Morris and Company at Merton Abbey: one man's memory of the last days of the works

An interview with Mr. D. Griffiths

recorded and transcribed by Denis Smith

William Morris (1834-1896) is perhaps best known as a writer and an artist. But, in addition to being a designer, he also formed a company to manufacture decorative tiles, stained glass, and to weave, dye, and print textiles. The firm was established in 1861 and traded as Morris, Marshall, Faulkner and Company *from premises at 8 Red Lion Square, Bloomsbury. In 1875 the firm was re-named* Morris and Company *and in 1881 moved into existing buildings on the banks of the Wandle at Merton Abbey. This was to be its final location and H.C. Marillier writing in 1927 said:*

> The buildings are old and picturesque. Here, in what was practically open country in those days, Morris carried out his long-desired scheme of reforming the public taste . . . In the spacious grounds at Merton Morris could dig out his huge indigo vats, set up his Jacquard looms for the weaving of gorgeous materials, lay out the long stone tables for printing his chintzes, install his stained-glass painters, and finally erect the great hand-looms for tapestry weaving and carpets.[1]

Douglas Griffiths was one of the last apprentices of Morris and Company and left them for military service at the outbreak of the second world war. When I met him in 1975 he was working for London Transport and he is now enjoying his retirement in Peterborough. We are grateful to him for his fascinating reminiscences and for his kind permission to publish them. The transcript is changed only minimally from the original tape. The products of the Company may be seen all over the world, and in London notably at the Victoria and Albert Museum and at the William Morris Gallery, Lloyd Park, Walthamstow where further information may be obtained.

"I started at Merton Abbey Works, William Morris and Company, in 1934 as an apprentice of fourteen years of age, and I worked there until 'thirty nine when the current situation, the war, coming along finally folded the works up, which I believe finished in 1940 – I was in the forces by then. I was the junior apprentice, but on joining there, there was two lads of approximately two or three years senior to myself, together with some half a dozen senior weavers all of various ages, some of them quite antique – the age of the people over the whole of the works was quite old – in their seventies, some were even eighty.

On my arrival at the tapestry weaving shed, I was introduced first of all to the Arras tapestry and upright looms (Plate 1). Of course I was the tea boy, that was my main function at one time, and sweeping up in the evenings. But I was put to keeping all the mountains of wool and silks – keeping them in order, keep them tidy, and I was allocated a small loom of my own where, in between my various other duties, such as winding spools for the Master Weavers and things like that, I could tinker about and gradually learn the trade. My first piece was just a plain block of weaving, just a plain block. The idea being, of course, to keep it straight up the sides, flat, no cockling, all the various techniques that's required. My first actual piece was a hand – it looked a bit ghastly, one of these Tutankhamen's tomb it looked like, but nevertheless you can see that in Lloyd's Museum[2] if you wish. But from the hand I worked up to feet, that's upside down but nevertheless, that's the way it was – feet are harder than hands. And then pieces of gowns, various gowns, they'd just take a small section off a cartoon and say there is the bottom of Jesus's gown – do that you see. Finally, I was allowed to make a small tapestry of my own. I did St John's head, you can see that in there. Incidentally you've so many warps to the inch – that particular little loom I had was sixteen warps to the inch, which is very fine really, the average is fourteen which you reckon on about a square foot a week. But the bigger tapestries such as the Lancing tapestry, that was twelve to the inch, which meant that you could do about a foot and a half a week. But with a tapestry ten foot wide, twenty odd feet long you did have a coarser weave.

The working day consisted – eight thirty start until five thirty, an hour off for dinner and two breaks, with just Saturday mornings, eight till one. In those days this was considered to be generous, for the simple reason the work was of a mental character and very trying at times – you were constantly using your eyes and staring, looking, the colours – all this kind of thing.

The River Wandle which ran through the middle of the complex, the middle being the operative word, was essential to the whole operation. The water was used even in the boiler to heat and drive what antiquated machinery there was available. It was also used for the dyeing processes, to wash the chintz in, and of course us boys we used to have a little swim in there as well, because in those days this pollution wasn't really known. The first pollution of the River Wandle used to start with the Board Mills which was our next door neighbour downstream. So above there, the only other place we had which might pollute at some time was Liberty's. Their showrooms are at the top of Regent Street. Occasionally when they started washing their chintz, their dyes used to come drifting downstream, and our old boy, who was waiting to wash our chintz, used to do his nut, and belt off on his bike up the river bank and have a word with his opposite number – "When you going to finish?" and that sort of thing. But between the two of them they did alright. So basically the River Wandle was used by quite a large number of various cottage industries and this sort of thing.

