

**Artefacts: Spring 2023**

**Changing Birmingham – its people and places:**

**Morris' influence on Birmingham: art 'made by the people and for the people'**

**By Jim Wells, Friends Trustee**

William Morris – poet, designer and campaigner – may not seem an obvious topic given the 'Birmingham' theme of my previous 'Changing Birmingham' articles. However, alongside his daughter, Morris had a close and a symbiotic relationship with Birmingham. Friendship, artistic development and support for a number of key Birmingham institutions were fundamental elements of this relationship.

William Morris (1834-96) came from a respectable and wealthy middle class family in Walthamstow in Essex, then a rural district, and went to Oxford University with the intention of becoming a clergyman. But at Oxford everything changed. It was there that he met 'Ned', otherwise known to us as Sir Edward Burne-Jones, the son of an unsuccessful picture frame maker on Bennetts Hill who had been baptised at St Phillip's and was a product of King Edwards School (KES), then in New Street. This was the start of a lifelong friendship and a highly productive artistic collaboration. Burne-Jones introduced Morris to 'the Set' at Oxford, the majority of whom were from Birmingham and had been educated at KES. The significance for Morris was an exposure to people from an industrial town who were acquainted with the social conditions and reform politics. Staying in Birmingham he saw industrial production at first hand, on a personal note on one of those visits the sister of Cromwell Price, one of the Set, noted in her dairy that he was 'very handsome'.

After meeting the Pre-Raphaelite painter Daniel Rossetti, Morris assisted with the decoration of the Oxford Union in 1857, and there he met Jane Burden (1834-1914). Jane was a skilled embroiderer in her own right and also modelled for Rossetti. Morris fell head over heels in love with her, declaring 'I cannot paint you but I love you' after attempting to paint her as Isolde. They were married in 1859. Jane was a central figure in Rossetti's work, an example of which is 'Proserpine', a painting which is in Birmingham's collection. However, the relationship between the painter and his model became



'Snakeshead', Designed by William Morris, Manufactured by William Morris & Co, 1876-77; 1941M398; Presented by the Friends of Birmingham Museums & Art Gallery, 1941; Photo by Birmingham Museums Trust, licensed under CC0

more than that, overshadowing Morris and Jane's marriage. The author Henry James on a visit to the Morris household made the observation 'It is hard to say whether she's a grand synthesis of all Pre-Raphaelite pictures ever made - or they a keen analysis of her .....in either case, she is a wonder'. At the time of the visit of James an affair between Rossetti and Jane had developed leading to a famous 'menage a trois' at the shared residence of Kelmscott Manor. William Morris, although deeply saddened was determined to reject Victorian morality and accepted the situation.

In terms of Morris's impact on Birmingham, he left two major legacies: the Municipal School of Art and the windows of St Phillip's. Morris was one of the significant voices who campaigned for the Municipal School of Art, speaking at the Town Hall. He was also involved in other Birmingham

organisations and, in 1878, he wrote to his daughter, May Morris: 'Did I tell you that they have made me President of the Birmingham Society for Arts? ... that means a speech early next year.' That address was called 'The Art of the People' in which Morris set out many of his key ideas, central to which was a call for: 'an art which is to be made by the people and for the people, as a happiness to the maker and the user'. Morris was a regular speaker in Birmingham although on one occasion after a small turnout he complained about having to compete with a performing flea circus. In 1894 he was invited to present the address at the prize giving of the Birmingham Municipal School of Art, in which he made a point that still seems relevant today: 'to guard our ancient buildings jealously, therefore, against brutal destruction and egotistical falsification, seems to be one of the prime duties'.

Concerning the windows of St Phillip's, they were a product of the close friendship between Burne-Jones and Morris, although this did not stop Morris paying Burne-Jones what he considered the 'pittance' of £200. The correspondence relating to the design and execution of the windows reveals a great deal of difficult negotiations, with Burne-Jones fiercely resisting what he would have considered to be the unwanted interference of the patron Emma Wilkes, and Morris using his diplomatic skills to maintain the commission, which was to be produced by Morris & Co. It could be argued that the windows are the finest product of this friendship and there is evidence that both Morris and Burne-Jones felt this. We are lucky to be able to admire them in the heart of our city.

