

Arts and Crafts

An article by Mark Temple

Overview

Whilst both AWN Pugin and John Ruskin, with their strong religious principles, often focussed on the moral dimension in artistry and work, Ruskin also talked about the joy of physical endeavour and like William Morris recognised the importance of personal fulfilment in both creative and manual toil. Like Ruskin, Morris felt that, first and foremost, manual labour needed to have some dignity and that financial gain shouldn't be the only objective. Both were often critical of the way that increased mechanisation often resulted in a division of labour separating designer and craftsman. Morris was disturbed that many workers found themselves stifled by being placed in factory environments where the constant drive towards mass production simply made their work a drudgery. Through the experience of running his own firm, Morris realised the difficulties of producing honest, quality works for everyone, as well as giving everyone new opportunities to experience pride in their labour. So he gradually became drawn to acknowledging the need for social reform.

A few years later, Ernest Gimson (1865-1919) was thinking along similar lines by supporting the notion of a 'craftplace' community, where the workers could be offered the opportunity to both design and construct at the same time as enjoying the sharing of ideas and knowledge. Such ideas were given rein at places like Rodmarton Manor where fellow architect, Edward Barnsley, had worked for many years in creating and furnishing an arts and craft home in the Cotswolds for the Biddulph family. Here they established a community committed to the revival and sharing of many of those rural crafts in danger of being lost. Sadly, the First World War thwarted many similar projects thriving elsewhere.

Unlike Art Nouveau and Art Deco, Arts and Crafts should not be viewed as simply a style, it is better regarded as a philosophy; and a very English one at that. There is no one manner of expression or style within the movement. Ernest Gimson, like William Morris, recognised that all products needed to be practical (fit for purpose) and whilst some products might consist of simple lines and forms, others could be very intricate. For example, at Stoneywell cottage- the rural home in Charnwood forest- designed by Gimson for his older brother Sydney- the furniture in the kitchen is made of English ash and oak. It is plain and solid suitable for the wear and tear of everyday use as well as being able to survive the damp and cold of winter in the Leicestershire countryside. By contrast the brass sconce in the living room whilst practical is pleasingly intricate with incised decoration derived from nature. In this room, where people relax, it forms part of the decoration and gives pleasure. Likewise for Sydney's town house (in Leicester) where he might entertain other business people Ernest designed a very elegant

cabinet using exotic wood (ebony) for the carcass intricately inlaid with mother of pearl decoration.

The Arts and Crafts movement which Morris championed looked to both nature and past designs for inspiration, to English medieval and 17th-century work as well as drawing on designs from the Italian Renaissance, India, Japan and the Islamic world. Morris despised the Victorian fashion for sham; meaningless and badly designed ornamentation. For him, decoration should 'honestly reflect the character of materials' and construction and be relevant to the product; rather than viewing it as an end in itself. Whilst distancing himself from the fussiness of inappropriate flamboyant carving (3D) Morris didn't shy from using paint and artistic embellishment (2D) on furniture and in room interiors.

He enjoyed rural, vernacular styles with humble (even primitive) features, some of which were far removed from the Venetian exotic images he also used from time to time in his designs. He enjoyed the beauty of natural materials like stone and wood. However, he wasn't afraid to use contemporary materials e.g. lino and commercially made textiles, wallpapers, carpets and paints if they were high quality materials and were well made.

He encouraged others to "have nothing in your house that you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful." When trying to furnish his own house (both his town residence, the Red House in but later at Kelmscott in the Cotswolds, he denounced what he received as 'sham and shoddy' for the working classes and also the 'puffed up follies' designed for the well to do. He also ridiculed the way that the rich lived in 'rabbit warrens' of rooms they don't use or need.

Behind all was the abiding principle that work should be an uplifting, fulfilling experience for the working man and not a demoralising and dehumanising one which it was rapidly becoming in the drab factories and cities of Victorian Britain.

Arts and crafts: the Loughborough & Stoneywell Connection

When I attended Loughborough University during the mid 1970s it was roughly the same time as Seb Coe was honing his running skills and a certain, Philip Serrell, was still contemplating a career teaching PE. Our paths haven't crossed since until 2018 when I met up with T.V. antiques guru Phillip Serrell as he was presiding over an online auction of surplus pieces of student furniture at the university. These were not tacky pieces made of ply, churned out in kit-form but solid timber items made in the old college workshops by handicraft students in the 1930-1960 period. Coinciding with this event a small exhibition has been running in Martin Hall (until 13th October) of similar pieces created under the watchful eye of two of the most influential arts and craft designers of this period. The first of these



Ornate Gimson cabinet now in the Cheltenham Museum

designers was Dutchman, Peter de Waals who for many years presided as foreman with the Cotswold group of craftsmen at the Danesway House workshops. Ernest Gimson and the Barnsley brothers had moved there in 1902 after leaving Pinbury Park; where they had been toiling away whilst renovating the adjacent Manor House for their landlord, Lord Bathurst. When they outgrew their old premises and his lordship announced his intention to retake possession, the group were happy to move on to another of the semi-derelict ruins he happened to own nearby, namely Daneway House.

