CHAPTER 1 • VELLUM COPIES

INTEENTH-CENTURY English publishers, when they wished to produce a special version of a book aimed at wealthy collectors, usually printed a few additional large-paper copies (sometimes described as “L.P.” in booksellers’ catalogues), in which the original text setting was retained but leaves of more ample dimensions were substituted. Morris himself did this in a few of his pre-Kelmscott books, but by the 1890s he was strenuously opposed to the practice, because it ruined the proportions of margins and set the text adrift in an immense sea of paper.

However, it was clear from the beginning that the expensive Kelmscott Press books would appeal primarily to collectors, and it must have seemed self-evident, therefore, that Morris would somehow have to produce a few “specials” of each title. His solution (as was often the case for Morris) was to follow the example of the earliest printers, including Gutenberg, by printing a handful of copies on vellum rather than paper; he proceeded to do this with nearly all the Kelmscott publications, beginning with the first book, The Story of the Glittering Plain, which was issued in the spring of 1891. Initially Morris was able to use some vellum that he had bought years earlier for his experiments in calligraphy, but that ran out quickly, and he had to find other suppliers. He then turned to an Italian source of vellum (but found himself in competition with the Vatican), and eventually he discovered two English manufacturers—Henry Band (of Middlesex) and William J. Turney & Company (of Worcestershire)—who met his high standards.

In private, Morris and Emery Walker both expressed reservations about the suitability of vellum for printing, and certainly his pressmen found it an exceptionally difficult material to work with. The existence of these costly special copies serves also to remind us of one of the amusing paradoxes of the Kelmscott Press: that Morris, an avowed Marxist, professed to despise the capitalists who bought his products. The Chaucer in particular was a spectacularly opulent book, obviously aimed at well-to-do buyers. Not surprisingly, the vellum copies of The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer stirred up a frenzy of excitement among collectors and speculators. Here was la crème de la crème—the most desirable copies of the most remarkable book published by the most celebrated private press in history. With these superlatives ringing in their ears, Morris’s contemporaries (the seriously affluent ones, that is) found the vellum Chaucer almost irresistible.

Because of the fame of the Kelmscott Chaucer, there has always been a strong interest in the story of the vellum copies, but confusion about the number printed has bedevilled every attempt to write an authoritative account of them. In 1898 Sydney Cockerell declared flatly that there were “13 on vellum” and added that two of them were in the Doves pigskin binding (A Note by William Morris, pp. 44, 47). That sounds straightforward enough, but behind the scenes Cockerell acknowledged that there were many extra vellum sheets (“overs”) of the Chaucer, created as insurance against spoilage, and the question of whether these spare sheets might be bound into one or more additional volumes inevitably arose. In a letter to J. & J. Leighton, 28 February 1896, for example, he remarked that “Mr. Bowden [the foreman of Morris’s printers] will look out all the Chaucer overs, so that you can make up as many good cop-
Yellum Copies

In a letter to May Morris, 31 October 1923, Cockerell acknowledged that an “extra (retree) copy was given by your father to Walker, I think,” and presumably that accounts for the fourteenth copy cited in 1951. Even Morris, writing to Cockerell in the summer of 1894, had been aware that the projected figure of thirteen was probably unreliable: “The number of the Caucer is to be 325 paper [later increased to 425], and 13 (— or 14?) vellum.” But the slightly uncomfortable fact is that we have found fifteen vellum copies, for which we can find no explanation in Cockerell or any other reliable source.

The leading authority on the subject was the late Decherd Turner (1923–2002), successively the librarian of the Bridwell Library (Southern Methodist University) and the Humanities Research Center (University of Texas at Austin), who attempted to compile a census of the vellum copies only of the Kelmscott Chaucer. Turner, who was exceptionally well-connected in the world of rare books, for many years carried on an exhaustive correspondence with dealers, auction houses, librarians, and collectors; near the end of his life he approached three persons (Steven Bakker, Eric White, and Jay Dillon) about the possibility of collaborating with him, but at his death the census was unfinished. We believe that there were at least three reasons for his failure to complete the project: in his later years Turner was caring for his wife, who was seriously ill, and found it difficult to get out of the house; he was (as he admitted) baffled by the Internet and by computer technology generally; and, perhaps most importantly, he seems to have been startled and confused by the discovery (by Steven Bakker) in 1985 that Heribert Tenschert, a Swiss dealer, was offering in one catalogue two vellum copies of the Chaucer, neither of which had a discernible provenance—and which, by his own count, brought the number of vellum copies to a completely unexpected fifteen.

We sympathize with his sense of bewilderment, which we confess we shared when we first examined the Tenschert catalogue, because we too are unable to solve all the mysteries presented by these fifteen copies. Nevertheless, we have reconstructed the provenance of each as fully as possible, and we have also listed, in Chapter 3, seven vellum copies in catalogues that cannot be definitely attached to known, located copies. We are not suggesting that there are more than fifteen copies; but we hope that when additional information emerges in the future, it may be possible to connect the seven mystery copies with the fif-

1. Kelmscott Press letterbook (William Morris Gallery). It is possible, but highly unlikely, that Cockerell is here referring to paper copies; however, in his correspondence and diaries he never refers to the paper “overs” in this kind of language. Cockerell recognized the immense value of even the vellum scraps.
3. BL Add. Ms. 52740, fols. 100–01. There is also in the British Library (shelfmark C.43.h.17) a bound, incomplete vellum set, assembled from “overs” and discarded leaves, and purchased from May Morris in December 1923.
teen known copies, since several of the latter display conspicuous gaps in their history of ownership.

