

Where Janey used to live

by Margaret Fleming

'So to the meeting we went, in a room in Holywell. . . it used to be the room of the Architectural Society when I was a boy, and is now a music room - it is just opposite where Janey used to live - Lord how old I am!' (William Morris to Georgiana Burne-Jones, February 1885).

In 1898, when J.W. Mackail was preparing his biography of William Morris for publication, he wanted to include an illustration of 65 Holywell Street, the address given on Jane Burden's marriage certificate. He wrote to Cockerell 'Mrs. Morris objects to a drawing. . . of the bit of old Oxford (off Holywell Street) in which she lived before her marriage. . . Mr. Webb has told her without effect. . '. On 27th August Philip Webb had written coaxingly to her, 'That of the Holywell back view with New College Tower in the distance I thought very well done. I must know Holywell almost as well as you. My father had two or three regular patients there and when was a little modest boy I used sometimes to go to the house of one of them. . . but that was on the north side of the street . . . Now you will take my word - I am sure - that this print should go into the book - in spite of your waggery, you are in a way - amenable to my reasons?' She was not, and on 22nd September Mackail wrote angrily to Cockerell 'If Mrs. Morris feels ashamed of having lived in a little house among surroundings of extreme beauty before she married, all I can say is that such a feeling is to me unintelligible.'

It is surprising that the normally impassive Mackail was so annoyed by her refusal, for an illustration of the wife's family home is not usually considered an indispensable adjunct to a biography, but neither, on the face of it, is there any reason why Jane should not have told him the

truth, which was that the Burdens had only lived there since about 1857, and then in one of the little cottages behind No. 65.

Mackail's manner was sometimes unfortunate - his daughter said 'All that was wanting to make him complete was a larger acquaintance with the market-place' - and is perhaps best



Jane Morris - wearing ordinary clothes of c.1860, not the flowing unadorned dress of the Rossetti photographs of 1865, she may still have been Jane Burden when this was taken.

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conveyed by the lines in 'Balliol Rhymes':

'I am rather tall and stately
And I care not very greatly
What you say or what you do:
I'm Mackail - and who are you?'

and it was this attitude, combined with Jane's diffidence - 'In spite of her beauty and her high mental qualities, she was very shy and retiring, almost fearful, in her attitude towards others,' said Watts-Dunton, who knew her well - that caused the mistrust. But the significant phrase in Webb's letter, 'on the North side of the street' shows that although he knew her well, he did not know that she had once lived on the North side too.

Jane's parents had arrived in Oxford in the early 1830s, as part of the influx of young people who were driven to the towns by the Enclosure Acts, and where Robert Burden's elder brother James was already established at Magdalen College as Stable Groom. Robert came from Stanton Harcourt, a village about 8 miles South West of Oxford, where he was baptised on 3rd April 1808, and his wife Ann came from Alvescote, 5 miles North East of Kelmscott and 16 miles West of Oxford, where she was baptised on 6th October 1805. It was from her mother's side of the family that Jane inherited her tall dark looks.

