

Henry Morris and the first village colleges

Introduction

The provision of buildings for the system of public education will in the present century be one of the chiefest ways in which the art of architecture can influence the body politic. If the opportunity is not taken it will only be through dullness and lack of vision.¹

In 1924, Henry Morris, Chief Education Officer for Cambridgeshire between 1922-54, wrote a short pamphlet with a long title that was to change the course of community education across the country. Initially self-published as *The Village College: Being a Memorandum on the Provision of Educational and Social Facilities for the Countryside with Special Reference to Cambridgeshire*,² it set out Morris's vision for the village college. It was a guide on how to merge the educational and ordinary life of the rural population, and to create an institution that rivalled those found in towns. The college was to be a multi-faceted building for several nearby villages, working as a senior school during the day and adult education and community centre in the evenings and weekends. The new institution would play a significant role in the reconstruction of rural Cambridgeshire, which at the time was the second poorest county in England, despite the affluence of Cambridge.³

Completed in 1939, the village college at Impington was the fourth of Morris's institutions to be opened and has long been considered the most architecturally significant. It was one of the few buildings designed in England by Walter Gropius in partnership with Maxwell Fry, revisions overseen by Jack Howe once Gropius had departed for the United States. The building's sleek, tempered Modernism combined with its progressive programme charmed the architectural press and critics including Nikolaus Pevsner, whose claim that it was one of 'the best buildings of its date in England, if not the best' has been often repeated.⁴ Impington was realized through a progressive network of architects, educators and philanthropists determined to show the public what Modernism could do for community education, and is an important reminder of how vibrant architectural activity could be before the outbreak of the Second World War.

¹ Henry Morris, 'The Village College: Being a Memorandum on the Provision of Educational and Social Facilities for the Countryside, with Special Reference to Cambridgeshire,' in Harry Rée (ed.), *Educator Extraordinary: The Life and Achievement of Henry Morris* (London: Longman Group Ltd., 1973), p.153.

² From here on referred to as the *Memorandum*, Morris initially self-published the pamphlet in 1924. In 1925 it was republished by Cambridge University Press and again funded by Morris.

³ Tony Jeffs, *Henry Morris: Village Colleges, Community Education and the Ideal Order* (Nottingham: Educational Heretics Press, 1998), p.24.

⁴ Nikolaus Pevsner, *Cambridgeshire: The Buildings of England No.10* (London: Penguin, 1970), pp.412-13.

It was, however, only one part of the story. As this chapter will show, Impington was the culmination of a much longer trajectory of Morris's ideas about community education, architecture and rural reconstruction, ideas forged in the lead up to and aftermath of the war. Impington's influence, and that of its architects, in particular Gropius, has meant that it is often cited as a key turning point for how school design could be sensitively shaped by Modernism, partly paving the way for the Ministry of Education's array of prefabricated building experiments after the Second World War. Whilst recent work has rightly questioned this, it has meant that the specificity of Morris's ideas and the architectural development of the first three village colleges has been somewhat overlooked.⁵

This chapter seeks to redress this through a discussion of the conceptual and architectural designs of the first four village colleges and traces elements of their philosophical origins and contemporary influences. Morris's concept of the village college – a vision that extended beyond Gropius's designs – was shaped by pre-war ideas and wartime experiences. An examination of accepted pedagogical and school-building practices in the 1920s and 1930s shows how far the village colleges departed from educational and architectural convention. The *Memorandum*, shaped by the author's formative years, is an indispensable source for understanding the educator's vision of how the village colleges would work in educational, social and architectural terms. The programme's detailed description reveals distinct spatial relationships which can be read architecturally, showing how the architecture of progressive education was formed, represented and constituted through written documents and networks, as well as through the materiality and images of the buildings themselves. Analysing the design of the first three colleges establishes the basis for a reconsideration of Impington's importance, clarifying the innovations Gropius brought to the project, alongside those Morris had already set in motion.⁶

Morris's formative years: childhood, Oxford and the war

⁵ See Alan Powers, *Bauhaus Goes West: Modern Art and Design in Britain and America* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2019), pp.66-70.

⁶ Historians of education and former staff members of the village colleges have paid close attention to the educator's life and work. These accounts include: M. Dybeck, *The Village College Way* (Cambridge: Cambridgeshire County Council, 1981); D. Farnell, *Henry Morris: An Architect of Education*, MA diss. (Cambridge Institute of Education, 1968); Tony Jeffs, *Henry Morris: Village Colleges, Community Education and the Ideal Order* (Nottingham: Educational Heretics Press, 1998). The most complete biography remains Rée's *Educator Extraordinary* (1973), which draws on Morris's letters and interviews people who knew him. Architectural historians regularly note Morris's scheme thanks to Gropius's involvement, something which has recently resurfaced following the Bauhaus centenary. See Leyla Daybelge and Magnus Englund, *Isokon and the Bauhaus in Britain* (London: Pavilion Books Group, 2019); Fiona MacCarthy, *Gropius: The Man Who Built the Bauhaus* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2019); Nikolaus Pevsner, *Cambridgeshire: The Buildings of England No. 10* (London: Penguin, 1970); Alan Powers, *Bauhaus Goes West: Modern Art and Design in Britain and America* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2019); Andrew Saint, *Towards a Social Architecture: The Role of School-Building in Post-War England* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1987).

