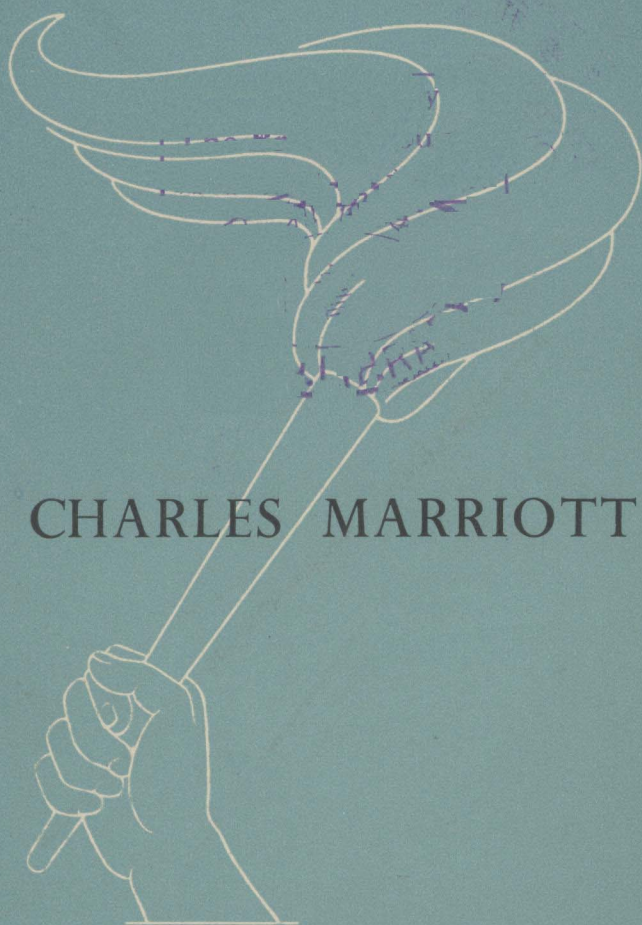


BRITISH HANDICRAFTS



CHARLES MARRIOTT

BRITISH LIFE & THOUGHT

BRITISH HANDICRAFTS

BY

CHARLES MARRIOTT

Hon. A.R.I.B.A.

With twelve illustrations

Published for

THE BRITISH COUNCIL

by LONGMANS GREEN & CO

LONDON NEW YORK TORONTO

LONGMANS, GREEN AND CO. LTD.

OF PATERNOSTER ROW

43 ALBERT DRIVE, LONDON, S.W.19

NICOL ROAD, BOMBAY

17 CHITTARANJAN AVENUE, CALCUTTA

36A MOUNT ROAD, MADRAS

LONGMANS, GREEN AND CO.

55 FIFTH AVENUE, NEW YORK

LONGMANS, GREEN AND CO.