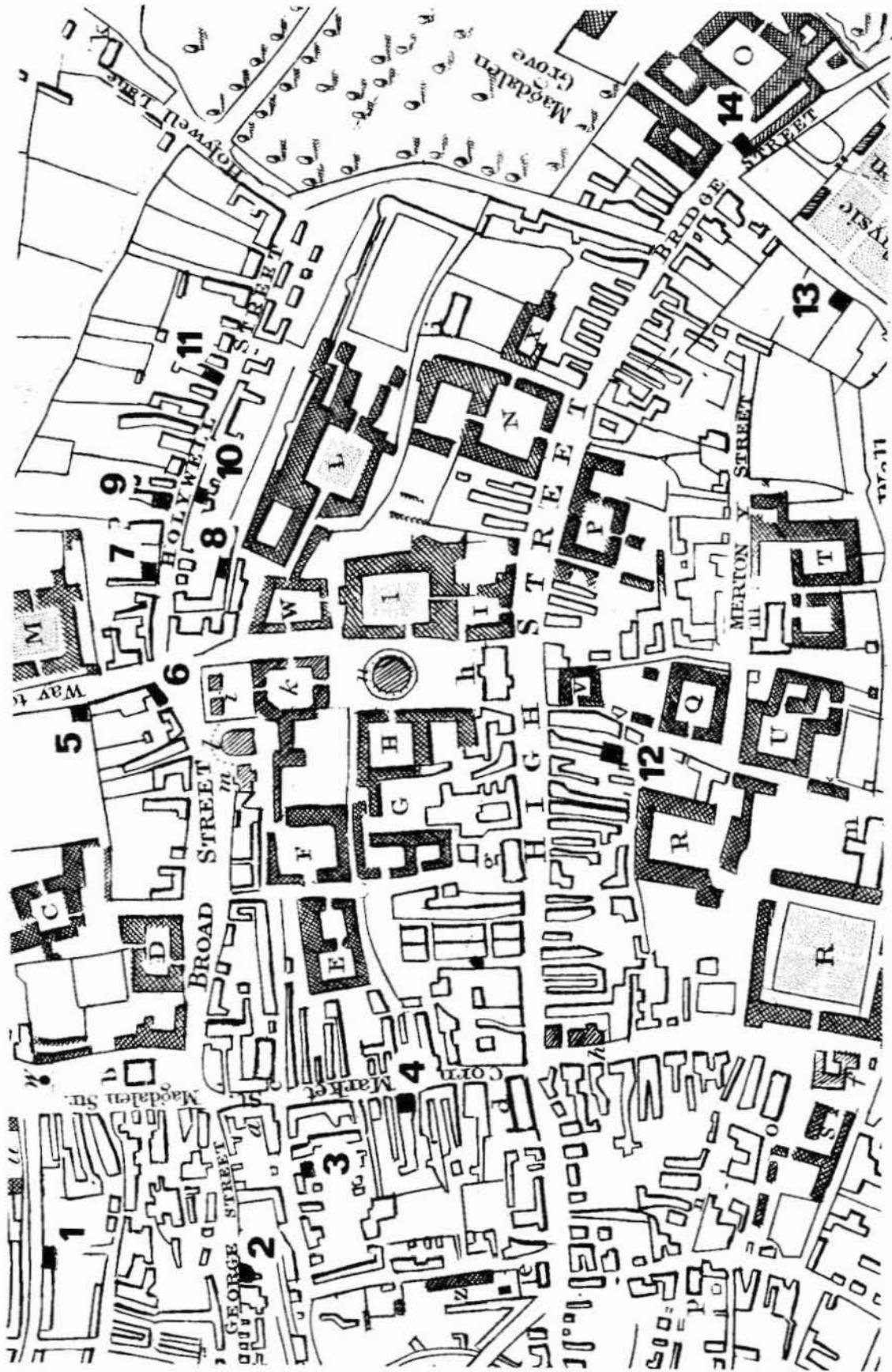
The Burdens were married on 6th May 1833 in the church of St. Mary Magdalen at the junction of Broad Street and Cornmarket Street, but by 1835 they had moved eastwards to St. Helen's Passage in the parish of St. Peter-in-the-East, where their first child, Mary Anne, was baptised on 17th May.

It is St. Helen's Passage that is just opposite the Music Room in Holywell, a group of small tenements built at the end of the 18th century, which although picturesque, were described thus in 1848, 'St. Helen's is said to have been much improved within the last few years, but the part near New College Lane is still very bad. There are several very unwholesome dirt heaps, an exceedingly bad surface drain, and a deep pit partly filled with solid matters and covered with a wooden trap door is situated close to a house, the inhabitant of which complained much of the smell arising from it.' These 'surroundings of

extreme beauty' were typical of the courts and alleyways where the migrants had settled, proving too great a strain on the town's resources, so that the problem of the disposal of sewage resulted in the cholera outbreaks of 1832, 45 and 53. Life was rough, and in a disquieting incident on 30th January 1837, Robert Burden appeared before the magistrates for assaulting a Mrs. Moore of Holywell, and was fined ten shillings and costs and bound over to keep the peace for twelve months. This was a large sum for him to pay, for in March 1837 a parish rate was levied, and in the Churchwarden's accounts, on a page headed 'Not collected in the March rate' appears a list of names bracketed 'the whole of this List are Poor.' and at the end is entered 'Rent £5 Burden 3d'.

On 30th April 1837 a son, William, was baptised, and Robert was described as an Ostler; on 19th October 1839 Jane was born, her mother registered the birth on 26th November, and the certificate states that she was born in St. Helen's Passage, that her father was a Stableman, and her mother's former name was Maizey; it is signed with a cross, for Ann was illiterate, although Robert was not. In 1842 the last child, Elizabeth, was born.

