



Arts and Crafts gardens are distinguished by their exceptional architectural detailing, exemplary craftsmanship and exquisite flower borders. So it's no surprise that William Morris played such a considerable role when it came to realising the dynamic between house and garden design. By Judith B Tankard.

Morris's earthly paradise



The well court in the garden at Red House became a fragrant enclosure where family and friends could enjoy their afternoon tea. *Tea at Red House*, watercolour, 1907. By Walter Crane

The Arts and Crafts movement championed the unity of the arts, in which the house, the furnishing of its interiors, and the surrounding garden were considered a whole. The parallel revival of the art of garden design came into play at a time when architects not only saw to every detail of the house and its interiors, but routinely laid out the gardens. With their neatly clipped hedges and ordered geometry, these gardens harked back to the England of the 16th and 17th centuries. Gardens designed by Arts and Crafts architects and their collaborators were intimate in scale, with soothing colours and textures. They harmonized perfectly with the house and were often distinguished by individualistic architectural components, such as garden houses, dovecotes, and pergolas, all constructed

using the local materials of the region.

Morris's first biographer, J W Mackail, observed that although Morris always prided himself on his knowledge of gardening, he doubted whether "he was ever seen with a spade in his hands." Gardens never strayed far from his mind. His two country homes – Red House and Kelmscott Manor – as well as his workshops at Merton Abbey abounded with the flowers, fruits, and birds that formed the core of the Firm's famous wallpapers, textiles, and tapestries. Morris's gardens were a testament to his fascination with the Middle Ages and among the earliest examples of the rage for old-fashioned gardens. Morris, in fact, dedicated his life to medieval times, from its romance and visual imagery to the traditional handcrafts and

medieval-inspired guilds that made them.

During an idyllic childhood in the country, on the edge of Epping Forest in Essex, Morris developed a lifelong passion for all aspects of nature. In the early 1860s, he began designing wallpapers, choosing as his vocabulary the garden and meadow flowers, fruits, and vines he knew as a youth. The names he chose for his patterns, *Blackthorn*, *Daisy*, *Eyebright*, *Honeysuckle*, *Larkspur*, *Pomegranate*, and scores of others, attest to his devotion to the natural world.

In 1861 Morris founded the firm Morris, Marshall, Faulkner and Co to produce simple, yet elegant home furnishings such as hand-printed wallpapers, fabrics, furniture, and decorative arts as an antidote to the machine-made, overly ornate Victorian pieces – vestiges of the Great Exhibition of 1851 – that he abhorred. In its heyday, the firm produced an exhaustive range of wallpapers, fabrics, tapestries, carpets, furniture, tiles, stained glass, and metalwork, all with characteristic medieval-inspired floral designs. In the end, Morris's legacy as a pattern designer outlasted his reputation as a poet and socialist; many of the individual patterns remain in production today. His reverence for old buildings, traditional crafts, and the beauty of the English countryside inspired generations of followers, among them Gertrude Jekyll, Ernest Gimson and the Barnsley brothers, Robert Lorimer, C F A Voysey, and M H Baillie Scott, who would form the nucleus of the Arts and Crafts movement. Each designer would leave his or her own distinctive mark upon architecture and garden design of the period.

The aberration of carpet-bedding

Morris's thoughts on gardens and flowers can be found in some of his writings, and not surprisingly he had strong opinions. He railed against the popularity of florists' flowers, with all their natural traits bred out of them. "When the florists fell upon the rose [which Morris regarded as the queen of flowers] . . . they strove for size and got it, a fine specimen of a florist's rose being about as big as a moderate Savoy cabbage." They "improved" the scent, but "missed the very essence of the rose's being. . . they threw away the exquisite subtlety of form, delicacy of texture, and sweetness of colour." He also cautioned against double flowers and other tokens of artificiality, such as carpet-bedding ("an aberration of the human mind"), as well as the misuse of plant curiosities that were more appropriate for botanical gardens than home gardens. He also had definite ideas about the use of colour in gardens. "Flowers in masses are mighty strong colour, and if not used with a great deal of caution are very destructive to pleasure in gardening," he wrote. Some flowers, such as scarlet geraniums and yellow calceolaria, were simply "bad" and when planted profusely showed that "even flowers can be thoroughly ugly."

