3 The Prophet

Virtually all the critics agreed that the standard of work shown at the second international exhibition in 1862 had improved since 1851. But in the Medieval Court, the exhibits of one firm, Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co., were singled out for special hostility. The *Builder* denounced the firm's furniture as "unnecessarily rude and ugly".[1] The *Building News* was much more explicit: "If all modern inventions, luxuries, tastes and history are to be entirely ignored, and Medieval art is required in its mingled purity and impurity, then undoubtedly Messrs Morris, Marshall & Faulkner take and merit the foremost rank. Their works are almost perfect; their hangings, their music stand, their sofa, their chests, would all suit a family which might suddenly be awakened after a sleep of four centuries, and which was content to pay enormous prices suitably to furnish a barn. Standing on the opposite side of the Court and looking at the hangings, the harmony is exquisite; there is scarcely a false tone throughout them. The design of the ornament is also in keeping with the workmanship of the material. And all are thoroughly medieval; but they are no more adapted to the wants of living men, than medieval armour would be to modern warfare, middle-aged cookery to civic feasts, or Norman oaths to an English lady's drawing room. They would be all very well as curiosities in a museum, but they are fit for nothing else . . . The two doors of the lacquered cabinet are beautifully painted with single figures on a punctured gilt background. These pictures are decidedly the best of Messrs Morris, Faulkner & Marshall's work. If we possessed the cabinet, we should cut them out and put the rest behind the fire, *because* it gives us perfectly the rude execution and barbarous ornament of centuries ago. Messrs Morris, Faulkner & Marshall's works are the most complete, and the most thoroughly medieval of any in the Court. They are consequently the most useless."[2]

Morris, Marshall Faulkner & Co was the furnishing wing of the pre-Raphaelite movement, which explained both the Ruskinian savageness of execution of the woodwork and the quality of the painting. The firm, which was to have a prodigious effect on late nineteenth-century design,* had been founded only a year before the exhibition by a group of artists brought together by William Morris.

Morris (1834–1896) was born in Walthamstow, the son of a wealthy City businessman. In 1840, when Morris was six, his father acquired a fortune by speculating in a Devon copper mine, and the family moved to Woodford Hall on the fringe of Epping Forest, a world which had not changed greatly for hundreds of years. The household "brewed its own beer and made its own butter; as much a matter of course as it baked its own bread."[3] Morris rode his pony in the forest (sometimes clad in a specially made suit of armour): he fished and shot, gardened and learned the beauty of plants and birds. The Epping period ended when Mr. Morris died in 1847 and his family, though still well off, had to move back to Walthamstow.

All his life, Morris tried to recreate the idyllic, almost medieval life of Woodford Hall: self-sufficient, financially secure, practical, in close contact with nature. But in Morris's vision, the ideal was to be shared by everybody, not just those who happened to own great houses in the country.

Love of medieval beauty was fostered by his undergraduate years in an Oxford little changed since the fifteenth century. It was confirmed when, with Edward Burne-Jones, his greatest university friend, he read the newly published *Stones of Venice*.

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* For all the magazine's hostility, the firm was awarded two medals by the exhibition's jury—public acclaim enough to set the company on the track of prestigious commissions (for instance rooms in St. James's Palace and the South Kensington Museum).

effect of "The Nature of Gothic" on the two young men was dramatic and made them resolve to give up their common ambition to take the cloth. Burne-Jones decided to become a painter and Morris resolved to be an architect.

At twenty-two, after obtaining a pass degree, Morris took articles with Street, then architect to the Oxford diocese. Morris described Street as "a good architect as things go now, and he has a good deal of business, and always goes for an honourable man."[4] The relationship lasted only nine months, for Burne-Jones, who was already studying under Dante Gabriel Rossetti, introduced him to his master and Morris "made up my mind to turn painter and studied the art but in a very desultory way for some time."[5]

In 1857, he took rooms with Burne-Jones at 17 Red Lion Square, and, being unable to find suitable furniture, he sketched some designs, massive pieces which were made up by a local carpenter and painted with scenes from Chaucer and Dante by Rossetti and Burne-Jones. Savage furniture was born.

In the same year Rossetti offered to paint the walls and roof of the new Oxford Union Building. A gang of painters including Morris and Burne-Jones took part in creating a now lost Pre-Raphaelite masterpiece. (Rossetti had no real knowledge of how to work in fresco, and the paintings began to fade almost as quickly as they were done.) Morris had chosen as his subject "How Sir Palimydes loved La Belle Iseult with exceeding great love out of measure and how she loved not him again but Sir Tristram."

