

## The Eclectic Collection Of Miss M.F.V. Lobb

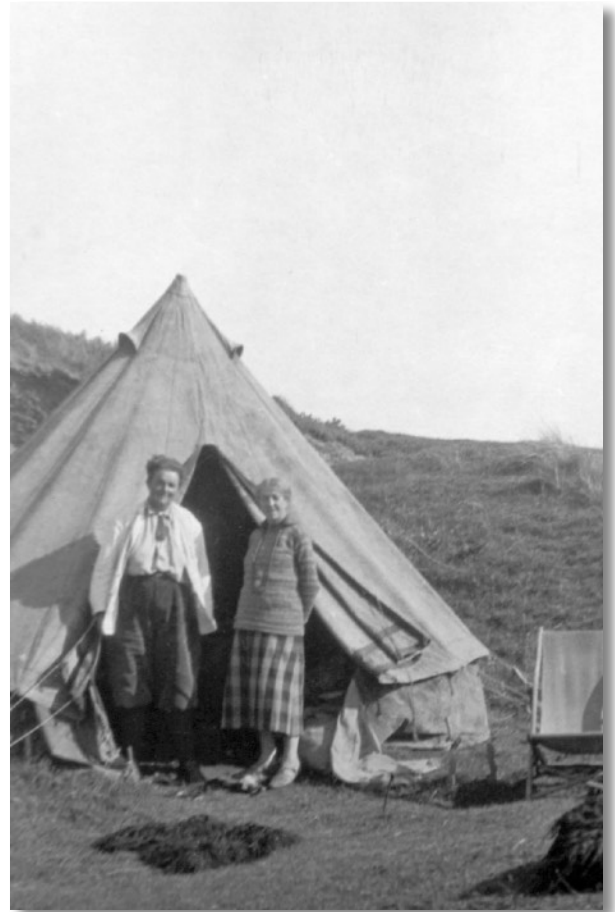
By Simon Evans

In 2013, I was working on a Library project to digitise a selection of pre-1910 photograph albums. There were some family albums with shots of trips to the sea, countryside picnics, and many topographical prints, mass produced for the nineteenth century tourist. There was one album, number 279, which caught my attention. Among the 140 or so photographs, there are about 50 round prints, approximately 3.5 inches (8.5 cm) in diameter, which I hadn't seen in any of the other albums, as well as the more familiar formats produced by Kodak in the 1890's. The images were all quite informal, showing some very affluent people. Some were on board a ship, some around the grounds of large country houses, which appeared to be in Denmark. There were also some mass-produced views of, among other places, Egypt. But it was some of the candid shots that really stood out for me. One in particular shows two women standing in a window, almost silhouetted, with the light behind them. They seem to be deep in conversation, one possibly comforting the other for some reason. It seemed to me to be a very observant, intimate image, with a feminine feel to it. As a photographer myself, I knew that shooting into the light like this was a technically challenging situation for the fairly primitive equipment of the time, and not something that many early photographers would attempt. I was keen to find out who the photographer was, and began a journey which would take me in an unexpected direction.



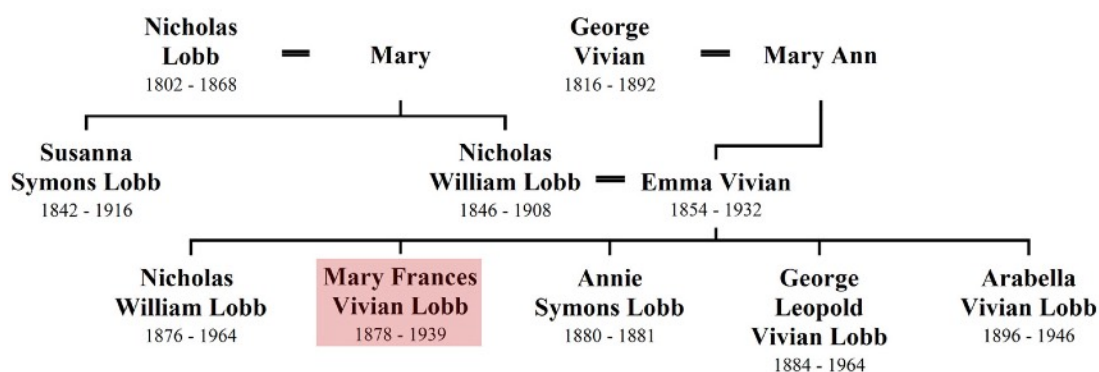
Looking at the Library catalogue, I found that this volume was part of an apparently small collection, some 17 items, attributed to Miss M.F.V. Lobb of Lechlade, Gloucestershire. A further search revealed a brief mention in the Library's annual report for 1939-40:- "A miscellaneous collection of scrapbooks, postcard albums, etc."

