William Morris at Kelmscott

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The recent publication *William Morris's Kelmscott: Landscape and History* contains much detailed and useful information about the history of the village and the area, but some of its remarks about Morris himself seem to me to be disputable. In Tom Hassall's introductory chapter about the Kelmscott Landscape Project, we are given an account of *News from Nowhere* and its culminating scene with Ellen at the Manor, and the reasonable observation that Morris enjoyed and was inspired by the 'Manor and its garden, and the village with its flower-filled meadows and hawthorn hedges', together with local buildings, such as Kempsford and Inglesham churches and the barn at Great Coxwell. Hassall then goes on: 'Yet the Kelmscott landscape of Morris's time was certainly not the rural idyll he portrayed in *News from Nowhere*.' He then quotes the bleak description in the novel of the women haymaking in the later nineteenth century as remembered by the narrator, remarking that this was 'the reality of agricultural depression'. This is indeed Morris's point; why, then, is it seemingly presented as evidence that Morris idealised the village? The passage fails to do justice to Morris's fictional method.

In a similar vein, Simon Townley, in the final section of his thorough account of 'Medieval and Modern Settlement at Kelmscott', on the village after 1800, finds irony in the fact that Morris encouraged his landlord, R.W. Hobbs, to re-thatch his farm buildings, while Hobbs was well known locally for his intensive, modern farming methods - 'the antithesis of the timeless rural idyll that Morris thought he was inhabiting'. And, in the last and interesting chapter 'Kelmscott and Conservation Policy', Robert Parkinson remarks: 'Ironically, Morris idealised country life at a period of dramatic decline in agriculture. The years up to the end of the century were characterised by lower grain prices, rural depopulation and drift to urban areas.' As applied to Kelmscott, this view is countered by Mary Hodges, who shows that the population of the village remained surprisingly stable throughout the nineteenth century and even rose towards the end of it, because of 'the prosperity of local farming'. But the point that I shall take issue with in the rest of this article does not concern the history of the village; it is the idea that Morris 'idealised country life' or thought he was living in 'a timeless rural idyll'.

Morris was above all a historical thinker, later on with a Marxist perspective,
and the idea that he was unaware of the actual conditions in Kelmscott or thought
that the village existed outside history is incompatible with this perspective. What I should like
to do is to look, as carefully as the evidence allows, at Morris’s
attitude to the village and its inhabitants, and to try to explain how contemporary
historians like Hassall, Townley and Parkinson, who have basically sympathetic
views of Morris, can have come to these views. Doing so will remind us of the
complexities of the historical process and the perplexities of taking up positions
within it.

*William Morris’s Kelmscott: Landscape and History* provides much important
information about the village that Morris came to, more or less by accident,
in 1871. Kelmscott is on the north side of the upper Thames, some four miles (6.5
km) from the next village, Buscot, to the south of the river. The small towns of
Lechlade (five miles; 8 km) and Faringdon (seven miles; 11 km) were sources for
supplies and tradesmen; the railway on which Morris and his family travelled
was at Faringdon in 1871, and reached Lechlade two years later; the journey, from
Paddington via Oxford, took some three and a half hours. Kelmscott was a working
village, and agricultural work at the time was demanding and exhausting. As
Alun Howkins concluded in 1981:

‘In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread’, says Chapter Four of Genesis,
and to the poorest of Victoria’s subjects this represented literal truth as well
as biblical punishment. Farm work was unremitting toil in all weathers,
from the sleet that accompanied winter ploughing to the burning sun of
August. Harvest took a terrible toll. Every year boys ‘riding holdya’ fell
from the horses and were crushed under the wagon wheels, and a scythe
or an unguarded binder could cause a terrible wound which often went
untreated and led to death. Old men and women, driven by poverty to
work in the fields at the busiest time of the year died of heatstroke, and
in the end many were turned off the farm crippled with rheumatism or
arthritis. These things were as much part of Victorian life as the skill of the
thatcher or the dignity and strength of the mower …

Although, surprisingly, no information is given in *William Morris’s Kelmscott:
Landscape and History* about either pay or hours of work, it can be assumed that
the former was low and the latter were long. As Townley tells us, the village was
very small – only thirty-five households in 1841 – and dominated by four farms,
Manor Farm, Home Farm, Bradshaws and Lower House, called the Manor from
1864 when James Turner ‘crowned several decades of expansionism with the pur-
chase of the manorial title’. Turner was succeeded by relatives of the Hobbs
family, who worked from Home Farm and Bradshaws, while the smaller Manor
Farm was let to several tenants in succession. The Hobbses thus came to be the
most important family in the village, which contained no representatives of the
professions. Although a National School was built opposite the church around 1872 on land given by Charles Hobbs and his aunt Elizabeth Turner, there is no reference to a resident teacher. There was one public house, the Plough, but no village hall until May Morris provided one as late as 1934. It was, as Townley tells us, ‘predominantly a village of landless agricultural labourers’:

Out of thirty-five households in 1841, twenty-seven (77 per cent) were headed by labourers, and the proportion remained similar in 1861 and 1881, when the only non-agricultural householders were the publican of the Plough, a housekeeper at Kelmscott Manor, a widow on poor relief and a domestic groom. Farming, particularly the Hobbses’ dairying operations, remained labour-intensive...

All this suggests a hard way of life for the majority, particularly when we bear in mind the frequent and severe flooding of the area in the winter. Apart from the church, The Plough would have been the only meeting-place in the village, from which women would have largely been excluded. Nor is it likely that the middle-class Morris would have found himself at home there; there is no record of his having visited it.

Mixed farming was practised, combining the arable with cattle and sheep. As to farming methods, Townley tells us that ‘Hobbs became renowned for developing intensive, semi-mechanized stock-rearing and dairying at Kelmscott’, although he does not give exact dates and we may assume that this was in Morris’s later years in the village. Hobbs was, as we have seen, the main farmer in the area as well as Morris’s landlord. Mary Hodges gives further details about the Hobbs family and its farms. Robert W. Hobbs (1851–1920) inherited in 1873; three of his sons, Robert, Stanley and Henry, farmed with their father, creating ‘a very successful model farm, concentrating on cattle and sheep’, including a flock of Oxford Down sheep inherited in 1873, which were traded in Kelso market, the rams being highly regarded.

