JUDITH GOODMAN on WILLIAM DE MORGAN AT COLLIERS WOOD

As mentioned in the Workshop Report in September's *Bulletin* (No.131, page 15) I recently discovered, quite by accident, that the ceramic artist William De Morgan, friend and colleague of William Morris, had his 'Merton Abbey' workshop, not in Merton, but on the other side of the Wandle, at Colliers Wood.

William Frend De Morgan (1839-1917) had as father a musical mathematician and as mother a philosophical classicist. Both were free-thinkers. Their seven children grew up in a high-minded, but happy atmosphere, though four were to die relatively young of TB, and the fear of this disease clouded much of William's life.

De Morgan came to ceramics by way of stained glass and experiments with lustre. He had met William Morris (1834-96) in the early 1860s and worked with him briefly at Queen Square before setting up his own workshop in Chelsea.

The two men shared a dream of setting up their ideal factory where men and women would exercise their skills in traditional crafts among beautiful surroundings; and they undertook many fruitless journeys in search of a site for this 'fictionary', as they called it. Finally, in 1881, they came upon a printworks at Merton Abbey, within the old priory precincts, with picturesque buildings, a millpond, trees and meadows. Morris took a lease on this site, and by the end of the year was beginning to manufacture his goods - but it has never been clear where De Morgan established himself and built his kiln.

J.W.Mackail, Morris's first biographer, stated only that the plan of "joint, or even contiguous, factories never fully took effect".[1] Mackail, who was Burne-Jones's son-in-law and also knew Morris quite well, almost certainly would have known exactly where De Morgan's workshop was, but unfortunately did not think it relevant to his narrative. Later writers have contented themselves with locating De Morgan, vaguely, next door to Morris[2], or very close by[3]. For some reason however the Museum of London booklet on Morris[4] placed De Morgan s workshop in the middle of the Morris site. Apart from the fact that no building is shown there on the OS 1:2500 map of the mid-1890s, a very well-known article from 1883 in *The Spectator* makes it clear that the sites were indeed quite separate: "Turning out of the garden [of the Morris site] it says, a few minutes along the high road bring us to the building where Mr.De Morgan s pottery is already manufactured, though the whole building is not yet finished…"[5]

De Morgan took a little time to get started at his new site, wherever it was, but early in 1882 he was beginning to produce 'Merton Abbey' wares.

Impressed Merton Abbey marks on De Morgan pottery and tiles

De Morgan stayed at 'Merton Abbey' for only six or seven years. He found the travelling from Chelsea, where he lived, tiring, and he was troubled with a painful back which he was fearful was tuberculosis of the spine (it wasn't). In 1888 he set up his Sands End factory in Fulham, and early the following year finally moved all his manufacture there.

Rice plate, with green fish on royal blue ground, surrounding a central motif in turquoise. Made at Merton Abbey in the 1880s.

Until now I had been more or less convinced that De Morgan had taken over the old copper mill immediately to the east of the Morris works. Copper milling had ceased in the 1860s. The site had briefly become a flock mill, but seems to have been standing empty by the early 1880s. Admittedly it was scarcely a few minutes walk from the Morris site - it was next door and barely a minute away - but I could not see where else De Morgan could have been. And that was because it had never occurred to me to seek him over the border.

It was when looking for dates and addresses for mineral water bottlers in Mitcham (see September *Bulletin*), and going alphabetically through the commercial pages in the Mitcham section (where I had never before ventured!) of the Kelly's directory of 1884,[6] that I was astounded to see an entry which read:

