

Taste and Morality at Plymouth Grove: Elizabeth Gaskell's Home and its Decoration



JIM CHESHIRE AND MICHAEL CRICK SMITH

***Abstract:** In 2010 Manchester Historic Buildings Trust appointed Crick Smith Conservation to analyse the paint and decorative finishes of the Gaskell's House at 84 Plymouth Grove, Ardwick, Manchester. The purpose of this commission was to inform the Trust of the way that decorative surfaces were treated during the period of the Gaskell family occupancy and to make recommendations for the reinstatement of the decorative scheme. This article will examine Elizabeth Gaskell's attitude towards taste and interior decoration and then explain how the techniques of architectural paint research can be used to establish an authoritative account of the decorative scheme implemented at Plymouth Grove during her lifetime. We will argue that this enhanced understanding of how Gaskell handled the decoration and furnishing of her home can contribute towards our understanding of the author's life and work.*

One of my mes is, I do believe, a true Christian – (only people call her socialist and communist), another of my mes is a wife and mother, and highly delighted at the delight of everyone else in the house [...]. Now that's my 'social' self I suppose. Then again I've another self with a full taste for beauty and convenience whh is pleased on its own account. How am I to reconcile all these warring members? (*Letters*, p. 108)

Elizabeth Gaskell's well-known letter of April 1850 describes her conflicting loyalties and feelings as a series of different 'mes'. While it is tempting to see this passage as an expression of Gaskell's concerns about being an author, the subject of the letter was not literature but the family's impending move to 42 Plymouth Grove, a substantial suburban villa that reflected the family's prosperity.¹ Gaskell was concerned about the expense that this entailed and whether this could be justified in the context of what she knew about the poverty co-existing with her in Manchester. The question of how she might express her 'taste for beauty

and convenience' while retaining her personal integrity presented her with a dilemma, and just how Gaskell resolved this problem is a subject of considerable interest when we consider the prominent role that interior decoration played within her fiction.

In 2010 Manchester Historic Buildings Trust appointed Crick Smith Conservation to analyse the paint and decorative finishes of the Gaskells' house. The purpose of this commission was to inform the Trust of the way that decorative surfaces were treated during the period of the Gaskell family's occupancy and to make recommendations for the reinstatement of the decorative scheme. This article will examine Elizabeth Gaskell's attitude towards taste and interior decoration and then explain how the techniques of architectural paint research can be used to establish an authoritative account of the decorative scheme implemented at Plymouth Grove during her lifetime. We will argue that this enhanced understanding of how Gaskell handled the decoration and furnishing of her home can make a significant contribution towards our understanding of the author's life and work.²

I: The Mid-Victorian Interior in Fiction and Theory

Interiors charged with significance are a pervasive presence in Elizabeth Gaskell's fiction; irrespective of wealth, certain types of interior signal integrity, while others signal ignorance or weakness. In the first few chapters of *Mary Barton*, the reader hears the narrator commend the poverty-stricken Alice Wilson's cellar, which 'was the perfection of cleanliness' and contains glimpses of decoration, a 'check curtain' and a 'whitewashed wall.' At the other end of the spectrum the gin palace telegraphs its immorality, as 'the splendidly fitted up room, with its painted walls, its pillared recesses, its gilded and gorgeous fittings-up, its miserable, squalid inmates.'³ Mr Thornton's drawing room in *North and South* is one of the seminal nouveau riche interiors of Victorian fiction. Margaret Hale is horrified by the garish 'pink and gold walls', the brilliantly flowered carpet and the 'smartly-bound' books arranged for display. To Margaret the room seems so filled up with ornament as to weary the eye.⁴ In her last novel, Gaskell provokes the reader's indignity when Molly Gibson's 'little white dimity bed, her old-fashioned chest of drawers, and her other cherished relics of her mother's maiden-days, were consigned to the lumber room' by a new interior scheme implemented by her stepmother. When Molly retreats to her 'smart new room' it 'hardly yet seemed a familiar place': she is bewildered by the superficial newness that had replaced the old fashioned integrity.⁵

The logic of connecting interiors to their inhabitants is a consistent theme in Gaskell's life writing, where she shows a marked admiration for modest or old-fashioned interiors. Typical is a letter to Catherine Winkworth in 1849:

What sort of rooms have you? Grand proper rooms, I dare say, as dull as dust, with no amusing warming-pans, nor crockery, nor spurs, nor dresser, as Selina and we had at the Lakes; our dear charming farm-kitchen at Skelwith was worth a dozen respectable properly-furnished rooms! (*Letters*, p. 83)

Ornate rooms that conformed to mainstream taste lacked the human interest that Gaskell found in her 'farm kitchen', while the retention of traditional objects and furnishings signalled a refusal to conform to fashion and a confidence in traditional values and customs. This can be seen as part of Gaskell's wider interest in what might now be described as vernacular culture, which surfaces in her interest in the local customs of Northern England, the historic sites surrounding her birthplace and the frequent inclusion of vernacular language in her fiction (*Letters*, nos. 28-33; 291-3)

Modest interiors would seem to typify the homes of women that Gaskell admired. At Charlotte Brontë's home: 'Everything fits into, and is in harmony with the idea of a country parsonage, possessed by people of very moderate means' (*Letters*, pp.248-9). On Florence Nightingale's room she commented: 'It is curious how simple it is compared even to that of our girls. The carpet does not cover the floor, is far from new. The furniture is painted wood; no easy chair, no sofa, a little curtainless bed; a small glass not so large as mine at home' (*Letters*, p.307). Here Nightingale's sparse furnishings are a source of puzzled admiration that questions even the modest luxuries of Plymouth Grove.