A quick search online produced a small selection of articles, some of which contained photographs. The first image I found showed a broad shouldered, large woman with short cropped, curly black hair. In fact, quite masculine looking. She was working on an early model of tractor, probably taken around 1916, and was captioned ‘Miss Lobb working on her tractor at Hobbs Farm before she went to live as May Morris's companion at Kelmscott Manor’. <sup>1</sup> Another photo showed the same woman, aged a little, much heavier, wearing plus fours, standing with another woman, older, thinner, almost frail looking in comparison. This was Miss May Morris, youngest daughter of designer and poet William Morris.



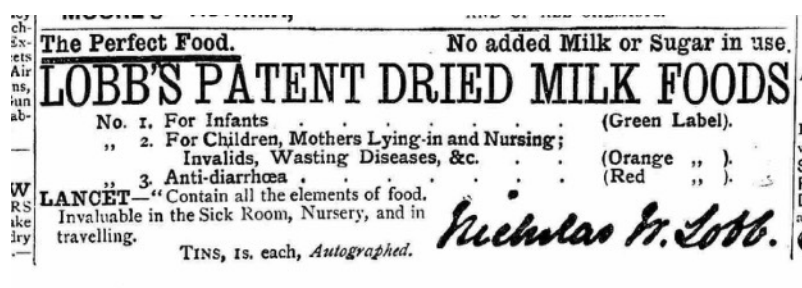
*Miss Lobb (left) Miss May Morris (right)*

Morris is known for his printing company, The Kelmscott Press, and for Morris & Co., famous for the textiles and furniture bearing his signature floral designs. He also wrote poetry, painted and was a key figure in the early Socialist movement. His wife Jane is well known as muse and lover to Pre-Raphaelite painter, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and she appears in some of his most iconic paintings.



So now I was intrigued. Who exactly was Miss Lobb? Where did she come from? Where did she fit in to the story of the Morris family? Could she have taken the photographs which had first caught my attention? And, why did she end up leaving her possessions to The National Library of Wales?

Mary Frances Vivian Lobb was from a Cornish farming family, from the Launceston area. Her family history is a fairly prosperous one. Her parents came from two big farming families. Her father, Nicholas William Lobb, and his family originally farmed 270 acres at Tregillis Farm. Her mother, Emma Vivian, came from another large land owning family nearby. Her father is described, according to various censuses, as a landowner and farmer, in 1871, in 1881 as a 'financial negotiator' and as "living by own means" in 1901. He also lodged several patents, including, "An improved machine



for the re-capping of central fire cartridges", and "Improvements to vermin traps". But it was his work with dried milk products which brought him major success. This took him and his wife away from Cornwall for some time, to Surrey, where their first two children were born. Nicholas William Jr was born in 1876 and in 1878, Mary Frances Vivian. There were more siblings: Annie, born in 1880 died within the year, younger brother George in 1883, and another sister, Arabella, was born in 1896.

The Census shows the young Mary Lobb living with her parents, at her Grandparents' house in Petherwin in 1881. The census of 1891 shows that when she was about 13 years old, she was boarding at St. Thomas College in Launceston, with 10 other girls.<sup>2</sup> Very little information has surfaced concerning her school days, or about the school itself. All I can say is that it was a small, privately run College for girls. The Headmistress was a Miss Caroline T. Stringer and the teachers included her two sisters, Emma and Alice. They advertised lessons in French, German and Italian, and in crayon or watercolour drawing. It has to be said that none of these skills seem evident in her later life. The local paper would publish lists of those pupils who had passed their exams, but as yet I have found no record of her achievements, so it is difficult to know how far her education went. The censuses of 1901 and 1911 record her as living with her family at Trenault House, Trewen. She is often pictured with animals of various kinds - horses, ponies, prize cows, and, quite often little dogs, cats, lambs, anything small and fluffy!