One wonders how much Morris knew about the nearby Buscot estate, ‘one of the most highly industrialised farms in nineteenth-century England’, as the National Trust’s Guide to The Faringdon Collection describes it. The semi-derelict 3,500-acre (1400 ha) estate had been bought by Robert Tertius Campbell, a wealthy returnee from Australia, in 1859. Campbell drained the land and built a reservoir, to create an extensive irrigation system. His aim was to produce spirit alcohol from sugar-beet. The distillery is said to have cost £100,000 to build. To collect the sugar beet and other produce from the farms, Campbell built a narrow-gauge railway round the estate with over six miles (9.6 km) of track and three tank engines. He also built a mill for making oil-cake, a gas works, an artificial fertiliser works, a vitriol works and a large corn mill driven by a water turbine. For cultivation, Campbell employed up-to-date Fowler ploughing engines.
and used traction engines for estate duties. He was, we are told, a considerate employer, who paid good wages and instituted a nine-hour day—a reminder of the long hours of farm workers of the time. However, Campbell’s project failed. ‘Ten years after their opening in 1869, the distillery and factories were gone; everything saleable was sold off and the site cleared’.16 Some evidence still exists of Campbell’s venture, including what the booklet calls ‘the magnificent cast-on-site mass-walled concrete barn, still used today for grain and machinery storage’; built around 1870, it apparently predates by some thirty years other known Victorian concrete farm buildings. Hassall remarks of it that it still stands, as ‘a symbol of the way agriculture was to develop in the second half of the twentieth century’.17 How aware was Morris of Campbell and his resolutely modern estate; what might he have thought of the concrete barn? Rossetti complained to his mother on 2 January 1873:

The weather is decidedly colder than it was in London, & today is very dismal. Moreover a dreadful man in the neighbourhood, who has a beet-root-spirit factory, has established a steam-whistle to call his workmen. This goes 7 times a day, beginning at 5 AM, & is the dreariest of super- or sub-human sounds. It is a long way off but still one hears it here much too distinctly to be pleasant.18

But no such comments are to be found in Morris’s letters. As the whole operation was closed by 1879, it is possible that Morris knew little of it; or perhaps he preferred to ignore it.

Morris took the lease of Kelmscott Manor on a joint tenancy with Rossetti in June 1871. For Morris, Kelmscott was to be a place of relaxation; his favourite activity while there was fishing, mostly alone but sometimes with friends like Ellis or Wardle. (Morris’s references to fishing are always brief and factual; it is perhaps significant that The Compleat Angler was not among his favourite books). His other main sources of pleasure were, as we know from his writings, the Manor and its garden. Kelmscott was also a place in which the Morris family could get away from the pressures of London, and, in the early years, where Jane could spend time with Rossetti. Here, too, Morris could entertain his colleagues and friends. In addition, as Linda Parry remarks, to Jane the area ‘had always been more familiar to her than it had been to her husband: she had lived in Oxford all her life before marriage, and her mother had come from the neighbouring village of Alvescot’.19 Jane wrote to Philip Webb in 1871, slightly defensively but with affection for the area:

The country I find is not so beautiful after one gets away from the river, though it is all delightful and home-like to me, and I love it, still I can well
understand others not being much impressed with it, who are not used to it; every field is lovely by itself, and every house, but somehow when one looks far out there is a sameness, a bareness of tree, which makes one begin to want more, but of course I am only speaking of the few miles in the immediate vicinity.20

Morris’s affection for Kelmscott and the Manor is well known and has been written about positively by all his biographers. Although we need not go all the way with Roderick Marshall in his somewhat mystical, mandala-inspired belief that ‘This good place gave him epochs of rest from time to time and the soothing penetration of the Kelmscott peace, which came close to that peace which passeth understanding’,21 we certainly know that it was a place of fruitful tranquility for him amid the pressures of his busy life. Fiona MacCarthy suggests that the ‘gabled, grey stone building replaced Red House as his ideal imagined place of domesticity, gregariousness, happiness, fulfilment’,22 though emphasising that Morris was no sentimentalist in his view of the countryside and that even here his social concerns were operative. She argues persuasively that Morris’s knowledge of the network of small village communities around Kelmscott fed significantly into his idea of the garden-city and of planning more widely.23

Although Morris’s delight in Kelmscott and the Manor has received much, and appropriate, attention, Morris’s relationship with the people and village of Kelmscott has been less studied. As far as I know, only Frank Sharp’s ‘William Morris’s Kelmscott Connections’, in this Journal, in 1999,24 has had this focus, and Sharp is particularly concerned with the work of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB) in the locality.

1871–1882: THE EARLY YEARS

References will necessarily be mainly to Morris’s writings, but in her informative Introductions to her father’s Collected Works of 1910–15 May refers quite often to Kelmscott and the Manor, although it is not always possible to date the reminiscences exactly. However, in her Introduction to Vol. viii, May recalls the summer of 1871 spent at the Manor with her mother and Rossetti, for whom she enjoyed sitting and whose loneliness moved her. She writes affectionately about Mouse, the pony that Morris brought back from Iceland, remarking that ‘Father rode him about the country a good deal at first, and then I rambled about with him, and we also had a little basket-carriage, between the shafts of which he looked incredibly fat and funny’.25 May enjoyed what she called ‘roof-riding’, to the distress of her mother. She remembers that ‘The manor, or the “Lower House”, as it is called in the village’, belonged to the Turner family, whose graves
in the churchyard go back to the sixteenth century. Mr Turner had died, but Mrs Turner, their landlady, lived with an unmarried sister and brother in a house 'down the river', at Eaton Hastings:

We used to make pleasant visits there, going to see the beasts and watching the cheese-making, and after gigantic teas coming back in the cool of the evening, the boat laden with flowers and fruit—everything the free-handed souls could prevail upon us to take away. A tall frail handsome woman was Mrs. Turner: she left the farm down by the river and crossed over to Kelmscott as a bride, and then left the manor and crossed back to her old home—and died there.26

It may be assumed that the 'we' of this passage would have been the children, perhaps with their mother. Another most interesting reference to village life is May's description in Vol. xi of Annie Cumlie (as she spells the name usually given as Comely). This follows a memory of the floods, of which May remarks:

Twice only, I think, since we have been at the Manor, the family has had to live exclusively on the upper floor for a while (with the chickens roosting in silly content on the rafters of the garrets!): all very good fun for young people, but a time of hardship for the neighbouring cottagers. The postman would come in a punt, likewise the baker, who presented his loaves at the cottage upper windows on the prongs of a pitch-fork. I can remember the pleasure of sailing over the fields during the summer floods, but the 'winter inundation' was a more serious thing. Embankments and drains have of late years altered all that.27

May then goes on to recall one of the two floods which occurred during a visit by her father, and the 'exciting accounts' they had afterwards been given of it:

There was specially an amusing picture of Annie Cumley rescuing the live-stock in great thigh-boots: Annie was our gardener's niece and her wonderful fair hair, transparent eyes and milk-and-rose complexion are to be seen in Rossetti's 'Gardener's Daughter' painted at Kelmscott. She donned my father's Icelandic waders with determination, and laboured about in the swirling waters, aiding the men—probably inspiring their work, and having the time of her life in the bustle. Indeed, I think Annie saved the situation entirely by getting at the boat-house—a good step away, and so establishing communication with the outer world.28

Morris's own references to the people of Kelmscott are not numerous but are often illuminating. When Morris and Rossetti rented the Manor, with sixty-eight acres (27 ha) of 'closes' or enclosures, in 1871, it was, as we have seen, from Elizabeth, the widow of James Turner, whose family had lived at Kelmscott for
some four hundred years, although possession soon passed to the related Hobbs family. Those the Morries encountered in Kelmscott would have included their landlord and their servants; there are a number of references to both. Ellis, reported by Mackail, describes the staff at the Manor:

The house was then kept ... by an old couple, Philip Comely and his wife, who were the ideal English villagers, capable, careful, frugal, and industrious. But Morris was much embarrassed by the apparently mechanical arrangement, 'as though it were a trick of machinery', by which Philip's hand rose to the brim of his hat, or lacking that to his forelock, with every word he uttered. Philip's cottage served as a sort of lodge to the manor-house, rented for a shilling a week, with a good-sized and fruitful garden.29