Gaskell's interest in the material culture of the domestic interior is part of a much wider debate in the mid-Victorian period, often referred to as 'design reform'.⁶ A crucial element of both Gaskell's attitude and design reform is the use of morality to justify a particular style or approach. This has its source in the theoretical arguments of the Gothic Revival, which sought to justify the gothic style in moral, rather than aesthetic, terms. The most influential writer in this area was A.W.N. Pugin, who argued that gothic was not superior because of its beauty but because of its moral qualities: it was essentially Christian and honest because it revealed its structure.⁷ Pugin expanded his architectural arguments to include advice on how a wide range of materials and products could be correctly deployed in domestic and ecclesiastical settings. He spoke out against 'Gothic-pattern papers [...] where a wretched caricature of a pointed building is repeated from the skirting to the cornice'. They were 'defective in principle' and 'a moment's reflection must show the extreme absurdity of *repeating a perspective* over a large surface with some hundred different points of sight'.⁸ These wallpapers are wrong because they flout the accepted rules of perspective. He went on to offer advice on how the gothic style might be correctly applied to wallpapers: 'they must consist of a pattern *without shadow*' and went on to suggest that his comments 'will apply to modern carpets, the patterns of which are generally

shaded. Nothing can be more ridiculous than an apparently *reversed groining* to walk upon, or highly relieved foliage and perforated tracery for the decoration of a floor.⁹

Pugin's arguments had a major influence on the way that ecclesiastical design was perceived within the Anglican Church, through the Cambridge Camden Society (later the Ecclesiological Society) which successfully conflated Pugin's theories with the liturgical implications of the Oxford Movement.¹⁰ Gaskell's relationship to ecclesiastical design is not obvious but some connections are apparent. Her cousin Henry Holland allowed his sons, Harry and Frank to be taught by high-church Anglicans involved in church restoration (*Further Letters*, p. 33). Frank later became incumbent of the Quebec Chapel in Mayfair, which 'attracted a fashionable high-church congregation'.¹¹ Another high Anglican project that had Gaskell's support was Priscilla Sellon's 'Sisters of Mercy' one of the new Anglican convents, which she defended in a letter of 1850 and visited herself the following year (*Letters*, pp. 116, 158). Gaskell described a Bolton draper, Gilbert French, as 'a protégé{e} [sic] of Pugin's' and stated 'I myself believe him to be a very ingenious man, with a good deal of imagination – strongly excited on ecclesiastical subjects – which has directed his powers into a very narrow channel; but I believe him to be a conscientious authority' (*Letters*, pp. 376-7).¹² While this interest might seem unusual for a prominent Utilitarian, Chapple suggests that Gaskell satisfied a 'nostalgic longing for custom and ceremony' by attending Anglican services at Oxford and retained a sympathetic attitude towards Roman Catholicism.¹³

Later design theorists who lacked Pugin's enthusiasm for gothic were still deeply influenced by the idea that a design could be correct or incorrect because of its relationship to an abstract principle. The appropriate use of materials, the correct use of perspective and the right level of naturalism in patterns are ideas that run right through the design reform movement and form the foundations of the programmes initiated by Henry Cole and Owen Jones at the South Kensington Museum. Design reform attained widespread coverage in the years following the Great Exhibition of 1851, as Cole and his colleagues promoted their ideas through the Museum of Ornamental Art and the emerging Schools of Design. Gaskell would almost certainly have been aware of this debate. She might have read the satire of the 'false principles' section of Henry Cole's Museum of Ornamental Art, published in *Household Words* in 1852: she had been publishing in Dickens' periodical since 1850 and *Cranford* was published there between December 1851 and May 1853.¹⁴ Gaskell is unlikely to have missed Dickens' famous attack on design reform in the opening chapters of *Hard Times*, published in 1854: Gradgrind's quest for rational thought is supported by 'a gentleman' who forces strict design reform principles upon the class: 'You

don't walk upon flowers in fact; you cannot be allowed to walk upon flowers in carpets.¹⁵

Another explanation for the strange mixture of morality and consumerism prevalent in mid-Victorian culture has been located in the decline of the evangelical revival. In *Household Gods*, Deborah Cohen has suggested that 'as the tide of severe religion ebbed, what was left in its wake was morality; all sorts of activities, including furnishing, offered a venue for moral improvement.'¹⁶ Cohen's argument marginalises the influence that ecclesiastical design had on secular taste but the broad point remains valid: in an increasingly wealthy culture, the influence of evangelical austerity was likely to weaken. Victorian society did not frown upon possessions or wealth but the middle classes derived a lot of significance from exactly how wealth was expressed through material culture. Gaskell's descent from two old dissenting families would have given her a clear sense of the virtues of Puritan austerity, and the dilemmas that this presented surface continually in her life and work.

John Ruskin's writing had a profound influence on the Gothic Revival, design reform and Elizabeth Gaskell. A letter of September 1851 shows that Gaskell had recently read Ruskin's *Seven Lamps of Architecture*, which has passages that must have resonated strongly (*Letters*, p.161). Ruskin, like Gaskell, had a nonconformist background but benefitted from his father's considerable wealth: the dilemma between affluence and austerity shows strongly in his writing. The 'Lamp of Sacrifice' deals explicitly with appropriate and inappropriate decoration and ornament. Section VII commences by questioning whether money should be given to charity rather than wasted on churches or private houses. While he declares himself 'no advocate for meanness of private habituation,' he 'would not have that useless expense in unnoticed fineries or formalities; cornicings or ceilings and graining of doors, and fringing or curtains, and thousands such; things which have become foolishly and apathetically habitual.'¹⁷ Austerity for Ruskin was an important counterpoint:

I speak from experience: I know what it is to live in a cottage with a deal floor and roof, and a hearth of mica slate; and I know it to be in many respects healthier and happier than living between a Turkey carpet and gilded ceiling, beside a steel grate and polished fender.¹⁸

Ruskin's well-known letter explaining the furnishings in Holman Hunt's *The Awakening Conscience* is closely related to what Margaret Hale sees in the Thornton drawing room:

There is not a single object in all that room, common, modern, vulgar [...] but it becomes tragical, if rightly read. That furniture, so carefully painted, even to the last vein of the rosewood - is there nothing to be learnt from that

terrible lustre of it, from its fatal newness; nothing there that has the old thoughts of home upon it, or that is ever to become part of a home? Those embossed books, vain and useless - they also new - marked with no happy wearing of beloved leaves.¹⁹

Ruskin's commentary implies that the moral values of Hunt's seducer are materially expressed in the decoration and furnishing of the interior depicted in the painting, and although Gaskell's commentary is more about social class and taste it is clear that both writers are participating in a shared vocabulary of meanings and associations that espouse disdain for mere material value or fashionable ostentation.

