

'The City Of Dreadful Delight' William Morris in the East End of London

Rosemary Taylor

I

In December 1888, William Morris, designer, poet, artist and writer, and above all socialist, took strong exception to Henry James's description of London. In a robust article, Morris attacked the American novelist:

Mr Henry James, the American novelist, has been writing an ingenious paper on the impression made by London on his feelings; but as a matter of course, his view of the monstrosity is taken from the standpoint of the superior middle-class person, who looks upon the working classes as a useful machine, and, having no experience of their life, has not the imagination enough to realise the fact that the said machine is composed of millions of men, women and children who are living in misery ...

It is this from which is born the 'dreadful delight' on which clever but dull Mr James expatiates so ingeniously ...

I should like a view of London from a quite different kind of man from the clever historian of the deadliest corruption of society, the laureate of the flirts, sneaks and empty fools of which that society is most composed, and into whose hearts (?) he can see so clearly. I should like the impressions of London given by one who had been under its sharp toothed harrow ...

But he should not be a man born and bred in the slums, not even 'used' to them, not a man born poor anywhere, but someone who once lived in a pleasant place with hope beside him. From him I should like a true tale of the City of Dreadful Delight.¹

The East End of London, the City of Dreadful Delight, was to be Morris's political arena for six eventful years, as he formulated his socialist ideals and sought to impart them to working people. He travelled extensively around the country during these years, often taking in two and sometimes three meetings a day.² But he returned to the East End, making regular appearances at working-

men's clubs and in Victoria Park, lecturing and addressing the 'East Enders', as he liked to call them, always with the feeling that somehow he was not really getting his message of socialism across and deeply conscious of the great class divide which separated him from them.

The name of William Morris crops up frequently in accounts of the work of East End activists such as Annie Besant and Eleanor Marx, and of events such as Alfred Linnell's funeral (1887), the Match Girls' Strike (1888), and the London Dock Strike (1889). However, the local history enthusiast who seeks details of Morris's activities in the East End within published accounts of his life and work, meets with disappointing results. There is barely a passing mention, even in a recent, definitive work,³ and it was this which prompted my search for William Morris's East End connections. What I have gleaned, mainly from Morris's letters to friends and family, from his Socialist Diary, and from *Commonweal* ('Notes on News') is presented here, not as a critique of Morris and his work, but in celebration of the justified claim that 'William Morris was here in the East End'.

William Morris was born in 1834 at Walthamstow, then a suburban village on the edge of Epping Forest. It was, in Morris's own words, 'once a pleasant enough place, but now terribly cocknified and choked up by the jerry-builder'.⁴ The modern postcode for Walthamstow (E17) places it within 'East London', although not, strictly speaking, the 'East End' of London.

As a commercial enterprise, Morris, Marshall, Faulkner and Co., established ('the Firm', established in 1861) was eventually a great success, and as Morris and Co. (from 1875), continued to trade until 1939. But for Morris, its great failure lay in its inability to cater for anyone but the rich. 'I don't want art for a few, any more than education for a few or freedom for a few'.⁵ Gradually, his questioning of the nature of the relationship between art and society, led him into social action, and ultimately, to socialism.

Morris joined the Social Democratic Federation (S.D.F.), founded by Henry Mayers Hyndman in June 1881, on 13 January 1883. In a letter to the exiled Austrian socialist Andreas Scheu, dated 15 September 1883, he wrote: 'It must be understood that I always intended to join anybody who distinctly called themselves Socialists, so when last year I was invited to join the Democratic Federation by Mr Hyndman, I accepted the invitation, hoping that it would declare for Socialism.'⁶

By June 1884, Morris had established the Hammersmith branch of the S.D.F. but Hyndman's autocratic manner and attitude was soon to alienate his fellow socialists, amongst them Eleanor Marx and her common-law husband Edward Aveling. Together with a few other like-minded socialists, they broke away to form their own group, the Socialist League. On 30 December 1884, Morris became editor of its weekly paper *Commonweal*, with Edward Aveling as sub-editor.

