

Book Review: Who was Mrs Morris?

Morris suffered bankruptcy, when the Oxford Automobile and Cycle Agency collapsed through his business partner's social spending in 1904. This was not long after he had met and married Elizabeth Maud Anstey on April 9th 1904. She and her sisters were the daughters of a farrier who, when she was sixteen, had left their mother and taken off for Leeds. The girls worked hard to support themselves with two becoming teachers, and Elizabeth becoming a dressmaker, working in Oxford's renowned department store Ellistons. The misses Anstey were keen members of the cycle club to which Morris belonged and it was here of course that he and Elizabeth met. She proved a hearty companion on the tandem bicycle and they spent many happy hours cycling. Their trips covered considerable distances bearing in mind the inhospitality of roads to cycles, and it was not unknown for them to venture into Wales for week-ends. This woman who came in to Morris's life brought not only the fellowship of a shared pastime, but a very similar background of the heartache and disappointment they both experienced in those early teenage years due to the shortcomings of their respective fathers, something which was to affect them both throughout their lives.

Elizabeth supported Morris during the very difficult time prevailing at their marriage, to the extent of selling her own few possessions of worth. She was a very shy person by nature and her inclination, as Morris's profile grew, was always to avoid the public spotlight and this was something he fully endorsed to the extent that he would not allow any interview with her. Despite their growing affluence in the years ahead, Elizabeth always maintained a philosophy of frugality which bordered on meanness; it was a close family member who reasoned that Elizabeth's great fear was that

the hardship she had experienced in her youth, and the difficult situation she encountered when she married Morris, resolved her never to find herself under financial duress again.

The Morris's had no children and it was suggested by one of the few people really close to them that they did not enjoy a particularly happy home life. Almost everything Morris had built up over his early years especially his attempts to support his family during his father's 13 years of ill health ebbed away on the collapse of the Oxford Automobile and Cycle Agency.

Fortunately the good relations he had nurtured and retained with suppliers, plus assistance from a small bank, gave him the springboard to start again. He returned to Longwell and rented again his showroom in High Street. Convinced by now that a partnership association was not for him, he further determined that funds would go solely into production, and not the marketing of his goods, a process he regarded as merely a re-emphasis of his product.

Without doubt the collapse of the Automobile & Cycle business honed his existing sense of fiscal frugality, a characteristic as appealing to his wife as it was to Morris. From a modest wooden shed, 1914 saw Morris's first model roll off the production line in numbers. Morris, then twenty-seven years old was fit, energetic and determined. Hard work and business acumen were driving forces in his meticulous routine.

This text is from Nuffield, the Man, by Caroline Nixon, 2010.

Contributed by Alan Gulleford

