

Working for Morris & Co.

Arthur Frederick Wingate

My first job on leaving school at the age of fourteen in 1930 was with William Morris and Company at Merton Abbey. As I was rather artistic and always did well at printing, writing, drawing, painting, geometry and carpentry, my headmaster said that I, along with two other lads, was offered the opportunity to go to Wimbledon Technical School of Art, free, for two more years to improve our ability, I suppose. But my parents said that they couldn't afford the school uniform, let alone let me stay at school for two more years. I really fancied being a sign writer. However, my Dad took me along to Wimbledon Labour Exchange one Friday evening and the Superintendent there told me of a vacancy at Morris's. So we made an appointment, taking along various school paintings and drawings, and met the manager Dr. Duncan Dearle, who was the son of Henry Dearle. He said he would like me to start in the stained-glass window-painting shop, starting at 15 shillings a week with a two shillings and sixpence a week rise after six months. Well, of course, I was pleased about that except that I was also to be the post boy, making tea for the men over in the tapestry shop and the two block printers; also taking messages up to London to the showrooms, 17 George Street, Hanover Square. The manager there was Mr. Marillier.

Beneath the stained-glass window shop were two dyers who dyed all the wools required for the tapestry shop. There were two very deep vats for the purpose of submerging a wooden frame, with yards of white woven material carefully stretched back and forth between little hooks, into the blue dye solution; indigo discharge I suppose. The frame was then transferred to the two block printers who cleverly positioned various patterned blocks on the material, which had been treated with a bleach solution, and hammered hard with a maul (like a club hammer). It was then transferred to a huge steam chest, under steam pressure, then very carefully washed

in the river Wandle, then dried and returned to the printers for further patterned blocks and different colours. There were, of course, many other patterns and designs which when completed were very impressive (similar to Liberty's, a little further up the river from us). There was another weaving shop with French Jacquard looms weaving silks, damasks, brocades for curtains etc., and a more modern shop where three girls were repairing tapestries that had been sent for repair because of their age and moth-holes. Some, I remember, had come from Hampton Court Palace.

However, after adapting myself to glass painting there wasn't much work coming along, and Mr. Duncan Dearle asked me if I would like to learn tapestry weaving, as there was a very large order from Lancing College Chapel, West Sussex; so I did. The tapestries were a triptych, three panels each 10ft 6ins wide and about 30 feet long. Each took about 18 months to complete, the top and bottom borders being woven separately on a smaller loom and stitched on afterwards. The tapestries are the largest in the country and were designed by Lady Chilston, wife of Lord Chilston, the British Ambassador to Budapest and later Moscow. Her maiden name was Akers-Douglas. She designed various other tapestries for Eton College. I remember one tapestry, nearing completion, was of the Last Supper, being woven by Percy Sheldrick and Sid Mears for Sir Thomas Beecham, the conductor. They then wove a tapestry of a map of South Africa, designed by an African architect; when finished it went to South Africa House in the Strand; one day when I was in London I saw it hanging there. The next tapestry they wove was for Lady Chilston's country house near Maidstone, I think; she designed it herself of course. On the large loom Fred Reed and Edward Russell were completing one called The New Dispensation – that one had been woven some years before for Eton College. (The Last Supper had also been woven before.) However, I was pleased to help with the central one, called Christ in all his Glory, for Lancing College, and was half way through the right-hand panel when I was asked to leave the firm, because I was at an age when I could find another job. The Lancing tapestries were the last ones woven, by the way.

The site is now Sainsbury's Home Base Hypermarket, occupying the whole area which used to be the Merton Board Mills and also Cornfields, which made aluminium utensils also for Liberty's. The centre part of the tapestry was sent to Christies in London to show to the general public. I went to see it hanging there. I then went to the College to see it hanging in its proper position.