

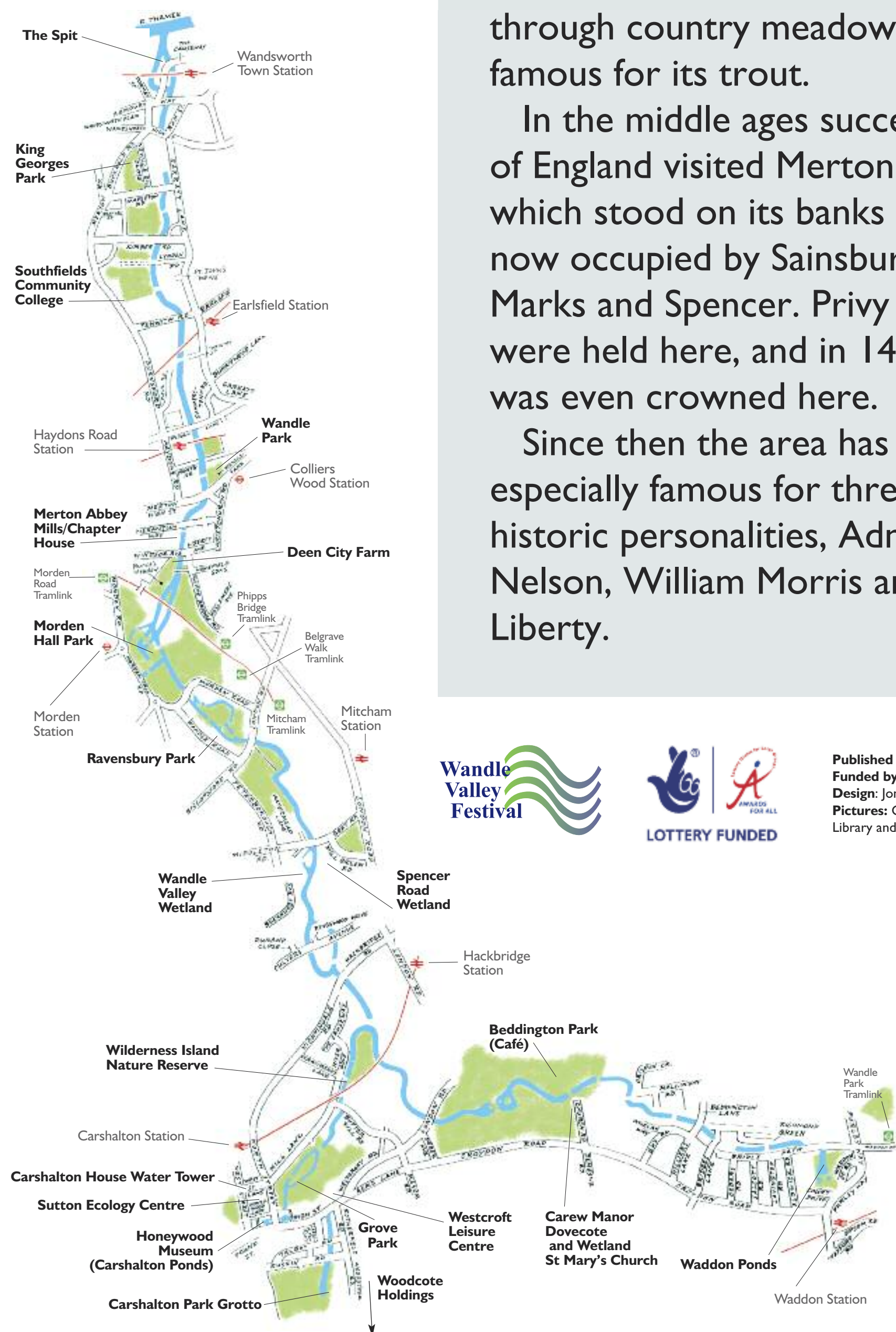
River Wandle In Merton

Famous people of the Wandle

The River Wandle has a fascinating history. In the nineteenth century it became heavily industrialised and polluted, but before then it was a beautiful chalk stream meandering through country meadows, and famous for its trout.