215 VICTORIA STREET, TORONTO

THIS BOOKLET IS PRODUCED IN
COMPLETE CONFORMITY WITH THE
AUTHORISED ECONOMY STANDARDS

CODE NUMBER : 11023

First Published 1943

Reprinted 1944

Reprinted 1945

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN

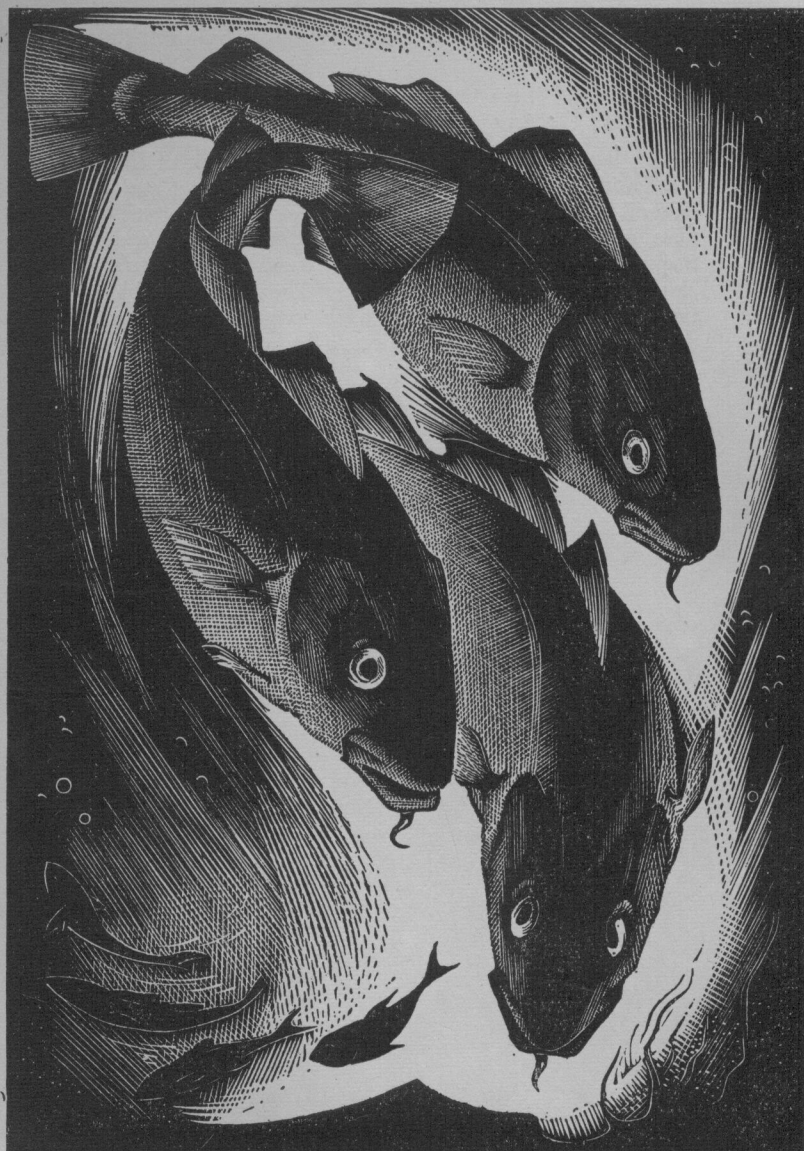
BY R. & R. CLARK, LIMITED, EDINBURGH

BRITISH HANDICRAFTS

The inspiration behind all handicrafts may be given in the words of Robert Bridges :

“ I too will something make
And joy in the making.”

British handicrafts include rural crafts (the work of the blacksmith, basket-making, weaving, the making of agricultural implements, etc.) ; decorative crafts (pottery, glass, gold and silver work, printing, textiles, etc.) ; and manufactures in which the design is based on handicraft although the making is by machinery. The work of British craftsmen through the centuries to the present day is here described by Mr. Charles Marriott, a former Art Critic of *The Times* newspaper.