Understanding Morris's personal, educational and religious experiences contextualize the village college concept. Born in 1889 in Southport, Lancashire, Henry Morris was the seventh of eight children. He came from a humble background: his mother died when he was young and his father, a plumber, brought up their family in a small semi-detached house. Morris attended the local elementary school until he was fourteen when he secured a job at the local paper, the *Southport Visiter*, and was soon promoted to reporter. His meagre experience of compulsory schooling instilled in him an ambition to shift the focus of learning from childhood to youth and maturity, as well as from didactic discourse to more active ways of learning. Outside work, Morris was involved with the local Anglican church, organising events and concerts in the church hall. Rée suggests it was the influence of a local vicar who encouraged him to continue his education at the Harris Institute at Preston which provided a variety of courses for older students.⁷ In 1910, he entered full-time university education to read Theology at St David's University College, Lampeter. There he took the first part of an Oxford degree which enabled him to enter Exeter College, Oxford. The influence of religion and the church had a profound effect; he insisted that the architect's obligation was to evoke 'the numinous, that sense of awe.'⁸ In later life he spoke about the need of towns to build community centres where people could pass their time in learning and living and wrote: 'I would myself include places for worship, silence and meditation, where the sense of the sacred and eternal could be nourished.'⁹

At Oxford, Morris's tutor was the theologian and historian Hastings Rashdall, author of a three-volume history of the European universities of the Middle Ages, and one of the few individuals that Morris acknowledged as an influence. Rashdall nurtured Morris's intellectual development and faith in the value of education, likely introducing him to the ideas of TH Green, a central figure of the British Idealist movement and one of the intellectual progenitors of the New Liberalism, a social and political philosophy with a pervasive influence amongst progressives in the first decades of the twentieth century.¹⁰ Morris, along with other progressive educators such as John Dewey, Edmond Holmes and Michael Sadler, was very much a product of the Idealist tradition, believing that the transformation of society and the promotion of the 'good life' depended on both citizens' moral attitudes as well as governmental reform. The village colleges were to later reflect this belief, materially and spatially, enabling active citizens to become their best selves through

⁷ Rée, *Educator Extraordinary*, pp.7-11.

⁸ Morris cited in Rée, *Educator Extraordinary*, p.12.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.12.

¹⁰ Jeffs, *Henry Morris*, p.10.

direct involvement with their community, thus reconciling the twin ideals of communitarianism and individual freedom.¹¹

It is also probable that Morris discovered the residential settlement movement through Oxford; settlements, such as Toynbee Hall established by Canon Samuel Barnett, provided a template for the future village colleges. These centres were not just dispensers of charity but research, community and educational hubs where those from privileged and educated backgrounds could live and share their knowledge with poorer neighbours. Although these settlements were mostly urban and did not supply full-time schooling, they influenced other experiments in community education. In 1914, for instance, the Arts and Crafts architect and designer CR Ashbee, who had had a long association with Toynbee Hall, wrote *The Hamptonshire Experiment in Education*. The book drew from his experience of Arts and Crafts education and was a blueprint for a new type of school that responded to the needs of rural communities.¹² Settlements, like the village college, were often designed to form a society in microcosm, a social laboratory capable of achieving on a small-scale what eventually might be secured on a larger or universal scale. Morris, too, wanted his scheme to become a national network of rural school-based settlements fostering fellowship, association, neighbourliness and a sense of community.¹³

By November 1914 Morris had joined up and was posted to the Inns of Court Officers Training Corps and later commissioned in the Royal Army Service Corps. He served as supply officer to the 41st Division and was a staff officer with the 14th Corps in Italy from 1915 to 1919, reaching the rank of captain and mentioned in despatches. It is difficult to overstate the formative impact the war had on Morris and other young men like him who did not attend the public schools but became officers. The experience that commissions gave them opened doors in the postwar world which would have otherwise remained closed. As an officer he learned about administrative responsibility and leadership and by the time the war was over he had adopted the gestures and voice of a successful public-school product. But the social transformation came at a terrible cost and the war was an episode which Morris rarely spoke about. He had experienced the horrors of the front, losing his friends as well as his faith; during his last days in hospital in 1961, he was heard saying: 'I've seen men hanging on the wire.'¹⁴ Morris was demobilized in 1919 and needed only one more year at Oxford to

¹¹ Ibid., p.13.

¹² 'C.R. Ashbee', *King's College Cambridge*, <https://www.kings.cam.ac.uk/archive-centre/online-resources/online-exhibitions/c-r-ashbee - toc-5> (accessed 24 March 2020). In 1887 Ashbee and his students redecorated Toynbee Hall's Dining Room in line with Ruskin's principles on the dignity of manual work. Through this project, Ashbee had the idea of establishing a new art school, which opened the following year as the Guild and School of Handicraft at Mile End in East London. In 1902, drawn to the rural idyll, Ashbee relocated the Guild to Chipping Camden in the Cotswolds.

¹³ Jeffs, *Henry Morris*, pp.15-18.

¹⁴ Rée, *Educator Extraordinary*, p.10.

complete his degree but he could not stay, likely haunted by the memories of better days with lost friends. He lost too the desire to enter the Church – perhaps studying Theology now felt futile – so he transferred to King’s College, Cambridge to read Philosophy. After graduating, he served a brief apprenticeship at the Kent Education Offices. In 1921 he moved back to Cambridge to be Assistant Secretary for Education in the County Offices. Following his predecessor’s death in 1922, he succeeded as Chief Education Officer at the age of thirty-three.¹⁵

Accounts of Morris describe him as a complex, mercurial and often contradictory character. Undeterred by his youth or lack of experience, he brought dynamic zeal to his leadership style, which was both inspiring and infuriating to work with. Through his educational experiences, he became attached to the university ideal and developed a social conscience that sought to enrich the quality of compulsory schooling and community education. While his ideas for the reconstruction of education were radical for his time, he endeavoured to maintain their respectability, a tendency which also reached into his personal life as he sublimated his gay identity and was wary of sectional interests and extreme politics.¹⁶ Although he admired Sidney and Beatrice Webb and was sympathetic with the left, he was critical of ideological and minority fanaticism. Instead, he was for the ‘scientific commonwealth’ – a term he used to describe an absence of irrational anger – and firmly believed in democratic local government, pragmatism, and education as a process where ‘the ideal order and the actual order can ultimately be made one.’¹⁷ These beliefs and values, alongside his life experience thus far, went on to shape the *Memorandum* and the eventual formulation of the village college experiment.

