

## **William Morris Society UK**

The William Morris Society, UK has a robust education program for primary/elementary students. Dedicated volunteers oversee class visits to Kelmscott House in Hammersmith, where students are introduced to Morris and his world. This document provides detailed information on study sessions geared to the young learners with sections on stained glass, textiles, Victorian object handling, the printing press, aspects of block printing all with age appropriate hands on activities. Many of these concepts can transfer to the higher education classroom as well, particularly in introductory classes.

Young learners often ask very practical questions associated with the life of Morris and object handling is one of the most engaging activities. Students benefit from making comparisons between the world of Morris and the present day. For example: the quill pen and inkpot match the computer, phones and tables. Students are intrigued and fascinated by the change in printing and often form immediate connections with the design of stained glass, something many are familiar with from visiting churches.

The documentation provided by the volunteers and staff of the WMS UK is provides a wealth of information which will engage young learners and help develop a new generation of Morris enthusiasts.

### **Notes on study sessions for primary school pupils**

- 1. Introductory session**
- 2. Stained glass**
- 3. Textiles**
- 4. Victorian object handling**
- 5. Printing press**
- 6. Block printing**
- 7. Additional text for introductory session**

The following notes are intended as a guide rather than a prescriptive text for the leading of study sessions for primary school pupils.

All instructions are indented, *in italics*.

The objects to be used to illustrate the talks are in **bold**.

Where possible, the teacher should be asked before the session about the amount of knowledge the pupils already have, any related visits that they have undertaken (e.g. to the V&A) and how the study session relates to wider projects that they are undertaking (e.g. a 10-week project on the Victorians).

The introductory session should be held in the coach house; for craft sessions the pupils are split into two equal groups between the coach house and the drawing room whenever there are more than 15 pupils; otherwise, as single session may be held in the coach house.

## 1. Introductory session

### Items to prepare:

- Photo board of house and area at end of 19<sup>th</sup> century
- Fabric sample book
- Curtain material
- Wallpaper book
- Wood block
- Chaucer copy
- Daffodil, sunflower and apple wallpapers

*[Introduce self and any other staff or volunteers assisting]*

“Who are you here to learn about today?”

*[Say a few words about William Morris and the Arts & Crafts movement. Link to the Victorian period if the pupils are learning about this specifically]*

“Why have you come to this building in particular to learn about William Morris?”

*[answer: he lived at Kelmscott House]*

“This is where William Morris lived for the last 18 years of his life. When he lived here, there were two entrances to the building: the main one to the big house and the small one down some stairs to the basement. This is because there were people living here other than his family. Who do you think these people were?”

*[answer: servants]*

“Yes, William Morris had servants living here in the basement rooms. He could afford this because he had an inheritance of £900 per year. Who thinks that £900 is a lot of money?”

*[allow time for pupils to answer]*

“It’s not a lot of money to live on now, but when William Morris was alive in Victorian times it would have been quite a lot. Let’s have a look at photo of the house from the time that Morris was living here.”

*[bring out **black and white photo board**]*

*[describe things & talk about house]*

“Can you see any differences between the photo and what the area looks like today?”

*[allow time for pupils to point out differences]*

“One of the big differences is the lack of cars. How do you think William Morris would have got around?”

*[answer: walking, carriage, train]*

“That’s why this room we’re in now is called the coach house.”

“Now we’re going to take a look at what William Morris created while he was living here. What is he famous for making?”(adapt next part to fit order in which pupils name things)

*[bring out **fabric book**. Describe some designs and ask what Morris was inspired by: nature]*

“William Morris and all of the people that he worked with were inspired by the nature around them, by plants, flowers, fruits, trees. Bear this in mind when you’re doing your own designs.”

*[bring out **curtain material** that matches the curtains in the photo of the house]*

“What do you think this is made of? It’s quite heavy”

*[answer: wool]*

“Can you see that the design is the same on both sides? What is that kind of design called?”

*[answer: symmetrical]*

“You might like to think about creating a symmetrical pattern when you do your own designs in a minute.”

“What else did William Morris make?”