The buildings themselves were built by the Huguenots – they were emigrés driven out from France and they come over into the south of London and established themselves, and this was part of their works. However, when they finally were observed in the locale – I don't know quite how they vanished, but they did, and William Morris took advantage of their building complex

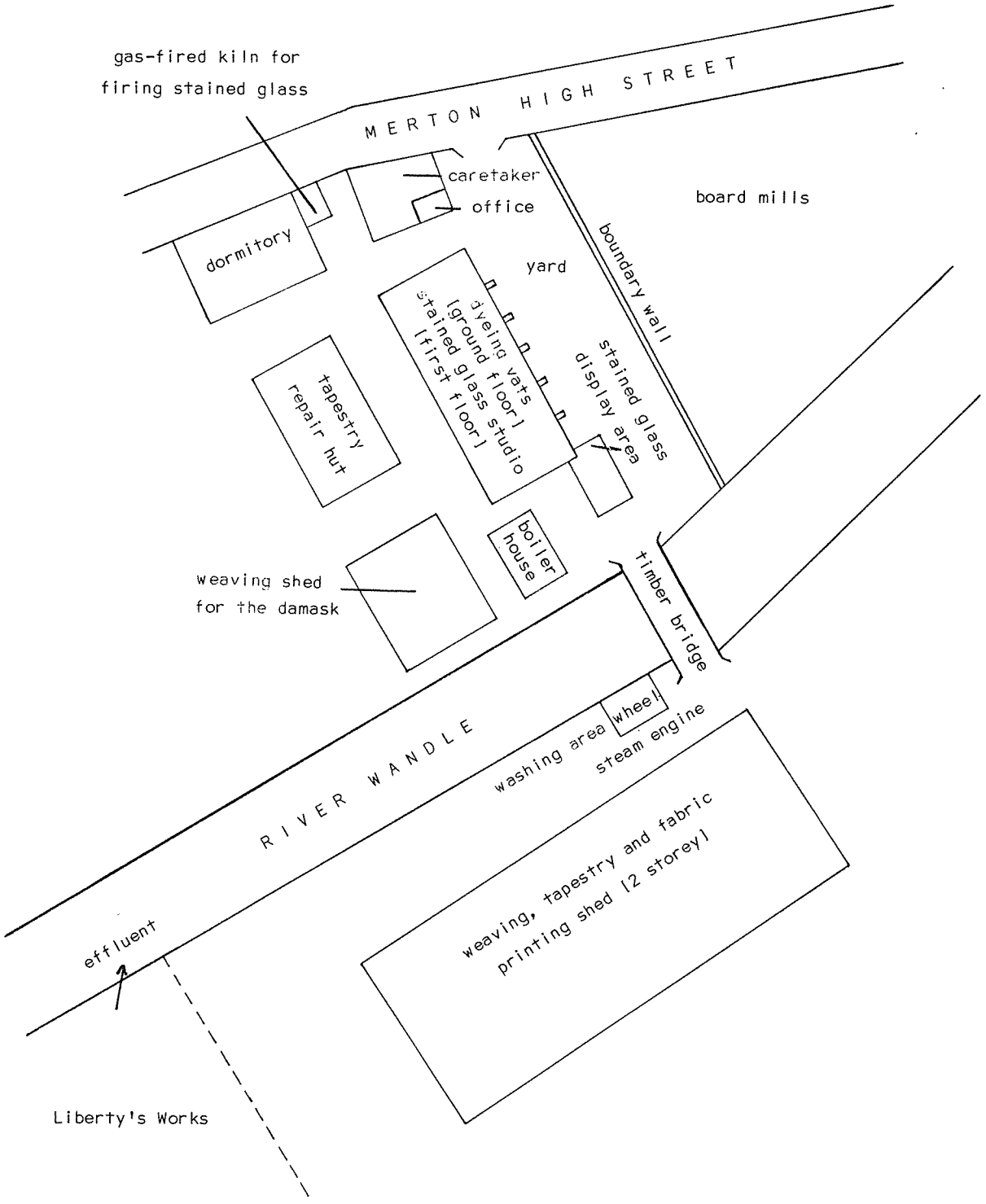

Fig. 1. *Sketch plan of Merton Abbey works (not to scale)*

nere. But of course he had to adapt the buildings to his own requirements. These buildings were all wooden, clapboarding, shored up well by the time I arrived. But they were long buildings adapted to – for instance, in the fabric printing shed you'd have a long table perhaps fifty, sixty feet long with a little railway which consisted actually of gas piping, I think, nailed on the floor, and a trolley where the printers would push this trolley along with their various colours in them, and use their blocks to make out their chintzes and that sort of thing.

Situated on the bank of the river, and beside the small footbridge (made of timber of course) was what we used to call the wheel. This was used to wash out the chintzes that were made in the fabric printing shed, and driven by a steam engine which was supplied by steam from our boiler house. When the material was placed on the wheel, the idea was that it used to flip round pretty smartly with about thirty feet of chintz thrashing up and down in the water. This used to – remember that the water was then quite clear – this used to get rid of the excess indigo dye. Practically all the dyes used were of a vegetable character – there were very few chemicals as such. The excess was washed out and then, providing it stayed on the wheel and the wheelman wasn't a bit tipsy from a visit across the road – if he was then we all had to pull our trousers up and dive in and get it