In 1839, as part of the ordinary rate list Robert Burden paid 1/- and in 1840, 2/-. His name then disappears from the returns of St. Peter-in-the-East, for by the Census of 1841 the Burdens had crossed over to the North side of Holywell which lay within the parish of St. Cross, or Holywell, where they lived in Brazier's Passage, between Nos. 23 and 24; Charles Symonds' livery stables were at No. 30 and the Music Room at No. 34. There were Parish Schools for poor children, and it is likely that the Burdens sent their children to the Holywell school, which was nearest; however they may have gone to St. Peter-in-the-East in Rose Lane, just across the road from the cottage in Gravel Walk at Magdalen, occupied by James Burden and his wife. Jane told Mackail that 'she used to pick violets on the Iffley Road, just out of St. Clements,' which is near Rose Lane. Although the school registers no longer exist, the prospectus for Rose Lane does, which would be typical, and in 1846 it states that 'the daily girls' school contains about 46 girls under a governess, but is taught chiefly by voluntary



November sun is shining brightly on the perspective of the yard and stables, and the tower of New College; the dark archway gives one a peep of Holywell Street; while the cold blue sky is flecked with gleaming pigeons.



Charley Symonds' Yard; the Livery Stables, No. 30 Holywell Street, where Robert Burden was a groom. Illustration by the author, engraved by Edmund Evans, from *The Further Adventures of Mr. Verdant Green* (1854) by 'Cuthbert Bede' - the Rev. Edward Bradley.

Key to street plan of Oxford, from Henry Slatter's *Oxford Guide* of 1851

- | | |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1. G. E. Street's office | 2. No. 13 George Street |
| 3. The Oxford Union | 4. J. G. Miller's shop |
| 5. Lizzie Siddal's lodgings | 6. Dr. Acland's house |
| 7. Holywell Music Room | 8. Symonds' Livery Stables |
| 9. King's Head Yard | 10. No. 65 Holywell Street |
| 11. St. Helen's Passage | 12. Maclaren's Gymnasium |
| 13. Rose Lane School | 14. Groom's Lodgings (James Burden) |

Philip Webb's home was just off this plan, north of Magdalen Street on the east side of St. Giles's.

assistance. The whole afternoon is given up to Needlework or Ironing and every girl is required to take part in scouring a room on Saturday.' A sampler and exercise book still exist which show that the standard was high; the latter contains an essay on the Duties of a Cook which are like those described by Floss Gunner in her account of kitchen work at Kelmscott. On 14th September 1849 Mary Anne died of tuberculosis, from which she had suffered for 12 months; her death was notified to the Registrar by her aunt Hannah, wife of James Burden, and she signed the death certificate as having been present at the death.

Perhaps because of the unhappy associations, the Burdens moved again, and by 1851 Census they were living at No. 1 King's Head Yard, one of a string of small cottages behind the King's Head public house at No. 17 on the North side, and little larger than the loose-boxes of Symonds' livery stables. William, then aged 14, is described as a College Messenger, and Jane (11) and Elizabeth (9) as Scholars.

Holywell contained a wide range of people from clergymen to college servants, among whom were a Manciple, a Cook and a Butler. They were sufficiently important to be listed by name under 'College Servants' in the County Directory, including James Burden, so that Robert would have had useful contacts to place William well; Mackail believed him to have been at Lincoln College, but no records survive. The college messengers were the sap in the University grapevine, and provided a service not only between colleges, but also between the tradesmen and college servants. They were said to be able to deliver a letter and bring the reply within two hours.