The Socialist League was soon actively spreading its message throughout the East End, and it was these activities which led to Morris’s appearances, which continued intermittently for six eventful years. The League focused its activities on the East End at least partly because Morris believed that the huge mass of workers living in poverty had been crushed by the system into such a state of apathy and indifference that it was necessary for socialists to go amongst the people, rather than to expect the people to come to them. At first, Morris expressed his views in lectures given in working men’s clubs. He read Karl Marx’s writings and ‘suffered agonies of confusion of the brain’. He confessed, ‘... in my position of a well to do man, not suffering from the disabilities which oppress a working man at every step, I feel that I might never have been drawn into the practical side of the question if an ideal had not forced me to seek towards it’.⁷

Commonweal gives the dates and times of the many meetings held throughout the following year (1885). Whilst the headquarters of the League was located in Hammersmith, a major branch was established at the spacious Mile End Radical Club at 108 Bridge Street (now Hamlets Way), off Burdett Road, and a further branch opened at 110 White Horse Street, just off Cayley Street, Stepney. White Horse Street is now a lane running alongside the eastern boundary of St Dunstan’s Churchyard, and the area has been cleared of all housing.

Weekly open air meetings were organised outside the Salmon and Ball public house in Cambridge Heath Road, Bethnal Green on Sunday mornings, and in Victoria Park, Bow, in the afternoons. The pub lies diagonally opposite St John’s Church, at the junction of Bethnal Green Road and Cambridge Heath Road, and adjacent to Bethnal Green underground station. Volunteers distributed the four-page leaflet *What Socialists Want* written by Morris,⁸ and made house-to-house calls with lists of future meetings. Another popular spot for the League’s open air meetings was Mile End Waste, which lay opposite Trinity Almshouses and Charrington’s Great Assembly Hall. Here, the space between the road and the buildings which lined it, allowed for fairly large audiences.

One of the earliest references to Morris in the East End was a visit on 8 April 1884 to St Jude’s Church, Commercial Street, Whitechapel, where he gave a speech at the opening of the Fourth Annual Art Exhibition. The Vicar was Augustus Barnett, who had taken on St Jude’s in 1872, at the age of 28. With his wife Henrietta, Barnett set to work in the ‘worst parish in London’. He believed that the influence of intellectual and talented young men would have an uplifting effect on the minds and morals of the inhabitants of East End slums, and to this end he appealed for University undergraduates to spend some time working to improve the lot of their less fortunate brothers and sisters in and around Whitechapel.⁹

One result of Barnett’s labour was the founding of the University Settlement, Toynbee Hall, named after Arnold Toynbee, a young, idealistic Oxford under-

graduate recently deceased. Barnett organised the first art exhibition in 1881, with G.F. Watts pictures, and Morris fabrics. Other artists, such as Holman Hunt and Walter Crane, soon joined in this annual attempt to bring art to the masses. The success of the exhibitions, which also attracted the attention of prominent art lovers from the West End, brought a demand for larger premises. Therefore, in 1886 three additional rooms were added, which in their turn proved to be inadequate. Barnett campaigned vigorously for funds for suitable exhibition space, and turned to the public for contributions. Thus was laid the foundations for the now famous Whitechapel Art Gallery, built 1898–1901.

William Morris addressed meetings at the ‘Tee-To-Tum’, a coffee house at 166 Bethnal Green Road on two occasions in 1884, in January and in April. During the following year, he increased his forays, speaking in March at the Radical Club at 110 White Horse Street, Stepney and again in May. He wrote to Georgiana Burne-Jones of a meeting he had addressed on 27 May 1885.

On Sunday I went a-preaching Stepney way, ... My visit intensely depressed me as these Eastwards visits always do; the mere stretch of houses, the vast mass of utter shabbiness and uneventfulness, sits upon one like a nightmare; of course what slums there are one doesn't see. You would perhaps have smiled at my congregation; some 20 persons in a little room as dirty as convenient and stinking a good deal. It took the fire out of my fine periods, I can tell you; it is a great drawback that I can't talk to them roughly and unaffectedly. Also I would like to know what amount of real feeling underlies their bombastic revolutionary talk.

He concludes with these melancholy words, ‘I don't seem to have got at them yet – you see this great class gulf lies between us’.¹⁰

Morris made his first appearance in Victoria Park, Bow on 26 July 1885. But it was via incidents in Dod Street, Limehouse, which attracted unwelcome police attention and landed Morris in court, that his role as a socialist and champion of the working class was given wider coverage in the media. Morris had become embroiled in the exploits of the Free Speech Vigilance Committee, formed with the S.D.F., the Socialist League and the Radical Union to defend their right to speak at what had become a traditional spot, the corner of Piggot Street and Dod Street at Limehouse. This densely populated factory area of East London was usually deserted and quiet on Sundays, and the open space afforded an ideal venue for open air meetings. Several prominent socialists addressed the crowds, including Edward Aveling, Eleanor Marx, and Lewis Lyons, the Jewish Tailors' Trade Union leader.

