The most credible historians have related that Jaffier, the father of Khalid, who was called Bermukh, was one of the blood of the ancient kings of Persia. Jaffier, like his forefathers, was in his young days a worshipper of the Fire, and priest at the fire-temple of the city of Balkh; but suddenly by the decree of the divine mercy, which suffers not the elect to abide in error, the sparks of truth were lighted up in his mind, and the glory of his state received new splendour from the resplendent graces of Islaam: with his kin and his goods he departed and came to Damascus, where as then—

A set italic band by William Morris now in the Bodleian Library. (Actual size)
Morris and calligraphy

by Alfred Fairbank

William Morris, when 36 to 41 years of age (1870-76) made a number of illuminated books. On his 40th birthday he was working hard at illuminating the *Horace* now at the Bodleian Library. In these books, made in the prime of life, there are hundreds of pages of writing and much illuminating, though not all the illuminating was by him. In the catalogue of the Centenary Exhibition held in the Victoria & Albert Museum (1934) there are listed 25 items, but not all are books. Some are of discarded leaves. So far as I am aware the considerable corpus of Morris’ work in this field, though commented upon by May Morris and Graily Hewitt, has not engaged much attention of late. This may be because the manuscripts do not bear directly on the productions of the Kelmscott Press, are dwarfed by the mass of printing, and are out of sight in libraries.

Graily Hewitt in 1934 had remarked that ‘our later practice and sophistication reveals to us certain roughnesses in Morris’ manuscripts.’ This is true enough, but we may take pleasure in their vitality, freshness, and individuality. I find it particularly interesting to see the attempts by Morris to restore the Renaissance italic hand, but one has to admit that Morris had no great aptitude as a penman and was probably more concerned with illuminating than with the writing it decorated. May Morris showed Graily Hewitt quills cut by Morris and Hewitt said they were not well cut. Morris was a pioneer and must have been at a disadvantage from living in that period.

Morris possessed four Italian 16th-century writing books (bound in one volume), namely *La Operina* and *Il Modo* by Ludovico degli Arrighi (Vicentino), *Thesauro de Scrittori* by Sigismondo Fanti, and *La Vera Arte de Scrivere* by Giovantonio Tagliente. His attempts to teach himself both the roman and italic scripts can be seen in a fascinating reproduction in the catalogue of Sotheby’s sale of items from Sir Sydney Cockerell’s collection, on 10 December 1956. On the back of a leaf begun for his *Virgil* he wrote as if talking to himself: ‘let us try some hands now this
is not right this is not right good but rather shaky tis somewhat of a puzzle to know how to set to work about it: tis between pointed and round . . . ’ He tries a fast and very sloped cursive and comments: ‘a good piece of work is not to be done with such a very broad nibbed pen upon vellum with only common ink.’ Then he wrote a slower and more careful italic and included in his trial the name of Arrighi and of his second manual: ‘Con le varie Sorti de littere ordinato per Ludovico Vicentino In Rome nel anno no good at all: it all ran together . . .’

This demonstration of his struggles to revive lost scripts shows him in a less relaxed state than when, according to May Morris, she and her sister explored (with the eye only) Morris’ table at his Chiswick house: ‘we were shown how the gold was laid, and my father would pass the broad badger-hair brush used in taking up the leaf through the forest of thick curls in the orthodox way. This made us laugh.’ A charming domestic picture!

A bridge connecting Morris’ calligraphy and illuminating with more recent work in the field is made for me by the italic hands of Tagliente and Arrighi and by the illuminating which Louise Powell added to Morris’ manuscript book Fritiof The Bold. When I first began to work with her in making a Comus and an Ecclesiasticus she continued the decorative style she had used in Morris’ book. Mrs Powell assisted Graily Hewitt when he was completing for Fairfax Murray a number of Morris’ manuscripts, including a Virgil.

There are today five facsimilies of Arrighi’s La Operina which have been printed in France, USA, Sweden and Denmark. There is a Society for Italic Handwriting with a thousand members in 30 countries. There is a Society of Scribes and Illuminators, a body of professional calligraphers with also lay and honorary members, totalling 200 members. There are numerous works on how to write the italic hand. Thousands of London children are writing in italic style. Since there is so much current interest in italic handwriting, which we can trace back until we reach Morris, I have thought it quite suitable to show, with the permission of the Keeper, a discarded leaf in the Bodleian Library (MS. Eng.Misc.d.265, fol. 6 r). The incomplete decoration of the initial has a lively Morris movement, and the script, nearer to Tagliente than to Arrighi but still not close to either, does show that Morris at least did learn how to cut and hold the quill for the italic hand and how to exploit the hairline.