

# ‘Unique, never published, Kelmscott Text Proof on vellum with a marvellous association’

Pam Pryde

‘Unique, never published, Kelmscott Text Proof on vellum with a marvellous association’. That was the opening line in the email that Caroline Brass, from David Brass Rare Books of California, sent me. It certainly caught my attention. It referred to a bifolium text proof of Jacobus de Voragine’s *The golden legend*, printed on vellum and illustrated with two beautiful six-line decorative initials. It was printed at the Kelmscott Press in March of 1891, barely two months after the Press had started operating.

*The golden legend* was written in around 1260, and is a chronological work on the lives of the saints of western Europe, as well as an account of events in the lives of Jesus and the Virgin Mary and information about holy days and seasons. It was an immensely popular work in the Middle Ages, and was quickly translated into all the major western European languages. Its author, Jacobus de Voragine (1230–1298), was known as a brilliant preacher and highly respected Dominican theologian who rose to the rank of Archbishop of Genoa, a position he held from 1292 until his death in 1298, aged 68.

Around 900 manuscript copies of this work survive. It was first published in Strasburg in around

1470, and was translated into English and published by William Caxton in 1483, making it one of the very earliest books to be printed in England. To give some idea of the work’s popularity, during the first 50 years of printing in Europe, an average of two editions a year appeared. The work also has several variant titles: it began life as *Legenda sanctorum* (Readings of the saints), but it quickly became commonly known as *Legenda aurea* (Golden legend), allegedly because the people of the time considered the work worth its weight in gold. It is also known as *Lombardica historia*, a title which originated from the fact that the work contains a substantial history of the famous Italian Lombard family down to 1250.

Some 630 years after de Voragine wrote his major work, William Morris (1834–1896) started the Kelmscott Press. He began printing books intended to be a pleasure to look at as objects of typographical design and fine printing, while still remaining easy to read. Morris found that he was particularly fond of 15th century typography, which he considered always looked beautiful, and it was that look he set out to emulate at the Kelmscott Press.

To gain an understanding of book-making, Morris separated the process

into its component parts, which he decided were paper, typeface, the spacing between the individual letters, the spacing between words, the spacing between the lines of type, and the positioning of the printed block on the page.

Paper had to be handmade, according to Morris, for appearance as well as longevity. It was to be linen rather than the more usual cotton, and made on a ‘laid’ mould, that is, one with chain lines and wires. Morris specified that the paper needed to be robust enough so that the mould wires would not be too dominant, as this would cause a ribbed impression on the mould side of the paper which would make it difficult to print on well. The paper also needed to be well sized to give a relatively impermeable surface so that the impression of the typeface would remain sharp. To size the paper, handfuls were dipped into a hot solution of animal gelatine made from vellum or leather shavings boiled in water.

Initially Morris had envisaged *The golden legend* as a folio format, with two columns per page. However, the paper size Morris first developed with papermaker Joseph Batchelor was quite small: a mere 16” x 11” (41.0 cm x 28.0 cm), which is slightly smaller than our A3 size, and similar

Lyke as the lawe was gyue in the hiest of the mount of Synay, so the holy ghoost in the solier where the soupper of Jhesu cryst and of his appostles was made. In this appiereth that the holy ghoost is the perfection of all the lawe, for in that is the plenytyude of dilection. Secondly the perdurable remuneracion is in the holy ghoost, wherof the glose saith thus, that the fourty dayes in whiche our lord conuersed with his disciples signfeye the holy chirche, also the fyfty day on whiche the holy ghoost was gyuen, expressheth the peny of the last retribucion and reward perdurable. Thirdly of the holy ghoost is the remyssyon of synnes, as saith the glose ¶ Therefore it was gyuen in the fyfty day, by cause in the fyfty yere was the jubylee and alle thyng pardoned, and by the holy ghoost the synnes ben pardoned. And it foloweth in the glose ¶ In the jubylee spyrytuel the prysonners ben delyuerd, the debtes ben quytred, the exyled ben repelled and called

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to the smallest of the popular 14th and 15th century Bolognese paper sizes. This meant that the page would not be wide enough to hold two columns; Morris was also of the opinion that while two columns worked well for the narrower black letter, it did not suit a Roman typeface so well. He went back to the 15th century printers to test his intuition on this and found that Venetian printer Nicholas Jensen never printed a Roman typeface in double columns, not even in the largest of his works. So Morris settled on a wide-page format.