De Morgan, Wm, Stone pottery, Singlegate, Merton Road

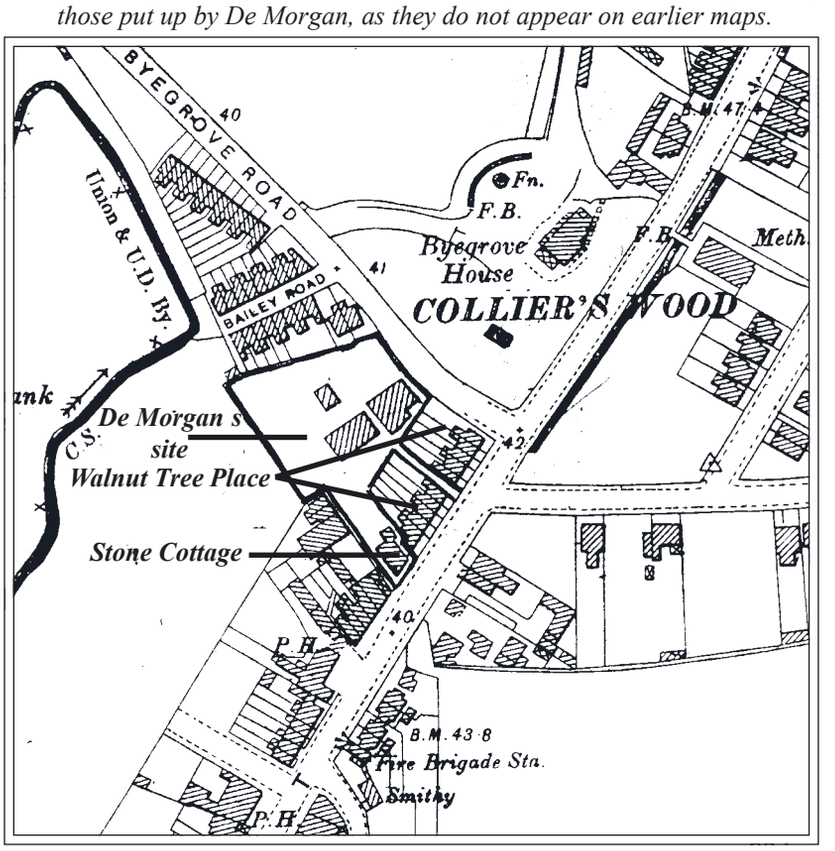
On trawling through the various directories of the period I found that De Morgan was listed from 1884 to 1892. Later entries were more accurate and place him firmly at "Stone *Cottage* Pottery". The fact that he had returned to London several years before he ceases to be listed is not surprising. Such directories frequently lag behind events.

Stone Cottage was a small one-storey building which may have been constructed in part from remains of Merton Priory. It is believed to have served as the local tollgate house for the Surrey Iron Railway during the early 19th century. The pantiled roof is known to have collapsed in 1838, but presumably it was worth repairing,[7] and at the time of the 1881 census the cottage was occupied by an agricultural labourer. "Singlegate" in the address refers not to the railway gate but to the turnpike gate which had barred the road until 1870, at what would become the site of Colliers Wood station. It was known thus to distinguish it from Merton Double Gates which stood at Merton Grove, the future site of South Wimbledon station.

Stone Cottage, from a photograph of a pen-and-ink drawing probably by Hubert Williams. Location and date of original not known, but copies are held at Wandsworth Museum, Lambeth Archives and Surrey History Centre, Woking.



From the 1898 OS map 1:2500. The buildings shown on the site are probably those put up by De Morgan, as they do not appear on earlier maps.

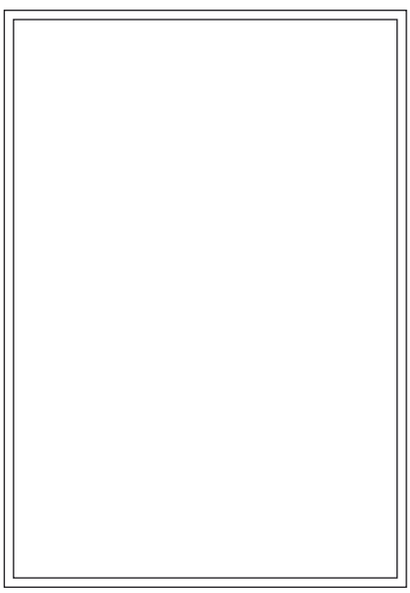


De Morgan seems to have taken Stone Cottage itself, which may have served as the office, and also a piece of land which lay behind both this building and the neighbouring cottages known as Walnut Tree Place. In directories which included listings for each road separately the entry "*here is private road to Potteries*" is shown between the two blocks of Walnut Tree Place. The site, which was about a third of a mile (five or six minutes walk) from Morris s site, lay entirely in the Colliers Wood area of Mitcham, on the north-west side of Merton Road (the present Colliers Wood High Street). On the west, between it and the Wandle, were meadows; on the east the boundary was Byegrove Road. At the rear, on what had recently been fields, was a new street of small terraced houses, Bailey Road. As at Morris's site along the road, the suburb which was "woeful beyond description"[8] was close at hand!

