Thomas Morris, Resident Director of the Devon Great Consols

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In the 1840s William Morris's father, a successful city bill-broker, joined with his brothers Francis and Thomas (a Camberwell coal-merchant), to finance a company prospecting for copper in Blanchdown Woods, on the Devon banks of the Tamar River, about four miles from Tavistock. The land around the Tamar had for centuries been a source of valuable minerals, and already in 1817 a canal had been completed between Tavistock and the port on the Tamar at Morwhellham to carry supplies, machinery and mineral ores from West Dartmoor. A huge deposit of copper had been found at Blanchdown in 1844, and the Devonshire Great Consolidated Copper Mining Company was registered as a joint stock company in 1845, the Morris brothers holding 304 of the 1,024 shares. On coming of age in 1855 William Morris was given thirteen shares and it was this inheritance and the shares which he subsequently acquired which underpinned financially his early artistic, creative and commercial life. In 1871 Morris also became a director of the company, although he resigned four years later, selling his shares piecemeal to finance his own work.

Thomas Morris, who owned 32 shares, was appointed resident director of the Devon Great Consols in 1845, and the company built a house for him just outside Tavistock so that he could represent the interests of the London directors and effectively run the mining enterprise. Such was the excitement at the massive discovery of copper that by 1847 dividends of £71 a share had been declared and the £1 shares changed hands at £800. The miners worked an eight hour day in three shifts and were paid for piecework just under £4 a month; the girls whose job it was to break the ore into pieces received a little over Is a day and children fourpence to eightpence. The work was hard and many miners made the journey of three or four miles to and from Tavistock on foot, carrying the children who were to earn extra money for the family. Miners paid into a club to provide medical care, as accidents and tuberculosis were not uncommon. In some cases families lived in one room with beds occupied night and day by those who worked different shifts.

The years between 1870 and 1875 saw a turning point in William Morris's life, both personally and commercially. He painfully came to accept the close relationship between Janey and Rossetti and, despite claiming not to have enough money for his needs, embarked on two major commitments: the lease of Kelmscott Manor (with Rossetti) in 1871 and the lease of Horrington House in West London in 1873. He was also importing vellum from Rome for his new and
absorbing interest in calligraphy and the illumination of manuscripts. With these expenses it was not surprising, therefore, that he took on a directorship of the Devon Great Consols in 1871. Evidence of his involvement survives in his letters to his mother, after whom one of the mines was named: Wheal Emma. In 1872 he wrote to reassure her that although there was to be increased liability after the company had been reorganised, the shareholders would not in fact be called upon and there was a hope that tin would be discovered. In a similar vein he stressed that they had a ‘new contract for arsenic, & got a very good price for it’. Finally in May 1875 he told her that he had ‘ended my business there, except for receiving my £100 which they were kind enough to vote us’. Commercially, 1875 was highly significant: in March, seeking complete control of the Firm, he managed to dissolve Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co. and after paying three partners £1,000 each (three other partners generously waiving their claims) set up Morris & Co. wholly in his control. It was perhaps because of a growing sympathy for the poor that he resigned his directorship of the Devon Great Consols and, as Fiona MacCarthy tells us, ‘deliberately sat down on his top hat’.

By the 1870s the copper mines were in decline as the ore loads became less productive and new sources of the metal were exploited in America and Australia. The company, therefore, diversified, producing arsenic to try to maintain its
income, but trouble was brewing with the Duke of Bedford on whose land, let to the company at no risk to himself, the copper had been found. Despite the falling income from the mines he was unwilling to reduce his royalties. A year later, in 1871, shareholders were complaining that the company’s agents were being paid too much and the differences with the Duke remained unresolved. Already by 1872 a letter signed ‘T. W.’ in the Mining Journal memorably describes Tavistock as deserted and blames the decay of the mines on notorious swindles, greedy speculators and ignorant agents. Whether these accusations were true or not, they seem evidence of strong feeling in the town.

Disputes between the miners and the company had occurred sporadically from the 1850s, but they came to a head in 1878 when the directors decided (in the absence of Thomas Morris) to improve the company’s cash flow by paying wages every five weeks rather than four, although, for most employees, this was not to mean a reduction in the year’s total pay. The miners went on strike for two months against the proposed five-weekly payment. As resident director, Thomas Morris (who had the men’s trust) became the mediator between them and the London directors, who were regarded as absentee profiteers and not to be trusted to keep their word. Accompanied by the miners’ representative, Morris went to London to plead the workers’ cause in opposition to his fellow directors and on his return addressed the men in person in the open air, giving them the assurance on his honour that wages would not be reduced. The Tavistock Gazette, clearly feeling for Morris in his difficult task, describes him as speaking in a ‘kind and sympathetic’ tone. The newspaper makes it quite clear that Morris supported the miners’ cause, despite being the local spokesman for the London directors. At the same time, the Duke of Bedford remained obdurate over his royalties, although he did oppose the board’s decision to pay wages every five weeks.