The semantics of design reform surface repeatedly in Gaskell's fiction and her detailed attention to domestic interiors is no longer seen as a sign of her political conservatism. *North and South* has become a key text: John Kanwit has argued convincingly for the interdependency of the domestic and the political, Kerri Hunt has demonstrated the nuanced way in which characters relate to objects, and Beatrice Bazell has emphasised how Gaskell's depictions of wallpaper articulate the uncertainty about appropriate taste in the 1850s.²⁰

II: Historic Interiors and Architectural Paint Research

If Gaskell's response to the domestic interior is an important element of both her life and fiction, then an accurate account of how she decorated her own home is a subject of considerable interest. The desire to recreate historic interiors is widespread in the British heritage industry but achieving this with any degree of authenticity is problematic, in the first instance because the idea of a designed 'interior' is not easily measured, quantified or defined. A chair or a carpet is a reasonably concrete artefact, open to various types of analysis, but an interior is a much more amorphous proposition that defies easy definition. We might approach an interior as a group of artefacts and surfaces within an architectural space but these objects need to have been combined with intent to create a certain impression: an interior has semantic intent. Arguably, another necessary factor is a viewer who looks at these objects as a group and sees significance in both the objects and the ways that they are combined. To some extent, to see 'an interior' the subject must be looking for one, and in this sense we could understand an 'interior' as involving an interpretative strategy on behalf of the viewer. By the time Charles Locke Eastlake published *Hints on Household Taste* in 1868, there was a large enough audience to make this publication a success on both sides of the Atlantic: between the emergence of design reform in the early 1850s and the late 1860s the idea of the interior gained widespread currency among the middle classes.²¹ This was a period of great literary activity for Gaskell: her fiction both responds to, and helps to

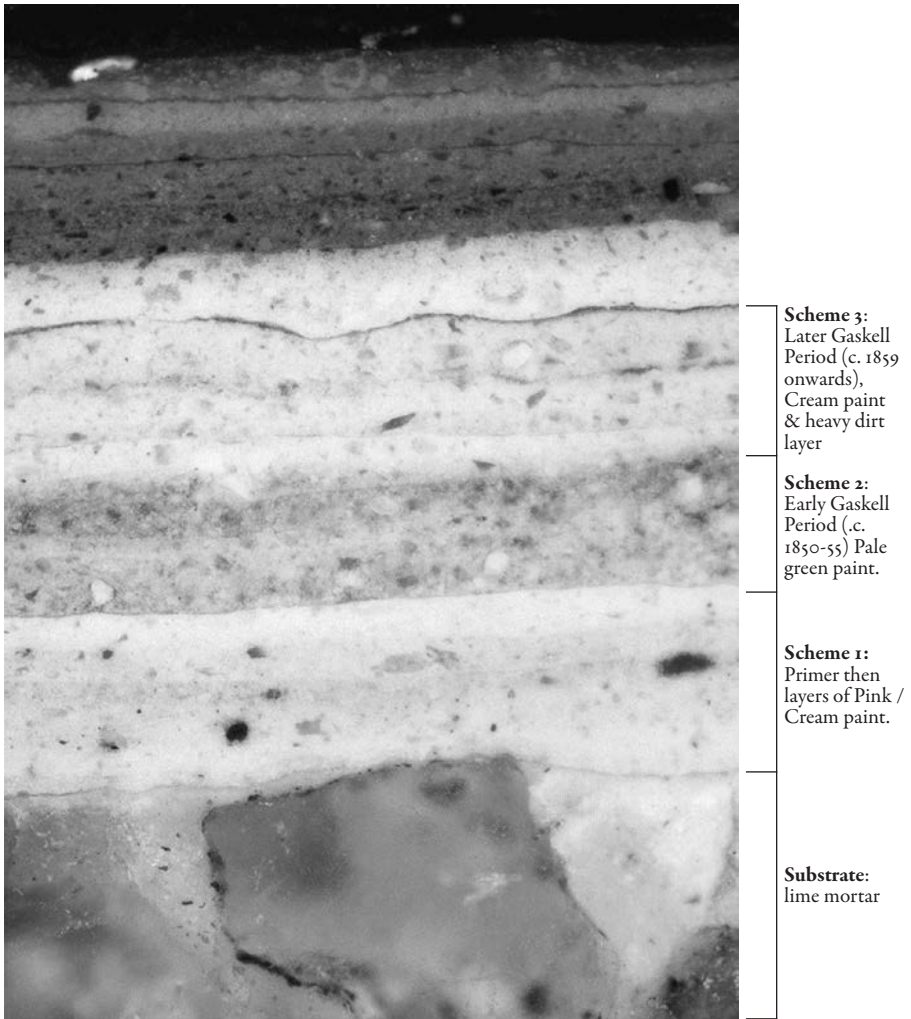


Figure 1: Magnified paint sample from the main wall of the dining room

form this new way of arranging and interpreting interior decoration in the mid-Victorian period.²²

Historic interiors rarely survive as well as historic buildings, so not only is the idea of an ‘interior’ complex but its survival is also unlikely. Most middle-class Victorian families rented their houses and imposed their taste on the building through furnishing and decorating, which meant that many people commenced their tenancy by covering up or destroying the decorative scheme created by the

previous inhabitants.²³ From the ubiquity of clichés about cluttered or over-decorated Victorian interiors it might be assumed that we know a great deal about how the houses of the 1850s and 1860s were furnished, but this is not the case. We have plenty of evidence to show how these interiors were disparaged by subsequent generations but know far less about what was actually there.²⁴

Historians of interior design rely extensively on illustrative material for establishing what a given interior looked like. This approach is valid but should not be taken as presenting an accurate impression of how people arranged their homes. Any visual representation of an interior has a point of view, whether it be a painting, photograph or engraving. The creator will select, emphasise or edit according to their area of interest or prejudice: there is no such thing as an objective view. Colour is deeply problematic and will often be more a consequence of the medium in which the image is produced (oil paint, water colour, chromolithograph) rather than an authentic representation of the original colour.

