

# INTRODUCTION

## 'PERHAPS THE GREATEST ARTIST OF THE LOT'

By all accounts Henry Wilson was a quiet man, modest to a fault. At first sight, apart from his distinctive aquiline profile, his appearance was unremarkable. He was not widely known to the general public, and even amongst friends it was hard to get him to talk much about his own works, which were mostly unsigned. When he died in Menton, France in 1934, he was buried in a leased plot, long since obliterated.

Such unassuming worldly credentials belie the powerful originality of his work and his prodigious skills as a craftsman. In dramatic architectural schemes, and in the expressiveness of his executed buildings and sculptures; in his richly evocative jewellery and fine metalwork, in inspirational lectures and writings; in all these, he displays an exceptional intensity of invention and insight. The works summon up deep-seated meanings which often surpass their material reality. They, and the thinking that underlies them, most thoroughly represent Henry Wilson. And it is through the diverse, yet linked, aspects of his creativity that his character and impact is most properly revealed. As he himself wrote in 1902 'design is the expression of your personality in terms of the material in which you work'.<sup>1</sup>

Janet, the astute and observant wife of Wilson's fellow designer and ideologist C.R. Ashbee, testified to the admiration felt for Wilson in arts and crafts circles when she described a group of Art Workers' Guild members gathering for a rehearsal of their masque *Beauty's Awakening* in May 1899. Gradually they assemble:

*Selwyn Image, Walter Crane, Louis Davis ... and Wilson, who looks like a seedy bank clerk and is perhaps the greatest artist of the lot.*<sup>2</sup>

Ashbee bemoaned the fact that frankly, England 'wasted'<sup>3</sup> Henry Wilson, and it is true that several of his most impressive schemes, including two cathedrals, remained unexecuted. Hermann Muthesius, architect, critic and international apostle of the English Arts and Crafts movement, sounded similarly aggrieved in his 1904-5 book, *Das Englische Haus*:

*It is a matter of profound regret for English art that an artist of Wilson's brilliance has not found greater opportunity to express his splendid artistic powers.*<sup>4</sup>

The time is long overdue to fully recognise these powers, to set Wilson firmly in his context, and at last to properly celebrate this gifted architect, designer, craftsman, writer, teacher and Arts and Crafts publicist.

The Arts and Crafts movement was well-established by the time Wilson started work in the 1880s, and it was against this backdrop that his attitudes to design developed. It was a movement that delighted in a fresh, non-copyist approach led by individuality and inspiration. Its buildings were typically endowed with a sense of purpose and their own *genius loci*, and like its designs in other media, showed dedicated originality and craftsmanship. Tradition was respected, but never allowed to fossilise. Wilson's adherence to craft ideals was flexible enough to evolve with the changing times – times which were scarred by the Great War and shaped by mass production. Such developments were met with an inexhaustible blend of vision and pragmatism by Wilson, one of the most talented architects and designer-craftsmen of the period.

An examination of Wilson's career could be approached from several angles. Investigating his work according to profession or style, for example, would be convenient, in that a broad

pattern is discernable. At times he was most readily identifiable as, say, an architect, or sculptor, or silversmith, working in the Arts and Crafts style or in an Art Nouveau mood. But the relative ease of compartmentalising him, most famously as a jeweller, along with his own humility and a tendency to regard him as the ‘closest’ and ‘best’<sup>5</sup> pupil of the architect J.D. Sedding who drifted off into the crafts, has undoubtedly contributed to the absence so far of an all-embracing analysis of his achievements. But only an interlinked overview can present an accurate picture of his importance within late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century architecture and design.

In his consideration of Sedding’s career published in *The Architectural Review* of 1897–98, Wilson declared that the ‘best critic [is] he who can divine most of the artist’s thoughts’.<sup>6</sup> As with William Morris, to look in isolation at what Wilson *made* is not enough. To understand how, why and in what context he was working is crucial. Highlighting the links between the different elements of Wilson’s cross-disciplinary vision is fundamental. Each aspect of his work forms part of a cohesive whole which, as well as conforming to many of the stylistic preoccupations of the day, also illuminates Wilson’s intense individuality.

