

March 2020 - 'Boat Race Day'

AFTERWORD



The Boat Race, 1892 – Hammersmith & Fulham Archives

Note: William Morris's house is the largest property with the brilliant white door surround.

Why Boat Race Day?

David Parr can be linked to William Morris through his employer Frederick Leach, who was the proprietor of Morris's preferred decorating company. They worked on some of Morris's most prestigious commissions, of which one was an interior designed around a series of panels painted by Morris's friend and collaborator, Edward Burne-Jones.

Through researching Morris, I learnt that, upon moving to Hammersmith in 1878, he held an annual Boat Race Day party. The race was staged to coincide with the incoming tide. Therefore, it wasn't held on a fixed day each year. In the eighteen years between Morris taking on the house and his death in 1896, the race often took place within days of his birthday.

Photographic and documented evidence shows that the race attracted vast numbers of spectators even in Morris's day.

David Parr and his employer, Frederick Leach, were Cantabrigians. Morris and his friends, many of whom became his collaborators and business associates, had studied at Oxford. Therefore, the rivalry between the two universities must have given rise to some friendly banter, especially in the run up to the Boat Race. I like to think that Parr and Leach earned themselves an invite to Morris's Boat Race Day party on at least one occasion, but I have no evidence of this.

When I proposed this story to Tamsin Wimhurst, Head Trustee of the David Parr House, neither of us could have foreseen that the 2020 Boat Race, which was due to take place on 29th March, would be cancelled due to the coronavirus outbreak.

Some of the details I used in my story came from a photograph I found in Fiona MacCarthy's biography of William Morris (see top of this document). It was taken in 1892, just a year after my story is set.

At the beginning of March, I was taken aback to learn that Fiona MacCarthy had died on 29th February 2020. Given how long I had held her book and poured over the photograph, I was saddened by the news.

(MacCarthy also wrote biographies of Edward Burne-Jones and, most recently, Walter Gropius, founder of the Bauhaus, who incorporated Morris's values into the school's mission statement and designed Impington Village College.)



Hammersmith on Boat Race Day – Walter Greaves
c. 1862 – Tate collection

Walter Greaves (1846 – 1930) was the son of a Chelsea boat builder and waterman, who had been J. M. W. Turner's boatman.

In 1863, Greaves and one of his brothers met James Abbott McNeill Whistler. They boated the American artist up and down the Thames enabling him to capture views from the river. The Greaves brothers became his studio assistants and pupils, forming a twenty-year association. Most notably, the brothers helped Whistler to decorate 'The Peacock Room' for the shipping magnate Frederick Leyland in his Kensington townhouse. His heirs sold the room to the industrialist Charles Lang Freer. Upon Freer's death, in 1919, the room was installed in the Freer Gallery of Art, part of the Smithsonian in Washington D. C.



Having chosen the theme for the ‘March’ story, which year would best illustrate the times in which David Parr lived in or would provide interesting material?

For a while I considered basing the story around the ‘dead heat’ of 1877 in which boat race judge, John Phelps, who was over seventy and blind in one eye, had to determine which boat came first without the aid of finishing posts. As his verdict led to claims and counter claims* and spectators maintaining that their crew had won, the race organisers couldn’t afford another repeat and ensured finishing posts were erected before the next race.

(* One scurrilous rumour suggested John Phelps had been found drunk under a bush.)

In 1888, the boat race fell on William Morris’s birthday (24th March). The favourites, Cambridge, won by seven lengths, which must have dampened his celebrations. According to authors G. C. Drinkwater & T. R. B. Sanders, the Dark Blues "...did not develop into a good crew" and "...never looked like possible winners", whilst the Light Blues "...had a surplus of excellent material". Morris might have consoled himself that, overall, Oxford were still ahead by twenty-three wins, against Cambridge’s twenty-one.

It’s worth noting that the day before the race, William McGregor, who was associated with his local football club Aston Villa, had visited London to discuss the establishment of a football league.

In January 2020, as the UK was being battered by storms and the Corvid-19 virus was still a (seemingly) safe distance away, I settled on 1891 because Briton had just got through the worst winter on record with a continuous cold spell from 25th November 1890 to 22nd January 1891, therein eleven continuous ice days. Kent and Surrey recorded minimum temperatures of minus 17.8c and parts of Lincolnshire had snow 8 – 19” deep.

William Morris was, nevertheless, able to travel to Cambridge on 11 December 1890, where he gave a speech at Trinity College on the protection of ancient buildings. Yet, he must have

been mindful of the plight of others as, on 23rd December, he sent £5 to be distributed among the poor of the village of Kelmscott (where he had rented a second home).

