

The revival of the Merton Abbey Tapestry Works

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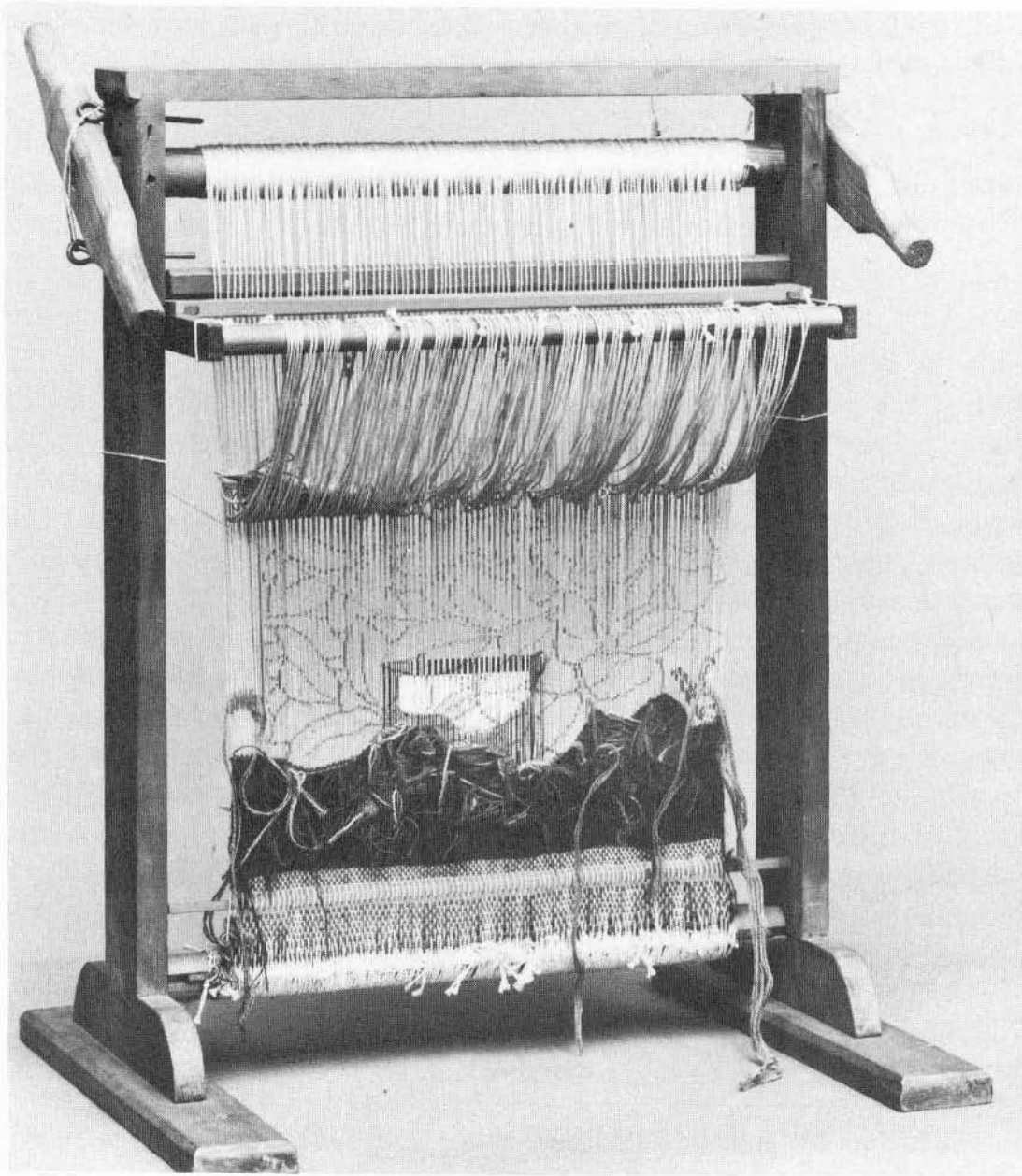
It was not long after the outbreak of War before tapestry weaving at the Merton Abbey Works of Morris and Company became affected by shortages of materials and a dwindling work force, and in 1916 the Directors of the Company decided to close this section of the Works. For H.C. Marillier, who had himself enlisted, this was intended to be a temporary move but the process of re-opening some years later was not nearly as straightforward as had been envisaged.