out of the river – it was then placed in what was known as a hydrometer, nowadays we just call it a spin-dryer. But it was big enough for two or three of us boys to get into, and we was always threatening to chuck each other in – to stir our brains up. However, perhaps sixty, eighty, one hundred and twenty feet of chintz could be put in here, and once the old belt system, which drove it, was put into action, this used to go with a terrific roar, and you could hear it right up the other end of the building. We all used to hope that it would stay on its mountings and not come un-moored.

When you walked into what was known as the yard, this was about thirty feet wide and two or three hundred feet long, and led from the main gates straight up to the bridge over the Wandle. This used to be the delivery area as well, and immediately after you'd passed the little office and the caretaker's house, you were only a hundred feet from Merton High Street, but it was just like being in a rural world of your own.

dyeing that you required, they might remain in there all day or just two hours – and then lifted out and stood to drain. Then after about an hour you used to reverse the whole thing upside down so that it would drain out the other way – then you wouldn't get dark at the bottom, you know.

These big vats – very often people fell into them, and you was like the proverbial blue-arse monkey for a week, but you just had to put up with that! And of course most people who worked in the dyeing shed they all had blue trousers you see, because even if you never fell in, you eventually dipped your trousers in because they were splashed with it – even though you wore leather aprons and protective clothing. The vats used to be prepared with dye. They would be filled with water from the Wandle – in a powdered form the dye would be in, being dried vegetable. It would be put in to the strength required by the Master Dyer – he'd come in and have a look and say 'Right-O, put another tin in' and huge paddles used to stir it up, and you used to get a