An unlikely compromise was reached: wages were cut to 13s 7d. per week but miners received payment every four and not five weeks. However, the following year a new dispute broke out and it was accepted that wages would be cut by ten percent. The chairman’s reports and the accounts of the annual shareholders’ meetings for 1878 and 1879 make it clear that Thomas Morris had lost the confidence of his fellow directors. There is repeated criticism of the company’s failure to note and make provision for the fact that large sums were due to the Duke of Bedford for damage to his land and it is implied that the resident director paid out money for timber and merchants’ bills without entering it in the cost sheets or obtaining the board’s consent. Furthermore shareholders and directors were indignant in 1879 to learn that the company’s employees had always enjoyed twice the customary number of single days holiday. It is not surprising that at the same shareholders’ meeting Thomas Morris interrupts the chairman’s reference to him and declares that he is not seeking re-election and that he can thus ‘relieve the Chairman from any unpleasant reflection’. Henceforth, the Devon Great Consols is to be run from London, the company will save the £400 p.a. paid to Morris and the house he occupied is to be sold.

By the end of the nineteenth century the copper ore loads were exhausted and the copper mines that had been the largest in Europe ceased to be productive. The
mines, which had extended over 45 miles underground and whose shareholders had received over £1,200,000 in dividends, were abandoned in 1903 and the materials sold off.23

Thomas Morris, who comes well out of this account, occupied Abbotsfield, a house built for him by the company in the country south of Tavistock. In 1873 the house was listed among the company assets and valued at £2,600.24 Morris lived there with his family while he was resident director. His wife, Agnes, died in 1858 leaving nine children, two of whom died soon after.25 The 1871 Census return shows Thomas Morris living with his older sister, his four daughters (aged from 14 to 28) and a son of 22. This son was evidently handicapped as in his will Morris left the young man £200 to be invested with the request that ‘the interest [should] be paid to the person or persons he may be living with towards his maintenance & clothing during his life’. The family at Abbotsfield were looked after by one male and four female servants. When Morris died in 1885 at Dawlish, a seaside town in south Devon, he left an estate of about £9,500; after
provision had been made for his son, this was to be divided between the four daughters named in the 1871 census, none of them married. Morris’s funeral was held at Tavistock parish church and he was buried in the family vault. Three unmarried daughters attended, as did his nephew H. Stanley Morris, a director of the Devon Great Consols, and a married niece. No other members of the family are named in the *Dawlish Times* account.26

Abbotsfield stands on the road to Gunnislake and Calstock, now the A309; it was only after the Second World War that the town expanded, engulfing the house with buildings on the surrounding fields and in the ten acre grounds of the house itself, destroying the garden and many of its mature and unusual trees. The stables have now gone but the cottage for groom or chauffeur still stands in the stable yard. The house has its major rooms arranged on two floors and its secondary rooms on three; there is also a cellar. The front elevation has seven bays and the side elevation two/three with a gesture to classicism of timid pediments over the main windows and equally timid corner stones; the outer walls are now stuccoed and bare but they used to be covered in Virginia creeper which turned a flaming red in the autumn. The large hall was panelled in oak and has a pleasant fireplace with a stone surround decorated in bas relief. The impression given by the rooms when I knew them before the Second World War was of comfortable and unpretentious good taste.

The garden remained clearly Victorian at that time, with lawns, ferns, pampas grass, bedding plants, greenhouses, potting sheds, walled vegetable and flowers gardens, a tennis court and a croquet lawn. At the end of the terrace stretching away from the house a grotto remains, made of large stones forming an entrance to a small and dark area, which used to be inhabited only by bats. The most notable trees were pines – probably Monterey pines – with their deeply fissured bark, but there were also spruce, larch, a monkey puzzle tree and an abundance of rhododendrons.

In 1940 Abbotsfield became the headquarters for various Divisions of the British army, and two years later the headquarters of the American 29th Infantry Division. A plaque in the hall now recalls that immediately prior to the Allied landing in Normandy in 1942 it was the scene of important conferences between General Eisenhower and Montgomery. Since then it has been used for a variety of purposes: it housed German POWs in 1945, was for a time a rather large Youth Hostel, and is now a nursing home for twenty-five elderly persons.27

I can find no evidence that William Morris ever visited his uncle even though he was for four years a director of the Devon Great Consols. However, when Janey Morris was staying in Torquay in December 1870 he wrote to her proposing to join her there for a week.28 It is possible that he then met his uncle which led to his taking up the directorship in 1871. In any event, it may be supposed that he was not attracted to the ethos of a mining company; he may even have felt that if he drew his wealth from that source it was better not to know too much about the conditions of work of the men, women and children who drew the copper and arsenic from the earth.
NOTES

1 All this information is to be found in Fiona MacCarthy, *William Morris: A Life for Our Time* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), pp. 7, 22, 65, 171, 342.


3 ibid., pp. 239-40.


7 ibid., p. 171.

8 ibid., p. 255.


12 *Mining Journal* 42 (29 June 1872), pp. 615-16.


15 *Tavistock Gazette*, 17 May 1878.


17 ibid. (4 May, 7 June 1878); *Tavistock Gazette*, 7 June 1878.


26 *Dawlish Times*, 17 December 1885.