Morris was also persuaded by his pressmen that a paper double the size would be more appropriate for *The golden legend* so that four pages could be printed at a time. It was expected that *The golden legend* would be around 1,500 pages long, so being able to print four pages at a time instead of two would be twice as efficient. Each sheet of paper was watermarked with a primrose between the initials W. and M., which Morris named 'flower paper'. In all, one and a half tons of paper was used in the printing of *The golden legend*.

As for the typeface, Morris could not find a commercially available typeface which met his requirements, so he set about designing one of his

own. He favoured a Roman font and aimed for letters that were 'pure in form', severe and solid, without the thickening and thinning of the line which he particularly disliked in the popular typefaces of the day and which he considered made reading difficult. Nor did he want a laterally compressed type—which was another popular convention of the late 19th century. Morris turned to the work of early printers and found that Jensen best expressed the look he was seeking, and in Morris's opinion had in 1475 produced the finest example of *The golden legend* in existence. Using modern technology—and Morris was not afraid to use modern day technology—he had Jensen's typeface photographed and blown up by Emery Walker. He then copied the letters over and over until he felt he had mastered the essence of Jensen's Roman fount. Only then did Morris start working on his own typeface which he called 'Golden'. Morris had planned for the fount to be Great Primer, or 18 point, but Edward Prince, who cut the punches, suggested that 18 point would be too large for the design and so an English, or 14 point, fount was cut. The cutting began in mid-1890 and by the end of the year was mostly complete.

When designing his typeface, Morris made the size of the face of the individual letters, which was the part that was printed, as close as possible to the size of the body to which the face was attached. This allowed for very little space between the printed letters on the page, as Morris particularly disliked a lot of white on the page. Following the same principle, Morris wanted as little space as possible between individual words—just enough to distinguish one word from another, and the spaces between words had to be as even as possible. This meant that words often needed to be broken and hyphens inserted to justify the line, but it also avoided those ugly rivers of white you sometimes see running down a page. Similarly, Morris wanted the space between lines of type to be minimal, so the common practice of leading—increasing the space between lines by using thin strips of lead—was to be avoided at all costs.

Possibly the most important part of the process for Morris was the positioning of the printed matter on the page so that it pleased the eye. Morris considered the unit of a book to be the open book, consisting of facing pages. The margins on the page differ as they enclose the body of text and once again Morris followed



the rules established in the medieval world, with the two gutters—inner margins—narrower than the top margin, which was narrower than the fore-edge margin, which was narrower than the bottom margin. Morris worked on an increase of around 20 per cent from one margin to the next.

Once the matters of paper, spacing and positioning were addressed, Morris believed that it would be possible to make any book pleasant to the eye, with or without illustration. Touching on the issue of illustration, Morris believed that any illustration or decoration on the printed page should be a part of the page of type—that the weight of the type and the design of the illustration needed to be in harmony in order to create a thing of beauty. He had no time for tipped-in copperplate engravings or lithographs which were produced by a quite different process and which he felt were not in harmony with the printed text.

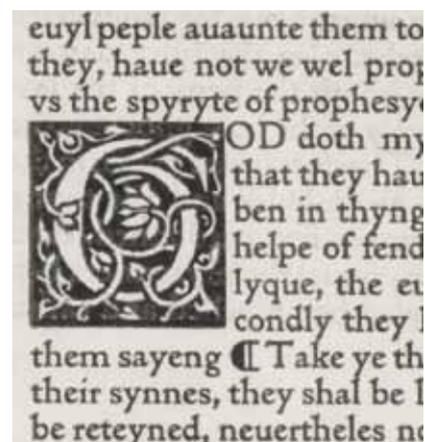
Although Morris did not mention it as a component part of book-making, a further area of great importance for him was ink. He absolutely despised the thin grey ink that was so popular at the time and set about finding a supplier for the thicker, slow-drying clear black ink of the medieval world. Unable to

source such ink in England, he found a company in Hannover, Germany, Gebrüder Jänecke, which could meet his specifications. However, the ink proved very stiff and hard to work with and his pressmen refused to use it. So Morris tested the best English ink he could find, but the results were not satisfactory and Morris found himself forced to take a hard line with his pressmen, announcing that they either used the German ink or he would close the Press. In response—and keep in mind that Morris was very generous with wages and working conditions—his pressmen decided they would use the ink, but in turn produced an extraordinarily small daily output.

