

THE RED HOUSE BUILDING CONTRACT

Notes on research into this important document

PROVENANCE OF THE DOCUMENT

The contract had been purchased by Robert Coupe in North America from a book dealer in New York who had acquired it at the estate sale of Stephani Godwin. She was a friend of May Morris in the latter's later years and must have received it as a gift from her during this time.

Who was Stephani Godwin?

Stephanie (Stephani) Mary Godwin Allfree (1917-2006) was born in England, daughter of the World War I painter Geoffrey S. Allfree. She emigrated to the United States in 1948, with her then husband Edward Godwin. She was a painter, writer, and illustrator, and lived mostly in Woodstock, New York.

She destroyed a lot of her early work, but there are a few surviving works done in the 1930s and while living at Kelmscott Manor in the 1940s.

May Morris died in October 1938.

It had been thought by Robert Coupe that the contract was one of several original copies, however a study of the document reveals on page 5 that:

'The several drawings and specifications supplied by the Architect are to be carefully preserved and returned to him when required'

This indicates that there was only one copy of this document, not several, and this was apparently normal practice at the time (it is difficult to see how more than one copy could have been made in light of the numerous drawings scattered throughout the document).

The contract document contains many alterations and crossings-out, and this initially led to some confusion over what the document actually was. After a copy of the document had been kindly sent by Robert to the Chairman of the Friends of Red House, it became clear following some initial research that the document was in fact the original building contract, plus notes referring to the proposed **Burne-Jones extension**.

Several clues led to this conclusion, such as the change of Webb's address between the original specification and the annotations, which can be dated to post Spring 1864 (**Webb moved from no.7 Great Ormond Street, where he was living in 1859 to no. 1 Raymond Buildings, Grays Inn in the Spring of 1864**) and the changes to the brickwork specification on page 6 which refer to filling in between the timbers on the first floor and attic (the proposed Burne-Jones extension was known to be 'half-timbered above the ground floor'). The proof appears in the added footnotes on page

7. Here there are unambiguous references to windows and other openings to be altered together with their indicators on the plans (ax, bx). An examination of Webb's plans for the proposed extension (the originals are in the Victoria & Albert Museum) shows these precise indicators in the places stated. (As one example, the reference in the contract's changes to 'cut away wall at G^x' is shown explicitly on the extension plans as 'G^x').

However, not all the annotations refer to the Burne-Jones extension. Several of the in-text changes especially to dimensions, and clarifications such as 'bricks laid diagonally' altered to 'herring-bone brickwork', are thought to be changes to the original specification as worked progressed.

As you will appreciate, this makes the document of premier importance for our understanding of how Red House was built and its proposed development. The information contained in the contract's original form is already leading to some re-assessment of what we thought we knew about the House,

WHAT THE CONTRACT COVERS

The contract is a twenty-two page document written in longhand on folio sheets. It contains three sections, the Agreement, the Specification of Works, and the Conditions. It also contains American spellings – e.g. color, labor.

The agreement

The text opens with the words "The Agreement, dated this 16th May 1859"
The Agreement proceeds to name the parties, William Kent, builder, and William Morris Esq., employer, and nominates Philip Webb as architect. A brief description of the work follows, and then a statement of the contract sum of £1,997, with details of the stages of payment.

The specification

First part includes site preparation
Instructions for the Excavator & Bricklayer
Instructions for the Tiler
Instructions for the Carpenter & Joiner
Instructions for the finishing trades (Plasterer, Smith, Plumber, Glazier, Painter)

The conditions

'All the works shall be executed with the best materials and in the best and most workmanlike manner to the satisfaction of the architect'.

Any changes to the specification shall be added or deducted in value of the contract by the architect, but it is up to the builder to complete the work on the already specified date (he has to increase the number of workman on site if necessary).

All work must be complete by 16th November 1859. If this date not met, then Kent has to pay Morris £5 for each week that the work overruns. (However, work was

delayed and did overrun – Morris moved in late summer 1860 and Jan Marsh says some contractors were still at work.)

A separate condition is included for the painting and wood staining – this must not start until the architect directs, but then must be finished within one month. Similar penalties apply.

