

Spring Outing

Red House and Greenwich

SATURDAY 18th MAY

PATRICIA HOOPER-SHERRATT

The Red House was the only house built by William Morris, and it embodies many of his ideas about art and life. It was also the first independent architectural work of his friend Philip Webb. The tiles in the garden porch are decorated with the medieval form of the letter M (for Morris) together with his Latin Motto 'Ars Longa Vita Brevis' meaning 'Life is short, but art endures'.

Morris found the site for his new home in the autumn of 1858 in the open country above the Cray valley, in a landscape of orchards and oast houses. The place also had deep historical resonances, Chaucer's pilgrims would have passed nearby on their way to Canterbury. The garden porch was named the 'Pilgrim's Rest' and the tiny hamlet of Upton (now part of Bexleyheath) was only a short railway journey away from central London. The total cost including building the house was £4,000, money that Morris had inherited from his father.

William Morris married Jane Burden in 1859, they moved into Red House in June 1860 when the work of decorating and furnishing could begin. The furnishings were brought with Morris, such as,

antique ironwork, armour, enamels and manuscripts he had collected in France, also the famous 'Prioress's Tale' wardrobe (now in the Ashmolean Museum), which Burne-Jones and Webb had made him as a wedding present. Eventually, Morris was finding difficulty in finding what he wanted to furnish Red House which led to the foundation in April 1862 of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co.

William and Jane Morris had two children Jenny born in 1861 and May the following year. Morris proved a devoted father to his 'littles', as he called them, but inevitably their arrival marked an end to the carefree early days at Red House.

By 1864 the Morris firm had outgrown its first premises in Red Lion Square and Morris had grown weary of the daily commute into London, so considered



Redhouse, May 2013 © Patricia Sherratt

moving the whole business out to Bexleyheath. Morris and Jane were also both unwell and their marriage was growing increasingly strained. In 1865 Morris abandoned Red House and with it his dream.

In 1875 Morris reorganized Morris & Co. under his own control and transformed it into both an artistic and commercial success. Two years later he helped to found the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings. Morris's campaign to save Britain's greatest architecture - both grand and humble - directly inspired the birth of the National Trust in 1895 and still guides its work today.

From 1890 to 1903 the house belonged to Charles Holme, a Bradford textile manufacturer who in 1893 financed the setting up of *The Studio*, an influential magazine that supported the Arts and Crafts movement. From 1903 to 1920 Red House was home to the parents of Edward Maufe, the architect of Guildford Cathedral, whose early work was strongly influenced by Arts and Crafts ideals. A later editor of *The Studio*, Alfred Horsfall, owned Red House from 1927 - 35 during which period the magazine devoted a special issue to Morris's work.

During the Second World War the house was occupied by the National Assistance Board, which filled the house with ration books. Red House had reached its lowest ebb by 1952, when it was bought by Dick and Mary Toms, in partnership with Ted and Doris Hollamby, for £3,500; £500 less than it had cost Morris a century before. The two families lived happily together at Red House until 1957, when the Tomses were followed by David and Jean



Macdonald. They all contributed to a pragmatic, but respectful restoration of the house. In 1964 the Hollambys became sole owners, and over next four decades they welcomed the increasing number of Morris enthusiasts who made the pilgrimage to Bexleyheath.

In the late 1990's the Red House Trust was established with the aim of securing a sympathetic future use for the property after the Hollambys' death. Ted died in 1999 and Doris in 2003. Then their children decided to sell the house to the National Trust to ensure its permanent preservation. It was acquired with generous assistance from benefactors, the William Morris Society and Bexley Council. The 'Friends of Red House' who have helped keep the place open for several years, continue to act as guides and other volunteers.

We left the Red House at 1 pm and went onto Greenwich, where everyone had free time to do whatever they chose. After having lunch we found that there were plenty of places to visit. A few of us visited the Fan Museum, which was fantastic. Others visited the Cutty Sark, the Maritime Museum, the vibrant market and other historical buildings. We came away tired but agreed that it was well worth the visit.