Morris, Burne-Jones and French Gothic
... go forth again to gaze upon the old cathedral front, where you have
smiled so often at the fantastic ignorance of the old sculptors: examine once more
those ugly goblins, and formless monsters, and stern statues, anatomiless and
rigid; but do not mock at them, for they are signs of the life and liberty of every
workman who struck the stone; a freedom of thought, and rank in scale of being,
such as no laws, no charters, no charities can secure; but which it must be the
first aim of all Europe at this day to regain for her children.

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SOURCES AND ABBREVIATIONS

The sources most frequently referred to are abbreviated as follows: I have not noted every reference from the Letters which are reprinted on pages 14-18

Burges

Letters

Mackail

Memorials

Murray

Ruskin

Street
George Edmund Street, *Brick and Marble in the Middle Ages*, 1855.

Unrau

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INTRODUCTION

For the long, long, canker of peace is over and done,
And now by the side of the Black and the Baltic deep,
And deathful-grinning mouths of the fortress, flames
The blood-red blossom of war with a heart of fire.

Let it flame or fade, and the war roll down like a wind,
We have proved we have hearts in a cause, we are noble still,
And myself have awaked, as it seems, to the better mind;
It is better to fight for the good than to rail at the ill;
I have felt with my native land, I am one with my kind,
I embrace the purpose of God, and the doom assigned.

Tennyson, Maud (Text of 1st edn 1855)

In the summer of 1855 three young men set out on a walking tour of Northern France; they were undergraduates at Oxford, in some ways typical of their generation, in some ways not at all. Coming from the upwardly aspiring middle-classes, they were intended for the Church, a career which would free them from the taint of trade in their background, and round off their parents’ investment in their upbringing. In behaviour they might well have appeared immature, though we must make allowances for the then current sentimentality of male comradeship, and the teasing and practical jokes that went with it. For somewhere on the other side of Europe, as the quotation from Tennyson indicates, English and French boys of the same age were shooting at Russians in the trenches which defended Sebastopol. Of this they were not in ignorance, and they did care: on their return from holiday they would start a magazine in which serious articles and poems would explore the national crisis.

The three friends were William Morris, Edward Burne-Jones and William Fulford. At this time Morris was slim and clean-shaven; at 21 he had still to develop the image and interests by which we recognise him (and it may be that the usual habit of biographers - looking back into the youth for evidences of the older man - does no justice to the special qualities of his youthful style). Another Oxford contemporary, Canon Dixon, described him as "an aristocrat and a High Churchman": he was immensely rich and could do what he liked. He was fascinated by archaeology - a term which at that time really meant the Middle Ages exclusively. He read widely and omnivorously, and wrote poetry which, in its forceful originality and aesthetic detachment, was ahead of its time.

Nevertheless, I think Edward Burne-Jones would have seemed far more interesting in his potentiality at that age, and was in fact the talent singled out by Rossetti and Ruskin in the later 1850s. He had come up the hard way, relatively speaking; certainly, in comparison to Morris, he was emotionally and financially deprived, and this had made his personality harder and sharper. He took his religion very seriously: "in an age of sofas and cushions Newman taught me to be indifferent to comfort; and in an age of materialism he taught me to venture all on the unseen..."

He tells us that when he was little he had visited the monastery of Grace-Dieu in Charnwood Forest, the first to be founded in England since the Reformation. He and Morris had planned to found a monastery themselves at Oxford, or if not a monastery some kind of Brotherhood. At Godstow in 1854 Burne-Jones had seen "visions of knights and ladies on the river-bank"; he was to go on seeing such visions, and 'trying to step inside them', all his life. Tall and spare, as if in training to become a medieval ascetic, he found some relief in sketching at every opportunity: in this at least he seemed to know exactly what he wanted to do. We may do wrong to assume, with hindsight, that Morris was, at this stage, the intellectual leader.
Certainly, as the Memorials indicate (i. 109), there are hints of conflict between the two of them early in 1855. Moved by the spirit of the times, so clearly evoked in Tennyson's poem, Burne-Jones had tried to join the Army in March or April: commissions were on offer to those undergraduates who were willing to go to the Crimea with the Engineers. Once again, it is only too easy to see this with hindsight as an entirely comic episode, and to make the usual comment that 'luckily he was rejected on the grounds of health...': but what did he really mean when he said later 'I wanted to go and get killed', passing it off as a joke? We could speculate that the proposed trip to France was a deliberate attempt by Morris, not only to divert his friend's attention from what must have seemed a kind of failure, but also to offer a compensatory vision of a purposeful future, a future in which there would once again be common ground between them.

Of William Fulford, the third member of the trio, not too much is known: two years older than the others, he seems cast in the role of a satellite. Yet this had not always been the case: in his early years at Oxford he had seemed 'very strong and active, immensely vivacious', a devotee of Tennyson, whom he imitated in his own rather sentimental poetry. Mackail is very scathing about him; it is true that he had exhausted his own early promise, but he was, in the end, the only one to take orders. For him, as for Burne-Jones, it was his first visit to France. Morris, on the other hand, had visited Rouen, Chartres, Beauvais, Amiens and Paris with his sister Henrietta the year before. Because of this, and because of his wide reading, Morris 'knew everything about every place they went to.'

The cathedrals and churches of Normandy, Picardy and the Île de France were a continual source of fascination to English travellers in the nineteenth century, and Morris and his friends were in no sense pioneers in following this route. One could even argue that this journey had become an inexpensive middle-class Romantic alternative to the Classical Grand Tour of Italy which had suited the tastes and economic power of eighteenth-century aristocrats. For artists and architects, too, the tour to the Mediterranean had been a compulsory part of the 'syllabus' ever since Inigo Jones had brought back Renaissance ideas in the seventeenth century, but the Gothic and medieval revival changed all that. On this tour of Normandy, Morris and his friends had been preceded by John Sell Cotman (1817-20), Pugin (1820s and 30s), Samuel Prout (1818 and later) and John Ruskin (1840s). We shall be using Ruskin's notes in particular as a guide to what one went out to see, besides the interestingly quirky guide-book published by John Murray.

Their walking-tour took Morris, Burne-Jones and Fulford three weeks to complete; though they did not in fact walk very far, this could be considered as rushing it. In 1848 a similar itinerary had taken Ruskin nearly three months, but then he was not short of time or money. For the three friends there was still plenty of time for sketching, for creative idling, for immersing themselves completely in landscape and townscape, as Morris's letters somehow show us. Cut away from the influences of home, surrounded by evidence of the ideal medieval world which they believed to have once existed, their minds responded, advanced to a higher stage, took up the challenge presented to them. Caught up in the same spirit of the age as Tennyson's hero they 'embraced the purpose of God, and the doom assigned'. They found the moment of decision—or the moment found them—walking on the quays of Le Havre. To understand this experience of conversion—for that is really what it was—we will need to pursue their journey in detail, and then ask ourselves a question: Why would French cathedrals provide an equivalent, at that particular time, for serving in the Crimean War?
MAP SHOWING THE ROUTE OF THE WALKING TOUR ROUND THE CHURCHES OF NORTHERN FRANCE MADE BY WILLIAM MORRIS, EDWARD BURNE-JONES AND WILLIAM FULFORD IN JULY - AUGUST 1855
CHRONOLOGY

1855

Thursday 19 July  London > Folkestone > Boulogne > Abbeville
Friday 20 July  Abbeville > Amiens
Saturday 21 July  Amiens > Clermont > Beauvais
Sunday 22 July  Beauvais > Clermont > Paris
Monday 23 July  Paris
Tuesday 24 July  Paris
Wednesday 25 July  Paris > Chartres
Thursday 26 July  Chartres
Friday 27 July  Chartres > Maintenon > Dreux > Bueil > Évreux > Louviers > Louviers St-Pierre > Rouen
Saturday 28 July  Rouen
Sunday 29 July  Rouen
Monday 30 July  Rouen
Tuesday 31 July  Rouen
Wednesday 1 August  Rouen > Caudebec-en-Caux
Thursday 2 August  Caudebec-en-Caux > Yvetot > Le Havre
Friday 3 August  Le Havre > Caen
Saturday 4 August  Caen > Bayeux
Sunday 5 August  Bayeux
Monday 6 August  Bayeux > St-Lô > Coutances
Tuesday 7 August  Coutances
Wednesday 8 August  Coutances > Avranches
Thursday 9 August  Avranches > Mont-St-Michel > Avranches
Friday 10 August  Avranches
Saturday 11 August  Avranches > Granville
Sunday 12 August  Granville > Jersey > Southampton
NARRATIVE

Wednesday 18 July, London. Burne-Jones and Fulford called at the Macdonalds' in Chelsea. They stayed the night at a hotel near the station; Fulford read Keats aloud to entertain Burne-Jones. Morris was presumably still at Walthamstow.

Thursday 19 July, London > Abbeville. Morris met the others at the train. They crossed the Channel from Folkestone to Boulogne, the weather being 'wet ... but not ... rough'. Ferry passengers usually expected to be 'ill', but Morris tells us that this was not the case for his group.

They were in Boulogne for at least three hours and may have seen something of the town. The railway to Paris had recently (1848) been opened and had new rolling-stock, so that the 8.15 p.m. slow train, in which they rode 3rd class, was 'pleasant enough'.

At 10.30 p.m. they arrived at Abbeville station. They had to walk a mile into the town where they stayed at the Tête du Boeuf. Morris wrote to his mother at midnight to announce their safe arrival.

Friday 20 July, Abbeville > Amiens. Morris aroused the others early 'to wander about the town until breakfast'. He later wrote to his mother that 'Abbeville has a very fine church, though very unfinished, and the town itself is very old and full of exceedingly good houses; we were all three in exstasies thereat'. Murray had not been so enthusiastic, pointing out in his Handbook that 'Those who will penetrate into its narrow and filthy streets will find some quaint specimens of ancient domestic architecture etc ... but the chief object of interest, which really ought to be seen, is the church of St Wolfran.' The three friends ascended the tower and looked out over the roofs of the town and the surrounding countryside. Burne-Jones sketched in one of the streets.

About 12 noon they left for Amiens by train, arriving at about 2 p.m. They spent most of the time in the cathedral, one hour before dinner, and then afterwards until quite late in the evening. Fulford reported: 'Morris surveyed it with calm joy and Jones was speechless with admiration. It did not awe me until it got quite dark, for we stayed till after nine, but it was so solemn, so human and divine in its beauty, that love cast out fear.'

Saturday 21 July, Amiens > Beauvais. Morris became lame, 'filling the streets with imprecations on all bootmakers'; this was because his shoes did not fit, and he bought 'a pair of gay carpet slippers'. (This is his only reference to textiles in a town which was then the centre of an important industry.)

They left early, continuing their rail journey in the direction of Paris, and got out at Clermont, from where they walked 17 miles back westwards to Beauvais. Morris of course wearing his slippers. (Although the trip was intended to be a walking-tour, this was their last walk for some time.) Morris comments on the beauty of the countryside: Street says of the same district: 'There is no country in Europe so much as France ... so thoroughly foreign in its aspect ... the entire absence of hedgerows and other trees than poplars, all go to make up a thoroughly unEnglish picture.' They arrived at Beauvais at 3 p.m.