Throughout December there was little sunshine because of persistent cloud or freezing fog, with parts of London recording no sunshine at all. Rivers, lakes and canals froze to the depth of several inches.

In stark contrast, Cambridge recorded a temperature of 18.9c on 27th February.

After a spell of mild weather, March brought the Great Blizzard. Between 9th and 13th March southern Britain was disrupted by snow drifts and severe storms off the South coast, with the loss of 220 lives. Trains were caught in snow drifts and some 14 ships were lost and their crews perished.

After another spell of mild weather, the month of May brought more snow on Whit Monday.

It would be interesting to find out how F. R. Leach & Son's work commitments were affected from David Parr's notebook.

One thing is certain, William Morris, Edward Burne-Jones, Frederick Leach and David Parr had all survived the deadly influenza pandemic of 1898-1890.

The outbreak reached Tomsk in Russia on 15th October 1898 and St. Petersburg on 27th October. By 17th November 1889 it had reached Paris, presumably by means of railway links from St. Petersburg, as it didn't reach Vienna and Berlin until 30th November. By December 1889 it had crossed to the British Isles.

There were recurrences: March – June 1891, November 1891 – June 1892, winter 1893–1894 and early 1895.

The flu pandemic claimed one million lives worldwide.

Match Making & Matchgirls



The dangers inherent in some industries were either ignored or slow to be addressed by management as they were not prepared to sacrifice profitability. An example of this is match making, whether in a factory setting or as a cottage industry. Even though (less toxic) red phosphorous was discovered in the 1840s, the match making industry continued to use white phosphorus because it allowed matches to be struck on any surface to produce a flame. Workers suffered from 'phossy jaw' (phosphorus necrosis of the jaw) and other related symptoms. Workers became severely disfigured and there was a mortality rate of 20% in recorded cases, yet the use of white phosphorous in the production of matches didn't become illegal until the end of December 1910.

Aside from the dangers, match makers had to work a fourteen-hour day, they had to pay for some of the materials they used as part of their work and, even though they were paid a pittance, they suffered financial penalties for even the slightest infringement, which was taken off their pay at source. Things came to a head in 1888, when the workers of the Bryant & May company, who were predominantly young women and girls, went on strike, which led to some improvements in their working conditions.

In 1891 (the year my story is set), the Salvation Army opened its own factory which paid higher wages and used red phosphorous. Supporters of the Matchgirls' cause ensured its financial viability. Unfortunately, a decade later, its factory was forced to close as sales had slumped.

(Whilst, strictly, I refer to a match seller in my story, rather than a match maker, see Wikipedia's excellent on-line article on the 'Matchgirl's Strike', which goes into more detail.)



The Doctor – Luke Fildes

1891 – Tate Gallery, London

There were some hard-hitting social activists in Victorian Britain who tried to stem exploitation. As for William Morris and his artistic acquaintances, they were social-minded and did their bit. Morris tried to create change through politics. In the late 1850s, John Ruskin, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Edward Burne-Jones and Ford Madox Brown had taught at the Working Men's College.

Similarly, the 'Holland Park Circle' also supported the volunteer movement. They were a set of highly esteemed painters who were acquainted with the first and second generation of Pre-Raphaelite painters. Their activities included the formation of the Artists' Rifles. Lord Frederick Leighton became President of the Royal Academy from 1878 and was elected to Colonel-in-Chief of the Artists' Volunteers.

'Holland Park Circle' artist Luke Fildes put his powerful painting 'The Doctor' on public display in April 1891 as part of 'Show Sunday', then, again in the same year, at the Royal Academy. It was considered a 'triumph'. The painting had been commissioned by the Liverpool millionaire Henry Tate in 1890, who donated it to the nation.

Ciamelli



'Adoration' triptych, Edward Burne-Jones – 1861 commissioned for St. Paul's Church, Brighton

Copyright – apologies none stated by source

I was inspired to include a street organ grinder in my story after reading in Georgiana Burne-Jones's 'Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones' the following passage:

'The world of the model is closely connected with the artistic life... I remember a splendid Italian one, **Ciamelli** by name, whose head with its bush of blue-black hair **may be seen in the triptych 'Adoration' as one of the Kings**. He ground his organ in the streets and sang to it very finely out of the southern heart when he was not sitting, and sometimes brought it with him when he came to sit. His name is always associated in my mind with a ludicrous scene that happened one day when he was left to wait in the studio and it occurred to him to beguile the time with music. Edward was in the next room hastening over breakfast, but even through the wall the noise of the organ became so intolerable that he jumped up to stop it as he thought, with a word: a harsh braying gust of a tune, however, simply buffeted his ears as he opened the door and drove the word back into his throat, while Ciamelli, seated on the floor with his back against the wall and wrapped in a whirlwind of sound through which nothing could penetrate, ground on, unconscious of offense.