At the core of this individuality lies the desire he himself identified: to ‘reach down to the lower levels of mental life’<sup>7</sup> and tap into a store of ‘unconscious memories’.<sup>8</sup> In so doing he developed a highly articulate visual language that mingles conventional symbolism and personal insight. The resulting blend is both eclectic and original. So whilst the process of unpicking particular threads can provide helpful focal points, it remains a misleading one if these threads are not rewoven and seen relative to each other and to his life as a whole. Dissecting him and leaving it at that militates against the concept of ‘the all-round man’<sup>9</sup> which he proposed as the ideal, and which he himself surely fulfilled.

This all-round approach was expressed from the very outset of Wilson’s career in the architectural profession, and persisted through every area into which architecture naturally, and logically, led him. His early architectural training, especially during his last formal appointment between 1888 and 1891 as John Sedding’s chief assistant, would influence the whole of his subsequent career. There, in the office of this free Gothic architect, he worked alongside other pupils including Ernest Gimson and John Paul Cooper, each of whom absorbed Sedding’s special instinct for the crafts. It was an environment in which the connections between the crafts, and between them and architecture as a whole, were actively and enthusiastically explored. An ethos had been created of using tradition without being bound by it, and of getting the craftsmen involved in a building to work, as Ruskin advocated, as a team.

Sedding’s sudden death in 1891 effectively propelled Wilson into the role of fully-fledged Arts and Crafts architect. Out of loyalty Wilson dedicated unconscionable hours to completing, in some cases improving, his late master’s projects-in-hand. At the same time he produced some strikingly original works of his own in which familiar historical elements were boldly transformed into novel, dramatic forms. Just such a transformation is evident in one of his ‘wasted’ schemes, for St. Andrew’s, Boscombe (1895). This proposal, for a Dorset parish church with the resonance of a cathedral, sadly never progressed beyond Wilson’s drawing board.

In his *Memoirs*, reviewing the year 1902, Ashbee listed some of the ‘real architects’ then at work in Britain as ‘Bodley, Webb, Lethaby, Harry Wilson and Charles Holden’.<sup>10</sup> George Frederick Bodley (1827–1907) and Philip Webb (1831–1915) were both of an older generation and had established their styles and principles already – Bodley as one of the great Victorian Gothic revivalists, Webb as the figurehead of Arts and Crafts vernacular architecture. But the three younger architects, fully alive to their predecessors’ pioneering work and impatient of designs that framed form without feeling, were poised to exploit new creative possibilities.

As much as any of his early buildings, it was Lethaby's 1891 book *Architecture, Mysticism and Myth* that set ripples rolling through his generation of designers and craftsmen. Its range of cosmic allusions and its exploration of ancient shapes, symbols and meanings were embodied in his own arcane little Herefordshire church at Brockhampton; but this was not built until 1901-2. Meanwhile, no one manifested his book's theories more coherently and consistently than Wilson. In him, its ideas fused with the liberating impulses bequeathed him by Sedding, and were channelled into intriguing new directions. It was in following these paths in the 1890 Ladbroke Grove library design, or in his bold church schemes for Lynton (1892) or Highgate (1896), that he most clearly entered into creative interchange with other innovators including Charles Nicholson, Charles Harrison Townsend and Charles Rennie Mackintosh.

Given his distinctive contribution to architecture, it is not difficult to see why Wilson was offered honorary membership of the Royal Institute of British Architects – nor, however, is it hard to understand why he declined it. From both experience and instinct he shrank from a body which seemed more concerned with academicism, or worse, business-led professionalism, than with the flesh and breath of real building. Any message which could be conveyed through architecture's formal qualities alone struck Wilson as a distinctly partial message. His, by contrast, was a multifaceted one into which craft experience had been thoroughly absorbed. Consequently it was inevitable that in time he 'ceased to practice architecture as generally understood',<sup>11</sup> and sought instead to approach it through what he called the 'building arts'.<sup>12</sup> His telling phrase effectively summed up those crafts which made a vital contribution to architecture and in turn derived their strength from it. As the various elements of Wilson's career unfold he can be seen to step back from architectural practice and into the building crafts – and at times, away from both, towards the ornamental crafts, notably jewellery. Significantly, though his essays in this art were intensely architectural in the broadest, architectonic sense of the word. Making precious metalwork seems very different from putting up buildings, but throughout it all there remains a latent sense of the miniature, intrinsically architectural world it inhabits. In this sense, though he disengaged from architectural practice, Wilson never gave up his architectural vocation.