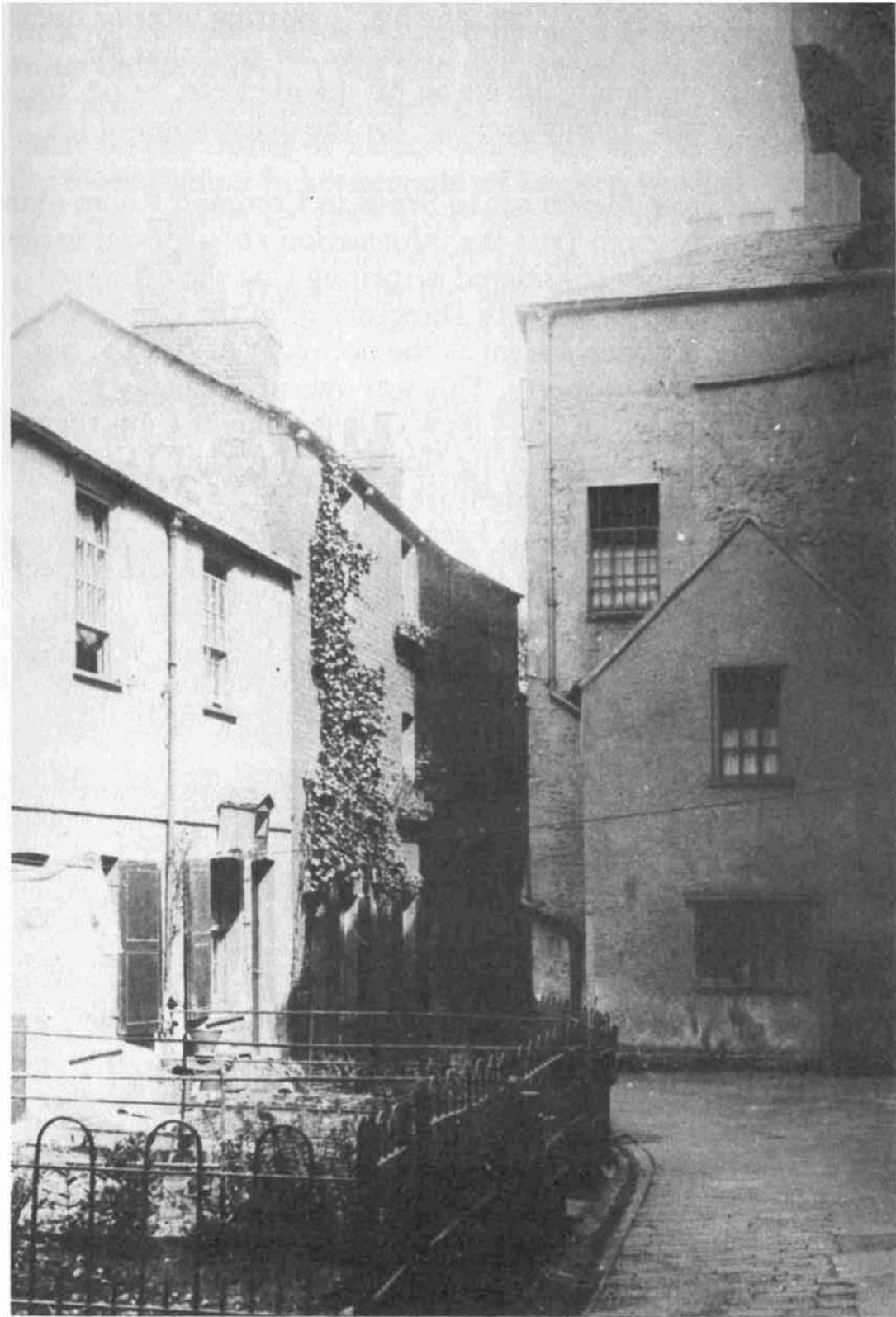
When Harry Macdonald, Georgie's brother, came up to Corpus Christi College in 1854, he found his scout waiting for him with advice: 'Simmonds thinks I shall want a dozen each of tea and coffee cups and plates to match. . . he says I ought to have 2 dozen wine glasses (i.e. for 2 sorts of wine) and that they are of no use without decanters. . . I told him I should not do much in the wine department, and he replied "Oh, you'll all get together, Sir."' Harry was no match for the worldly Simmonds and when he returned after a term's illness later, he found that his Scout 'had disposed of such things

as would ultimately have become his. . . putting inferior ones in their place.' In *Mr. Verdant Green* we are told that Mr. Larkyns kept no family letters on his mantelpiece, being "too wary to leave his "family secrets" for the delectation of his scout.'

