JOSEPH MORRIS and the PEARL BUILDING, READING

by H. Godwin Arnold

Christian faith in the renewed coming of Christ has at times led to precise forecasts of time and date and place for the event which have so far commonly been falsified and even to the announcement that it has already happened. Tabor in Bohemia in 1420 was to be the Mount of Olives where Christ had foretold his return. In 1534 John of Leyden proclaimed that in Munster the Kingdom was established under a new David while others at the time expected it at Strasburg. In Commonwealth England it was to come about in 1656-and if need be to be hastened by violent revolution by the Fifth Monarchy men. For George Fox, the Quaker, it was already, in a spirutual sense, a present reality. Archdeacon Ebel announced it in 1838 in East Prussia. In Albury in Surrey the Catholic Apostolic Church looked for it in the lifetime of their apostles-all alas now dead. A London clergyman of Queen Victoria's reign announced himself from his own altar steps as "I am that Lord Jesus Christ who died and rose again and ascended into heaven".

In Reading, in September 1902, in the home of the County Surveyor of Berkshire at "Ampthill", No. 3 Craven Road, it was announced to a fellowship of worshippers that "Jesus Christ has

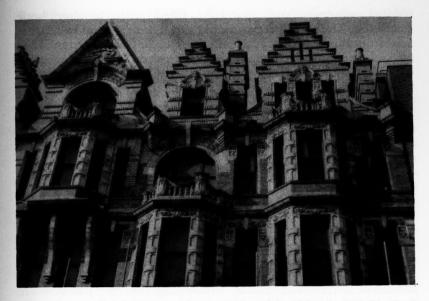
come again and is upon earth".

This new Christ was the Rev. J.H. Smyth Piggott. His architect and his leading disciple in Reading was Joseph Morris, County Surveyor of Roads and Bridges. The startling nature of the event may not be always matched by the startling character of Joseph Morris's architecture, but that comes (or came) near to doing so in the Pearl Buildings, 17-27 Station Road, built as the office of his department. As one looks at it in astonishment dragons with seven heads do not seem altogether more fantastic, nor, some might even say, more frightful. Certainly one would be

hard put to find its like anywhere.

So strange a building at the very heart of a town, almost the first to strike (and strike is the word) the eye of the visitor arriving from the railway station, it stamps its character on the town as forcefully as St. George's Hall, a temple noble but coal-black, declared the wealth and dignity of Liverpool, or, in the same city, the three great riverside Pierhead buildings, the pride of a great port. "With-it" clergy in these days can be heard to justify the outrageous dress of the young as their way of proclaiming "It's me—I'm different". Perhaps a town might be allowed so to announce itself, but if so Reading has now had that distinction removed by the loss of the Pearl Building.

The evidence of date and style tends to suggest that the principal designer was not Joseph Morris himself but his son Francis Edward, generally known as Frank Morris. Joseph was



Built in 1901-1903 to the design of Joseph Morris and demolished in 1980: The Pearl Building, Reading, showing part of the asymmetrical front.

born in 1836. An architectural practice in his name alone existed from 1858 until 1876. From about 1876 until 1885 there is a partnership with Stallwood, Morris alone until about 1902, and finally Morris and Son until 1905. It appears that Morris was born in Reading and that he was articled for seven years to John Berry Clacy. More probably this means that he served articles for three of four years and then continued as an assistant. John Berry Clacy in true Victorian fashion combined the practices of architect, surveyor, insurance agent and post master. As a jack of all trades he certainly was no great master of architecture.

Morris's partner from about 1876 until 1886, Spencer Slingsby Stallwood, has a life much more conventional and characteristic of the Victorian professional man than that of Morris. He starts as a young man in the choir of a High Church parish in Folkestone, a keen sportsman and a crack shot, and ends as an honorary curator of the Silchester collection in Reading Museum and Past Grand Warden of Freemasons in Berkshire. St. Peter's Church at Folkestone, a church known for its "advanced" or High Church practices, was built typically to serve the poorest district of the town. At 27 he had added a north aisle and presumably about the same time built the infants school building next to the church. This is of red brick in a gothic style clearly related to that of William Butterfield in his quieter moods—with such features as equilateral arches above white

painted windows and spandrels filled with herring bone brickwork. The style is recognisably also that of several handsome and substantial primary schools in Reading built from 1874 onward and strongly suggests that these were Stallwood's work.