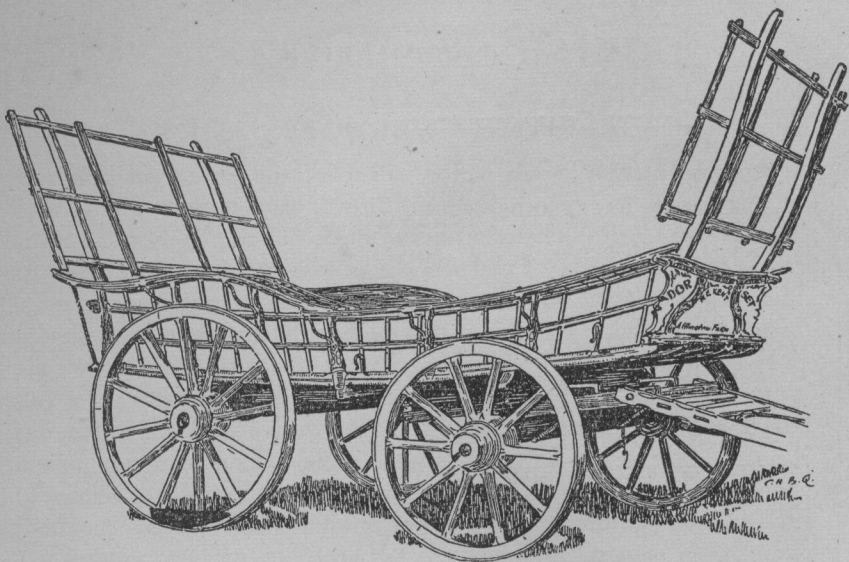
Wood-engraving by Agnes Miller Parker

CONTENTS

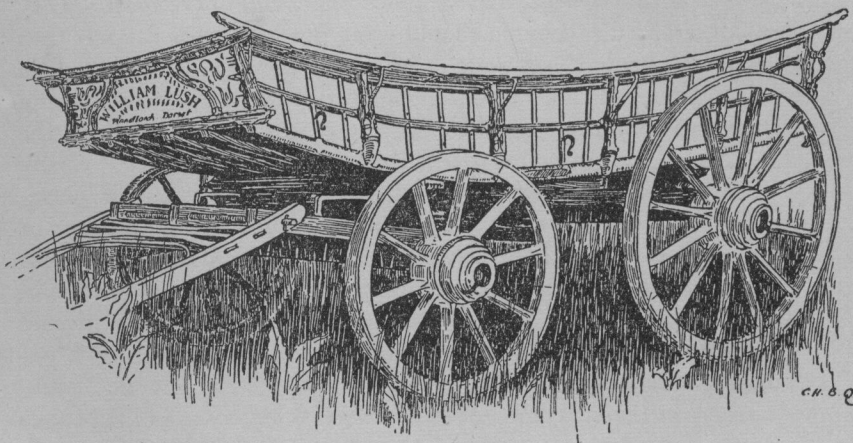
SOME BRITISH CHARACTERISTICS	7
WHAT ARE HANDICRAFTS ?	9
A GLANCE BACKWARDS	10
WILLIAM MORRIS	15
CRAFT ORGANISATIONS	16
RURAL CRAFTS	18
ARTS AND CRAFTS	22
DESIGN AND INDUSTRY	41
BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTES	48

ILLUSTRATIONS

WOOD ENGRAVING	<i>Frontispiece</i>
FARM WAGGONS	6
QUILTING	16
BASKET MAKING	17
NEEDLEWORK PICTURE	20
SHETLAND SHAWLS	21
SILVER-GILT ALMSDISH	28
SILVER COFFEE-POT AND MILK JUG	29
DUNKIRK CUP	32
POTTERY	33



Waggon made in Stoborough, Dorset. The body is blue, the wheels and underframing red.



Waggon made in Horton, Dorset, 1873. Body blue, wheels and underframing red.

Both are reproduced from A History of Everyday Things in England, Vol. 4, by Marjorie and C. H. B. Quennell, by kind permission of the publishers, B. T. Batsford, Ltd., London.

BRITISH HANDICRAFTS

SOME BRITISH CHARACTERISTICS

ANY particular activity of any nation will reflect the general characteristics of that nation, and before discussing British handicrafts it may be well to glance at some British characteristics in fields that are likely to be more familiar to foreign readers. Food and clothing are obvious examples. As discriminating foreigners will allow, British cooking has merits of its own, but the remark of a witty Frenchman that the British have a hundred religions and only one sauce is poetically true. That is to say, in England we are more preoccupied with the intrinsic qualities of the raw materials of our cooking, our beef, mutton and potatoes, than we are with added flavours and their organisation into an artistic whole. We take our stand upon plain roast and boiled. Listen to the post-prandial conversation of Englishmen in the family circle, and the emphasis is nearly always on intrinsic qualities; "a prime cut of salmon", "a nice piece of beef" or "a fine cauliflower" are typical remarks.

This does not mean that the English are indifferent to cooking, but only that they are inclined to consider cooking in relation to the thing cooked rather than in relation to what may be called the design of the meal. They are more concerned that cooking should bring out individual flavours than that the flavours should "compose". A typical commendation is "done to a turn"—a reference to the turn of the spit formerly used in roasting—and a typical complaint is that there was not enough or too much salt in the potatoes. The traditional adjuncts to an English meal are directed chiefly towards enhancing or correcting individual flavours; mustard or horseradish with beef, red-currant jelly with mutton, apple sauce with goose or pork, for examples. This is not to say that there is no regard for the sequence of flavours in an English meal. As a rule there is a robust common sense in the order of dishes, but the subtleties of relationship in often substituted flavours which make a meal a sort of poem are generally lacking.