Attitudes to pedagogy and school-building

Working in the County Offices, Morris would have been aware of educational and architectural developments at state level, some of which shaped his vision of how the village college was to work pedagogically and spatially. In the first half of the twentieth century two themes dominated government responses to state education: the health of the population and access to secondary schools, both of which stemmed from concerns about national performance and international competitiveness. These influenced attitudes to school-building.¹⁸ To offer guidance on these issues, a consultative committee, chaired by Sir

¹⁵ Ibid., pp.10-11.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp.15-16, p.59.

¹⁷ Morris cited in Rée, *Educator Extraordinary*, p.14.

¹⁸ Andrew Saint, *Towards a Social Architecture: The Role of School-Building in Post-War England* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1987), pp.35-38.

William Henry Hadow, was set up and published six reports between 1923 and 1933.¹⁹ Some of its most important recommendations related to the structure of the national school system and curriculum. It advised that the school system be further divided into stages from junior to senior and hoped to encourage new ideas for school design by giving greater autonomy to local county authorities. The 1926 Hadow Report advised that the curriculum should be planned holistically, with subjects taught in relation to each other and practical work provided to stimulate pupils' capacities; it was to promote learners' interests in formal education as well as in their later-lives, preparing them for future occupations. In 1931 the Committee published an official expression of 'progressive ideas' suggesting that the curriculum was to be thought of in 'terms of activity and experience rather than knowledge to be acquired and facts stored.'²⁰ With this in mind, Morris's critique of 'pedagogic fallacy' – the tendency teachers have of trying to educate adolescents with exercises and materials suitable only for very mature or gifted young pupils – chimed with the more progressive elements of the government's education policy making.²¹

Such optimism, however, did not correspond with the architectural reality of 1920s and 1930s educational environments. Schools were mainly designed by local-authority architects working to written briefs without consultation from the teaching profession, a practice against which Morris railed.²² In accordance with the Board of Education's rules and regulations, these briefs detailed the accommodation to be provided, perpetuating conventional teaching practice, which were in turn codified in the school's spaces. Classrooms were set out in lines of pavilions or packed more closely together in blocks, and tended to be grouped together off corridors, lined with rows of rigid locker-desks and orientated towards a blackboard. The semiotics of this spatial arrangement spoke to the authority and expertise of the teacher, dispensing their knowledge to attentive, disciplined children, rather than promoting a more progressive philosophy of student-centred learning.²³

Historians of this period have shown how school building was shaped by imperatives of economics, science, hygiene and national efficiency that sought to produce a nation of

¹⁹ Derek Gillard, 'The Hadow Reports: An Introduction', *Education in England: the history of our schools*, <http://www.educationengland.org.uk/articles/24hadow.html> (accessed 5 January 2020). The six reports were: 'Differentiation of the Curriculum for Boys and Girls' (1923), 'Psychological Tests of Educable Capacity' (1924), 'The Education of the Adolescent' (1926), 'Books in Public Elementary Schools' (1928), 'The Primary School' (1931) and 'Infant and Nursery Schools' (1933).

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Rée, *Educator Extraordinary*, p.81.

²² See UCL Institute of Education Archives/Papers of Harry Alfred Rée (HR19/21). In a talk to RIBA on April 26 1945 Morris criticized the practice of only using official county architects as it failed to exploit creative talent across the industry.

²³ Saint, *Towards a Social Architecture*, p.37.

effective, democratically responsible and healthy citizens.²⁴ Indicative of this tendency was Felix Clay's appointment as architect to the Board of Education between 1902 and 1927, replacing ER Robson, which marked the start of a fundamental shift in attitudes to school building that continued well into the 1920s. Clay's appointment saw developments that focused less on conventions of architectural plan and elevation, and more on the management of internal space.²⁵ Growing recognition of the benefits of through-ventilation, ample sunlight and the value of a hall in which noise did not disturb the surrounding classrooms led to the development of spread-out lines of single-storey buildings, later known as the pavilion plan. While surveillance was never abandoned, it was superseded by an emphasis on a healthy environment for all pupils, a concern that can be traced back to multiple sources, including the work of mid-nineteenth century public health reformers such as Edwin Chadwick, Margaret McMillan's open-air nursery school in Deptford (opened 1914), and the child-study movement in the US which developed new forms of education based on the capabilities and characteristics of children throughout the first half of the twentieth century.

Following the war, social commentators continued to highlight how defects of the body prevented efficient citizenship as well as military advantage. As a result, the physical ideal of the 'good citizen' remained primarily the strong, healthy male body well into the 1920s.²⁶ To provide for this, schools had to be hygienic and provide for physical needs: classrooms were to be sunny and airy with sufficient lavatories and clean drinking water supplied. When Clay republished the third edition of *Modern School Buildings* in 1929, this change became apparent at the level of central government. Instead of mechanical ventilation, the principle was free cross-ventilation with adequately sized windows on both sides of a room that would provide efficient lighting.²⁷ In 1936 the Board of Education published its first school-building guidelines since 1926, replacing earlier regulations that had become obsolete in the face of rapid development of elementary education after the war. These gave further attention to the sensory experience of the school; nurseries were advised to use rubber, cork or linoleum instead of floorboards. Similarly, in elementary and secondary schools, architects were encouraged to use wooden blocks instead of floorboards to improve acoustics, as well as coating walls with sound absorbers such as perforated fibre slabs or porous plaster. The opening up of the main block produced a wide range of arrangement and

²⁴ See Geraint Franklin, *Inner-London Schools 1918-44: A Thematic Study* (English Heritage, 2009); Elaine Harwood, *England's Schools: History, Architecture and Adaptation* (Swindon: English Heritage, 2010); Malcolm Seaborne and Roy Lowe, *The English School: Its Architecture and Organisation, Vol 2 (1870-1970)* (Trowbridge and Esher: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1977).