1.1 BRITISH LIBRARY

British Library, London.† Doves binding (1899). Walker copy. [C.42.l.12.]
Book-label (printed at the Kelmscott Press: Bibliography, D10.3) of Emery Walker, 3 The Terrace, Hammersmith. In Doves Bindery oak box.


Emery Walker (1851–1933) acted as Morris’s chief adviser at the Kelmscott Press, which was founded largely as a result of an illustrated lecture about letterforms that he delivered in November 1888. The son of a London coachbuilder, Walker had risen to become England’s leading process-engraver and an authority on typographical matters both modern and historical. He declined to become Morris’s formal partner at the Kelmscott Press, but, as Cockerell remarked in his Times obituary, “he was all the while a virtual partner, and no important step was taken without his advice and approval.” He was cofounder with Cobden-Sanderson of the Doves Press, and his views on the Caslon types, leading, and word-spacing had a profound influence not only on Morris but on the printing trade as a whole.

For his other copy of the Chaucer, see Cheltenham Art Gallery and Museum (Paper Copies); originally laid in the paper copy was an invoice, dated 31 May 1899, from Cobden-Sanderson—“Binding vellum copy Kelmscott ‘Chaucer’ in oak boards & white pig skin & tooling done to William Morris Pattern”—that was undoubtedly for this vellum copy.

(Charlotte) Dorothy Walker (1878–1963), Walker’s daughter, deposited the vellum Chaucer in the British Museum during the Second World War, as she recorded in two memoranda to her executors (at the Emery Walker House): [1 February 1939] “I gave all Doves Press (vellum copies) except Bible & Agricola, to the British Museum, telling Mr Marsden that they would be given on my death, also wayzgoose programmes (in drawer of small bureau in dining room). When I gave the Kelmscott Press vellum copies (except Chaucer & Froissart, Godfrey of Boulogne & Sidonia the Sorceress) I said that the Chaucer & Froissart should also go to B.M. at my death, they had already copies of Godfrey & Sidonia given by W.M in exchange for some leaves of another book. But as mine are inscribed to EW by W.M. I think they should go with the set. ¶ [1940] 1940? July? Took K.P. vellum Chaucer & vellum Doves Bible & Froissart leaves to B.M. also Doves’ Tacitus on vellum for safe custody in the War. ¶ Fetched from the depths of the B.M. on Friday Nov. 23rd. They were actually under the Kings Library when an incendiary did a lot of damage.”

1.2 CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY

Rare Books Department, Cambridge University Library, Cambridge, England.† Doves binding (1898). Hodson–Charrington copy. [Sel.116.]
Bookplates and labels: (1) Laurence W. Hodson, Compton Hall, near Wolverhampton (Bibliography, D10.7); (2) John Charrington, The Grange, Cambridge.

Vellum Copies

Sir Emery Walker

BRITISH LIBRARY


Dellum Copies

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY


HARVARD UNIVERSITY


Shenley; (3) "Presented by J. Charrington, M.A. Trinity College, 2 November 1918." Inserted at the back of the book is a print entitled "The Yard of the Tabard Inn on the Morning of the 17th April, 1387" by P. D. Hardy, 1900.


Laurence William Hodson (d. 1933) probably acquired the book directly from the Kelmscott Press; his name appears in a list, sent by Cockerell to Jane Morris, 2 March 1898, of persons who “have a full set of K.P. books or else have all those written by Mr Morris” (BL Add. Ms. 52738, fol. 37). Hodson, director of the Springfield Brewery Company, Wolverhampton, knew Morris well and had hired Morris & Company to redesign the interior of Compton Hall in 1895–96 (and commissioned three of the most celebrated Burne-Jones–Morris tapestries depicting the search for the Holy Grail).1 In 1897 he visited the Kelmscott Press, and the following year, when the Press closed, he provided the money for C. R. Ashbee to purchase Morris’s printing equipment. He is described and quoted as “Shareholder No. 9” in Craftsmanship in Competitive Industry, Ashbee’s history of the Guild of Handicraft, but Hodson, in a letter to Ashbee, 27 July 1908, inserted in the British Library copy of the book (shelfmark X.510/215), complained that Ashbee had misrepresented his views. He added that he was “a bit out of the swim just now” and regretted that he was no longer able to provide financial support. Two years earlier, in 1906, Hodson had gone bankrupt: he was forced to sell Compton Hall (now a hospice), and his library—which included the manuscripts of most of Morris’s writings, many of them earlier purchased by Charles Fairfax Murray—was dispersed in a Sotheby sale on 4 December of that year.2 His vellum Chaucer was purchased by Sydney Cockerell, who presumably was representing a client (probably John Charrington).

John Charrington (1856–1939), chairman of the oldest coal business in England, was a collector of prints and early illustrated books who had strong ties with both the Fitzwilliam Museum and the University Library, and he became an important benefactor to both institutions: the print room of the Fitzwilliam, in fact, bears his name. His friendship with Hodson in 1895–96 (and commissioned three of the most celebrated Burne-Jones–Morris tapestries depicting the search for the Holy Grail).3

1. Cockerell’s diary for 1899 (BL Add. Ms. 52636) indicates that he visited Hodson at his home near Wolverhampton and “spent the evg in looking at his treasures which include several fine manuscripts from W.M’s library” (16 August 1899).

2. The furnishings of the house were sold at Christie’s, 6 July 1906.

3. Charrington’s letters to Cockerell in the British Library (Add. Ms. 52709, fols. 194–217) do not shed any light on the Chaucer, but it is most likely that he bought it directly from (or through) Cockerell, from whom he purchased several other Kelmscott books.