The claim made by D.S. MacColl, artist, National Gallery curator and writer sympathetic to the Arts and Crafts, that Wilson had been 'a gifted architect who went off into the minor crafts'<sup>13</sup> would have left Wilson bemused. For him no craft was 'minor', rather '... all are worthy of the best energies of the artist'.<sup>14</sup> By 1891 his interests were already diversifying. At Holy Trinity Church, Sloane Street, he fulfilled roles as both architect and craftsman-decorator, playing an integral part, as Sedding's right-hand man and successor, in its building and furnishing. These roles reappeared at Welbeck Abbey, Nottinghamshire, where between 1893 and 1897 he completed the creation and decoration of the new library and chapel; and at St. Mark's, Brithdir, which Wilson built and decorated between 1895 and 1898. Because of its seclusion this Welsh mountain church has received relatively slight attention, though it is certainly amongst the best work he ever carried out. But alongside his talents as architect and decorator must be ranged his skills in sculpture and stained glass, plaster and woodwork, lettering and stage design. Each has an important bearing on the others, the last casting an interesting light on the deliberate theatricality of his architectural and interior design work.

Taking pride of place amongst all these attainments, however, are Wilson's unsurpassed talents in goldwork, silverwork and jewellery – the crafts for which he is most widely known. A review of his seminal book *Silverwork and Jewellery* when, in 1912, it went into its second edition was unequivocal in its praise, calling him 'unquestionably the most brilliant of the craftsmen engaged in the design and making of silverwork and jewellery'.<sup>15</sup> As for Wilson himself, he insisted in 1908 that he would 'rather be known as a goldsmith than as anything else in the world'.<sup>16</sup> The crafts of fine metalwork

and jewellery would receive renewed interest from the Arts and Crafts in the period following 1900. It was during this time that Wilson moved from London to rural Kent, where he built a family home and set up his own metalwork and jewellery studio.

By this time he had produced some of his most symbolically-charged silverwork, including his chalices for St. Bartholomew's Church, Brighton (1898) and for Gloucester Cathedral (1900). He had also started to make his naturalistic, evocative jewellery, from brooches and rings to necklaces and tiaras. The influence of Sedding and the researches of Lethaby mingle with his own idiosyncratic vision and sensational expertise. Intricate gold and silverwork tendrils and stems enmesh semi-precious stones or border pools of glowing enamel. The techniques at which Wilson excelled – including, most difficult amongst the whole repertoire, transparent network enamel or *plique-à-jour* – were so sophisticated that they amazed critics and clients alike. Fellow craftsmen, too, were thrilled by the work, like the Scottish silversmith James Cromar Watt. His response is all the more potent in springing from informed admiration: 'apart altogether from their beauty,' he enthused in a letter to Wilson, 'the making of the things beats everything...'<sup>17</sup> The finished pieces trap and translate themes of nature, Christianity, myth and astrology, and for all their meticulous order and craftsmanship, still manage to seem spontaneous.

The workers in fine metals with whom Wilson shared common interests were all innovators, individualists. The jewels of Arthur and Georgie Gaskin, for example, were refreshingly naturalistic, often comprising tight clusters of small leaves set with semi-precious stones and enriched with touches of enamel. Alexander Fisher's experiments with painted enamel were being made in the 1890s, when he and Wilson entered a brief working partnership, the technique finding expression in both men's work. And Paul Cooper, whose work would evolve its own modern idioms, had started out in architecture, like Wilson himself, before moving successfully into the metalworking arts. Wilson's impact on him in the 1900s was so pronounced that during this period it is occasionally difficult to differentiate their work. As in architecture, a web of influences and cross-borrowings surrounded Wilson's fine metalwork and jewellery, though none of his fellow smiths and jewellers displays such enthralling fluency in so wide a range of symbolic allusions and technical coups.