The founder of the Agapemone-"The Abode of Love" which was established at Spaxton in Somerset was Henry Prince. With a group of earnest fellow students at St. David's College, Lampeter, he led in England a movement of perfectionism, the belief that the Christian, sanctified by the Holy Ghost, was above sin, which had its simultaneous counterparts in America and in Germany in the years after 1836. For Prince, since the Second Coming had already occurred, he and his followers were now living the life of the redeemed and so the ransomed of the Lord were to be found playing billiards in a Somerset country house. Marriage of three of his followers to three sisters, wealthy heiresses, provided the means. Havelock Dixon in "Spiritual Wives" sums up the episode as "A dozen ardent clergymen smitten with the passion for saving souls, shut themselves up in a garden, muse and dream, surround themselves with lovely women, eat from rich tables, pretending that the passions are dead, and waiting in the midst of luxury and idleness for the whole world to be damned! Is this all? No not quite all; in the mean time the reverend gentlemen play a game of billiards in what was their church". "I did not see a temple in the City for its temple is the Lord God, the Almighty, and the Lamb" (Rev. 21).

The Spaxton Agapemone still had sixty residing in the community when Havelock Dixon visited there and interviewed Prince in 1867. Prince himself died in 1899 but he had a disciple and successor, the Anglican clergyman, who announced himself as the Messiah, built himself a church by public subscription, retreated to Somerset with a female convert, was unfrocked for immorality, and died in 1927. As late as 1936 the dwindling family survived and John Betieman visiting there met Joseph

Morris's daughter.

The Church of the Ark of the Covenant at Stamford Hill in Hackney, the first and only church of the sect, is expensively built, with a large tower displaying appropriately those four symbolic winged creatures which, figuring in the Book of Revelation where perpetually before the throne of God they sing "Holy, holy, holy", are by tradition used to represent the four Evangelists, lion, eagle, man and ox. The building is in a full-blooded Gothic style which by 1895 was almost old-fashioned. "Go" in architecture was the enthusiasm of the high Victorians; tastes were more delicate by the end of the century.

Some time after leaving Clacy, Morris had an office in London at 28 Queen Street, Holborn in the 1850s but he must have abandoned metropolitan ambitions and, returning to Reading, appears in the local directory for the first time in 1867 with an office at 9 Friar Street. He was Surveyor of Bridges and Buildings to Berkshire County Council from 1872 to 1905. A list of work associated with the successive practices of Joseph Morris, Morris & Stallwood, and Morris & Son is given as an appendix. It starts in 1858 with a fairly standard Victorian village church at Highmoor, north of Reading, built in flint and with an ornamental tiled roof, and ends around 1906 with a group of County Police Stations in an Art Nouveau style. Judgements based on architectural style do not readily divide the works among the several partners. The school buildings, some of which are attributed to Morris alone, are recognisably similar in style to that at St. Peter's Folkestone which is by Stallwood, well before the time he came to Reading. Stallwood's name could reasonably be attached to the "Queen Anne" or "Dutch" style buildings with much cut and carved or moulded brickwork of which "Hillside" is the chief example. The date of the introduction of the element of original wildness in to the designs late in the life of Joseph Morris and after the separation from Stallwood suggests finally that this is really the work of Frank Morris. It must however be noted that the Huntley & Palmer estate of staff houses adjoining in "Hillside" dating from the 1880's and reasonably attributed to Stallwood, since he had his own house there, is in its own way as wild as any of the rest with its two colours of slate and four colours of brickwork, diapers, arches, gables and turrets.