Architectural paint research (APR) offers some valuable solutions to the historiographical problems of the historic interior.²⁵ This technique is based on microscopic analysis of paint layers in order to establish the presence and nature of a decorative scheme. First, appropriate samples must be taken from the interior in question, which requires experience and judgement. The researcher needs to have a good sense of where colours or surface treatments might have changed, as the samples have a very small surface area and will only indicate the paint layers for this area. For example, a late Victorian artistic interior may have had a tripartite division of the wall plane between dado, fill and frieze, each section probably having a different surface treatment. Each of these sections would clearly need a separate sample. Over-painted patterns or stencilling can often be detected under raking light, again signalling specific areas that need to be sampled. Intensive sampling is typically needed on moulded skirting boards or cornices as individual elements within these areas are quite often gilded or picked out in contrasting colours. Essentially, in order to sample effectively, the researcher has to ask the right questions about the interior – questions that are predicated on knowledge of historic interiors and the deployment of surface decoration.

Samples are typically taken in a line down a wall plane and then selectively in areas where colour changes are likely. Attention needs to be paid to surfaces that may have been stripped back; in this instance good paint samples can still be obtained but the researcher needs to look for small sections of surface that the decorator did not strip back properly, such as the underside of a handrail or corner of a moulding. The original location of samples is carefully recorded so that a well-informed picture can be built up of the interior.

Element	ALL JOINERY	WALLFACES	CORNICE & CEILING ROSE	CEILING BED
Scheme number Later schemes not shown				
Scheme 10 c.1900	Cream lead oilpaint scheme	Red lead oilpaint Picture rail inserted and walls painted pale cream above	Pale cream lead oilpaint	No evidence for later schemes indicating that the ceiling was lining papered at the time of scheme 6 and painted over. This paper has since been removed
Scheme 9	Cream lead oilpaint scheme	Red lead oilpaint	Cream lead oilpaint	
Scheme 8	Cream lead oilpaint scheme	Red lead oilpaint	Cream lead oilpaint	
Scheme 7	Cream lead oilpaint scheme	Red lead oilpaint	Cream lead oilpaint	
Scheme 6 (pre 1897) Shown in historic photograph	Mid brown lead oilpaint scheme	Mid brown lead oilpaint	Dark stone coloured lead oilpaint with mid stone coloured oilpaint picking out	
Scheme 5 (after William's death)	Two-tone green lead oilpaint scheme	Duck egg blue lead oilpaint	Stone coloured lead oilpaint with green oilpaint picking out	Warm cream lead oilpaint
Scheme 4 (1860's) Later E. Gaskell period	Mid oak woodgraining scheme with a heavy dirt layer over, indicating that it was retained for some time	Cream lead oilpaint	Warm cream lead oilpaint	Warm cream lead oilpaint
Scheme 3 (1850's) Early E. Gaskell period	Mid oak woodgraining lead paint scheme	Pale green lead oilpaint	Warm cream lead oilpaint	Warm cream lead oilpaint
Scheme 2	Mid oak woodgraining lead paint scheme	Pale green lead oilpaint	Pale cream lead oilpaint	Pale cream lead oilpaint
Scheme 1 (c.1835) Earliest scheme	Mid oak woodgraining lead paint scheme	Pale pink/cream lead oilpaint	Pale cream lead oilpaint	Pale cream lead oilpaint
Substrate	Softwood	Lime plaster	Fine plaster	Lime plaster

Figure 2: Scheme Chart – dining room, recording the nineteenth century decorative schemes only

Once the samples have been collected, they are mounted in clear casting resin and the surface of the resin block is ground back and polished to reveal a cross section of the sample suitable for microscopic analysis. Samples are viewed under high-powered binocular microscopes using a variety of lighting techniques, including simulated daylight, ultra-violet and polarizing light. This allows the researcher to establish the paint stratigraphy of a given sample: an image of the layers of decorative finish that have been applied to a given surface, often including paint, varnish, gilding and dirt. For example Figure 1 shows a sample taken from the main wall face of the Gaskell's dining room at 100x magnification. The coarse material at the bottom of the image indicates the lime plaster substrate: what look like large blocks are grains of sand. The next four layers constitute 'scheme 1': a white primer, two layers of pink undercoat and a pink / pale cream topcoat. The pink undercoat layers are of a coarser texture, indicated by granular texture of the paint layers. Five layers of more restrained colour follow; two of pale green and three of cream. The last of these layers is topped by a thin dark brown line, indicating a heavy layer of dirt, which suggests that this layer stood for a considerable period before redecoration. The next scheme shows a change in colour: back to pale blue / green oil paint before later schemes of darker colours, mid brown and red.

The colour of the layers in the image only gives an approximate colour of the wall surface but further processes can aid assessment. Further forensic techniques can produce data that identifies the elements used in a particular layer of paint: Fourier transform infrared spectroscopy (FTIR) and scanning electron microscope (SEM) are the two common techniques used to carry out this process. Once the elements are identified, secondary research can be used to establish which pigments were used at particular periods to create particular tints. For example, the presence of a specific chemical compound might indicate artificial French ultramarine, a paint developed in the 1820s and commonly used from the 1830s, thus allowing the researcher to narrow down the likely dates.²⁶ Further evidence of colour can be obtained by carefully removing paint layers to corroborate the conclusions of the research – this is not a good initial approach because researchers need the paint stratigraphy to know what they are looking for. A final approach to establishing authentic colour is to compare the paint sample with the growing 'library' of accurately identified APR samples, which can be used to corroborate attributions.²⁷

Once the evidence from individual samples has been extracted, the data is collated in such a way that individual decorative schemes can be identified. This process essentially looks for patterns in the paint stratigraphy that indicate a decorative scheme: if most of the samples from a room exhibit similar paint layers this can be taken as a representative stratigraphy for that room. The

results from the wall faces will typically be considered alongside results from the interior woodwork, cornice, ceiling rose and ceiling bed. This will often reveal parallel elements that make up a scheme: typically the walls would have been painted simultaneously with the painting or varnishing the joinery and gilding or repainting the cornice. Tabulation of the results allows the researcher to establish the sequence and nature of decorative schemes (Figure 2). When results from different areas of the house correlate this indicates a decorative scheme that extended beyond one room and so once all the results have been collated, a good picture of the decorating activity can be established. In some cases this overview of the decorative history of an interior is even more significant than establishing the nature of the individual paints: APR can give an archaeological understanding of a historic interior that can rarely be matched by using other techniques or methodologies.

