This is the entrance to Morris & Co’s works at Merton Abbey. To the right of the green entrance doors — a white house in whose upper room William Morris held his Socialist evenings. The red bricked building next door was office and drawing and designing room and contained the large portfolio of all designs for stained glass windows, made by Madox Brown, Burne-Jones and others, and a largish board. A porch with pillars gave access to the street. A narrow staircase where there was a gas ring and a kettle led out on to a small lawn and garden, in the middle of which was a new building in wood—the weaving shed—which housed two jacquard looms and a mechanical loom. Far across the lawn to the left was a long low building made of tarred weatherboards. On its earth floor were gigantic vats to hold indigo. The building was badly lit. An outside wooden staircase led up to the stained glass workshop and at the top of the stairs was the largest window in the works — where the finished window could be seen against the sky.

The stained glass room was also badly lit. Three windows on the south wall were occupied by two of the painters—on the other side a leading-up bench under one window and the cutting table under another window. A cinder path led on towards the River Wandle. It passed the boiler house and the steam boiler for the heating system. (There was a boiler for processing the indigo on the printed fabrics as well.) The path then crossed a wooden bridge over the river where the fabrics were washed and led to a wooden building of two stories which con-
tained, on the side facing the large paper works, two tapestry looms of large proportions. Easels and boards occupied the centre of the ground floor on which were pinned the full sized photographically enlarged cartoons by Burne-Jones. upstairs were the beautifully long padded tables, separately lit on both sides, where the famous fabrics were printed. Two or three men worked there continuously. I think three people — a man and two women — were engaged as tapestry weavers. In the stained glass department there were two painters and a cutter-leader-upper. Two weavers, a boilerman-cum-colourmixer for the fabric dyes and an odd job man who took the mail, a young accountant who worked in the office just inside the main gates and lastly Mr Dearle the manager in charge.

He was an elderly man — very capable — peppery, trained up from a student apprentice by Morris in all the crafts. He did what drawing and designing was necessary i.e. on new windows and new tapestries (unless other artists, like my father, were asked to design tapestries). He saw to the carrying out of all the orders which came down from the Firm’s showrooms in George Street, near Hanover Square. Orders for fabrics, for silk woven cloths, for stained glass windows. He sent back to the office his orders for dyed silks, which were carried out elsewhere.

At the end of the year 1929 my father, Henry A. Payne, got me the chance of helping Mr Dearle run the works. The opening came through Sir Muirhead Bone. We were invited to dinner with Mr H.C. Marillier at his London house — and I started work. I found the ideals and methods of work at Merton quite different from the lines on which my father ran his studio. My father was trained in glass work under Christopher Whall at Lowndes & Drury’s studios in his thirties when he was himself an accomplished portrait painter, decorator and painter of historical pictures. Drawing and design were no problem to him, nor was the use of colour on a vast scale, or so it appeared to me — I may not have seen the struggle beneath the seeming ease with which glorious windows after windows flowed out of his studio, interspersed with games of tennis, landscape painting in watercolour, cycle rides all over Gloucestershire to visit Malvern, Camden, Fairford.
Textiles by William Morris and Morris & Co., 1861—1940

OLIVER FAIRCLOUGH AND EMMELINE LEARY

The designs of William Morris have been admired for over a hundred years throughout the English-speaking world, and still attract constant interest on both sides of the Atlantic, as well as in Germany, Switzerland and France. Yet Morris always insisted on mastering the techniques of a particular art form before he started designing for it, and through Morris & Co. he wanted to revive the medieval ideal of the artist-craftsman who designed and executed his own work. Set up in 1861 to produce mural decorations, carvings, stained-glass windows, furniture and embroidery, it was not until the firm was reconstituted in 1875 with Morris as sole manager that textiles began to replace stained glass and wallpaper as the firm's most popular products. Morris devoted himself to perfecting new techniques for colouring and producing them, simultaneously exploring the art of weaving, so that by 1880 weaving, dying and cotton printing had become Morris & Co's principal activities. The authors here present the most definitive discussion of Morris & Co's fabrics yet written. Covering the embroideries, printed fabrics, woven textiles, carpets and tapestries, their authoritative work even includes a list of all the material commissioned for America and a useful summary of modern versions and adaptations of the original designs that are still available from Arthur Sanderson & Sons Ltd.