While a study of the works of such a provincial practice or succession of practices would be a useful contribution to architectural history, for Reading like other towns has firms and families whose association with various aspects of the construction industry extend over at least two centuries, this essay must be limited to the single astonishing building 17-27 Station Road,

Reading.

This was built as the offices of the County Surveyor of Bridges and Buildings, having shops on the ground floor, offices on the first floor, and flats above. A basement was reputedly partly used as a stable, but this seems doubtful. The original symmetrical building consisted of five gabled elements and was later extended by a single bay in the same style. All this was of five storeys above the basement. Several other sites on the same side of Station Road were occupied by smaller buildings, mostly of two elements in width, having exactly similar details in the upper storeys but one floor less in height. From these, none of which now survives complete and unaltered, it is just possible to see a ghostly image of what has now been demolished. The Pearl Building, as it came to be known, was bought by that company in 1921. In 1969 maintenance was becoming a problem. In 1975 an application to demolish the building, which by then was listed,

was refused by the Council. A later application which was also refused by Reading District Council came on appeal to a Public Inquiry in February 1980 and permission to demolish was granted on the advice of Mr. D. Kearsley, Dip. Arch., F.R.I.B.A., the Inspector. Factors contributing to the Minister's decision were the presence of dry rot throughout much of the building, the insufficiency of their return on the property, and the inherently unreliable conditions of the structure, such as its filler joist floors and cantilevered bays, aided perhaps by a popular error which holds that Reading is a town without architectural or historic interest.



The distinctive entrance doorway of the Pearl Building, recessed in long sprayed jambs with a tapered conical vault.

The following description of the main elevation ignores the added southern bay. The original front was symmetrical and divided into five bays. On the ground floor in the centre was an entrance doorway, recessed in long splayed jambs with a tapered conical vault or tunnel above, developed from the combination of side splays and a semi-circular arch over the doorway. The splays had coloured and gilded mosaic panels inscribed "County Surveyor of Bridges & Buildings". These were rescued by the present County Surveyor's Department. Flanking this central arch were pairs of shop windows each with its own semi-circular arch, and between and beyond each pair very narrow doorways which at once introduced a Baroque feeling of strain into the design. Although of a adequate width, their exaggeratedly narrow proportion was such that it looked as though one could only squeeze through them. The ground floor arches first

introduced some of the ornament which flourished wildly up above. They were made by Carter & Co. of Poole, Dorset, who, in Reading, were also responsible for ceramic work in an Art Nouveau style at a building now called "The High", designed by another local architect, William Rowland Howell (1867-?) for Messrs. E. Jackson & Son.

Between the ground floor shop window arches appear large brackets on consoles which support flat slabs on which the bays of

upper storeys, wherever they occur, always stand.

Above this ground floor begins a complicated game of counterpoint, advance and recession. In the outer bays the bay windows rise through three floors and finish with open parapets formed with miniature inverted arches, so reversing the forms on the ground floor. In the second and fourth bays, the next to the outermost, the bay windows rise only two floors, finishing with similar inverted arched parapets, being crowned by large arched windows equal in size and shape to the main entrance doorway. In the central bay are two flat faced storeys each with four tall narrow sash windows. The consoles reappear among the upper central windows of this unit to carry a matching flat slab and a bay window on the third floor only in the central bay.

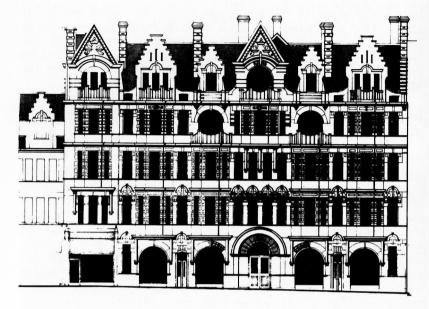
Corresponding to the increase in elaboration in the modelling of the building as one progresses upward is a gradual change in the dominant colour from a dark red glazed brick in the plinth, which predomnates in the three lower floors, to a yellow brick which entirely governs the attic and skyline. This change in tint and increase in elaboration "the nearer to heaven" and also the fretted skyline relate the building to the principles of

Butterfield and Waterhouse in the previous century.