Having presided over this workshop from 1901 Waals didn't move into his own premises at Chalford until after Ernest Gimson's death in 1919. Waals came to Loughborough in 1935 having been invited by College Chancellor, Herbert Schofield, to become their new 'design adviser.' The East Midlands Training College for Teachers of Handicraft had been established at Loughborough in 1930. Writing in *The Limit* (1930) J.W. Bridgeman, head of Teacher Training, wrote there is a "demand for teachers who have a practical

as well as academic education; and to meet this demand a new type of residential college is required." Back in 1921 Schofield had recognised the need for courses to retrain ex-servicemen who were feeling frustrated that the war had deprived them of civilian careers. Initially he introduced courses to help kickstart them as school handicraft instructors. Throughout the twenties he advocated 'Training on Production', encouraging students to produce goods both for sale and use in college. Understandably some students found this rather unfair, paying for their training, making furniture and then seeing it sold off to benefit the college.

Some of Waals designs in the 'Cotswold tradition' have occasionally been displayed exhibitions. After Waals died suddenly in 1937, fellow 'Cotswold' graduate, Edward Barnsley (son of Sidney Barnsley) assumed the role of design consultant at Loughborough which he held until 1965. By all accounts Edward Barnsley was a formidable character. At Stoneywell we have occasionally had former handicraft students through our doors many of whom recalled his rather dogmatic teaching style; his obsession with accurate measurement and how all his students were left in no doubt that the Barnsley way of doing things was the promoted as the 'only right and proper way.' One student said that the trouble with Edward Barnsley was that although he was a perfectionist when it came to construction at the same time he didn't want his students to be too precious about what they were creating, telling them, "Don't worry too much about finger-marks on your oak furniture; it will develop a lovely patina in 20 years or so!"

At the end of their courses students were normally given the task of constructing a trio of items incorporating elements of both Barnsley and Waals design. An example of these 'bedroom sets' can be seen not only in the exhibition but also at Leicesters' New Walk Museum and at Stoneywell. These trios comprised a chest of drawers, a wardrobe and a bookcase that could link together to form one unit. Subsequently at the end of three years students were given the option to purchase the items they had made otherwise they would be sold off or retained for use in the college halls of residence.



Maplewell Trio



Examples from the 2018 Loughborough College Arts and Crafts Exhibition

It is quite sad that the college authorities decided a few years ago that the arts and craft style of furniture no longer fitted in with their concept of contemporary student living. Back in 2012 Philip Serrell, an ex-loughborough student himself, presided over the first sale of items formerly housed in the university's Hazlerigg-Rutland Building. Ernie Miller (talk-service volunteer) attended this sale and bought several pictures of these pieces including the chair made by G.F. Blachford in the exhibition in 1930. The items offered in the sale last weekend were of an inferior quality (according to Mr Serrell) but nevertheless a few pieces stood out and the bidding was frantic.

Maplewell Hall School was formerly a hall of residence for Loughborough College during 1950-1951. A selection of desks and 'student sets' were amongst items Herbert Schofield had brought in from Loughborough and which were left behind when the hall was sold off to become a special school in the early 1950s. These pieces were used for most of the thirty-four years I was teaching at the school. Three of them have ended up at

Stoneywell because as I left the school and started volunteering for the Trust, the school coincidentally decided to refurbish some of the classrooms. At one inaugural talk by Ernest Miller I recognised the similarities between my old classroom furniture and pieces he identified as being made by generations of Loughborough students using Waals' designs. Simon Chesters-Thomson and I persuaded the headmaster that the pieces becoming 'surplus to requirements' would find a sympathetic home in Stoneywell.

When I first met Donald Gimson's niece, Barley Roscoe, in August 2015, I mentioned this furniture and my Maplewell connection and she sent me this in an email: 'Looking in Annette Carruthers book, *Edward Barnsley and his Workshop*, there is a brief reference to the Maplewell Hall/School furniture on p95 which indicates that "around 1945-46 Edward Barnsley was making furniture for Maplewell Hall at Loughborough College." However, it appears that it was Waals who developed most of the original designs for the study bedrooms. Although they haven't made it into the cottage the chest of drawers resides in the staff office whilst my old desk, with its characteristic D handles, surmounted by the simple bookcase, can be seen in the old laundry which has become the tea-room.'