

Morris and Company in the Twentieth Century

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The main text of this article was first given in the form of a memorial lecture for John Compton at the Victoria and Albert Museum in February 1985.

William Morris's will was published in the *Daily News* for Thursday, 17 December 1896. It empowered his trustees Jane Morris, Sydney Cockerell and Frederick Ellis to retain or dispose of his firm Morris and Company in the best way they saw fit. He presented them with alternatives. They could act with the surviving partners, the brothers F. and R. Smith, to sell by private contract, tender or auction, or continue business until the sale could be effected. Alternatively if they felt it desirable to form the business into a limited company by shares, they the executors should become directors or appoint 'in their stead such other fit persons'. In the event of a sale he empowered his trustees to accept in payment 'bills or promissory notes, bills of sale, mortgage or such other security as they . . . may think sufficient for securing the due payment of such portion of the purchase money as may remain unpaid after the completion of the purchase'.

The Smith brothers decided to continue business for the next few years with J. H. Dearle as Manager of the Merton Abbey Works producing all new designs and supervising new commissions. By the early 20th century they were anxious to retire from active management. It is clear that the firm needed new initiative and dynamic management if it was to recover from the loss of Morris and the doldrums which followed his death, and 'on the recommendation apparently of several people' they approached Henry Currie Marillier.¹

Marillier was born in 1865 in South Africa where his father was serving in the Cape Mountain Rifles. Returning to England in the 1870s he was educated at Christ's Hospital and Peterhouse, Cambridge, where his interest in the arts first became apparent. He was first employed as an engineer in the Parsons Turbine Works at Heaton, but left after three years to take up scientific journalism. Then for two or three years he joined his wife's cousin, Cameron Swan, in the Swan Electric Engraving Company in Charing Cross Road, London. The company produced half-tone copper engraving for the Bodley Head amongst other publishers and his involvement with such notable productions as *The Yellow Book* brought him into contact with many of the leading artistic figures of the day including the designers Ricketts and Shannon and the artists of the New English Art Club. He was then offered a partnership in W.A.S. Benson's art metal business (which had showrooms at 82 and 83 New Bond Street) where he worked for five

years. A falling off of Benson's business coincided with an offer from the Smith brothers.

Marillier was already acquainted not only with the Morris firm but with the Morris family as in 1897 he had purchased Kelmscott House, Hammersmith from Jane Morris, Morris's widow. 'Morris's furniture was still in the house when we took it and the oak table in his study was covered with beautiful printed sheets', Marillier wrote in his memoirs. He bought as much of the contents as he could afford 'but it was a wrench to see the rest of the lovely furnishings go'. Beatrice, his youngest daughter, was born there in January 1898 and his wife died there in 1901. He remarried in May 1906 and a third child, a son, was born in 1909. For part of the Marillier family's occupancy the house was shared with Sir Valentine Chirol (foreign editor of *The Times*) who occupied Morris's bedroom 'leading out of his study by a flight of steps and situated over the long empty shed where he (Morris) had first woven his hand-made carpets . . . it was ramshackle but not uncomfortable'.

The Smiths' offer to Marillier was strictly financial and Marillier wrote that they required a very large sum for the business and goodwill, in accordance with Morris's wishes. Keen to take advantage of this opportunity, Marillier approached his wife's brother-in-law, Canon Valpy of Winchester, who offered to put up a substantial part of the required capital with other friends and relations also contributing. The Smith brothers obtained a further large sum from one of their customers, Mrs Wormald of Berkeley Square² on the condition that her son-in-law the Hon. Claud Lambton was involved in the management of the company. In 1905 a private limited company was formed and registered under the name of Morris & Co. Decorators Ltd. The first board of Directors comprised John Withers (Company Secretary), H. C. Marillier (Managing Director), J. H. Dearle (Artistic Director), the Hon. Claud Lambton, the two Smith brothers and W. A. S. Benson to whom Marillier offered a Directorship as recognition of his kindness to him in earlier years. The Benson and Morris firms subsequently traded as one until 1917 when Benson resigned from the board. Marillier found the task ahead daunting: 'We soon found that the Smiths had been too clever for us and that the Morris business, which seemed so prosperous on the figures supplied, had been let down and was actually making a loss when we took over. This meant very uphill work.'