²⁵ Tom Hulme, "A Nation Depends on Its Children": School Buildings and Citizenship in England and Wales, 1900–1939', *Journal of British Studies*, 54 (2015), p.411.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.418-419.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.412; Saint, *Towards a Social Architecture*, p.38.

experimentation and throughout the 1920s most elementary schools had incorporated features of the pavilion design with neo-Georgian details remaining popular. One popular variation of this was the quadrangle arrangement that enabled cross-ventilated pavilion-style classrooms with bi-lateral lighting whilst retaining a more compact plan. Clay approved of its aesthetic association, both monastic and collegiate, ideals that were also reflected in the first village college.²⁸

The Memorandum

In the summer of 1924 Morris spent a week in Oxfordshire at the home of JW Robertson Scott, founder of *The Countryman*.²⁹ While there he drafted the twenty-four-page *Memorandum*, which outlined his vision for how the village college scheme would work. The importance of this writing is difficult to overstate; the dissemination of Morris's ideas on educational architecture was a defining aspect of the project and enabled the buildings to be realized. It provided both the programme and a succinct, persuasive narrative for publicity, which appealed to a range of supporters including educators, policymakers, international financial sponsors and the architectural press.

The pamphlet began with Morris outlining what he termed the 'rural problem,' the process of the countryside falling behind the urban centres economically, educationally and culturally, which had a highly detrimental effect on the welfare of rural communities. He argued that the sources of the problem were multiple. Rural de-population, often viewed as a natural by-product of industrialisation had, by the 1920s, been a feature of British life for at least eighty years.³⁰ Rapid population increases in urban centres had attracted the attention and concerns of reformers and politicians more than the quieter countryside and gaps in educational standards between town and country increased. This was compounded by the neo-feudal structure of rural society which contributed to the departure of more able individuals as well as the failings of a weakening school system. The 'squirearchy' and middle classes who controlled local government often did not want to increase rates to pay for better schools and services that might upset the balance of power within their communities. Wider debates around rural renewal and change stemmed from these structural issues, as well as from the physical encroachment of the towns into the

²⁸ Felix Clay, *Modern School Buildings Elementary and Secondary: A Handbook on the Planning, Arrangement, and Fitting of Day and Boarding Schools* (Edinburgh: B.T. Batsford Ltd, 1929), p.165.

²⁹ Launched in 1927 and still in circulation today, the magazine reports on rural issues for people who live and work in the countryside. Robertson Scott, also its first editor, wanted it to challenge overly-sentimentalized representations of the countryside. Although his biographers do not say how they met, the relationship presumably equipped Morris with a deeper understanding of contemporary rural issues.

³⁰ Jeffs, *Henry Morris*, p.24.

countryside, which led to the creation of bodies like the Council for the Preservation of Rural England, set up in 1926.

In particular, Morris observed how the small size and scattered nature of the villages and their schools made their organisation and coordination difficult. Teaching staff were underqualified and the more academically able children were often drawn to the better equipped grammar or technical schools nearly always found in the towns. Urban schools were disconnected from the life of the countryside so when leaving school, pupils either stayed there for work or if they did return to the villages, they had little preparation for how to adjust or succeed in the context of rural life.³¹ To address these issues, he set out a series of steps which would 'afford the palpable and concrete demonstration of rural reconstruction' in order to re-orientate the life of Cambridgeshire through a system of village colleges.³²

Morris's first recommendation was that the small primary and senior schools across the countryside be consolidated into larger centres, allowing them to be more easily organized as well as benefit from economies of scale and improved accommodation. But simple reorganisation of the school system was not enough. A village college was required to unite and coordinate the educational and social agencies which had previously existed in isolation: 'an amalgamation which, while preserving the individuality and function of each, will assemble them into a whole and make possible their expression for the first time in a new institution, single but many-sided, for the countryside.'³³ The aim for the scheme was to establish about ten centres, a system of village colleges to provide for the co-ordination and development of all forms of education, from primary level to old age, together with social and recreational facilities and the provision of a community centre for the neighbourhood.

By shifting the emphasis to life-long learning, Morris sought to unify the ordinary and educational life of the countryside as well as increase democratic participation through each college's shared management. Active citizenship was more than just the obligation to vote; it required individuals to cultivate their best self, pursue the common good and better themselves through institutions and habits which made the welfare of all the welfare of each.³⁴ He claimed that the village college could realize this because it was not a foreign institution enforced on the community but instead drew from its pre-existing traditions across a network of villages. It was to be a union of local social services and a composite home for various voluntary bodies of the countryside, thus cementing education into the life of the community.

³¹ Morris cited in Jeffs, *Henry Morris*, p.25.

³² Morris, 'The Village College', p.157.

³³ *Ibid.*, p.147.

³⁴ Jeffs, *Henry Morris*, p.13.

Of significant importance for the design development of the buildings was Morris's articulation of the project's architectural requirements laid out in the *Memorandum*, which enabled educator and architect to work collaboratively to realize each village college. The scheme was presented in terms of rural reconstruction as well as spatially, as a set of social relationships to be nurtured and synthesized throughout the plan of the new architectural typology. No less than twelve different types of interiors for education, recreation and community use were detailed, along with outdoor spatial requirements such as recreation grounds and school gardens. The multi-functional programming and the relationships between several of these spaces was defined. The hall, for instance, was to be used by the school as an assembly hall, for the midday meal, physical training and for plays and concerts during the day, while in the evenings it would serve the community for events such as performances, lectures, dances or other public meetings. Adult evening classrooms were to be shared by different associations or societies and held in the school's practical learning spaces, such as the handicraft workshop or the domestic science room. Used in conjunction with the agriculture education room, a science laboratory was also to be made available and crop demonstrations were to be organized at nearby farms. A library was to house a permanent book collection as well as a reading room for newspapers and periodicals, providing a learning resource which people could 'freely pass to and fro' on their way to classrooms, lecture-rooms or demonstration plots.³⁵ The balance between the senior school, adult activities and community centre was to be carefully maintained so no single group dominated the building's use. Morris illustrated the balance with a simple three-winged diagram that formed two open courts in plan. One wing represented the school, one was for adult education and recreation and the central one was for the social and welfare provision for the whole community.

