting room Rosalind ordered another stamped leather paper which depicted, against a green background, golden cupids squeezing grapes into wine goblets, an odd (and extravagant at £113.8s.0d) choice for such an ardent temperance reformer.

The previous November Rosalind had written to William Morris asking his advice as to which patterns to use and Morris had directed his assistant to write “recommended” and “specially recommended” on certain of them; sadly these notes do not survive. On 24th November 1881 he had written that “the gold and red sunflower is on my board at Queen Square & I will do my best to hit the due colour.” This he must have done, as 13 pieces at £19.13s.6d appear in the accounts for 1882. His recommendation of the red silk damask he had produced for Saint James’s Palace fell on deaf ears, despite his reminding Rosalind that he could do “pretty well any colour you want” including “ravishing yellows, rather what people call amber”, and what he inquired would she say “to dullish pink shot with amber, like some of those chrysantheums we see just now?”* Rosalind’s reply is unknown.

In 1884 wallpapers were again being ordered for Castle Howard, “16 pieces of red mallow for the Boys schoolroom at £4” (a surviving piece was found behind a radiator) and 16 pieces of Sunflower for the schoolroom next door. Yellow Venetian paper was put up in what is now known as Lady Georgiana’s Bedroom and red Queen Anne adorned the walls of George Howard’s studio. The old Library in the east wing received red Poppy paper and 65 yards of red Kidderminster carpet covered the floor. In the same year 90 yds of Rose chintz and of Pink chintz, presumably for curtains, was purchased as was 62 yds of Indian chintz. The following year 1885 saw one of the most dramatic transformations as the light and airy Long Gallery was smothered in 170 pieces of blood red Sunflower pattern wallpaper. The local decorator, who rejoiced in the name Carass Topham, was paid £89.15s.3d for his trouble, the paper itself cost £46.15.0d. Extra bookcases darkly varnished, oriental carpets and chairs upholstered in blue chinese silk with gold embroidery were introduced, adding to the rich if heavy effect. Evidence of the increasing time the Howards were now spending at Castle Howard was the very practical purchase of 6 rolls of rush matting for the long cold stone passages!

The boys’ schoolroom was redecorated in 1886, the red Mallow giving way to the much lighter Daisy wallpaper, and this is the only original Morris & Co. wallpaper to survive in situ at Castle Howard. For this reason when the room was enlarged in 1988 to form the souvenir shop it was cleaned and conserved, the wallpaper from the demolished wall rescued and the adjoining room decorated to match, in paper specially printed by Arthur Sanderson & Sons. Another survival from 1886 was discovered in the Caretaker’s cupboard in the form of a piece of Axminster carpet. Rosalind Howard had ordered 228 yards of this carpet from Morris & Company for the Tapestry Drawing Room and the Music Room. It can clearly be seen in old
photographs of the Tapestry Room, whose cluttered appearance brings to mind William Morris’ famous declaration that he had “never been in any rich man’s home which would not have looked the better for having a bonfire made outside it of ninetenths of all it held.” Also dating from 1886 is the upholstery on a suite of gilded furniture comprising two sofas and four chairs; the woollen fabric used was a blue version of Bird & Vine, a design popular for church furnishings, which proved remarkably resilient despite its long exposure to light in the sunny south-facing Garden Hall.

Whilst Naworth Castle was gradually covered with Morris & Co. wallpapers and chintz during the late 1880s, Castle Howard was given a more varied treatment with wallpapers ordered from Maples; two surviving examples being a “rose branch on gold ground” paper in the Castle Howard Dressing Room and a “blue Stork” paper in the Archbishop’s Room. More Japanese leather paper was ordered, this time for the Museum Room where it still remains. It was not until 1892 that Morris wallpaper reappears in the accounts for Castle Howard when Rosalind’s two youngest sons, bedrooms were decorated: Michael received Larkspur, Geoffrey (the eventual inheritor of Castle Howard) Bower, with Mallow for their shared dressing room. In the same year the Howards bought twenty “Persian and Shumack” rugs from Liberty’s and Cardinal & Harford respectively; these were photographed and copies sent to William Morris, who wrote his grateful thanks as the designs would prove of use to him in his carpet designs. Besides the Axminster carpet the Howards had in 1880 purchased several of Morris’s hand-made Hammersmith rugs and had commissioned for Naworth Castle Library a large carpet (31 feet 3 inches × 15 feet 2 inches) which, when completed in October 1881, weighed according to Morris “about a ton” and cost the Howards £200.00. Two more state rooms at Castle Howard were to succumb to Morris & Co. wallpaper in 1894, the Orleans Room being decorated with green Acorn, while red Bird & Anemone was used to cover Pellegrini’s frescoes of the Fall of Troy in the High Saloon. This mild act of philistinism was reversed in the 1920s by Rosalind’s son Geoffrey, who employed the same firm, Topham Brothers of Harrogate, to remove the wall paper and restore the frescoes. Tragically the whole room was then destroyed in the disastrous fire of 1940.

William Morris’ death in 1896 may have prompted Rosalind’s purchase the following year of numerous small quantities of chintz as samples of his work. The designs included: Lea, Brer Rabbit, Rose & Thistle, Lodden, Bird & Anemone, Evenlode, Severn, Cray, Daffodil, Trent, Snakeshead and Eden. The same motive might also be behind the acquisition of one piece each of the following wallpapers: Spring Thicket, Compton, Tom Tit, Blackthorn and Woodland Weeds. These purchases and the remnants not used on rooms in the house mean that Castle Howard now possesses a good representative archive of Morris & Company’s wallpaper designs.

Without doubt the single most important item from Morris & Company to survive at Castle Howard is the three-panel screen especially made for George and Rosalind Howard. The 9th Countess’s account book records in 1889 a payment of £80 for the panels (a cheque was sent by George to Bessie Burden on 30th August 1887) and a further £18/7s for making them into an oak screen for Naworth. Now at Castle Howard the serge panels embroidered in wool, silk and gold thread by Jane Morris and her sister Elizabeth (Bessie) Burden were originally intended as wall hangings for
Morris' own home, Red House, Bexleyheath, and were part of a series derived from Chaucer's poem 'The Legend of Good Women', although typically Morris included some heroines of his own. The screen includes three full-length figures with long hair, dressed in flowing medieval robes, standing on flower-filled plots of grass against a floral background; Lucretia carries a sword, Hippolyta a lance and Helen of Troy holds a torch; two are crowned but Hippolyta wears a wreath of laurel leaves. This outstanding example of the skill of Jane Morris and her sister is, because of the necessity of low light-levels, now kept in the private chapel where, together with the magnificent stained glass windows, it provides a visual reminder not only of the patronage by the Howard family of Morris & Company, but also of the personal friendship between George and Rosalind Howard and Jane and William Morris.

NOTES
2. Diary of Rosalind Howard, 9th Countess of Carlisle; Castle Howard Archives (C.H.A.) J23/102/12, Castle Howard, York – by kind permission of the Howard Family.
5. This and the following quotations, and figures regarding purchases, are taken from Rosalind Howard, 9th Countess of Carlisle’s account books. C.H.A: J23/105/1-30.