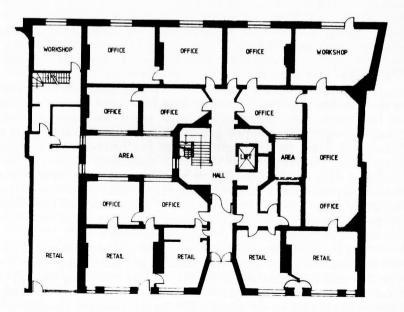
In the attic storey the division into bays remains the same but a new rhythm appears. The outer bays have crow-stepped gables of full width. The intermediate bays, above the upper arches, have narrower crow stepped gables. Finally the central bay has a triangular gable with straight copings but introduces a central large arch, the only one at this level, matching the two in the flanking bays of the floor below and the entrance, four floors below, so producing a cluster of arches crowning the centre of the building. This description ignores the appearance of corbelled diagonal features, and the gradations in the degree of modelled ornament applied to all of the various elements.

The extension by the addition of a single bay was related to the original design by using the consoles and slab at first floor for the first and only time in the group, and by repeating the upper floor arched gable on the street front and, with a blind opening, also on the return in the party wall. An old postcard photograph shows the north gable ornamented in large coloured letters in the

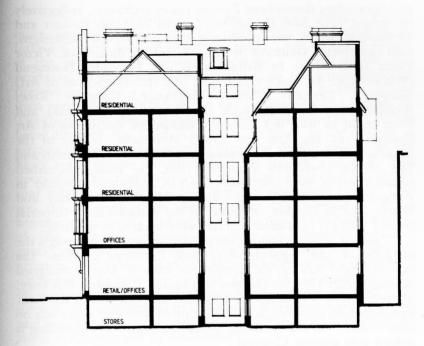
brickwork with the name "Broadway Buildings".



The Pearl Building, Reading: The frontage to Station Road 'a complicated game of counterpoint, advance and recession'.



Ground floor plan showing the various uses, office, retail and workshop, to which the space was put.



Section through the Pearl Building showing its five storeys above a basement.

Having bent over backwards to keep the whole building, and having spent over £100,000 in its endeavour to retain the existing structure the Pearl Assurance Company co-operated and assisted in recording it by paying the cost of dismantling an entire arch and by the gift of such items as doors, stained glass and ironmongery. Various fragments of the building were rescued by enthusiasts for Reading brickwork and architectural history. The fireplace surrounds in the flats which were as individual in design as anything else in the building reappeared, stripped of their original black stain, in the local pine wood shop. Another such, painted, is in the Brooking Collection at Guildford. The red glazed bricks are a full 9" x 4½" x 3" with two glazed faces on a cream coloured body of a heavy clay. There are frogs top and bottom, one of which bears the stamp J.C.E.

On the design of the building and on the use of terra cotta

the following is contributed by Matthew Saunders:-

"The Pearl Assurance Building, Reading, is an extraordinary structure which can so easily be dismissed as the nightmarish confection of a religious fanatic. It can only really be understood in context and given that framework it emerges as a stunning and irreplaceable example of its age."

"It was designed and constructed at the turn of the century

at a time when throughout Europe many architects, collectively christened "The Anti-Rationalists" by Sir Nikolaus Pevsner and Sir James Richards, were producing unrestrained eclectic designs, men like Hector Guimard in Paris, Gaudi in Barcelona, Victor Horta in Brussels. In Britain men like Harrison Townsend (Whitechapel Art Gallery 1897-99), Mackintosh (School of Art, Glasgow), Lethaby (Orion Insurance, Colmore Row, Birmingham), Caroe (Church Commissioners, Millbank) and Prior could be wild but generally within the disciplines of Art Nouveau and the Arts and Crafts Movement. It was in the terracotta buildings of the closing decades of the nineteenth and first of the twentieth centuries that the most unabashed counterparts of men like Domenesch in Spain and Lechner in Hungary were found in this country. Morris in Berkshire and Fitzroy Doll in London, architect of the extraordinary Imperial Hotel (1905-11) in Russell Square, were leaders in the field."