[Figure 1 here]

Figure 1. Morris's illustration in the *Memorandum* showing how the village college might be visualized as two three-sided courts.

In addition to programme requirements, Morris included a section entitled 'Architecture,' discussing the philosophy of design from which the colleges should benefit. He was critical of most rural schools which were 'often bad and seldom beautiful' and equated good architecture with good design, something which was simple and aesthetically pleasing. Morris therefore called for the architect to design:

³⁵ Morris, 'The Village College', p.148.

A building which will express the spirit of the English countryside which it is intended to grace, something of its humaneness and modesty, something of the age-long and permanent dignity of husbandry; a building that will give the countryside a centre of reference arousing the affection and loyalty of the country child and country people, and conferring significance on their way of life? ... in such a synthesis architecture will find a fresh and widespread means of expression. If the village college is a true and workable conception, the institution will, with various modifications, speed over rural England; and in course of time a new series of worthy public buildings will stand side by side with the parish churches of the countryside.³⁶

Again, Morris insisted that the village college would not be a foreign institution enforced on the rural community but instead would draw from local traditions and bring them together into relation, both socially and architecturally, to enhance the existing culture. Its architecture, along with bringing the different aspects of the village college programme together, had capacity for further synthesis. By being locally available and providing for the needs of the whole family, it would abolish the 'duality of education and ordinary life.' It would bring citizens together to become 'a training ground of a rural democracy,' finally bringing together good government and self-government. All this was to provide an opportunity for 'creative architecture,' a type of noble and public architecture for the English countryside that the State had not yet been able to supply.³⁷

On returning to Cambridge, Morris submitted the *Memorandum* to the County Council. They were impressed and agreed in February 1925 to implement the plans on the condition that they were not to entail any further expenditure.³⁸ In response, Morris demonstrated exceptional independence in both thought and action as Chief Education Officer, a role which was typically managerial and educational, implementing the policies of the Local Education Authority as expressed in Council and Education Committee meetings. To convince these committees of the feasibility of his public plans, he realized he had to raise private money. This set Morris on an energetic programme of fundraising, later being referred to as an 'expert beggar.'³⁹ By 1927 he had secured several donations to secure the first village college, the largest of which came from the Carnegie Trust for £5,400, who he had directly appealed to in the final pages of the *Memorandum*. Most notably, however, in 1929 Morris borrowed his fare to the United States and secured a grant from the Spelman Fund of New York for £45,000.⁴⁰ Faced with such sizeable financial support, the Council

³⁶ Ibid., pp.153-154.

³⁷ Ibid., p.155.

³⁸ Jeffs, *Henry Morris*, p.42; Réé, *Educator Extraordinary*, p.28. Jeffs points out that the educational authority had no jurisdiction over Cambridge, something which further limited the resources at Morris's disposal.

³⁹ Réé, *Educator Extraordinary*, p.39. The author uses the phrase which came from Leonard Elmhirst who described Morris as one of 'the more expert of beggars'.

⁴⁰ Réé, *Educator Extraordinary*, p.48.

were practically obliged to enact the scheme; this fundraising strategy established a future pattern for how Morris secured committee support.

The first three village colleges: Sawston, Bottisham and Linton

In 1930, five years after the Council approved Morris's plan, the first village college at Sawston was opened by the Prince of Wales. It was designed by county architect HH Dunn in consultation with James Shearer, the latter chosen and paid for by the Carnegie Trust.⁴¹ Neo-Georgian in style, it took the form of a symmetrical three-sided open court with the hall placed at its centre, flanked by rooms for manual instruction and domestic science. The south wing featured a low, enclosed arcade that connected the adult education rooms, as well as the library, medical services and the agriculture education room. Across the grass court and fountain stood the north wing composed of five classrooms for the use of the senior school. The yellow bricks, red pantile gables and hipped roofs set in the quadrangle arrangement made it the most formal of all the village colleges. It reflected Morris's desire to recreate the university-like, collegiate atmosphere he had known at Cambridge, fusing the domestic with the civic.

There are other associations at play: Morris's architectural tastes were informed by Geoffrey Scott's *Architecture of Humanism* (1914). Scott related Classical principles to human proportions and humane values, arguing that when we look at a building we 'transcribe architecture in terms of ourselves.'⁴² For contemporaries, neo-Georgian civic design could be deeply symbolic of social welfare and community needs, offering a way to reintegrate aesthetics with ethics.⁴³ There was, in other words, serious architectural ambition in Sawston's design, married to developed social and political ideals: it was neither as conventional nor conservative for its time as has been assumed, and often unfavourably compared to the later modernist village colleges. Instead, this was a building that embodied a modern understanding of rural life, while tracing a history of human endeavour and achievement in the countryside. It was the first county school of its size to have a separate hall, a wing specially built and suitably furnished for adults and the first to have a library for shared use by the school and by the community. It featured a youth employment office as

⁴¹ Ibid., p.32, p.43. Herbert Henry Dunn (fl.1882-1925) specialized in school buildings, making additions in 1904-08 to the De Aston Comprehensive School in Market Rasen, Lincolnshire and to the County School for Boys in Cambridge. He designed Kesteven and Grantham Girls' School which opened in 1910 and made references to vernacular and Queen Anne styles. Following his work at Sawston, he designed the Shire Hall in Cambridge (1931-32). See 'Kesteven and Grantham Girls' School', *Historic England*, <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1412888> (accessed 5 January 2020).