She appears to have been close to her older brother, Nicholas. He preferred to use his middle name, William, shortened to Will, possibly to distinguish himself from his father. In 1892 he was an apprentice fitter with London & North West Railway. By 1901 the census describes him as an electrical engineer, which, at that time must have been cutting edge technology. He spent much of his life in Canada, where he was involved in the building of power stations. He settled near Montreal, married, but had no children. He would often send his sister postcards, nearly all of them pictures of various steam engines, which seemed to be a shared interest, and they were all kept carefully in an album.<sup>3</sup> There are snippets of correspondence on some of these postcards. There is chit chat about trains, and we find that Will was very fond of tennis. Also there are mentions of their father's deteriorating health and a hint at a quarrel with their aunt, Susanna Symons Spear. When their father died in 1908, the inheritance went not to Will, the eldest son, but to George the younger brother. This was, perhaps, because Will had his own life and no interest in the land. Of course, Miss Lobb was the next eldest, thirty years old at this time, but as a woman was unlikely to inherit. Will visited his family quite often over the years and when his wife died in Canada, he settled in Devon. When he died in 1964 his body was sent to Ayers Cliff, Quebec, to be buried next to his wife, Carrie.

Soon after the outbreak of the First World War, Mary was advocating putting women to work on the land. In March 1916 she was involved in a demonstration of the kind of work women could do, organised largely by the wonderfully named Ingeborg Lady Molesworth-St. Aubyn, at Scarne Farm near Launceston, which was well attended and reported in *The Cornish & Devon Post* and *The Western Times*.<sup>4</sup> Also, in September of that year, a few lines in *The West Briton* inform us that:

"CORNISH WOMAN DRIVES STEAM ROLLER. Miss Lobb, of Trenault, a lady of independent means, is to be seen every day driving a steam roller on the main roads near Launceston".

The newspaper report doesn't elaborate, but I suspect that this was probably to help raise awareness and encourage women to take on what was seen as men's work, and, in the collection, there are a couple of blurry photographs which show her at the controls of such a machine.

When, in 1917 the Women's Land Army was officially formed, she was one of the first to sign up and appeared in Lechlade, to work on Robert Hobbs Farm. She knew about the land, was good with

horses and machinery and had an inventive mind. In fact, later, in 1928, following her father's example, she lodged two patents for rubber hoof pads for horses. She should have fitted in well at what was a large modern farm. However, she wasn't there for long. For some reason, she left or was made to leave. One rumour has it that she was found dozing one afternoon in the fields and was dismissed on the spot; another says that the other farm hands were intimidated by her masculine appearance, manner and bad language.

Nearby was Kelmscott Manor, the country retreat of William Morris and his family. Morris had jointly leased the place with Rossetti in 1871. William died in 1896, his wife Jane in 1914, just after purchasing the property. Jenny, the elder daughter, developed epilepsy in her late teens and spent much of her time in care homes. So now, May Morris the youngest daughter was living there alone.

May is of course well known for her own achievements in art and in politics. When she was just 23, she had become the director of the embroidery department at her father's company, Morris and Co. She almost married George Bernard Shaw, but married the then secretary of the socialist league, Henry Sparling, in a marriage that lasted 4 years. Later, she edited the 24 volume '*Collected Works of William Morris*', founded the Women's Guild of Arts, and supported the Socialist movement which had been so important to her father. We don't know exactly when or how they met, but Mary Lobb soon went to live and work at Kelmscott, initially as a gardener, and stayed there.

Over the coming years she and May became a familiar sight around Kelmscott and nearby Lechlade, working together in the garden, attending local events together, out and about with the horse and trap. Obviously, this caused much talk amongst the locals and some of May's friends. Many people didn't quite know what to make of her and the relationship between the two.

