**Liz Woolley**

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Walk south down St Aldates, leaving the city behind you … past Christchurch and towards the River Thames.

Before you reach Folly Bridge, you’ll see on your right a grand ashlar building. High up on the façade is a plaque. It features the upper body and head of a man, his arm resting casually along the top of a tablet, which reads: William Morris, Viscount Nuffield, 1877-1963, motor manufacturer and generous benefactor.

I think that that short poetic phrase sums up very neatly a man who did more than any other individual to transform Oxford in the 20th century - physically, economically and socially.

My name’s Liz Woolley; I was a student here in the 1980s, but stayed on afterwards and crossed the great divide to become a ‘townie’. Now I’m a freelance local historian, working on commercial research, community history projects, and as a part-time tutor at the university’s Department for Continuing Education. My main interest is in the city of Oxford in the 19th and early to mid 20th centuries, and in particular in social history, industry and commerce. And that’s why the subject of this plaque – William Morris, or Lord Nuffield as he became in 1934 - is so appealing to me. Like many other people, I also have reason to thank him – I was born in the maternity wing of the Radcliffe Infirmary, which he built in 1932, “so that, as he put it, *“any woman in Oxford can have her baby in hospital”.*

This building is now the County Court, but the plaque is here because it was originally built as one of several motor garages which Morris had around the city. Large curved plate glass windows on the ground floor – now filled in – allowed passers-by to admire an impressive display of the latest cars, and, in the days before private garages and car parks, you could leave your vehicle here. There were changing rooms so that motorists could *“cast off the dust of the road”* and change into their evening clothes when attending functions, *“without having to trouble about an hotel.”* And whilst you were dining at the Randolph, or enjoying a theatre production in town, your chauffeur could while away the hours in a special waiting room here, smoking and reading the latest motoring journals.

By the time this building was erected in 1932, William Morris was well on his way to becoming one of the most successful businessmen that this country had ever seen, one of its most generous benefactors, and someone who put Oxford firmly on the international map.

He started at the age of 15, with a capital of just £4, by setting up a bicycle repair business in a shed at the back of his parents’ house.

Soon he was building bicycles and selling them; his business expanded and by 1901 (when he was 24) he had taken over premises in the city centre. By 1912 he was assembling cars, and soon moved his factory to Cowley, a village 2.5 miles to the south east of the city. Within 15 years he was making 55 thousand cars a year - two fifths of all the cars produced in Britain – and on the eve of the Second World War he was employing 11,000 people, 30% of Oxford’s working population.

A lot of those workers came from outside the city: thousands of men migrated here from depressed mining areas in South Wales, Yorkshire and Derbyshire, where Morris actively advertised for their labour. Their wives and children followed, and large new housing estates were built, particularly between East Oxford and Cowley, to accommodate them. These men and their families brought with them their religious non-conformity, their left-wing politics and trade unionism, and their culture– that’s why we have an Oxford Welsh Male Voice Choir to this day.

The manufacturing and residential expansion prompted by the growth of the motor industry had an enormous effect, not just on Cowley but on the make-up of the population and the layout of Oxford as a whole. Many people, particularly within the university, were dismayed by these developments, and Morris received lot of criticism from academics over the changes that his business had wrought. The writer CS Lewis said: “How I hate that man” and the poet John Betjeman sneered at “pale-faced mechanics in Oxford bags walking down the Cornmarket”. They were also alarmed by the fact that Morris’s factories paid reasonably well – certainly better than jobs at the colleges, which based their payments to staff on Oxfordshire’s notoriously low agricultural wages. And so although employment in the car industry meant putting up with long hours, dangerous working conditions, and sometimes ruthless supervisors, many preferred to be part of an exciting new industry, with an employer who provided sports and social facilities, than kowtowing to pampered undergraduates and fusty old dons at the centuries-old university.

So within just a few decades, William Morris changed the demographics, the physical layout, and the social and religious life of the city. He also made Oxford world-famous, not just as the home of a university, but as a manufacturing centre from which cars were exported all over the globe. To meet demand, he set up foreign assembly plants in South Africa, India and Australia. The Hindustan Ambassador, based on the Morris Oxford, was still being manufactured in India in 2014. Such was the fame of the Morris car works here in Oxford that tourists flocked to visit the factory, and some academics noted ruefully that the University had become little more than ‘Cowley’s Latin Quarter’.

William Morris was a complex character - he had an infinite capacity for hard work and tremendous energy, which stayed with him all his life. He was a great entrepreneur, but was autocratic and stubborn, which had a disastrous effect on his business in the late 1930s.

He inspired devotion amongst sections of his workforce, but fell out spectacularly with some of his senior managers, with friends, and with people on the City Council and within the university.

He amassed a fortune - at one time he was said to be earning £2k a day - but gave most of it away and lived frugally. When asked about the benefits of riches he said: “Well, you can only wear one suit at a time.”

He gave enormous donations to higher education, to scientific research and to medicine, both here in Oxford and elsewhere.

His interest in medicine was personal - he was almost obsessed with medical complaints and their cures - *“a notorious hypochondriac”* - and was a great taker of pills: his sovereign remedy for most ailments was bicarbonate of soda.

He gave regular and large benefactions to various hospitals, including to the Wingfield Orthopaedic in Headington - later renamed the Nuffield Orthopaedic. He bought the Radcliffe Observatory site on the Woodstock Road for the Radcliffe Infirmary (where the Oxford and Empire Network is now based) and established the Nuffield Institute of Medical Research, forcing the university to show an interest in medical sciences, really for the first time.

He provided numerous medical research scholarships at various colleges, and endowed the Nuffield Dominion Scholarships, bringing medical graduates from universities in Australia, NZ, and South Africa to further their education in Oxford. Though when asked why he didn’t include Canada, he replied “Well, they didn’t buy any of my cars!”

This former Morris garage on St Aldates is just one of many sites across the city which remind us of lasting impact which Lord Nuffield had on both town and gown.

You can visit his first city-centre premises at 48 High Street, where he built and sold bicycles and motorised pedal-cycles. Or see his first car showroom, built in 1913 at 36 Queen Street, and his garage on Longwall Street, where he garaged and repaired cars, and assembled the very first Bullnose Morris. Visit St Peter’s, the college which Nuffield saved from collapse only a few years after it opened, and where a student accommodation block is named the Emily Ann Morris building after his mother, and his portrait as benefactor hangs in the dining hall.

Go to see Nuffield College, founded by William Morris with a donation of nearly a million pounds to the university, the first Oxford college to have a subject specialisation, to admit both men and women as students and academics, and to be graduate only.

And of course you could also leave the city, head south east and visit the car works at Cowley, where 5,000 of the world-famous Mini are made every week, every one of them pre-ordered by a customer from somewhere across the globe, and every one of them unique. Would William Morris, Lord Nuffield, approve of the hi-tech robots which have now largely replaced human workers on the production line? He was always looking to the future, so I think he probably would.

I hope that you’ve enjoyed this podcast; please visit the Oxford and Empire Network website to listen to others, and to find out more about Oxford’s relationship with empire.