Sunday 22 July, Beauvais > Paris. In the morning they attended High Mass in the cathedral, a strange and impressive ceremony which Burne-Jones described many years later (see p. 27). Morris wrote home: 'I think I like Beauvais Cathedral better than Amiens; the apse of Beauvais must be the finest in the world.' Murray tells us, and it is a point that Burne-Jones does not mention, that 'in the choir [of the Cathedral] are hung eight tapestries.'

At this point there was a dispute among the three friends as to the next stage of the journey. Morris wishing to proceed directly to Chartres, and leave out Paris, because of 'the mischief that was being done ... to Notre Dame, and how miserable it would be to see.' However, such a diversion would have wasted time, involving a two-day journey: so they agreed to go on to Paris,
which Fulford wished to visit, and because Burne-Jones was keen to see the pictures in the Louvre.

In the afternoon they attended Vespers in the cathedral, and stayed on in the town until the evening; then they left for Clermont by diligence, and there joined the train to Paris. They finally reached their destination at 11.30 p.m.

† Monday 23 July. Paris. ‘On the morning after arrival at Paris we went first to the Sainte Chapelle,’ says Fulford in his account of the visit. ‘Street, who made several journeys to Paris in the 1850s, commented acidly on the restorations then in progress under the supervision of Viollet-le-Duc and others — ‘one never seems to see any progress inside the chapel ... the same man appears to be always busy stencilling in the same place as before... When is the chapel to be used at the present rate of going on?”

From the chapel the three friends went on to the Beaux Arts department of the Exposition Universelle, staying there for ‘about 7 hours.’ In spite of this excessive devotion to contemporary art, Morris says rather grudgingly that it ‘was well worth seeing for the English pictures therein and for nothing else.” These are listed by Fulford: ‘conceive our delight to find no less than seven Pre-Raphaelite among the English pictures: three by Hunt, including the Light of the World, three by Millais, one by Collins. They seemed to be entirely unappreciated, except the Order of Release, which attracted a great many from time to time.’ At least one other painting can be named — Hunt’s Strayed Sheep (Our English Coasts). The 16 hours’ sightseeing credited on this day by Lady Burne-Jones in the Memorials seems hardly possible, and the phrase ‘at least 12 hours’ in the Letters seems more precise, especially as in the evening, at Edward Burne-Jones’s request, they went to the Opera ‘for he had never seen one’. They heard Alboni in Le Prophète; ‘Jones was enraptured; Morris seemed a good deal bored’, says Fulford. Morris significantly does not mention the opera in his letter home to mother, but not, I think, for the reason that Fulford gives; we could surmise, from a similar omission in a letter by Effie Ruskin when writing home from Paris in 1848, that in an Evangelical family this was not considered a very respectable thing to do. It is also interesting that Street, in commenting on church furnishing, uses this opera as a point of reference — ‘I fear it is too often the case that French arrangements of altars are more likely to remind one of a scene from the Prophète, or some such representation in an opera-house, than of the real dignity of the Christian altar.’ One can see from this that Morris, who had similar tastes to Street, would not have even found the opera visually stimulating.

† Tuesday 24 July. Paris. The second day in Paris was spent in the Picture Gallery in the Louvre. Only one painting was singled out for special mention, and this was a picture which Morris had seen on his visit the year before. In a letter to Cornell Price (No. 7) he discusses some engravings from it which he had purchased before coming to France in 1855. Lady Burne-Jones tells us that ‘Morris made Edward shut his eyes and so led him up to Angelico’s picture of The Coronation of the Virgin before he allowed him to look, and then he was transported with delight.’ Many years later Burne-Jones told Thomas Coke that it was this experience which made him see how he could succeed as a painter. Again, it is worth noticing the similarity of tastes with Street, who would always ‘feast his eyes on Fra Angelico’s Coronation of the Virgin in the Louvre,’ Either on this day or the next they visited ‘Notre Dame, and some half dozen other churches’. The restoration of Notre Dame by Viollet-le-Duc was as prolonged and as thorough as that of the Sainte Chapelle. It was Victor Hugo’s Notre Dame de Paris (1831) which had re-opened everyone’s eyes to the Romantic possibilities of the building, and the restoration had begun in 1845. Morris had warned Burne-Jones that ‘Notre Dame would be a sight miserable to look at, for the sculptures were half done and lying in careless wrecks under the porches’. It is not clear how much of this was actually the case in 1855, though Lady Burne-Jones comments that at this moment Edward ‘for the first time saw some of the secrets of restoration.’ Two years previously Street had visited the building and his comments both fill out and offer a partial explanation of what Morris had observed: in 1853 the statues of the Kings of Judea, which had been destroyed in 1793, had still not been replaced, and Street was ‘amazed to find that the painted imitations of statues still decorate the long row of niches in the west front. In the interior still more miserable is the taste displayed in the papering of the vaulting of the
aisles with blue paper powdered with gold bees... I find more pleasure in looking at the beautiful sculptures behind the stalls of the choir than in anything else."

¶ Wednesday 25 July. Paris > Chartres. On this or the preceding day they visited the Hotel de Cluny, which the other two had considered to be a special treat for Morris. This well-known museum had been opened in 1844, and presumably some of the tapestries of the Lady and the Unicorn were on display then as now in what is still recognisable as a fifteenth-century residence. Nevertheless Morris was seen by the others as unhappy and 'fidgety'; 'I don't quite like Paris yet,' Morris wrote home in his next letter, 'though my friends are delighted with it.' He bought a pair of cloth boots as a gesture to the so-called 'walking-tour'; then, largely to please him, the group left by train in the evening for Chartres, arriving there at 10.30 p.m. Fulford wrote a letter from Chartres that night.

¶ Thursday 26 July. Chartres. This being one of the goals of the 'pilgrimage', it is a little surprising that they stayed for only one day in Chartres; but this was in fact as long, if not longer, than the time allowed for Amiens and Beauvais, and it may be that the journey planned for the Friday could not be undertaken at the week-end. Burne-Jones's recollection, that they were 'two days at Chartres', spending all our time in the Church' does seem a little discrepant here, though he could simply have meant two nights. Morris wrote to his mother on the 28th describing Chartres — 'we stayed there all the next day Thursday, enjoying ourselves immensely over its quaint streets and gorgeous Churches.' Something rather more than 'quaint' is expressed in the letter he later sent to Cornell Price — 'the beautiful statues, and the stained glass, and the great, cliff-like buttresses.' At this time of the year the particular effect, peculiar to Chartres, of the cathedral appearing to rise out of the vast cornfield of La Beauce, may well have stayed in his memory as well. On this day they must have made detailed arrangements to proceed cross-country to Rouen, avoiding the return journey to Paris and 'railway all the way.'

¶ Friday 27 July. Chartres > Rouen. Morris devotes a very long letter to Cornell Price and half of a much shorter letter to his mother to simply describing this day. I suppose it is possible to say that we know more about this one day than any other in Morris's early life.

At 6 a.m. they caught the early train from Chartres in the direction of Paris; 'drizzling rain ... almost hid the spires of the Cathedral' as they journeyed to Maintenon, a distance of about 20 miles. From Maintenon they proceeded by public conveyance — 'a queer little contrivance with one horse' — which took them about 17 miles to Dreux. At this point Morris's famous letter to Price takes off into the lyrical cadenced prose that characterises his early romances: in this transfigured countryside the trees and flowers are at the same time dynamic with verbal activity, 'growing round' and 'together', 'sweeping up to the brows of the long low hills' and sometimes 'changing' into vines and forage, and static — 'they all looked as they would grow there for ever, as if they had always grown there, without change of seasons, knowing no other time than the early August.' This combination of energy and permanence reminds me of a Morris pattern design.

Meanwhile the weather improved into a 'bright sunny day', though the strength of the sun made Edward's eyes 'bad'. At Dreux they waited one hour, and visited the church and the belfry, which Morris calls 'a delightful old secular tower.' They then continued in the same public conveyance to Buell which Morris calls 'Bouéill', where they rejoined the railway: this conveyed them to Évreux in half an hour.

It is difficult to work out the time at which they arrived, though Morris tells us that they had to divide their attention between 'eating our dinner and gazing on the gorgeous Cathedral'; for all that Morris gives a very accurate description of the interior and exterior of the building. But he didn't notice, as Murray did, that this town was famous for cotton manufacture, and that hand-looms were still used rather than the steam-engine. After Évreux the countryside changed, and Morris describes the succession of hills and 'quite flat valleys' through which they travelled by conveyance; 'by the way,' he tells his mother, 'this same conveyance is a thing with an open coupée holding three, and a rotonde holding four, it is drawn by one horse, and goes very slow I can tell you.' Ruskin had frequently to make use of a similar vehicle in 1848. Eventually they
arrived at Louviers, another famous cloth-making town: in the sixteenth century its prosperity had paid for the embellishment of the south porch of the church. Morris tells us — the outside has a kind of mask of the most gorgeous flamboyant (though late) thrown all over it, and he comments on the contrast between this exterior and the “nobleness” of the early Gothic interior. Murray, on the other hand, could only see “a mass of incongruities and sad mutilations.”

The railway-station, Louviers St-Pierre, was a further five miles, which they covered in the local omnibus: in his letter to Cornell Price Morris tells of the views of the valley in which Louviers lies — “it was all like the country in a beautiful poem, in a beautiful Romance such as might make a background to Chancer’s ‘Païmon and Arcite’...” The letter continues with the famous attack upon railways as ‘ABOMINATIONS’; in fact they had to join the main Paris to Rouen line, which took them very conveniently and rapidly to their destination, so that they arrived at 8.30 p.m. In his earlier letter to his mother Morris — writing immediately after the event — showed no prejudice against railway travel; he expressed his delight in the cheapness and, for that time, rapidity of the whole journey. It has cost nine shillings and lasted fifteen hours: ‘I have seldom enjoyed a day so much.’

† Saturday 28 July, Rouen. They stayed at the Hôtel de France. Morris had such splendid memories of Rouen from the preceding year’s visit that he had ‘misgivings’ but in fact the town came up to his expectations and he wasn’t disappointed at all. He was able to act as host to his friends, and showed them the sights. On the first day they went round the churches, saw Rouen from the top of the view spire, ascended to the roof and lantern of St-Ouen, and heard Vespers in the Cathedral. After dinner they climbed to the view-point on Mont-St-Catherine, and stayed there until after dark. Morris began a letter to his mother that evening (No. 9).

† Sunday 29 July, Rouen. In the morning Morris finished his letter home, indicating that they expected to stay another fortnight. In the afternoon they once again attended Vespers, which were only sung on Saturday and Sunday in that diocese; on this occasion ‘a great deal of the psalms were sung to the Peregrine tone, and then, didn’t they sing the hymns!’

† Monday 30 July.
† Tuesday 31 July, Rouen. No particular account is given by Morris of the activities of these days. We only need to remind ourselves that to Ruskin ‘Rouen was a labyrinth of delight’, and that Murray told his travellers that Rouen ‘will alone furnish occupation for many days’. Murray goes on to tell us that ‘its narrow streets of gable-faced, timber-framed mansions... swarm like an ant-hill with busy crowds passing to and fro: it is a focus of trade, and the chief seat of the cotton manufacture of France. It may indeed be called the French Manchester.’ It’s worth comment that Morris doesn’t seem to notice the crowded slums of the city (which were destroyed in the century), seeing only the poetry of the place.