On 20 September 1885, at the end of a meeting, the police launched a violent attack on the speakers, arresting and charging eight men, among them Jack Williams¹¹ and Lewis Lyons. The hearing was set for Tuesday 22 September. Morris wrote to Jane, ‘I did not go either to the East End meeting or the Parks on Sunday:

but, as you will see by the papers, I felt bound to go to the police court today. My adventure there is pretty well told by the Daily News and the Pall Mall I send you’.¹²

At the Thames Police Court, Edward Aveling and Eleanor Marx gave evidence on the men’s behalf; nevertheless Lewis Lyons was sentenced to two months imprisonment. Morris, as he mentions in his letter above, was amongst the public in the court who cried ‘Shame’ when the sentence was passed. He immediately found himself under attack, as the police turned their attentions on him, and two hours later he was in Thames Police Court in front of the magistrate on the charge of disorderly conduct. When the magistrate, Mr Saunders asked, ‘Who are you?’ Morris replied, ‘I am an artist and a literary man, pretty well known, I think, throughout Europe’. This reply evidently impressed Mr Saunders, who dismissed the charges against Morris.¹³

The episode served only to strengthen the Committee’s resolve to defy the law, and the next Sunday an estimated crowd of sixty thousand people turned up in Dod Street in order to hear Aveling and Eleanor Marx, amongst others, speak. So great was the gathering that it spilled over into East India Dock Road and down West India Dock Road. This time the police kept away, on the orders of the Home Secretary, who did not want an incident which could be used to the advantage of the Government’s opponents during the run up to the elections, which were being held in November of that year.¹⁴

Victoria Park was a popular spot for Sunday orators, and amongst them could be seen the unmistakable figure of William Morris. On 26 July 1885, Tom Mann, one of the leaders of the 1889 ‘Dockers’ Tanner’ Strike, saw Morris on what was to be the first of several visits to the Park. He was being heartily applauded by his audience of workers, but to Mann’s mind Morris looked ‘the picture of Bluff King Hal’.¹⁵ Notwithstanding Mann’s reference to Morris’s regal appearance, the latter was aware that he presented a somewhat different profile to the young working lads who frequented the Park. In a letter to his daughter Jenny, dated 30th March 1887, Morris wrote:

Last Sunday it befell me to go to Victoria Park (beyond Bethnal Green) to a meeting. Now I have mounted a cape or cloak grey in colour so that people doubt whether I be a brigand or a parson; this seemed too picturesque for some ‘Arrys’ who were passing by and they sung out after me, Shakespeare – Yah!¹⁶

Morris was again in the Park on 11 October 1885, no doubt with the memories of Dod Street fresh in his mind. There had been some dissension amongst the socialists and radicals over the order of speakers at Limehouse, which was not fully resolved. The dispute could be the reason Morris wrote to Scheu, a few days later, on 16 October:

It's all right; I am to lecture on Sunday next. I suppose we shall try the Park again, and I will go if I am well enough; but I can't get rid of my sciatica and now I have a cold to boot ... I don't know if you saw about Sunday's Victoria Park meeting; I suppose it might be called a success; but after all as far as the League was concerned we were taken in; for 'twas a Federation meeting and there was I in a van with the whole gang – including Hyndman.¹⁷

Soon after, Morris fell ill with severe gout in both feet, and was bedridden for several weeks.

Morris made only one visit to the Park in 1886, on 8 August, after which he wrote to his daughter Jenny:

... and then away Eastward Ho to Victoria Park rather sulky at having to turn out so soon after dinner. Though Victoria Park is rather a pretty place with water (dirty though) and lots of trees. Had a good meeting there also spoke for nearly an hour altogether in a place made noisy by other meetings, also a band not far off. Whereby I was somewhat hoarse for our evening lecture which was Shaw's, not mine, and very good.¹⁸

Morris was a regular visitor to Victoria Park in 1887 and addressed the crowds there no fewer than five times, on 27 March, 21 May, 23 July, 21 August and 11 September. On Wednesday 30 March, he noted in his diary:

On Sunday (27 March) I gave my 'Monopoly' [a set speech, with the full title of 'Monopoly: or How Labour is Robbed', which he delivered on several occasions] at the Borough of Hackney Club, which was one of the first workmen's clubs founded, if not the first; it is a big club numbering 1,600 members: a dirty wretched place enough giving a sad idea of the artisans' standard of comfort: the meeting was a full one, and I suppose I must say attentive; but the coming and going all the time, the pie-boy and the pot-boy was rather trying to my nerves: the audience was civil and inclined to agree, but I couldn't flatter myself that they mostly understood me, simple as the lecture was. This was a morning lecture over about two o'clock: I went afterwards with poor Vandenhout to the Hackney Branch as I had to speak at the 'free-speech demonstration' in Victoria Park. Dined on the way off three pence worth of shrimps that I bought in a shop, and ate with bread and butter and ginger beer in a coffee shop, not as dirty as it looked from outside.

I went afterwards to the Demonstration on Free Speech in Victoria Park: as a demonstration it was a failure, I suppose enough fuss hadn't been made about it: but it was a good Sunday afternoon gathering the crowd very quiet and attentive 300 or 400 I should suppose.¹⁹

The Free Speech Demonstration was held at 3.30 pm in Victoria Park, under the auspices of the Hackney Branch Socialist League, in order to celebrate the release

from prison of James Allman, one of their members.

In August 1887 Morris again wrote to Georgiana Burne-Jones:

It is a beautiful bright Autumn morning here, as fresh as daisies; and I am not over-inclined for my morning preachment at Walham Green but go I must, as also to Victoria Park in the afternoon. I had a sort of dastardly hope that it might rain. Mind you, I don't pretend to say that I don't like it in some way or other, when I am on my legs. I fear I am an inveterate word-spinner and not good for much else.²⁰

However, his enthusiasm for speaking in the Park now began to diminish and he came to dread such occasions. He was in the Park in September 1887, but did not return there until May the following year.

II

The activities of the Socialists and the Radicals were being viewed with increasing misgivings by the government. The Victorian ruling class believed that they were confronted with the most serious danger to public order since the Chartist uprising of 1848. *The Times* had praised the execution of the Chicago anarchists, and spoke enviously of the United States where the police carried revolvers and used them without mercy at the first sign of resistance.

The culmination of the Socialists' struggle for the right to free speech came on 'Bloody Sunday', 13 November 1887, when three people died and over two hundred others were injured, some seriously. Three hundred demonstrators were arrested, amongst them two Members of Parliament who later received prison sentences for their part in the event. Eleanor Marx, who was in the thick of action at Parliament Street, said: 'I have never seen anything like the brutality of the police; the Germans and Austrians who know what police brutality can be, said the same to me.'²¹

Briefly, the events which led up to those shameful days in November and December 1887 were as follows: The Metropolitan Federation of Radical Clubs had planned a series of demonstrations and marches in order to protest against Government policies towards Ireland, and the continual harassment of open air speakers by the police. Marches were broken up amidst great violence by the police, marchers were refused entry into Trafalgar Square, and on 8 November, public meetings in the Square were banned.²²

William Morris, speaking on behalf of the Socialist League, responded to the ban by proposing the setting up of a Law and Liberty League in order to defend the right of free speech. On Sunday 13 November thousands of people converged on Trafalgar Square,²³ which was guarded by four thousand policemen standing

in ranks four deep, and three hundred mounted police with batons. Behind the police were three hundred soldiers with fixed bayonets, and in support was a battalion of Life Guards. William Morris and Annie Besant addressed the marchers on the need to resist all attempts to gag free speech. They marched along with George Bernard Shaw, and were lucky to escape being attacked, but Cunningham-Graham, MP for North West Lanark, John Burns MP, and Hyndman, were beaten up. Burns and Graham, though bloodied and cut, were later sentenced to six weeks imprisonment.

A total of three hundred were arrested that day and one hundred and twenty six charged and sentenced to anything from a fortnight to six months hard labour. Seven men went before the Surrey or Middlesex Assizes; all received sentences, one being sentenced to a year's imprisonment. One man received five years penal servitude at the Central Criminal Court. In all one hundred and sixty people were sent to gaol. Of the over two hundred people who were injured, some seriously, three later died of their injuries.

