

ART ON THE WANDLE

SINCE the days of 1539, when the complacent Prior, John Bowle, surrendered the once famous Abbey of Merton to Henry VIII for cash down, and a snug Windsor Canonry, Merton has been associated with the manufacture of calicoes, prints, silk fabrics and the like; indeed, it is surely not too much to suppose that the manufacture took its rise as an employment of the Abbey folk. Whether this be so or not, for hundreds of years such manufactures have flourished round the crumbling old flint walls, reaching a glorious climax when in 1881 William Morris, poet and artist, became the occupant of the seven acres of lush meadows, bounded and intersected by the Wandle's windings, with their rambling, quaint buildings of tarred weather-board and red tile, scattered promiscuously among the willows. These buildings stand now as they were erected, early in the 18th century, by a family of Huguenot refugees, for use as a silk-weaving factory.

Morris' advent meant a great revival of energy to the old works. Many sites had been



THE ADORATION OF THE MAGI
 Figures by SIR E. BURNE-JONES. Foreground, background, decoration
 and colouring by WILLIAM MORRIS
 Reproduced from a photograph of the tapestry by permission of
 Messrs. MORRIS & Co., 449, Oxford Street, London

viewed and abandoned before the balance of advantage was found to be in favour of Merton, the quality of the water for dyeing purposes being one very important consideration. The circular issued by Morris when the new workshops were ready to be put into full operation was, as can well be understood, very unlike the usual document sent out on such occasions.

The following extracts will show what it set forth as being the objects of the industry to which Merton had given a home:—

1st. Painted Glass Windows : . . . Mr. Burne-Jones entrusts the execution of his Cartoons for Painted Glass to us alone.

2nd. 'Arras' Tapestry, Woven in the High Warp Loom : We have of late turned our attention to this beautiful art, in the hope of raising it from its present state of neglect and degradation ; of all kinds of Wall Decoration it is the most durable, except Mosaic, and the most desirable, next to the Painting done by the hand of a good master. . . .

3rd. Carpets : . . .

4th. Carpets, Hand Made : We beg to call special attention to our goods of this kind, which are woven under constant artistic supervision, and claim to be considered as works of art. The decay of the art of Carpet Weaving in the East makes, we think, our efforts in this direction of more special importance.

5th. Embroidery : . . .

6th. Printed Cotton Goods : . . . We beg to call special attention to these goods, the designs for which aim at fuller and richer decoration than is usual in such Cloths.

7th. Paper Hangings: . . .

8th. Figured Woven Stuffs: . . . Our aim in these has been to turn out stuffs of good design and genuine materials that shall make no pretence of being what they are not.

9th. Furniture Velvets and Cloths: . . .

The principle underlying the entire undertaking was, and is, that nothing should be done by machinery that the hand of man is capable of, and thirty-five to forty men and women here show their capability.

Let us walk round and see what is going on here after all these years of establishment. Passing through a rickety gateway from the sadly common-place High Street, we go up the yard and ascend a ladder-like stairway into the upper floor of a long building, much resembling a barn. Here for many years have good workmen sat, deftly and patiently carrying out the different processes necessary to produce the finest stained glass work that has graced England since the 15th century. The main portions of the designs have been those of the late Sir Edward Burne-Jones, Morris' dear friend ever since their Oxford days; and in this art at the present day England stands pre-eminent, as many of her churches testify.

If you ask, 'How is a Morris window better than another?' you must be satisfied here with the short answer that it possesses a depth and

soft brilliancy of colour, nobility of design, and breadth of treatment for which you seek in vain among other modern productions.

The ground floor of this building is more useful and interesting than ornamental, being devoted to cold-dyeing and yarn-dyeing, for cotton-prints and fabrics respectively, and colour-making shops for cotton-printing. Here Morris would spend hours among the rows of great vats of indigo, madder, etc., several feet deep, trying experiments, and spoiling his clothes, but succeeding.

It is impossible within the scope of this article to treat with even an approach to adequacy on all the interesting processes. One section of the long, well-lighted barns gives space for the stamping-rooms, where plain woven fabric, sun-bleached in the meadows close by, is transformed, by the sureness of a man's eye, and the pressure on a wood-block design by hand and mallet, into a hanging fit for the palace of a king, and as much in place in the cottage of the shepherd.

Then there are the weaving-rooms where the silk and woollen tapestries of Morris' own designs are woven by hand in the same manner as our fore-mothers did in the 15th century.