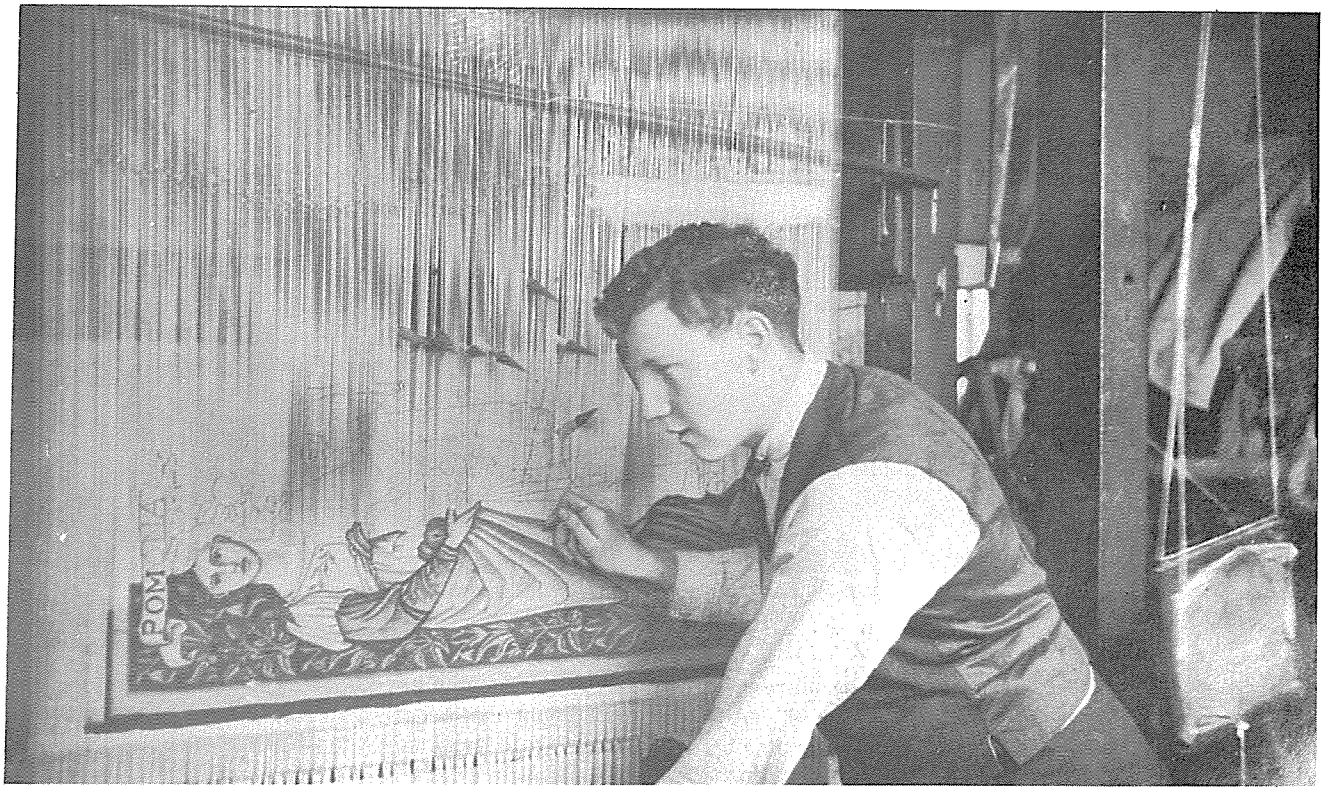

Plate 1. *Douglas Griffiths as an apprentice working at an Arras tapestry loom at Merton Abbey*

The building on the right hand side – on the ground floor was the dyeing complex and upstairs was stained glass. In the dyeing area there was about eight vats six feet deep, about six feet square (Plate 2), and these were used to dye the calico before it was taken up to the fabric printing shed (Plate 3). When things were a bit quiet in the tapestry weaving shed – as one of the apprentices, we'd be sent down to give a hand out to the dyers. There was large frames which with nails, little bent hooks, we used to hook on the calico – quite stiff, and you'd get about thirty, sixty feet according to what you were going to dye. Then the whole dye was lifted up, quite an effort, it used to take two of you all your time to lift it up, and lowered gently into the vat of indigo, or whatever colour you were using. It was either chrome yellow for the background and indigo blue, mostly indigo. Sometimes you just used to have the plain calico go up, if that was the background colour required. According to the depth of the

sludge of indigo dye anything up to a foot deep at the bottom. So eventually, after say six months, you'd take one of these vats out of action and it would have to be cleared right out – horrible job! Also in the dyeing shed you used to dye the wool for the weaving, the tapestry weaving, according to the colours required. There were vats above ground, made of wood about three inches thick, and they'd be about waist height. These were used in the same manner as those in the ground, but of course you had a much bigger variety of colours. There again the whole place was littered with carboys of sulphuric acid, acetic acid, which were mainly used for fixing the dyes after they'd been finished with.