Here De Morgan built a workshop and a kiln - the "magnificent basement" that "became a skyscraper", as he said.[9] His foreman described the kiln as "*in* and *on* the ground, right in the centre of the building - the chimney shaft quite a splendid idea, but unfortunately it was built over the centre of the kiln, and the weight of the shaft was enormous ... [I]f it fell it would take the whole of the building with it".[9]

After De Morgan s departure the Stone Cottage site stood empty for a while, before being taken over, by 1899, as the Abbey Cork Mills, proprietor Walter Mays. And as a cork works it continued for decades. By the late 1950s Stone Cottage had gone, replaced by part of a motor company's premises. Today its site lies beneath the forecourt of Colliers Wood Service Station. The cork works site at the rear was redeveloped in the mid-1960s. Here stands Newborough House, named to mark the creation in 1965 of the new London Borough of Merton. It would be good to see it bearing a plaque celebrating De Morgan's association with the site.

William De Morgan, chalk portrait by Evelyn De Morgan, 1907 (De Morgan Foundation)



At the end of the 20th century, when De Morgan is seen as one of the great figures of the Arts and Crafts Movement, it seems astonishing that the memory of his presence at Colliers Wood had vanished so completely. In James Bass's reminiscences of an Edwardian childhood at Millers Mead[10] he mentions the "cork factory (where tiles were previously made)", and he might have been talking of a sanitary ware works. However it seems to have been true that in his own day De Morgan achieved more fame in his second career. Because of poor health he gave up making pottery and became a successful novelist, producing nine books between 1906 and 1921. They were mainly in a sub-Dickensian vein and have not remained popular, though the first (and best), *Joseph Vance*, was reprinted in the World's Classics as late as 1954.

De Morgan was clearly a delightful companion and an entertaining friend. He married, in his late 40s, artist Evelyn Pickering. In a letter to Edward Burne-Jones he announced his engagement as follows:

> Dear Ned,
>
> I meant to come in yesterday evg: but I was engaged to be married and couldn't!
>
> I wanted to convey the news to you of *two* engagements that have just come to pass. One is my own - I am engaged to a lady. The other is Evelyn Pickering's - she is engaged to a cove, or bloke...

It seems to have been a strong and happy marriage, though Evelyn, who survived her husband by only two years, was 17 years his junior. There were no children.

Why did he call his works "Merton Abbey"? He must have known he was in Colliers Wood, Mitcham. He would have paid rates, after all. However, that part of Mitcham then received its mail through Merton Post Office, and the whole area by the Wandle where the parishes of Merton, Mitcham and Wimbledon met, was generally spoken of as Merton. Moreover the name would have reaffirmed the friendly collaboration with Morris, whose workshops were indeed at Merton Abbey. Would William De Morgan's Mitcham Works, or Colliers Wood Works have sounded so euphonious as the Merton Abbey Works? Possibly not.

1. J.W.Mackail *The Life of William Morris* (1899) World's Classics edition vol ii p46
2. e.g. Mark Hamilton *Rare Spirit, A Life of William De Morgan 1839-1917* Constable 1997 pp55-6
3. e.g. Charles Harvey and Jon Press *William Morris: Design and Enterprise in Victorian Britain* Manchester University Press 1991 p132
4. David Saxby *William Morris at Merton* Museum of London Archaeology Service and London Borough of Merton 1995 p5
5. *The Spectator* 24 November 1883
6. Merton Local Studies Centre has copies of various local directories from the early 19th century onwards.
7. E.N.Montague *History of Colliers Wood* 1979, unpublished typescript at Merton Local Studies Centre p61
8. Letter from William Morris to Jane Morris 19 March 1881, *The Collected Letters of William Morris* vol ii pt A 1881-84 Norman Kelvin (ed.) Princeton University Press 1987
9. De Morgan's words and Bale's account, both quoted in A.M.W.Stirling *William De Morgan and His Wife* Thornton, Butterworth 1922 p28
10. James B.Bass *Once Upon a Time* Merton Historical Society Local History Notes - 15 (due to be published Autumn 1999)

A comprehensive account of De Morgan's work in ceramics is given in:

William Gaunt & M.D.E.Clayton-Stamm *William De Morgan* Studio Vista 1971 - copy in Merton Local Studies Centre

Some places to see De Morgan ceramics:

Victoria & Albert Museum
City Museum and Art Gallery, Birmingham
Kelmscott Manor
Old Battersea House
William Morris Gallery, Walthamstow
Leighton House, Kensington
Standen House, East Grinstead
8 Addison Road, Holland Park

(Old Battersea House and 8 Addison Road are not open to the public but may be visited by arrangement.)