Hard by, midst airy, healthy surroundings, with alternate 'knot' and 'snip,' patient,

practised girls' hands make those wonderful carpets which so well warrant Morris' hope that the deteriorating carpet industries of the Orient might be superseded by home-made articles, good in workmanship, bold in design, and perfect in colour.

But all else pales before the wonderful beauties of the hand-woven tapestries. Young men do the actual making. Seated on low stools, in front of them is a long line of vertical strings, the width the tapestry is to be, on which is traced the outline of the design. A flat coloured representation of the tapestry when completed is placed behind them, and this is reflected in a mirror beyond the strings upon which they work. The many-hued silks lie ready to hand, and under deft fingers and fertile brain the wonderful work grows. Thus by a combination of head, heart and hand these masterpieces are created.

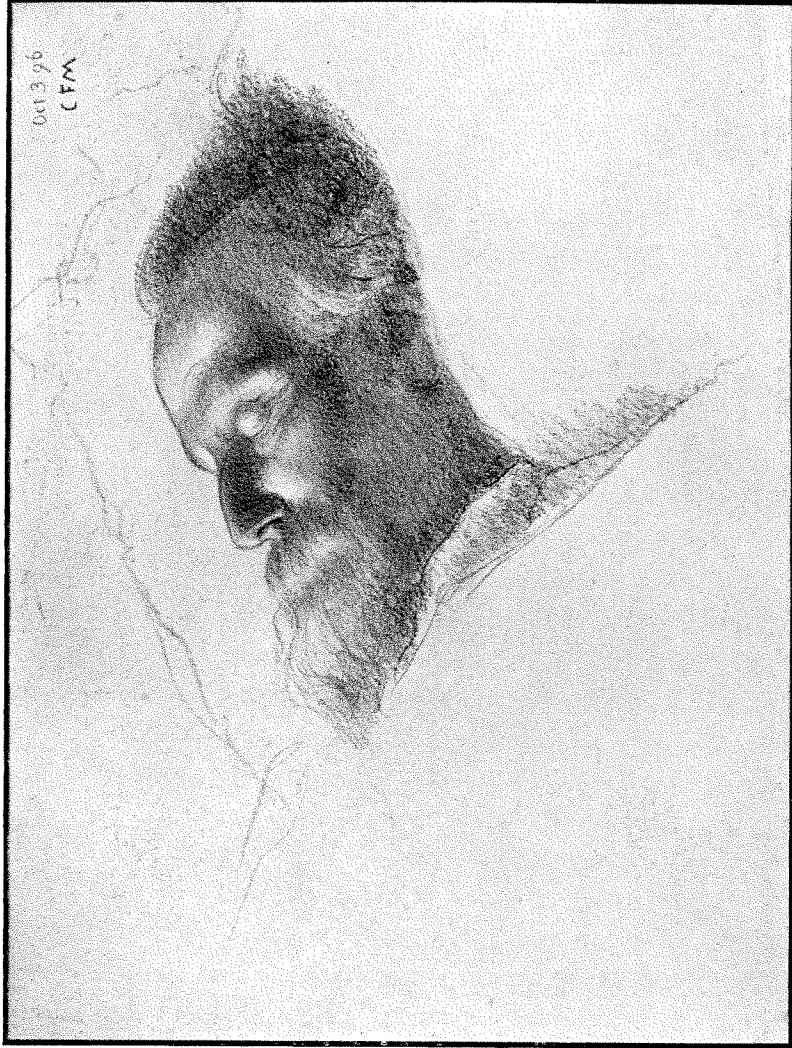
At present the work in hand comprises two 'wings,' each measuring 14ft. by 9ft., which with the centre piece already installed, will complete a triptych representation of 'The Adoration of the Virgin,' and will cover the entire east end of Eton College Chapel,

William Morris lived fifteen years after he established his business at Merton, and never was mortal man happier than when he could

get away for a quiet day among his men, arranging and advising in the kindly manner that endeared him to all.

The first illustration to this note represents, as well as it can, the gorgeous tapestry made at Merton, and presented by Morris to his own college at Oxford. It now hangs in the dark on the right hand side of the choir of Exeter College. The last illustration speaks for itself, and the nobility of its subject was never more apparent than in this last phase. To most Mertonians Morris is not known even as a name, to some as a name and no more, but to a few he is a prototype and his life a creed. The new Arts he created, and the old Arts he resuscitated at Merton will give him and our sad-faced Surrey village remembrance, centuries after the place itself has become an indistinguishable portion of the London wilderness.

HERBERT M. ELLIS.



WILLIAM MORRIS

From a pencil drawing made immediately after death, by C. FAIRFAX MURRAY