

# A William Morris letter

*Peter Faulkner*

The letter presented below is in private hands, and is not included in Norman Kelvin's *The Collected Letters of William Morris*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 4 vols., 1984–1996; it appeared in facsimile form in order to accompany *On the Visionary Work and Revolutionary Life of an Idle Idol: William Morris* by John Mitchinson, published by Bracketpress in 2008.

The letter (Figures 1–2) is written on two sides of a single folded sheet of Morris's Kelmscott House writing paper, as was common at the time; the address is printed in small capitals on the top right-hand side of the first page. Morris provides a date in November, but no indication of the year, although it clearly belongs to a period of political activism, probably the late 1880s, possibly 1886. Gaps have been left in the text below in order to indicate the four pages of the letter.

I am not at present able to specify the year, and I hope that members will be able to do so in view of the historical references in the letter; please send suggestions to [reviews@williammorrisociety.org.uk](mailto:reviews@williammorrisociety.org.uk).

KELMSCOTT HOUSE,  
UPPER MALL,  
HAMMERSMITH.

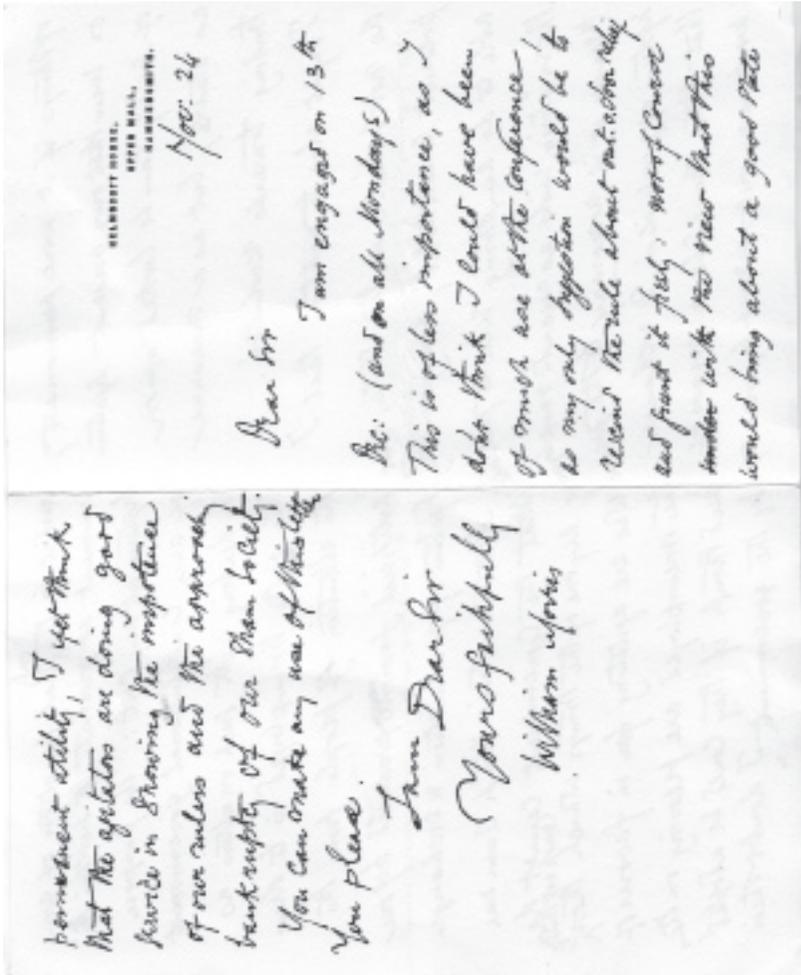
Nov: 24

Dear Sir

I am engaged on 13th Dec: (and on all Mondays) This is of less importance, as I don't think I could have been of much use at the conference, as my only suggestion would be to rescind the rule about out.o.door<sup>l</sup> relief and grant it freely: not of course ~~under~~ with the view that this would bring about a good state

of things if it were permanent, or even that our present system of society can be looked upon as stable, but as a measure tending towards revolution.

I ought also to mention that I do not believe in the State, as at present constituted,



8 Figure 1 – Pages 4  
and 1 of facsimile of  
letter. (See text for  
explanation.)

Figure 2 - Pages 2  
and 3.

of things if it were permanent,  
 or even that our present system  
 of society can be lasted upon  
 as stable, but as a measure  
 tending towards revolution.  
 I ought also to mention that I  
 do not believe in the State, as a  
 present constituted, ~~being~~ <sup>being</sup> ~~the~~  
 able to do anything else to ~~prevent~~  
 the existing evils as regards employ-  
 ment because it is necessary to the present  
 system of production & exchange  
 that there should be a mass of  
 workers out of employment;

and it is the <sup>only</sup> real function of gov-  
 ernment at present to sustain the  
 system at any cost. The purpose  
 of any Constitutional government  
 in dealing with such matters as  
 this of the unemployed is to draw  
 the attention of people from the  
 artificial famine produced by our  
 present Constitutional system of production & exchange.  
 At the same time though I am sure  
 that the Government cannot ~~do~~  
 anything to ~~prevent~~ any one of the things which ~~they~~  
 who are agitating ~~for~~ in favour of  
 the unemployed are pressing on them  
 and though if they could be adopted  
 by the government I doubt their

doing—even being able to do anything even to palliate the existing evils as regards employment. Because it is necessary to the present system of production & exchange that there should be a mass of workmen out of employment;

and it is the only<sup>2</sup> real function of government at present to sustain this system at any cost. The purpose of any constitutional government in dealing with such matters as this of the Unemployed is to draw the attention of people from the artificial famine produced by our system of production & exchange.

At the same time though I am sure that the Government cannot do any one of the things which those (such as the SPE)<sup>3</sup> who are agitating for in favour of the unemployed are pressing on them and though if they could be adopted by the government I doubt their

permanent utility, I yet think that the agitators are doing good service in showing the impotence of our rulers and the approaching bankruptcy of our sham society.

You can make any use of this letter you please.

I am  
Dear Sir  
Yours faithfully  
William Morris

## NOTES

1. out.o.door - out-of-door relief was that provided for the poor in Britain without the demand that they should stay in a workhouse, which provided 'indoor relief' after the introduction of the New Poor Law in 1834. Henry Fawcett in his *Political Economy* in 1876 argued that 'Out-of-door relief ought to be greatly restricted'. (OED)
2. a caret is used here to insert the word 'only'
3. a caret is used here to insert the material in brackets, evidently the initial letters of the organization referred to; unfortunately the first two cramped initials indicating the name of the organization are hard to decipher; suggestions for the name would be welcome.