Summing up, in his later letter to Price (No. 11), Morris says as he looks back over the whole journey that ‘Ted [B-J] liked the Cathedral, on the whole, better than any other church we saw.’ This is perhaps borne out by the summary account in Memorials where little mention is made of anything after Rouen. Murray often mentions the English ‘colonies’ of these French cities, occasionally urging the traveller to pay for the upkeep of the local Anglican minister, and the English connections of Rouen are perhaps exemplified by the fact that Morris was able to obtain the latest Thackeray novel, The Newcomes, in a Tauchnitz edition there.

† Wednesday 1 August, Rouen > Caudebec-en-Caux. Having originally planned to travel down the River Seine to Le Havre, Morris and his friends found that the steamer was not available at this time of the year; according to Murray, ‘the diligences had also ceased to run’, because of the opening of the rail link. So they walked 25 miles to Caudebec. There is no indication of the route they took, but assuming the older roads on a modern map serve us as a probable guide the D982/N182 comes to 36 km., to which one could allow 4 km. extension to visit the abbey at Jumièges or the banks of the Seine. Morris gives no description of this ‘glorious walk’, though his letter to Price contains the admission that in the description of the rich trees and flowers around Drux he may have been thinking of ‘the land between Rouen and Caudebec.’
The three of them were quite exhausted by the journey, though Morris inevitably blames his new shoes. An indication of his later abandonment of conventional sartorial tastes is perhaps to be found here also; he tells his mother that he has thrown away his ‘beautiful violet ribbon’ at Caudebec.

At this time Caudebec would have been a fine example of medieval survival, full of ancient houses. The church carries lettering in praise of Our Lady round the line of the roof, and is exactly the kind of Flamboyant Gothic edifice which we might have expected Morris to notice: it had sent Ruskin into ecstasies seven years before.

¶ Thursday 2 August. Caudebec-en-Caux > Le Havre. Being unable to walk any further, the three friends took the diligence to Yvetot, 10 miles for a penny, and then went on by train to Le Havre.

It was here, as Burne-Jones tells us in a later account [but note that it is not mentioned in Morris’s letters home, which is to be expected, nor in the letter to Cornell Price] that the decisive conversation took place: ‘it was while walking on the quay at Havre at night that we resolved definitely that we would begin a life of art, and put off our decision no longer – he should be an architect and I a painter... That was the most memorable night of my life.’ We shall discuss this decision later, but one or two factual points need to be made. So many people have misread Mackail, and assumed that they were waiting for the boat to England (which they were not) that most modern accounts of this holiday end it here. Since ‘waiting for a boat’ is what one does on a quay (isn’t it?) I assumed myself that they were waiting for the steamer or the tide to take them to Caen: but Morris states quite clearly that ‘we slept at Havre the Thursday night’ (Letters No. 10), so this hypothesis won’t do either. It is here that Murray comes triumphantly to our rescue, and redeems himself from any errors of taste or whatever which we may have detected in his Handbook. The principal tourist attraction at this, the largest port in France and the main entry for goods to Paris, was provided by the quays. These, says Murray, are ‘the chief scenes of life. The strange cries and glittering plumage of parrots and macaws will remind the stranger of the connexion of the port with tropical countries.’ So we have to think of our group of travellers, or at any rate two of them, surrounded by the fantastic imports of modern times while they make the leap of faith to the Middle Ages, devoting themselves to the cause of High Art while surrounded by the popular side-shows of a combination of bazaar and zoo.

¶ Friday 3 August. Le Havre > Caen. In the morning they continued their journey by steamer. Murray is once again helpful, explaining that there was a regular daily service which took four hours, ‘starting as soon as the height of the tide allows them.’ The sea was ‘very smooth’, Morris told his mother, and we find that in 1848 Ruskin confused his father by telling him that ‘The mouth of the Seine ... is a noble scene – not unlike the Gulf of Spezzia in its width and in the modulation of the hills on its shores – or perhaps I shall give it to you more accurately by telling you to mix Gulf of Spezzia with firth of Forth.’

Caen itself Morris found disappointing in comparison with Rouen, and he only singles out the church of St-Etienne as ‘splendid’. Murray talks of its ‘numerous specimens of ancient architecture’, though because of the usual processes of urban renewal ‘they are fast disappearing’. The town attracted the English because of the cheapness of house-rent and provisions.

¶ Saturday 4 August. Caen > Bayeux. The group ‘left Caen on Saturday afternoon by diligence for Bayeux, slept there on Saturday evening...’ The next phrases of Morris’s letter home are not clear, and it is possible that they visited the Cathedral on the Saturday, though the Sunday is more likely.

¶ Sunday 5 August. Bayeux. Morris thought the Cathedral of Bayeux ‘a very good one’ – parts of it had been sketched and praised by Ruskin. But in 1855 it was not possible to get into the East end ‘as they were repairing the choir and the transepts’ – ‘in spite of our strenuous efforts’. Knowing of Morris’s reputation for violent rages one wonders what is glossed over by this phrase!
Murray found the town ‘quiet and dull ... with much the air of some cathedral towns in England,’ its claim to fame was of course the tapestry; in the early nineteenth century this was unwound from rollers yard by yard, a process which had caused some deterioration, so that in 1842 it was unrolled and displayed behind glass in the Public Library. Although one can read too much into a hasty catalogue of events, in the third letter to his mother (No. 10), Morris disappoints us by calling it ‘quaint and rude, and very interesting’. Though these adjectives have been devalued in common speech – he really means ‘curious, savage and full of significance’, it is strange that he doesn’t really see it as an art-object at all, nor is he interested in its process of manufacture.

Monday 6 August. Bayeux > Coutances. They left Bayeux in the morning (all travel must now be assumed to be by diligence or contrivance, as it had been for Ruskin in 1848.) In the middle of the journey they stopped for about two hours at St-Lô, and admired ‘the fine church’. This was largely destroyed, together with the town centre, during the Second World War. It has never been a cathedral, incidentally, nor does the accurate Morris describe it as one. But since both Ruskin and Murray thought it was, Morris may have counted it as one of the nine in his list. At Coutances they put up at the Hôtel de France, which Murray considered ‘dear’. The Cathedral, which many people today think of as one of the best examples of a thirteenth-century building, is undamaged. Though it is built on the remains of a Romanesque structure, Morris appreciated the uniformity of style – ‘like our Early English, very plain but very beautiful.’ Ruskin had been rather sour: ‘a little too much like Salisbury – not much detail about it.’ The situation of the town also commanded Morris’s admiration, ‘built mostly of granite, and lies up a steep hill overlooking a very pretty country, very English in its look, much like Clay Cross without the Chimneys.”

Tuesday 7 August. Coutances. On this day Morris wrote home to his mother (No. 10) describing their plans for the remainder of the tour, and commenting on the ‘seediness’ of his clothes, shoes and general appearance. He had just taken his ‘cloth boots’ to a cobbler’s: they could not be repaired.

Wednesday 8 August. Coutances > Avranches. This would seem to be a fairly short day’s journey, but going by diligence probably took far longer than we think. In 1848 the same route had taken the Ruskins all day, the roads being ‘heavy in sand’. They must have travelled via Granville, as Morris speaks of going back to Granville from Avranches.

Thursday 9 August. Avranches > Mont-St-Michel > Avranches. Whatever it may have been in the Middle Ages, in 1855 Avranches was not of great ecclesiastical interest: its cathedral had collapsed in 1790, though Murray glamorises this into ‘destroyed by a mob at the Revolution’. Ruskin did not even mention the place, but it was the usual point of departure for the excursion to Mont-St-Michel, which Morris and his friends made on this day. Effie Ruskin says that it was a twelve-mile journey, but both Ruskins were put off by their picturesque emotions by the stench around the mount and by the sight of the prisoners who were seen working at ‘the black and crowded looms on which they make calico.’ It may be significant that Morris too makes no attempt to describe his visit.

Friday 10 August. Avranches. On this day Morris wrote the long and detailed letter to Cornell Price (No. 11) which is mainly concerned with the journey of 27 July. He calls Avranches ‘a very beautiful place’, probably because of the famous views of the Mont-St-Michel. He gives the information that ‘we are waiting here’ for the return journey to England by steamer.

Saturday 11 August. Avranches > Granville. There is no exact record of their journey home as forecasted in letter No. 10, and No. 11 is actually vaguer. They presumably stayed on at Avranches all day and left for Granville in the evening.

Sunday 12 August. Granville > Jersey > Southampton. Murray says that Granville ‘contains no objects of interest’ though it was at this time a fashionable watering place as well as a commercial port. They appear to have left on the 11 a.m. steamer. It is also possible that they may have had to sleep at Jersey on the way home.
Four Letters of William Morris, July-August 1855

8    To Emma Shelton Morris

La Tete du Boeuf,
Abbeville, Picardy,
(12) Midnight
[July 20, 1855]

My dear Mother

We got here (to the Station at least) at half past 10 – We had a wet passage across but not at all a rough one; I was not ill, nor, was either of my friends; the rain went off before we got to Boulogne & it is a glorious night – the 5 o'clock train did not stop at Abbeville, so we had to wait till the 8.15 train which was a slow one; we went 3rd class, which is pleasant enough here. We walked from the station to our inn though it was so late, & it is more than a mile & of course we knew nothing of the road; however we walked along a paved road with poplars on either side, till we came to the River Somme into which we nearly walked, but a railway porter showed us the way into the town, and at last by dint of asking the way, we found the Tete du Boeuf; wh: seems to be a good inn, we have got very good rooms at 5 francs. We caught a glimpse of the Big Church, it looks exceedingly splendid, a very mountain of wrought stone; I long for tomorrow morning; as far as we could see the country about the town is very pretty; but of course a beautiful starlight night does wonders – My best love to Emma & Joseph Henrietta the boys & all of them –

Your aff: Son, William

MS: Walthamstow

9    To Emma Shelton Morris

Rouen. Hotel de France
(Saturday Evening.)
Sunday. July 29 [1855]

My dear Mother

I suppose you will be expecting to hear of me by this time, so here is a dull account of what we have been doing since we landed; Abbeville has a very fine Church, though very unfinished, and the town itself is very old and full of exceedingly good houses; we were all three in exstasies there; we left Abbeville about midday the next day (Friday) and got to Amiens in an hour or so, we stayed there till the next morning, being in the Church nearly all the time; my friends were utterly taken aback at the grandeur of the French Churches and have remained in that state ever since; we got on the Saturday we went first by train to Clermont, and thence walked back 1 to Beauvais, (about 17 miles) we reached that town about 5 o clock in the evening having had a splendid walk through the lovely country, a very flower garden it is at this time of the year; I was rather knocked up by the walk, in consequence of having to wear my slippers, for the shoes I brought with me I could not wear at all: I think I like Beauvais Cathedral better than Amiens; the apse of Beauvais must be the finest in the world; well we stayed there till the Sunday Evening, when we went back to Clermont by diligence and got to Paris by half past 11 o'clock; we stayed at Paris Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday; and saw there the Beaux Arts department of the Exhibition, which was very well worth seeing for the English pictures therein and for nothing else; we stayed there about 7 hours on one day. We saw too the Picture Gallery in the Louvre; Notre Dame & some half dozen other Churches, including the Sainte Chapelle, & besides that, the Hotel de Cluny; nothing else, though we worked hard at sight seeing for at least 12 hours a day, doing a great deal of walking; I don’t quite like Paris yet, though my friends are delighted with it: we left Paris on the Wednesday Evening, and got to Chartres about 10 and a half o’clock, and stayed there all the next day Thursday, enjoying ourselves immensely over its quaint streets

1 Amended, on grounds of geography, from <by?> in Kelvin’s edition.
and gorgeous Churches; on the Friday morning early, we took train back to Maintenon (‘tis a very little way). From Maintenon to Dreux by a very quaint nondescript public conveyance, Dreux is a very quaint old town with a fine church; from Dreux to a place with an unpronounceable name Bouelil, by the same conveyance; from Bouelil to Evreux by a railway, it is only a half hour’s ride, we had a very short time at Evreux to our grief for seeing the beautiful Cathedral there, and then had to go on by a similar nondescript conveyance to Louviers; by the way this same conveyance is a thing with an open couple holding three, and a rotonde holding 4. Louviers has a very rich, and beautiful, though (for France) small Church; well from Louviers we went for a few miles by omnibus to Louviers S. Pierre where we met the Rouen railway, and got to Rouen by 8 and a half P.M. this was much better we thought than having to go back to Paris and lose a day in railway travelling; for we fairly enjoyed this journey (wh: took us in all about 15 hours and cost about 9s a piece) travelling through a most beautiful country, (no Lowland country I ever saw equals the valley in wh: Louviers lies) seeing too 3 picturesque old towns each with its lovely Church; it was quite delightful, I have seldom enjoyed a day so much; the railway took us little more than an hour in all.