*[bring out **wallpaper book**]*

“Here is a sample book showing a range of Morris wallpapers. A sample book is made so that people can select what wallpaper they want to buy. When it arrives from the shop, the wallpaper is in rolls. You need lots of them just to paper one room. How do you think Morris put the pattern onto the wallpaper, given that he had to make so many rolls? Here’s a clue: you might have done something like it at school”

*[answer: printing]*

*[bring out **wood block** and describe simply how a block is carved. Show the motion of pressing the block onto paper]*

“Can you see that there’s a bit of paint left on the wood block? What colour were the flowers printed in?”

*[answer: red]*

“So we would have red flowers printed on white paper. Does that sound like a William Morris pattern? What is different in the wallpapers that we looked at?”

*[answer: there were many more colours]*

“How would you print the next colour?”

*[pupils typically answer “paint the next colour onto the wood block”]*

“But if you just painted over the woodblock with another colour like blue then you’d end up putting blue paint on top of the red paint. You would need to carve another wood block that had patterns in places between where the flowers are. So you need one block for each colour in the pattern. It would take a long time to print a whole pattern, so do you think that William Morris’s wallpapers were cheap or expensive?”

*[answer: expensive]*

“Yes, so only rich people would have been able to afford these. Of course, you could mass produce things more cheaply in Victorian times, but Morris wanted to make the finest quality objects and this cost time and money.”

“What else did William Morris make?”

*[bring out Chaucer]*

“This is a book that William Morris would have printed on a press like the one we’re going to look at in a minute. Can you see the beautiful decorative borders that he put around the text? You might like to make decorative borders for the designs that you’re going to create.”

“And what else did William Morris make?” *[briefly cover stained glass, furniture, carpets etc.]*

“William Morris gave names to all his designs. The names that he gave them were usually after the most important thing in them. What do you think he called this one?”

*[bring out Daffodil, Sunflower and Apples in turn. Talk about the difference between portrait and landscape]*

“You can see in the Apples design that the colours are not the natural colours of an apple. William Morris used his imagination to produce interesting combinations of colours, and you can do this too.”

“Also, you can see that all the lines in the picture are curvy not straight. The branches are in a kind of S shape. You might like to use curvy, flowing S shapes in your designs.”

“William Morris thought that people should only surround themselves with things that were either useful or beautiful. Why do you think this was so important to him?”

*[answer: Victorian London was dirty, polluted]*

“Yes, it was dirty and polluted because of the factories, and also each home would have had a coal fire - when this was lit a lot of soot was generated. Also, the area around here contained many slums.”

“Morris was trying to bring nature back into the city.”

“William Morris set up his tapestry looms in this Coach House. These were known as jacquard looms, after a French man called Jacquard. The pattern would have been punched onto large ards that were fed into the loom. Morris later moved all this to Merton Abbey in South West London.”

“What else is Morris well known for, other than arts and crafts?”

*[answer: politics]*

“William Morris joined the Liberal party, which is a forerunner of today’s Labour party. However, Morris decided that the Liberal party wasn’t radical enough for him, and so he started the Socialist League. This attracted many famous people, who gave talks at the Coach House. “

*[see end of document for additional text on notable Coach House speakers]*

## 2. Stained glass designing

*[Introduce self and any other staff or volunteers assisting]*

“What we’re going to do today is to create our own designs, using some of the ideas that we’ve learnt from looking at what William Morris created. First, we’ll design some stained glass. Can you spot the stained glass in this room?” *[pupils point to **stained glass box**]* “What is wrong with the glass?”

*[allow time for pupils to take a look at the glass and see that it is cracked]*

“In the 1960s William Morris wasn’t very popular, and this glass was in a house that was being knocked down. The builders knocked right through the glass, but someone from here found out about it and rescued pieces of it to glue back together.”

“Can anyone see any tiles in the room? This is another thing that William Morris designed.” *[pupils point to fireplace]* “ Why were tiles a good thing to put in a fireplace?”

[answer: because they are easy to clean the dirt and coal dust off]

“Now can anyone see a stained glass design in this room?”