It is hardly necessary to say that these references are to domestic or vernacular cooking in England, and not to the more or less cosmopolitan cooking of hotels and restaurants. If only on the grounds of "difference", discriminating foreign visitors generally prefer the former. Here and there, too, we can claim a positive advantage. With a generally happy experience of the food of eight foreign countries I will stoutly maintain the superiority, in respect of both colour and flavour, of the English over the Continental treatment of spinach.

British Handicrafts

If we turn to English clothing we find similar characteristics. The first comment of an English man or woman on new clothes in the family circle is to finger the material ; cloth, tweed, serge, flannel or silk, as the case may be ; with admiring or critical remarks about its substantial quality, perhaps with the addition that it should " wear well ". If " cut " or " style " come into the discussion, the former is generally understood in relation to the figure of the wearer ; whether the clothes fit well or badly ; and the latter is used in a social rather than an aesthetic sense. Everybody in England knows what is meant when it is said that a man or a woman is " good style ".

It is, by the way, revealing that the words " style " and " form " have acquired with us an almost exclusively social meaning. One consequence, bearing on the subject of this brochure, is that it is the most difficult thing in the world to explain to the average lay person in England what is meant by " form " in works of art.

So habitually do we think of clothes in terms of quality of material and appropriateness to the wearer that any distinction of " cut " or " style " for its own sake immediately suggests a foreigner, or at least a Jew. There is a true story of two Oxford undergraduates who had discovered the excellence of subscription dances in Whitechapel. They were not very successful in finding partners, and asked an M.C. the reason why. After some hesitation he said apologetically, " Well, to tell you the truth, you are not well-dressed enough for our girls." The young men had been polite enough to appear in what some novelists call " immaculate " evening clothes, but the little refinements of " cut " and the additions of braid or silk that make for smartness were lacking.

Another pronounced British characteristic comes out in games. The Englishman likes winning as much as the man of any other nation, but he is, as a rule, more completely absorbed in the game itself, regardless of results. In this connection it may be suggested the familiar injunction " play the game " has more than an ethical meaning. It is a reminder that the game is its own reward. Not, of course, that all foreigners play games with ulterior motives, but only that the idea of doing so would not occur to the average Englishman. The Teutonic notion of playing games in order to be strong is one of our stock jokes. If it be true that Waterloo was won on the playing-fields of Eton, the reason is that the boys did not think of any such thing when playing. It is the brilliant " stroke " or " pass ", irrespective of its contribution towards the success of the game, that excites the enthusiasm of English spectators. The English attitude to games, as to things in general, is very well summed up in the poetical answer to the question of who won the battle : " I doubt if anyone won, But fine was the fighting."

These digressions, as they might be called, are directed towards finding

What are Handicrafts ?

out in more familiar fields the characteristics to be expected in British handicrafts. They may be summed up as appreciation of and pride in intrinsic quality of substance, "good stuff", and good workmanship, and a delight in doing things for their own sake, to the comparative disregard of their effects when done. It is not surprising, then, when we turn to British handicrafts, to find them on the whole better in quality of substance and workmanship than in quality of design. This applies not only to design with an eye to formal beauty but also to nice adaptation to purpose and to changing taste, and it is as true of British manufactures as of handicrafts proper. It stands to reason that in proportion as you like doing a thing for its own sake you will be less concerned about what it looks like when done or what other people prefer.

There is, too, it must be confessed, a reason for British conservatism in design which goes beyond liking. On the whole we are more active physically than mentally. As most people know when they are quite honest with themselves, there is a kind of industriousness that springs from mental indolence, because it is easier to go on doing a thing than to make the mental effort for a fresh start.

One historical consequence of the national peculiarities indicated is that artistic improvements in British handicrafts are nearly always due to special efforts by gifted individual designers, often outside the particular craft concerned. Quality of substance and workmanship in British handicrafts can almost be taken for granted, and when we say, as we often do, that a thing will "last for ever", we both claim a merit and confess a fault in our way of doing things.

WHAT ARE HANDICRAFTS ?