While the forensic techniques described above can indicate a type of paint and therefore a date range, more traditional historical methodologies can often establish a more precise picture of when decorative schemes were carried out. Paint stratigraphy establishes a reliable sequence of decorative schemes but, as materials analysis will normally indicate quite a wide date range, this sequence needs to be related to historical research to ground the findings in a more precise chronology. This is the point at which it is interesting to turn to Elizabeth Gaskell's life writing as an essential source for building up the picture of the interior scheme at Plymouth Grove.

III: The Decorative Schemes at 42 Plymouth Grove

In some instances, Gaskell's letters provide firm reference points that facilitate interpretation of the paint stratigraphy. On 10 September 1852, exterior painting was underway, Gaskell wrote to Marianne: 'The house is being painted *outside*, which makes so bad a smell inside, that Papa is planning where we can all go forthwith' (*Letters*, p.199). Oil paints were used over large surfaces in the mid-Victorian period and would have generated very strong odours. On 12 July 1855 fumes caused by interior painting caused the removal of the children:

I must try & get the children out of the house [,] the paint affects Julia so much. She is as white & weak as possible. Mrs Shuttleworth has asked them & Hearn to go there on Monday, (when Miss Hill leaves her,) till we can get them lodgings at Silverdale. (*Letters*, pp. 355-6)

A few weeks later another letter shows that the offer was accepted: 'Meta came home; but the house is abominable with paint and smells so badly that we have gladly accepted Mrs Shuttleworth's offer to let the children sleep there' (*Letters*, p.358). In May 1859, the Gaskells' landlord offered to make repairs to the house

if the family vacated it and the Gaskells evidently took the opportunity to redecorate at the same time: 'The house is to be painted and papered (passages & bedrooms) in May, but we shall rather adhere to the old colours' (*Letters*, p.536). On 4 August 1859 the family returned but the smells lingered: 'At last we are at home, in a house oh! so clean, but smelling of paint to the last degree, as the workmen only went out two days before we came in' (*Letters*, p.566). This evidence makes it clear that within the APR we should look for two major decorative schemes initiated by Gaskell in 1855 and 1859.

Further correspondence in the period leading up to the move and the period immediately afterwards give further insight into how the family used the house, the state of their finances and how these issues influenced the way they decorated and furnished the house. Gaskell's first letter to Eliza Fox ('Tottie') after finding the house shows both excitement and guilt at the extravagance:

And we've got a house. Yes! we *really* have. And if I had neither conscience nor prudence I should be delighted, for it certainly *is* a beauty. [...] Well! I must try and make the house give as much pleasure to others as I can and make it as little a selfish thing as I can. My dear! Its [sic] 150 a year, and I dare say we shall be ruined [...]. (*Letters*, pp.107-8)

Another letter to the same correspondent lists more detailed tasks and Gaskell characterises herself as Rossini's Barber of Seville:

But my dear, don't you see there are beds to be taken down, and curtains dyed and carpets cleaned, and cornices chosen and carpets selected, and cabbages planted in *our* garden, – and that I am the factotum della città – and its [sic] Figaro quà, Figaro là, – all day long. (*Letters*, p.110)

The level of Gaskell's involvement suggests that the family would have requested some redecoration of the interior before they moved in. After the move, the strained finances dictated several decisions about the house. On 17 February 1851 a letter to Marianne shows some makeshift arrangements concocted for entertaining guests:

On Saturday Miss Noble came to dinner, Mr & Mrs Shuttleworth, Miss Jane Noble, Mr & Mrs Charles Booth, & Miss Marsland's to tea. We turned the dining room into a drawing room, by sending the great table out, and bringing the table out of Papa's study with the very gay table cover. I think every one was very merry [...]. (*Letters*, p.145)

A few months later the reasons become clear:

Our house is proving rather too expensive for us, – MA's schooling taken into account; we aren't going to furnish drawing room & mean \ to be /, and are

very oeconomical [sic] because it seems such an addition to children's health & happiness to have plenty of room, & above all a garden to play in. (*Letters*, p. 159)

At this stage the education and wellbeing of the children is clearly the priority. In December 1851 the same arrangement was still in place, the dining room being the hub of the house and the drawing room apparently somewhat redundant:

Next week they return with Emily & Maggie Deane & Annie Austin; so then I suspect we shall have noise enough; more especially as we've hired a grand piano for the holidays, & and got it in the dining-drawing room; and put the old one in the unfurnished drawing room. (*Letters*, p.175)

This evidence shows that early in the Gaskell's residency only one of the main reception rooms was in use, the dining room, while the drawing room remained unfurnished and used to store secondary pieces of furniture.

When the documentary evidence is combined with the APR it is likely that schemes 2, 3 and 4 (Figure 2) were influenced by the Gaskell family. Scheme 1 constitutes the initial decoration of the new house, clearly demonstrated by the layers of primer and undercoat (Figure 1). Scheme 2 would appear to be a relatively superficial decorative scheme possibly requested by the Gaskell family in 1850, before they moved in. While there is no documentary evidence of this, the APR indicates that this scheme is a 'freshing up' of scheme 1, rather than a comprehensive redecoration. For example, in the drawing room the wallpaper was retained, the gilded oil paint on the cornice was left untouched (indicated by a heavy dirt layer), while the ceiling bed was repainted and the joinery was retouched and varnished. Schemes 3 and 4 were probably the events recorded by Gaskell in 1855 and 1859: quite comprehensive redecoration initiated by the family. Scheme 5 shows a marked change and probably represents the decorative programme initiated by the Gaskell children after the death of William Gaskell in 1884.