The firm's shop, at 449 Oxford Street, continued to trade throughout the War. A loom had been set up in the back room of the shop, originally to demonstrate the technique of tapestry to potential customers, but with the looms silenced at Merton Abbey this was now pressed into producing a number of decorative furnishing panels.¹ Jean Orage² took charge of this work, and with the assistance of Miss B. Marillier and two boys, she managed to maintain in clients' memories this side of the firm's manufacture. Mrs Orage and Miss Marillier also demonstrated their skills at the 1916 Arts and Crafts Exhibition, and Morris & Co. exhibited a number of original designs for some of their finest tapestries woven previously. These included Morris's 'Woodpecker', Henry Dearle's working cartoon and Edward Burne-Jones's preliminary sketch for 'The Passing of Venus', a tapestry which had been destroyed by fire at the Brussels Exhibition of 1910.

In October 1917 the shop moved to more fashionable premises at 17 George Street, Hanover Square, but as existing contemporary photographs of the showrooms show that no provision was made for the demonstration loom in the new spacious accommodation, it is unlikely that any further tapestry weaving was carried out by the firm until 1922.

On Marillier's release from naval duties in February 1919, he immediately set about gathering support for the re-opening of the tapestry section at Merton Abbey and looking for weavers. Eventually William

This photograph by permission of the Victoria and Albert Museum.



Miniature tapestry loom, made as a teaching aid for use by apprentices at Merton Abbey. Given by William Morris to the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1893.

Sleath, who had worked for Morris & Co. since being taken on as a boy in 1885, was re-employed together with Richard Carter (who had only two years experience before the 1916 closure of the works) and a new boy called Frederick Reed. Marillier also looked to another ex-employee, Walter Taylor, for the training and supply of new staff. In 1920 Taylor set up the tapestry department of the Central School of Arts and Crafts, and took in for training a number of ex-servicemen. In

his first class were Percy Sheldrick and Edward Russell both of whom were employed by Morris & Co. after three years training under Taylor. It was not until 1922 however that enough competent staff were found to re-open the works so for the next three years Marillier concentrated on the management of the tapestry conservation workshop at 2B Granville Place.

Marillier and Henry Dearle (who as Artistic Director was stationed permanently at Merton Abbey) cannot have been too down-hearted with the general lack of enthusiasm shown by the British public in the immediate post-war slump, for the tapestry department had passed through, and recovered from, similar doldrums in 1909. It had been decided at that time that a general rallying around of press and patrons was called for. An article in the Burlington Magazine for June 1909 wrote: 'A communication received from a well-known and public spirited art lover calls attention to the fact that Messrs. Morris are considering whether they shall not give up their Merton Abbey tapestry looms and turn adrift the long acquired skill of all the workers'. Potential clients were also contacted and on March 30th 1909 Morris & Co. wrote for the first time to George Booth of Detroit offering for sale *The Passing of Venus* panel at the price of £1500 (a reduction of £200), considering it 'in many respects the finest piece which has been made on the Merton Abbey Looms'. In 1911 the company wrote again to Booth this time offering a panel they proposed to weave of Frank Dicksee's Chantrey picture of *The Two Kings*.³ Without any instructions from Booth the tapestry was not woven. The firm survived this early crisis by commissioning designs from free-lance designers, a move that found favour with the public.