In the middle ages successive Kings of England visited Merton Priory, which stood on its banks on the site now occupied by Sainsbury's and Marks and Spencer. Privy Councils were held here, and in 1437 Henry VI was even crowned here.

Since then the area has become especially famous for three great historic personalities, Admiral Lord Nelson, William Morris and Arthur Liberty.



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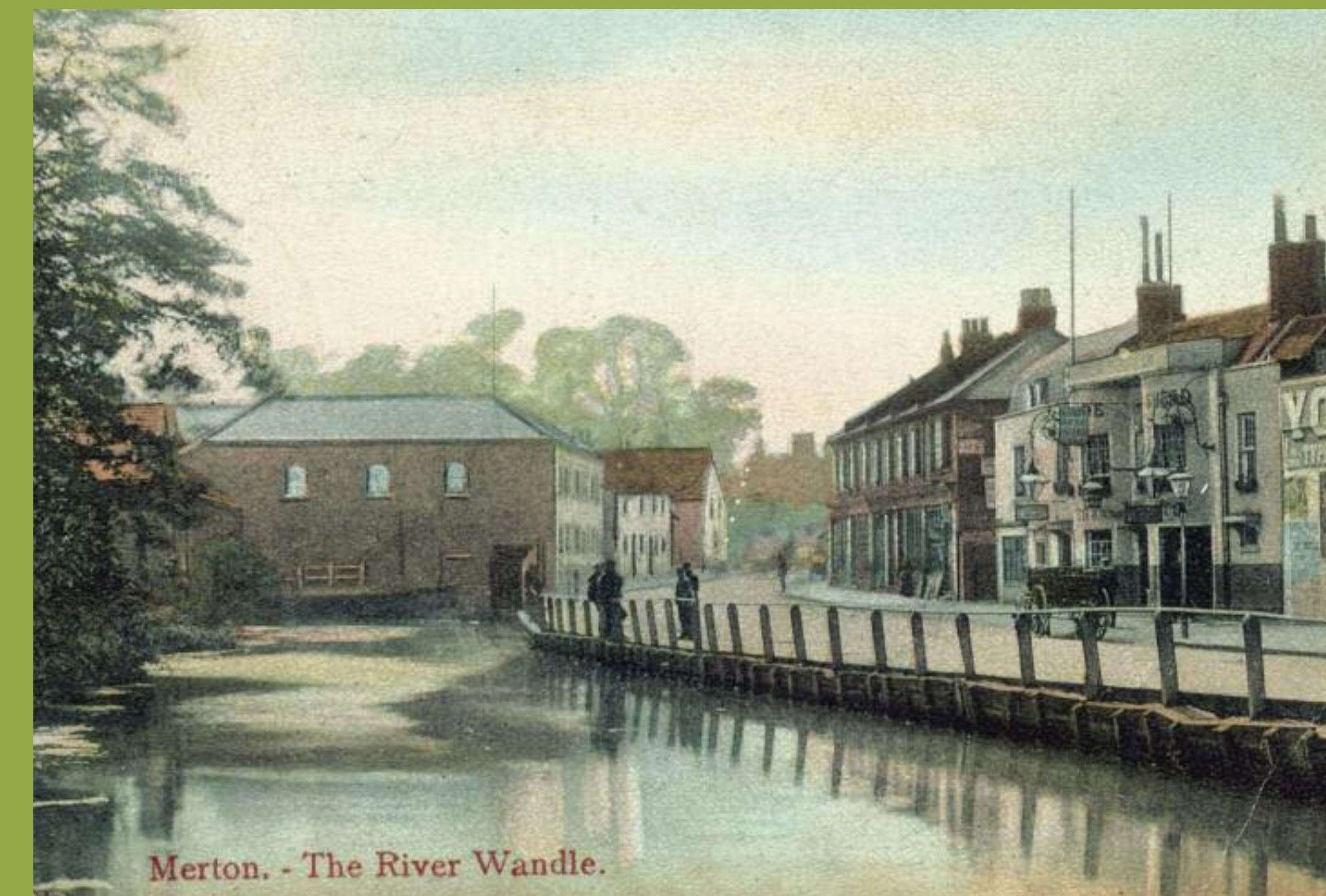
William Morris