The friendship of Edward Burne-Jones and William Morris lasted throughout their lives with their families spending much time together. Burne-Jones often drew amusing caricatures of his friend and a particularly touching one shows Morris with his arms around his two daughters attempting to feed them when toddlers. The younger of those daughters was May Morris who went on to establish her own reputation, one that in recent years has rightly received more attention. She managed the embroidery side of Morris & Co from 1885-96 and her talent was a combination of her



'Wey' by William Morris, Watercolour for printed fabric design, 1882; 1941P395; Presented by the Friends of Birmingham Museums & Art Gallery, 1941; Photo by Birmingham Museums Trust, licensed under CCO



'Printed Textile, Wey', Designed by William Morris, Manufactured by William Morris & Co, 1882-83; 1941M396; Presented by the Friends of Birmingham Museums & Art Gallery, 1941; Photo by Birmingham Museums Trust, licensed under CCO

father's design abilities and her mother's embroidery skills. Her connection with Birmingham comes with the time May spent as a teacher at the Municipal School of Art. Some of her lecture notes survive as well as an embroidered bed cover from 1905 which was produced by students and teachers, one of whom was Mary Newill, whose work was discussed in the Winter 2022 edition of 'Artefacts', Issue 71. This work was shown at international exhibitions and a firm friendship was formed between May and Mary, leading on to the

founding of the Women's Guild of Arts. Women were excluded from the Art Workers Guild at the time, only being accepted after 1972. Describing a Guild meeting in December 1910 in her diary, at which Mary was present, May noted: 'It is a pleasure to meet women who know their work and are not playing at Art'.

The Morris connection with Birmingham continued into the twentieth century, in 1941 the Friends contributed to the purchase of 35 artefacts relating to William Morris to enhance Birmingham's collection, which included printed textiles as well as Morris' paper drawings which were the designs to be used for the printed fabrics. Details of these are on our website:

<https://fbmt.org.uk/publications/friends-acquisitions-history/>.

'The Holy Grail Tapestries' are some of the jewels in Birmingham's collection and they again demonstrate the collaboration between Burne-Jones and Morris. The main designs for these were created by Burne-Jones, alongside John Henry Deale and William Morris, and the tapestries were manufactured by Morris & Co (see 'Artefacts', Spring 2022, issue 68 for more on the 'The Holy Grail Tapestries').



Quest for the Holy Grail Tapestries - Panel 6 - The Attainment; The Vision of the Holy Grail to Sir Galahad, Sir Bors and Sir Percival', Designed by Sir Edward Burne-Jones, William Morris and John Henry Dearle; Manufactured by Morris & Co, 1895-96; 1907M131; Photo by Birmingham Museums Trust, licensed under CC0.

Both William and May Morris's connections over two generations with Birmingham, its people and its institutions proved to be beneficial artistically for both parties.

## Illustrations

<https://dams.birminghammuseums.org.uk/asset-bank/action/viewAsset?id=7076&index=52&total=54&view=viewSearchItem>

'Quest for the Holy Grail Tapestries - Panel 6 - The Attainment; The Vision of the Holy Grail to Sir Galahad, Sir Bors and Sir Percival', Designed by Sir Edward Burne-Jones, William Morris and John Henry Dearle; Manufactured by Morris & Co, 1895-96; 1907M131; Photo by Birmingham Museums Trust, licensed under CC0.