In July 1871 Morris writes from Queen Square and tells Jane that he has asked Philip [Comely] about crayfish: 'he says there are plenty and he seems to know about catching them; make him get a basket for them & begin the fishery as soon as they come on'.30 In 1874, on 16 April, Morris writes brusquely to Rossetti, who had been at the Manor since September 1873, saying that he could not afford to keep up his share of the payment for the Manor which was being monopolised by Rossetti.31 On 9 July Rossetti left in some psychological confusion, and was never to return; that autumn the publisher F.S. Ellis became Morris's joint tenant. On 9 July 1876 Morris writes to Jane, 'the fishing is bad; water low & bright; but I am not absolutely fishless, even as you foretold: for I am to dine off fish today, and am sousing (or Mrs. Comely is) two small Jack for tomorrow or Sunday'.32

Several subsequent letters concern Philip's health. On 2 March 1877, Morris tells Jane: 'I saw Philip: he looks dreadfully wasted I am afraid the old idiot starves him: & I just fancy, they have chosen to bring him back to the cottage in the thick of this weather: I scolded them till they promised to bring him back till the warm weather set in'.33 In June 1877 Morris tells Jenny of some improvement: 'Philip seems a good deal better than when I was here in February: he has been told he should go to the sea-side: it seems there is a hospital at Margate: does Aunt Emma know anything about it?'34 But on 14 December Morris tells Jane, 'Philip has been better, but he looks rather queer again now'. In the same letter Morris makes one of his few references to his landlady: 'The blowndown tree is the one by the causeway gate: it makes a sad gap, for it was a fine branchy tree: a great mess it makes too: I shall write to Mrs. Turner & ask her to bestir herself to get it moved, for it nearly blocks up the gangway altogether'.35 On 16 March 1878 Jenny is told that 'poor old Philip is worse again: he comes down for an hour or two in the day & sits by the fire-side; but he seems very weak: I doubt he cannot last long'.36 No further reference to the Comelys occurs. Sharp tells us that Harriet continued to oversee the household after her husband's death, and that by 1891 she was living
in the cottage attached to the Manor, 'presumably being taken care of in her old age by the Morrices'.

References to Kelmscott are few in the early 1880s, but on 4 September 1881 Morris writes enthusiastically to Georgiana Burne-Jones about the harvesting:

Hobbs began at it on Wednesday morning, and by the next morning the thatchers were putting the bright straw cap to the new rick: yesterday they were carrying the wheat in the field along our causeway and stacking it in our yard: pretty as one sat in the tapestry-room to see the loads coming on between the stone walls – that was for the other rick though, just beyond the little three-cornered close in front of the house.

Later in the month, on 15 September 1881, Morris tells Janey, who was on a visit to the Burne-Joneses at Rottingdean, that he had given Jenny and May 'a lecture on archaeology; which I went on with yesterday in Kelmscott church', He was evidently keen to impart something of his knowledge of buildings and their histories to his daughters.

It can be seen that these years yield little information except about May and her youthful pleasures and about Morris's relationship with the servants. May's account of the visits to Mrs Turner suggests that in those early years the children brought the Morrices into contact with some local families – although only perhaps of the middle social ranks – but these contacts probably declined as the children grew and the years passed. Morris was driven by his indignation about 'restoration' to found the SPAB in 1877, and he gave a good deal of time to that organisation, but it did not enter his activities in the Kelmscott area until later.

1883 TO 1889: THE SOCIALIST YEARS

Morris committed himself to Socialism by joining the Democratic Federation in January 1883, and soon began to issue his works of socialist critique, which necessarily include consideration of the countryside. An early example is the positive piece about Henry George in Justice for 5 April 1884, which refers to 'the depression throughout the country and the serious state of our agricultural industry' and argues that 'we [Socialists] too desire to overthrow the landlord domination; we too have worked for years to get back the land for the people'.

On 20 February 1885, Morris concludes a letter to May, mostly concerned with Socialist League matters:

Bright cold weather these two days: But a fairish flood after the late rains: they have been polling the willows a good deal which must be expected:
Hobbs was going to cut down all the bushes on the causeway; but I prayed him not, so he was very civil and consented to spare them: lucky I was just in time! 41

As we might expect, Morris was keen to protect the vegetation from his practically-minded landlord. To these years too probably belong May’s memories of taking visitors to Great Coxwell: ‘Everyone had to be taken to see the Great Coxwell Barn’, and also to the church to see the fifteenth-century brass commemorating Willm and Johane Morys that Morris had discovered there, to his great pleasure. 42 It is likely that these years also saw Morris’s creation of the dragon in topiary in the garden: ‘The dragon in the yew-hedge which Mr Griggs has drawn so delightfully, was cut by my father a good many years after our first occupation of the house; we had a merry time of it when he periodically trimmed and shaped the beast – “cutting the dragon’s hair” was a ceremony that took place in the presence of an interested and critical audience’. 43 Similarly, in her Introduction to Volume xiv, May recalls in some detail aspects of her father’s life at Kelmscott and its importance to him:

I feel that these notes, to give the true impression of things, must always have their ‘undertone’ of Kelmscott life: for year by year, Father slips away more and more often from London work to the small quiet river and the fragrant garden; either to join us summering there, or for a few days’ stay of solitary work and rest. One August (1888) he wrote from Kelmscott to Jenny about the various simple pleasures of the country. I do not think I have mentioned before that he was a born cook (according to the well known proverb), and that it was only lack of opportunity that prevented him from developing this accomplishment into an art. And cooking in a country kitchen, with the garden-scents coming in through the lattice windows, and a daughter hovering round as audience and willing kitchen-maid, is assuredly a pleasant distraction. 44

In the autumn of 1885, as Tony Pinkney has shown in his recent William Morris in Oxford, Morris was invited by Charles Faulkner to speak to the branch of the Socialist League that Faulkner had managed to set up in Oxford; Morris had also become aware, as he wrote in a letter to the chair of the League on 2 November, that ‘the Oxford Branch held a meeting at Wheatley a village near oxford [sic] last Saturday that was attended by over 100 agricultural labourers, who were much interested’. 45 In the same month, Morris began a correspondence with the Rev. Oswald Birchall, the conscientious and politically progressive rector of nearby Buscot. Sharp tells us that ‘a series of letters written by Birchall to the editor of the periodical The Christian Socialist from 1887 through 1891 shows a keen concern with the economic condition of the rural poor which Birchall believed could
be alleviated by Socialist reforms'.\textsuperscript{46} Morris wrote to him very positively on 7 November 1885 about Socialism and possible public meetings:

Now as to the meetings: I don't see much use in speaking to the Lechlade tradesmen, who would be very hostile, and would not understand me any better than the labourers; but to the latter the field-labourers I should very much like to speak, and to show them the evils of party government: so if you could get an audience in the Buscot schoolroom I should prefer it to the town ... I think I could come in the week ending with the 28th & you will hardly poll before that day, I should think.\textsuperscript{47}

Morris went on to express his gratitude for Birchall's interest in political issues—'one is only too glad to find someone with opinions of any sort'—and to express his hope that the Liberals would not get in with a large majority, as many expected would be the case under the new franchise, extended for the first time in 1884 to agricultural labourers: 'that would mean Whiggery triumphant'. In the event, the Liberals gained the comparatively small majority of 334 to 250. Morris concluded his letter with a suggestion: 'If I can't get an audience down there before the elections, what do you think of my trying for an open-air audience next summer?\textsuperscript{48}' Whatever Birchall thought of the idea, there is no evidence that Morris acted on it at any point.