Morris's story was hidden behind a great mass of sunflowers and his figures were so ill proportioned that they caused Rossetti to burst into sarcastic laughter. But, behind the vegetation, Morris found his own Iseult, Jane Burden, a groom's daughter, a "stunner", with a long neck, vast dark eyes and a great mane of dark hair, who had been persuaded by Rossetti to sit as a model for the frescoists. William and Jane were engaged in 1858, and in the same year Morris's friend from the Street days, Philip Webb,

12 The great settle which moved from Morris's Red Lion Square lodgings to the Red House
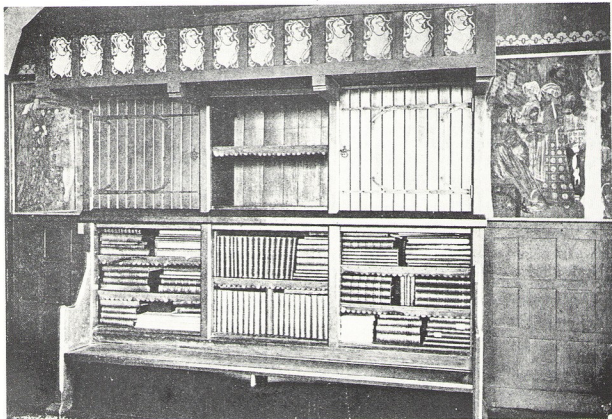
was commissioned to design a house for the couple. This was the Red House at Bexley Heath which is described in the next chapter. It was as difficult for a convinced Ruskinian to furnish his new home as it had been to fit out Red Lion Square. Webb had to design much of the furniture, and the interior was decorated by Morris and his friends.

The experience determined Morris's final choice of career. He was to be a designer and interior decorator. In April 1861, the firm of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co. was set up with, as partners, Morris, Burne-Jones, Webb, Rossetti, Ford Madox Brown (the Pre-Raphaelite painter who had already dabbled in furniture design), Charles Faulkner (one of Morris's Oxford friends, a mathematics don), and Marshall (a surveyor friend of Brown). Morris was general manager. The Firm was set up at 8 Red Lion Square and offered furniture, wall paintings, stained glass, embroidery, table glass, metalwork, jewellery and sculpture. Although its work had received such a drubbing from the critics at its first public appearance in the 1862 exhibition, the Firm quickly secured work: the partners bought things for themselves; Webb persuaded his clients to commission decorative schemes, and Gothic church architects like Street, White and Bodley ordered stained glass and wall decorations. It was on these ecclesiastical commissions that the Firm survived the '60s to blossom into domestic success in the '70s.*

As a Ruskinite, Morris was bound to become involved in craft work as well as design. He explained to an admirer, "almost all the designs we use for surface decoration, wallpapers, textiles and the like, I design myself. I have had to learn the theory and to some extent the practice of weaving, dying and textile printing: all of which I must admit has given me and gives me a great deal of enjoyment."[6]

His own designs for wallpapers, textiles, tapestries, embroideries and carpets are too well known and well loved to need description here. Their power emerged from a creative tension between Pugin's rule that the designer should be truthful to his materials (for this reason Pugin argued that the patterns of wallpaper

must always be flat, with no hint of perspective) and Ruskin's doctrine of naturalism under which the (imperfect) designer should struggle as hard as possible to depict (imperfect) nature. Of all Morris's splendid designs, the most joyous combine Pugin's stiff heraldic structure and a loving, delicate observation of leaves, fruits and flowers.

For all his skill as a designer, Morris never tried architecture. His experience in Street's office had not been happy: he had been set to copying a drawing of a doorway in St. Augustine's church, Canterbury (by Butterfield) and "suffered much tribulation in delineating the many arch mouldings 'and at last the compass points nearly bored a hole through the drawing board'."[7] The mechanical nature of architectural work did not at all suit Morris's temperament, but he was quite clear that architecture was the mother of the arts and crafts, that it should be a "union of the arts mutually helpful and harmoniously subordinated to one another."[8]