Related to the above, Georgiana Burne-Jones wrote an interesting account of what she describes as her husband's first important (1861) commission:

'...Two large triptychs that he painted in oil, each with an Adoration in the centre, and the Angel and Virgin of the Annunciation on the wings. These side figures were the same in both ones, but the treatment of the middle subject was different. The origin of these pictures was a commission for an altarpiece in St. Paul's Church, Brighton, but, when Edward had painted the first design, he found the composition of the centre too elaborate to tell its story from a distance...'

Edward Burne-Jones then learns of the death of his patron, Mr Plint. To satisfy the executors, Burne-Jones offers to produce a '...simpler version, with the kings standing instead of kneeling, with the figures more detached from each other and the whole painted upon a gold background."

In both pictures there are portraits of Morris as one of the kings, and of Swinburne and Edward amongst the shepherds. The commission came through our friend **Mr G. F. Bodley**, who unselfishly suggested that the church should have a painted altarpiece instead of reredos, which he himself had been asked to design, and that Edward should be the artist employed.

It was by a curious chance that, some ten years afterwards, Mr Bodley, hearing of an 'old Venetian picture' somewhere in London, went to see it, and under that name recognised and bought the first of two triptychs. It had been sold at Mr Plint's sale and then disappeared. Mr Bodley says that the man from whom he bought it had no idea, but that it was an old Italian picture, and adds, 'It was for me, a curious and happy thing I should see it' ...'

G. F. Bodley was responsible for the interior decoration of All Saints Church, Jesus Lane, Cambridge and the Old Hall at Queens' College, Cambridge. In turn, he employed F. R. Leach & Sons to apply stencilled designs to the walls and ceilings throughout both interiors, thereby, David Parr worked on both buildings.



'Adoration' triptych, Edward Burne-Jones – 1861 commissioned for St. Paul's Church, Brighton

Copyright – apologies none stated by source

Gaetano Meo

Continuing with the 'street musicians' theme, I can recommend looking up **Gaetano Meo's** Wikipedia entry – not just because of his fascinating life story, but because he features in numerous pre-Raphaelite paintings.

Meo was the son of an Italian shepherd who, together with an older brother walked from Naples to Paris – he was only 15. They supported themselves as street musicians. His elder brother worked for his passage to the USA. Meo began posing as an artist's model in Paris, which he continued in the UK. He went onto model for the leading British painters of the day.

His list of achievements is extensive. He became an artist in his own right, for twelve years he led the team of craftsmen in St. Paul's Cathedral, and is linked to Dame Ellen Terry through his granddaughter Nelly Gordon Craig.



Love in Ruins (oil version) - Edward Burne-Jones

1894 – National Trust (Displayed at Wightwick Manor)

Kelmscott Press

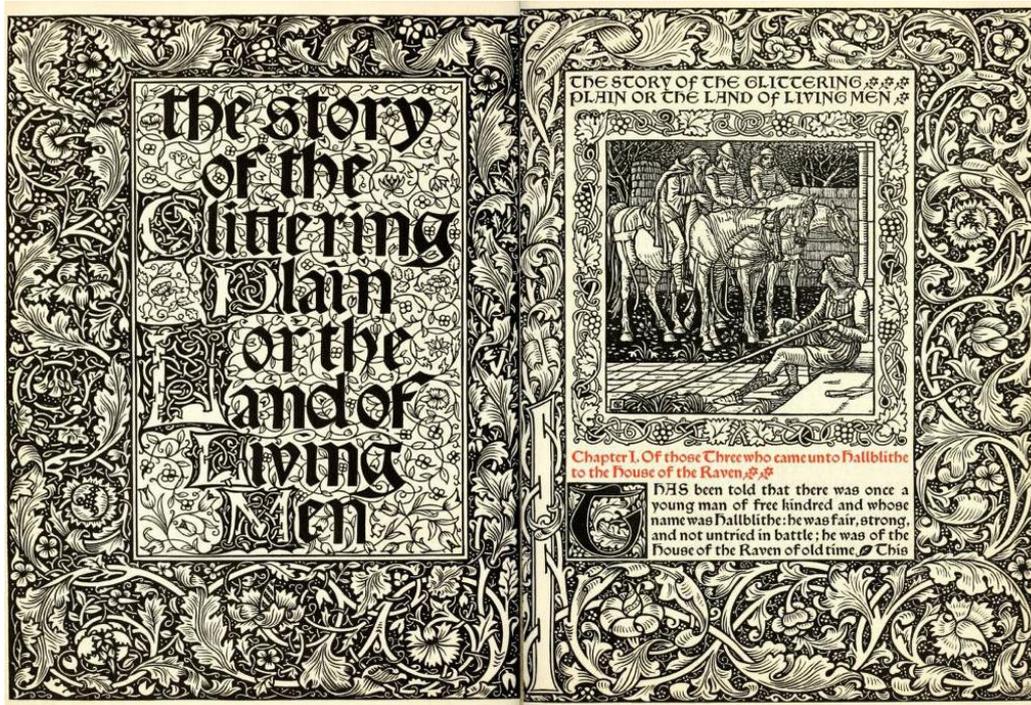
(See the British Library & the Emery Walker House websites for comprehensive information on the Kelmscott Press.