Above the dyeing vats was the stained glass studio, or works. The whole of this building was about two hundred feet long. To get upstairs you used to go up a large staircase, very wide,

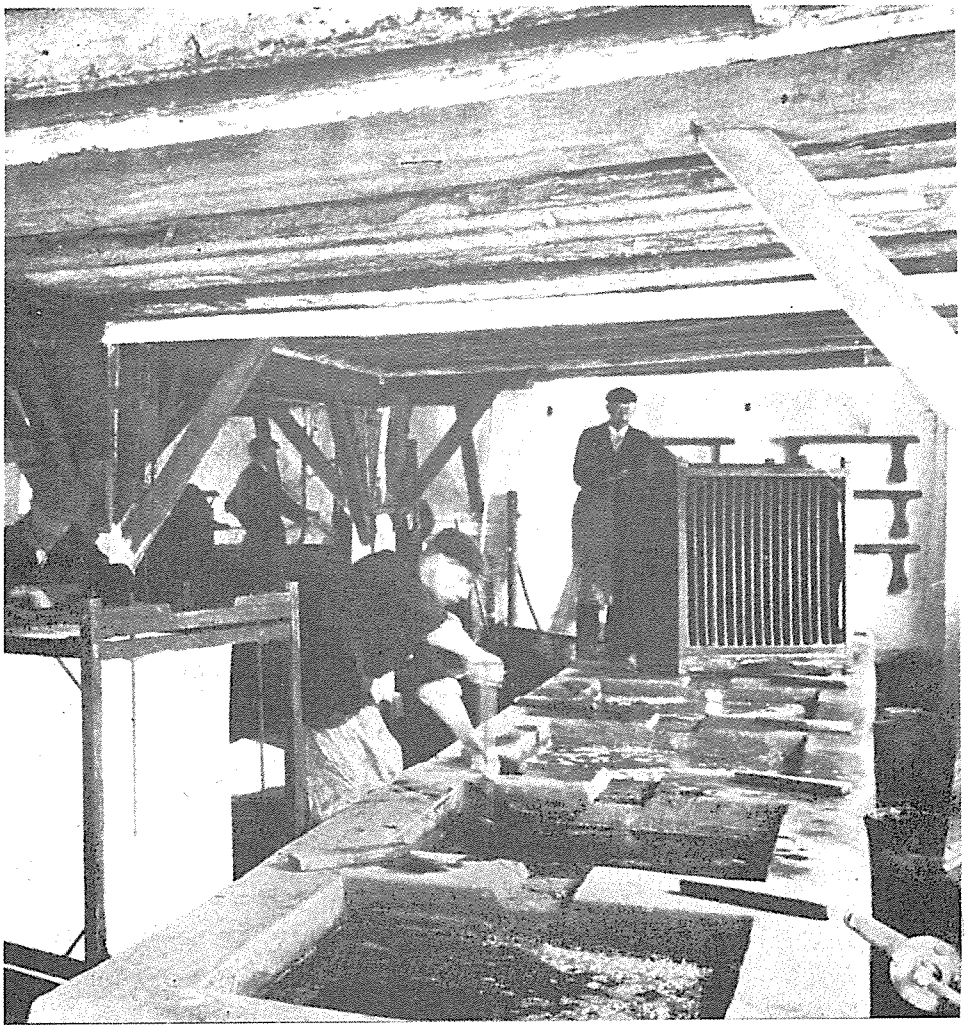

Plate 2. *The Indigo Vats at Merton Abbey*

which had a window about twelve to fourteen feet high by about eight feet wide at the top. This was a display window, so that when the stained glass was finished with we used to to put it up, fix it up with battening onto this window, and then go down to the bottom of the stairs and you had the impression of being in a church looking up at a stained glass window.

Once you got inside the stained glass studio, you'd start off with the design, whatever was going to be made, a one, or five-light window, or whatever. The drawings would be made, passed by the various church committees, and after the design was made, it would be enlarged to actual size in the form of what we used to call cartoons. The cartoon would be covered with glass, cut out, and the various shades of bottle green, dark green, ruby, or whatever would be laid on the paper. The stained glass artist would then put the glass up on his easel, paint on the bits of jig-saw, the various angels, archangels, cherubs or cherubims or whatever was going on, and it would be taken down to be fired in the kiln that was on the premises. After firing it would be brought back – it was a bit more complex than this but I'm just speeding the process up – it would be brought back, fetched in by old Bill Roberts – our lead man who made up the leaded lights; the last process being linseed oil and bran rubbed all over it to give it a sort of nice finish. It was made into the shape required, put up in the display area, and providing everything was alright, that was it – bom bom – into the packing case and away to Muddlecombe-on-the-Marsh.

