KELMSCOTT MANOR
SOCIETY OF ANTIQUARIES OF LONDON

KM291 – Brass Rubbings in Garden Hall

Contents

Report

These brass rubbings, which now hang in the Garden Hall of Kelmscott Manor, were made by William Morris of several brasses in St Giles's Church, which lies in the village of Great Coxwell, less than 10 miles from Kelmscott. The practice of brass rubbing grew in popularity over the Victorian period, and several suppliers began to produce specialist equipment; HS Richardson's advert in the Art-Union journal in July 1845 offers '*prepared paper*' and '*metallic rubber*', allowing practitioners to gain an '*EXACT FACSIMILE*' of the brass, as opposed the negative image.[1] Morris's rubbings depict a husband and wife, each measuring 18 inches tall, inclined towards each other with their hands in prayer; there is an inscription at the feet of both and their three children are situated below. This differs from the layout of the actual brasses as the children appear below William with Johane on an adjoining slab.

Early gothic brasses tended to depict the dead as recumbent two-dimensional figures, so the attempt at shading here and the posture of the effigies points towards these brasses having been designed towards the end of the medieval period, and they have been dated c.1510.[2] It is unusual for the brasses to be engraved separately, but the overall design and arrangement of the figures is very typical of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century. The female effigy in particular is very typical of the time, as many women from this period are pictured with the same kennel-shaped headdress, belt and fur cuffs. Male brasses tended to reflect the occupation of the deceased and hence were more varied, with some appearing in clerical dress or suits of armour.

A photograph of the house during Morris's lifetime [fig.1], and another taken for *Country Life* in 1921, indicates that they were hanging in their current position between 1895 and 1921, if not before. By 1926, they were hanging on the first-floor landing. Letters from Morris's youth attest to his enthusiasm for brass rubbing; whilst on vacation from Oxford in April 1855, he wrote to his friend Cormell Price detailing the unusual brasses he had discovered in Essex, declaring '*I think there are only two other shrouded brasses in England*'.[3] In the same month he wrote again to say '*I am going a-brassing again some time soon: to Rochester and thereabouts, also to Stoke D'Abernon in Surrey*', the latter housing one of the earliest monumental brasses in the country, dating from the late thirteenth century.[4] His choice of brasses is a testament to his knowledge of the field. A year later in 1856, Edward Burne-Jones recorded '*Topsy and I live together in the quaintest room in all London* [on Upper Gordon Street, Bloomsbury, where they lodged for only a few weeks before moving to Red Lion Square] *hung with brasses of old knights and drawings of Albert Durer*'.[5] However, he was particularly delighted with *these* brasses because they were dedicated to a William and Johane Morys. In a letter to Jane Morris in 1889, Morris notes that he saw the '*brass again'* at Great Coxwell, indicating that he had already discovered the monuments by this time.[6] This William Morys was a *'sumtyme fermer'* who leased the manor of Great Coxwell and its grounds from the Cistercian Abbey of Beaulieu; the family remained here until 1638 when the land was sold to the Coleshill estate.

Morys's fur-edged gown and the purse hanging from his girdle attests to his relative wealth. Brass was largely manufactured in Germany due to its rich deposits of calamine (zinc ore), which is used to

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[1] Richardson, HS, 'Monumental Brasses', in *The Art Journal* Vol.6-7 (1845/2013), p.247 < https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=t_c9AQAAMAAJ&hl=en_GB&pg=GBS.PP1> [Accessed: 9/8/2019]

[2] Bertram, Jerome, *Brasses and Brass Rubbing in England* (Newton Abbot: David & Charles Limited, 1971), p.12

[3] Morris, William, '4: To Cormell Price', in *The Collected Letters of William Morris,* I ed. by Norman Kelvin (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), p.10

[4] Morris, William, '5: To Cormell Price', in *The Collected Letters of William Morris,* I ed. by Norman Kelvin (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), p.11

[5] Mackail, JW, *The Life of William Morris* (New York: Dover Publications, 1995), pp.107-8

[6] Morris, William, '1629: To Jane Morris', in *The Collected Letters of William Morris,* III ed. by Norman Kelvin (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), p.77

create the alloy of zinc and copper. Britain did not produce brass until the 17th century, meaning that the metal had to be imported.[7] The greatest cost associated with commissioning a monumental brass was the initial transportation of the metal; as such, there are a greater concentration of brasses around eastern cities. The connecting Thames would have lessened the cost of transporting the brass to a workshop close to Great Coxwell. Once the brass arrived from Germany, a craftsman would have engraved the design into the metal, then the lines would have been filled with a wax or resin to render the brass level. Some parts of the engraving would have been cut away and filled with brightly coloured paint or enamel, which in the majority of instances has now faded away. Some brasses were commissioned by friends or relatives to celebrate the virtues of the deceased, but the design and inscription could also be stipulated in a person's will. It is likely that this particular brass was actually laid in the church prior to Morys's death, as there is a gap next to the inscription, indicating he had requested that the date of his demise be filled in after the event.

The renewed Victorian interest in monumental brasses stems from the Gothic Revival, a period in which architects and artists attempted to emulate the dominant aesthetic of the Middle Ages; some of its major proponents, such as eminent architect AWN Pugin, even designed bespoke monumental brasses for their contemporaries. Morris trained under the Gothic revivalist architect GE Street between 1855 and 1856 who also designed memorial brasses. This fascination with the medieval was not confined to those with a professional interest however, as is attested to by the number of clubs dedicated to the study of the past that were set up in this period; between 1830 and 1900, at least 38 societies were founded across the country dedicated to antiquarianism and archaeology.[8] There were even societies wholly dedicated to collecting and discussing brass rubbings, the most notable perhaps being the Cambridge University Association of Brass Collectors, which was founded in 1886 and would eventually become a national organisation, the Monumental Brass Society.