This early financial crisis forced the new Directors into an immediate examination of policy and a new image was decided upon. This cannot have been quite as foolish a decision as it appears today for the traditional reputation of the firm, based on the 1880s designs of William Morris, was now greatly out of step with fashionable Edwardian London; but it must have upset Henry Dearle. As a staunch follower of Morris he must have felt his work was at variance with Marillier's plans. However, he was a quiet, polite and modest character and only one indication of his true feelings is evident, when Marillier wrote to a client describing a Dearle design as being by Edward Burne-Jones. It is difficult to know whether or not Marillier's mistake was deliberate.

The firm's anxiety to capitalise on the name of the founder meant that many of Dearle's own designs were listed or sold as being Morris's work. Marillier's ignorance and hard business practices are unlikely to have advanced Dearle's own

reputation and it is only now that his real contribution to the artistic reputation of Morris and Company is becoming recognised. Dearle had after all been trained by Morris not only as a designer but as his successor and although early patterns show a copying of Morris's style, by 1896 Dearle had developed as an artist of great skill and originality.

Many of Morris's own designs for textiles continued to be produced in one form or another but in 1905 a number of new products appeared. Whereas all new woven textiles from this time were reproductions of historic patterns, a new range of glazed printed cottons appeared and many items of furniture were sold with printed cotton upholstery. Morris & Co's furniture showed a great mixture of period styles and customers could select either 'cabinet work of the highest standard . . . seasoned woods figured veneers and inlays' or 'joiner-made country furniture solidly made in oak, stained or painted pine', as described in contemporary catalogues.

Some of the firm's printed cottons popular at this time were modified from early Morris wallpapers, a practice of which Morris himself would have disapproved. Some totally new designs were also issued quite unlike traditional Morris work in style or colour. It is likely that Dearle drew most of them, but his uneasiness is evident in these patterns which are out of step with his usual work.³ Some old ideas were given modern treatments and a number of old Morris favourites were modernised in line with contemporary fashions. Designs with dark grounds popular in the 1880s were printed with pastel or white grounds with Morris subsidiary patterns left off. Other patterns originally printed in a number of colours were simplified and some issued in monochrome. Morris's favoured blue and white continued to be used in moderation but often in conjunction with paler shades of pink and grey.

This new look for the firm revived business, and their popularity was compounded in 1911 with commissions to provide embroidered altar cloths and thrones for the coronation of George V and Queen Mary. In the same year the firm was also asked to supply the King and Queen's chairs for the Investiture of the Prince of Wales in July 1911. In 1914 at the height of their new found commercial success and no doubt flushed with the pride of a royal warrant, the firm produced a tapestry commemorating the coronation based on a Bernard Partridge *Punch* cartoon called 'The Arming of the King'. This panel is their most conventional design and shows the extremes of conformity that Marillier as a member of London society had imposed upon the company. But it was not a commercial success and despite the Queen's interest (it was taken to Buckingham Palace for her to see) and Lord Kitchener's attempt to buy it by subscription for the Palace of Westminster, it remained unsold for a number of years.

Tapestry had always been an important side of Morris and Company's business and Marillier was keen to continue this tradition. He was a tapestry historian of note and wishing to offer a more comprehensive service in tapestry care he travelled to France to study tapestry restoration. By 1910 he had set up a repair section in the firm's workshop at Granville Place, staffed with French girls trained at Neuilly and Puteaux under the supervision of Madame Chaudfroid who

Marillier complementarily described as one of the few people alive who 'knew the feel of old wool'. In 1912 the Office of Works asked Morris & Co. to undertake the maintenance of the tapestry collection at Hampton Court. Marillier installed a staff there and in 1916 took on his own daughter Beatrice as a tapestry apprentice hoping that one day she would supervise this work,⁴ but her early marriage prevented this and the staff were managed by weekly visits from Marillier himself. This side of the firm's activities outlived the company and exists to this day under the control of the Property Service Agency.

Initially the 1914–18 War had a disastrous effect on Morris & Co. with many of their workforce joining up. The tapestry weaving section at Merton Abbey closed down and little artistic work was achieved in other sections of the Works. The war also put an end to visits from American tourists who throughout the early twentieth century had seen the Works as a place of pilgrimage. Marillier enlisted in the Royal Navy leaving Dearle to manage Merton Abbey and Mr Hewitt, the shop manager, organising the retail side. A little tapestry weaving was completed on a loom in the back of the Oxford Street shop and demonstration weaving was performed by Beatrice Marillier at the Arts and Crafts exhibition at Burlington House in 1916.⁵ The cabinet works were turned into a propeller factory at first on a small scale but finally expanding, and the firm earned enough from this venture to pay off debentures to the Smith brothers who in 1920 retired from the Board of Directors.