William rose from Messenger to Scout to Common Room man, and would have given Jane the information about social usage that it is sometimes considered surprising that she possessed. At no time, either in the City Directory or in the Census return, is Robert Burden shown as the occupant of No. 65, nor in the lease of the property. This was owned originally by Merton College, but in 1884 New College bought from them the block of houses containing No. 65, and with the Conveyance came a copy of an Indenture of 19th August 1859, leasing to 'Moses Brooks. . . Farmer. . . No. 65 in Holywell Street. . . then occupied as two dwelling houses in the respective occupation of William Price and William Burden. . . and also the gateway, yards, gardens Workshop Cottage and other buildings within the said yard.' As a college servant William would have been able to secure a tenancy more easily than his father.

There is a photograph by Henry Taunt of the passageway leading to the cottage; and it was the custom to call the yard leading down the side of a house after the tenant or owner; thus in the 1861 Census Moses Brooks occupies No. 65 Holywell, and Robert, Ann and Elizabeth Burden live in the second dwelling in Brooks Yard. William was married by then, having passed the tenancy to his father, and living at No. 2 Bailey's Yard, beyond the Music Room.

On 20th May 1855 Elizabeth Siddall arrived in Oxford, by arrangement through Ruskin and Rossetti, to receive treatment from their friend Dr. Henry Acland; he is now remembered for his work on Cholera and as an art patron, but was then consulted by women patients with emotional problems. She was in a nervous state, already 25 years old, and overwrought by Rossetti's procrastination over marriage. She lodged round the corner from the Acland's home at the junction of Broad Street and Holywell, opposite Exeter College, and according to Rossetti's letter to his mother, Lizzie had a



St. Helen's Passage. Jane Burden was born in one of the houses on the left in 1839. *Photo. Henry Taunt. By permission of the Oxfordshire County Librarian.*

most enjoyable time, thanks to Dr. Acland, who knew everyone in Oxford. As Rossetti did not accompany her, Acland wrote to him to say there was no organic trouble, but clearly advising an end to the ambivalent relationship; Rossetti replied gratefully 'to think of you thinking it possible. . . that I should misapprehend any of the things you said with so much delicacy'; he did not, however, change his attitude. It was not until 1856 that Rossetti met Burne-Jones and Morris in London, and in the summer of 1857 they all returned to Oxford.

In a letter to Miss Sara Acland in 1903, who had applied to him for details of the painting of the Union frescoes for a projected biography of her father, Sir Henry Acland, Val Prinsep wrote: 'About the original commission and by whose influence Rossetti was summoned I know nothing. I have a sort of hazy idea that your father and Ruskin aided Woodward the architect in securing Rossetti with not altogether satisfactory results I fear. I lodged by myself and not with Rossetti with whom lived Burne-Jones and Morris.' This letter forms the basis of Prinsep's article in the *Magazine of Art* in 1904, in which he describes how Morris and Faulkner designed an entire suit of armour, which was made, according to Burne-Jones, by a smith 'hard by the Castle.' This would be James Gardner, of the smithy in George Street Mews off George Street, where Morris, Rossetti and Burne-Jones lodged at No. 13, with Johnson, a wheelwright.

Prinsep describes how Morris, 'hiring a stalwart navy, marched off to a photographer to get photographs of a man in armour in all sorts of positions!' These no longer appear to exist, perhaps because, of the two photographers then in Oxford, Bracher and J.G. Miller, the nearer was Miller, with premises just outside Frewin Court, the entry to the Union, and his entire stock of prints and negatives was destroyed by fire on 21st November 1857. When the fire was discovered by his daughter he was in Castle's shop nearby chatting with the owner and some College Messengers, and they all ran to help. Mr. Miller's daughter was called Susannah, and she later became the wife of Jane's brother, William.

Meanwhile, in the *Oxford Journal* of 25th July 1857, it was

announced that Mr. Hooper of the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, would bring his company for a season, lasting from 3rd August to 3rd October, to Russell's tennis court in Oriel Street. This was the site of Archibald Maclaren's old gymnasium, frequented by Morris, Bliss and Harry Macdonald, and was fitted up as a temporary theatre by 'Mr. Jones the builder, with side-lights and some elegant chandeliers, Stalls 3s. Pit 2s. Gallery 1s.' When the *Memorials* say that Edward and Rossetti saw Jane in a box, this would be the gallery of the court.