Amongst the assortment of architect-decorators for whom Wilson's example was naturally a source of interest were three significant exponents of the new domestic architecture and design – Baillie Scott, Gimson and Ashbee. In creating his carefully-harmonised early interiors, Mackay Hugh Baillie Scott drew on the styles of both Townsend and Edgar Wood, but also on the forms and nuances of Wilson's, his style finding colourful expression in his designs of 1897 for the drawing-room of the Grand Ducal Palace, Darmstadt. Ernest Gimson was an exponent with whom Wilson would collaborate on several projects; like Wilson, he had learned to love traditional skills in Sedding's office, but after some memorable essays in vernacular architecture, he would concentrate on furniture design, plasterwork and metalwork. Each thread endured throughout his working life, though without his encompassing, or aspiring to, such a broadly-based stance as Wilson's. By contrast, C.R. Ashbee, one of the most impressive Arts and Crafts figures of all, in common with Wilson embraced both practice and theory: he collaborated on the Darmstadt commission, built his celebrated asymmetrical houses of 1899 in Chelsea, and, with equal facility, designed flowing, Art Nouveau silverwork and jewellery for his Guild of Handicraft. That enterprise, established in 1888, forms an interesting parallel with Wilson's ideas about self-supporting craft villages. Wilson admired Ashbee's energy and devotion to craft ideals, but Ashbee never attained Wilson's expertise as a craftsman. Indeed, with his generous praise for Wilson's brilliance, Ashbee would have been the first to admit the disparity between them in this respect. As Christopher Whall, artist in stained glass and plasterwork, remarked 'he [Ashbee] has great ideas, but one contrasts them with his personal work and one trembles...'<sup>18</sup>

Contemplating Wilson's achievements as a sculptor – the art which, in his latter years, embodied Wilson's highest ambitions – Ashbee judiciously put him on a par with the renowned nineteenth century sculptors Alfred Gilbert and Alfred Stevens. To his own admiration for these figures, Wilson added an affinity with the medieval masters, with Rodin, and with the emotional and spiritual universes of Burne-Jones and William Blake. He was elected to the Council of the International Society of Painters, Sculptors and Gravers in 1899, remaining a staunch member until its dissolution in 1925. Soon after, his energies unabated, he was writing to his brother Edgar

*I want all the Wilson family to be on top in everything. I haven't got to the top in sculpture yet but I hope to before I go over to the other side.<sup>19</sup>*



Figure 1. Church of St. Mary the Virgin, Kemsing, Kent: Henry Wilson, bronze cherubs on top of Collet family tomb in churchyard, 1905-6.

Within a few months, he had won the Silver Medal at the 1927 Paris Salon. His exhibit, a pair of bronze doors for an American tea company's headquarters, told in their relief panels the story of tea culture from planting to export. Some of Wilson's associates, including a former workshop assistant, H. Brown-Morrison, felt sure he would be remembered 'chiefly as a sculptor', and indeed there can be no doubt that Wilson's sculptural achievements deserve to be ranked alongside the great masters like those mentioned by Ashbee. Brown-Morrison adds with conviction, 'Some of the most lovely modern figures I know are by him on a tombstone in Kemsing....'<sup>20</sup> He meant the pillared tomb of 1905-06, which is infused with symbols of life, the soul and the elements. Upon it three bronze cherubs – emblems of the Trinity – sleep, as Wilson's own notes explain, 'within the circle of eternity around the cross'.<sup>21</sup> (Fig. 1). His old friend and colleague, the architect Francis William Troup, believed that Wilson's fame would rest on

the Elphinstone Tomb with its eloquent bronze personifications of the Virtues and Vices, which he created for King's College, Aberdeen between 1909 and 1926. However, at the summit of Wilson's achievements in sculpture, the culmination of the four commissions for bronze doors that he would undertake, must be placed his final work, the most conspicuously-sited and ambitiously-sized of all his creations, the huge bronze doors which he designed between 1927 and 1931 for the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, New York: they present, in their sequence of 48 relief panels, gripping scenes from the Old and New Testaments and the Apocalypse.