"Morris' stylistic inspiration is hard to detect. Although the imagery of the Agapemonites was Christian, witness the extraordinary Ark of the Convenant church Morris designed without fee in 1895 for the sect at Clapton Common, Hackney, where the style was fullblooded Gothic with symbols of the Four Evangelists on the spire, it is interesting to note that there was no echo at all of the Gothic in the Pearl Assurance. The detailing is

indeed only vaguely Classical."

"There was of course nothing exceptional in the mixture of glazed brick and terracotta. Terracotta seemed the ideal material for an architecture of ornament being more resistant to pollution and lighter than stone and far easier to shape through the use of moulds with little need to carve. It was as strong as stone, although this was often disputed by its opponents despite frequent tests which proved its high crushing strength. It was also markedly cheaper. As C.T. Davis, an American, stated (in "A Practical Treatise on the Manufacture of Bricks, Tiles and Terracotta", 1895)—

'Terracotta is today the most available material used for the construction of buildings of all classes and forms. It is indispensable in every assemblage of artistic architectural ornamentation and has virtually taken the place of stone and is now used in the completion of seven-tenths of the structures erected ... In the beauty of colour it has an advantage over stone, for the use of chemicals almost any colur can be produced and they are found to be less apt to change under atmospheric influences. In terracotta we can find a scope for freedom, with a capacity for supplying the increasing demand for decoration in the most durable material.'

On the question of colour, the natural terracotta colurs are buff and red and the Pearl orrange came from oxides and the use of coloured slips before firing."

"The manufacturing process for terracotta components was quite complex. The architect's or manufacturer's drawings of the intended detail had first to be enlarged to allow for the shrinkage of the material. From these drawings a plaster model was produced. A mould was then made from the model and clay pressed into it to a thickness of approximately an inch. It was then reinforced by struts which cut the interior into chambers. The mould was then removed and the clay allowed to dry before being finished and fired. The main problems in the making of terracotta were encountered during the drying process as the block could distort considerably if not treated with care. This necessarily slow process and the possibility of kiln disasters meant that delivery dates to the building sites were often erratic. This was the main objection raised against the material as its use became widespread: otherwise it fitted most of the requirements of the Victorian architect. Despite the material's obvious practical advantages, some architects discredited it on aesthetic grounds, maintaining that 'crockery cubes' were not a sufficiently dignified building material. John Ruskin the oracular authority on Art, was in favour of the material and helped raise it by stressing the craftsmanship involved. "A piece of terracotta", he said "which has been wrought by the human hand is worth all the stone in Carrara cut by machinery".

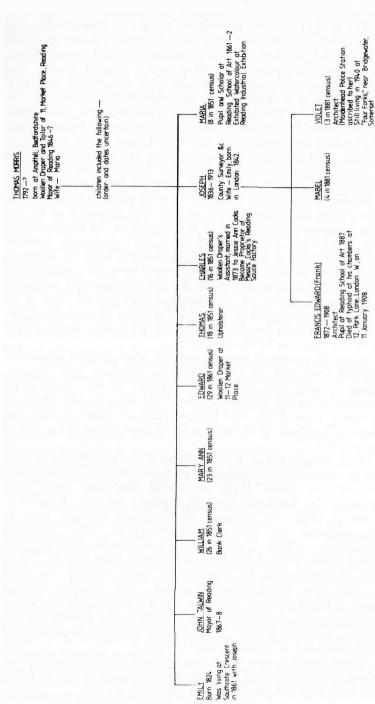
"Given its practical advantages and respectability terracotta triumphed, not just in offices but in theatres, gin palaces, shopping arcades and shops like Harrods. It was particularly favoured in cities like Reading. Alfred Waterhouse who designed Manchester Town Hall, The Natural History Museum and The Prudential Building, Holborn, made his reputation in the use of

the material.