It will not have escaped some readers that cooking and clothing—that is to say, tailoring and dressmaking—at which we glanced for light on British handicrafts, are handicrafts themselves. That brings us to the necessity of making clear to foreign readers the exact scope of this little book. Obviously it cannot include everything done by hand, such as cooking, tailoring and gardening. Since the days of William Morris and the "Arts and Crafts Movement" which derived from him, almost everybody in England understands the limitation that must be observed here, but so far as I know there is no equivalent to the limitation in any foreign language. The Latins, at any rate, call the handicraftsman the artisan—which to us conveys the idea of the mechanic. To add to the confusion our word "manufacture", which we reserve for machine production, really means made by hand. It is doubtful if, even in England, "handicraft" would have much meaning if it were not coupled with "art".

British Handicrafts

The truth is that the idea of "handicraft", as distinct from "art" on the one hand and "manufacture" on the other, is comparatively modern. It dates from the foundation of the French Academy in 1648, when the term "fine arts", to distinguish painting, sculpture and architecture, came into general use. During the Middle Ages there was no such distinction. This, by the way, is more than an academic discussion of words, because the whole history of handicrafts in England, in their flourishing, decline and revival, is affected by the circumstance which gave rise to the words.

There is, indeed, much interest and not a little humour in the efforts which have been made to distinguish handicrafts from arts. They are none of them satisfactory, being either too inclusive or too exclusive. For instance, if we call them "the industrial arts" we must obviously include things like carpentering, shoemaking and gardening. If, on the other hand, we call them "the decorative arts", we should exclude things like domestic pottery and the weaving of tweeds, which, though they have a decorative aspect, are primarily for use. The clumsy term "artist-craftsman", to distinguish the maker of "craft" objects from the manufacturer, is in itself a confession of the difficulty of precise definition. If, with the idea of distinguishing the "artist-craftsman" from the painter of pictures, we exclude pictorial art from his province, we are landed in the difficulty that wood-engraving for book illustration, which is ordinarily included among the crafts, is pictorial.

These difficulties are due of course to the fact that the attempted definitions are artificial and, so to speak, idiomatic. The most that can be done towards making clear the scope of this book to those who are not familiar with our loosely idiomatic way of talking is to say that it is concerned with the designing and making of objects and materials which, though they are primarily for use, give artistic pleasure by their appearance. In the main they are the objects and materials that come into the province of the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society, but they are not exclusively so. Particularly in view of the future they must include some objects, designed "by hand", but in the production of which machinery is employed. If then we say that "handicrafts" as understood here touch the fine arts at one end and manufacture at the other, and that the typical or "central" handicraft is that in which the designer and the executant are the same person, we shall perhaps get as near as can be got to defining the scope of the book.

A GLANCE BACKWARDS

From what has been said about national characteristics it almost follows that British handicrafts have had a higher reputation than British arts—in the sense of the "fine arts". The history of British painting is largely the

A Glance Backwards

history of digested foreign influences ; as the names of Holbein, Rubens, Van Dyck, Lely and Kneller, all of whom worked in England, and more recently Monet and Cézanne, will show ; but the history of British handicrafts is mainly domestic, with the influence proceeding outwards to the Continent.

From the Celtic period it is only necessary to name the illuminated manuscripts, such as the "Book of Kells", the stone carvings, and the gold ornaments which have been found from time to time in Ireland and Cornwall. In dealing with the Anglo-Saxon or so-called "pagan" period, from A.D. 450 to the Norman Conquest, the late Professor G. Baldwin Brown found it necessary to devote two stout volumes, totalling 813 pages, to describing and illustrating the objects ; coins, adjuncts to costume, bronze bowls, vessels of glass, potteries, embroideries, illuminated manuscripts—such as the "Lindisfarne Gospel"—and stone carvings ; which have survived.

But it was in the Middle Ages, roughly from the Norman Conquest to the end of the fifteenth century, that British handicrafts reached their highest level. How much of this was due to the patronage of the Church, and how much to the organisation of the craft guilds, need not be debated. It is enough to say that, in the abbey and the cathedral, the Church provided a stable demand for handicrafts and a place for their assembly.