So expressive and emotionally charged are Wilson's designs in whatever medium he chose to work that often they 'speak' visually, while his ability to communicate with an audience manifested itself more literally in his work as writer, teacher and lecturer. These talents appeared in numerous articles, which continued well into the 1920s in periodicals such as *The Architectural Review*, of which he himself was editor from 1896 to 1901. In them he would debate topics ranging from architecture, advertising and education to post-war reconstruction, creativity, and the meaning of art itself.

But it is in his book *Silverwork and Jewellery*, completed in 1902 and published by John Hogg in January 1903, that his writing blends most fully with personal, practical insight. While his designs unite consummate skill and vitality, his book links the authoritative voice of experience with an empathetic, I'm-here-at-your-shoulder tone. Familiar with the joys of creativity, he knew its pitfalls

all too well: ‘... the joint looks perfectly soldered, but on filing ... immediately falls to pieces...’<sup>22</sup> It is easy to share the response of one contemporary reporting back to him – ‘we read your book and felt able to sit down and do it all’.<sup>23</sup>

The captivating character of *Silverwork and Jewellery* found a voice in real life in Wilson’s own workshop, where he was renowned for his patience, clarity and enthusiasm. This is not to say that every worker would feel at ease with him. His manner could be disconcerting: as Brown-Morrison vividly recounted

*I admired rather than liked Wilson. He was often sarcastic and cynical which worried me as a boy. His highest praise of any work was ‘Quite amusing’.*<sup>24</sup>

Nevertheless, his students (Wilson teaching variously between 1896 and 1917 at the Central School of Arts and Crafts, the Royal College of Art, and Birmingham’s Vittoria Street School for Jewellers and Silversmiths) were unanimous in their respect and affection for their tutor. Sedding’s niece, who studied under Wilson at the Central School, recalled

*how able and inspiring was his teaching, and how devoted to him were all who owed their training to him. By his charm this ideal companion of the adolescent could in a moment turn a lesson into an amusing game.*<sup>25</sup>

It was typical of Wilson to break into French or Italian. Favourite phrases were ‘jamais, jamais de la vie’ and ‘je m’en doute’<sup>26</sup>, but such fragments disclosed little of his outstanding gifts as a linguist. It was he who could happily translate Marinetti’s original Futurist Manifesto into English, and when the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society showed their members’ work in Paris in 1914 it was Wilson who contributed, in French, the catalogue’s introductory essay on the current renaissance of English jewellery. In fact, in French he was fluent, and even acquired a competency in the principles of an Oriental language when a Japanese helper joined the household at their home in Kent from 1902.

Wilson’s magnetism as a public speaker radiates from his lecture notes. The galvanising effect of his ‘Gates of Wonder’ talk is almost palpable. It urges, pleads with every one of his listeners to recognise, and express, their creativity: ‘you can all be great, you can all be individuals’.<sup>27</sup> His active part in promoting the public face of the crafts formed a natural corollary to his teaching, and he became an influential commentator on pivotal twentieth century design initiatives such as the Deutscher Werkbund and the Design and Industries Association. In 1920 he became one of the nine founding governors of the British Institute of Industrial Art (a direct forerunner of the Design Council), which was established primarily to improve design standards in manufactured goods. His communication skills found yet another incarnation as a tenacious and resourceful exhibition organiser for the Arts and Crafts – a talent informed, in part at least, by the same theatrical instincts that moulded his several stage designs. Despite inevitably problematic circumstances, he steered to fruition the 1916 exhibition of the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society. And in 1925 he was the chief organiser of the British Pavilion at the legendary International Exposition of Decorative and Industrial Arts in Paris.

In 1917, Wilson became Master of the Art Workers’ Guild, Ashbee rating him as one of the greatest the group had ever had. His year of office ran concurrently with his seven-year presidency of the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society, a role that Lethaby urged him to accept in 1915, confident that he would be a much-needed ‘guiding force’ who ‘would certainly confer great benefit on it and the country’.<sup>28</sup>

This encouragement, from so longstanding and valued a friend, underlines the parallels between the two men. Gimson highlighted their complementary qualities when he wrote to Wilson ‘you and he are the brains and wisdom of the movement’.<sup>29</sup> Of all the comparisons to be made between

Wilson and his peers, that with the architect and theorist Lethaby is perhaps the closest. Lethaby neither sought nor acquired Wilson's supreme skill in so wide a range of crafts; but both were architecturally trained designer-teachers driven by a desire to promote design as 'part of the cosmic process'.<sup>30</sup>

Looking back in 1952 Brown-Morrison confronted the daunting task of summing up his former master's complex and inspirational career. 'He seemed to have taken the lead in any sphere in which he operated' he mused. Indeed, he concluded, 'he seemed intellectually a giant'.<sup>31</sup> It is timely, more than a lifetime after Wilson's death, to hold up to the light the traces this giant left behind.