*[allow time for pupils to find **Burne Jones design**. Discuss the picture – what clues are there that she is a saint?]*

*[hold up **stained glass bird**]*

“Can you see how the outline of the bird is created first and then colour is added? The black line here is made with lead, but we’re going to use black marker pens to draw the main lines of our designs, and then coloured pens to fill them in.”

“You should start by drawing your design onto a piece of white paper, and when you are happy with it you can place the acetate over and trace the design using the black marker pen, before colouring it in. Remember all of the William Morris designs that we looked at and the types of designs that he made, but try to use these to create your own. There are lots of things on the tables to give you ideas.”

### 3. Textile designing

*[Introduce self and any other staff or volunteers assisting]*

#### **Structured session**

“In this session you’re going to produce three pieces of work based on William Morris’s designs. Morris wrote a book “Hints on Pattern Designing” where he explained his idea that people feel better if they are surrounded by nature and can feel that they are in a natural environment.

Look at these examples of wallpaper and fabric

*[bring out **Willow Boughs & Pimpernel**]*

How many colours are there? Where are the repeats? [show horizontal and vertical repeats] What plants are used?

*[Show **woodblock** and explain how a design is printed]*

Trace stems – major and minor ones

Drawing leaves – look at the leaf. Draw the main vein first, then the outline. Then add the details such as the serrated edge etc. Finally add the smaller veins.

Start in pencil, then use colours. Be bold!

Repeated patterns (see instructions below)

Now copy one rectangle onto silk.

Today we’ve looked at William Morris’s designs and how he used stems, leaves and flowers to build up repeating designs. I hope when you get back to school you find some leaves, all shapes and sizes, and try copying them to make more repeated patterns etc.”

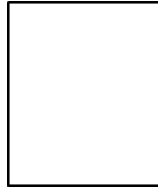
#### **Free style designs**

You have seen how important nature was to William Morris. We are going to draw on silk, inspired by Morris’s natural designs. You might pick flowers, fruit, leaves... What I want you to do is to focus on three components of your design only.

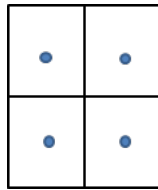
Look at wallpaper and fabric patterns. Symmetry. What colours would Morris have used? Will you use the same colours, or will you try to design something inspired by Morris but modern? How different does it feel working on silk than on paper?

## How to create a repeat pattern

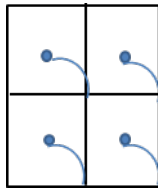
- Take a piece of paper and fold it in four



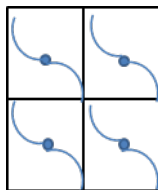
- Mark the centre of each of the four sections



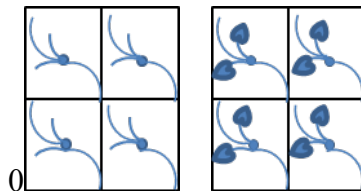
- Draw a curved line from each central point to the bottom right corner of the section



- Repeat this but to the top left corner (turn the paper round and do it exactly the same as before – you're more likely to make the lines match)



- Keep building up the design, adding stems, leaves etc., always making sure that each section is an exact copy of the others





#### 4. Victorian object handling

*[Introduce self and any other staff or volunteers assisting]*

“Today we are going to look at a number of Victorian objects in pairs. These are the kind of objects that William Morris and his family would have used, so we will get an idea of what it felt like to live here 100 years ago. The ones that we’re going to look at didn’t actually belong to William Morris, because then they would be too precious to handle.”

*[bring out **carpet beater**]*

“Can anyone tell me what this is? Why was this needed in Victorian times? How could you beat a carpet if it was attached to the floor

*[answers: there were no vacuum cleaners; carpets weren’t fitted, more like large rugs]*

“People would often give their carpets a really good beating by hanging them outside on a line, usually in the spring (hence ‘spring cleaning’) and beating them with this to get the dust out. Do you think that William Morris would have done this himself? Or his wife?”

*[answer: no, his servants would have done it]*

“What is it made of, and why?”

*[answer: bamboo, but willow or birch would work. It’s flexible enough to bend into shape and soft enough not to damage the carpet]*

“Would you like to have the job of beating carpets until they were clean?”