<https://dams.birminghammuseums.org.uk/asset-bank/action/viewAsset?id=7078&index=26&total=54&view=viewSearchItem>

'Snakeshead', Designed by William Morris, Manufactured by William Morris & Co, 1876-77; 1941M398; Presented by the Friends of Birmingham Museums & Art Gallery, 1941; Photo by Birmingham Museums Trust, licensed under CC0



'Snakeshead' by William Morris, Watercolour for printed fabric design, 1876; 1941P397; Presented by the Friends of Birmingham Museums & Art Gallery, 1941; Photo by Birmingham Museums Trust, licensed under CC0



<https://dams.birminghammuseums.org.uk/asset-bank/action/viewAsset?id=17530&index=4&total=24&view=viewSearchItem>

'Printed Textile, Wey', Designed by William Morris, Manufactured by William Morris & Co, 1882-83; 1941M396; Presented by the Friends of Birmingham Museums & Art Gallery, 1941; Photo by Birmingham Museums Trust, licensed under CC0



'Wey' by William Morris, Watercolour for printed fabric design, 1882; 1941P395; Presented by the Friends of Birmingham Museums & Art Gallery, 1941; Photo by Birmingham Museums Trust, licensed under CC0

## Sources and further reading

### 1) **'William Morris: A Life for Our Time', Fiona MacCarthy, Faber & Faber, 1994**

A fairly recent biography and a real insight into the person as well as his work, making use of the greater availability of documents now than for earlier biographies.

### 2) **'May Morris: Arts & Crafts Designer', Anna Mason et al, V&A Thames & Hudson, 2017**

A publication which brings to light the contribution which May made to the Morris legacy. Well illustrated with lots of examples of her work and plenty of biographical detail.

### 3) **'William Morris: His Life and Work', Stephen Coote, Garamond, 1990**

A beautifully illustrated book which draws to the attention of the reader the artistic and design contribution of William Morris.

### 4) **Jane and May Morris: A Biographical Story', Jan Marsh, Pandora Press, 2000 edition**

A lovely insight into mother and daughter which leaves the reader with a real sense of what these two people were about.

### 5) **ODNB (Oxford Dictionary of National Biography)**

|                |                 |
|----------------|-----------------|
| Jane Morris    | Frank Sharp     |
| William Morris | Fiona MacCarthy |
| May Morris     | Jan Marsh       |

The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography is a free online resource with your library card and is always a good starting point for research, in this case providing three succinct biographies.

### 6) **'William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary', E. P. Thompson, The Merlin Press Ltd., 2011 edition, original 1955**

Written by one of Britain's eminent historians in 1955, as the title indicates focussing more on the political aspect of William Morris.

## Contemporary Sources

### 7) **'News from Nowhere', William Morris, 1892, Thames Hudson edition V&A, 2017**

A utopian novel, originally a series of articles, this edition by the V&A is in the original style of the Kelmscott Press set up by Morris, and is magnificent.

### 8) **Speech: 'The Art of the People', William Morris, 1879**

'An Address delivered before the Birmingham Society of Arts, February 19<sup>th</sup>, 1879, by William Morris'. This speech by Morris, delivered in Birmingham, gives a sense of the man and his views. Available on the internet.

### 9) **'The Collected Letters of William Morris', Volume I: 1848-1880', 'Volume 2: 1885-1888' Norman Kelvin, Princeton University Press, 1984/87**

This mammoth piece of work by Kelvin/Princeton University brings all the letters of William Morris together in two volumes from scattered sources and give us a lovely insight into his thoughts and life.

## Additional Illustrations

<https://dams.birminghammuseums.org.uk/asset-bank/action/viewAsset?id=64&index=295&total=400&view=viewSearchItem>



‘Proserpine’ by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 1882, Oil Painting; 1927P7; Photo by Birmingham Museums Trust, licensed under CC0

In Fiona McCarthy’s biography of Morris she describes this as ‘the most sultry of Rossetti’s many images of Jane Morris’. Jane is portrayed as Proserpine, captured by Pluto to be Queen of Hades, clearly reflecting Rossetti’s view of Morris at the time.