His ideal was an architecture altogether free of imposed style, one which would grow unselfconsciously from its surroundings and the needs of ordinary people. "If the old cottages, barns and the like, are kept in good repair from year to year, they will not need to be pulled down to give place either to the red-brick, blue-slated man-sty, or the modern Tudor lord-bountiful cottage. And where . . . new buildings must be built, by building them well and in a common sense and unpretentious way, with the good material of the countryside, they will take their place alongside of the old houses and look, like them, a real growth of the soil."[9] He hoped that "it will be from such necessary, unpretentious buildings that the new and genuine architecture will spring, rather than from our experiments in conscious style, more or less ambitious or those for which the immortal Dickens has given us the never-to-be-forgotten adjective 'Architectooralooral'."[10]

A clean simplicity should be the aim, for "simplicity of life, even the barest, is not misery, but the very foundation of refinement." The choice was between "a sanded floor and white-washed walls, and the green trees and flowering meads and living waters outside; or a grimy palace with a regiment of housemaids always working to smear the dirt together so that it may be unnoticed."[11]

If the Arts and Crafts architects had ever felt the need to write a manifesto, these passages might well have formed its core, so widely were their principles accepted. Their work is often accused of being back-

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* Success and Morris's declining private income caused the dissolution of the original partnership. In 1875 Morris, whose money and energy had carried the company, reorganized it under his sole proprietorship as Morris & Co. This caused a split with Rossetti and Brown, but Burne-Jones and Webb remained faithful friends and continued to contribute designs. The quarrel between the original partners was later made up with the help of Edwina Burne-Jones, Edward's wife.

13 *Bibury, Gloucestershire. This Cotswold hamlet was described by Morris as "surely the most beautiful village in England." The ageless domestic architecture of England held by Morris to be a model for future building*

ward looking and, of course, it often was so. Yet for those who took the teachings of Ruskin and Morris really seriously, classical architecture was forbidden as were experiments with machine-made products like steel and cast iron. They were restricted to a range of traditional materials, used in a more or less traditional way but without classical rules. So, even if they had not wanted affinities with pre-classical late medieval and Tudor building, it would have been almost impossible to have escaped them, just as William Morris could envision the post-industrial, post-hierarchical society of *News from Nowhere* only through a translucent screen of idealized medievalism as painted by Carlyle, Walter Scott and Ruskin. No architect can be free of influences from the past and most Arts and Craftsmen welcomed and exploited the obvious connections with late medieval architecture

in their own work.* At the same time some of the more adventurous spirits were prepared to experiment with new materials like concrete which could be adapted to craftsmanly techniques (see p. 64 and p. 77).

Morris's vision of the town as it might be was as potent as his ideas on architecture. It foreshadowed the Garden City movement of the turn of the century (chapter 13). Cities, he believed, should be quite different from "our great sprawling brick and mortar country of London . . . the centre with its big public buildings, theatres, squares and gardens; the zone round the centre with its lesser guildhalls grouping together the houses of the citizens; again with its parks and gardens; the outer zone again, still its district of public buildings, but with no definite gardens to it because the whole of this outer zone would be a garden thickly besprinkled with houses and other buildings. And at last the suburb proper, mostly

* At first occasionally, then increasingly, Georgian architecture, classical building's relaxed little brother, was also seen as a native architecture, and a suitable source of inspiration.

fields and fruit gardens with scanty houses dotted about till you come to the open country with its occasional farm-steads."[12]

If the new architecture and planning were to draw their inspiration from the old, preservation of old work was vitally important—not just as a model but as a reminder of the continuity of the past, present and future. In 1877, Morris was outraged by a proposal by Sir George Gilbert Scott to restore Tewkesbury Abbey. Earlier restorations by High Victorian architects which were honestly but ruthlessly intended to return buildings to their original state had, in Morris's eyes, ruined many fine medieval architecture, partly through ignorance and partly through having to use nineteenth-century methods of work, under which it was impossible for stone-carvers to express true Gothic savageness.