Morris intended that *The golden legend* would be the first book to be printed at the Kelmscott Press, but because of its length and the associated problem of the availability of the amount of paper the size required, he was forced to change his plans. By the end of January enough type had been cast to print a trial proof of what then became the first book to be printed at the Kelmscott Press, *The story of the glittering plain*. This was done on a sample of paper made by Joseph Batchelor and another month passed before enough type and paper were available for printing to begin on this small

quarto-sized book. Two hundred copies were printed on paper and six copies on vellum.

No sooner had the first pages of this little book left the Press than Morris fell ill. It was during his convalescence that the trial proof the University recently acquired was printed; it was also during this period that Morris designed the border for page one and several of the decorative initials. By late April, 50 pages of type had been set when disaster struck: the weight of the type broke the table on which the formes were stored, and 50 pages of type pried on the floor. This type then had to be distributed back into the cases and reset. Incredibly we still find that on 11 May the first sheets rolled off the press and the first volume was completed (other than illustrations and preliminary matter) in October 1891. The two illustrations in the book and the title, which was the first woodcut title designed by William Morris, were not cut until midway through the following year, by which time the third volume was approaching completion. The date of the completed work was 12 September 1892, and the first of the bound books was ready to be issued just two months later. The two illustrations, designed by Edward



Burne-Jones (1833–1898), were so late in happening that they had to be inserted on separate leaves, while the Burne-Jones frontispiece that Morris promised the bookseller Bernard Quaritch instead turned into the first of Morris's engraved title pages.

The ornaments and decorative initials in the work were actually printed from electrotypes, not woodblocks. The title page and illustrations by Burne-Jones were printed from woodblocks, but even these were created with the assistance of modern technology. Burne-Jones drew the designs, which were then translated—or simplified—by Robert Catterson-Smith. This process was repeated until both sides were satisfied and the agreed image was then transferred to the wood by means of photography.

*The golden legend* turned out to be the seventh book to come off the Kelmscott Press, and was printed as a large quarto, gathered in eights, in three volumes. All the copies were printed on paper—none on vellum.

The text from which Morris initially worked was the 1527 Wynkyn de Worde edition, a copy of which Morris bought especially for the project. However, he subsequently decided he preferred the earlier 1483 Caxton translation—amazingly, at the time he was able

to borrow the Caxton from the Cambridge University Library and take it home. Phyllis Ellis, daughter of Morris's editor Frederick Ellis, transcribed the whole text, which her father then read against the Caxton before he began the editing process. Frederick also consulted a French version of the *The golden legend*, which he believed Caxton had used as his source.

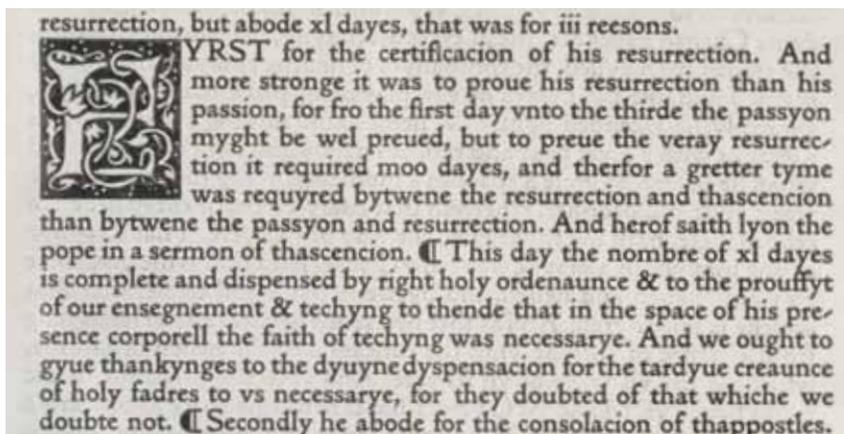
*The golden legend* was financed, published and sold through Bernard Quaritch. The contract negotiated between Morris, Frederick Ellis and Quaritch specified that Morris and Ellis were to contribute gratis their services as editors, but in exchange each editor would receive 12 copies of the book. Quaritch was to pay for the paper, the printing and the binding of 500 copies while Morris had absolute and sole control over the choice of paper and type, the size of the book and the selection of printer. Interestingly, this contract dated back to September 1890, when the idea of the Kelmscott Press was still just that—an idea.