In this general high level certain handicrafts gained a special reputation. It was about the middle of the thirteenth century that the term *opus Anglicanum* was applied to a certain type of ecclesiastical embroidery made in this country ; not, apparently, to describe any special technique, but to say where it came from—as we might say Irish linen or Scottish tweed. Matthew Paris records that in 1246 Pope Innocent IV was so struck by the beauty of the gold-embroidered vestments of English ecclesiastics then in Rome that he asked where they were made. English alabaster carving, too, was celebrated, and there is evidence that it was exported. In the fourteenth century in particular English illuminated manuscripts, such as the "Luttrell Psalter", ranked with the finest in Europe, and stained glass, wood and stone carving and the work of the goldsmith were all at a high level of excellence.

As was said, during the Middle Ages there was no distinction between the artist and the craftsman. The professional artist as we know him did not exist. Apparently the painter, sculptor, embroiderer and metal worker all carried on their crafts in the same workshop, under the general direction of a master builder, and designs for one art were frequently adapted for another. To quote Professor W. G. Constable, the arts of the Middle Ages must be looked upon as "joint products of an activity dominated by the architect".

Considering British handicrafts of the Middle Ages as a whole, there is a

British Handicrafts

technical character to be observed that throws light on later developments. Speaking generally, and not forgetting English alabasters and other sculpture, the native instinct seems to be for line and colour rather than for mass—for designing “on the flat” rather than “in the round”. This comes out in the special excellence of English embroideries, illuminated manuscripts and stained glass, as also in what survives of mediaeval wall paintings, such as the “Chichester Roundel”, and even so late as the miniatures of Nicholas Hilliard (1547–1619). When, in contemporary painting under foreign influence, the English painter realises objects “in the round”, it seems to represent an ambition rather than an instinct. In formal language, the British artistic genius appears to be graphic rather than plastic.

Some authorities attribute this linear bent to the Celtic strain in our mixed inheritance; certainly it is marked in the “Book of Kells” as also in the carved crosses of the Celtic period. The subject of native and acquired characters in art is extremely complicated. Authorities are divided on the question of direct communication between early Britain and the East, but much as we owe to the Mediterranean peoples through Rome, there certainly seems to be a natural affinity between our art and that of Asia. Or, to put it another way, we incline to the example of Siena rather than to that of Florence. However that may be, in the light of what may be observed in the mediaeval period, the question of two-dimensional versus three-dimensional design becomes important when we are considering British handicrafts at the present day.

It is customary to say that British handicrafts declined after the Reformation. The degree to which the Church inspired the crafts may be left an open question; what cannot be doubted is that the Church was their chief patron. If to the removal of this patronage be added the wholesale destruction of church ornaments during the reign of Henry VIII and later under Cromwell, some decline in handicrafts is only to be expected. The Reformation was a European movement, but in its practical effects there was nothing on the Continent to correspond to its effects in England.

But apart from the effects of the Reformation there was another reason, shared with the Continent, for a decline in handicrafts. That was the appearance of the professional “artist”, that is to say, the designer as distinct from the maker of things. Even in the mediaeval workshop the designer, in the person of the master builder or architect, existed, but he was in such close collaboration with the various handicraftsmen that there was no breach in their functions. But with the elevation of the designer to the status of professional gentleman he tended, so to speak, to wash his hands of the workshop and concentrate his art on what may be called the higher branches, that is to say, pictures and statues.

A Glance Backwards

The process, which was gradual, was akin to that which took place in the later industrial revolution, when the ordinary man split up into the "black-coated worker" and the "labourer". So, with the Renaissance, the handicraftsman split up into the "artist" and the "workman". There was still a relationship between the two functions of designer and executant, but it had changed in character. What the artist now required of the workman was not so much close collaboration, with a constant give and take between them, as a more or less mechanical obedience to his designs. Naturally the workman lost his initiative, and with it the peculiar liveliness in execution which distinguished British handicrafts in the Middle Ages. The decline was not so much in design or execution themselves as in the intimate relationship between the two. What survived was the stubborn pride in good substance and workmanship, and when we speak of the "tradition" of British handicrafts we mean this rather than an artistic tradition.