In 1917 the shop was moved to more fashionable premises at 17 George Street, Hanover Square and the range of services offered was increased. As well as a full cleaning service for carpets, tapestries and textiles, antique textiles and furniture were sold. The catalogue boasted 'Morris & Co. have good facilities for purchasing genuine old furniture of Tudor, Jacobean, Queen Anne and Georgian times and have generally got a selection of picked pieces, at very moderate prices, to choose from'. Many items anonymously passed through the salerooms today may well have been restored and re-upholstered in the Morris workshops. Despite the catalogue's words 'at very moderate prices' such stock increased the firm's exclusiveness. May Lea, one of the company's curtain makers, remembers not daring to enter the George Street shop, seeing it as a place only for illustrious and wealthy clients.

The 1920s saw a revival of fashion for floral chintz fabrics and a number of reproduction designs were revived named after country houses. Plain carpets, wall-papers and shot fabrics also became popular and a wool-and-cotton tweed (reflecting fashionable hand-loom weaving) was sold as the demand for silk damask furnishing fabrics diminished.

On November 26th 1925, the firm's name was changed to Morris & Co. Art Workers Limited. Studio pottery with figures by Stella R. Crofts appeared in the shop with modern glassware made for the firm by James Powell & Sons. Wrought ironwork became a popular sideline and the George Street shop was re-decorated and enlarged to show the firm's expanding range.

Business did not keep pace with the constantly changing image of the firm, how-

ever, and Marillier blamed much of this on a deterioration in the raw materials, especially those used for dyeing. From the early 1920s madder was unobtainable. The public were not interested in chemical substitutes and in line with a universal post-war slump sales never recovered.

Dearle had recruited many of the old workers back to Merton Abbey after the War and block-printing and weaving continued using chemical dyes. Artificial silk was experimented with in woven furnishing fabrics but not adopted into the shop ranges. As workmen retired few were replaced and new recruits lacked the training and dedication of those who had worked alongside Morris and possessed a 'familiarity born of socialism' as Marillier described them later.

In the 1930s two businessmen were employed to try to put the firm back on its feet. One of them, society photographer Kutturah Collins, was responsible for the publication of a new catalogue illustrating yet more attempts to keep abreast of the market. This shows a total lack of originality and it soon became clear that the general public cared little for quality and more fashionable goods could be bought at lower prices.

In 1932 Henry Dearle died and the firm never recovered from losing such an important figure. His younger son Duncan took over management of Merton Abbey but though a designer by training he had little interest or aptitude for the job.

The 1934 Morris centenary exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum provided a temporary but short-lived revival of interest in the firm. For several years the company had benefitted from various generous donations from a rich American called Harris who lived at Vevey in Switzerland and was a devoted follower of William Morris's work. By 1935 these gifts had ceased and Marillier, feeling the strain of a business rapidly running out of time experienced a breakdown.

By 1939 with the advent of the Second World War the firm did not have the means or energy to re-adjust its place in the retail market and Marillier was forced to place the company in the hands of the receiver, Thomas Alfred Ryder of Throgmorton Avenue, London. As many of Morris & Co's assets as possible were sold and many designs found their way into public collections. At the age of seventy five Marillier recovered from seeing a lifetime's work result in failure and lived for a further eleven years concentrating his time on the compiling of a comprehensive catalogue of tapestry weaving, his most enduring memorial.

NOTES

¹ Henry Currie Marillier, 'Those Jollier Days', unpublished manuscript. I am indebted to Mrs Betty Rogers for allowing me to study her father's memoirs and for allowing me to quote from it in this article.

² Mrs Wormald was a friend of Jane Morris's. An embroidered curtain tie-back designed and embroidered especially for Mrs Wormald is now in the Victoria and Albert Museum.

³ See catalogue of textiles in *William Morris Textiles* by Linda Parry, London, 1983.

⁴ Beatrice Marillier was taught to weave by Jean Orage, a notable craftswoman who on leaving Morris & Co. worked with many of the leading designers of the day. Beatrice worked for the company for two years working mostly on a tapestry loom in the Oxford Street shop. She worked on 'Kings and Queens of England' and produced a panel depicting a castle which was bought by Sir Charles Parsons and a 'Partridge' panel which was bought by Lord Kitchener.

⁵ For further details see 'The Revival of the Merton Abbey Tapestry Works' by Linda Parry in *The Journal of the William Morris Society*, Vol. V, no. 3, Summer 1983.

⁶ This is now in the Department of Textiles and Dress, Victoria and Albert Museum.