Well here we are in Rouen, glorious Rouen; yesterday we went about the Churches; mounted to the top of the view spire (360 ft.) Such a view from there. Went all about the roof and Lantern of S. Ouen; heard vespers at Notre Dame, and finally after dinner mounted Mont S. Catherine and wandered about there till it was quite dark.

Well we have had a glorious time of it, working desperately hard; my two friends have been in a state of ecstasy since we landed, and for the matter of that so have I. The weather has been just what we could have wished; we hope to be able to stay out another fortnight. I musn’t write any more or it will be over weight – Best love to all

Your affectionate Son
William

(The pen is very bad)

MS: Walthamstow, Extract published CW, 1, xxxii.

10 To Emma Shelton Morris

Hotel de France,
Coutances, Normandy,
August 7, 1855

My dear Mother

We left Rouen on the Wednesday morning, & being disappointed of the Havre boat (wh: doesn’t begin to run till later in the year went on foot to Caudebec, we had a glorious walk but it was rather too far perhaps for one day’s tramp, being 23 miles, we were all three a good deal knocked up, (you know I have very bad shoes for walking or I could have done it easily) and we could not well walk the next day so we went by a diligence to Yvetot & by railway from Yvetot to Havre; and by the way as a rather remarkable fact, I might tell you that we paid the sum of one penny sterling for our ride from Caudebec, to Yvetot a distance of 10 miles; we slept at Havre the Thursday night, and went on the Friday morning to Caen by steamer over a very smooth sea; Caen is a fine place, but I was never the less disappointed therewith as I had heard so much of it but I was not disappointed with S. Etienne in that town, which is a splendid Church; we left Caen on Saturday afternoon by diligence for Bayeux, slept there on Saturday Evening, and saw the Cathedral wh: is a very good one, and the tapestry on the Sunday, but as they were repairing the choir and transepts, we could not, in spite of our strenuous efforts get into that part of the Church much to our disgust; the tapestry is very quaint and rude, & very interesting. Well on the Monday morning we went on to Coutances stopping an hour or two at S. Lo where there is a fine Church; the Cathedral here is one of the finest we have seen, built almost uniformly in a style like our Early English, very plain but very beautiful; there are two fine Churches here besides; the town is built mostly of granite, and lies up a steep hill overlooking a very pretty country, very
English in its look, much like Clay Cross without the Chimneys. We go on tomorrow by diligence to Avranches from whence we shall see Mont-St-Michel, & there alas! alas! will end our French tour, for we shall go back to Granville on the Saturday evening, & start from Granville for Jersey on the Sunday morning (at 11 o'clock just when you are all in Church) and I suppose the Monday or Tuesday following will see me at Walthamstow, in a very seedy condition as to my clothes, for my coat is a beautiful russet brown where the sun has caught it, & my beautiful violet ribbon, had become so seedy that I was obliged to throw it away at Caudebec, and no words can describe the seediness of my dusty hat; then my shoes. Of my shoes! I was obliged to buy a pair of cloth boots at Paris, (boots like you wear, you know) because those shoes I took with me had made my corns so bad, well they were not good things to walk in, but they were the only things I could wear, and I hope they will hold together till I come home, but I don’t think they will, they have been patched twice at the sides, and now the heels are coming off, and today I took them to a cobblers, there were 3 men and a boy there. I said when I had taken off my boot (in French of course) ‘can you mend my boot if you please’ and made a face expecting what the answer would be, well they laid their heads together and presently they (or rather one of them) said, ‘Monsieur we cannot mend it’ — so I went away — Well, I can’t tell you when I shall be at home as I don’t quite know whether we shall be obliged to sleep at Jersey or not, if I can find out before leaving Avranches I will write and tell you — It is, I am happy to say, just dinner time, so good bye. Give my best love to all —

Your Affectionate Son
William


11 To Cornell Price Avranches, Normandy August 10, 1855

Dearest Crom

I haven’t quite forgotten you yet, though I have been so long writing, but the fact is, I am quite uncomfortable even now about writing a letter to you, for I don’t know what to say; I suppose you won’t be satisfied with the names merely of the places we have been to; and I scarcely think I can give you anything else. Why couldn’t you come, Crom? Of the glories of the Churches we have seen! for we have seen the last of them now, we finished up with Mont S. Michel yesterday and we are waiting here (which is a very beautiful place however) till Saturday evening or Sunday morning when we shall go back to Granville and take steamer for Jersey and Southampton. Crom, we have seen nine Cathedrals, and let me see how many non-Cathedral Churches; I must count them on my fingers; there, I think I have missed some but I have made out 24 all splendid Churches; some of them surpassing first-rate English Cathedrals.

I am glad that Fulford has lightened my load a little bit, by telling you what we did as far as Chartres: so I won’t begin till after we left that place: Well, Crom, you must know that we had thought that we should be forced to go back to Paris to get to Rouen and that we should be obliged to go by railway all the way, which grew so distasteful to us after a bit, that we made efforts, and found that we could get across the country with very little railway indeed; so we went; I enjoyed the journey very much, and so did the others I think, though Ted’s eyes were bad, as they have been all the time whenever the sun has been out; we went the greater part of the way in a queer little contrivance with one horse the greater part of the way. Behold our itinerary. We started from Chartres quite early (six o’clock) with drizzling rain that almost hid the spires of the Cathedral, how splendid they looked in the midst of it! but we were obliged to leave them, and the beautiful statues, and the stained glass, and the great, cliff-like buttresses, for quite a long time I’m afraid – so we went for about 20 miles by railroad to a place called Maintenon, where we mounted the quaint little conveyance and went off, with the rain still falling a little, through the beautiful country to Dreuix; for a distance of about 17 miles; there was plenty to look at by the road, I almost think I like that part of the country better than any other part of the lovely country we have seen in France; so gloriously the trees are grouped, all manner of trees, but more especially the graceful poplars and aspens, of all kinds; and the hedgeless
fields of grain, and beautiful herbs that they grow for forage whose names I don’t know, the most beautiful fields I ever saw yet, looking as if they belonged to no man, as if they were planted not to be cut down in the end, and to be stored in barns and eaten by the cattle, but that rather they were planted for their beauty only, that they might grow always among the trees, mingled with the flowers, purple thistles, and blue corn-flowers, and red poppies, growing together with the corn round the roots of the fruit trees, in their shadows, and sweeping up to the boughs of the long low hills till they reached the sky, changing sometimes into long fields of vines, or delicate, lush green forage; and they all looked as they would grow there for ever, as if they had always grown there, without change of seasons, knowing no other time than the early August. So we went on through this kind of country till we came to Dreux, and the rain had cleared up long before we reached it, and it was a bright sunny day. Some distance from Dreux the country changed very much into what I will tell you afterwards, but a great part of Picardy and the Isle of France seemed to be a good deal the same kind of country, and the land between Rouen and Caudebec, along the side of the Seine, was much like this, so much so, that I think I had it in my mind a good deal just now; perhaps it is even lovelier than this, the hills are much higher, but I scarcely think the flowers are so rich, or perhaps, when we went through it, the flowers had gone off a good deal. Well, we had to stop at Dreux about an hour and we saw the church there, a very good one, flamboyant mostly, but with an earlier apse very evily used, and with a transept front very elaborately carved once, now very forlorn and battered, but (Deo gratias) not yet restored: there is a delightful old secular tower at Dreux too, that is flamboyant also, with a roof like the side of a cliff, it is so steep. So we left Dreux, and set our faces as though we would go to Evreux; we were obliged to undergo about half an hour’s ride in the railway before we got there, to my intense indignation. We had only a very short time to stay at Evreux, and even that short time we had to divide (alas! for our Lower Nature) between eating our dinner and gazing on the gorgeous Cathedral: it is an exceedingly lovely one, though not nearly so large as most of the Cathedrals we saw, the aisles are very rich flamboyant, with a great deal of light canopy work about them; the rest of the Church is earlier, the nave being Norman, and the choir fully developed early Gothic; though the transepts and lantern are flamboyant also by the way: there is a great deal of good stained glass about the Church. When we left Evreux we found that the country had changed altogether, getting much more hilly, almost as glorious in its way as the other land perhaps, but very different; for it is a succession of quite flat valleys surrounded on all sides by hills of very decent height with openings in them to let out the river, the valleys are very well wooded, and the fields a good deal like the other ones I have described, quite without hedges, and with fruit-trees growing all about them; so we kept going on, first winding up a long hill, then on a table land for a greater or less time, then down into the glorious lake-like valley, till at last we got to Louviers; there is a splendid church there, though it is not a large one; the outside has a kind of mask of the most gorgeous flamboyant (though late) thrown all over it, with such parasets and windows, it is so gorgeous and light, that I was utterly unprepared for the inside, and almost startled by it; so solemn it looked and calm after the fierce flamboyant of the outside; for all the interior, except the Chapels, is quite early Gothic and very beautiful; I have never, either before or since, been so much struck with the difference between the early and late Gothic, and by the greater nobleness of the former. So after we had looked at the Church for a little time we mounted the omnibus to go to the railway station where we were to take train to Rouen — it was about 5 miles I should think from Louviers to the station. What a glorious ride that was, with the sun, which was getting low by that time, striking all across the valley that Louviers lies in; I think that valley was the most glorious of all we saw that day, there was not much grain there, it was nearly all grass land and the trees, O! the trees! it was all like the country in a beautiful poem, in a beautiful Romance such as might make a background to Chaucer’s Palamon and Arcite; how we could see the valley winding away along the side of the Eure a long way, under the hills: but we had to leave it and go to Rouen by a nasty, brimstone, noisy, shrinking railway train that cares not twopence for hill or valley, poplar tree or lime tree, corn poppy or blue cornflower, or purple thistle and purple vetch, white convolvulus, white cleomatis, or golden St. John’s wort; that cares not twopence either for tower, or spire, or apse, or dome, till it will be as noisy and obtrusive under the spires of Chartres or the towers of Rouen, as it is [under] Versailles or the Dome of the Invalides; verily railways are ABOMINATIONS; and I think I have never fairly realised this fact till this our tour: fancy, Crom, all the roads (or nearly) all that come into Rouen did down into the valley where it lies, from gorgeous hills which command the most splendid views of Rouen, but we, coming into Rouen by railway, crept into it in the most seedy way, seeing actually nothing at all of it till we were driving through the town
in an omnibus.