If the great Victorian designer is famous everywhere today for his wonderful nature-inspired fabric and wallpaper patterns, they were only a small part of this extraordinary man's achievement. He was a poet too, a novelist, a translator, a Socialist pamphleteer, a philosopher, businessman, printer and architect, and a passionate advocate of the ideals and traditional skills of art and craft.



Nature was the inspiration of Morris's fabric designs, and one of his famous was named 'The Wandle Chintz'

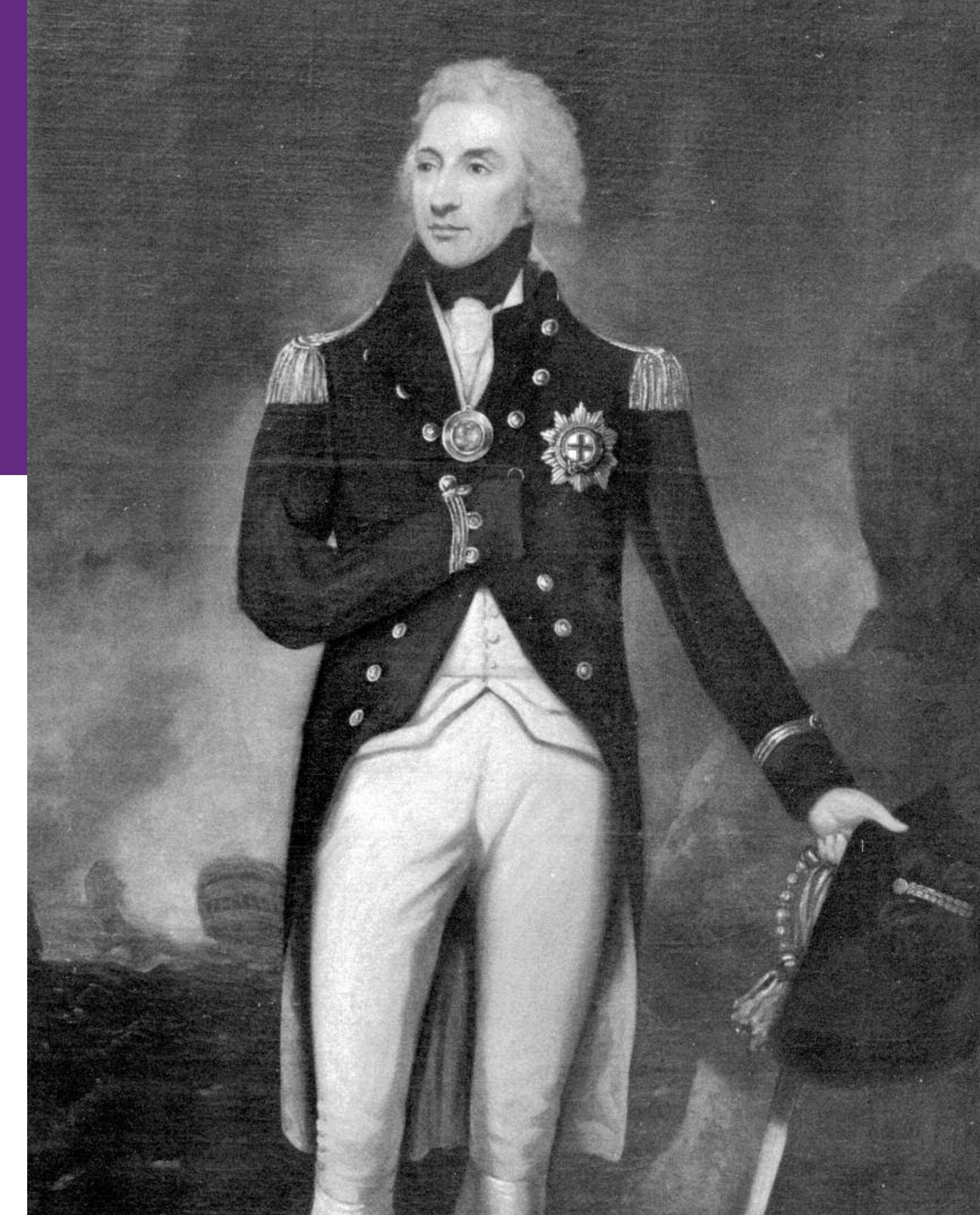


Merton - The River Wandle.

So he founded The Arts and Crafts Movement, and gathered about him such famous contemporaries as the artists Burne-Jones and Rossetti, and the ceramic designer William de Morgan. Morris's factory was in the centre of London till 1881, when he found an ideal premises in Merton High Street on the Wandle, whose water quality was perfect for his purpose and whose local plants were ideal for producing the natural dyes that were essential to his processes.



His premises were demolished before the Second World War, but they were excavated by archaeologists not long ago, and you can see a small plaque marking the spot, just opposite Sainsbury's on the banks of the Wandle.



Horatio Nelson

The happiest years of England's greatest naval hero's life were spent in Merton. In 1801 he bought Merton Place, a house that stood near the present day South Wimbledon Station, whose estate was a stone's throw from the River Wandle. He described it as 'his dear, dear Merton'.

It was all too short-lived. Nelson left Merton for Trafalgar in October 1805, never to return. Emma lived on there for a while, but her debts forced the sale of the house, which was never again lived in. It had been demolished by 1823, and all traces are now lost beneath the High Path Estate housing development, except for a blue plaque.



The Seat of the gallant Admiral Lord Nelson, who died in battle, Oct. 21, 1805.