If any materials or workmanship is disapproved of by Webb, Kent has 24 hours after written disapproval to put things right. Any workman who Webb disapproves of must not be re-employed on the work without Webb's permission.

Kent has to bear all risks and costs in safeguarding the works and the site, including all fences and fruit trees, and make good at his own expense any damage howsoever caused (including flood, fire, high winds, accidents etc) and provided a watchman if the architect thinks it necessary.

Of course there is also a clause allowing the architect to dismiss the builder if he is not performing satisfactorily. Indeed in June 1859 Webb wrote to Kent to say that work was proceeding 'in a most irregular and unsatisfactory manner'. Defects have to be put right at the builders' expense within six months of completion.

Payment was to be in instalments of £250 on certification by the architect that the work to this value has been done.

Kent must have a competent general foreman on site at all times who will act as the contractor's agent, but he can be dismissed by the architect if he has cause to do so, and Kent will have to replace him.

The builder has to leave any scaffolding or standing that the architects requires for the use of the decorators for 3 months after completion of the works at no charge.

SOME DETAILS OF THE SPECIFICATION

The first page of the contract instructs William Kent in what and where to build. He shall:

'.....erect and build and completely cover in and finish and make fit for habitation upon the piece of ground at Upton in the parish of Bexley in the County of Kent recently purchased... by William Morris from Thomas Luck Attreed Esquire. Having a frontage on the north side thereof to the highway leading from the village of Upton.... to the London and Dover Turnpike Road a dwelling house outhouses buildings and premises according to certain specifications and conditions annexed hereto, and certain plans prepared by Mr Philip Webb.....'

Starting the work

On page 5 of the contract we find:

'an office to be built for the clerk of works of sufficient size to have a desk stool fireplace and door with good locks.....the contractor to keep all materials sheds etc at the open space in the north west corner'

In other words where the stables are now.

Morris's evident keenness to preserve the semi-rural nature of the site is shown by the text in the first part of the contract specification where is included '*the contractor is*

to be answerable for any damage that may be done to the fruit trees and bushes, none of which are to be cut or moved without permission of the architect'

(Webb had separately recorded eighty orchard trees, the majority of which were apple, but included damson, plum and cherry. 40 trees were still shown on the 1862 map).

Excavating

Accurately stake out and remove the earth to not less than 9 inches overall (lower where necessary). *'The well to be dug 40 feet deep skinned half brick thick.3 feet diameter in the clear'*

It also states that *'the upper two feet to be built in mortar and domed over in half brick in cement with a manhole in the same'*. This however has been crossed through. (No mention of the wellhead as this was planned a little later)

There are also three other underground structures outside the building: an 8ft x 8ft rain water tank, an 8ft by 10ft cesspool and a 3ft x 6ft overflow cesspool. The plans show the rain water tank to be just outside the building line where the present gate is from the garden path to the courtyard on the west side. The main cesspool is shown behind the outhouse range to the south (where the current air raid shelters are).

The specification is then given for the concrete to fill the trenches dug for all building footings and the areas to be paved.

Bricklaying

The contract calls for:

'The bricks to be good sound hard and well burned The cheapest that can be procured consistent with the above qualities. The whole of the facing and other exposed brickwork in walls etc to be done with bricks of the quality and color of those in the adjoining Danson Farm House....on the south side (these bricks are supposed to be made of the ordinary clay of the neighbourhood as they are more or less used for common purposes in the whole district)the colors required as will be seen by the example are deep red brown and bright red, and it will not be necessary to get them of one uniform color so long as they agree with the above particulars..... the mortar to be composed of best Dorking lime and clean sharp sand.....'

It had previously been considered that the bricks for Red House may have been sourced locally, as brickyards existed within a few miles of the chosen site. The (no longer extant) Danson Farmhouse mentioned in the original contract was within a quarter mile of the Red House and would have been the nearest substantial vernacular building. Presumably the bricks required to match this building were not available locally and had to be sought further afield . We now know that all facing bricks were in fact obtained from a brickyard in Malling near Maidstone (from a later Burne-Jones extension note).