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From what I have read since of the life of William Morris, Morris was more interested in getting a craft started and then leaving it to others to carry it on. This was in fact what the works at Merton existed for, i.e. to carry out his designs of fabrics, woven materials etc., to carry out Burne-Jones’ designs for stained glass windows, and to produce tapestries either to Burne-Jones’ designs or get other artists to make designs. I think I am right in saying Mr Dearle made some printed fabric designs. He certainly made a magnificent tapestry design for a client in Belfast. Otherwise I think he adapted Burne-Jones figures to whatever new shapes an order for a stained glass window demanded. It was the strength in the construction of Burne-Jones’ figures which kept the vitality — or what was left of the Morris vitality — in the glass windows produced at Merton whilst I was there. So many of the abuses, which Christopher Whall writes against in his book on stained glass published 1905, were beginning to creep in; the repetition of formulas for figures, the channelling of the best painter to paint only heads, the weaker painters being endlessly relegated to border repetition and lettering. There might have been scope for original design, but the framework was too massive and full of Morris’s tastes to allow for a breakthrough. I could only wait and long to paint pictures and portraits and was too ignorant of life and too weak on the administrative side to see the possibilities for development in a set-up gradually crystallizing out into set forms, whilst abroad, outside, new designs were breaking out. The French Impressionists, Picasso, the Bauhaus, the German Expressionists, the Swiss glass-makers — those men who trusted to the exploitation of the possibilities of the material to give their effects. The wonder to me was how could the wonderful windows of Burne-Jones that William Morris made for St. Philip’s, Birmingham (the Cathedral) ever have been made at Merton. The whole place must have hummed with life. Instead now there were shadowy figures creeping around in the gloom waiting for orders from head office who were transmitting orders from a dwindling set of clients as the taste of the time changed.

I could have learnt so much, so much about bookkeeping. There were rows and rows of leather bound books in red, con-
taining copies of all the letters referring to stained glass orders. I turned up one of the first volumes and there were records of Selsley Church (not far from here) designed by Morris and Philip Webb, Rossetti and Burne-Jones in the 1860s. I have just been releading the rose window of the ‘Creation’ which Philip Webb designed. It is beautifully simple in its construction of lead and in its imagery, so living and fresh. When I compare this to the practice at Merton in 1929 when a new order for a window came in — the files were turned up for suitable figures; these were enlarged or reduced as the case might be, background added to a kind of Flemish formula, with Burne-Jones-type Eastern buildings. The whole work had a spirit of compromise about it so different from that upheld by Christopher Whall. ‘Recast your composition — make corrections — read, study — always compare your insignificant work with the greatest masters of the past. Efface yourself in front of the architecture. Make masters of your apprentices or try to make them so — sacrifice sometimes business profits for art. Do the work again . . . ’ — and many other of those enlivening and invigorating precepts and wise words of advice which shine out from every page of his book. I could see no future for me there and without asking my father’s advice resigned most stupidly my post. Mr Marillier said ‘I don’t think any young man of your age knows what he wants to do’. He was right — but I thought I was right too and went to paint wall decorations and study Rubens and Stanley Spencer and the men of our age — the post-war years. Morris’ age had vanished by then. The works went on till the Second World War under the leadership of Dearle’s son Duncan who was a chemist. My father made a tapestry design for them in 1935 and I went there to make some corrections to the drawing of a dog’s head. There was no one at Merton who could draw then! I suppose this was inevitable — with the shop and showrooms at George Street, Hanover Square selling Morris goods and Morris-type goods. The originality of the early work produced by the Firm in Morris’s day was due to the master spirit of the founder — when that went, what was left? ‘Better to dig or beg than to carry out work under false conditions or have a mill-stone hung around your neck’, writes Christopher Whall.