



## KM291 BRASS RUBBINGS: Research findings

Morris was keenly interested in brass rubbings from early on in his life, commenting excitedly in a letter to Cormell Price in 1855 ‘*The other day I went ‘a-brassing’ near the Thames on the Essex side: I got two remarkable... one was a Flemish brass of a knight, date 1370, very small; another a brass (very small, with the legend gone) of a priest in his shroud: I think there are only two other shrouded brasses in England*’.<sup>1</sup> Indeed this appears to be one of his earliest interests, for even during his time at Oxford University, where he first met most of ‘The Firm’ – his closest friends and collaborators, he was engaging in this activity. Morris’s biographer Fiona MacCarthy paints an almost comic picture of his hobby consuming his living space, stating how ‘*his rooms at Exeter were gradually filled with brass rubbings*’, and indeed Morris was never one to do things by halves, as the tremendous volume of creations in a range of media through Kelmscott Manor shows.<sup>2</sup> This passion continued when he came to Kelmscott, and he would still often venture to churches to examine and take rubbings of their decorations.

Consequently, when he found a brass of ‘Willm Morys, su[m]tyme farmer of cokyswell’ and of ‘Johane the wyf of Willm Morys’ at the church at Little Coxwell, not far from Kelmscott Manor, it was a source of great delight, both artistically and personally. How excited Morris was by this discovery can be shown from the frequent mentions of it in the accounts of Morris’s friends and family. May Morris, his daughter, recalls:

‘One time when my father and mother were taking some friends to see the famous barn at Great Coxwell they went over the church, and they made the rather starting discovery of a handsome late fifteenth century brass of a man and his wife.... It can be imagined that this gave great delight. Father took a rubbing of the brass later, and there it is, framed and hanging in one of the lobbies of Kelmscott – rather a ghostly sort of thing to meet one’s own epitaph out walking.’<sup>3</sup>

William Morris appears to have shown not just the rubbing, but the original brass, to other visitors, with his librarian and secretary, Sydney Carlyle Cockerell mentioning in an account of his first visit to Kelmscott Manor on 10<sup>th</sup> August 1892 ‘*we went on to the little church which has some pretty tracery, & 2 15<sup>th</sup> c. brasses to William Morys & Jehane wyf of William Morys, oddly enough*’.<sup>4</sup> Morris also comments in a letter to ‘*dear Janey*’ on 21<sup>st</sup> June 1889 ‘*we saw his [Willm Morys’s] brass again*’, showing that it was not just a passing amusement, but something that Morris got continuing pleasure from, and was also keen to know more about the original Morys. His discovery that ‘*William Morris it seems was Lord of the Manor there*’ shows a keen interest in the history of those involved.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Letter from Walthamstow to Cormell Price in April 1855. Found in: Henderson. P. (1967) *William Morris – His Life, Work and Friends*. Thames and Hudson. P25.

<sup>2</sup> MacCarthy. F. (1994) *William Morris*. Faber and Faber. London. P61

<sup>3</sup> Morris. M., (1913) Introduction to *William Morris – The Collected Works, Volume VIII*. Longmans Green and Company, London. Page XXVII

<sup>4</sup> (1996) *The Collected Letters of William Morris – Volume Three*. Ed. Kelvin. N. Princeton University Press. Princeton. P424. Appendix 1.

<sup>5</sup> (1996) *The Collected Letters of William Morris – Volume Three*. Ed. Kelvin. N. Princeton University Press. Princeton. P77

The brasses that so delighted Morris are still visible in St Giles' Church, in Great Coxwell. Mackail hypothesises that the reason that Morris found them was because they lay halfway between Kelmscott Manor, and the White Horse Hill of the Berkshire Downs, which he made a 'regular yearly pilgrimage' to see, delighting in the rural buildings, fields and peace, which reminded him of the Medieval life that he was so fascinated and inspired by.<sup>6</sup>

It has even been speculated by the William Morris Society that the brass directly influenced some of his design work. Mr R. C. H. Briggs, secretary and trustee for the William Morris Society went as far as saying that there was 'little doubt that Morris, when making his designs, remembered the old brasses at Great Coxwell.' Because of 'a leaf that fills in the line' on the rubbing showing a startling 'resemblance between the form and employment of this and one of Kelmscott Press leaf ornaments, as well as between the flower on the brass and the first watermark for Kelmscott Handmade paper, leaves.'<sup>7</sup> Whether this was the direct inspiration is unknown, but the discovery certainly fitted in with the love of the Medieval that Morris had, and is found throughout his creations. In closer examination of the brass the words:

*“Here lieth Willm Morys  
su[m]tyme fermer of Cokyfwell on whose foule  
ihu have mercy amen*

*here lieth Johane the Wyf of Willm Morys  
on whose foule ihu. Have mercy amen”*

are visible, linking the brass to this period that William Morris so adored and found inspiration from. Underneath are three praying children – the two sons and daughter of Willm and Johane Morys – another link to William Morris who shared a close relationship with his children, May and Jenny.

It is clear that the brass had great sentimental value to Morris, and it appears in many accounts and images of Kelmscott, including two images, from c.1895 and 1921, showing the rubbings in the North Hall as they are now [see figure 5] and in the upstairs passage as mentioned in May Morris's memorandum of the contents of Kelmscott Manor in 1926 [see figure 6].

S. Fraser, Oxford University research intern 2018  
© Society of Antiquaries

---

<sup>6</sup> Mackail. J. W. (1995) *The Life of William Morris*. Dover Publications Inc, New York.

<sup>7</sup> Briggs. R. C. H. (1959) *Annual Report of the William Morris Society*. London. Found in: Henderson. P. (1967) *William Morris – His Life, Work and Friends*. Thames and Hudson. London.

ILLUSTRATIONS

FIGURE ONE: Brass of Willm Morys (taken 8/8/18)

FIGURE TWO: Brass of Johane Morys (taken 8/8/18)



FIGURE THREE: Brass of Willm and Johane Morys in St Giles' Church, Great Coxwell (taken 8/8/18).



FIGURE FOUR: Brass of Willm and Johane Morys' children praying found underneath their brass figures (taken 8/8/18)



FIGURE FIVE: Looking from the North Hall into the Panelled Room, c.1895  
Kelmscott Manor Archive

FIGURE SIX: May Morris' *Memorandum of the Contents of Kelmscott Manor*, Document attached to will, 1926

- Embroidered wool hanging [Red House]
- Three Eastern rugs
- Brass rubbing from Great Coxwell Church
- 2 "Webb" candlesticks
- Pearson De Morgan copperdish
- Graffito chest

FIGURE SIX

# BIBLIOGRAPHY

## PRIMARY SOURCES

May Morris' *Memorandum of the Contents of Kelmscott Manor*, Document attached to will, 1926

## SECONDARY SOURCES

Briggs. R. C. H. (1959) *Annual Report of the William Morris Society*. London.

CountryLifelimages.co.uk

Henderson. P. (1950) *The Letters of William Morris to his Family and Friends*. Longmans, Green and Co, London.

Henderson. P. (1967) *William Morris – His Life, Work and Friends*. Thames and Hudson. London.

Kelvin. N. (ed.) *The Collected Letters of William Morris*. (1996) Volumes One, Two, Three, and Four. Princeton University Press, Princeton.

MacCarthy. F. (1994) *William Morris*. Faber and Faber. London.

Mackail. J. W. (1995) *The Life of William Morris*. Dover Publications Inc, New York.

Morris. M., (1913) Introduction to *William Morris – The Collected Works, Volume VIII*. Longmans Green and Company, London.

Rodgers. D. (1996) *William Morris at Home*. Ebury Press, London.