On 10 November 1885 Morris writes again to Birchall, from Hammersmith, thanking him for his interesting letter. He is still keen to give a lecture, but is suffering health problems 'which must be expected with a middle-aged man verging towards the elderly'. He concludes:

I will let you know in about a week what I can do. If I lectured in your school-room, I should prepare something of the very simplest & most elementary kind, & I should be very careful to keep anything out of it that could be construed as personal: If things go wrong, the better the persons are, the more that proves the necessity of altering the system. Indeed for my part though I find much stupidity & more ignorance in the world, I find but little malice.\textsuperscript{49}

There is, however, no evidence of a lecture in Buscot until November 1887. But it is evident that Birchall continued to enjoy corresponding with Morris on politics. For instance, on 7 September 1886 Morris tells Jenny, 'I have had a long letter from Mr. Burchall [sic] this morning about semi-socialism: he is really a very sensible man: & Mr. Turner [Hugh Thackeray Turner of the SPAB] says he has a very good knowledge of archaeology'.\textsuperscript{50}

One of the few occasions when Morris participated in a communal activity in the village is referred to in a letter of 11 May 1887? to May, which also shows his
friendly relationship with Oswald Birchall:

Item there was a steam launch aground on the ford last night. I helped
with the rest of the youth of the village in getting her off. Otherwise I feel
lazy, though I have done some lecture. I am now going a walk to see if Mr.
Birchall is in. 51

Morris took Jenny to see the work being done in Kelmscott church in 1888, as he
tells May on 26 October: ‘Yesterday Jenny and I went to see the Church: they are
putting down the old flagged floors again, I am glad to say: they have uncovered
a good bit more of the painting; over the doors is some apparently of the same
date as that in the North Chapel. The chimney is finished and is as ugly & vulgar
as the heart could wish’. 52 Morris provides an official report to the SPAB in his
‘Notes on the Churches of Inglesham and Kelmscott, July 1889’ in which he states
that ‘The Society reported on this little building to those engaged in its restora­
tion, and the result shows the good service which the Society does’. He likes the
‘solid and unpretentious and unstained’ new roof, and praises the removal from
the west gable of the ‘modern unarchitectural bell-cot of lath and plaster in bad
repair’. 53

From January 1885 to July 1886 Morris published his narrative poem ‘The
Pilgrims of Hope’ in Commonweal. Much of the action of the poem takes place
first in London and then in the Paris of the Commune, but its eighth section,
‘The Half of Life Gone’, published in January 1886, takes us back to the rural
setting with which the poem had begun. Fiona MacCarthy has drawn attention
to the following lines in which, as she suggests, ‘Morris described practices that
continued in the countryside around him’. 54 The passage is certainly full of affec­
tion for the observed or imagined scene:

There is work in the mead as of old; they are eager at winning the hay,
While every sun sets bright and begets a fairer day.
The forks shine white in the sun round the yellow red-wheeled wain,
Where the mountain of hay grows fast; and now from out of the lane
Comes the ox-team drawing another, comes the bailiff and the beer,
And thump, thump, goes the farmer’s nag o’er the narrow bridge of
the weir. 55

It is striking that Mackail, describing Morris’s funeral, noted that ‘One of the
farm wagons, with a yellow body and bright red wheels, was prepared in the
morning to carry the coffin from Lechlade station’. 56

It seems to have been the Rev. Oswald Birchall who prompted Morris to involve
the SPAB in the protection of Inglesham church, although Morris had written
much earlier to Georgiana Burne-Jones, on 24 August 1880, about trips he had
been making, and telling her that the church—some eight miles (13 km) from Kelmscott—was 'a lovely little building about like Kelmscott in size and style, but handsomer and with more old things left in it'.\(^5\)\(^7\) However, there is no further reference to the church until 1886. In a letter of 14 October from Hammersmith, Morris thanks Oswald Birchall for his letter about the church, and tells him that he [Morris] had visited it with 'a professional member of our Committee'—identified by Kelvin as J. T. Micklethwaite—and that they had drawn up a short report. Morris also mentions that he had had a long talk with the vicar, G.S. Spooner, who 'seemed on the whole to be of our way of thinking'. Morris then tells Birchall:

I shall be happy to subscribe to any fund that is got up for repairing the church, but it would have to be conditionally of the repairs following the lines marked out by our Society. I think the best time for our Society to move in the matter would be after the fund is set on foot. Any literary help of mine you may need in the matter is at your service. Hoping we may meet when I come to Kelmscott again.\(^5\)\(^8\)

The 'literary help' offered presumably bore fruit in the 'Appeal for the Preservation of Inglesham Church, 1887', which had to be directed to 'the more wealthy neighbours and to others' because 'the small population of the parish is so poor, that there is no hope of raising even that amount [the "moderate" sum needed] there'.\(^5\)\(^9\)

On 22 October 1886, only eight days later, Morris wrote briefly:

I enclose a note for you about Inglesham in which I have worked up your suggestions; the archaeological part had best go into an appendix I think. You can put down my name as a subscriber of £5.

I hope you will be able to take the chair at the Swan tonight.\(^6\)\(^0\)

This final remark may refer to a meeting at the public house in Lechlade, presumably to raise funds for the repairs to the church. The friendly relationship with the Birchalls evidently developed further. Two years later, on 28 August 1888, Morris wrote to Jenny about the 'beautiful day' he had spent with friends on the Sunday, 'sheltering ourselves from driving rain under Mr. Birchall's Yew-tree' in the morning, but finding that '10 by 2 the sun was hot and bright and the day straight on most lovely'. He had walked later with Janey and Crom—their friend Cornel Price—to the Church, and 'It went to my heart on that beautiful afternoon to see the neglect and stupidity that had so marred the lovely little building: yet it still looked lovely'.\(^6\)\(^1\)

It is evident that the Birchalls were some of the most sympathetic of Morris's near-neighbours. May recalled them affectionately in 1936 in Ch. 8 of William Morris. Artist, Writer, Socialist while discussing how education in Socialism might
be conducted ‘in a humble way... in not specially interested provincial towns in
the heart of the country, even in remote villages where personal influence might
possibly tell’. Of Birchall she remarks that ‘if all clergymen were like him English
people would understand the true spirit of the old Christian faith’. 62 She recalls
the ‘stately rectory whose great gardens ended in a pleasant willow-shaded walk
beside which our little stream flowed dreamily down by the Kelmscott meadows
... In this home of echoing rooms he and his wife lived frugally, giving what they
could not spare to the poor in simple loving-kindness’.63

In 1887, on either 26 September or 3 October, Morris writes to May about a visit
he will be making to the Manor: ‘it is Thursday I am coming, not Wednesday.
Also I don’t much relish having to speak at Lechlade, as I am coming for a rest; but
ifI must, you had better hire the Swan as before’.64 On 5 October he wrote to May
(who was learning the part of Mary Pinch, the labourer’s wife accused of theft in
Morris’s play ‘The Tables Turned’, which was to be performed on October 15):

All right I will come & lecture on Tuesday; I think I shall need one day’s
holiday afterwards so we might come back on the Thursday together ...
there was a good rehearsal yesterday, & ’tis thought the play will be a suc­
cess. I am very glad that you will be the MP in it.