The effect of the severance between the detached, and often learned, artist and the skilled workman is well seen when, as occasionally happens, fourteenth or fifteenth century bench-ends and a Jacobean screen are found in the same church. From a formal point of view the screen is well designed, and the carving is well executed, but the vitality and feeling for wood apparent in the mediaeval work are lacking.

By the eighteenth century, when the field of the crafts was dominated by the architect, the situation was clear. Both good design and good workmanship prevailed, but they were done by different classes of people, who stood in the relation of master and servant. We are justly proud of our eighteenth-century architecture, but it cannot be said to show much vitality in the execution of detail. A truth that is often overlooked is that classical motives in ornament themselves discourage freedom in the handicraftsman, as will be evident in comparing a range of Corinthian with a range of Early English capitals. What is required of the carver of classical ornament is exact repetition and neatness and precision in execution, and there is a good deal to be said for the suggestion that the Renaissance unconsciously anticipated the industrial revolution, the machine age, which by the middle of the eighteenth century had already begun.

What happened might be summarised by saying that art had evaporated from the crafts into the rarified atmosphere of the "fine arts", as administered by the Royal Academy, to be re-condensed in designs for the crafts which were not always very well adapted to them. The group of four stained glass windows which Sir Joshua Reynolds, first President of the Royal Academy, designed for the chapel of New College, Oxford, is a notorious example. But much good work in the crafts continued to be done, particularly in cabinet-making, as the names of Chippendale, Sheraton and Hepplewhite

British Handicrafts

will show, and in silver, cut glass and pottery. The example of Josiah Wedgwood (1730-95) shows to perfection the effect of the classical spirit on British handicrafts. Wedgwood greatly improved the technical quality of his wares, and he employed excellent designers, including Flaxman, but it cannot be denied that he stiffened and, so to speak, mechanised the craft.

Whatever may have been the benefits to literature and pictorial art of the Romantic movement in England, there can be no doubt that, in unholy alliance with industrialism, it was disastrous to the crafts. This, it may be ventured, was chiefly because it distracted architects from the sober tradition in design of the eighteenth century. A point to be insisted on, of great importance in view of the problems of the future, is that machine production, which was now general, lends itself much better to classical design than to the Gothic design, revived by the Romantics, which, in its turn, was admirably adapted to handicrafts, from which, in fact, it arose.

The first serious attempt to grapple with the machine problem had been made by the Royal Society of Arts, which, founded in 1754, was incorporated by Royal Charter in 1847. With the advertised object of benefiting by the fresh ideas of the young, the Society offered, and still continues to offer with good effect, scholarships and prizes in annual competitions for industrial design in many branches of applied art.

Then, in 1851, came the Great Exhibition in Hyde Park. This was due chiefly to the initiative of the Prince Consort and Sir Henry Cole (1808-82). The exhibition was housed in a great building of glass and iron, afterwards known as the "Crystal Palace", which was later transferred to Sydenham, where it was destroyed by fire in 1936.

Cole's aim was frankly to work with industry rather than, like William Morris, to revive handicrafts. He sought to develop "art manufacture", meaning fine art or beauty applied to mechanical production, and a valuable part of his programme was the foundation of the Victoria and Albert Museum, the first museum of decorative art, with its associated school of design, now known as the Royal College of Art.

Unfortunately Cole's ideas, admirable in themselves, were interpreted by designers and manufacturers chiefly as the imitation by the machine of what had been done formerly by hand, with a characteristic tendency to naturalistic ornament, and plenty of it, and what survives from the 1851 Exhibition is alarming rather than edifying. It is interesting to speculate what might have happened if the classical tradition in design of the eighteenth century had survived, and there are hints of its possibilities in the admirable industrial designs, notably for cast-iron fireplaces, by the great English artist, Alfred Stevens (1817-75). There is, by the way, delicious irony in the circumstance that the 1851 Exhibition, which represented mainly the misapplication of

William Morris

design, should have been housed in a building, designed by Sir Joseph Paxton (1803-65), which is now generally looked upon as a superlatively good example of designing directly in terms of glass and iron.