I had some kind of misgivings that I might be disappointed with Rouen, after my remembrances of it from last year; but I wasn't a bit. Of what a place it is. I think Ted liked the Cathedral, on the whole, better than any other church we saw. We were disappointed in one thing, however, we had expected Vespers every afternoon, we found they were only sung in that diocese on Saturday and Sunday. And weren't they sung, just. Oh! my word! on the Sunday especially, when a great deal of the psalms were sung to the Peregrine tone, and then, didn't they sing the hymns!

I bought The Newcomes² at Rouen, Tauchnitz edition, it is a splendid book. Well Crom, I can't write any more, I am fairly run down; I am tired too, and have got to pack up as well, which is always somewhat of a bore; when I see you (which I hope will be soon) I will tell you about the rest. Ah me! if only you had been here, how I have longed for you! so very, very much. This is a scedy letter to send to such a fellow as you are, Crom, please forgive me, and be jolly when I see you. Shall I see you at Birmingham?

Your most loving
Topsy.


² Thackeray's novel first appeared serially between 1853 and 1855 and was published in book form in London and Leipzig 1854-1855.
THE THEORY OF FRENCH GOTHIC

(i) The poetry of architecture

'We took a volume of Keats with us, and no other book'

Edward Burne-Jones, quoted in Mackail (174)

In trying to establish what our three travellers thought about the buildings which they saw, we can only rely on hints in Morris's letters and on the recollections of their friends of that time at Oxford. Their thoughts about architecture, and their conceptions of the Gothic style, were inevitably those of their age, however much they were modified by their own personalities and special interests. A naked encounter with a cathedral - what an indecorous thought! - is impossible to imagine; on the other hand they were not totally weighed down with tracts or encumbered with guide-books. There are limits to what one can carry on a walking-tour, as Burne-Jones so helpfully indicates.

Though Keats' poetry had been published during his life-time, it had been considered unnecessarily obscure. For a long time his work was not much read, though one must except practising poets such as Tennyson from that generalisation. It was in the 1840s that, following the publication of his life by Monckton Milnes, Keats became widely fashionable; a book could well be written on his influence on the paintings and the theories of the Pre-Raphaelites. The word-paintings of French scenery - the 'lush green forage' and 'the hedgeless fields of grain', all somehow frozen into an eternal moment - which Morris put into his letter to Cornnell Price (Letter No. 11), seem to owe a great deal to similar descriptions of Nature in Endymion and the ode 'To Autumn'; but Keats is also the poet of architecture, and many of his word-pictures parallel Regency buildings or Romantic paintings of ruins. The gaudy palace of Lania comes to mind, and also the palace of the sun-god in Hyperion, which seems to have been designed by John Martin. The same poem contains the

dismal cirque
Of Druid stones, upon a forlorn moor,
When the chill rain begins at shut of eve,
In dull November, and their chancel vault,
The Heaven itself, is blinded throughout night. \(\text{(II 34-8)}\)

'Chancel vault' is nice. In the revision of the poem, The Fall of Hyperion, Keats builds a cathedral higher than anything in the real world:

I look'd around upon the carved sides
Of an old sanctuary with roof august,
Built so high, it seem'd that filled clouds
Might spread beneath, as o'er the stars of heaven; \(\text{(61 ff.)}\)

The poem continues with an interesting anticipation of the church furniture of the later nineteenth century Aesthetic Movement:

Store of strange vessels, and large draperies...
Robes, golden tongs, censer, and chafing dish,
Girdles, and chains, and holy jewelries. \(\text{(73 ff.)}\)

Then the poet embarkds on a truly architectural investigation of the 'cathedral':

once more I rais'd
My eyes to fathom the space every way;
The embossed roof, the silent massy range
Of columns north and south... \(\text{(81 ff.)}\)

Within these surroundings the poet expects to find, and is given, a revelation of the meaning of human history.
Even if this passage of Keats had not come their way, Morris and Burne-Jones would have known of the Gothic ‘casement high and triple-arched’ in The Eve of St Agnes, a poem much illustrated by the Pre-Raphaelites. In its less-famous companion-piece, The Eve of St Mark, Bertha reads in her wondrous illuminated book until she comes upon the legend of the saint, and

his holy shrine
Exalt amid the taperers’ shine
At Venice, —

Here the links between poetry and architecture pre-figure the work of John Ruskin, who compared the cathedral of St Mark’s to a missal, and who drew a building in order ‘to eat it all up into my mind, touch by touch’ (letter of 1852). This shows a thoroughly Keatsian sensibility, and we are not surprised to discover that Ruskin’s first articles were written on ‘The Poetry of Architecture’ (1837-8).

(ii) Ruskin

It was when the Exeter men, Burne-Jones and he [Morris], got at Ruskin, that strong direction was given to a true vocation – ‘The Seven Lamps,’ ‘Modern Painters,’ and ‘The Stones of Venice.’

Canon Dixon is describing the winter of 1854-5; of all the varied reading which he mentions, Ruskin must be seen as the main theoretical influence on Morris and Burne-Jones. The Seven Lamps of Architecture was based on the journey which Ruskin made through Normandy in 1848; we have already quoted his (and Effie’s) letters in describing the route which our travellers followed, and it would be reasonable to assume that they chose to visit certain churches, e.g. St-Lô, because Ruskin mentioned them. Ruskin, writing in the infancy of architectural criticism, repeatedly states that poetry and architecture are related, but the main emphasis of the book lies in the application of ethical standards to the appreciation of buildings.

The Stones of Venice is central to our understanding of Morris and Burne-Jones’ view of the cathedrals. It is impossible to summarise the argument of the whole book, which is notorious for its confusion — and, of course, not all of it had been published in 1855. It veers from sound perceptions, supported by detailed drawing, to wild yet important-sounding statements about the relation of art to life; many of these have been challenged or ignored by later generations, but there is a sense in which, as Tolstoy felt, Ruskin defines the discussion in which others must take up their position. In particular, the chapter on ‘The Nature of Gothic’ leads inexorably to the social programme which the later Morris devoted his life to expounding: ‘to some of us when we first read it, now many years ago, it seemed to point out a new road on which the world should travel.’ (Introduction to the Kelmscott Press edition, 1892.)

Ruskin focuses his attention upon the men who built the medieval cathedrals, and contrasts their pleasure and fulfilment in their labour with the degradation of the wage-slaves of nineteenth-century industrial processes; the climax of his exhortation — ‘go forth again to gaze upon the old cathedral front’ is printed as the epigraph to this essay. It is not an argument which one can prove or disprove, though some of the statements about the medieval labourers are factually incorrect; it is simply a series of assertions. Nevertheless, it is this chapter, above all else, that answers our original question, that makes the study of Gothic cathedrals — for the youth of 1855 — a worthwhile alternative to service in the Crimean War.

Even though Unravu and other recent critics of Ruskin see him as a kind of poet — in, for example, such sentences as the following:
It is that strange *disquietude* of the Gothic spirit that is its greatness; that restlessness of the dreaming mind, that wanders hither and thither among the niches, and flickers feverishly around the pinnacles, and frets and fades in labyrinthine knots and shadows along wall and roof, and yet is not satisfied, nor shall be satisfied.

‘The Nature of Gothic’ § 40 -
this is to remove him from his subject-matter into a kind of transcendental vagueness. There is also the counter-tendency - on which Unrav’s whole book is based - to engage with things, to investigate the minute particulars of buildings, to make people look - 'go forth again to gape ... examine once more those ugly gobins.' Finally, at the end of 'The Nature of Gothic' he requests the spectator to read the sculpture of buildings like a book, which is exactly what Morris will do when he comes to write ‘Shadows of Amiens’.

(iii) The Thirteenth Century

... at last we got to Louviers; there is a splendid church there, though it is not a large one; the outside has a mask of the most gorgeous flamboyant (though late) thrown all over it, with such pampets and windows, it is so gorgeous and light, that I was utterly unprepared for the inside, and almost startled by it; so solemn it looked and calm after the fierce flamboyant of the outside; for all the interior, except the Chapels, is quite early Gothic and very beautiful; I have never, either before or since, been so much struck with the difference between the early and late Gothic, and by the greater nobleness of the former.

William Morris - Letter No. 11 [my italics].

It is easy to forget what rapid progress had been made in the first half of the nineteenth century in sorting out the styles and dates of Gothic architecture. Having named the styles, it was considered by the early Victorians that the Decorated was the best form of Gothic, especially for use in modern churches; certainly this was the style preferred by the Camden Society and propagated by Gilbert Scott in the 1840s. By 1850, however, the thirteenth century - Early English or Early French - was coming into favour.

As an ‘archaeologist’ Morris would have been fully aware of these distinctions before his journey to France, but it is nice to see the moment of actual realisation of his own preference recorded in the passage quoted above; and Mackail tells us of Morris’s ‘lifelong passion, that for the thirteenth century in all its works and ways.’ (i, 41). Many of the cathedrals and churches which our travellers saw are those recommended later by Burges and Street (Burges 121). By the end of the 1860s it was generally agreed that French Gothic was to be preferred to English Gothic in the thirteenth century, though the taste of English architects soon began to swing in the other direction.

I am not, therefore, claiming that Morris was ahead of his contemporaries; it is just that he exemplifies a moment in the history of taste, a moment signalled by Ruskin in the preface to the Second Edition of The Seven Lamps of Architecture, (1855):

I have now no doubt that the only style for modern Northern work, is the Northern Gothic of the thirteenth century, as exemplified in England, pre-eminently by the cathedrals of Lincoln and Wells, and in France by those of Paris, Amiens, Chartres, etc.

Somewhere behind all this is the ‘evolutionary model’ that imposes itself upon so much nineteenth century thought; like vegetables, or like the Roman Empire, things inevitably ‘rise, decline, and fall’. One had to pick the moment when the Gothic style had not yet begun to show symptoms of decay. Ruskin’s *doctrinaire* statement is of a piece with his repudiation of St Wulfram’s, Abbéville, in *The Stones of Venice*, as ‘linear Gothic’, showing the final stages of the style. But the implications of this were that one should restore a much-altered building to what it looked like in its best period.
(iv) Restoration

Well, we had to stop at Dreux about an hour and we saw the church there, a very good one, flamboyant mostly, but with an earlier apse very evilly used, and with a transept front very elaborately carved once, now very forlorn and battered, but (Deo gratias) not yet restored...

William Morris - Letter No. 11 [my italics].

As a consequence of this worship of la treizième, just at the time that Morris and his friends were touring France, Viollet-le-Duc was restoring whole buildings back to their thirteenth-century appearance. We have seen how, because of the wholesale demolition that this involved, Morris was anxious to steer his friends away from that architect's treatment of Notre-Dame, and it is somewhat surprising that they rushed to see the Sainte Chapelle, for there, too, Viollet-le-Duc was in charge of restoration: later he was to say

To restore a building is not just to preserve it, to repair it, and to remodel it, it is to re-instate it in a complete state such as it may never have been in at any given moment.