*[Hand out **worksheets, clipboards and pencils**]*

“I need you to get into pairs, and I’m going to give a different object to each pair. Bear in mind that sometimes the object will be just part of a set that includes other items. I want you to handle the object, look at it very carefully and try to answer the questions on the sheet: what is the object made of, what does it look like, what might it be used for, who would use it, and what is the modern equivalent? Then draw a picture of the object at the bottom of the sheet. You have ten minutes for this investigation, and then we’ll present the results to the rest of the group.”

*[Allow the children 10 minutes. Chat to each pair to make sure they are following the instructions and don’t have any questions.]*

*[Let each pair present to the group. Prompt them to answer the questions on their sheets. See if they – or others in the group – can identify the object]*

#### **Additional explanations of objects**

*[prompt the children to come up with part of these explanations, e.g. why would you need a candle snuffer rather than just blowing out the flame?]*

### Candle Snuffer

Using a candle snuffer is the best way to put out a candle and avoid getting burned from splashed wax that results when one blows out the flame. When the snuffers small bell shaped piece is placed over the flame, the oxygen supply is cut off. Candle snuffers were used daily when the candle was the main source of lighting a home, before electric lights were available.

### Carpet Beater

By the middle of the 19th century carpets in Britain became cheaper due to new methods of mass production. This meant that more homes had them, and in greater quantity than before.

As vacuum cleaners did not become affordable until the early 20th century, carpets either had to be swept or taken outside and beaten to remove dust and dirt. They would be hung over a washing line or railings and it is easy to imagine how difficult, strenuous and unpleasant this task was, especially with very large rugs.

This beater is made of cane, though some were made of wire, wood or spring steel. The intricately woven head of the beater creates a strong, flat surface that will release dust without damaging the carpet.

### Candlesticks

In the Victorian period, candlesticks were made from base metals such as brass & pewter, or from pottery, with major manufacturers like Wedgwood producing a monumental array of candlesticks in their creamware, pearlware, & jasperware bodies.

However, the candlestick of choice for the wealthy was of course made from silver, mainly as a show of wealth, but perhaps also because of the way that the soft, flickering candle light would have reflected off the precious metal.

### Breadcrumb Sweeper

Tables could get rather messy with all the food people had to eat in a grand house. The maids also did not want to wash the table cloths unless they were stained. The crumb scoop was a special pan used for getting loose bits of food off of the dining table. It looks nice because, unlike a normal dustpan, the maid might have to use it in front of her master or mistress.

### Iron

Flat irons were also called smoothing irons. Heated in front of the fire or on the top of a stove, their metal handles became so hot they had to be wrapped in a cloth to enable them to be used without causing burns. A laundry maid needed at least two flat irons to work - one heating up by the fire while she used the other.

Irons had to be kept immaculately clean, sand-papered, polished, and be regularly but lightly greased to avoid rusting. Beeswax prevented irons sticking to starched cloth. Constant care was needed over temperature. Experience would help decide when the iron was hot enough, but not so hot that it would scorch the cloth. A well-known test was spitting on the hot metal, but Charles Dickens describes someone with a more genteel technique in *The Old Curiosity Shop*. She held "the iron at an alarmingly short distance from her cheek, to test its temperature..."

### Nutcracker

Nutcrackers often matched the exquisite table settings of the Victorian era when fruit and nuts were served at the end of the meal. Dried legumes were available all year round, and widely used. The chestnut was the most commonly consumed nut and one of the most commonly eaten street snacks in the chestnut season, running from September through to January. Filberts or hazelnuts were available from October through to May; walnuts were another regularly bought seasonal nut. Imported almonds and Brazil nuts were more expensive, but widely consumed around Christmas as a 'treat'.

### Embroidery Sampler

In the 18th century, sampler making had become an important part of girls' education in boarding and institutional schools. A commonplace component of the samplers was an alphabet with numerals, possibly accompanied by various crowns and coronets, all used in marking household linens. Traditional embroidered designs were now rearranged into decorative borders framing lengthy inscriptions or verses of an "improving" nature and small pictorial scenes. These new samplers were more useful as a record of accomplishment to be hung on the wall than as a practical stitch guide.