In September 1852 the Gaskells had the exterior of the house repainted. This was essentially conservative in that it retained the appearance of the house as it was when they moved in. The house was painted in 'mid stone' oil paint, the effect being to simulate the appearance of a stone villa, very much in line with late Georgian taste. The only difference evident through the APR is a slight lightening of the porch internal render from 'dark stone oil paint' to 'mid stone oil paint' during the period of the Gaskell family residency.²⁸ Two decorative schemes were carried out during the 1850s, suggesting that the exterior was redecorated in an identical fashion during the work of 1859. Following the exterior paintwork there are gradual signs that that some furnishing investments were being contemplated: a new piano in November 1852 and an antique

bureau, spotted by Gaskell while staying in London in June 1854 (*Letters*, pp. 213–4, 295–6).

The work of July 1855 constitutes a substantial redecoration of the house and signals the changing usage of the reception rooms; this scheme is recorded in some detail by the APR. Several rooms were treated in very similar manner to the existing decorative scheme. The dining room walls were painted with pale green oil paint; it is unclear whether this is the first or the second layer of green in Figure 1, although the latter is more likely as the first layer is likely to have been part of ‘scheme 2’, the freshening up of existing scheme before the Gaskells moved in 1850. The ceiling and ceiling rose were painted a slightly warmer tone of cream and the mid oak tone of the wood graining was retained on the joinery. In the morning room the cream paint of the joinery was retained but not varnished, as in the previous scheme. In the hallway the wood graining on the joinery was simply re-varnished and the wall faces painted in a pale blue-green colour, rather than the cream of the existing scheme. Most of the rooms showed little dramatic change: joinery was either re-varnished or painted in similar colours and where paint was present on wall faces it was in a neutral, cream tone.

The 1855 scheme suggests that, by this date, the Gaskells had started to use the drawing room as a public room: it shows signs of a relatively elaborate treatment consistent with it being the central location for entertaining guests on calls. The joinery and cornice were painted in cream and grey lead oil paints with certain elements picked out with gilding: the central roll moulding on the door architraves, the ring of the corner paterae on the architraves and the roll mouldings on the skirting boards. This scheme replaced cream oil paint with varnish, a subtle change of tone: a more matte finish but increased gilding that would have added more decorative interest in well-defined areas. This is not a ‘Puritan’ scheme, but the muted colour and the selective gilding still suggest restraint; this is a decorative interior but not a showy one, ornament without inappropriate opulence.

An absence of paint on the wall faces of the drawing room signals that wallpaper was hung and this proves to be a significant factor in understanding the decorative scheme. The earliest drawing room paper probably dates from the first (pre Gaskell) scheme of c. 1835–41, as the pattern is structured by a crocketed diaper grid containing pointed quatrefoils (Figure 3). This type of pattern is typical of the emerging interest in gothic patterns of the early Victorian period but too ornate and florid for a design reformer. The second wallpaper, probably the first chosen by the Gaskells, also has a Gothic Revival influence through its fleur-de-lis motif, but is far simpler (Figure 4). The repeat is quite small in scale, and the pattern is very flat, with no hint of the perspective so frowned

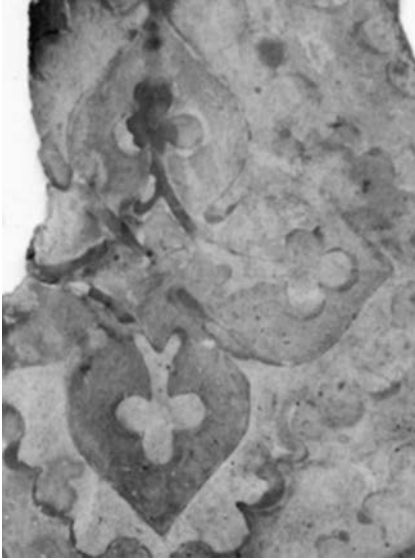


Figure 3: Pre-Gaskell drawing room wallpaper fragment

Figure 4: Early Gaskell (c.1850–55) drawing room wallpaper fragment

upon by Pugin. The ochre of the fleur-de-lis might well have been conceived as a response to the gilding used in the joinery and cornice. This scheme would seem to mark the point at which the family started to use the room as a proper reception room, and, more importantly, as Gaskell's writing room. In June 1854 she wrote to Marianne: 'Meanwhile I write every spare moment in the little room beyond the dining-room'²⁹ but by 1857 described herself to Charles Norton as 'sitting at the writing table in the drawing-room' (*Letters*, pp. 297, 474). About 1860 the wallpaper was replaced with a different pattern that retained a similar palette of ochre, grey and cream. This may have been part of the wider decorative scheme of 1859 (Figure 5).

A fascinating sequence of wallpapers documents the decorative history of the study. The earliest wallpaper, a design of a trailing grape vine, was block-printed onto a machine-made woven paper indicating that this was produced no earlier than the late 1830s (Figure 6). The second layer (still extant in the study behind the removed bookcase) seems to date from c. 1850, but before the Gaskells moved into the house (Figure 7). The basic motif is derived from a fleur-de-lis, which forms the centre of a reticulated ogee framework, and the repeat is relatively large at about 15cm. All three features can be found in A.W.N. Pugin's wallpapers from c. 1847, especially those that he designed for the Palace of Westminster. A likely attribution, therefore, is an early 1850s commercial derivation of a Pugin design.³⁰ Another slightly later source might be Owen Jones, whose wallpaper designs from c. 1852 included a number of reticulated

Figure 5: Drawing room wallpaper fragment c 1860

ogee structures, often including Moresque elements.³¹ The Gaskells seem to have left this paper in place until 1855, when a paper with a smaller scale repeat was hung (Figure 8). This pattern is essentially a variation on the fleur-de-lis motif within and a vaguely Moresque framework with restrained colouring – this too could easily be a commercial paper derived from a design by Owen Jones.