⁴² Geoffrey Scott, *Architecture of Humanism: A Study in the History of Taste* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1914), p.213.

⁴³ For instance, see Neal Shasore, "'A Stammering Bundle of Welsh Idealism": Arthur Trystan Edwards and Principles of Civic Design in Interwar Britain', *Architectural History*, 61 (2018), p.179.

well as a mechanics workshop, geared towards agricultural engineering, funded by the Elmhirsts of Dartington.⁴⁴ There were playing fields for use by both village and school, a medical services room and Warden's house.⁴⁵ Many of these features were to become commonplace but in 1930 they were innovative and gave important impetus to the village college scheme.

The economic crisis of the early 1930s slowed progress and the next village college did not open until 1937. In between, however, an important shift took place in Morris's awareness of Modernist architecture, art and design, which highlights the collaborative nature of the scheme and the influence of his wider networks. The most significant of these contacts was Morris's friendship with designer and entrepreneur Jack Pritchard, formed whilst they were both studying at Cambridge. Pritchard, through his later research trips to Europe, had met Gropius and in 1934 helped facilitate the architect's escape from the Nazi regime. On his arrival to London, the German architect moved into the recently finished Lawn Road Flats in Hampstead and Pritchard employed him in his new business venture, the Isokon Furniture Company. Within the first few weeks Pritchard had introduced him to Morris and despite Gropius's basic command of English, Pritchard was impressed how quickly they understood each other. A visit to Cambridge was organized and Morris was soon won over to the cause of Modernist design: '[Gropius's] conversation and many months of study of modern architecture techniques confirm me in the necessity of doing all contemporary buildings without regard to traditional style.'⁴⁶

[Figure 2 here]

Figure 2. Ground floor plan, Sawston Village College (1930). Architect: HH Dunn. Courtesy UCL Institute of Education/Papers of Harry Alfred Rée (HR27/9). Drawing by Gemma Fowlie.

[Figure 3 here]

Figure 3. Ground floor plan, Bottisham Village College (1937). Architect: SE Urwin. Courtesy *Architects' Journal*. Drawing by Gemma Fowlie.

In January 1937 the second village college at Bottisham opened, designed by county architect SE Urwin. Programmatically it remained almost the same as Sawston, drawing

⁴⁴ In 1925 Dorothy and Leonard Elmhirst bought Dartington Hall in Devon and set up a community with experimental interests in rural reconstruction and progressive education. Dorothy Elmhirst was a millionaire philanthropist who supported charitable causes, many of which aligned with their own project. Morris first wrote to the Elmhirsts in 1928, visited Dartington in the same year and in 1929, after several requests, they supported Morris's scheme with a grant of £1,000.

⁴⁵ Rée, *Educator Extraordinary*, p.43. The term 'warden' was Morris's equivalent for headmaster, to further differentiate it from a school, and some details of the position are outlined in the *Memorandum*.

⁴⁶ David Elliott, 'Gropius in England', in Charlotte Benton (ed.), *A Different World: Émigré Architects in Britain 1928-1958* (London: RIBA, 1995), p.112; Daybelge and Englund, *Isokon and the Bauhaus in Britain*, p.86, p.126.

some 240 pupils aged eleven to fifteen from ten nearby villages during the day and used as an adult education and community centre in the evenings and weekends. The important changes were in style and plan. It followed a more restrained, *moderne* idiom and with it a significant increase in glazing. The influence of the open-air school movement can be seen in the large, glazed, folding classroom doors and covered walkways which bring users into more regular contact with fresh air and sunlight. Construction was again in yellow brick, placed on concrete foundations but this time with a steel framed assembly hall with brick filling, woodblock floors and underfloor heating coils.⁴⁷

The asymmetrical plan, formed of two separate blocks, was principally single-storey and looser than at Sawston. The main block comprised an entrance, assembly hall and adult wing on a north-south axis. At the north end, a gently curving classroom range – a form which would reappear at Impington – reached out on the east-west axis, suggesting two sides of an open court. Immediately to the south of the main block a small nursery and junior school were built, which included medical rooms, supporting Morris's vision to cater for the welfare of all ages.⁴⁸ The *Architects' Journal* reported that the design and equipment within the building was a result of a 'co-operative effort' between the Education Committee, Warden and officers of the Board of Education.⁴⁹ Close attention was paid to designing tables for the domestic science room, and bright colours were selected throughout. The junior school was treated with primrose, pink, blue, red and orange, whilst the senior school classrooms were painted with more subdued colours.

Urwin also designed the third village college at Linton, which opened a few months later in March 1937. In programme and style it followed his previous work: another low, elegant *moderne* idiom with yellow, handmade bricks. The plan evolved again and, while still asymmetrical, it was closer to Sawston's three-sided court though with a different sequence of spaces. The hall, for instance, was placed off the central axis, in the east wing, next to the main entrance. The classroom wing was straightened but the large sliding doors were retained, facing the south-east to benefit from maximum sunlight. Each classroom's relationship with the exterior was reinforced by steps leading out onto the central grass court. Linton's innovations were subtle but important for what Impington could build on. Although a small entrance hall had been included at Bottisham, a larger crush hall now appeared – a space which evolved significantly at Impington, more successfully uniting the

⁴⁷ 'Village College, Bottisham', *Architects' Journal*, (May 1937), pp.783-787.

⁴⁸ Rée, *Educator Extraordinary*, p.40; Morris, 'The Village College', p.149. Writing to request financial support in 1929, Morris informed Leonard Elmhirst that a nursery school was intended to be included for each college. These were not only early childhood education but also for the education and training of older girls and parents. Morris wanted to 'realise some of the objectives of the Merrill Palmer School' which he had recently visited in Detroit. Morris outlines the college providing a nursery school room which would also serve as an Infant Welfare Centre as well as a primary school for children aged five to ten.