In this the English differed widely from the continentals, though of course there are many examples of conjectural restoration in this country. Ruskin hammered home his message again and again, lamenting in later editions of The Stones of Venice "things now never to be seen more", and of course it was Morris, who, in 1877, having noted that it was 'nothing less than the Minister of Tewkesbury that is to be destroyed by Sir Gilbert Scott', went on to found the Society for Protection of Ancient Buildings. While all this is a long way in the future from the point of view of 1855, it is important to see Morris at this time already conscious of what had and what had not been restored!

(v) Pater and modern ideas of French Gothic

To the modern spirit nothing is, or can rightly be known except relatively under conditions.

Walter Pater, 'Coleridge' in Appreciations.

Paul Frankl, in his great collection of references to and discussion of ideas about The Gothic, is pretty scathing about Ruskin and Ruskin-derived accounts of the style; it is surprising that Ruskin even makes his way into the Index. However, Morris's socialism is discussed at some length. As time has gone by, we have come to know far more factual information about the way in which the great churches were built. There is no reason to suppose the builders to have been 'savage' and they seem to have been well organised. New theories of construction, to be seen in the work of John James, for example, make the builders into mathematical thinkers of a very high order.

There has also been a considerable shift, since 1855, in our aesthetic perception. I merely want to signal that it was Walter Pater, the contemporary of Morris and Burne-Jones, who removed the heat from the discussion and enabled a new kind of art-criticism to emerge. Though in some ways he is as dated as Ruskin, he is the first modern critic. It was Pater who demolished the High Victorians' earnest desire to find the meaning of life in this area of experience, and substituted the 'hard gemilike flame' and 'the love of art for art's sake'. Though they now stand as the Conclusion to The Renaissance, these words first appeared in 1868 in a review of William Morris's poems. I think that Pater was right to see these 'aesthetic attitudes' already present in Morris's work, and I also think we can see them in many of the comments and phrases of the 1855 letters, in particular in those Keatsian passages of landscape description already referred to, and in some of the prose which we shall be looking at in the next section. However charged with Ruskinian earnestness Morris later became, at this stage he is stimulated by the beauty of these 'gorgeous' and 'splendid' churches as much as by their social message. In all this one does not blame Morris for once again anticipating the drift of so much later artistic theory (you could say
it is all in Keats, anyway); as in Tennyson's "The Palace of Art", he was prepared to allow his soul to explore the Palace, before having to reject the beautiful in favour of social concern. For Burne-Jones, on the other hand, the break is total; out of the window for good go any last hankenings after religious certainty or patriotic sacrifice. The Crimean War ceases to be of any importance—"we would begin a life of art."

AFTERWARDS

(i) The 1850s

"And what were they going to do with the Grail when they found it, Mr Rossetti?"

Jowett to Rossetti in a cartoon by Max Beerbohm.

The immediate response of Morris and Burne-Jones to the experiences of their holiday can only be described as extremely euphoric—"ecstatic" was Morris's most frequent way of describing their state of mind. Whatever medieval France had done, they too could do it: they would not be able to beat it, but they would join it, be on its side against the world. Whatever these great Churches of North France represented—not only,—and it's a significant omission, their religion— they would now devote their lives to proclaiming and propagating. As Mackail so unforgettably put it:

Walking together on the quays of Havre late into the August night, Morris and Burne-Jones at last took the definite decision to be artists and to postpone everything in this world to art. (t:80)

Burne-Jones would become an artist, Morris an architect. Later on, but not yet, Morris would have to explain all this to his mother.

As Mackail points out (t:86) Morris's letter of 11 November 1855 (Letter No. 14) with its anxious plea to the wounded parent bears some resemblance to the situation of Clive Newcome in Thackeray's novel ("I bought The Newcomes at Rouen ... it is a splendid book."

Letter No. 11). The novel discusses, among other things, the socially unacceptable role of the artist: upper-class attitudes are spelt out and dramatised throughout the book, even though Clive's choice of career comes to be supported by his father. In his long review of the novel in the Oxford and Cambridge Magazine, January 1856, Burne-Jones develops this point:

There is one more great social problem [besides marriage] ... set forth ... that episode in Clive's life where he makes known to his father the desire of his heart to become a painter, and dedicate his life to that end. ... the good Colonel ... cannot be brought to see it with the eyes of his son. Can understand him adopting it for amusement's sake ... but to be a painter by profession—to live by the labour of his hands so, this he cannot comprehend, this society and immaculate respectability cannot endure."

Burne-Jones is verbose, but what a world is brought back into view with 'immaculate respectability' and the threat of 'to live by the labour of his hands.'

Burne-Jones did go on to become a painter by profession, but since his father was a picture-framer and of little account in his life, one cannot really apply all this to his own case. Morris, on the other hand, was constrained by fortune and his family's social expectations: his decision to become an architect was, at one and the same time, a bold kicking over the traces and a compromise. After all, Morris did go one step further and became a painter in the late 1850s; though Mackail (t:81) does his very best to reassure us about Morris's relationship to architecture throughout his life, the actual choice of career in 1855 may well be regarded as a respectable version of 'artist' in order to placate his mother.

Yet, one might answer, an admirer of French Gothic would surely go straight into that profession where the very form of his favourite buildings was being revived, and the choice of George
Edmund Street as the architect to whom Morris wished to be articulated seems to be another decision which may have been brought about by the holiday in France. Street was an energetic Gothic Revivalist with a practice based in Oxford; Morris would have noticed him at meetings of the Oxford Plaistow Society. Now plain song — that is a very important indicator: ’A man may be judged by his feelings on Plain Chant’ said Pugin (Burges p. 23). Street had first crossed the Channel in 1850 at the age of 26, had visited the Northern French cathedrals and particularly admired their height — ’in September 1850 ... in 10 days he saw Paris, Chartres, Aisne, Lié, Rouen and Amiens, sketching all the time with might and main’ (Unpublished Notes, ed. C.G. King 1916). In 1855 he published Brick and Marble in the Middle Ages with accounts of travels in France and Italy which I have already quoted from; his then unpublished journals describe churches and cathedrals in Rouen and the lle de France. Morris was articulated to Street on 21 January 1856, shortly after taking his degree: in the autumn of 1856 he went to Lille and St-Omer with Street [the biographies of Street insist that this was the autumn of 1855, but there may have been two similar journeys and Morris was not likely to have been available while preparing for his examination: ] So Street and Morris, in spite of contrary implications in Mackail, shared similar tastes and liked the same churches; as Burges observed, Street was ‘a thirteenth century man.’ (p. 121).

Nevertheless, Morris only stayed with Street for nine months or so. He moved to London when Street moved his practice there in 1856 and shared digs with Burne-Jones. I do not propose to follow their story any further, since it is largely to be seen from this point as coming under the influence of D.G. Rossetti, except to make one last observation. Everybody knows that when they lived in Red Lion Square they had to make their own furniture, or rather it was made for them by a carpenter to their own designs. But what did they do next? They painted it.

This dramatic break with the whole tradition of English furniture design may have had many sources, but one may have been the memory of what they had seen on their French holiday. In 1856 Viollet-le-Duc published an engraving of an armoirre to be seen in the museum at Bayeux (Burges, plate 181), and it is tempting to see this as an example of direct influence.

(ii) The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine

Though The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine had been planned before the trip to France its final shape and editorial policy were only arrived at after their visit: the whole enterprise is far more earnest than is often supposed. Besides Burne-Jones’s review of The Newcomes, already mentioned, the early numbers contain three pieces which relate directly to experiences of Northern France.

‘The Story of the Unknown Church’ is a tour-de-force by Morris, anticipating so much of the symbolic work of the later nineteenth century. With its strange dream-sequences it resembles his other early stories, and is usually thought to have been in existence before July 1855, though it may have been revised before publication in January 1856. It may therefore be related in the first instance to what Morris had seen on his first journey to France in 1854, but reinforced by later impressions during the walking-tour with Burne-Jones. The style resembles that of the letter to Cornell Price (No. 11), e.g.

I said that nothing grew on the trellises by the poplars but crimson roses, but I was not quite right, for in many places the wild flowers had crept into the garden from without; lush green briony, with green-white blossoms, that grows so fast, one could almost think that we see it grow, and deadly night-shade, La bella donna, O! so beautiful...

and the church itself resembles Amiens. There are several references to sculpture mentioned in ‘Shadows of Amiens’, and on the West Front there are ‘little quatrefoils that carry the signs of the zodiac and emblems of the months.’ On the other hand the situation of the church, as May Morris points out in the introduction to Volume 1 of the Collected Works, could easily be that of Chartres ‘above the “great golden corn sea” of the Beauce.’ The fact that the story takes place exactly 600 years ago shows that we are in the thirteenth century.
'A night in a Cathedral' is a much inferior story, which has always been assumed to be by William Fulford until quite recently. It is very close to what actually occurred at Amiens, beginning with a circumstantial account of a visit to a cathedral before and after dinner. It grows late, and the narrator finds that he is locked in for the night. Childish night-fears are evoked, but neither the horrors nor the architectural detail bear comparison with Morris's best work at this time.

Morris had great difficulty in composing the third of these pieces: 'it has cost me more trouble than anything I have written yet; I ground at it the other night from nine o'clock till half-past four a.m., when the lamp went out, and I had to creep upstairs to bed through the great dark house like a thief' (Letter No. 15). It is entitled 'The Churches of North France No. 1. - Shadows of Amiens', though it was never followed up with Nos 2, 3, etc. It is an unusual example of Morris attempting to write art criticism, and often rises into rhapsody over the building and its sculpture. The first three paragraphs, exact in their reference to Morris's two visits to France, and breathing the same atmosphere as that of 'The Story of the Unknown Church', have often been anthologised:

Not long ago I saw for the first time some of the churches of North France; still more recently I saw them for the second time; and, remembering the love I have for them and the longing that was in me to see them, during the time that came between the first and second visit, I thought I should like to tell people of some of those things I felt when I was there;—there among those mighty tombs of the long-dead ages.

And I thought that even if I could say nothing else about these grand churches, I could at least tell men how much I loved them; so that, though they might laugh at me for my foolish and confused words, they might yet be moved to see what there was that made me speak of my love, though I could give no reason for it.

For I will say here that I think those same churches of North France the grandest, the most beautiful, the kindest and most loving of all the buildings that the earth has ever borne: and, thinking of their past-away builders, can I see through them, very faintly, dimly, some little of the medieval times, else dead, and gone from me for ever, — voiceless for ever.

In appreciation of the architecture which follows, we are first invited — in imagination — to view the West Front from somewhere high up: 'if you were to mount one of the steeples of the town...' and we are led up to the spire over the crossing, which is transformed into a symbolic history of the entire building:

Once it was gilt all over, and used to shine out there, getting duller and duller, as the bad years grew worse and worse; but all the gold is gone now...

This is an interesting anticipation of Oscar Wilde's story of 'The Happy Prince'!

What we remark most, though is Morris's boisterous enjoyment of the interior of the building:

I think I felt inclined to shout when I first entered Amiens cathedral; it is so free and vast and noble, I did not feel in the least awe-struck, or humbled by its size and grandeur.

However he is quite intolerant of anything later than the early sixteenth century in his appreciation of the interior decoration, and particularly scathing about the chapter's decision to white-wash the building throughout in 1771: this totally obliterated the paintings and all the colour inside.