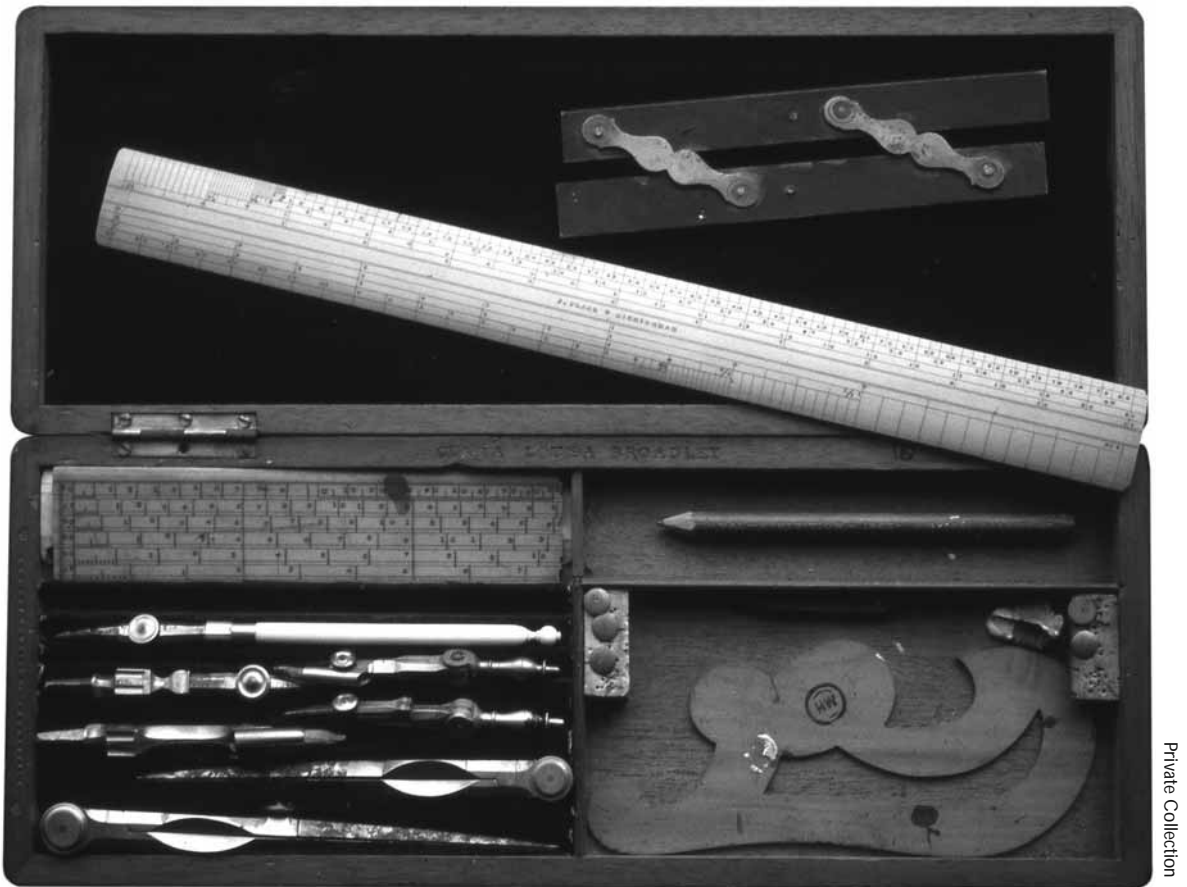


Figure 2. Drawing box, inherited by Wilson from his mother, whose maiden name, Clara Louisa Broadley, is stamped into the hinge-edge of the bottom portion; his own initials appear on the French curve.