⁴⁹ 'Village College, Bottisham', *Architects' Journal*, (May 1937), p.787.

college's various functions.⁵⁰ Another innovation was the development of specialized and practical teaching spaces. Even though some of these were included at Sawston, at Linton an art room, practical laboratory, domestic science and needlework room were added. Classroom interiors evolved too with built-in cupboards for storage and pigeon-hole accommodation for each scholar instead of locker desks, the furniture designed by the architect in collaboration with Morris.⁵¹ The colour scheme was chosen by Gropius's Bauhaus colleague László Moholy-Nagy, who had arrived in London in 1935 and was introduced to Morris possibly during his short stay at the Lawn Road Flats.⁵²

The evolving specialisation of learning spaces within the first three colleges evidenced the importance Morris placed on aesthetic and practical education, something that for him would dissolve divisions between the vocational and the academic and allow for greater self-expression. Like other Idealists, Morris believed individual self-realisation was inseparable from participation in the communal life of society and good citizenship. And although gendered spaces for domestic science and needlework seem conservative by today's standards, recent scholarship has argued that these kinds of activities were defined as a particular feminine conception of citizenship.⁵³ Understood as a process of self-expression through making, active citizenship was able to be performed through the domestic arts of the home, a site which was now more closely connected to the affairs of the State following the dislocation of the war. At the same time design reformers were seeking to revive interest in craftsmanship of all kinds and linked the social and artistic value of handicrafts to the nation asserting that 'the country and country-life must be the basis of national life.'⁵⁴ Morris, like his Oxford tutor Hastings Rashdall, wanted vocationally oriented learners to be inducted into the theory underpinning their craft, as well as a general education, as without these they would become mere operatives. The village college in this way was not only to be a place of active learning, but also a 'silent teacher' providing an aesthetic education through its high-quality designed environment and original artworks. Each iteration of the village college thus far demonstrated how a modern school might be

⁵⁰ Samuel E. Urwin, 'Tendencies in School Design: A Paper Read Before the British Association', *The Builder*, (September 2, 1938), p.421. Urwin suggested the crush hall be a space every school should be provided with so scholars could congregate and achieved by increasing the width of a corridor to 15 or 20 feet and located near the entrance and cloak rooms.

⁵¹ 'Village College, Linton, Cambs', *Architects' Journal*, (October 1937), pp.573-577.

⁵² Powers, *Bauhaus Goes West*, p.66, p.109.

⁵³ See Alice Kirke, 'Education in Interwar Rural England: Community, Schooling, and Voluntarism', PhD diss. (UCL Institute of Education, 2016), pp.218-227. The author carefully traces this development through the rural activities of the Women's Institute, one of the several organisations that Morris lists in the *Memorandum* to be included in the programme.

⁵⁴ William Lethaby cited in Kirke, 'Education in Interwar Rural England', p.222.

conceived with a curriculum and community articulated in its architecture. And it was in collaboration with Gropius that this idea was even more clearly expressed.⁵⁵

[Figure 4 here]

Figure 4. Ground floor plan, Linton Village College (1937). Architect: SE Urwin. Courtesy *Architects' Journal*. Drawing by Gemma Fowlie.

[Figure 5 here]

Figure 5. Ground floor plan, Impington Village College (1939). Architects: Walter Gropius and Maxwell Fry. Courtesy *Architects' Journal*. Drawing by Gemma Fowlie.

Impington Village College

Set among trees, Impington followed the principally single-storey form of the previous colleges, but its fan-shaped assembly hall with cantilevered canopy and generous glazing announced itself with more assurance. The hall, together with the two-storey block for practical work and the promenade, formed the centre of the plan and represented its community use. The rest of the accommodation was placed in two wings. The first was the gently curving adult education and recreation wing, which included games and meeting rooms as well as a library. The other was the classroom wing for the senior school, planned for some 240 boys and girls aged eleven to fifteen. The classrooms and laboratory were equipped for subject-specific learning, including a stage for English and Drama and map reading tables for Geography and History. Like Linton, these were connected by a covered walkway and featured sliding doors that could be fully opened to the landscape. Each wing was accessed from the promenade, which measured some 140 feet long by 20 feet wide, lined with lockers and WCs on one side and staff room and warden's room on the other.

Impington commanded the attention of architects, educationists, artists and critics alike. It featured in Herbert Read's *Education Through Art* (1943), held up as a model for how a school building could provide a purposeful aesthetic experience. Pevsner praised it in his *Buildings of England* series and observed:

Can it have been the effect of English picturesque notions on the more rigid intellect of Gropius? As for this loose grouping as such, it must however be said that the village colleges preceding Impington had already used this device, though without the full realisation of its aesthetic possibilities ... Perhaps it originated in the mind of Henry Morris, whose idea the Village Colleges had been.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Saint, *Towards a Social Architecture*, p.37.

⁵⁶ Pevsner, *Cambridgeshire*, pp.412-13.

Though much of Impington's reception and legacy can be justly attributed to Gropius's experience and international reputation, he also had the advantage of drawing on Morris's knowledge and the first three colleges. As Pevsner inferred, Gropius brought a renewed clarity for how the village college architecture responded to its rural context, synthesized its multiple functions and framed new ways of seeing.