He describes the sculpture from photographs; on the one hand, you could say that he doesn't know how to use these except as a stimulus to rhetorical dreaming; but he is capable of using words like iconography, and in discussing the Virgin and Child in the centre of the South door of the West Front he can cross-ref almost learnedly to 'what Lord Lindsay says concerning the
inability of Giotto and his school to paint young children. He writes at great length about other sculpture on the West Front, including the figure of Abraham with the souls enfolded in his robe, a figure which he imagines his hero carving in 'The Story of the Unknown Church'. The article concludes in a circular fashion, like one of his stories too, bringing us back to say

Farewell to the spire, gilt all over with gold once, and shining out there,
very gloriously; dull and grey now, alas: ...
It is fair still, though the gold is gone, the spire that seems to rock, when
across it, in the wild February nights, the clouds go westward.

This last phrase reminds us too of

Westward the banner rolls
Over my wrong.

('In Prison')

Though it would be a fascinating exercise to explore the poems Morris wrote at this time, set in an idealised medieval world, I think it would be impossible to find any exact reference to France. Similarly in early paintings and drawings by Burne-Jones I think we can only point to the castle, the open fields, and the windmills in the background of Going to the Battle (1858) for anything approximating to the scenery of Northern France.

(iii) Later recall

It is important to be specific here or we shall be lost. All their lives Morris and Burne-Jones were influenced by medieval buildings, books and imagery, and all this could be related to their early tour of France. Equally it could not. All I wish to establish is how often they referred back to this holiday, and in what way they recalled it in later years. There is considerable divergence between them here.

For example, Morris frequently revisited the area, Burne-Jones never, so far as I can tell. One explanation is Morris’s greater economic power, at any rate in the early years, but this doesn’t account for the difference entirely. Morris went back again and again in the 1850s, but then, apart from visits to Paris, there is a long gap until the 1890s. These visits are perhaps worth tabulating, as the dates are not always in agreement in standard works:

1854 Long vacation. With sister Henrietta to the Low Countries and Rouen, Chartres, Beauvais, Amiens, and Paris (Louvre and Musée de Cluny).
1855 Long vacation. The journey discussed here.
1856 Autumn. With Street to Low Countries, Lille and St-Omer.
(ii) October. Returns to collect armour and MSS, etc., for new house.
1859 Spring. Wedding tour of Paris, Belgium and Rhineland.
   Apart from visiting Paris on the way to other places, or for business reasons there is nothing except for a visit to France in 1866 with Warrington Taylor and Fulford listed by May Morris in her chronology, but not elsewhere.
1891 July/August. With Jenny to Abbeville (Tête de Boeuf), Amiens, Beauvais (‘after 33 years’: this time he mentions St Stephen’s as if well-known, and makes excursions to Gournay-en-Bray and St-Germer-de-Fly), Reims, Soissons and Laon. His letters are full of lively descriptions – see Henderson’s edition of The Letters of William Morris to his Family and Friends, pp. 340-7.
1892 November. With Janey to South of France, but has time to visit the Cluny Museum in Paris.

1896 July. Day-trip to Boulogne while staying at Folkestone.

Burne-Jones also made several later journeys to Paris, usually on the way to somewhere else. Though he did not go back, he encouraged Thomas Rooke to make detailed studies of Rouen Cathedral and ancient buildings in the city which he seemed to remember very well (see under 1895 in Burne-Jones Talking). Since we won't be referring to Burne-Jones again, let him sign off with his most famous account of their holiday, his reminiscence of Beauvais in a letter of c. 1892:

‘Do you know Beauvais, which is the most beautiful church in the world? I must see it again some day – one day I must. It is thirty-seven years since I saw it and I remember it all – and the processions – and the trombones – and the ancient singing – more beautiful than anything I had ever heard and I think I have never heard the like since. And the great organ that made the air tremble – and the greater organ that pealed out suddenly, and I thought the Day of Judgment had come – and the roof, and the long lights that are the most graceful things man has ever made.

‘What a day it was, and how alive I was, and young – and a blue dragon-fly stood still in the air so long that I could have painted him. Oh me, what fun it was to be young. Yes, if I took account of my life and the days in it that most went to make me, the Sunday at Beauvais would be the first day of creation.’

In the end, it is fair to say, Burne-Jones was more influenced by his later Italian tours than by the French holiday: in Morris’s case we ought to be able to find a few examples of direct influence or borrowing from French sources. In her book William Morris Textiles Linda Parry refers several times to the tapestries which they would have seen hanging in the cathedrals and at the Hotel de Cluny, and suggests that these would have given Morris the models which he later used in his own work in this field. In printing too there is some evidence that the carvings of scrolls and vines which he had seen on the doorways at Rouen and Beauvais cathedrals provided the designs for the backgrounds to initials.

In his lectures Morris refers several times to his first visit to France (i.e. 1854) and in recalling this – after a lapse of years – the emotions he calls into play may be understood to encompass in part his feelings of 1855 as well. In The Aims of Art he remembers how

Less than forty years ago – about thirty – I first saw the city of Rouen, then still in its outward aspect a piece of the Middle Ages: no words can tell you how its mingled beauty, history and romance took hold on me; I can only say that, looking back on my past life, I find it was the greatest pleasure I have ever had...

But the appearance of Rouen has altered, as has that of Oxford:

What is it, for instance, that has destroyed the Rouen, the Oxford of my elegant poetic regret?

It has been muddled away by the forces of money, greed and quick commercial returns. Rouen has become for Morris a central focus of his vision of the past.

Other references in the lectures are to more generalised pictures of the medieval period, e.g. in Art and Socialism:

Let us think of the mighty and lovely architecture ... of medieval Europe

and can hardly be cited as specific in their recall. In The Lesser Arts of Life, however, he does mention visiting the Gobelins factory in Paris in 1854. On 10th April 1891, according to Eugene Le Mire’s check-list of Morris’s lectures, he gave an extempore lantern-slide Lecture on English
and French Cathedrals, probably while preparing for his holiday in France that year: of this 'no text remains.'

Two final quotations in conclusion: in A Dream of John Ball a single sentence may recall Beauvais or Rouen. Of the marching-song at the end of Chapter Two we are told:

This time the melody was a piece of the plain-song of the church, familiar enough to me to bring back to my mind the great arches of some cathedral in France and the canons singing in the choir.

A more telling reflection, in a letter written to Georgiana Burne-Jones from Verona in 1878 (Letter No. 552), is concerned with both the passing of time, and also, in a Wordsworthian sense, with the quality and meaning of the experiences he underwent in France:

[Verona, May 16, 1878]

'Tis a piping hot day, not a cloud in the sky. I have just been into Sia. Anastasia, which is hard by: a very beautiful church, but appeals less to the heart than the head, and somehow don’t satisfy that: also though ‘tis meant to be exceedingly Gothic and pointed, it is thoroughly neo-classical in feeling. S. Zeno is not quite what I expected: ‘tis a round-arched Gothic church, just as S. Anastasia is a pointed-arched Renaissance one. I am more alive again, and really much excited at all I have seen and am seeing, though sometimes it all tumbles into a dream, and I do not know where I am. Many times I think of the first time I ever went abroad, and to Rouen, and what a wonder of glory that was to me when I first came upon the front of the Cathedral rising above the flower-market. It scarcely happens to me like that now, at least not with man’s work, though whiles it does with bits of the great world, like the Garda Lake the other day, or unexpected sudden sights of the mountains. Even the inside of St. Mark’s gave one rather deep satisfaction and rest for the eyes, than that strange exaltation of spirits, which I remember of old in France, and which the mountains give me yet.

For Morris, then, ‘a wonder of glory’; for Burne-Jones ‘the first day of creation’ — that French holiday, with all its multiple meanings and ecstatic visions, remained with them and continued to encapsulate the meaning of their lives, even as it had determined the direction they were to take.
CHECK-LIST

...to those fond of Gothic architecture...
Normandy will afford a rich treat.


This is an index of the places visited by Morris and his friends in 1855. It lists the cathedrals, churches and other features of the towns, and indicates what may be seen today. An * indicates that the church is recorded as having been seen by Morris; a [**] shows a church which it is reasonable to assume was on his itinerary. In his letter to Cornell Price (No. 11) Morris counts nine cathedrals; only eight are listed here, unless we include St-Lô, which was identified as a cathedral by other English visitors of the time. Twenty-four churches 'all splendid' may also be assembled from this check-list, but only about 11 are beyond doubt.

**ABBEVILLE, Somme**

Churches

1. *St Vulfran* [Wulfran]
   
   Built 1488-1539 in the Flamboyant style. There was much destruction in 1940; we are told that 'fire embraced the church for some days', so that little of the interior was left undamaged. Restoration is in progress.
   
   [An example of how we may get back to what Morris saw: Early photographs show the West Porch clearly with the original doors of 1550, and there is a sketch by Ruskin of the right-hand portal in the Collection of the Guild of St George, Sheffield. This was done in 1868. Six other drawings of the church are reproduced in Unrav.]

2. *St Gilles*

   The town was generally rebuilt after the Second World War.

**AMIENS, Somme**

*Cathedral de Notre Dame*

Built between 1220 and 1270, though the facade and towers were not finished until c. 1470. It is largely undamaged in spite of being in the battle-zone in two World Wars. Often considered to be the most rewarding of the Cathedrals to visit: the West front, with its three portals and rose window, is covered in sculpture, both with the larger figures of kings, apostles and prophets and also smaller scenes in quatrefoils. The nave is the highest in France, apart from Beauvais.

[See Morris's description in *Shadows of Amiens*. Ruskin, in The Bible of Amiens, recommended the view from the S. Interior transept.]

**AVRANCHES, Manche**

Morris mentions no churches here; the Basilica of St Gervais and St Protas and the other churches are modern. The Cathedral where Henry II did penance for the murder of St Thomas-a-Becket was pulled down in the 1790s and never rebuilt: the cleared space is known as 'la plate-forme', and in the corner is preserved one pillar of the former building together with a paving-stone where the king is alleged to have knelt. From this viewpoint one can see the Mont-St-
Michel, and it was from this town that, in Morris’s day, one made the excursion to the Mont via Genets and so across the sands.

BAYEUX, Calvados

Cathedral de Notre Dame *

The building shows Romanesque and Gothic features. The crypt (1077) has frescoes of musicians (XVth century) which would have appealed to Morris, one feels, if they were then visible. The nave has six Norman arches, and some forceful Romanesque sculpture: the choir is Gothic (1230-40).

[In the 1850s the central tower was unsafe; this was why Morris and his friends could not enter the East end of the building; in 1858 an engineer named Flachat devised a scheme for strengthening the pillars which held up the tower: he also added a curious “bonnet” which quite changed the appearance of the cathedral. Ruskin disliked the East end, but praised the West Front because, though its measurements didn’t match up, it illustrated “medieval symmetry”].

The Bayeux tapestry * is now displayed in a special building, and must be approached through preliminary slide-shows and cinematic exhibitions. All this is worthwhile, and a convincing explanation is given of the association of the Tapestry with the Cathedral: it illustrates the power of the relics on which poor Harold swore his oath.

In the town one or two old houses can be seen, as there was no destruction in 1944.