<https://dams.birminghammuseums.org.uk/asset-bank/action/viewAsset?id=4245&index=17&total=54&view=viewSearchItem>

‘Love is Enough’ by William Morris, 1913P200; Photo by Birmingham Museums Trust, licensed under CC0 - Initial letter 'L' entwined with Laurel Leaves, 1866-67

This is from one of the poems written by Morris in 1872. Remembered now for his designs and furnishings, at the time his fame was as a Poet, even being considered for Poet Laureate when Tennyson died.



<https://dams.birminghammuseums.org.uk/asset-bank/action/viewAsset?id=11174&index=0&total=1&view=viewSearchItem>

‘Caricature of William Morris as an Ancient Poet’ by Sir Edward Burne-Jones, 1870-1873; 1927P554; Photo by Birmingham Museums Trust, licensed under CC0

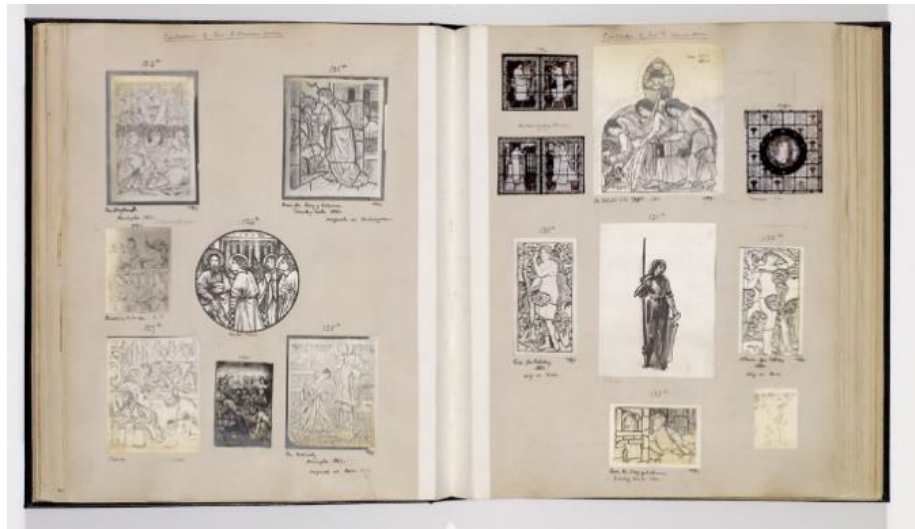
Throughout their friendship Ned (Burne Jones) did simple line drawings, often poking fun at Morris who seemed to take it all in good heart from a close friend .

<https://dams.birminghammuseums.org.uk/asset-bank/action/viewAsset?id=20463&index=57&total=200&view=viewSearchItem>

'Designs 124a-133a'

Morris & Company Windows Book - Photographic Album of Stained Glass Designs, 1900-1910;  
Design Record Book; Photographer: Frederick Hollyer;  
Editor: HC Marillier; 1940P604.5

Photographs of stained glass cartoons by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Ford Madox Brown, William Morris, Edward Burne-Jones, Simeon Solomon and Philip Webb, dating from 1862 and numbered 1a to 297a with six additional architectural photographic pages. The production of stained glass windows became a big part of Morris & Co as illustrated in these catalogue books, demonstrating a major aspect of Morris's life which was running a business in the decorative arts.



<https://dams.birminghammuseums.org.uk/asset-bank/action/viewAsset?id=20708&index=13&total=14&view=viewSearchItem>



'Portrait of Jane Morris', 1865-90; Photographer: John R Parsons; Printer: Sir Emery Walker; 941P359.1; Photo by Birmingham Museums Trust, licensed under CC0

In a letter dated 13th June 1870 to Charles Faulkner Murray, Morris writes: 'I am going to sit to Parsons the photographer(at) on Tuesday (tomorrow) could you come with me, or meet there'. Clearly the Morris family used John Parsons (an Irish painter and photographer) for photographs. The pictures of Jane were taken under the supervision of Dante presumably as a guide for his paintings when she was unable to sit for modelling.