Because of the delay in starting *The golden legend*, and to appease Quaritch, Morris decided to set one signature of the book as an experiment—and this is without doubt the gathering 'f' that is seen on the leaf acquired for the Library.

While the printing of *The story of the glittering plain* was happening, a number of trial proofs of *The golden legend* were also being printed off and Morris began experimenting with various dimensions. He eventually settled on a page size of 11½" x 8¼", with the length of the line of type 5⅛". As already noted, the balance of the margins around the page was of utmost importance to Morris and he made countless adjustments to these until he was satisfied. It is quite possible that our very early trial proof was printed while Morris was experimenting with the possibility of a folio edition versus a quarto edition.

The press used was not the traditional wooden press of the Middle Ages, but an Albion (iron) press, devised in around 1822 by London printer R.W. Cope. Because of the size of the project and the length of time the printing was taking, a second Albion press was acquired to speed up production.

On completion, the books were bound—some in vellum, some in half-holland—by J.J. Leighton, without the specially dyed silk ties, and we have three differently bound copies in the collection. Two of these I suggest were bound by Leighton and one copy by the owner, and all three copies come from the library of Dr J. Orde Poynton.



*The golden legend* cost £1,350 to print and bind, and sold at a price of five guineas. The enthusiastic response of reviewers and readers alike must have been pleasing for Morris and his team, with the publication described as 'truly magnificent' and marking a 'new beginning in the production of beautiful books in England'.

One final question: what do we know about the 'marvellous association' referred to in the book dealer's blurb? It turns out that the text proof comes from the estate of William Morris's close friend, Charles Fairfax Murray (1849–1919) who, like Edward Burne-Jones, was influenced by John Ruskin and the Pre-Raphaelite movement. Ruskin mentored Fairfax Murray; he even paid for his lodging and training during his first year in London, then arranged a position for him in Burne-Jones's studio. At the time Burne-Jones was illuminating the manuscripts with which William Morris was experimenting, and Fairfax Murray worked on that project with him, quickly becoming part of Morris's inner circle of friends. We know that Fairfax Murray also assisted Burne-Jones with the two illustrations found in *The golden legend*, so it is quite possible that Morris gave Fairfax Murray this

trial proof as a memento of his contribution to the project.

Fairfax Murray was himself an interesting figure: in 1871, aged 22, he went on a short visit to Italy to study and paint, returning again in 1873 at Ruskin's expense to copy the Botticelli frescoes in the Sistine Chapel. While there he married an Italian and settled in Italy, where he made a living by copying works for Ruskin and painting portraits. Any money he made he spent on building up a personal collection of old master drawings, while as an aside he worked as an agent for London's National Gallery and built up a clientele of private collectors worldwide, his influence reaching across the oceans to assist the development of several of the great American collections.

He returned to London in 1886. By this time his agency business had taken precedence over his personal artistic endeavours, but he still made time for portrait painting, and in this role he was much sought after.

From around 1903, Fairfax Murray began selling off much of his collection at below market value, the last major sale being of his personal collection of some 1,400 old master drawings to the American banker John Pierpont Morgan. Fairfax Murray died

in 1919, the text proof that the Friends of the Baillieu Library recently acquired for the Library, as mentioned earlier, originating from his estate.

To conclude, I suggest that the dealer who brought this item to our attention was absolutely accurate in describing it as a 'unique, never published Kelmscott Text Proof on vellum with a marvellous association'.

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