Of course ’tis Lechlade I speak on ... it will be from notes.65

This would presumably have been an introductory lecture on Socialism as Morris
saw it. However, only six weeks later occurred the violence of ‘Bloody Sunday’
in Trafalgar Square, and soon after, on 28 November 1887, we find Morris in cor­
respondence with Oswald Birchall about a lecture on that topic:

I have by no means forgotten my engagement & look forward with much
pleasure to meeting you ... I should be very glad of the opportunity of
telling people in the country the story of the ‘riots’ in London; as the daily
press has lied so consumedly that they can hardly be expected to know
what has happened.66

The events in Trafalgar Square had, not surprisingly, generated controversy. This
led to one of Morris’s most explicit statements about Socialism and its relevance
to the agricultural labourers:

I came in for a quaint little piece of coercion last Friday. I had been invited
to lecture on Socialism and the ‘disturbances’ in London in the parish
school-room at Buscott, a little village high up the Thames, by the re­
cctor, our friend, Mr. Oswald Birchall. It had been agreed some little time
back by the squire and other village magnates, who at the time wanted the
said school-room for Primrose League purposes, that it should be free to
speakers of all parties, so I went down expecting the usual quiet meeting; but at the last minute the said magnates forbade the meeting, I believe on the grounds that they expected a riot if I showed there. Then they stole a march of Mr. Birchall by locking up the room and taking the key away and ‘picketing’ the room to send away anyone who might come to the meeting. We tried to get the publican to let us have a room, which, however, he declined to do, fearing, not without reason, the wrath of the squire and farmers. However, things went pretty well, as in spite of all precautions, a few of the right sort had gathered round the school-room and with these we adjourned to the rectory, where we had a very useful meeting, the men listening very attentively and sympathetically. The true story of the ‘riots’ was clearly quite new to them, the Pall Mall (not to speak of the Commonweal) being of course tabooed in the neighbourhood; but they were clearly much impressed by it, and will spread it about wherever they go. I may say that men like these are not slow to learn the facts of their present position, their slavery to the farmers being so direct that it presses on them every day. A good distribution of leaflets would be fruitful among such men: though many of them cannot read, they would get them read to them.67

There is however no evidence that Morris acted along these lines. Perhaps he came to feel that it might be counter-productive.

However, in Commonweal for 30 June 1888 Morris notes how field-labourers are old and worn out by the age of fifty.68 But his critique is most fully developed in ‘Under an Elm-tree; or Thoughts in the Country-side’ in Commonweal in June 1889. The place described is further down the Thames from Kelmscott, in sight of the White Horse at Uffingham, which Morris liked to take his visitors to see. In the article Morris celebrates the beauty of the midsummer in the country, but notes the contrasting presence in it of the ‘ungraceful, unbeautiful’ haymakers, both male and female. They are clearly victims of sustained exploitation:

The hay-field is a pretty sight this month seen under the elm, as the work goes forward on the other side of the way opposite to the bean-field, till you look at the hay-makers carefully. Suppose the haymakers were friends working for friends on land which was theirs with leisure and hope ahead of them instead of hopeless toil and anxiety, need their useful labour for themselves and their neighbours cripple and disfigure them and knock them out of the shape of men fit to represent the Gods and heroes?69

This points forward to the passage in Ch. xxx of News from Nowhere about the ‘spindle-legged back-bowed men and haggard, hollow-eyed, ill-favoured women, who once wore down the soil of this land with their heavy hopeless feet, from day to day, and season to season, and year to year’.70
Two letters of 1888 are relevant here. On 2 September Morris tells Jenny, with some embarrassment, 'My dear to confess and be hanged I went 2nd class to Kelmscott with your mother: we did not like to be scrowged'. [The OED defines 'scrouge' or 'scrowge' as 'to crowd']. As Kelvin suggests, this may reasonably be taken to imply that when travelling on his own, Morris would have gone 3rd class. On 8 September he tells Jenny about how he and Emery Walker had gone to Kencott to get a pony cart to fetch his wife and daughter. In poor weather, Morris had been concerned as to whether the 'little old rat of a poney' would manage to get then to Kelmscott; it did so, but overturned on the way to Broadwell, fortunately, without harming the two Walkers. Morris goes on: ‘Mr. Young the owner of the poney (he had had him for 20 years) is an old inhabitant of Kelmscott, he told me various things about the neighbourhood & how he planted the aspens & willows by Mr. Mace’s himself’.72

On 22 April 1889, Morris writes to Georgiana Burne-Jones, recounting a matter that has aroused his indignation: ‘there were some beautiful willows at Eaton Hastings which to my certain knowledge had not been polled during the whole 17 years that we have been here; and now the idiot Parson has polled them into wretched stumps. I should like to cut off the beggar’s legs and have wooden ones made for him out of the willow timber, the value of which is about 7s. 6p’. Although, as we have seen, Morris was on good terms with some of the local clergy, it clearly was not so with the incumbent here, though it is at Easton Hastings that two early Morris & Co. windows are to be found, ‘St. Matthew with the Angel’ (1874) and ‘Christ with Banner’ (1877), both designed by Burne-Jones. On 21 June 1889 Morris writes to Jane: ‘Mr. Hobbs has carried the big field of hay first-rate. The country is one great nosegay, the scent of it intoxicating’. On 30 August 1889 Morris tells Jenny:

I came up to Lechlade from Oxford with Mr. Hobbs; and we talked amicably together. He told me that his new machine did not answer for cutting corn that was much laid. He was boastful over the ram lambs which he had sold in May (I think in May) and showed me a paper with an account of them as the Kelmscott flock; which sound grand, doesn’t it. I lost him at Oxford …

In her Introduction to Vol. XVIII of The Collected Works May gives a lively account of R.W. Hobbs:

I must hope our friend and neighbour will forgive the indiscretion of bringing him in as part of the story: impressions of Kelmscott would be incomplete without the inclusion of the leading personality which [sic] gives life to the place, whose kinsmen built and lived in the manor-house, and doubtless lived on the soil from early times. They were armigerous,
and the Turner arms are sculptured and painted in the principal living-rooms – a fine race, among the ‘makers of England’ (in a different sense from that of the popular journalist), stock that we have a right to be proud of – and to boast of when there is any national boasting to be done.76

May goes on to write appreciatively of attending a sale of Hobbs’s ‘Kelmscott Shorthorns’, but then recalls that this must have occurred after her father’s death: ‘In my father’s day, though, Mr. Hobbs’s fame as a breeder had not been established, and there were no young bulls of distinguished family gambolling in the little close opposite the window to beguile him from working.’77 It is clear that Hobbs had made a deep impression on May.

In these years Morris’s political and architectural concerns come to the fore. The tone of his references to Mr. Hobbs suggests that the relationship was not an easy one – perhaps word of Morris’s politics had reached his landlord. May would seem to have achieved a more admiring and relaxed relationship to the Hobbs family. 78

1890 TO 1896: THE LAST YEARS

In these final years, Morris’s rate of activity declined to some extent, though he still found the energy to create the Kelmscott Press and to continue writing his prose romances. On 15 November 1890 his final article for Commonweal, ‘Where Are We Now?’ was published. On 21 November the Hammersmith branch left the Socialist League, and on 28 November the first meeting of the Hammersmith Socialist Society took place. This was the organisation in which Morris would continue to show his undeviating commitment to Socialism for the rest of his life.