### Sugar Cube Tongs

Sugar tongs were used to place sugar lumps in the tea by the lady of the house as she served her guests. These sugar tongs were typically made of silver, though they could also be made of gold or pewter. They had the appearance of large, elegantly decorated tweezers which could grasp the sugar lump and drop it into the tea cup.

### Chamber pot

People used these in the Victorian times. Even when toilets were invented, these were usually outdoors because people thought that it was unhygienic to have them indoors. Also, servants would still have used the chamber pots. Has anyone seen a chamber pot like this? Some people use them as plant pots!

### Ink pot

What is missing from this is the quill pen. These were made of goose feathers, and were used extensively in William Morris's time. They were difficult to write with: the nibs would break easily, the ink would blot and it was difficult to write very evenly.

### Bell pull

This would have been used to call a maid. It would have been located in the living room or the bedroom. This one was probably for the living room, because it is highly decorative to impress visitors.

*[If there is spare time, hand around other objects for the class to discuss in the same way. If they struggle, ask them to consider what they are really sure about - for example that the object is metal - before speculating on its possible uses.]*

## 5. Printing press

*[Introduce self and any other staff or volunteers assisting]*

“Who has heard of Chaucer? What is he famous for? When was he born?”

*[answer: author; 14<sup>th</sup> century]*

“William Morris loved books, and thought that the mass produced books of the Victorian era weren’t beautiful enough, so he produced his own. Here is his most famous one: the complete works of Chaucer. These books were inspired by two things in particular that Morris loved: the medieval period, which you can see in the style behind the font he uses, and nature. He incorporates leaves and flowers into each of the large letters and into the borders.”

“What two types of letters do you use in your writing?”

*[answer: uppercase and lowercase]*

“This is why we call them uppercase and lowercase: because when printing was done on presses like this, the letters – or “type” – were held in cases like this, and the one with the capital letters was higher than the other.”

“What would you do if you wanted to write a book? How would you produce it?”

*[answer: use a computer]*

“In William Morris’s day, computers weren’t available and so people had to find other ways to print multiple copies of books. First they would take a chase and set the letters that they wanted to print in it, like this one here.”

*[bring out **chase with William Morris poem set into it**]*

“What do you notice about the way that the letters are placed here?”

*[answer: they are backwards, so that it will print the right way round]*

“Look at what we have set up to print here [on the bed of the press]. Who can explain how the picture is cut into the block and why?”

*[answer: the bits that you don’t want to print are cut away so that ink only transfers to the paper from the raised bits that are left]*

“I’m going to ink it up and then one of you can place some paper on it and try to make a print. [...] Why has it not worked well? What is wrong with it?”

*[answer: smudged & not even because the paper moved around]*

“What would happen if William Morris tried to print lots of copies of the Chaucer, with all the small fonts and fine detail, in the way that we just produced this print? [...] So what do you think this big machine – the printing press – is for? It’s to control all the moving parts so that we can get a perfect print every time.”

*[demonstrate how the press works: how the blocks / type are held in place, how the paper is held in place and the printing mechanism itself]*

## 6. Block printing

*[Introduce self and any other staff or volunteers assisting]*

William Morris is probably best known of now because of his beautiful wallpaper and material designs. So in this workshop today we are going to learn how he designed and created his wallpaper and textiles.

Morris wasn't just an artist as we may think of one now, he was also a business manager. Does anyone know what Morris's business was called?

[answer: if anyone mentions the original name explain about the change of ownership, but if not stick to Morris & Co.]

Morris & Company began in April 1861 and they created many different items – some of which were mentioned in the introduction today. Because Morris ran a company, he had employees and a factory. What do you think Victorian factories were like?

[answer: *dependent on whether or not they have covered the Victorians.* Loud, noise, busy, dangerous, children worked, people died etc.etc. ]

During the Victorian period Britain was known as the 'Workshop of the World' Britain was the first country in the world to have lots of factories. Factory machines made all kinds of things. Machines did jobs, such as spinning, previously been done by families at home.

Factories were noisy. People had to shout above the rattle and hiss of machinery. They breathed air full of dust, oil and soot that damaged them and the country around them. Iron and steel works got so hot that workers dripped with sweat. Flames and sparks lit up the sky darkened by smoke from factory chimneys.