The contract then goes into detail about the erection of the walls, the slate damp-proof course, corbelling out from ground floor chimney breasts to take the hearths on the floor above, cellar construction including the internal divisions to the wine cellar etc.

The corbelling for the windows is given special consideration, with directions to splay the bricks as shown in a sketch included in the contract document.

The chimneys likewise are given special consideration including the interesting instruction that:

'the flues to be well coved and pargetted, the construction from the fireplaces to be cut set and pargetted with hair pargetting,'

This section also has instruction about the laying of the drains and the floor tiles, differentiating between the 12 inch red paving tiles in the principal parts of the house and the scullery, pantry, larder, cellars and yard offices which are to be paved with building bricks laid flat in sand and jointed with mortar.

There are sketches of all the principal fireplaces inserted in the contract together with detailed construction notes, including the fitting of 'common white china tiles' to the jambs.

The bricklayer also has

'to attend to all other workmen where required and to provide all materials and labor necessary to secure the work from the effect of weather during their progress, he is also to provide all scaffolding and whatever other tackling may be required for the several trades.....the efficiency of all flues to be proved at their completion and such alterations as may be required to make them act well'

Tiling

Although a short section, this is full of detail and differentiates the main roof tiles and the ridge tiles. An example being *'the whole of the roofs to be covered with good plain bright red tiles laid with oak pins to proper gauge on heart of oak laths.....'*

Note

We now know that these tiles came from a yard near Bromley (from the Burne-Jones alterations)

The contract includes a sketch of the ridge tiles to be used, and we now know that these came from a supplier in Maidenhead (of which more later).

Carpentry and joinery

Several types of timber are specified in the contract. Fir is to be *'either Memel Danzic or Riga free from sap shakes and large and loose knots'*. Oak is to be *'English sound and cut die square free from sap and other defects'*. The Deals to be *'the best Christiana or others equal thereto free from sap and well seasoned'*. Both yellow and white deal is specified depending on location; yellow deal being used for the Dining and Drawing room floors.

A large part of this section is given over to timber dimensions and positions with reference to the scale drawings.

The Dining room panelling is precisely specified and doors are given a lot of attention too: their construction, the surrounding door case and how they are to be hung and

secured. The 3 main doors (entrance and garden porches and kitchen yard) are treated similarly and with *'simple wrought iron ring handles and plates with 10 inch oak locks with latches combined, the ring handles to have the latches which are to shoot into wrought iron boxes fixed to posts. Each of these doors to have 2 strong wrought iron bolts'*

The doors to the domestic offices and servant's quarters are specified to be of much simpler construction, mostly with Norfolk thumb latches. Internal panelled doors, for the dining room for example, to have mortice locks and brass door furniture. The water closets to each have a strong brass bolt. Other non-standard individual doors are also specified, including the hatch from the kitchen (no longer extant).

The stairs as one would expect are given a lot of attention, the main staircase being oak and the back stairs and steps in the passage in deal.

The most detailed specifications are reserved for the various windows. Most are sash windows with deal cased frames. However, the passage, stairs, scullery, pantry and larder are all specified as solid deal with the square windows having oak sills. In the Drawing room the three north windows are specified as solid deal frames with oak weathered sills and French casements, with only the centre one an opening casement. Other details follow including construction of the shutters where these are to be fitted. The last parts of this section relate to fitting of shelves in various of the domestic offices and the china closet in the Man's pantry; sink frame and pot board in the scullery; oak seats in the two porches; mantelpieces above fireplaces; a cistern in the roof over the back stairs, partitions in the servants bedroom; and the seats and fittings for the water closets.

Plastering

Much of this is mundane, except for the instruction to provide stamps of three different patterns to stamp the ceilings where shown on the plans. Also of interest here is the specification to pug the floors of the garden porch and dining room with lime and loam 2 inches thick. The plasterer is also called on to twice whiten all ceilings and twice limewash all walls not plastered, except the two porches.