In William Morris in Oxford, Tony Pinkney tells us that there was a campaign in Oxfordshire in the early 1890s to recruit members to the National Agricultural Labourers’ Union; the university chimney-sweep and socialist activist William Hines played a leading part, taking groups out to local villages to recruit, but although the movement began well with the establishment of some twenty-two branches in 1891, it had ‘fizzled out and disappeared by 1893’.79 Hines was to arrange for Morris to speak in Oxford in 1895, but there is no evidence that Morris knew of these efforts in the early nineties.

There are, perhaps surprisingly, no references in the letters before 1890 to the Rev. Horace Meers, who had been the vicar of Bradwell with Kelmscott, the local parish, from 1870. This suggests the Morris family did not attend the church. But on 23 December 1890 Morris encloses £5, to be distributed among
the 'Kelmscott poor people' and says that 'Mrs. Morris intends writing to you on the subject, as she has some wishes as to part of it at least'. Although Jane's letter has not survived, this indicates that she too was aware of the poor of Kelmscott and concerned to help them.

On 16 July 1890, Morris criticises 'the farmer' — identified by Sharp as Hobbs' bailiff, Thomas Glanville — to Kate Faulkner:

But the farmer has not taken the trouble to carry the hay in my fields (Ripham Water-hay and the two little closes) although I am told the hay has been made two or three times over: this it seems is because he is too big a buck and don't think it worth while to carry less than 40 acres at a time; which to me seems wasteful.

Morris's unchanging devotion to the Manor finds its fullest and finest expression at the climax to News from Nowhere, published in Commonweal in 1890, and in book form, somewhat revised, in London in 1891. In Chapter xxxi, 'An Old House amongst New Folk', Ellen asks Guest to take her to the house before the others arrive, and expresses her delight (and Morris's) in what she sees:

Yes, friend, this is what I came out for to see; this many-gabled old house built by the simple country-folk of the long-past times, regardless of all the turmoil that was going on in cities and courts, is lovely still amidst all the beauty which these latter days have created; and I do not wonder at our friends tending it so carefully and making much of it. It seems to me as if it had waited for these happy days, and held in it the gathered crumbs of happiness of the confused and turbulent past.

To the very end of his life, such buildings continued to give him the greatest pleasure.

Jenny spent a good deal of time at Kelmscott, of which she was evidently very fond, but we have few records of her life there. However, in a letter to Wilfrid Scawen Blunt on 22 October 1891 Jane remarks: 'All is well with us, we are not yet washed away -- Jenny tells me that the waters are still rising, and the villagers are afraid the baker's cart will not be able to pass'.

The only Morris & Co. stained glass in the area apart from that at Water Eaton is in Oswald Birchall's church, St. Mary, Buscot. The chancel east window is Burne-Jones's 'The Good Shepherd'. The inscription tells us that it was erected in 1891 by Alexander Henderson of Buscot Park 'in affectionate memory of his father'. Henderson (1850–1934), a London financier, was to become the first Lord Faringdon in 1916. His father had bought the Park from Robert Campbell's executors in 1889, and was an enthusiastic collector of art, including works by Watts, Millais, Madox Brown, Leighton and Burne-Jones, whose 'Briar Rose' sequence, completed in 1890, is splendidly displayed in the saloon.
ting, Burne-Jones painted the connecting panels between the four main scenes, thus covering the entire wall-surface. It was therefore most appropriate that Burne-Jones should have designed the memorial window in the local church. There is another Burne-Jones window in the south wall of the chancel with a sadder provenance. The small ‘Angels of Paradise’ bears the inscription: ‘in memory of basil hawkins birchall loved and only child of oswald birchall rector of buscot and kate his wife called home oct. 30th 1895 in his eighteenth year, buried at Malvern Wells’. There is further Morris & Co. glass in the form of the two two-light windows of the 1921 war memorial, and two later memorials of the Henderson family erected in 1922 and 1924.

Improvements to Inglesham church were achieved in 1892. When Sydney Cockerell paid his first visit to Kelmscott in August, he kept a diary; for 6 August he records, 'After lunch Miss Strick [Jenny's companion, Etta Strick] drove WM and me through Lechlade to Inglesham. The church is being repaired, mainly at WM's expense, by Micklethwaite who was to have met us, but could not come'. Two months later, on 7 October 1892 Morris wrote positively to Thackeray Turner of the SPAB:

By Mr. Birchalls wish, he being away, I went to see Inglesham today, & find that the bell-turret has been mended & put up again; and that the nave roof is nearly finished: they were nailing the boards on the N. side, & the S. side only lacked two common rafters (new): all the rest of the work to the roof, piercing and mending had been done and as far as I could judge satisfactorily ... I should have said that all the new wood is English oak, and is left rough as it comes from the saw.

According to Kelvin (ibid.), the restoration was begun in 1887 but not completed until 1901. Sharp gives further information about the work of the SPAB in the area, showing that Morris behaved with unusual tact in his dealings with Meeres over the work on Kelmscott church, and that he was careful to keep a low profile in the district, presumably to avoid rousing antipathy towards the SPAB. When the vicar of Fairford organized a major restoration of his church in 1887 and rejected the SPAB’s criticisms, Morris was still concerned to offer advice on the treatment of the old glass. But he asked the Honorary Secretary of the SPAB to send the letter he had drafted on behalf of the Society, remarking: ‘I think it much better this letter should be sent as coming from the Committee. If the parson has heard of me at all it will only have been as the maniac of Kelmscott; and all he will think is that I am after a job’.

By February 1892 it would seem that William and Mary Giles have become the caretaker/gardener and housekeeper at the Manor, to Morris's evident satisfaction. He tells Jenny on 23 February 1892: ‘everything [in the garden] seems to be doing well & Giles seems to understand his work; so I think we shall have a
beautiful garden this year. My dinner was served in style, so that I am quite proud of such attentions; and Mrs. Giles seems a nice kind simple person'. In the same letter Morris refers to "the fowells", as Annie Wheeler used to call them'. Kelvin suggests that this may have indicated a woman referred to as Annie Cook in earlier letters, or to a neighbour, with whom Jenny might have been 'friends since childhood'.

On 18 May 1892 Morris tells Jenny that the garden is flourishing, and 'as to seedlings Giles has lots of things to plant out: so we shall have a good late summer garden'. He goes on, entertainingly, to write that there have been 'Two more broods of ducks; all the others doing well save that 2 out of the 18 were killed by some accident. The second oldest go into the water now and behave very well; but the third eldest (the 16) being let out today went too far up the ditch and had to be hunted by Giles and me, and brought back again for all the world like naughty children' – an unusual glimpse of Morris in domestic mode.

On 20 October 1892, according to Cockerell's diary, Morris 'donned his best clothes and went to pay a society call on Mr. and Mrs. Hobbs'. May tells us that this Mr. Hobbs was 'the son of his landlord', but gives no explanation for the solemnity of the occasion.

Morris's confidence in Giles is shown in a letter of 5 November 1892 to C.M. Gere, who had been invited to come to the Manor to work on a frontispiece for the edition of News from Nowhere being prepared by the Kelmscott Press. Morris apologises for the fact that he will not be able to welcome Gere to the Manor, because he is planning to accompany Jane on a visit to Bordighera for her health. He tells Gere:

Any day you can get to Kelmscott will you send a note or post card to Mr. Giles c/o W Morris Manor House Kelmscott Lechlade to tell him that you are coming: he will meet you at Lechlade station & make you comfortable in the house.