Robinson and Jekyll: two prophets of Arts and Crafts garden design

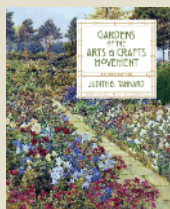


Arts and Crafts gardens might have been little more than a curious trend had it not been for William Robinson (1838-1935) and Gertrude Jekyll (1843-1932). Near contemporaries, their careers ran along parallel lines. Each possessed an exceptional knowledge of horticulture and each wrote more than a dozen important books, but their backgrounds and personalities were entirely different. Born in Ireland of unconventional parentage, Robinson was a shrewd businessman, while Jekyll, who was born in the more genteel environment of London's Mayfair, was an artist at heart. Like William Morris's Red House, their homes expressed their individuality and the fruits of their labours. Robinson's Gravetye Manor in West Sussex was Elizabethan in origin and at one time surrounded by a thousand acres of bucolic fields and woodlands; Jekyll's Munstead Wood in Surrey was a more modest affair, fifteen acres of grounds enveloping a modern cottage designed by Edwin Lutyens.

Robinson was considered the prophet of wild gardening and an unswerving advocate for the cultivation of hardy plants at a time when bedding-out with tender annuals was the accepted practice in British gardens. Jekyll's reputation rests equally on her writings and her practical work as a garden designer, while Robinson's legacy lies primarily in the incomparable array of publications he either wrote or edited. His two most important books – *The Wild Garden* (1870) and *The English Flower Garden* (1883) – were perennial favourites among many generations of gardeners, and the various magazines that he edited held a wide appeal to amateur and professional gardeners alike.

More recently, the gardens at Gravetye have been fully revitalised in 'luxurious abandon' by head gardener Tom Coward, who studied at Great Dixter, one of England's most important gardens and another mecca for Arts and Crafts enthusiasts. Now a luxury country house hotel, Gravetye is a monument to Robinson's ideals (gravetyemanor.co.uk, Garden Tours take place on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, starting at 11am).

Jekyll's home, Munstead Wood, can be considered the perfect expression of the symbiotic nature of house and garden. The character of Munstead Wood was lost after Jekyll's death in 1932, but her many books, articles, and photographs serve to keep its significance alive today. The house, principal gardens, and woodlands have been in sympathetic hands for many years. The gardens were substantially rehabilitated in the 1990s, and they continue to be refreshed. Jekyll's distinctive shrubbery borders, main flower border, spring garden, and seasonal colour borders bloom once again. (munstead.org.uk, Garden Tours strictly by appointment only contact@munsteadwood.org.uk).



Gardens of the Arts and Crafts Movement by Judith B Tankard is published by Timber Press (£27, from bookdepository.com). An art historian specialising in landscape history, Judith received an MA in art history from the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, and taught at the Landscape Institute of Harvard University for more than twenty years.

Above: In the belief that his gardens were 'full of pictures', Robinson invited many noted landscape painters to paint them: *West Paved Garden, Gravetye Manor*, watercolour, early 1900s. By Beatrice Parsons



Writing in 1879, Morris presaged ideas later promoted by other reformers, notably William Robinson and Gertrude Jekyll. Morris's ideas about the essence of a garden, rather than his thoughts about flowers, provided a credo for garden design theory that spilled over into the early 1900s. In *Hopes and Fears for Art*, Morris wrote: "Large or small, it should look both orderly and rich. It should be well fenced from the outside world. It should by no means imitate either the wilfulness or the wildness of Nature, but should look like a thing never to be seen except near a house. It should, in fact, look like a part of the house. It follows from this that no private pleasure-garden should be very big, and a public garden should be divided and made to look like so many flower-closes in a meadow, or a wood, or amidst the pavement."