In 1922 Marillier again turned to George Booth for help, and it is owing almost entirely to Booth's patronage at this time that the firm recovered enough to maintain the tapestry weaving workshop for a further eighteen years. Correspondence between Morris & Co. and Booth for the period 1922 to 1926 not only emphasises the importance of Booth's patronage but also gives an insight into the artistic aspirations and business management of Morris & Co. in the twentieth century.⁴

George G. Booth (born 1864) was President of the *Detroit News* and, unlike his contemporary Randolph Hearst, led a quiet life devoted to the distribution of knowledge. His wish and that of his wife, Ellen Scripps Booth, 'to die poor'⁵ was centred on their ambition to found a religious and educational centre. In 1904, land and property for this was bought in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, and over the years

\$12,000,000 was devoted to the project. The area was named Cranbrook, after the birthplace of Booth's father in the south of England, and Booth was pleased to find in the deeds that in 1819 a William Morris had taken land in the township. Five schools and a church were planned for the site and Booth's interest in both historic and modern weaving led to the establishment of a fine Museum collection⁶ and to the development of a weaving school at Cranbrook Academy of Art. In the 1930's this school became a centre for the teaching of design and modern techniques under such influential weavers as Loja Saarinen and Marianne Strengell.

Booth was a life-long follower of William Morris and much admired contemporary British design. In 1917 he became the first President of the Detroit Society of Arts and Crafts and in 1920 the Society housed an exhibition of British Arts and Crafts which included work by Morris & Co. and, under her own name, May Morris. From the exhibition Booth purchased a set of bed-hangings for his own home. Designed by May Morris and embroidered by her, by Mary Newill and by students from Birmingham College of Art, the hangings had been finished in 1916 and were exhibited in the Arts and Crafts Exhibition of that year where a price of £170 was asked for them.⁷ Booth also bought the tapestry *David Instructing Solomon in the Building of the Temple*, which had been woven at Merton Abbey between 1902 and 1903 for an Australian client, the Hon. George Brookman.⁸ Brookman had sold the tapestry back to Morris & Co. shortly before the Detroit exhibition.

In April 1922 Booth was asked if he would be interested in acquiring another panel *The Arming of the King*, designed by Bernard Partridge, which had been woven before outbreak of war but never sold.⁹ Depicting King George V being ceremonially robed and armed by the allegorical figures of Peace, Wisdom, Fortitude and Justice, the tapestry was rather a strange choice to offer an American. The subject matter of the panel, not surprisingly, was not to Booth's taste nor was he impressed when told that the panel had been exhibited at Buckingham Palace 'by the King's command'. Instead he commissioned Morris & Co. to re-weave *The Passing of Venus* tapestry which he had been offered thirteen years before. This tapestry was not destined for Cranbrook and Booth gave it to the Detroit Institute of Arts.

The commission was a turning point for Morris & Co. Not only did it provide valuable work and employment for an extra weaver but it also marked the end of the firm's use of vegetable dyes. The price of £2000 was estimated for the tapestry 'for which we will make an allowance if



This photograph by permission of Christ Church, Cranbrook

David instructing Solomon in the Building of the Temple.

Wool and silk tapestry originally designed by Burne Jones for stained glass in 1883. Woven in 1902–30 and acquired by George Booth in 1922.

the conditions of wages and materials during the period of the work should be found to justify it'. Morris & Co's letter went on to explain 'It is the last great tapestry which we shall loom-make in which the old vegetable dyes used by the Flemish weavers can be employed, because these dyes are no longer obtainable. Madder, which is the chief of them, has gone completely out of cultivation for dyeing and there seems no prospect of it ever being revived as few people other than ourselves were using it. We do not find alizarin substitute nearly so fine in colour or so good. In considering the choice of a Museum tapestry I should consider this a very important point.'¹⁰ Certain modifications were suggested by

both Marillier and Booth to the original design of the tapestry and Booth requested that a larger border of better design than that of the *David* panel be woven.¹¹ Considerable delays were caused before weaving started; the cartoon 'took some time to recover' (presumably mislaid at Merton Abbey since the 1916 showing) and five months elapsed before a suitable border design was agreed. Morris & Co's suggestion that the firm be mentioned in the inscription was turned down by Booth as he believed the word 'company' suggested too much competitiveness. Instead, an inscription from the source of the design, Chaucer's poem '*Le Roman de la Rose*' was chosen.¹²