On 7 February 1894? Morris tells May that 'I have not seen Mr. Hobbes yet, and I am not afraid of him; I have no doubt I shall see him tomorrow'. Later, he remarks, 'I travelled with Adams from Oxford to Lechlade last night; he and his family had been to a concert there' – presumably, as Kelvin suggests, a reference to the Vicar of Little Faringdon. Morris goes on, 'Tell mother that Mary [Mrs. Giles] is feeding me like a prince, or a Christmas Hog and that I am in fine condition'.

On 24 April 1894 Morris tells Jenny: 'It began to rain about 2 yesterday & was quite a wet afternoon & evening; so that Giles met me with the brougham
A letter to Jenny of 2 April 1895 suggests how useful the Gileses were to Morris:

two sittings [of ducks] are being sat upon: not however by Mr. & Mrs. Giles, but by their delegates, 2 hens to wit ... Giles has patched up the punt, and is sanguine about its holding water: so am I; but I think the water may be rather inside than out — however we shall see ... The house is as clean as a new pin. Giles has whitewashed the tapestry ceiling which shines again ... I forgot to say that I gave Annie Wheeler’s letter from you to Mary as soon as I got in yesterday.¹⁰¹

In the same letter, Morris tells Jenny about the garden, but also describes an event concerning a local character, which suggests that Morris was well aware of the harshness of the lives of the villagers:

A poor old chap called to thank me for my dole this morning: he said his name was Jones; he didn’t seem to me fit to work, was very frail, and said he was 83. I spoke to him with impressive dignity till I found that he was very deaf, after which I had to bellow in his ear; which spoilt the dignity, but was no doubt more impressive — to him.¹⁰³

Although Morris’s account gives no conclusion, one is left to hope that the ‘dole’ — presumably a small sum of money paid in respect of past services — was provided.

On 18 June 1895 Morris writes to Jenny from the Manor, where he has been ‘rather guzzling on peas and cucumber & strawberries’:

Giles was hard on haymaking today & has carried our hoppit in triumph by now, a pretty good crop: he being so busy I couldn’t bother him about fishing; but may go out tomorrow. Mr. Hobbs is carrying the big meadow (Wetham) ... Reefham was carried yesterday. I saw him this morning & he told me that the crop was poor: his clover also he has carried.¹⁰⁴

In April (?) 1895 also Morris loaned R.W. Hobbs £6,000 to buy out his brothers’ and sisters’ share in the ownership of the Manor, in return for a 21-year lease of the 275 acres (111 ha) of the estate. This arrangement terminated in 1913, when Jane bought the Manor outright.¹⁰⁵

The complement to Morris’s love of ancient buildings was his concern over current developments in building, and especially the materials coming into use. This finds expression in his impressively restrained letter to the Thames Conservancy Board of 19 July 1895 about the lock-keeper’s cottage at nearby Eaton Water:

The point I specially want to bring before the Conservancy is that one
of the most characteristic and beautiful features of the landscape in this neighbourhood is the prevalence of old houses built of the stone of the district and roofed with stone-slates or slabs: and I have noticed that any intrusion of other materials materially injures the landscape: This would be especially the case if a building of red-brick covered with ordinary slate took the place of the cottage at Eaton Weir, as it cannot fail to be a very prominent object in the landscape. I therefore earnestly beg the Conservancy to consider the suggestion that it should be built of stone & roofed with stone slates ... 106

According to Mackail, Morris was successful on this occasion: 'one of the last instances in which Morris was able to ward off encroachments on the beauty of the riverside was when he now prevented, by a temperate and dignified expostulation, the replacement of the old silver-grey roof which lay in sight of his own house by one of blue Welsh slate. At his urgent instances, too, the Conservators consented to give instructions that the men who cut the weeds on the river should spare the flowering plants on the banks as much as possible'. 107

But modernity could not always be held at bay. Some six weeks later, on 29 August 1895, Morris was writing with uncharacteristic fatalism to Georgiana Burne-Jones:

It was a most lovely afternoon when I came down here, and I was prepared to enjoy the journey from Oxford to Lechlade very much: and so I did; but woe's me! when we passed by the once lovely little garth near Black Bourton, I saw all my worst fears realized; for there was the little barn we saw being mended, and wall cut down and finished with a zinked (sic) iron roof. It quite sickened me when I saw it. That's the way all things are going now. In twenty years everything will be gone in this countryside, which twenty years ago was so rich in beautiful building: and we can do nothing to help it or mend it. The world had better say, 'Let us be through with it and see what will come after it!' In the mean time I can do nothing but a little bit of Anti-Scrape – sweet to eye while seen. Now that I am grown old and see that nothing is to be done, I half wish that I had not been born with a sense of romance and beauty in this accursed age. 108

In the light of this, it is pleasant to find Morris paying a fine tribute to the Manor in his article 'Gossip about an Old House on the Upper Thames', dated 'Kelmscott, October 25', and published in the short-lived socialist magazine The Quest in November 1895. In the article, Morris remarks that Kelmscott church was 'fortunate in having escaped the process of stripping and pointing which so many of our village churches have undergone at the hands of the restoring wise-aces'. 109 He concludes on a balanced note:
Here then are a few words about a house that I love; with a reasonable love I think: for though my words may give you no idea of any special charm about it, yet I assure you that the charm is there; so much has the old house grown up out of the soil and the lives of those that lived on it; needing no grand office-architect, with no great longing for anything else than correctness, and to be like Julius Caesar; but some thin thread of tradition, a half-conscious sense of the delight of meadow and acre and wood and river; a certain amount (not too much let us hope) of common sense, a liking for making materials serve one’s turn, and perhaps at bottom some little grain of sentiment. This was what I think went to the making of the old house; might we not manage to find some sympathy for all that henceforward; or must we but shrink before the Philistine with one, Alas that it must perish!  

During 1895 Morris’s health was declining, as Burne-Jones (recorded by Mackail) sadly observed in the autumn: “He found that the clipping of a yew dragon which had been for some years in progress under the gable of the tapestry-room at Kelmscott too fatiguing a task for him. His country walks became shorter in their range, and fishing was almost give up”. But Morris was still enjoying the beauty of the Manor, and particularly the garden, in the spring of his last year. On 27 April, he told Webb:

I have been enjoying the garden much: as one walks about & about there is no eyesore: all is beautiful. You are right about the grass; it is well grown and as green as ever. Also the apple-blossom (contrary to what someone told me) is very fine. I don’t think we at K ever had so much. We are rather between the flowers, but the tulips are coming on thick, and the wallflowers are splendid. Also Hobbs has been thatching his sheds all about; this is a great gain to me, who am always shaking in my shoes before the advent of zined iron sheets ...  
The rooks are very musical, but I have heard the blackbirds stronger. I only hear the cuckoo about 7 AM.