The Tewkesbury project caused Morris to found the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, which, with Morris's crusading zeal and Philip Webb's quiet technical competence, popularized the doctrine of honest repair rather than wholesale restoration to a state of pe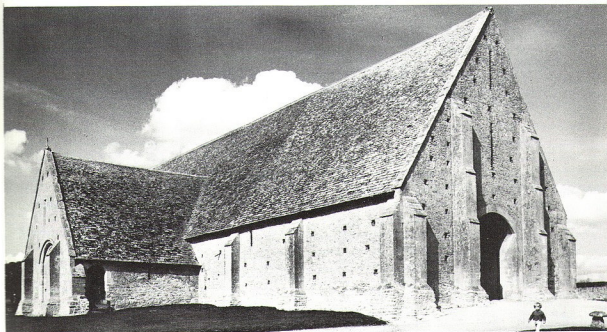rfection which often had reality not in history but in the architect's imagination. In the late nineteenth century SPAB saved many old buildings from the process of skimming off the accretions of time normally practised by the High Victorians. Many Arts and Crafts architects were members of SPAB, and the Society's gentle, honest approach did much to form their attitudes to old work which, whenever the occasion demanded, was lovingly and honestly incorporated into new construction.

In the SPAB manifesto, Morris urged his contemporaries "to treat our ancient buildings as monuments of a bygone art, created by bygone manners, that modern art cannot meddle with without destroying.

"Thus, and thus only ... can we protect our ancient buildings and hand them down instructive and venerable to those that come after us."[13]

The understanding that the heritage of the past belonged to everyman was one of the mileposts on Morris's long march towards communism. The impetus came very largely from Ruskin. Ruskin had seen the imperative of allowing every craftsman freedom to make his own contribution, no matter how ham-fisted. He had understood the importance of creative work and the need to give nobility to the degraded lives of the Victorian poor by offering everybody the chance of creativity. And he had stressed the need for beauty and health in the lives of the

14 *Great Coxwell Barn, Gloucestershire. Morris thought it "unapproachable in its dignity, as beautiful as a cathedral, yet with no ostentation of the builder's art." He believed that such structures could be the pattern of new public buildings*

15 Kelmscott, William Morris's country house. A medieval manor growing unselfconsciously from its surroundings. Paradoxically, the realization that buildings like Kelmscott were the inheritance of everyman helped direct Morris towards Communism

whole community. Morris believed that Ruskin, "by a marvellous inspiration of genius . . . attained at one leap to a true conception of medieval art . . . The essence of what Ruskin taught us was simple enough . . . It was really nothing more recondite than this, that the art of any epoch must of necessity be an expression of its social life, and that the social life of the Middle Ages allowed the workman freedom of individual expression, which on the other hand our social life forbids him."[14] But Ruskin, as the St. George's Guild showed, had refrained from the last logical step—acceptance that if everyone could be creative, society must be reorganized in a way that would give everyone an equal chance to create.

William Morris took this step in 1883 when he joined the Social Democratic Federation, the only socialist body then in existence. It was the start of a commitment to the socialist movement to which, through numerous vicissitudes, he remained faithful to the end of his life. He was never just a passive supporter but:

"When I joined the Communist folk, I did what
    in me lay
To learn the grounds of their faith. I read day
    after day
Whatever books I could handle, and heard about
    and about
What talk was going amongst them; and I
    burned up doubt after doubt,
Until it befel at last that to others I needs must
    speak."

By 1889 Morris was prepared to declare that "I call
myself a Communist and have no wish to qualify that
word by joining any other to it. The aim of Commun-
ism seems to me to be the complete equality of condi-
tion for all people; and anything in a Socialist direc-
tion which stops short of this is merely a compromise
with the present conditions of society; a halting place
on the road to the goal."[16]

Morris believed that the only way of resolving the
Puginian paradox was by revolution—bloody if need
be*—for "if people were once to accept it as true,
that it is nothing but just and fair that every man's
work should have some hope and pleasure always
present in it, they must try to bring the change about
that would make it so."[17]

Morris inherited Ruskin's hatred of machines but
he was far from the popular picture of a late Victorian
intellectual luddite trying to smash machinery with
single stick, carpenter's chisel and embroidery needle
that has been painted by some historians. Morris did
not hate machines as such—just the way in which
they were used by Victorian capitalism. For him,
Victorian machinery, like classical architecture,
reduced workers to slavery as machine minders or
carvers-to-rote.