The images of monumental brasses likely appealed to Morris's interest in medievalism and romance, however his fondness for them also reflects his appreciation for vernacular history. In his lecture 'The Art of the People' (1879), he explained that *'History (so-called) has remembered the kings because they destroyed; Art has remembered the people because they created'*.[9] Monumental brasses do not only commemorate the elite, but 'cover all social classes from duchesses to small farmers'.[10]

Morris particularly adored Kelmscott and the surrounding countryside because of its vernacular architecture; he declared that in such places, there is 'a full sympathy between the works of man, and the land they were made for'.[11] This belief in the connections between humanity, the structures that they build, and the landscape, inspired his love for the tithe barn at Great Coxwell; according to Sydney Cockerell, Morris believed it to be the '*finest piece of architecture in England*'.[12] However whilst the barn is constructed of Cotswold stone, the structure appears to be modelled on continental designs, as there is no comparable structure in England and it bears the closest resemblance to a barn near Bruges.[13] Nonetheless, he insisted on taking Philip Webb, Frederick Startridge Ellis, and Sydney Cockerell amongst others to see it; the latter noted after the visit, '*we*

[7] Turner, Eric, *An Introduction to Brass* (Ipswich: WS Cowell Limited, 1982), pp.5-7
[8] Dellheim, Charles, *The Face of the Past: The Preservation of the Medieval Inheritance in Victorian England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp.48-49
[9] Morris, William, 'The Art of the People', (1879/?), para. 11 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/morris/works/1882/hopes/chapters/chapter2.htm> [Accessed: 9/8/2019]
[10] Bertram, 1971 p.12
[11] Morris, William, 'The Lesser Arts', (1877/?), para.43 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/morris/works/1882/hopes/chapters/chapter1.htm> [Accessed: 9/8/2019]
[12] Cockerell, Sidney, 'Fn.1', in *The Collected Letters of William Morris,* III ed. by Norman Kelvin (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), p.424
[13] Munby, Julian, 'Vernacular Architecture in Kelmscott', in *William Morris's Kelmscott: Landscape and History* ed. by Alan Crossley, Tom Hassall and Peter Salway (Macclesfield: Windgather Press, 2007), p.82

went on to the little church which has some pretty tracery, & 2 15th c. brasses to William & Jehane [sic?] wyf of William Morys oddly enough'.[14] In Morris's 1889 letter to Jane, he was '*delighted with the barn again*', although complains that the church is '*much smaller than Kelmscott'* and is rather '*funny*'.[15] He reserved some affection for the brass, which he declares '*is really a very pretty one*'. May Morris later agreed that it is *'handsome'*, but questioned hanging it in the lobby, thinking it '*rather a ghostly sort of thing to meet one's own epitaph out walking'*, which perhaps accounts for the movement of the rubbing around the house after her father's death.[16] The church is also '*halfway between Kelmscott and the White Horse'* of Berkshire, which Morris visited every spring; John William Mackail, Morris's first biographer, records that '*the discovery of these monuments gave him extraordinary delight. In spite of his Welsh blood and of that vein of romantic melancholy in him which it is customary to regard as of Celtic origin, his sympathies were throughout with the Teutonic stocks…The very soil of his birth, 'this unromantic, uneventful-looking land of England', he loved with a tempered but deep enthusiasm*'.[17]

L Hyde, Oxford University research intern 2019

[14] Cockerell, 1984 p.424
[15] Morris, 1984 p.77
[16] Morris, May, 'Introduction to Volume XVIII: The Well at the World's End: Volume I', in *The Introductions to The Collected Works of William Morris,* II (New York: Oriole Editions, 1973), p.521
[17] Mackail, 1995 p.13

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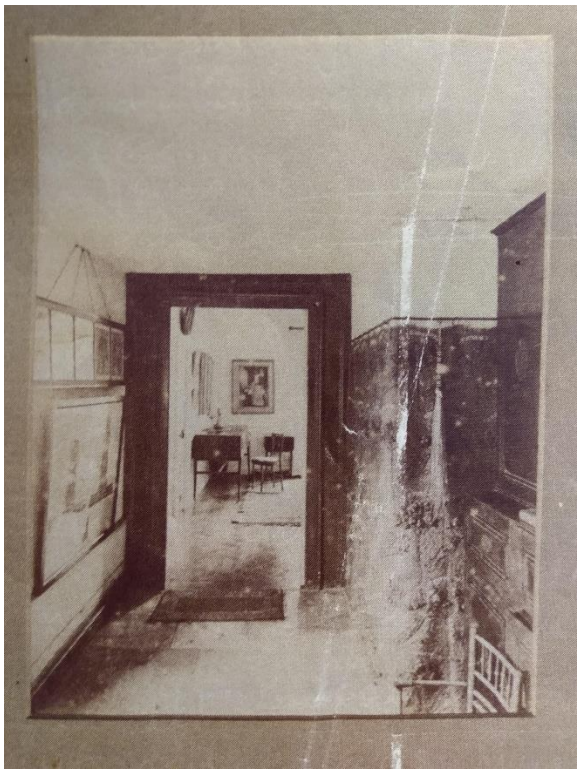
Fig.1



Photograph of the Garden Hall, 1895 (Kelmscott Manor Archive)