Kelvin quotes Morris’s diary for 1896 to similar effect: ‘Called on Mrs. Power; bribed her with £10 to have the two sheds at Kelmscott thatched’. The importance of the matter to Morris is shown by his writing along similar lines to Georgiana Burne-Jones on 28 April, concluding, ‘Hobbs has been re-thatching a lot of his sheds and barns, which sorely needed it, and used to keep me in a fever of terror of galvanized iron: so that this time at least there is some improvement in the village’. Morris left Kelmscott on 5 May; he was not to see it again. In his sermon at the funeral, Fiona MacCarthy tells us, the Rev. Mr Adams ‘did not venture into the controversial territory of Morris’s religion of the Cause. But Adams
reached a truth about Morris, emphasizing his twenty-five years of Kelmscott associations and his unknown and unpublicised acts of kindness to his country neighbours.\textsuperscript{115}

This later material strengthens the sense one has that Morris had complex feelings about Kelmscott. On the one hand, he loved the beauty of the Manor and its garden, but on the other he was well aware of the decline of British agriculture and the hard lives of many of the villagers. The last pages of *News from Nowhere* are striking in this regard. As Guest sees his friends fading into unawareness of his existence, he turns towards the village and the remains of the village cross, and meets a figure who contrasts strongly with the people he has just left:

It was a man who looked old, but who I knew from habit, now half-forgotten, was really not much more than fifty. His face was rugged, and grimed rather than dirty; his eyes were dull and bleared; his body bent, his calves thin and spindly, his feet dragging and limping. His clothing was a mixture of dirt and rags long over-familiar to me. As I passed him he touched his hat with some real goodwill and courtesy, and much servility.\textsuperscript{116}

This passage vividly evokes what Morris’s experience must have been in the class-divided England of the late nineteenth century. It could not have been written by a man who thought he was living in ‘timeless rural idyll’ or who ‘idealised country life’. But it is interesting to observe that Morris did not attempt to bring his politics directly to the villagers. He evidently made his small contributions to their well-being in the form of ‘doles’ and ‘acts of kindness’, but he knew only too well that the kinds of relationships which he would have liked to develop could come about only after the Revolution for which he longed and which he strove so committedly to make possible.

I began this article with the question why a number of fine local historians with a great respect for Morris should have attributed to him an idealising view of Kelmscott which a man of his historical awareness and political convictions is unlikely to have entertained. It may be related to our contemporary ideological climate, the cynicism of which makes it difficult to believe in the central importance of Socialism to a man like Morris. It also seems possible that it is related to the idealising English attitude to the rural scene, encapsulated in the belief that ‘God made the County but Man made the Town’. Sometimes our own sentimentalising of the rural, and particularly the rural past, prevents us from recognising that a strong-minded thinker like Morris could sustain a double vision, in which the aesthetically pleasing and the economically real were simultaneously recognised and given their due weight.
NOTES

6. Kelmscott, Ch. 6, p. 76.
11. Kelmscott, p. 53. Mary Hodges gives further details in Chapter 6, 'Kelmscott: The People in Their Place'. She confirms (p. 76) that 'some 80% of its householders were agricultural labourers working on the parish's fairly prosperous large farms'.
13. Kelmscott, p. 78. Mary Hobbs, R.W. Hobbs's second wife, became a good friend of May Morris; Kelmscott, p. 79.
15. Faringdon, p. 60.
20. Quoted in John Brandon-Jones, 'The Importance of Philip Webb' in William Morris and Kelmscott. London: The Design Council, 1981, p. 92; Brandon-Jones adds: 'Unfortunately these letters are undated, but they were probably written when Morris was in Iceland during the summer of 1871'.
26. Dunlap, i, 234.
27. Dunlap, i, 306.
31. Kelvin, i, 222.
32. Kelvin, i, 308.
33. Kelvin, i, 350–1; Note 2 suggests that the reference is to Philip Comely and that the ‘old idiot’ would presumably be Mrs. Comely.
36. Kelvin, i, 452.
37. Sharp, p. 49.
39. Kelvin, ii, 64.
41. Kelvin, ii, 389.
43. Dunlap, i, 103. The view of the Manor showing the dragon, by F.L. Griggs, is on p. 101.
44. Dunlap, ii, 294.
46. Sharp, p. 46.
47. Kelvin, ii, 485; Note 3 informs us that voting in the 1885 election took place from November 23 to December 19.
49. Kelvin, ii, 487.
50. Kelvin, ii, 573.
51. Kelvin, ii, 650.
52. Kelvin, ii, 831–3; on ii, 832 is a photograph of the chancel of the church in 1866.
54. MacCarthy, p. 313.
57. Kelvin, I, 585.
58. Kelvin, II, 580; Note 2 tells us that the June 1887 SPAB report recommended repairs estimated to cost £550; Note 3 tells us that G.S. Spooner was vicar of St. John the Baptist, Inglesham, from 1857 to 1907, while II, 581 gives two photographs of the church taken in 1986.
59. AWS, I, 160.
60. Kelvin, II, 587.
63. AWS, II, 216.
64. Kelvin, II, 696.
68. Journalism, 423.
69. AWS II, 512.
71. Kelvin, II, 813.
72. Kelvin, II, 817.
74. Kelvin, III, 77.
75. Kelvin, III, 93.
76. Dunlap, II, 530.
77. Dunlap, II, 530.
79. Kelvin, III, 249
80. Sharp, p. 49.
81. Kelvin, III, 181; Note 2 tells us that Ripham is the field of twenty to thirty acres (8–12 ha) to the south of the Manor, and that one of the small closes is the Home Mead of the 1902 memorial by Philip Webb and George Jack.
82. Wilmer, p. 220.
83. Peter Faulkner, ed, Jane Morris to Wilfrid Scawen Blunt. Exeter: Exeter Uni-
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84. A.C. Sewter, *The Stained Glass of William Morris and His Circle*, New

85. *Faringdon*, p. 19
86. *Faringdon*, p. 42.
87. Sewter, II, 40.
88. Kelvin, III, 424, Note 1.
89. Kelvin, III, 454.
90. Kelvin, 454, Note 2.
91. Sharp, p. 51.
92. Sharp, p. 53.

93. Kelvin, III, 377; photographs of the couple appear on the same page; Note 3
tells us that the couple lived in Garden Cottage beside the Manor, and that
their daughter Ada also worked as a servant there.

95. Kelvin, III, 402.
96. Kelvin, III, 404.
97. Nicholas Salmon with Derek Baker, *The William Morris Chronology*. Bristol:

98. Dunlap, II, 529.
100. Kelvin, IV, 1996, 126.

102. Kelvin, IV, 266; Note 4 tells us that Annie Wheeler and her husband Wil-
liam lived in Kelmscott; Kelvin had suggested earlier – Note 6 in Kelvin, III,
379 – that whether Annie was a servant or a neighbour, ‘the references to her
in the letters suggest that a friendship between her and Jenny existed’.

103. Kelvin, IV, 266.
104. Kelvin, IV, 288; the *OED* gives hoppet as ‘an enclosure, a yard, paddock, or
the like’.

105. Kelvin, IV, 289, Note 5.
106. Kelvin, IV, 294.
108. Kelvin, IV, 307; Note 2 tells us that the italicised quotation is from Morris
and Magnusson’s translation of *The Volsunga Saga*.

110. AWS, I, 370–1.
111. Mackail, I, 322.
112. Kelvin, IV, 368.
113. Kelvin, IV, 368, Note 6.
114. Kelvin, IV, 369.
115. MacCarthy, p. 676; the funeral sermon, as recorded 11 October 1896, is in the Mackail notebooks in the William Morris Gallery at Walthamstow.  