Morris's ideal society resembled that of his friend,
the anarchist Peter Kropotkin. Creative work would
be offered to everybody but, concomitantly,
everyone would have to take his turn at the essential
but unpleasant jobs like cleaning sewers or coal min-
ing. He could not conceive, as we can, of machines
that would accomplish these tasks, but he would
undoubtedly have welcomed them, for he argued that
"if the necessary reasonable work be of a mechanical
kind, I must be helped to do it by machine, not to
cheapen my labour, but so that as little time as poss-
ible may be spent upon it and that I may be able to

think of other things while I am tending the
machine."[18]

"Yet for the consolation of the artists I will say that
I believe that a state of social order would probably
lead at first to a great development of machinery for
really useful purposes, because people will still be
anxious about getting through the work necessary to
holding society together; but that after a while they
will find that there is not so much work as they
expected . . . and if it seems to them that a certain
industry would be carried on more pleasantly as
regards the worker, and more effectively as regards
the goods, by using hard work rather than machinery,
they will certainly get rid of their machinery, because
it will be possible for them to do so . . . I have a hope
. . . that the elaboration of machinery in a society
whose purpose is not the multiplication of labour as it
now is, but the carrying on of a pleasant life, as it
would be under social order—that the elaboration of
machinery . . . will lead to the simplification of life,
and so once more to the limitation of machinery."[19]

Morris was well aware that he was in a contradic-
tory predicament. When he was working on Philip
Webb's house, Rounton Grange, in 1874, the client
Sir Lowther Bell heard Morris "talking and walking
about in an excited way", and went to inquire if
anything was wrong. "He turned on me like a wild
animal—'It is only that I spend my life ministering to
the swinish luxury of the rich.'"[20] Morris was a
capitalist who preached communism; a designer of
mass produced art who believed in the freedom of
individual craftsmen; a manufacturer of machine-
made ornament who preferred utter simplicity.

These contradictions, which echo through the
whole Arts and Crafts movement, were the product
of a visionary trapped by circumstances in a very
different world from the one he wanted to see. Wil-
liam's daughter May recalled that when preparing to
visit a client to discuss some elaborate scheme of
decoration "he would often remark laughing that it
would not answer, in the interests of the Firm, if he
were to say what he really liked—white walls and no
furniture and no pictures or stuffy curtains: that is for
ordinary houses; for fine arras tapestry was the one
decoration for stately buildings in our northern coun-
tries, 'Wall papers are a poor makeshift' said the
designer of them many a time."[21]

This seems cynical and reinforces the view of con-
temporaries like Norman Shaw who believed that
Morris was a money grubbing hypocrite (p. 59). But
the alternative of fully enacting his social ideals in his

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* In Chapter XVII of *News from Nowhere*, Old Hammond relates
that the change in society came about through "war from beginning
to end: bitter war, till hope and pleasure put an end to it."

own way of life would not only have impoverished his family without changing society in the least, but it would have deprived Morris of the time and energy he needed to set the example of what the world could be like, freed from the fetters of capitalism.

Paul Thompson has analysed Morris's predicament. "Morris had in fact considered a complete scheme of profit-sharing . . . Morris calculated that in 1884 his own income from the firm was £1,800 while Wardle [the manager] received £1,200 and four others about £500 each. Two of the foremen were given bonuses. The rest, except for two or three 'lame dogs', were paid by piece work, rather above their trade rates. If he paid himself a foreman's wage he could distribute £1,600 a year to the other workmen, £16 a year each. But the utmost this income could do would be to help 'a few individuals more creep out of their class into the middle class'. True co-operation could never be organized within capitalism; and the gesture itself would cripple the support he now gave the socialist cause."[22]

Morris's communism was that of a man freed by his membership of the upper middle class. His intense individualism would never have allowed him to accept collectivism. The man whose volcanic energy caused him to gnaw the dinner table and vent the tines of his fork in his mouth when thwarted* was not likely to accept consensus quietly. Morris was never much at home with groups of people of any sort. George Bernard Shaw, who, though a non-revolutionary Fabian socialist, sometimes appeared with Morris at street corner meetings, recalled that "he was an ungovernable man in a drawing room. What stimulated me to argument, or at least repartee, made him swear."[24]

Yet Morris knew that, if working people got power in his lifetime, his privileged vision was unlikely to be accepted. "I have always believed that the realization of Socialism would give us the opportunity of escaping from that grievous flood of utilitarianism which the full development of the society of contract has cursed us with; but that would be in the long run only; and I think it quite probable that in the early days of Socialism the reflex of the terror of starvation, which so oppresses us now, would drive us into excesses of utilitarianism . . . So that it is not unlikely that the public opinion of a community would be in favour of cutting down all the timber in England, and turning the country into a big Bonanza farm or market garden under glass. And in such a case what could we do?"[25]

C. R. Ashbee, a young apprentice architect toying with socialism, was introduced to Morris in 1886. He "received us kindly and invited us all in to supper. Everything in his house is beautiful—such Rossettis, and such a harmony of colours and tones! Miss Morris in a plain crimson velvet dress with red glass beads and a silver ornament, looked like an Italian chatelaine of the fifteenth century. Sitting at table one felt like one of the people in Millais's Pre-Raphaelite picture of Isabella. Everything was harmonious . . .

