

Oxfordshire

BURFORD PARISH CHURCH

Burford Church and William Morris, by Nicholas Cooper

An indirect result of the restoration of Burford church from 1870 was the founding of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings by William Morris in 1878. Passing through the town on 4 September 1876, Morris was shocked by what he felt was the insensitivity of the work that had been done, and by the prospect of the remainder of the church being treated in the same way (the eastern parts had not as yet been restored). He therefore drafted a letter ‘urging the formation of a Society which might deal with such cases, and, if the destruction done by the restorers could not be stopped, might at all events make it clear that it was destruction and not preservation’.¹ The Burford visit, followed by proposals for the restoration of Tewkesbury Abbey, led to the launch of the Society with Morris’s letter to the *Athenaeum* in March 1877.

The traditional story is that when Morris expostulated with the vicar (the Revd W.A. Cass) on meeting him in the church, Cass replied, ‘Sir, the church is mine, and if I like I shall stand on my head in it.’ Cass himself told a rather different story to W.J.Titcombe of Burford, who recorded how, on being told that there were visitors in the church, Cass

‘hastened there and, on finding the party, introduced myself and showed them round the nave, explaining everything to them. The ladies were most intelligently interested but the gentleman, a burly man with a big beard, wearing a reefer coat and looking very much like a sea captain, never said a word nor appeared to take the slightest interest.

Presently, I led the party into the Chancel, pointing out that this and the adjoining aisles had not yet been restored. I said I hoped in time to raise funds to restore these to match the nave. At this point there emerged from the reefer coat a very gruff voice ... “then I hope to God you won’t !” Somewhat surprised, I turned to him, saying... “May I know to whom ... I have the honour of speaking ?” and the same voice replied ... “My name’s Morris ... Who was your architect ?” I told him “Street.” “Ah” he said, “then Street should be ashamed of himself and I shall tell him so when I see him. Here you had a beautiful, old church and you have completely spoiled it. He appears to have done everything possible to convert it into a new church. You’ve turned out the old flagg stones, replacing them with so many square feet of ‘Brummagem’ tiling; you’ve turned out the old glass of the windows, which have been in for centuries & was priceless and replaced it with your so-called Cathedral glass at so much per square foot” ... and so he continued dressing me down.’²

Titcombe also records that in later years Cass admitted that he regretted some of what was done, putting it down to his own inexperience.

¹ W. Mackail, *Life of William Morris* (new edn, 1901), I, 340.

² Burford, Tolsey Museum, AN 1671, extracts made by A.H. Swann, 1989. Titcombe records that the story was confirmed by 'Miss Morris', presumably Morris's daughter May, who was probably one of the party.