The programme included *Hamlet*, *The School for Scandal* and the historical drama *Jane Shore* (later the subject of Val Prinsep's first Academy painting), but the houses were not good, and in order to attract more of the townspeople - for the University was still down - a popular nautical drama, 'Ben Bolt' was put on at the end of September, about the time they first saw Jane. It contained the song 'Oh don't you remember sweet Alice, Ben Bolt?' which Du Maurier gave to Trilby to sing, in his novel. Prinsep, a great raconteur, met Du Maurier in Paris soon afterwards, where they were art students together, and it is interesting to speculate whether Prinsep's account of Jane and her visits to George Street suggested the character and appearance of Trilby to Du Maurier, for although the other characters in the novel are based on real people, no one has identified the heroine. When Burne-Jones read the novel he said that, of all novels about artists, only Trilby captured the real atmosphere of the studios 'with its innocent lawlessness.'

There is also a tradition, coming from Holman Hunt, that the group were introduced to Jane by his friend and patron, Thomas Combe. The Combes were devout Christians as well as art patrons, so that it would have been with the intention of providing a respectable arrangement for her to sit as a model, in the same way that Mrs. Combe helped Millais, by going out to the gamekeeper's cottage at Wytham to obtain a pair of boots from little Esther Carter, his model, so that he could complete 'The Woodman's Daughter.'

It should be remembered that Oxford still retained much of the unaffected simplicity of the 18th century, and that although not on a close social footing, the citizens of all classes knew

each other by sight to a greater extent than is now supposed, for all classes lived in the same districts, the rich in the large houses, and the poor in the courts and alleyways in between. Thomas Combe used the stables in Holywell belonging to Charley Symonds who 'was true and just in all his dealings and thoroughly reliable,' where Robert Burden worked. Beyond the stables was a large exercise paddock for the horses where Jane would have gone with her father, for she was a capable horsewoman.

W.H. Tuckwell, who lived as a boy opposite James Burden's cottage, moved next door to the stables when he married in 1858, and said of Jane, 'I well remember her sister and herself;' it would therefore appear that both Jane and Bessie were known in the neighbourhood, indeed Bessie 'was said to be the better looking of the two.'

However the most significant remark was made by Bell Scott, who said that after seeing Jane 'they made interest with her family and she sat to them.'

This phrase may afford the key to the relationship between Morris and Jane. When it became clear to the Burdens how attracted Morris was, it must have seemed a splendid opportunity to make a match that would ensure her future and theirs. It was quite a well-known practice in Oxford for a tradesman with a pretty daughter to ensnare a susceptible student.

In 1851 Tom Taylor wrote 'Not a few Oxford men. . . could tell a tale of frantic passion for a Gipsy girl entertained by two young men. . . one with ducal blood in his veins;' this refers to Sinetta Lambourne, an Oxford girl who married Charles Cavendish-Bentinck in 1839, with the understandable result that 'the cares of married life. . . retarded his studies.' As this cautionary tale was still current in Oxford in 1851, it would have been known to the Burdens, but as more encouragement than warning.

Arranged marriages were then common, and the fact that Robert Burden's parents had died recently as Parish Paupers at Stanton Harcourt indicates how poor the family were; furthermore James Burden had died in 1851 when only 48, so that his widow had to quit the Groom's Lodgings at Magdalen which went with the job, a sad warning of what might lie

ahead for Jane if she failed to take advantage of this opportunity. At some time before 1859 the Burdens, in William's name, became tenants of Moses Brooks in the cottage behind No. 65 Holywell, most likely in 1857/8, when Robert Burden's name appears for the first time as the householder in the List of Voters in the city.

Although Hall Caine later asserted that Rossetti confided that he always loved Jane, Allingham - who knew him at the time - reports him as saying 'I loathe and despise family life;' and from Madox Brown's eye-witness account of Rossetti's behaviour from 1856 onwards, borrowing money to buy a marriage licence for Guggum and then changing his mind - but not paying back the £10 - 'mad past care' about Annie Miller, it is unlikely that he would have offered marriage. At that time it is more likely that Jane was drawn to him, for the worldliness that so attracted them all would have been quite new to her, accustomed as she was to a town full of undergraduates.