"Old Morris was delightful, firing up with the warmth of his subject, all the enthusiasm of youth thrilling through veins and muscles; not a moment was he still, but ever sought to vent some of his immense energy. At length banging his hand on the table: 'No,' said he, 'the thing is this; if we had our Revolution tomorrow, what should we Socialists do the day after?'

"'Yes . . . what?' we all cried. And that he could not answer. 'We should all be hanged, because we are promising the people more than we can ever give them.'"[26]

In fact, Morris was regarded as safely respectable by the class he spent so much energy in trying to overthrow. So much so that, in spite of having been twice arrested at Socialist demonstrations, he was seriously canvassed for the Laureateship when Tennyson died in 1892. He smartly turned down the offer—though he derived some pleasure from receiving it.

It is this respectable Morris who presides in bronze over the Pantheon of the Arts and Crafts movement, the Hall of the Art Workers' Guild; his ebullient rug of curly hair is tamed and his douce expression can rarely have been worn in life. Below are written in letters of gold the names of the members. They gave him the place of honour because his example, in art and in life, had inspired them all: more than any other single man, Morris shaped the nature of the Arts and Crafts movement.

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* The strength of Morris's teeth occasionally had odd repercussions. Visiting, on behalf of SPAB, a church which was in the process of destructive restoration Morris saw some vile new oak stalls about to be installed. "Call that carving," he shouted, "I could gnaw it better with my teeth."[23] The vicar was not impressed.

1 *Builder*, Vol. IX 1862, p. 420
2 *Building News*, Vol. IX 1862, p. 99
3 Mackail, J. W. *The Life of William Morris*, Longmans Green, London 1922 (5th edition), p. 9
4 Lethaby, W. R. *Philip Webb and His Work*, Oxford 1935, p. 14

William Morris. Tile panel c. 1877

5 Letter to Andreas Scheu; quoted in Morris, May *William Morris, Artist, Writer, Socialist*, Vol. II, Basil Blackwell, Oxford 1935, p. 10

6 *Ibid.*, p. 12

7 Lethaby, W. R. *Philip Webb*, *op. cit.*, p. 15

8 Morris, William "The prospects of architecture", Lecture to the London Institution 1881. Printed in May Morris *Works of William Morris*, XXII, p. 119

9 Morris, William "On the external coverings of roofs", Lecture, 1890, *Works, op. cit.*, XXII, p. 408

10 Morris, William "Address to Birmingham Art Students" 1894, *Works, op. cit.*, XXII, p. 429

11 Morris, William "The prospects of architecture", *op. cit.*, p. 149

12 Morris, William "Makeshift" (1894), in May Morris *William Morris, op. cit.*, II, p. 474

13 Morris, William *SPAB Manifesto*, 1877. Still required to be signed by every recruit to the Society today.

14 Morris, William "The revival of architecture", Lecture, 1888, *Works, op. cit.*, XXII, p. 323

15 Morris, William *The Pilgrims of Hope* section VI. Quoted by E. P. Thompson in *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*, Merlin Press, London 1977, p. 270

16 Morris, William Letter in *Commonweal*, 18.5.89. Quoted in May Morris *William Morris, op. cit.*, II, p. 313

17 Morris, William "The prospects of architecture", *Works, op. cit.*, XII, p. 140

18 Morris, William "How we live and how we might live" (1885), *Works* XXIII, *op. cit.*, p. 20

19 *Ibid.*, p. 24

20 Lethaby, W. R. *Philip Webb, op. cit.*, p. 94

21 Morris, May *William Morris, op. cit.*, III, p. 616

22 Thompson, Paul *The Work of William Morris*, Quartet Books, London 1977, p. 50

23 Morris, May *William Morris, op. cit.*, II, p. 621

24 Shaw, G. B. in May Morris *William Morris, op. cit.*, II, xviii

25 Morris, William in May Morris *William Morris, op. cit.*, II, p. 315

26 Ashbee, C. R. *Memoirs*: typescript in the Victoria and Albert Museum Library, Vol. I, p. 19