WILLIAM MORRIS

The modern revival of British handicrafts was due to William Morris (1834-96). Morris, who was the son of a prosperous broker and was always in what are called easy circumstances, was educated at Marlborough and Exeter College, Oxford. Here he met Edward Burne-Jones, who, like him, was intended for the Church, and the two became close friends with a common interest in the Gothic period as discussed in the works of John Ruskin. Both gave up the idea of the Church, Burne-Jones to become a painter and Morris to be articled to George Edmund Street, R.A., the architect, who designed the Royal Courts of Justice, commonly known as the Law Courts, London.

Between what Morris was to do and the 1851 Exhibition there was a definite connection. It is recorded that, at the age of seventeen, he was taken to the exhibition by his mother and, after a preliminary glance, pronounced it to be "wonderfully ugly", sat down, and refused to go any further. It is unlikely that the boy reasoned out why the things were "wonderfully ugly", that is to say, because most of them were wrongly designed in view of their purpose and means of production, but this early experience must have played a part in his violent reaction from manufacture.

In 1857 Morris, who had come under the influence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, gave up architecture and took up painting. He and Burne-Jones moved into rooms in Red Lion Square, and it was the furnishing of these rooms that started him on his life's work in the handicrafts. Two years later Morris married the beautiful Jane Burden, who appears in many of Rossetti's pictures, and commissioned Philip Webb, who had been with him in Street's office, to design a house for them in Kent, which afterwards became famous as the "Red House". Out of the furnishing of this house came the firm of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner and Co., established first of all in Red Lion Square, then in Queen Square and finally, as Morris and Co., in Oxford Street. The firm undertook to execute church decoration, carving, stained glass, metal-work, paper-hanging, chintzes and carpets. Original members of the firm, besides Morris, Marshall and Faulkner, were Rossetti, Webb, Burne-Jones and Ford Madox Brown, so that the connection with the Pre-Raphaelite movement in painting was close. Morris was not content merely to design, but made himself master of the handicrafts involved, weaving in particular. In 1875 he became sole manager of the firm; in

British Handicrafts

1881 he established a tapestry weaving industry at Merton, Surrey; and in 1890 he set up the Kelmscott Press. Printing was begun in 1891, and in 1896, the last year of his life, Morris produced the *Kelmscott Chaucer*, which is generally regarded as his masterpiece in printing.

In considering the work of Morris and his hostility to the machine it must be remembered that besides being poet, painter and handicraftsman, he was also keenly interested in sociology and for a time a professed Socialist. At this distance in time it seems likely that his fanatical insistence on handicraft production was as much if not more in the interests of the worker than in the interests of the work. He saw that in making things by hand, which calls out a wide range of faculties, people are happier than they are in tending a machine, which merely exhausts one kind of attention, leaving the other faculties unemployed and undeveloped. At any rate that is the chief practical value of his teaching today, a value that is bound to go on increasing: not that, given appropriate design in each case, things made by hand are necessarily better artistically than things made by machinery, which is a matter of opinion, depending largely on whether the sense of beauty is for "customary" or "geometrical" beauty (in Sir Christopher Wren's happy distinction); but that things made by hand are infinitely better for the people who make them, about which there cannot be two opinions.

The influence of Morris and of the "Arts and Crafts" movement which derived from him was enormous, and extended far beyond these islands, to Northern Europe in particular. The first practical result in England was the foundation, in 1883, of the Art Workers' Guild, with Gerald Horsley, W. R. Lethaby, Ernest Newton, Mervyn Macartney and E. S. Prior as original members. The same group, with Benson as leader, founded in 1888 the Arts and Crafts Society, the first president of which was Walter Crane. Both these bodies are still active, and the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society, as it is now called, covers all the British handicrafts discussed in this book, with a special emphasis on work in which designer and executant are the same person. Its exhibitions, originally held in the New Gallery, Regent Street—since converted into a cinema—are now generally held in some of the galleries of the Royal Academy, though the Academy is not officially concerned with them. Prominent names in the history of the Arts and Crafts movement are those of Walter Crane, Henry Wilson, Robert Anning Bell, R.A., and Arthur Gaskin.

CRAFT ORGANISATIONS

Looked at broadly, existing British handicrafts may be divided into three classes: surviving rural crafts, such as the work of the blacksmith and wheel-