In November 1857 Cornell Price recorded in his diary that Rossetti was called away to Elizabeth Siddall, ill at Matlock. In January 1858, Madox Brown, unfortunately kept from Oxford during the painting of the frescoes by the death of his little son Arthur, except for a brief visit, wrote in his Journal, 'Jones brought Miss Macdonald [Georgie] here. . . he says he is going to cut Topsy he says his overbearing temper is becoming quite insupportable as well as his conceit'. Perhaps the strain of trying to persuade Jane to marry him had exacerbated his already difficult temper, but he cannot have been an altogether romantic prospect; however 'at the beginning of the Summer' of 1858, Georgie relates, 'Morris told Edward of his engagement to Miss Burden.'

Morris may have been anxious to establish his claim, for G.P. Boyce makes the following entries in his diary which would suggest that Rossetti had appeared on the scene again; 'June 2nd 1858: Rossetti called this evening. . . he made one or two rough pen and ink scratches whilst talking, one of a 'Stunner' at Oxford, which he tore in fragments, but which I recovered from the fire-grate.' 'December 15th 1858: To Rossetti. A most beautiful pen and ink study of Topsy's "Stunner" at Oxford.'

The delay between the engagement and the marriage in 1859 has caused speculation, but the most likely explanation is that Jane was hoping that Rossetti might break free of Elizabeth Siddal and deliver her from the engagement to Morris. This is born out by an entry made by Wilfrid Scawen Blunt in his Secret Memoirs, of confidences made to him by Jane, during their later intimacy.

When he went to her after Morris's death, she said; 'I am not unhappy, though it is a terrible thing, for I have been with him since I first knew anything. I was eighteen when I married him - but I never loved him.'

On March 6th 1859 Boyce made the following entry: '(Sunday) (At Oxford) Crowe*, Faulkner, Jones and self rowed to Godstow where we saw "Stunner" (the future Mrs. Morris).' There is a distinct impression that they took Boyce to see her intentionally - he was not to be introduced to her until January 1860, when 'he was surprised at the fine and beautiful character of her face.'

The river affords a clear view over Port Meadow, across which Jane and Morris would have been able to walk to Godstow, for the weather was unusually fine and warm for the time of the year; poor Morris's feelings can only be imagined, when, hoping to have a peaceful day alone with his love, he beheld a boatload of interested friends.

On 26th April, the Tuesday after Easter Day, they were married at St. Michael's church, the parish in which George Street lay, and left Oxford behind them.

In September 1859 William Burden married Susannah Miller at the Registry Office in Oxford, and their son William was born in January 1860; they prudently delayed his baptism until April, when, with a lively hope of favours to come, they christened him William Morris Burden. They moved to No.2 Bailey's Yard, and Bessie remained with her parents in Brook's Yard.

It has been assumed that Jane took Bessie to live with her on the death of their father in 1865, because their mother was

* this is a misreading by Mrs. Street of 'Crom', the nickname of Cornell Price. There is no Crowe in either the University Calendar or the City Directory.

already dead, but in fact Ann lived until February 1871, and it is likely that Jane thought that Bessie should be removed from unsuitable surroundings; Susannah had begun to be an endless source of trouble, and by 1863 William was back at No. 65, where he inserted a notice in the *Oxford Chronicle* stating that he would not be responsible for any debts contracted by his wife.

If Jane did marry Morris with reluctance, and under pressure from her family, it would afford an alternative interpretation of passages from two letters Morris wrote later. It is possible that his letter to an unknown correspondent, with its tone of resigned exasperation, in March 1876, beginning 'Wherein you are spiritless, I wish with all my heart that I could help you or amend it', is addressed to Jane - she may even have given it to Mackail to distract him from the Holywell illustration - for the word 'amend' carries with it a wish to make reparation for some past action on his part.

Again, in his letter of 16th October 1886, to C.J. Faulkner on marriage, he says 'when the wife can earn her living as a citizen, and the children are citizens with inalienable rights of livelihood there will be nothing to force people into legalised prostitution' . . . 'But,' he adds wistfully, 'I should hope in most cases friendship would go along with desire, and would outlive it, and the couple would still remain together, but always as free people.' It would explain why he tolerated the relationship with Rossetti, if he knew she had agreed to marry him without loving him, and wrote the sad little phrase in his letter from Iceland in July 1871, 'Please dear Janey be happy.'

The last word on the marriage is hers. In 1903 Blunt reported after a visit, 'Of Morris she said that, though selfish in little things, in great ones he was most magnanimous, the least selfish of men. "After all," she said, "I suppose that if I were young again I should do the same again."'

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The first Kelmscott Lecture
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