He lived there in the notorious 'menage à trois' with his lover Lady Emma Hamilton and her husband Sir William (until his death in 1803). They worshipped at St Mary's, the parish church of Merton, and after Emma had the house greatly expanded in 1805 the couple entertained lavishly.

Arthur Liberty



Liberty is the Regent Street store, world-famous for its exquisite printed silks. In the mid-19th century its founder Sir Arthur Liberty imported silks from the Far East, which became so popular that he started hand-printing them here in Merton with the firm of Littlers. He then bought the company, which flourished until the 1960s on the banks of the Wandle, at what is now Merton Abbey Mills.

Silk printing by hand is an extremely skilled operation, placing a series of heavy and intricately-patterned blocks, one for each colour, with extreme accuracy on a flimsy material. Liberty had a world-wide reputation for the highest quality.



Liberty was a friend and colleague of William Morris in The Arts and Crafts Movement, and it was he who suggested to Morris that Merton would be the ideal place to look for premises. Morris's factory has long since disappeared, but Merton Abbey Mills gives you a good idea of the sort of place it was – a pleasant place to work, on a human scale, the very opposite of the big Victorian factories of the day.

Izaak Walton

'The Compleat Angler' was virtually the first ever textbook on fishing, and Walton, born in 1593, is still the most famous writer on the subject. His was a lifelong passion, and he published his famous treatise 1653, updating and adding to it in several subsequent editions. He did much of his fishing on the River Lea near Hoddesdon, but was especially fond of the Wandle, whose 'trout marked with marble spots like a tortoise' he lovingly describes.



In the last century fish were virtually wiped out by pollution, but nowadays the Wandle Trust is doing sterling work in cleaning the river, stocking and nurturing the trout population once again, and promoting their 'Trout in the Classroom' project for children.