Although providing hope, Booth's commission did not entirely lift Morris & Co.s tapestry weavers out of danger, and even with an additional order from Eton College for four panels depicting *The Life of St George* (designed by Lady Chilston), Marillier still searched for more work. On completing the weaving of *The Passing of Venus* tapestry he wrote to the Victoria and Albert Museum offering to lend the panel for temporary display, hoping that such publicity would encourage further work. With no prior warning the Museum had no galleries free and had to turn down the offer. Marillier then turned to the press. On December 27th 1924 *The Times* printed an article by him entitled '*The Morris Looms in Danger*' and on January 2nd and 3rd the newspaper printed letters from supporters. W.G. Thomson, the tapestry designer and historian wrote 'It would indeed be nothing less than a national humiliation if the work so brilliantly begun by William Morris, and famed throughout the world should perish through lack of funds'. Alan S. Cole, who had been responsible for the 1887 catalogue of tapestries and embroideries at the Victoria & Albert Museum, advocated state subsidies citing the French Gobelins tapestry works and Sèvres porcelain factory as examples where this had worked. He also touched on the importance of the distribution and use of such works of art; this being carried out officially in France by the Mobilier National. 'We have nothing to correspond with them and do not furnish our public offices, museums and foreign embassies as France does'

On December 27th 1924 Marillier sent his article to George Booth writing 'I should be sorry to close the works, which will be a great hardship, moreover, to the weavers'. Booth replied promptly with an order for two tapestries for his proposed church at Cranbrook. He asked that they should illustrate a number of bible stories encompassed in the title '*Old and New Dispensations*'.

With work now guaranteed for the Merton Abbey weavers Marillier

wrote to Booth to confirm the order and thank him for saving the works. The power of the press was also acknowledged and the March 2nd 1925 edition of *The Times* printed the following letter from Marillier, 'I hope it will please you to know that the article on the Morris tapestry works which you were good enough to publish on December 27th last has resulted in a commission for two very large tapestries for a new American church—Christ Church, Bloomfield Hills, MichiganOther commissions are under negotiation'.

The efforts of George Booth did encourage further commissions, mostly in the home market, and Morris & Co. continued to weave tapestry for a further fifteen years.

NOTES

¹ Apart from cushion covers, settee backs and small panels, larger works included Byam Shaw's *Kings and Queens of England* and a screen panel of heraldic design by the Reverend E. Dorling.

² After leaving Morris & Co. Jean Orage went on to weave tapestries and rugs for a number of designers including Ronald Grierson and Edward McKnight Kauffer.

³ Morris & Co. were shocked by Dicksee's demand of a £50 fee.

⁴ The correspondence is housed in the Cranbrook Archives and a microfilm copy can be studied in the Archive of American Art, New York. I would like to thank Dr Alice Zrebiec of the Metropolitan Museum for telling me of this valuable source.

⁵ 'Editor and Publisher', *The Fourth Estate*, New York, Jan. 7th 1928.

⁶ The collection contains three Flemish tapestries of the fifteenth century, a Brussels panel of the sixteenth century and contemporary American work.

⁷ The Arts and Crafts catalogue lists the names of all the embroideresses. One side panel from the set is illustrated in the *Studio Yearbook of Decorative Art*, 1917.

⁸ A photograph showing the embroidered hangings and tapestry exhibited side by side at the exhibition is illustrated in the *Studio* vol. 38, 1921.

⁹ Lord Kitchener is said to have been involved in trying to acquire the panel for the Palace of Westminster but the War intervened before the purchase was negotiated.

¹⁰ Letter from Marillier to Booth, May 11th 1921.

¹¹ By comparing the 1921 state of the tapestry with its present condition it is clear that Booth had the border removed from the *David* tapestry.

¹² For further details of the commission see Linda Parry, *William Morris Textiles*, 1983. pp. 117–19.