Behind the stained glass building, there was a repair hut for tapestries. This wasn't used a great deal, and it was quite a modern building – just an ordinary large wooden hut. We did maintain a unit at Hampton Court, of some dozen girls who used to repair the tapestries at Hampton Court, and they'd start off at one end of the passage and by the time they'd got to the other end of the passage, about five years later, it was time to go back and start repairing all over again. Occasionally we'd have a tapestry come for repair, which we used to set up in this particular shed and get a gaggle of girls down from Hampton Court. And of course this suited us because all us boys used to find quite a lot of work to do around this particular shed – there was no other females working in the place. But also we did have one large arras loom in there which I can remember working on when we made a tapestry – the money was supplied by Sir A. Bailey, a diamond miner in South Africa. This particular tapestry was pictorial really, in the form of a map of South Africa which he presented to South Africa House – and it still hangs there now. In the map you had a little gaggle of lions in one corner and elephants in another, and a tin-mine symbol – gold mines and

things like that. And the sea had various dolphins jumping in and out – it was quite a large, ornate thing. Of course I wasn't really up to doing the dolphins and the elephants, I did the border which was quite a plain simple little thing, but nevertheless I managed to squeeze my initials in one corner, somewhere on the top of a wave I think – 'DG'.

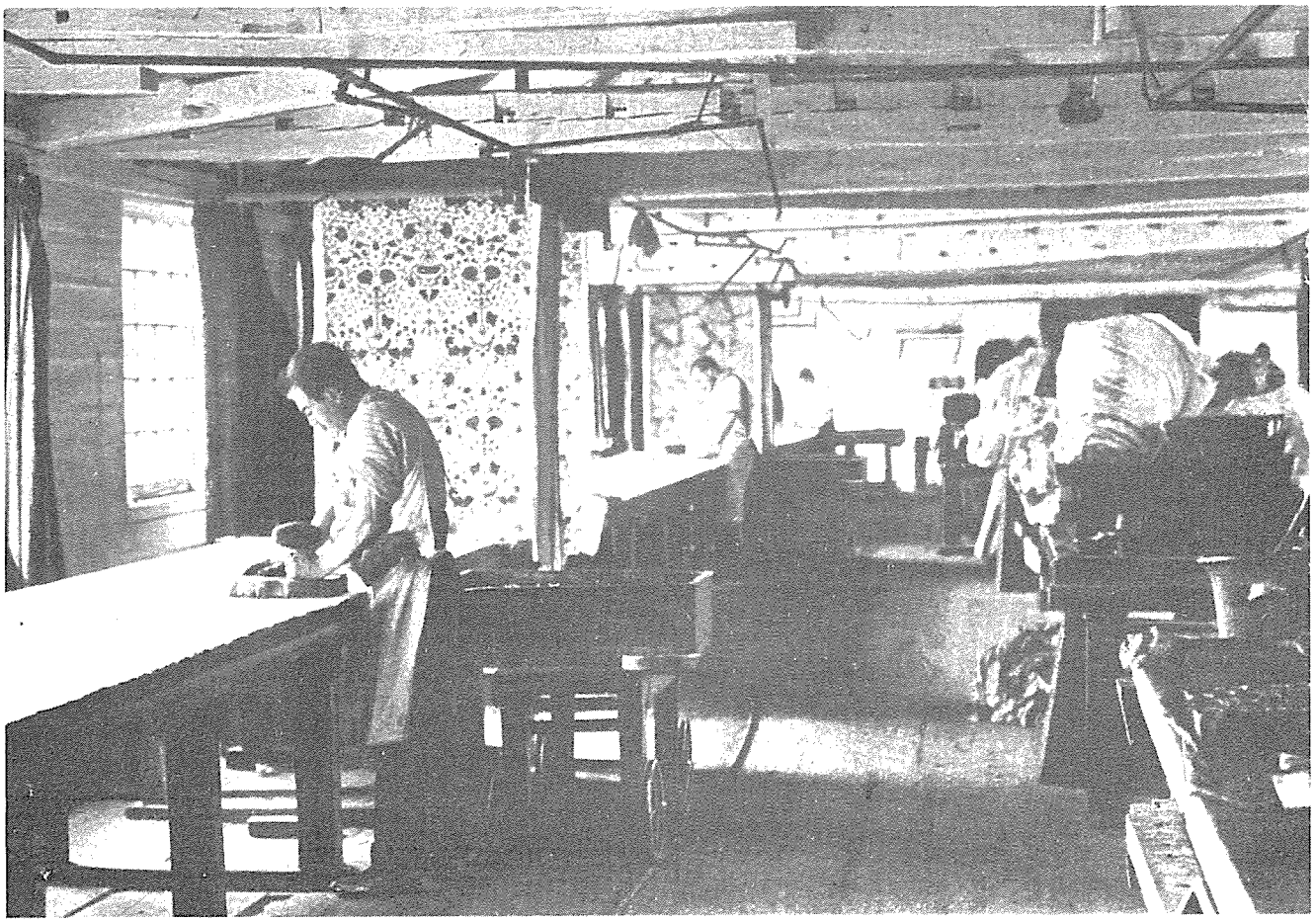

Plate 3. *Fabric printing shed – First floor of building South of River Wandle (block printing of chintz)*

Adjoining this shed was the weaving shed, this was mainly used to make damask – a very, very famous type of weave (Plate 4). But as time went by and the demand for it gradually dropped off, after all it was made from silk – these looms were adapted to an ordinary tweedy type thing which we used to hang on walls, and actual curtaining. The looms ran up each side of the shed, I should think there was about eight or nine each side, and at one time they used to have up to about twenty weavers working in there. It was an art on its own, like learning to ride a bike. You stood with one