[show picture and pass around]

Now, can anyone tell me whether or not you think William Morris would have liked to have a factory like that? and Why do you think that?

[answer: no, he liked nature and art etc. ]

[show Morris factory picture and pass around]

Can you highlight some of the differences between the two pictures? And can anyone tell me which they think is William Morris's?

[answer: space, less people, light, wallpaper on the wall etc.]

The picture you are looking at is from Merton Abby, Morris's factory and workshop in South London. There he dyed textiles with natural dyes, made furniture, stained glass and wallpaper. This is where we are going to imagine we are working today. It was spacious and his employees could work in a nice environment where they could concentrate on their creations. William Morris was the company's main pattern designer. When Morris had a design idea for his company, he would first draw a

pencil drawing of the pattern as a design. That drawing would then be sent to a group of very special craftsmen – who you can see in the picture. I have here an example of what Morris & Co would have used to make their textiles and wallpaper patterns. Does anyone know what this is?

[answer: a woodblock]

'Block Printing' is a method used to print text, images or patterns on textiles. This method was widely used throughout East Asia, originating in China in antiquity. The block would have been hand carved to copy the design sent to them by Morris. Can you see that there's a bit of red paint left on the wood block? This shows you that this block would have been red and only red. But I've shown you lots of very colourful Morris designs – how do you think they added a different colour?

*[pupils typically answer "paint the next colour onto the wood block"]*

But if you just painted over the woodblock with another colour like blue then you'd end up putting blue paint on top of the red paint, with the same pattern. You would need to carve another wood block that had patterns in places between where the flowers are. So you need one block for each colour in the pattern. It takes a long time to print a whole pattern! Downstairs we have an original woodblock used for the St James's design, to complete the design Morris needed **67 woodblocks** because of the different colours, and the tricky pattern (intricate repeating patterns needed extra woodblocks)

Today we are going to work as craftspeople in Morris's workshop and print our own design together, just as the people working for Morris' & Co would have done but on a slightly smaller scale. We have here some examples of Morris birds and flowers from his designs, we are going to use these, to print a section of our own wallpaper. At each of your places there should be a roller, tray, a design block to print and some paper. You are going to get two pieces of paper, and this is the first one - I would like you to cover that piece of paper with test prints of your design so you become expert printers. This is the chance for you to test out how much paint needs to go on each block, which colours and styles look good together, and how you want your finished design to look like. You have 7 minutes of practice and then I will give you your final paper.

[test activity begins: children will need help with apply the paint sparingly on the printing blocks, not mixing the colours, thinking about the repeats, and making sure they cover all the paper]

I am now collecting your tests and giving you your final pieces, because by now you are all expert printers like Morris's workers. Imagine that this piece of paper is a sample sheet of your wallpaper, just like William's in these sample books you can see in the room, that you are going to present to William to see if he wants to sell your design at Morris & Co.!

[activity beings]

Round up: this about colour, repeats, intertwining patterns and who's would sell the best.



## **7. Additional text for Introductory Session - notable Coach House speakers**

*[bring out 2 posters of famous Coach House speakers]*

### Annie Besant.

Annie Besant was married to a vicar and had two children with him. In those days a woman didn't have many rights. A man could beat his wife as long as he beat her in a 'reasonable' way. Also, when a woman married a man, all her possessions became his.

One day, Annie decided to rebel. She was at church, her husband was giving the communion, and she decided not to go up to take communion. There was a big uproar and she left her husband. She couldn't take her son with her, but she took her daughter. Annie became an early women's rights activist, fighting for women to have better lives and more equality with men. She helped women at a match factory to strike in objection to the poor working conditions that damaged their health.

Also, at the time women were having many children, which was difficult for them in terms of providing food and clothes, and was also very bad for their health. Annie Besant was the first advocate of family planning. There was a big negative reaction to her fight for women to control whether they had children, she was branded evil by some people and her husband took her daughter away.

Annie died in India in the 1930s. She got very interested in religion in her later life and went to India to research it and write books on theosophy, a combination of religion and philosophy.