Red House: midsummer lilies and autumn sunflowers

Morris's ideas about domestic architecture, interior design, and gardens coalesced at Red House, his country home near Bexleyheath,



Kent. Designed by Webb in 1859, it was the architect's first independent architectural commission and a new home for Morris and his bride, Jane. The couple lived at Red House for only five years before Morris was forced to sell it after running into financial difficulties that jeopardized his firm.

Today Red House symbolizes the values that Morris honoured most: honesty and beauty. It is also considered the first modern country house, representative of a new approach to house and garden design. Sited in an orchard and meadow, the house and garden are inseparable. "Red House garden, with its long grass walks, its midsummer lilies and autumn sunflowers, its wattled rose-trellises inclosing richly-flowered square garden plots, was then as unique as the house it surrounded," wrote Mackail in 1899. Fiona MacCarthy, Morris's modern biographer, suggested that the garden was even more influential than the house. May Morris, the Morris' younger daughter, remembered "the garden that graced this pleasant home [as] characteristic, so happily English in its sweetness

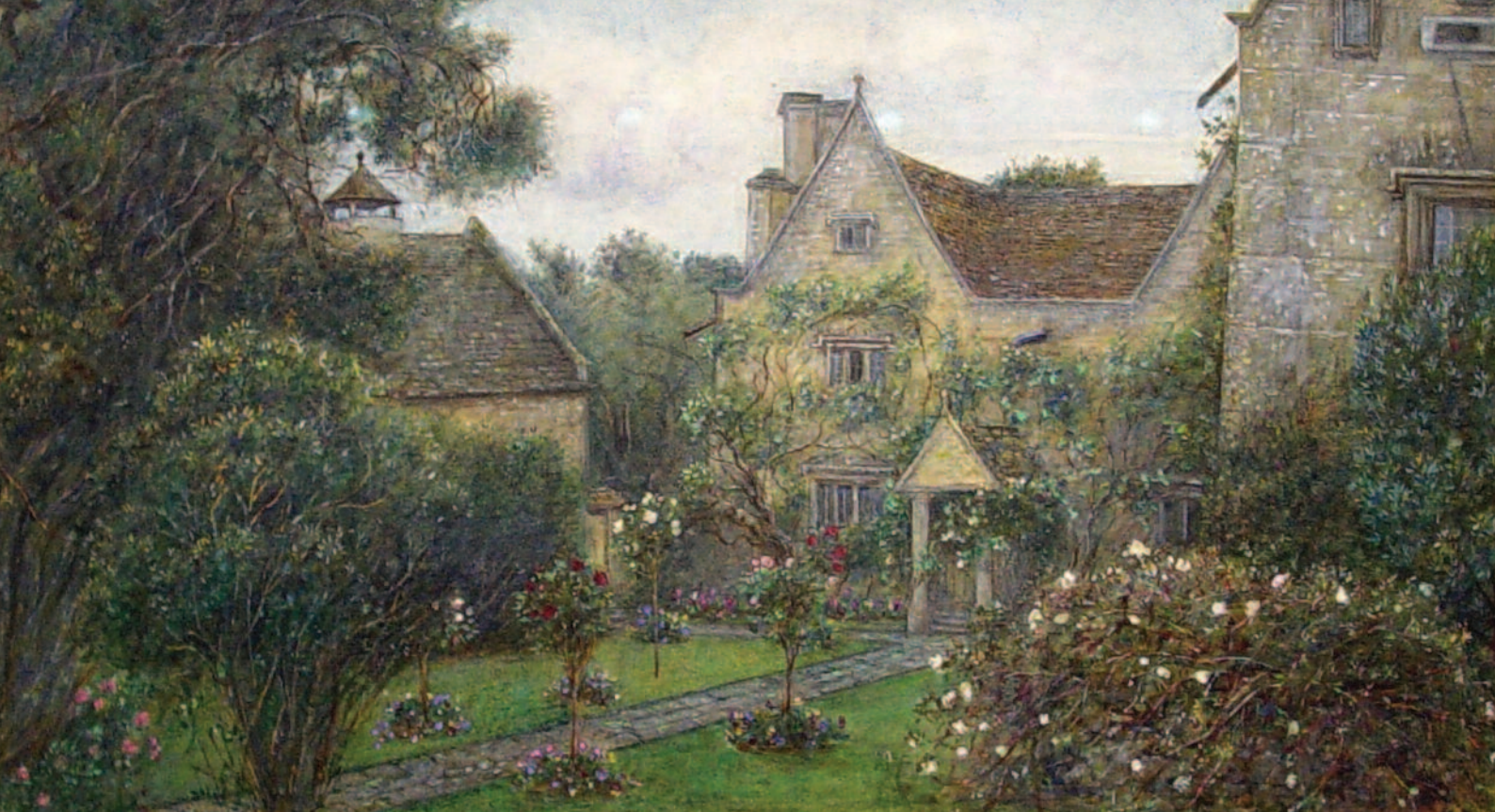
and freshness, with its rose-hedges and lavender and rosemary borderings to the flower-beds, its alley and bowling green, and the orchard-walks among the apple-trees." Another observer described the garden as "vividly picturesque and uniquely original . . . divided into many squares, hedged with sweet-briar or wild rose, each enclosure with its own particular show of flowers."