Ironwork (given as 'Smith' in the contract)

Although given as an instruction to William Kent, some of this was supplied by a third party, as one of the later annotations in this section shows that rain water goods were supplied by a Mr Gerish (who we will come back to in the final section). One interesting item is the provision of a *'wrought iron standard one and a half inches square and other ironwork shown to vane over stairs also provide and fix wrought copper vane to turn on steel pivot as shown with the necessary balance etc.'* Here is also specified the copper for the scullery; the basket grates for the fireplaces (accompanied by a sketch to show what they should look like); a kitchen range to the value of twenty pounds, a simple wrought iron grate and trivet for the scullery to the value of two pounds. One last item here are *'numbered bells of varying tones hung to proper boarding passage against the kitchen the bells to have the necessary springs, pendulums, connections wires cranks etc and the necessary preparation for the ceiling pulls but no pulls to be provided.....a heavier bell for front door with simple wrought iron pull in porch somewhat as sketch'*

Plumbing

The plumber is expected to deal with all leadwork, including on the roofs and cistern and sink lining. Two pumps were to be supplied to the scullery, one from the well and the other from the rain water cistern. Another pump was to be sited in the yard. Supply to the waterclosets had to be installed and fitted with a '*best watercloset apparatus*'. The inside closets were to have china pans with a glazed stoneware pan for the servants watercloset.

Painting

All exterior wood and ironwork usually painted is specified to have '*four coats of good oil color*' to a colour as directed. All inside woodwork to be '*slightly stained of an approved color and twice varnished*'.

The vane rod to be painted and gilded where required.

At the end of the conditions section of the contract there is a specification for the size and construction of boundary walls....almost as an afterthought.

A brief note about the Burne-Jones extension proposal

It is worth noting that the proposed extension would have been three floors, instead of the two floors of Morris's house, albeit the third floor being accommodated in the large roof space. The external appearance particularly from the internal, courtyard, side of the extension would also have looked different from the original, as it would have been a more medieval, half-timbered construction.

CONNECTIONS WITH NAMED AND DERIVED PERSONS

The Architect

Philip Webb

As mentioned before, In the Spring of 1864 he moved to no 1 Raymond Buildings, Grays Inn. W R Lethaby, although spending his early and formative years, and his early architectural training in Barnstaple, N Devon, moved to London in 1879 to work for Norman Shaw. Norman Shaw had been an assistant to GE Street. He became friends with Morris, Webb and the other founders of SPAB, and became involved in this work, co-founding the Art Workers Guild in 1884. In 1901 he was living at 2 Grays Inn Square, facing Raymond Buildings across the Gardens. A life long admirer of Webb's work, Lethaby died in 1931, but his book on Webb, *Philip Webb and his Work*, was published posthumously in 1935.

The Builder

William Kent

Little is known about his life and work.

At the time of the original (1859) contract his address was given as no.8 Paulin Street Bermondsey. This street no longer exists

There is no William Kent listed as a builder in 1855 PO directory for the area.

The PO directory for 1860, however, gives two addresses for him, the second being Southampton Street, Camberwell. (Perhaps his yard?)

Thought to be no longer at Paulin Street by October 1889 as a Jane Flint (wife of Henry Flint, a leatherworker) died there in that month.

The supplier of ridge tiles

‘Mr Cooper of Maidenhead’

This is probably the firm of J.K. & H. Cooper listed in the PO directory of 1854 as Surveyors, builders, brickmakers & lime burners & agents to the Phoenix fire office at East Street, Maidenhead.

Why would Webb have specified a tile supplier some 40 miles away?

Webb was working in the office of G E Street from 1854 until at least 1859 (including the time he was designing Red House).

During this time Street’s practice was working on several buildings in Boyne Hill, Maidenhead, including All Saint’s Church, the vicarage and cottage, a clergy house and almshouses. (The similarity of design elements in some of these buildings to Red House is striking).

The supplier of ironmongery

‘Mr Gerish, ironfounder, East Road City Road’

The name took some deciphering as it is not clear, but this is undoubtedly Francis William Gerish , whose firm F W Gerish is listed in the 1860 trades directory under ‘retail ironmonger’ of 16 East Road City Road

The firm was a large supplier of iron manufactures of all types, with several patents taken out for variously locks and door closers and springs.

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