

NOTES AND REVIEWS

RED HOUSE REVISITED

June 5th 1978

I suppose I first saw Red House twenty - no, thirty years ago - so much does time contract as we get into the second half of our life. Then, it had quite recently been taken over by young architects, enthusiasts for Morris: two couples and one bachelor -- who, lucky man, as the single person, enjoyed Morris's own room: L-shaped, well-windowed, a beautiful room -- but one of several beautiful rooms, various in size and shape and feeling. The house, some time in the twenties or thirties, had been daubed with uniform dreary dark brown institutional paint, reduced to a state as far as could be from that "beautifullest house in the world" described by Burne-Jones; which he and his Georgie, with Morris and Jane, Rossetti and Lizzie Siddal, Madox Brown and his Emma, Charlie Faulkner and his sisters; with Bessie Burden, Jane's sister; and any friends who cared to come and stay and take part, had made so: and, of course, Philip Webb, whose first designed and completed house this was.

Quiet, modest, secret Philip Webb: earliest and most devoted of Morris's friends after Burne-Jones, before Rossetti even. I suspect that to him, Morris had been in their earliest days of work and friendship, just such a catalyst, though two or three years younger, as Rossetti was catalyst to Morris himself; enabling him to realise a potential deeply felt but undefined, which might otherwise have been buried indefinitely in the long shadow of George Edmund Street, whose chief clerk Webb was when Morris took up his articles in 1856. Powerful figure as Street was, one of the great figures of the Gothic Revival, Webb had, all the same, a deeper and more individual spark. Had, too, the inestimable good luck to meet in Morris the man able to draw out that genius. Morris, romantic, passionately excited by the mother art; energetic, dynamic, headstrong -- the things that, so far as one can see, Webb was not, but which, in his growing friendship with Morris, gave him confidence -- and gave him in the commission for Red House, the amplest scope to realise his genius.

What a conjunction of stars that was! Morris, newly married -- or about to be so -- richer, at this point, than he would ever be again; Webb experienced enough to have reached definite and realisable ideas of what a house might be -- and do; intimate friends,