This medieval-inspired pleasure garden, filled with gnarled old fruit trees and a subtle selection of simple flowers, was a far cry from the typical parterre gardens of late-Victorian-era estates filled with the vividly coloured annuals that Morris loathed. In contrast, the garden at Red House harked back to a flowery medieval *hortus conclusus*, with enclosure hedges or trellises, straight paths, and profusions of traditional herbs, flowers, and fruits. Such gardens served as a source of inspiration for the Firm's renowned tapestries with their minutely detailed floral backgrounds. Morris's garden was basically a large square, subdivided into four spaces surrounded by wattle fence, similar to those

The flowers and foliage growing in Morris's gardens inspired his designs. Above left: *Pomegranate*, wallpaper, 1866. Above right: *Blackthorn*, printed cotton, 1892. Both block-printed in distemper colours. Inscriptions: printed in right margin Morris & Co. Both by William Morris.

depicted in medieval illuminated books. It was an earthly paradise, an oasis meant for practicality, enjoyment, and seclusion, rather than ostentatious display.

Red House was profoundly influential in its time, inspiring Jekyll, for example, in the design of the interiors of her home at Munstead Wood nearly forty years later. German architect, author and diplomat Hermann Muthesius, perhaps best known for promoting many of the ideas of the English Arts and Crafts movement in Germany, stated that Red House stood "at the threshold of the development of the modern English house," while Rossetti thought it more of a poem than a house. A picturesque Gothic cottage, built of red brick laid in English Bond, with a steeply sloping roof and pointed gables, the exterior belies its light and airy interiors. Behind the small-paned windows lay whitewashed walls, exposed brick,



red-tiled floors, plain rush-seated chairs, painted cupboards, and all the handmade furnishings that would inspire the formation of Morris's firm. In all, it was living proof of his insatiable thirst for design reform in the domestic arts.

Red House is also remarkable because the house and garden were conceived as an integrated unit. A romantic retreat, the house nestles into a surrounding orchard with hedged enclosures demarking the boundaries of the garden. As Mackail remarked, "The building had been planned with such care that hardly a tree in the orchard had to be cut down; apples fell in at the windows as they stood open on hot autumn nights." Roses clambered up the side of the house, and Webb's fanciful well house with its conical red-tiled roof, which gives so much character to Red House, solidified the relationship between the house and garden. Surrounded by trellises covered with roses, white jasmine, and honeysuckle, the well court became a fragrant enclosure where family and friends could enjoy their afternoon tea. Webb's detailed drawing of the trellis in the original plans for Red House may have inspired Morris's earliest wallpaper design, *The Trellis*, in November 1862, for which Webb drew the birds. Even though the outlines of Morris's garden and some of the original fruit trees still survive, the essence of his paradise garden can best be appreciated in the company's legacy of pattern designs and tapestries.