George Bernard Shaw, once described her as a 'terrifying creature...', and one ex-employee of Morris & Co., Lilly Yates, recalls Miss Lobb most unkindly. She referred to her as 'Lobbo' or 'Daughter of the Plough' describing her as "always wearing Knickerbockers and is quite uneducated and very rough." <sup>5</sup>

One of my favourite accounts has to be that recorded by the publisher Sir Basil Blackwell, who wrote an account, now held in the Merton Blackwell Collection at Oxford, of his dealings with May Morris and Miss Lobb. He had some reservations about publishing another two volumes in addition

to the already comprehensive 24 volumes of *'The Collected Works of William Morris'*. This displeased May and thus incurred the wrath of Miss Lobb. She cornered him, and, "...her legs astraddle and her arms akimbo, she unleashed a storm of eloquence..." ... "Now look here, Mr. Blackwell, you are worrying May, and I won't have her worried. You've got to publish all that stuff. Don't think I care a snap for the writings. I hate old William Morris, dreadful old bore, but I'll not have May worried!" She even offered him money towards the costs, but, considering himself '....No match for a woman as strong as any male farm worker,' he gave in, and all 500,000 words of *'William Morris; Artist, Writer, Socialist'* were published.

Together, they travelled the country, camping in Cornwall, Ireland, and Wales as well as making trips to Iceland. William Morris had made an expedition to Iceland, and May was keen to visit the place which he had found so inspiring. Maybe having Mary as a companion helped make that possible.

There is a wonderful account of the pair as seen through the eyes of a young Icelandic girl.<sup>6</sup> She says:

"The ladies were as unlike each other as any two people could be. One was rather small, slim and grey haired....She talked quietly, did not laugh, but smiled softly, sat and painted flowers in watercolours... The other lady was tall and rather fat with short, black hair that curled around her chubby face.....She talked rather loudly and laughed often."

*Miss Lobb with some Icelandic friends, circa 1922.*



On 17th October 1938, May died. She left personal effects and £12,000 to Miss Lobb, more than she left to any one of her other friends, servants or relatives. Perhaps more importantly, she secured tenure of Kelmscott for the rest of her life. But, sadly, it seems that life had become empty for Mary



Frances Vivian Lobb. On March 27th 1939, just five months after her best friend, she died.

Various correspondences brought to light at Kelmscott shows that May had, on several occasions, paid for Miss Lobb to see doctors in London, and there is a record of an operation being carried out, but no details are given about the procedure. It seems that she was not in the best of health in her later years. The death certificate lists a number of conditions which contributed to her death, mostly associated with being obese, too much smoking and drinking and not enough exercise.<sup>7</sup>

However, in those months before her death, she seems to have been very busy. She donated the jewellery left to her by May, to the National Museum in Cardiff, so already we see a connection with Wales. Her will, which was drawn up on the 19th March 1939, just eight days before her death, values her estate at £3,910. Just five months previously she had been left the sum of £12,000 and one has to wonder where all that money went in such a short time, or, indeed, if she ever received it. The will states that she left, “To The Museum of the City of Exeter all my Icelandic articles and effects, including those bequeathed to me by the late May Morris”, and “My scrapbooks to the National Library of Wales whose office is at Aberystwyth”. The will also set out her wishes for burial:

- "1. No coffin but just a plain oblong box of deal, rough but strong
2. No hearse, but a motor lorry instead

3. Cremation as soon as possible after my death and ashes to be scattered on a Cornish Moor preferably Bosporthenis Moor
4. No religious ceremony
5. No flowers or mourning and cremation to be private”

So, after learning a little about Miss Lobb’s past I found that there were still questions to be asked. Were all of the items in this collection personal to her or were some of them things she had been left by May? Why was this small selection of albums left to the Library? Could she have taken the photos that had first caught my attention?

Looking again at the well-dressed High Society people in the snapshots, I became convinced that these were not the circles Miss Lobb or any of her family would have been part of. Some of the images are taken on board a ship, in Copenhagen harbour, and I initially thought that it was possible that one of the Morris family, or a friend, could have taken them during one of their trips abroad.