The redecoration of 1859 is vividly captured in one of Gaskell's letters to Charles Elliot Norton:

Yes! we have got our drawing-room chairs & sofas covered with a new chintz. Such a pretty ones [sic], little rosebuds & carnations on a white ground. All the other furniture stands where it did. By little bits we pick up little bits of prettiness (such as two Black Forest carved brackets at the fair at Heidelberg,) but you'll be happy to hear we are not rich enough to make many or grand changes. Indeed I don't think I should like to do it, even if one could. The house is to be papered and painted (passages & bedrooms) in May, but we shall rather adhere to the old colours. We mean to have prettier flowers than ever this year in the conservatory. (*Letters*, p. 536)

This passage gives a good sense of Gaskell's constant negotiation between austerity and opulence: the need for continued domestic economy is almost a relief, since it means she does not have the responsibility of commissioning a scheme that could be interpreted as too extravagant. The significant new patterns are located in the furnishing fabrics. While describing the floral chintz Gaskell



Figure 6: Pre-Gaskell study wallpaper with green vine-leaves

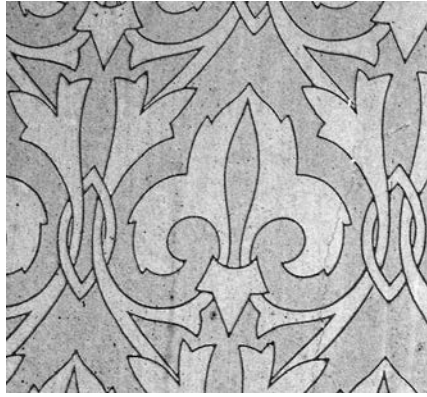


Figure 7: Early 1850s study wallpaper



Figure 8: 1855 study wallpaper



Figure 9: Later study wallpaper

calls the motif 'little' and 'on a white ground' suggesting that this cannot be in any way similar to the large scale, deeply shaded naturalistic pattern so frowned upon by those associated with design reform. The brackets from Heidelberg constitute another significant element to the interior. They sit somewhere between a souvenir and an item that forms part of a collection, an object that constitutes both a memory of a specific visit and an unusual but tasteful artefact. Most importantly this is not something that you could just go out and buy, not the sort of thing that Mrs Thornton could have included in her drawing room or an object tainted with Ruskin's 'fatal newness'. The visits to Heidelberg were family occasions, a letter from Gaskell to Marianne in 1858 being full of

news about 'Meta' and 'Flossy' and how they responded to the foreign country (*Letters*, pp.517-21). As the brackets are objects that carry meaning within the family, they are prevented from being merely vulgar purchases. Gaskell might have described them nonchalantly as 'little bits of prettiness' but being pretty without being vulgar or ostentatious was a difficult business, and a problem well negotiated through souvenirs from family trips abroad.

Gaskell's comment about 'adhering to the old colours' is corroborated by the APR; many of the painted surfaces show an identical scheme. In the drawing room several gilded sections were painted over with oil paint. In the study a new paper seems to have been hung but the style was very similar to the previous layer (Figure 9), a small scale repeat with a gothic or Moresque structure in muted green tones.

The importance of the personal touch goes right to the heart of mid-Victorian good taste. Crucially, taste could not be purchased and tradesmen were frequently castigated for selling naïve customers the wrong kind of product or offering a wide range of tasteless designs.³² Women were expected to actively orchestrate their interiors, which is why Gaskell so frequently saw interiors as a reflection of both fictional and real people. Just as Plymouth Grove was undergoing its first coat of exterior paint in 1852, Gaskell decided to furnish Marianne's room as her eighteenth birthday present: 'You know I said *my* birthday presents would be trying to furnish your dressing room as nicely as ever I could for you' (*Letters*, p.199). A couple of months later Marianne had still not returned from London and Gaskell lamented:

[I]t is a sad blank not to have her [Marianne] coming home when we expected; and the little ones have worked mats, & gathered flowers &c &c for her dressing-room. I have been making this said room as nice as I could for her, – bookshelves, table, inkstand &c, engraving of that beautiful Madonna della Sedia. (*Letters*, pp. 217–8)

Here the arrangement of the room is a family project: young children make objects or collect flowers and Gaskell assembles the furniture and chooses the decorations. This seems to have been something like a rite of passage in the Gaskell household. Marianne had just left Mrs Lalor's school and was coming back to Plymouth Grove to teach the younger children, Julia and Flossy.³³ Marianne's return and status as teacher seem to have made her eligible for her own dressing room, with an interior appropriately arranged by her mother including an engraving of a Raphael Madonna, very much the type of painting endorsed by Gaskell's friend Anna Jameson, who was emerging strongly as an arbiter of taste in religious art for middle-class liberals.³⁴

All the evidence of the decorative treatment of Plymouth Grove during the

Gaskell's occupancy points towards a carefully orchestrated scheme. Architectural paint research enables an accurate picture to be built up of what was essentially a restrained decorative scheme, both in terms of colour and surface finishes: limited but significant gilding, restrained colours and the type of wallpapers that conformed to the emerging discourse of design reform. Gaskell's life writing, and the way that the family used the house, suggest pride in giving priority to essentials such as education over the interior decoration. When more funds were available, the essentially conservative scheme was retained and 'prettiness' introduced in appropriate ways by using the right materials or objects that had particular significance within the family: the interior was seen as a comfort to the family rather than as a display to strangers. Gaskell's sensitivity to the messages and pitfalls of the mid-Victorian interior are a pervasive presence in her life and her fiction, but she was never simplistic about the subject. Most obviously, Mr Thornton, owner of the most unnerving drawing room in Victorian fiction, saves the Hales from a pink and blue wallpaper reeking of 'vulgarity and commonness' and eventually marries Gaskell's heroine (*NS*, p.65).³⁵ What Gaskell does so effectively is to articulate the dangers and dilemmas facing those making decorating decisions in mid-Victorian England. In Gaskell's fiction this allows the reader to understand her characters through the way that they perceive taste. With the benefit of APR, we can gain a glimpse of how Gaskell navigated the pitfalls of taste herself, through the decisions that she made about the decoration Plymouth Grove.

