

Jan Marsh, *William Morris and Red House* (London: National Trust Books, 2005), 160pp., 25.00 hbk, illus., ISBN 19054 00012.

Almost as soon as Red House became a National Trust property in 2003 plans were put in place to publish a book on the house. In

November 2004, following two summer openings, a seminar – ‘Red House: Past and Future Lives’ – was held at the Art Worker’s Guild which brought together specialists and those closely associated with the property. Papers were read on specific aspects of the house, its architecture, decoration and garden. Jan Marsh spoke about ‘Life at Red House’, concentrating on the period of the Morrises’ occupation, and Tessa Wild, the National Trust Curator in charge of the house, identified subsequent owners. The day proved extremely useful in gathering together existing knowledge and providing information for any future publication.

By this time the Trust had already approached Jan Marsh to write a book, sensibly recognising that the property’s importance lay not simply in its architecture and decoration but in the social and emotional significance in being the first, short-lived home of William and Jane Morris and as an important early meeting place for what is now described as the Morris set.

As an experienced biographer of members of the group, and in particular of two of the leading figures, Jane Morris and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Jan Marsh was well suited for the task, and the book is more comprehensive than the usual historical survey because of its emphasis on people rather than things. It is recommended reading, easily consumed in one sitting on the evening prior to visiting the house, and compliments the room by room guidebook published by the Trust in 2003.

Red House has featured in all the major Morris biographies since the first, Aymer Vallance’s *William Morris: His Art, his Writings and his Public Life* which was published in 1897. This book, which relied not just on the recollections of others but also visits to the house made by the author in the 1890s, together with J. W. Mackail’s *The Life of William Morris* (1899), which used the reminiscences of close friends (chiefly Georgie Burne-Jones and the notes of her recently deceased husband), are the earliest descriptions available. All published works since that time have used these two accounts, both of which have proved in retrospect to be very valuable but also confusing and, in some instances, inaccurate. Jan Marsh is dismissive of Vallance’s contribution (which is left out of her list of recommended reading) based chiefly on the fact that his book was not authorised by the family, who

were unwilling to help him. But it must be remembered that Jack Mackail had already been approved to complete this task and, as the son in law of Edward and Georgiana Burne-Jones, was considered family. Vallance's account is important for it records the house as an outsider and is not deflected too greatly by the story of the inhabitants. As Vallance was an experienced art critic and journalist it is also written with the benefit of his wide knowledge of the architecture and decorative arts of the time and for this reason alone it should be essential reading.

Throughout the second half of the twentieth century there have been a wealth of articles dedicated to aspects of Red House, with two publications in the final decade devoted to its architecture and interior decoration. These are Ted Hollamby's *Red House* which concentrates on Philip Webb's architectural drawings, published initially by The Architecture Design and Technology Press in 1991 (and repeated as part of Phaidon's series 'Arts and Crafts Houses' 1 in 1999) and *Red House: A Guide* by Ray Watkinson and Ted Hollamby, published by the William Morris Society in 1993.

Marsh's book also benefits significantly from research published since the centenary of Morris's death in 1996. These include publications by Derek Baker and Jill, Duchess of Hamilton, on Morris's gardens, the catalogue of the 1996 Victoria and Albert Museum exhibition and Sheila Kirk's comprehensive architectural biography of Philip Webb. All contain new material concerning Red House and whereas these books do appear in 'Further Reading' their use is not always identified, where appropriate, in the text. Had footnotes not been used in the book this would have been acceptable but a selective crediting of sources is puzzling.

Faced with a wealth of published material (few houses can be so well covered) what does an author include and leave out? The book's avowed intent is the celebration of Red House's move into public ownership, a campaign stretching back to 1935. This admirable aim is achieved very successfully by relating a complicated story in a very readable and interesting manner. The book is also visually attractive and of a format that makes it easy to handle, quite an achievement nowadays. The range of illustrations is good and adds much to the story but some are not tied in or explained in the accompanying text. For instance 'from Charles

Holme's album' is listed in six captions but the album is not explained in the text (more later). One can only surmise that these and other illustrations have been included by a picture researcher without the value of the author's caption. The text, however, more than makes up for these small irritations and has the quality of a good novel.

The first few chapters give a concise account of William and Jane Morris's life up to their move to Upton, in Bexleyheath; the finding of the site, the house's conception and design, building, decoration and occupation. Much of this is familiar but this book also includes a short but interesting survey of Bexley and Bexley Heath (as it was then) in the mid nineteenth century. Despite the author's declaration that 'it is hard to appreciate the compelling attraction of Upton' what follows is an illustrated account of a rather interesting area with bucolic, if unkempt, heath and a range of interesting historic buildings ranging from Lesnes Abbey (medieval), Hall Palace (Tudor), the Danson estate (now seen as one of the most significant British examples of classical architecture and decoration) and Aberleigh Lodge (Victorian) all of which could be found not too far away. The developing High Street and arrival of the railway to Bexley all must have made life there more convenient even if Morris in his time, and the majority of people since then, have judged such 'New Town' developments as retrograde.