I searched the internet looking for clues based around the locations in the photos. There were scenes around some big houses and gardens; these turned out to be Bernstorff and Fredensborg, the residences of the Danish Royal family. I wondered if these were the holiday snaps of some aristocratic tourists. Some of the images seem to show people who certainly seemed very much at home in the opulent surroundings, so I decided to see if I could identify them.

There were a few distinctive figures appearing in many of the photos. One was a very striking young woman, thin, large eyes and high cheek bones. The other was a large bearded man, broad and stocky, sometimes shown in some sort of naval uniform. He turned out to be Tsar Alexander III of Russia, and the young woman was his daughter, Duchess Xenia.

It was around 1890. The soon to be Queen Alexandra was making one of the regular trips to her family home in Denmark, along with many of her relatives. Her sister Dagmar was by now the Empress of Russia, Maria Feodrovna, married to Alexander III and was the mother of Duchess Xenia, and Nicholas, who would become the ill-fated last Tsar of Russia, and who also appears in the photographs. Others shown on board the ship (HMY Victoria and Albert II) include Alexandra's children - a young looking George Prince of Wales, later George V, and his sisters, the Princesses Maud, Victoria, and Louise. Alexandra's niece, Princess Maria of Greece, as well as others from the



Greek, Danish and Russian Royal families also appear.



*Royal Gathering: Tzar Alexander III (left), Crown Prince George, Maria Feodrovna, Princess Maria of Greece. On the right in the back row, in Naval Uniform, is the young Tzar Nicholas II.*



*Princess Victoria (left) with her cousin Duchess Xenia*

Alexandra was a keen photographer; she published several collections and held exhibitions. Many of the images in this album were probably her work as they certainly show her style. She also appears in some of the images, and these could have been taken by her daughter, Victoria, who

accompanied her mother on most occasions, but was not often photographed. This is an album of family photographs and private family snaps. When I spoke to a curator at the Royal Collection in Windsor, I was told it was extremely unusual for these kinds of photographs to find their way out of royal circles. So, what was this doing in Miss Lobbs collection?

Until now I had only looked at the few items chosen for the digitisation project, so I started investigating the rest of the collection. One of the first things I found was Mary Lobb's Iceland scrapbook, full of postcards, cuttings and photographs taken by May and herself.<sup>8</sup> Then, in contrast, there is an album containing among other things, what appear to be test prints for the engravings used as illustrations in the Kelmscott Press version of *Cupid and Psyche*. These were designed by another of the original Pre-Raphaelites, Edward Burne-Jones, also a lifelong friend of the Morris.

I delved into the ephemera which had been separated from the various volumes, and here I found more materials connected with the Morris family and Kelmscott Manor:

- Envelopes and a postcard addressed to May Morris
- A Christmas card from Henry and Catherine Salt, old friends from May's early days with the socialist movement, and other friends
- A partially hand coloured photograph of an intricate carpet with William Morris's name and address written roughly on the back
- A large number of photographic prints of views of European cities, dating back to the 1870's, with the emphasis on sculptures, murals and tapestries.

Then, some interesting correspondence came to light. A colleague, intrigued by my findings, dug into the Library archive and found letters written between the Library and the solicitors who dealt with Mary Lobb's will. The solicitors' letter says:- "The scrap books are at Kelmscott Manor, Lechlade, and there is quite a big heap and several books of unmounted scraps probably weighing five hundredweight in all." This didn't sound like the handful of volumes currently in the collection. Also in the archive is an inventory of the items received by the Library in 1939:- Scrapbooks, postcard albums, photograph albums, drawing books. The inventory lists, not the 17 items currently attributed to Miss Lobb, but 98 items, one of which was a box containing, '...Some thousands of loose items .. cuttings, prints, drawings.... From Christmas cards to paper wrappings of oranges'!

Now the task was to find all these items. Over the years, it seems, the collection had been distributed throughout the library, broken up into different categories, and to some extent forgotten. Some were called photo albums, some scrap books, postcard collections or drawing volumes; many were not recorded at all. Fortunately, when the collection had originally been received at the Library, someone had jotted numbers just inside the covers of each volume that corresponded to the inventory. By checking un-catalogued volumes for these numbers and comparing the contents to the descriptions on the list, I have been able to identify most of the items.