"Alas, despite the relative newness of the buildings and their practical advantages, aesthetic disapproval has meant that several of the better large terracotta buildings have been destroyed—The Birkbeck Bank in Holborn by T.E. Knightley, demolished 1965, the triumph of Doulton's Carrara ware (a phatasmagoria in majolica (Pevsner)), the Doulton Headquarters, Albert Embankment, demolished 1952-58, The Imperial Hotel, Russell Square, demolished 1966 and St. Paul's School, Hammersmith by Waterhouse, torn down at the same time. Yet now fashion has changed. The Natural History Museum is listed Grade I and barely a few years after the loss of its neighbour the Imperial, Fitzroy Doll's other Russell Square terracotta "monster hotel" The Russell of 1898 has been restored and rehabilitated at a cost of one million."

"Morris' wild design may seem perverse, even decadent, but it is the stuff of exuberant, memorable townscapes, and Reading

will be infinitely the poorer for its destruction.



Provisional Genealogy of the Morris family.

APPENDIX

In order of date works of the practices are as follows:

1	OCA!	nh	M	orris
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- 1858-9 St. Pauls Church, Highmoor
- 1859 Vicarage and stables at Highmoor
- 1861-2 National School and Schoolhouse, South Stoke, Oxon.
- 1862 Whitchurch—an ornamental cottage for Captain Fowler
- 1865 Tenders for Benyon and Sidmouth Wards, Royal Berks. Hospital (Possibly also work was done in 1862.)

In Directories from 1871 Joseph Morris appears in practice at 9 Friar Street. Morris & Stallwood are later at the same address.

- 1867-8 St. Lawrence's Church, Reading—restoration and refurnishing work
- 1871 St. Stephen's School (demolished)
- North aisle added to St. Mary's Church (Builder, Henry Lovett—a firm also responsible for Reading Station.)
- 1871 School in Albion Street in St. Stephen's parish
- 1872 Alterations to St. Mary's House (rebuilt in 1931)
- 1872 Tenders invited for out-patients wing and nurses home. Royal Berkshire Hospital
- Supervised the construction of Wesley Church, Queens Road and gave the pulpit. The church was designed by the Rev. J.P. Johnson of Wood Green, an amateur architect.
- 1873 Coley Board School, Reading.
- 1873 Katesgrove Board School, Reading.
- 1873 A Public House at Woodcote
- 1873 All Saints Rectory, Wokingham (now District Council offices)
- 1874 All Saints School, Wokingham
- New Board School in Silver Street, Reading (? National School still standing)
- Tenders for a new school near the Cemetery presumably the very interesting Newtown School
- Sunday School behind St. Mary's Church, Castle Street (demolished)

Morris & Stallwood (c. 1876-1885)

140	Ancient Monuments Society's Transactions
1876-77 1878	Wesleyan Chapel, Alma Road, Windsor "The Builder" illustrates Caversham Church restored and enlarged (not as executed, a level parapet slightly more resembling the former white weather boarded wooden tower was substituted for the saddle backed tower of the design)
1878-9	Restoration of St. Peter's Church, Caversham and a new tower
1879	"Hillside" described in "The Architect" of 11th October, as House at Southern Hill
1879	A design for Hosier Street chapel (believed not to have been built; the building demolished in the 1960's was older, smaller and more curious)
1880	House for Samuel Palmer in Finchley Road, Hampstead
1880	Principal's Room, Huntley Boorne & Stevens (London Street) illustrated in "Building News" 2nd April suggests that the bold street frontage of stone and granite with bays and ornamental gabled dormers was theirs also (demolished)
1880	All Saints Church, Wokingham, repair and enlarging tower
1881-2	Colonnaded forecourt wings to Royal Berks. Hospital with Doric colonnades in a style remarkably sympathetic to the 1839 original. Illustrated as "Nurses Home" in "The Builder" for 31st December, 1881. Laundry—The Royal Berkshire Hospital. Chapel—Royal Berkshire Hospital
1881	Restoration of tower and pinnacles of St. Laurence's Church. Mr. Higgs was the builder and contractor. The cost was about £2000
1881	Restoration of Hungerford Church
1881	Restoration Sulhamstead Abbots Church (also ascribed to W.F. Poulton)
1883	Old Town Hall, Battersea, London Illustrated in "The Builder" for 17th March, 1883 (other references 25th November, 1882 and 19th April, 1884)
1884	Oxford Road Board School
1885	Joseph Morris' own house in Southcote Crescent
From 1882	2 Stallwood had an address at 17 Friar Street. After