Kelmscott Manor: a perfect paradise

After leaving Red House, followed by years of living in smoke-choked London, Morris was again able to satisfy his yearnings for a summer place in the country. In 1871 he found an old house about thirty miles from Oxford on the upper reaches of the Thames that would become synonymous with his ideals. Located in a tiny village near Lechlade, Kelmscott Manor is a late-

16th century Tudor manor house built of grey limestone, with roofs covered in heavy stone slates and a picturesque farm enclosure replete with a dovecote. He acquired the lease in June that year but never actually owned the house. Morris reminisced lovingly about Kelmscott in 1895, remarking on what went into the making of an old house "grown up out of the soil" and the lives of those who lived there before him. He extolled the "sense of delight of meadow and acre and wood and river . . . a liking for making materials serve one's turn . . . and a little grain of sentiment."

In his pithy comments about gardens, Morris observed that "Many a good house both old and new is marred by the vulgarity and stupidity of its garden, so that one is tormented by having to abstract in one's mind the good building from the nightmare of 'horticulture' which surrounds it." Not so at Kelmscott, where "the garden, divided by old clipped yew hedges, is quite unaffected and very pleasant." In a letter to his mother, Rossetti spoke of the garden as "a perfect paradise." The walled garden was filled with flowers familiar from Morris's pattern designs, and beyond there was a meadow filled with bluebells, apple blossoms, and birdsong; rooks in the elm trees; blackbirds in the garden; and doves on the roof.

The most memorable evocation of Kelmscott is in the closing chapters of *News From Nowhere*, when the wayfarer journeys by riverboat from Hampton Court to Kelmscott: "My hand raised the latch of a door in the wall, and we stood presently on a stone path which led up to the old house . . . My companion gave a sigh of pleased surprise and enjoyment . . . for the garden between the wall and the house was redolent of the June flowers, and the roses were rolling over one another with that delicious super-abundance of small, well-tended gardens which at first sight takes away all thought from the beholder save

A perfect example of 'that delicious super-abundance of small, well-tended gardens'. *Kelmscott Manor*, watercolour, c.1890. By Marie Spartali Stillman. A friend of Jane Morris, Stillman was a regular visitor at Kelmscott Manor. She frequently sent her work to the USA, where views of Kelmscott Manor sold well.

that of beauty.

The garden was to be savoured from both inside and outside the house. From one of the rooms of Kelmscott, one could "catch a glimpse of the Thames clover meadows and the pretty elm-crowned hill over in Berkshire." From another place in the house, one could admire the sharp turn of the gables (the house has seventeen), the stone barn, sheds, and the dovecote. Today those same amenities await the visitor at Kelmscott Manor, although the interiors are not arranged as they were in Morris's day; they were, in fact, quite spartan. Morris thought that Kelmscott embodied the best of England, its countryside, architecture, and gardens.

Merton Abbey: roses climbing the walls

Morris, who died in October 1896, is buried nearby in the Kelmscott churchyard. One hopes that the house and garden brought him much pleasure in his lifetime. His workshops at Merton Abbey, on the River Wandle in Surrey, had equally pleasant surroundings. "His factory [was] a scene of cheerful, uncramped industry, where toil looks like pleasure, where flowers are blooming in windows, and sunshine and fresh air brighten the faces of artist and mechanic." Roses climbed the ruined abbey walls and a kitchen garden was filled with wild strawberries and plants used for dyes for his textiles. But Red House and Kelmscott Manor above all laid the foundations for the Arts and Crafts approach to home and garden making, namely the essential relationship between house and garden and the reverence for vernacular building arts. 🌹