It turns out that a large number of the Victorian scrapbooks which the Library holds come from Miss Lobb, many were not attributed to her until recently. Some of them come from her family, at least one of them seems to be her grandmother's, another has her sister Arabella's name on it, and several others have references to family members. They contain a bizarre mixture of brightly coloured lithographic 'scraps' which were popular from the mid-19th century, cuttings from magazines, engravings and greetings cards. There are several volumes of Christmas cards. These are not scrap books, but catalogues and trade samples, which were never used. They all date from between 1879-88. Some of them even come with their original price lists attached.



Still loose in an uncatalogued volume, I found 17 samples or test prints of the borders that frame the illustrations in the Kelmscott Press 1896 publication, *'The Works of*

*Chaucer'*, designed by William Morris<sup>9</sup>. We are lucky enough to have one of the 500 limited edition copies in the Library, and I had the pleasure of sitting with the volume and matching up the designs. One of the samples doesn't appear at all and some are used repeatedly, sometimes being reversed.

In that same volume there is a list with the title, '*List of contents of this box (Kelmscott Press) Packed 2 April 1898*'. It lists various items presumably sent from the printers in London, after William Morris' death in 1896:- 4 packets engravings *Cupid and Psyche*, manuscripts of extracts from *The Mabinogion*, vellum sheets, a scrapbook and other sundries.

One large scrap book contains examples of early printed text, magnified and photographed in detail.<sup>10</sup> These are almost certainly the materials William Morris used during his development of new typefaces in the 1890's. In '*A Note By William Morris On His Aims In Founding The Kelmscott Press*', he mentions;"...This type I studied with much care, getting it photographed to a big scale, and drawing it over many times before I began designing my own letter..." Tracing marks can clearly be seen on some of the photographs.

Hidden in among various other ephemera are watercolours. The consensus is that although these paintings aren't signed, we can safely attribute them to May Morris. One in particular caught my attention; a depiction of a small chapel at Mwnt, near Cardigan.



Later, I found correspondence on a postcard that places May Morris and Miss Lobb in the Cardigan area in 1921.<sup>11</sup> There are several other watercolours showing Welsh landscapes, from Swansea, in the south, to Talyllyn, at the foot of Cader Idris further north. They seemed to have travelled quite widely in Wales. Among the ephemera, I found just one painting by Miss Lobb herself, a small, rather dark seascape in oils, dated 1919.





A large part of the collection consists of photographs, both loose as well as mounted in albums. A great many of these are commercially produced albumen prints of architectural studies, carvings, sculptures, tapestries and ancient artefacts and *objets d'art*. These date from around 1870's and 1880's. They are from all around Europe, though mainly Italy, many from around Bordighera, which was a favourite retreat of the Morris family, Jane Morris in particular. Some albums contain images of various parts of England too, including Kelmscott from around the 1880's, one showing William Morris in the grounds of the Manor. There are also some more modern prints, from the 1920's and 1930's. Some of these are from the Icelandic trips, some show various visitors photographed around the gardens at Kelmscott.

Overall, this collection has a kind of split personality. Firstly, you have the chaotic, slap-dash scrap books, full of cuttings, scraps, cartoons, cards, photographs, and engravings. Some of these have leaves, flowers and fruit wrappers pressed between the pages and the majority of them are most definitely from the Lobb family. Some are very mixed, with cuttings from magazines dated from the 1890's right through to the 1930's. I like to think that while May Morris sat, quietly writing, drawing or embroidering, Miss Lobb was there with her pot of glue, cutting and sticking bits and pieces in whatever volumes she could lay her hands on! Secondly, there are the much older, tidier volumes full of travel photos dating from around the 1870's-80s, and those that contain direct connections with the Morris family and the Kelmscott Press. Then there are several 'unknowns'. One of those is obviously the volume of Royal snapshots. We know from receipts found both in the National Library and at Kelmscott that Miss Lobb was buying from antiquarian booksellers right up

to a week or two before she died. One album has a numbered label from an auction house; William Day of Maidstone, so it is quite possible that the Royal volume and some of the other oddities were acquired this way, but we may never know for certain.