From 1882 Stallwood had an address at 17 Friar Street. After 1887 the name of Morris appears alone. The list of Stallwood's independent works appears to commence with 1887. From 1898 Stallwood was surveyor of Ecclesiastical Delapidations for the Diocese of Oxford.

	A ST. ANNA CHURCH, MARCHES FER.
Joseph Mo	orris
1887	Co-op premises in Caversham Road to be enlarged (possibly one wall with the initials R.I.C.S. in blue brick is a relic)
1892	Haslam's office Friar Street (behind an elevation by F.W. Albury) destroyed
1894	Alterations to Amersham Hall to form the first building of Queen Anne's School, Caversham, as successor to the Grey Coat Hospital, Westminster.
1894-5	Church of the Ark of the Covenant, Rookwood Road, Upper Clapton, Hackney, London (now the Cathedral of the Good Shepherd of the Ancient Catholic Church)
1898	Wesleyan Church, Gosbrook Road, Caversham
1898 or	"Broadway Buildings" 17-27 Station Road,
1901-3	office of County Surveyor of Roads and Bridges, Station Road (Pearl Buildings), Reading.
1901-3	Restoration at Hurst and Swallowfield and supposedly at Wokingham (but also attributed to William Henry Woodyer, architect of Christ Church in Reading)
1901-3	Queen Victoria Street, Reading
Morris &	Son (Partnership dissolved in December 1905)
1902	The Toll Bridge from Whitchurch to Pangbourne rebuilt in steel and still in use
1909	Katesgrove School, enlarged

Katesgrove School, enlarged 1902Completion of McIlroy's Store 1903

Police Stations Wokingham and Thatcham 1904

Police Station Broadway Maidenham 1906

Cordes Hall, Sunninghill 1906

The Wantage Tramway Company's offices in Wantage dated 1904-in terracotta-are clearly related to the Queen Victoria Street and Cheapside buildings (see David and Charles "Railway History in Pictures"-Wessex). No. 5 Bridge Street shows ornamental brickwork very similar in detail to that of "Hillside". On the southwest corner of Cheapside is a small building recognisably similar to the terracotta buildings of the practice. Paul Joyce lists also McIlroy's Factory (undated) as the work of Frank Morris. This has the same colour scheme of yellow brick and red terracotta as Queen Victoria Street and very similar if not identical ornamental details. The obituary in "The Builder" of 10th January, 1913 adds the following undated works:

Sunninghill Church-vestry

Queens Hall Ascot, alterations and extensions for the County Council

According to Mr. Sidney Gold, Morris was the author of a pamphlet on "Housing for the Poor".

A partnership of Ravenscroft, Son and Morris is known from 1902 until at least as late as 1914, but it is established that this has no connection with Joseph, Frank, or Violet Morris.

Pevsner's "Berkshire" attributes a house, No. 76 (an error for 26) in Redlands Road to May Morris, daughter of William Morris. I suggest that this also is an error for Violet Morris. The design is sober but distinctive in the "Arts & Crafts" style with tile, rough-cast stone, white paint and small panes. Sir John Betjeman writes of visiting Joseph Morris's daughter at Spaxton—and of her having continued "her father's practice", leaving it ambiguous as to whether it was the practice of architecture or of religion. However, correspondence filed in the R.I.B.A. Library tells that she is believed to have been "the first woman architect and to have designed Maidenhead Police Station". The first is incorrect, although she may have been one of the earliest, and the second as yet untested. At least it should be said that the suggestion is worth further investigation.

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