Notes

- 1 After the Gaskell's residency the address was changed to 84 Plymouth Grove.
- 2 The results of the paint analysis are recorded in: Crick Smith Conservation, 'The Gaskell's House, 84 Plymouth Grove, Manchester. An Analysis of Decorative Finishes & Wallpapers with focus on Elizabeth Gaskell's Period of Occupancy (1850–1865)' (unpublished Consultancy Report, 2010). This report revealed much of interest about the interiors of Plymouth Grove after Elizabeth Gaskell's death but a discussion of this material is beyond the scope of this article.
- 3 *Mary Barton*, ed. by Macdonald Daly (London: Penguin, 1996), pp. 16 and 51.
- 4 *North and South*, ed. by Angus Easson (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 112. Subsequent references are to this edition.
- 5 *Wives and Daughters*, ed. by Laurence Lerner (London: Penguin, 1969), pp.220 and 225.
- 6 For an overview of design reform see J. Lubbock, *The Tyranny of Taste* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), pp. 248–78.
- 7 The two key publications are A.W.N. Pugin, *Contrasts, or a Parallel between the Noble Edifices of the Middle Ages, and Corresponding Buildings of the Present Day; Shewing the Present Decay of Taste* (London: 1836) and A. W. N. Pugin, *The True Principles of Pointed or Christian Architecture* (London: 1841).
- 8 Pugin, *True Principles*, p. 25.
- 9 Pugin, *True Principles*, p. 26.
- 10 The standard account of ecclesiology is James White, *The Cambridge Movement. The Ecclesiologists and the Gothic Revival* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962); for the

relationship between the Oxford Movement, ecclesiology and other high church factions see Nigel Yates, *Anglican Ritualism in Victorian Britain 1830-1910* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

- 11 Elizabeth Coutts, 'Holland, Francis James (1828-1907)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004.
[<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/48702>, accessed 19 March 2013]
- 12 Gilbert French was a Bolton draper who had been seeking to promote his products to the ecclesiastical market since the mid 1840s, a selection of which he exhibited at the Great Exhibition of 1851; see Gilbert French, *Practical remarks on some of the minor accessories to the services of the church, with hints on the preparation of altar cloths, pede cloths, and other ecclesiastical furniture, addressed to ladies and church-wardens* (Leeds: T. W. Green, 1844). French's display at the Great Exhibition is depicted in a painting at the V&A: <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O134838/church-furniture-watercolour-dolby-edwin-thomas/>. He exhibited in Class 26: See Catalogue, vol 1, p. 131.
- 13 John Chapple, 'Unitarian Dissent' in *The Cambridge Companion to Elizabeth Gaskell*, ed. by Jill L. Matus (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 164-77; pp. 173-5.
- 14 Henry Morley, 'A House Full of Horrors', *Household Words* 141 (4 December 1852), pp. 265-70. For a discussion of the opposition to design reform see Lubbock, *Tyranny of Taste*, pp. 271-8.
- 15 Charles Dickens, *Hard Times* (London: Penguin, 1995), p. 14.
- 16 Deborah Cohen, *Household Gods, the British and their Possessions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), p. 13.
- 17 John Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (London: Smith Elder and Co., 1849), pp. 15-16.
- 18 Ruskin, *Seven Lamps*, p. 16
- 19 The Author of Modern Painters, 'To the Editor of the Times' *Times*, 25 May, 1854, p. 7.
- 20 John Paul Kanwit, "'Mere Outward Appearances'? Household Taste and Social Perception in Elisabeth Gaskell's *North and South*", *Victorian Review* 35:1 (2009), 190-210; Kerri E. Hunt, 'Nouns that were signs of things: Object Lessons in Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*', *Gaskell Journal*, 26 (2012), 3-17; Beatrice Bazell, 'The Atrocious Interior: Wallpaper, Machinery and 1850s Aesthetics in *North and South*' *Gaskell Journal*, 26 (2012), 36-51.
- 21 C.L. Eastlake, *Hints on Household Taste* (London: Longman Green & Co., 1868).
- 22 The phrase 'interior design' was first used in the modern sense in 1927 and even the terms 'interior decoration' and 'interior decorator' were rarely used before the twentieth century. See "interior design, n." in OED Online. December 2012. Oxford University Press: <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/97833> [accessed 7 March 2013.]
- 23 For an overview of the socio-economic context of Victorian interiors see Chris Breward, 'Fashionable Living', in *Design and the Decorative Arts Britain 1500-1900*, eds M. Snodin and J. Styles (London: V&A Publications, 2001) pp. 401-29.
- 24 A lucid account of the historiographical problems involved in the history of interior design can be found in Stefan Muthesius, *The Poetic Home* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2009), pp. 9-13.
- 25 This section is based substantially on Crick Smith Conservation, 'The Gaskell's House'; the account of the techniques of APR and the interpretation of Gaskell interior have been greatly enhanced by conversations with Paul Croft and Ian Crick Smith.
- 26 See Rosamond Harley, *Artist's Pigments* (Oxford: Butterworth, 1970) p. 58.
- 27 The University of Lincoln is fortunate to be the custodians of the National Archive for Historic Decoration, one of most significant international collections of attributed paint samples.
- 28 Crick Smith Conservation, 'Gaskell House, Manchester. Exterior Painted Elements. Architectural Paint Survey Findings Document' (Unpublished Consultancy Report Commissioned by Manchester Historic Buildings Trust, 2009).

- 29 The 'little room beyond the drawing room' seems to refer to the small room to the west of the dining room, with a south-facing window to the left of the bow in the south wall of the house.
- 30 Pugin wallpapers of this type can be found on the V&A website, for example museum nos. E.104-1939, E.887-1979.
- 31 Owen Jones wallpapers of this type can be found on the V&A website, for example museum nos. 8341:70, 8341:43.
- 32 Blaming tradesmen for bad taste has a long tradition from Pugin's satirical illustration in *Contrasts* dedicated to 'The Trade', to Eastlake's critique of English ironmongery. See Pugin, *Contrasts*, p. vi; Charles Eastlake, *Hints on Household Taste* (Boston: James Osgood, 1874), pp. 143-5.
- 33 Uglow, p. 345.
- 34 Gaskell refers to the painting normally known as Raphael's *Madonna della Sedia* or *Seggiola* (Pitti Palace, Florence), c. 1514.
- 35 Kanwit (p. 204) and Bazell (p. 38) both recognise Thornton's replacement of the Hale's wallpaper as a sign of his ability to transcend the taste of his mother's drawing room.