William Morris's Early Furniture
by Pat Kirkham

Little is known of the furniture made for Red Lion Square, or Red House or even that by the firm of Morris and Company in the early days. At about the time of the Crimean War (1854-6) or just shortly afterwards, William Morris approached a London furniture-making firm to make up some pieces and one of the workmen involved, Henry Price, recorded the event in his diary which is fortunately preserved and now located in the Central Library, Islington. The furniture described by Price must surely be among the earliest ordered by William Morris and most probably went to Red Lion Square.

Price recorded Morris's commission thus:
A gentleman who in after years became a noted Social [i]st, and Poet as is an Art Furnisher called at our shop and got the govner to take some orders for some very old fashioned Furniture in the Mideavel Style. The guvner knowing that I took great interest in such things put the job into my Hands. Oak, Walnut, Pitch, Pine, Lime Tree and Mahogany all went into the job. A large Cabinet adout 7ft high and as long, a seat forming a bunk, with arms each end Carv to represent Fishes. Three Cupboards The Doors with fantastic ironwork hinges, representing Birds, fishes and Flowers Bolted on, and gilt coloured. The hinges cost 14 pounds. He spent a lot of his Leisure in carving the arms and panels. The govenor took the Order for £13. But my wages came to more than that. There were some tables and High backed chairs like what I have seen in Abeys and Cathedrals. A large Oak Table on tressels with a Iron Stretcher twisted and partly burnished The top in a bine [line?] with the tressils was inlaid with various coulours of wax to repesent the heads of the bolts.

I did a lot to it.

The large cabinet with three cupboards is similar to the large settle ‘with a long seat below and above, three cupboards with great swing doors . . . ’, designed by Morris and made for Red Lion Square, which is described by Mackail in his The Life of William Morris. According to Mackail, the settle was ordered after ‘intensely mediaeval’ tables and chairs had been made for Red Lion Square. The settle described by Mackail was adorned by Rossetti, who painted the panels of the cupboard doors and the sides of the settle, which was later moved to the Red House. The big settle now in the drawing room at the Red House, however, does not appear to have ever had any carved decoration and the metal work is quite plain. If the cabinet made by Price at about the same time as the settle for Red Lion Square is not the one at the Red House, where then is this extremely important piece of early Morris furniture? The same question can be asked of the large oak table on trestles with its partly burnished iron stretcher and table top inlaid with various coloured waxes to represent bolt heads, as well as of the other tables and chairs, although the high backed chairs may refer to the type which Rossetti decorated and which appear in a sketch of Morris and Burne-Jones at Red Lion Square.


2 Lady Burne-Jones, Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones, (London, 1904)
Mackail states that it was the poor design of furniture available and the unwillingness of furniture shops to make up pieces of good design that forced Webb and Morris to take up designing objects of common use themselves. In order to furnish the rooms in Red Lion Square Morris made rough drawings of the things he wanted and, according to Mackail, got 'a carpenter in the neighbourhood to construct them from those drawings in plain deal'. Burne-Jones recalled 'many scenes with the carpenter' but if the furniture described by Mackail and that described by Price was made at the same shop then it was not made by a carpenter, much as it may have pleased Morris and his friends to call him so. The owner of the furniture-making firm which made that on which Price worked was almost certainly Tommy Baker of Christopher Street, Hatton Garden, not too far from Red Lion Square, who in 1855 ran a 'good cabinet factory' which made all types of furniture, including dining room, library and bedroom furniture. The factory was open from six in the morning until six at night and day wages were 6½d per hour, Piece-rate workers earned about five or six shillings a week more than day-wage workers in what was probably a five-and-a-half day week. Price was glad to obtain work there particularly as food and other prices were high during the Crimean War. His wife also worked at that time, making army trousers at 1d per pair in the days before the sewing machine was widely used.

Price’s background is interesting. He was a native of Wiltshire but learned his cabinet making in the United States where he went in 1842. He returned to England in 1848 and worked in London from 1850. He had difficulty in obtaining work in decent shops since he had not served a craft apprenticeship and some of his methods of working were considered rough by Lon-

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3 The description of Baker and his factory in Diary, pp. 153-157. The employers for which Price worked in the years 1853-1858 are recorded in H.E. Price, Account book of income and expenditure of a working man. British Library. MS Room. 36603. A–C.

I am grateful to Norah Gillow of the William Morris Gallery and to Clive Wainwright of the Victoria and Albert Museum for their help in trying to trace the furniture.
don standards. He learned eagerly, however, from craftsmen with whom he worked, from visits to the Great Exhibition and from books such as *The Cabinet Maker's Assistant*, published in parts in 1853 (in order to obtain which he went without his lunch-time beer).

When Morris placed the order for 'some very old fashioned Furniture in the Mideavel Style' with Baker, Price was given the job because his self-improvement had given him an interest in such matters. The ironwork hinges on the large cabinet representing birds, fishes and flowers, were gilt and coloured and cost a total of £14. Baker took the whole order for £13 but in the end Price's wages alone came to more than that. Price stated that 'He spent a lot of his leisure in carving the arms and panels' and presumably referred to Morris, although Price's references are sometimes tantalizingly lacking in precision at just the time when one needs information about a point. It seems unlikely, however, that he was referring to himself.

Since Morris was unable, as Mackail suggests, to get a top class firm to make up his pieces, he was then in a position of not having the most skilled craftsmen to work on his pieces. He was fortunate that in the middling to cheaper end of the trade Henry Price had educated himself to make a wide range of items and had interested himself in the design of earlier periods. Although he did not go to the quality end of the trade, Morris went to a firm well respected in the trade which paid only 10% under the union rate which effectively only obtained in the West-end at that time. Price praised Baker as a good employer who valued steady workmen and looked after them as best he could.

In the later years of his life Price considered the position of the English worker and also wrote a few words on the medieval artisan, words which echoed the thoughts of that great socialist, poet and art furnisher whose furniture he had made in earlier days. It would be fitting if the efforts of the William Morris Society led to the discovery of that furniture.