An exhibition from the Cadbury Research Library

William Morris
and the Kelmscott Press

Muirhead Tower Atrium
9 January–17 May 2013
Weekdays 9am–6pm

www.birmingham.ac.uk/crl
William Morris was a man of many and varied talents. A social reformer, a writer, an artist and one of the most prodigious and influential British designers of all time he encompassed the breadth of Victorian passions. This exhibition examines the inspiration behind The Kelmscott Press, founded by Morris in 1891, by drawing on the wide breadth of the collections of the Cadbury Research Library, together with generous loans from the Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust and Birmingham Museums. The exhibition focuses on the splendour of the Kelmscott Press edition of The Works of Chaucer (1896), illustrated by Edward Burne-Jones, which set a new benchmark for book design at the end of the 19th century.

Morris’ approach to design was fundamentalist: he went back to the basics of any medium he employed. For his bookmaking he looked back to the earliest days of printing in the 15th century taking his inspiration from the work of Nicholas Jensen (1420–1480) a French engraver, pioneer, printer and type designer. Morris also drew on the work of other printers, designers and engravers including William Caslon (1692–1766), John Baskerville (1706–1775) and Giambattista Bodoni of Parma (1740–1813), and A. W. N. Pugin (1812–1852).

The Kelmscott Chaucer was the last great project of Morris’ life, bringing together his love of medieval literature, his socialist philosophy and a passion for high quality design and materials. The book was exceptional in its ambitious number of illustrations and rich decorative borders. ‘If we live to finish it,’ Edward Burne-Jones, (1833–1898) wrote, ‘it will be like a pocket cathedral – so full of design and I think Morris the greatest master of ornament in the world.’

Morris and Burne-Jones worked on the book for four years. Burne-Jones spent every Sunday on the book’s 87 illustrations, working long hours in fear that Morris might die before the project was finished. His pencil drawings were painted over in Chinese white and Indian ink by R. Catterson-Smith, whose interpretive role is often overlooked. The black and white designs were then transferred to wooden blocks and engraved by William Harcourt Hooper. In the same year as the book was published, 1896, William Morris died.