On the **British Library official website** enter 'Kelmscott Press Chaucer' in the search bar. You will be given the option of various editions in their collection, chose the 1896 edition. Then you can choose to view it on-line – hit the red 'Go' button. Scroll down, the history of the Kelmscott Press will appear below the image taken from William Morris's Chaucer.

On the **Emery Walker House website**, click on 'Emery Walker' on the menu bar, this will open another smaller window, select 'Kelmscott Press'.)

‘The story of the Glittering Plain’ was the first book published by the Kelmscott Press in 1891 – note: this edition wasn’t illustrated. A later edition was illustrated by Walter Crane.

‘The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer newly imprinted’ is considered the ‘absolute triumph’ of the Kelmscott Press. It’s 87 woodcut illustrations are by Edward Burne-Jones and the first two copies were printed and bound just four months before Morris passed away in 1896.



Charles Fairfax Murray (1849 – 1919)

Murray was Edward Burne-Jones’s first studio assistant. He carried out artistic commissions for Morris, Marshall, Faulkner and Co., working to Burne-Jones’s designs. Later he illuminated William Morris’s manuscripts. He also became an art dealer as well as an art collector.

He gave his Titian (Tarquin and Lucretia – 1571), numerous Constables, four early Gainsboroughs and a Corot to the **Fitzwilliam Museum**, Cambridge, as well as ‘Morris’ proofs and manuscripts from William Morris’s collection.

J. W. Mackail (William Morris’s first biographer) wrote that Morris was ‘...habitually careless about his own manuscripts, and kept no record of what he had written or even of what he had published. Without the help of Mr. Fairfax Murray, into whose hands a number of the unpublished manuscripts had passed, and who had kept a record of all the poems which had ever been printed in magazines and elsewhere, the collection (of poems) could hardly have been made... Among the pieces which had been rescued from total disappearance by Mr. Murray were a few belonging to the earliest period of ‘The Defence of Guenevere’.

'The Star of Bethlehem'



'The Star of Bethlehem' (watercolour) – Edward Burne-Jones

1891 - Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery

As mentioned in my 'March' story, in 1886, Morris and Burne-Jones were approached by John Prideaux Lightfoot to create a tapestry as a gift for the chapel of their Oxford college. He suggested the 'Adoration' as theme, to which both men had readily agreed.

I like to think that it's no coincidence that Lightfoot commissioned his tapestry a year or so after Jan Mabuse's 'Adoration of the Magi' had been declared the 'great attraction' of the Royal Academy's 1885 Winter Exhibition (see **January's 'Afterword'**).

The completed tapestry was presented to Exeter College in 1890.

In 1887, the Corporation of the City of Birmingham commissioned 'The Star of Bethlehem' painting for their new Museum & Art Gallery. Burne-Jones wrote, 'It will be a blaze of colour and look like a carol'. It was also the biggest watercolour painting in the 19th century at 260 cm x 390 cm.

Unlike Morris, who was known for his boundless energy, Burne-Jones had suffered from poor health all his life. Georgina Burne-Jones wrote of her husband in her biography '...[In 1890] he grew quite well and strong for a short time this autumn, and worked hard at his big picture of the Magi for Birmingham.'

Edward Burne-Jones wrote, 'And a tiring thing it is, physically, to go up my steps and down, and from right to left. I have journeyed as many miles already as ever the kings travelled. I have had a very happy month of autumn, living mostly in the suburbs of Sarras...'

The completed painting was taken to Birmingham's new gallery on 20th April 1891.

The Boat Race

Portrayal of the Dead Heat finish in 1877

