Book Review: Philip Webb: Pioneer of Arts and Crafts Architecture, by Sheila Webb (Wiley, 2005), by David French

A new book about of the architect Philip Webb correctly places him as the founder of the Arts and Crafts movement. He is most famous for designing Red House in Bexley for William Morris, but his importance has only been recognised since his death. The book is a combination of biography and architectural history, but our interest is in Webb's friendship with Hale White. Webb (1831 to 1915) is an almost exact contemporary of Hale White.

Webb was recommended to Hale White as an architect by Ruskin, following their correspondence in The Daily Telegraph (Kirk says The Times) in 1865. White had asked Ruskin if it were possible to build a "solid and plain" house near London "fit for a human being to live in". Ruskin recommended Webb as an architect who would give "perfectly sound and noble work for absolutely just price". Hale White selected the location and the resulting house, 19 Park Hill in Carshalton, was built in 1868 and, according to Kirk, Hale White was delighted with it. She writes that "Its design reflected White's obsession with privacy and heating and concerns about noise and draught", and that since "White suffered from claustrophobia [something this reviewer does not recall seeing documented before], the four bedrooms were exceptionally well lit." The house was Webb's first "small house".

The book addresses the issue of the degree of Webb's involvement in the design of the house and the contribution of his pupil C. G. Vinall by stating, in a footnote, that Webb took no fee because the construction of the house was supervised by Vinall. Apparently Vinall, who was an architect and surveyor, supervised the completion of several houses when Webb was busy with other work.

The author makes use of the letters from Webb to Hale White at Bedford Library. However, as Dorothy Hale White points out in her introduction to Letters To Three Friends, what remains of the letters does not make a correspondence. Their letters covered a range of topics including architecture, astronomy, warm clothing and art. They shared an interest in books, with Hale White making recommendations to Webb. Kirk refers to Webb's reading as including philosophical works, Carlyle, Bunyan, Balzac and Cobbett. Webb wrote to Hale White: "books that are masterpieces of human expression are like the landscape in front of our window in the country, never failing in their mission to bless."

There are many similarities between Hale White and Webb and it is easy to see why they would be friends. Both were men of integrity who disliked publicity. Webb believed that "pretentious or extravagant display, to which he was antipathetic, joined ugliness and shoddiness in being symptomatic of the era". He "disliked social gatherings, small talk and gossip but greatly enjoyed quiet conversation with a seriously thoughtful friend and delighted in a hearty laugh". This could almost be a description of Hale White himself.

The closeness of their friendship is exemplified by the fact that when Hale White moved to Crowborough he was delighted to be close to Webb who had retired to Worth, near Crawley in Sussex. Hale White even proposed building a cottage for Webb in Uckfield. Proximity to Webb was a factor in his decision to move to Groombridge. By 1894 they were meeting for a couple of hours

every two months as well as corresponding. In earlier days they met at Webb’s offices in Raymonds Buildings in Grays Inn, London.

The book is beautifully illustrated and is the product of many years’ research. It is already the standard work on Webb and worth reading in its own right. There is a full review of the book by Andrew Saint in the London Review of Books, 1 December, 2005.