Two chapters cover the Morris family's occupation of the house moving from the early exciting years when companionship and decorating and furnishing the house was the chief occupation of the family and their friends ('no protestations only certainty of contentment in each other's society' was how Georgie Burne-Jones described it thirty-five years later), to a more serious period in 1862 brought on by Lizzie Siddal's death, Edward Burne-Jones's illness and Morris's increasing pre-occupation with London and developing the new firm of Morris, Marshall Faulkner & Co. Further developments of the Morris firm included plans, in 1864, for an extension to be built on Red House for the Burne-Jones to occupy. Morris saw this as the final phase of his ambition to move production from London and create his own medieval inspired idyll, living and working in close community with others. With the



death of the Burne-Jones's second son and a re-occurrence of illness in the family they withdrew. Suffering from rheumatic fever at the time the news pushed Morris into deep depression as testified in a recently discovered letter from Philip Webb, found under the floorboards at Red House and discovered too late to be included in this book. In January 1865 Jane fell ill and by Easter she and her husband had decided to leave Red House forever. Four reasons are listed for this: the remoteness of the house and lack of good facilities, such as doctors in the area, the difficulty of commuting for Morris and finally the social isolation felt by both William and Jane in being so far from London. Jan Marsh is right to try to consider Jane's state of mind at the time for it is likely to have been one of the major causes of the move, but to describe her mood as reserved, insecure and weakened by illness displays too sympathetic a view for what appears to be a cooling of her affections for Morris and a restlessness brought on through Rossetti's increasing attentiveness and interest in using her as a model for his work. This is unlikely to have survived had she stayed in Kent.

The chapter 'Red House after Morris' is a real revelation for it lists the subsequent owners of the house until the outbreak of war in 1939 and records many of the changes they made to the house and garden. Of the eight families who lived there after the Morrises, Charles Holme, who resided between 1889 and 1905, is the most significant and interesting. Now famous as the publisher and first editor of *The Studio* magazine, he was also a leading importer of oriental goods both for Arthur Lazenby Liberty and for his own firm in which his partner was Christopher Dresser. Photographs from this period show the house decked like an eastern bazaar, much in line with the fashion of the period. The photographs are from an album recently given to the National Trust by the family of the late Edmund Penning-Rowsell. It is a pity that this generosity is not recorded here. It was during Holme's time at the house that the glass screen was erected in the porch and the many scratched signatures there show how widely and exclusively he entertained.

The penultimate chapter records the period from the end of the Second World War when the house was lovingly looked after and

lived in by three families. These were Dick and Mary Toms and Ted and Doris Hollamby who moved in in 1946 keen to recreate the semi-cooperative living so desired by Morris but never achieved. At a period when Morris was out of fashion the price of the house at £3,500 was just £600 more than when it had been sold to Charles Holme in 1889 and £500 less than the price of the plot and initial construction. In 1956 Jean and David Macdonald took over residency from the Toms. Dick Toms, Ted Hollamby and Jean Macdonald all worked together as architects and anyone who had the privilege of a guided tour of Red House with Ted Hollamby would know how proud he was to describe what he believed to be a direct linear connection with Philip Webb through his work as socially aware architects attached to the LCC. From 1964 Ted and Doris Hollamby and their children took over the entire house. It is thanks to the Toms, the Macdonalds and particularly the Hollambys in the later years that the house is in such good shape today and that their strong public spiritedness allowed them to share it with so many others. It was Ted's request for assistance in securing the future of the house that eventually led to its transfer to public ownership in 2004. The complex and, at times, seemingly impossible route is recorded here stage by stage, providing both a warning and also encouragement to others who find themselves in a similar position.

*Linda Parry*

Pamela Todd, *William Morris and the Arts & Crafts Home* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2005), 192 pp., £22.50 hbk, 217 colour illustrations, ISBN 05005 12523.

Brian D. Coleman, *Historic Arts & Crafts Homes of Great Britain*, (Salt Lake City, Gibbs Smith, 2005), 159 pp., £30.00 hbk, numerous colour illustrations, ISBN 15868 5531X.

Thames and Hudson have added steadily to their stable of books on the Arts and Crafts in recent years. Amongst others there have been *William Morris and the Art of Design*, edited by Diane Waggoner, Elizabeth Cumming and Wendy Kaplan's *The Arts and*