Despite Impington's modernist innovations, such as the asymmetrical pin-wheel plan, fan-shaped assembly hall (its roof doubling up as an open-air learning space) and extensive glazing, it clearly contrasted to the dematerialisation of Gropius's designs for the Bauhaus Building at Dessau where glass curtain walls dominated the façade and wrap around structurally significant points. The college was less exposed than the Bauhaus and the use of familiar yellow gault clay bricks concealed its steel structure and softened the rational plan. Bay windows along the adult recreation wing and ply mahogany panelling of its interiors suggested forms of English domesticity rather than industry or agriculture. And while Gropius's intentions to merge industrial production with craftsmanship at the Bauhaus were crystallized at Dessau, his designs at Impington respected Morris's call for the building to reflect something of the 'humaneness and modesty' of the spirit of the English countryside.⁵⁷ It was this aspect of the brief that Gropius followed by developing a 'simpler and more cordial accent,' a tempered approach to the machine-age Modernism he had developed on the continent and something he had learnt to respect whilst spending time in the English landscape.⁵⁸

In terms of the plan, the promenade was the pivotal innovation. It synthesized each of the building's components and worked as a place of congregation. Senior school children gathered in the promenade before attending their classes or during inclement weather. With events taking place in the hall, it allowed a freedom of movement for both children and adults to interact or observe exhibited art works. In *Education Through Art*, Read conceptually links it to the *peripatos* – the colonnades at Aristotle's Lyceum where he and his students met, talked and speculated – and considered bodily motion, along with aesthetic education, a potent medium for communication and self-expression. Alongside a capacity for ample movement, the promenade worked as a social technology, disseminating knowledge to its users as well as producing knowledge about them. The area demanded daily use: it provided access to lockers, toilets and staff rooms. In observing how students occupied the space, teachers were able to identify behaviours, evaluate and modify them either directly (through the rather non-progressive means of corporal punishment as college logbooks testify) or indirectly, encouraging greater social integration. Morris was particularly

⁵⁷ Morris, 'The Village College', p.153.

⁵⁸ Powers, *Bauhaus Goes West*, p.80.

proud of the promenade's centrality to the ritual of the midday meal, which he claimed helped students acquire good table manners and sound food habits for life. The school thus provided for both the 'mind and emotions,' as well as for the 'play and exercise of body' which youth required.⁵⁹

Gropius's interpretation allowed further innovations for how the building worked as a viewing apparatus, one which architecturally framed new social and educational relationships, whilst at the same time employing new technology to disseminate their representation through mass media. The building was intended to look dynamic – numerous components within one composition – that allowed the college to be dramatically represented through photography and that reflected Morris's call for a 'new institution, single but many-sided.'⁶⁰ At the back of the hall a cantilevered projection room was situated to play sound films, approved by Morris as local censor. Impington's image itself was employed by a variety of media to convince public audiences that Modernism was a logical choice for improving school design, including Abram Games' 'Your Britain. Fight for it Now', commissioned by the Army Bureau of Current Affairs (1942), the documentary film *Children's Charter* (1945) and *The Modern School* by Stillman and Cleary (1949). In these examples it was the strength of Impington's image, rather than the more complex and radical details of its programme, that was used as visual shorthand to educate audiences about architectural and educational progressivism.

Conclusion

For all these reasons, Impington quickly secured its place within a canon of British Modernist architecture. Nevertheless, the architectural history of the village college is more extensive, indeed richer, than Gropius's designs alone and Impington's meaning is reliant on its place in a longer trajectory. The first three colleges were not isolated experiments, but rather formative stages in the educational and architectural ideas Morris had been developing for nearly two decades by the time Impington was complete. The impression of Gropius's Impington, developed *sui generis* as an architecturally 'pure', unmediated Modernist response to the village college ideal is fictional. The colleges worked as framing devices, mediating a series of tensions and values: the modern with the traditional, the individual with the social, the executive with the cooperative, in an effort to enhance the educational and democratic life of rural communities. Inevitably, they were not perfect: democratic accountability was not as representative as Morris had hoped and major assumptions were made about student needs that were embedded in tradition. In particular, there was a

⁵⁹ Morris cited in Jeffs, *Henry Morris*, p.56.

⁶⁰ Morris, 'The Village College', p.147.

tension between Morris's desire to see individuals fulfilled and happy, and a sense that the young needed to remain in the area and work on the land like their families had.⁶¹ Critics have also pointed out that the programme depended on the presence of a powerful executive, whether that was a warden or Morris himself, and it is telling that following his retirement the village colleges came to resemble conventional schools rather than maintaining their original programme. Although he saw architecture as a radically civilising influence on society, there was undeniable paternalism in his conviction of what was good for a community and in his determination to provide it for them.

The *Memorandum* framed Morris's view of the world, but he rarely acknowledged the sources of his ideas. Dewey had outlined ideas on community education in *School and Society* (1899), 'learning by doing' had been credited to Friedrich Froebel since the nineteenth century and open-air learning had become popular by the 1920s. But it was also this covert eclecticism that spurred him on to synthesize these ideas into practice and to personally secure the financial investment required to give them spatial and material expression. As a gay man and atheist working in local government he was well aware of the risks of being too progressive and did not want his persona or plans to be associated with non-state sanctioned ideas which might have jeopardized his ambitions for rolling the scheme out nationally.

Such criticism should not overshadow the inherent radicalism of the scheme and its continued relevance as a reminder to educators and policymakers alike that schools can take an abundance of different forms. The village college, as originally conceived, offers a laudable alternative to today's highly centralized schools, one which encourages local, cooperative ownership against individual, vested interest and blurs the distinction between life and learning. Morris's legacy also lies in his followers and staff who have continued to develop and implement the concept of community education that he forged. One notable example was Stewart Mason who became Chief Education Officer of Leicestershire in 1949 and set up a string of community colleges including Ashby de la Zouche and Countesthorpe, both of which were run by wardens who had worked at Sawston and Bottisham. Such sites offer further opportunities for investigating the creative connections between educational and architectural ideas, and their possible forms of expression.⁶²

⁶¹ Caitlin Adams, 'Rural education and reform between the wars,' in Paul Brassley et al. (eds.), *The English Countryside Between the Wars: Regeneration or Decline?* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2006), pp.50-51.

⁶² Rée, *Educator Extraordinary*, pp.136-137.

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