foot on the floor, one foot pressing the big wooden beam up and down which operated the warp which was controlled by a system of cards – punched card operating at the top. In this way you then had one hand which banged what was known as the comb, to pull down and make the weave firm. And when you pushed that back, you pressed the pedal, this parted the warp, and then the right hand used to shoot across the weft, either from left to right or the other way – just depended which side you'd got your loom. Then also on this little wooden handle (that shot the weft across) there was a little trigger affair which slid down a box. Because you didn't just have one bobbin to weave – if you wanted different colours you therefore had to have up to four, five or six different colours on these bobbins which was in a sort of projectile, very, very smooth so that it could slide through quickly. And you just had to learn to shoot it across with sufficient strength so that it didn't stop halfway or fall out the other end, but that it went into the box opposite without smashing straight through it and piercing some poor bugger in the thigh! So this was quite an art of its own. If you can imagine, it was something like working a one-man band, the only limb that wasn't used was the one you were standing on. After you'd done a day's work of that, when you were walking home people probably thought that you suffered from St Vitus' dance – so it was quite something.

There was a small group of buildings up against the road, and years gone by, when Morris was in his heyday, he used to use one of the buildings as a dormitory for the boys, the people he used to find jobs for. In a way it was a good thing; he used to get lads who would be out of work, or hanging about, and he'd teach them a trade and he'd keep them there, pay them a small wage. Incidentally, when I started there I got ten bob a week, that was half-a-crown for me and seven-and-six for mum. But when I left, I was nineteen and I was only getting about thirty bob then. So one building was used as a dormitory, but when I arrived of course the boys wasn't there, so the top part was used as a living quarters for one of the members of staff, who was one of the original boys. They let him stop on there, rent-free, with his wife, and he also did a bit of caretaking and worked in the