Miss Lobb's legacy is lurking in every corner of the Library, it seems. The original inventory of the items in the bequest mentions a box containing, '...some thousands of loose items...' These were described largely as topographical prints, cuttings, postcards etc.

My favourite recent find has to be a small bundle of papers brought to my attention quite recently. A colleague stopped me one day and informed me that he had found a postcard addressed to May Morris, with miscellaneous other items. They had been removed from the Pictures and Maps Department back in 1981, probably during a clear out to make way for refurbishment. There is a postcard, not a picture postcard, sent from Paris, dated August 1886 and addressed to May in Hammersmith. The message written on it is simple and dire: 'My wife died an hour ago'. It is signed by Laurence Gronlund, political writer, lecturer, and activist, best known for his work, '*The Cooperative Commonwealth*'. He was Danish born, and after living in The United States for over 20 years, he travelled to Europe in 1885, returning to America in 1897. It seems that he lost his wife, Beulah, en route, and that the couple must have been friends of the Morris family, May in particular.

Another interesting item is a letter written by Trade Unionist and Politician, John Burns, to Henry Halliday Sparling. May Morris married Sparling in 1890 and stayed together for four years, although they didn't divorce until some years later. Unfortunately the letter is undated, but judging by the content, I would place it somewhere around 1890. Burns mentions his ill health, and I have found a newspaper article (*Dundee Telegraph*, January 22nd 1890) reporting that, "John Burns is at present indisposed, his illness being brought on by overwork." Yet, on 28th January he attended a meeting opposing the Compulsory Land Purchase Bill, which proposed the buying out of landlords in Ireland (*Birmingham Daily Post*, 29th January 1890) and it seems that it is to this meeting that the letter refers. Burns also asks Sparling to "send best wishes to Morris and folks at Kelmscott..."

Last, but not least, there are several small pieces of paper with recipes hand written roughly on them. They're recipes for, amongst other things, mince pies and cheese cakes. Some of these bear the name Miss E. Vivian - Miss Lobb's mother, Emma. So, this was another orphaned fragment of

the bequest, and I can only speculate as to how it ended up 'in the wild' as it were, for so long. My guess is that these items were loose in the back of a scrap book or photo album. Either they were removed deliberately, as is usually the way with ephemera like this, or they fell out and no one was quite sure where they should be. It doesn't really matter, it's enough that they have survived.

Over the last few years, I have been asked many times why Miss Lobb left this collection to the National Library of Wales. Until recently, I haven't been sure how to answer.

Of course, her biggest influence would have been May. The Morrisises had Welsh ancestry. May's great-grandfather, on her father's side, came from an area described as "the remote Welsh valleys of the upper Severn and its tributaries". The Severn starts its life high in the Cambrian Mountains. William Morris himself may have been born in Essex, but always celebrated his Welsh blood. If May felt the same, that her ancestry was important to her, then I think it would have become important to Miss Lobb, and this would have some bearing on the way she made her will. And remember, she had already given jewellery to the National Museum of Wales in Cardiff in the months following May's death.

Another possible influence could be her local doctor, Rhys Morgan, who seems to have been friends with both ladies. It is his name on the death certificate and one of the very few individuals to benefit from her will. The trust fund Miss Lobb set out in her will benefitted firstly her younger brother George, then sister Arabella, then Dr. Morgan. His family originated in Cardiganshire, very close to Aberystwyth. She also bequeathed him her collection of pewter tankards and all her copies of the London Illustrated news.