BEAUVAIS, Oise

Cathedral - St-Pierre *

Unfinished, but would have been the most daring of Gothic Cathedrals. It consists of the choir, begun in 1247 and carried to an immense height; it then had to be buttressed to save it from collapse. The transept was built in the sixteenth century, but the nave was never started. [The apse, or hemicycle, was praised by Morris – see Letter No. 9. It was the favourite cathedral of William Burges, who made his first visit in 1853; his many drawings enable us to get back to the appearance of the building in the 1850s. He also wrote an article in 1856 about an ancient mitre in the museum, which Morris may also have seen.]

Churches
1 Notre-Dame-de-la-Basse Oeuvre [*] Remains of an earlier church, possibly eighth century, adjacent to the cathedral.
2 St-Etienne [*] Romanesque nave and transept, Gothic choir, Renaissance stained glass. Bombed, but restored. There is a wheel of fortune on the outside. [Mentioned by Morris on a later visit in 1891.]

The town was much damaged in the Second World War. The Conway Library in the Courtauld Institute has a 1944 photograph of children going to school through the levelled ruins of the town centre, – but the cathedral is upright and undamaged: “It takes more than German bombs to destroy a medieval cathedral.” The Tapestry Museum in the town is also worth a visit.

BOULOGNE-SUR-MER, Pas-de-Calais

No Gothic churches. The lower town was largely destroyed in the Second World War.
CAEN, Calvados

Churches

1. *Abbaye aux Hommes, St-Etienne*
   Largely Romanesque: built by William the Conqueror between 1066 and 1077; the site of his tomb in the sanctuary is marked by a stone of the eighteenth century. The almost 'moral' severity of the building makes most other Norman work seem derivative, or lacking the structural unity which this church seems to comprehend. In the thirteenth century the towers were crowned with spires and the Gothic chancel was built. There is an unusual sixteenth-century portrait of William the Conqueror in a side-chapel next to the South Transept which has the cheerful anachronism of Shakespeare and the late Medievals.

2. *Abbaye aux Dames, La Trinite[*]
   Romanesque (1062-1200), built by and containing the tomb of Queen Matilda. Some eighteenth-century alterations, but still gives a good idea of the original state.

3. *St Pierre[*]
   The parish church has many examples of Flamboyant decoration and the East end shows the transition to the Renaissance.

4. *St Nicolas*
   Unspoiled eleventh century church.

5 etc. Caen is full of ancient churches, and one assumes that Morris would have seen St Sauveur and St Ouen. Note that many of Caen's churches e.g. Vieux St Etienne were damaged, and some were totally destroyed in the war. In compensation, here as elsewhere, the removal of surrounding buildings has enhanced exterior views. There are still some old houses to be seen in the Rue St Pierre.

CAUDEBEC-EN-CAUX, Seine-Maritime

Church *Notre Dame*
   Built in the fifteenth century (1425/6-1515/36) in the Flamboyant style. Note that this was largely during the English occupation of this area of France and there are various English touches, including a statue of St George. The rose-window is unusual, and notice, too, that there is lettering running round the outside of the church, with quotations from Magnificat and Salve Regina. The West front has a number of tiny statues, — see especially the musicians — some of which look very much like the kind of figures which Morris was to imitate in stained-class.

The town was burned down in 1940, losing its many timber-dwellings. Only three ancient houses, one the thirteenth-century Templar's house, survive to the left of the church.

CHARTRES, Eure-et-Loir

*Cathedral de Notre-Dame*
   A remarkably unified thirteenth-century cathedral, though there are fascinating minor variations which escape the innocent eye (see John James: Chartres: the Masons who built a Legend). The sculpture on the famous West doorway is mid-twelfth century, but the portals to the North and South transepts are full of thirteenth-century decoration and sculpture. The interior is particularly dark and solemn, bringing out the richness of the stained-glass windows. Chartres has attracted a good deal of mystical and mathematical speculation. Notice the labyrinth on the floor of the nave.

Churches
1. *St Pierre-en-Vallée* [*]
   Abbey church built between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries.

2. *St André* [*]
   Twelfth century.

[Old photographs of Chartres are available; those taken by Henri le Secq show the appearance of the cathedral in 1851. Though the town was damaged in the Second World War, streets of old houses survive.]

**COUTANCES, Manche**

*Cathedral de Notre Dame* [*]

The original Romanesque structure was almost completely destroyed by a fire in 1218, and the cathedral was completely rebuilt in the thirteenth century with surviving pillars of the earlier building overlaid and incorporated into a total thirteenth-century Gothic stylistic unity. Clean and decent, a building full of light, though there is some excellent thirteenth and fourteenth-century stained glass, including a window of c. 1220 dealing with the murder of Thomas-a-Becket. Some interesting vestiges of decoration on the ceiling.

Churches

1. *St Pierre* [*]
   Fifteenth and sixteenth-century Flamboyant Gothic, with extensive decoration at the higher levels.

2. *St Nicholas* [*]
   Seventeenth-century reconstruction of a fourteenth-century church.

Though the town was attacked during the Second World War, the cathedral is undamaged. The surrounding countryside, and the fact that the town itself is built on a hill, bear out Morris’s comparison to the East Midlands.

**DREUX, Eure-et-Loir**

Church *St Pierre* [*]

Originally a thirteenth-century building, with additions up to the seventeenth century. Much altered and restored.

Morris also saw the belfry [*] in the Place Métézeau, which is Flamboyant with Renaissance features. It was built c. 1537.

[See Morris’s very accurate descriptions in Letters Nos. 9 and 11.]

**ÉVREUX, Eure**

*Cathedral de Notre Dame* [*]

Built at various periods from 1119 – the nave is twelfth century – to the seventeenth century. There is a richly Flamboyant North door, and many small Renaissance features.

[The spire and the upper parts of the towers were destroyed in 1940, when the lead melted. Restoration is in progress.]

A large part of the town has been rebuilt since the war.

[See Morris’s Letters Nos. 9 and 11.]
GRANVILLE, Manche

Church of Notre Dame
This is seventeenth century with some fifteenth-century features.

This was a very fashionable resort in the nineteenth century, and was developed as a commercial port. [One feels from the tone of the references in the Letters that Morris avoided the place as much as he could.]

LE HAVRE, Seine-Maritime

The town was totally destroyed in 1944, and rebuilt upon a new plan.

LOUVIERS, Eure

Church Notre Dame *
Built between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries. The view from the South is of an exuberant Flamboyant screen of pinnacles and open-work (often compared to the art of the silversmith) which quite hides the much earlier thirteenth-century building behind. [See Morris's Letter No. 11 for a very keen perception of this difference and his flash of understanding which confirms him in the preference for Early Gothic.]

MONT ST MICHEL, Manche

Churches

1 St Pierre [*]
The parish church in the town below the Abbey. It has some eleventh-century columns, but has been much restored.

2 Abbey Church of St Michel *
One of the wonders of the medieval world. The church's construction upon earlier crypts and cellars is an example of the engineering ability of the monks and their masons: nevertheless there were various disasters. The present church is shorn of its three Western bays: the nave is Romanesque and the choir Gothic (1421).

The range of monastic buildings * would have been included in the tour, then as now. At the very top, the cloister is open to the sky, and is ranged with columns of Purbeck marble. The Marvel (La Merveille) is the name given to the three-storeyed Gothic constructions which flank the pinnacle of rock: they were begun in 1211 and exhibit the purest 'treizième' style. Everywhere one can see details which would have intrigued Morris and the Victorian Goths, e.g. the lancet windows in the Refectory with their ingenious concealed lighting — and the plain trefoil window above the door. The hooded fireplaces in the Knights' Hall wait to be translated to the hall of Queens' College, Cambridge.

[At the time of Morris's visit the Abbey was used to house political prisoners, who had to endure a minimum sentence of ten years. They were kept in solitary confinement, and only met each other for work on the treadmills or at the looms. One misses some expression of sympathy, from either Ruskin or Morris, comparable to Swinburne's poem 'A Song in Time of Order, 1852'. Note also that while we approach the Mount along a made-up causeway, Morris would probably have crossed the sands from Genêts in a vehicle. Further, remember that the well-known belfry and spire were not erected until 1897.]
PARIS

Cathedral of Notre Dame *

Begun in 1163, it has been extensively altered. There were depredations during the French Revolution and a wholesale restoration was deemed necessary in the mid-nineteenth century. In fact the visit by Morris and Burne-Jones was a last-minute alteration to please E. B-J; otherwise they would have avoided it because of Morris’s views of the restoration.

Churches

Staute Chapelle *

Built in 1243-48 by Louis IX as a shrine for relics: it is a box of glass (which must have seemed a marvellous piece of engineering at the time), and also neatly illustrates class division, with its lower chapel for palace servants and upper room for the nobility. [The restorations decided upon in 1837 continued until 1867; in spite of Street’s comments - he saw no progress - the glass would at least have been restored by 1855. The Chapel has been described as ‘over-restored’; nevertheless the use of colour and the stencilling must have influenced W M’s decorative schemes.]

2-6 ‘Some half dozen other churches *’ still have to be identified.

The Louvre * and the Hotel de Chuy * are still standard places for tourists to visit, and no description is given here: but there is a history of Museums, as of everything else, and one longs to know exactly what Morris and his friends saw, and how it was displayed at that time.
[Remember that though they went to the opera the present Opera theatre was not then built.]

ROUEN, Seine-Maritime

Cathedral of Notre Dame *

After a fire in 1200 the Cathedral was rebuilt almost immediately. There were many additions and reconstructions at later dates so that the outward aspect is more often Flamboyant than earlier. The view-spire, which Morris ascended, dates from the nineteenth century. [The cathedral was drawn so often in the nineteenth century that we can easily recover its appearance at that time: a number of drawings by Ruskin are in Unrav. Ruskin was particularly enthusiastic about the North door and the sculpture there, and so influential was his taste that even Proust was stirred to make a special journey to Rouen just to see ‘a little man’ described in The Seven Lamps of Architecture. The ‘little man’ is to be identified as the third sculptured figure up in the row adjacent to the North Door itself on the East side: he has his cap pulled forward and one hand to his cheek. Two other figures in the rows to the left have grotesque dog-like heads, and one of these is also commented on by Ruskin.]

Churches

1 St Maclou *

Built between 1437 and 1517, yet hardly affected by the Renaissance. A Flamboyant structure; restored.

St Ouen *

Abbey church of the fourteenth century. Contains stained glass of the same period. [Morris and his friends managed to get on to the roof.]

There is so much to see in Rouen that one can only say ‘here is God’s plenty.’ Morris’s later tribute to the town is often quoted. Though it suffered in the Second World War, a large number of its famous old buildings, including wooden structures, managed to survive: the houses that formerly abutted onto the cathedral have been removed.
ST-LÔ, Manche

Churches

1  Collegiate church of Notre Dame *
   [As discussed in the main text Morris may have followed Ruskin and others in counting
   this as a cathedral.] Built in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries to a curiously
   irregular ground-plan 'as land became available'. It was extensively damaged in 1944,
   only the mutilated towers showing in photographs of the time; but a considerable
   amount did in fact survive, including the unusual outside pulpit on the North side. It
   has now been restored, though the towers have been left as they were at the end of the
   war. [In this case only old photographs can show us what Morris saw: Ruskin drew a
   detail in 1848.]

2  Ste-Croix
   Romanesque church, also restored.

The town was almost completely destroyed and took twenty years to rebuild.

YVETOT, Seine-Maritime

A large market-town which was totally destroyed by bombing in 1940. St Peter's is a modern
round church of some interest, but in no way resembles what Morris would have seen.
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