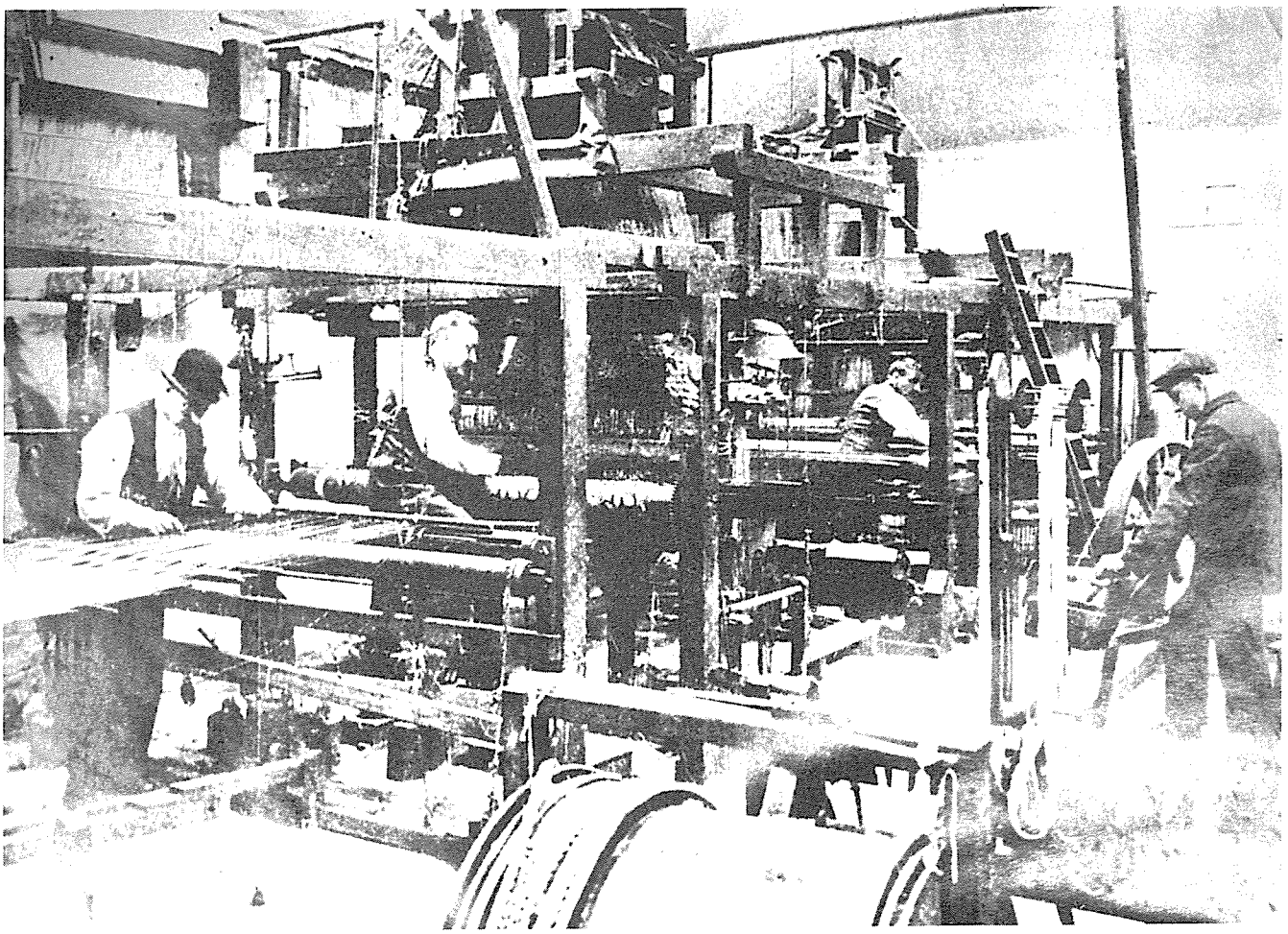

Plate 4. *Weaving shed – ground floor of building South of Wandle*

stained glass studio. Duncan Dearle, who was the Manager at that time – the last one, his father was one of the designers and cronies of Morris and his pre-Raphaelite friends – used the bottom part, partly as a store room for all the various cartoons and designs, and he also used to use it when he got inspiration, he'd whip out an easel and draw something up quick. Not that it was ever used. He was a weird old geezer, he used to play the piccolo and that. Probably partly through him this is why the place dropped off a lot – although the economic situation as it was, and the war coming along, it didn't make any difference. The building next to it, incidentally, was just the caretaker's house and a little office. In other words, the place was used, more or less, as an admin. area, and it was right beside the small gateway which led in from the High Street".

References

1. Marillier, H.C. *History of the Merton Abbey Tapestry Works,* Constable 1927
2. William Morris Gallery, Water House, Lloyd Park, Forest Road, Walthamstow, London, E17