After I had given my first talk on this subject, an ex-curator at the National Library who had retired some years previously, informed me about some other items connected with the Morrisises. He told me that there were about a dozen pages of vellum with illustrations, and they were accompanied by a letter from May Morris to the then Chief Librarian John Ballinger. After a brief search I found them. These were surplus pages, or retrees, from the Works of Chaucer printed on vellum. It appears that these had been sent to the Librarian, personally, and he had probably kept them in his office. Due to several changes of location within the Library, they had escaped being properly catalogued. In the accompanying letter, dated 1926, May refers to her friend JD Morgan from Cardiff. He was the treasurer of the Labour Party in Wales for some years, and also seemed to be

known to John Ballinger. More facts came to light at around this time. Sir John Williams, the founder and first President of the Library was a subscriber to the Kelmscott Press. He lived in rooms in Aberystwyth which were entirely decorated by Morris and Co, including the furniture.<sup>12</sup> It seems that there has always been a connection between the National Library of Wales and the Morris. So, Miss Lobb would certainly have been aware of the institution. She would probably have known about the Vellum retrees which May had given to the Library, and could even have visited the place herself during one of the many trips that they made together to Wales. It's likely that she only made her bequests because she thought that it was what May would have wanted, which in my mind, hints at how close they must have been.

And, of course, the other question I'm asked is, exactly what kind of relationship did she and May have? She and May were very different in many ways, but they were both ladies who, despite rumour and gossip, defied the social conventions of their time. They were certainly very close. May was unlucky in her relationships, and, in her later life I think she found comfort in having someone around who could be a mixture of close companion, and body guard. She seemed to feel safe around Miss Lobb. Each had their own strengths and weaknesses and they looked after each other. We know May paid doctors' bills for her and, as one receipt I saw at Kelmscott Manor shows, bought her a pair of pink spectacles for reading. They were not inseparable. May would always stay in her London house by herself, and Miss Lobb would often stay in nearby Burford. There are snippets of correspondence between them on some of the collected postcards. One is addressed to May in London, wishing her a Happy Christmas from all in Cornwall. Another Christmas card is simply addressed, "To MF from MM". There's a wonderfully cryptic message on a card sent by May from Burford to Miss Lobb back at Kelmscott. It reads: "After posting letter, I just grasped the thread at the end of yours, and having grasped (how slow of me!) I will be most careful. M.M."<sup>13</sup> I would love to have read some of their letters!

There was always the rumour that they shared a bedroom, and there is some evidence which suggests that it was indeed the case. There is a postcard I was shown at Kelmscott, from a trip to Wales, in which Miss Lobb is writing to ask someone back at the Manor to send Miss Morris's shawl which is in "our" bedroom.

Every now and then I have a quick look through newly digitised newspapers online, just in case something turns up. I came across a couple of letters that Miss Lobb had written to a Cornish



newspaper. I'd never found anything like this before. One relates how she learned about the use of nutmegs for the relief of rheumatism from a Roman Catholic Priest, at a friend's house. She ends the letter by saying, "I personally find them keep rheumatism at bay, but have friends who find them no use at all."

The second letter is entitled "Cotton Patterns On Quilts":

"Sir,- I saw with interest in your Woman in the Westcountry page that in Exeter certain Guildswomen were reviving this craft. Recently a hunt in an old attic chest revealed to me a petticoat or dress shirt, I do not know which, with a beautiful tufted pattern all over it. Whether it was handmade or not I do not know. I should put the date of it to be 1850, but, of course, that is a guess.

MFV Lobb, Kelmscott Manor, Glos."

I found it interesting that she took newspapers from back home while she lived in Kelmscott, but these letters took on a certain poignancy when I realised their date. They were written when she was alone at Kelmscott in the dismal winter months between the time May died and her own death. I imagine she was finding it very lonely indeed in that dark, cold house without her old friend.

Mary Frances Vivian Lobb is a fascinating character. I think she has been very much maligned and misunderstood, mainly because so little is known about her. She's been a bit of a novelty on the sidelines in the history of Kelmscott and the Morris family. I have to say that I've become quite



fond of her as I've learned more and more about her. The legacy she left to The National Library is far richer than anyone had thought, probably richer than Miss Lobb herself knew. Her scrapbooks and the eclectic materials she collected are fascinating, but she also secured the survival of a number of interesting and important items relating to William Morris and his family, as well raising awareness of the items already in The Library's collections. There is, I'm sure, more to uncover yet. But I hope that this little piece of research has helped to bring her out of the shadows and show her to the world in a kinder light.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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