The following Sunday the police were out again in force, charging their horses at the crowds which had collected in Trafalgar Square. A Mr W. Green of 17 Fairfield Row, Bow, who was Secretary of the Bow Branch of the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners, wrote:

People were being knocked about recklessly. Those that ran in front or were compelled to run in front were met by this line of policemen who struck out right and left. I saw one knocked down insensible from a full butt punch in the face ... I assisted him to a cab.²⁴

Alfred Linnell, a law clerk, should not have been walking about the streets on that cold and foggy Sunday afternoon, but he had nothing better to do. He was a lonely and rather unhappy man. His wife had died, and as he could not look after his three children, two boys and a girl, whilst working in London, he had sent them to relatives. They in turn sent the unhappy children to the workhouse school in Mitcham. On Sunday, 13 November, Linnell took a walk up the road in order to see what was going on in Trafalgar Square.

In Northumberland Avenue he suddenly found himself being charged by a police horse, which trampled upon him, smashing his thigh bone. Linnell was left writhing on the ground until some of the bystanders lifted him gently and carried him to Charing Cross Hospital. After two weeks of agony, he died on 2 December. Neither his children nor his two sisters and their families were informed of his injury, and by the time they found him, it was too late.

The Law and Liberty League found in Linnell a martyr for their cause. They took over all the arrangements for his funeral, which was held on Sunday 18 December; they were supervised by Annie Besant. The cortege began from Great Windmill Street and was headed by a scarlet banner, with a brass band playing

Handel’s ‘Dead March’ from *Saul*. Fifty wand bearers, veterans of the Chartist agitation, walked ahead of the open hearse, which carried the words emblazoned on a shield ‘Killed in Trafalgar Square’. Over the coffin flew the red flag of the Socialists, the green flag of the Irish, and the red, yellow and green flag of the Radicals. The coffin itself was draped in black and carried a brass plate with the inscription:

Alfred Linnell, aged forty-one. Died December 2 of injuries inflicted by the police in Trafalgar Square, November 20, 1887.

Annie Besant paced slowly on the left of the hearse, with W.T. Stead, Herbert Burrows and Cunninghame Graham. On the right walked William Morris, Robert Darling of the Irish Land League, Frank Scott of the Salvation Army, and James Seddon. Following in a coach with Linnell’s family were Dr Richard Pankhurst and his wife Emmeline, and John Burns MP. Eleanor Marx rode in one of the other coaches. The Rev. Stewart Headlam, the controversial clergyman from St Matthew’s Church, Bethnal Green, officiated. According to Annie Besant, the steps of St Paul’s Cathedral were black with spectators: ‘The chimney pot hats stayed on, but all others came off as the coffin went by’.

It was estimated by some sources that more than 100,000 people followed the cortege.²⁵ The route took the mourners through Coventry Street and Cranbourne Street, and then they were diverted to Long Acre, Covent Garden and the Strand, up Fleet Street and on to Aldgate, Whitechapel Road and Mile End Road to the City of London and Tower Hamlets Cemetery. It was half past four, raining and dark by the time they reached the entrance, to discover that the main gate was guarded by a hundred policemen; the procession had to squeeze through the narrow path, now called Hamlets Way, and enter from a side gate.

Linnell’s grave is situated in Square No. 73 close to the entrance on the right hand side of the cemetery. The plot was paid for by the Law and Liberty League. The walls of the grave were decorated with holly and evergreens. By the aid of a lantern and in an increasing downpour, the Reverend Stewart Headlam read the burial service. William Morris spoke of Linnell’s relative obscurity in life. He said:

Our friend who lies here has had a hard life, and met with a hard death; and if society had been differently constituted his life might have been a delightful one. We are engaged in a most holy war, trying to prevent our rulers making this great town of London nothing more than a prison. I cannot help thinking that the immense procession in which we have walked this day will have the effect of teaching a great lesson.²⁶

By matchlight, the choir sang ‘A Death Song’ composed by Morris and set to music by Malcolm Lawson. Copies of the song were printed in an eight page

pamphlet with a cover design by Walter Crane and sold all along the route for the benefit of Linnell's orphans.

What cometh here from west to east awending?
And who are these, the marchers stern and slow?
We bear the message that the rich are sending
Aback to those who bade them wake and know.
Not one, not one, nor thousands must they slay,
But one and all if they would dusk the day.

We asked for them a life of toilsome earning,
They bade us bide their leisure for our bread,
We craved to speak to tell our woeful learning,
We come back speechless, bearing back our dead.
Not one, not one, nor thousands must they slay,
But one and all if they would dusk the day.

They will not learn; they have no ears to hearken.
They turn their faces from the eyes of fate;
Their gay-lit halls shut out the skies that darken.
But lo! this dead man knocking at the gate.
Not one, not one, nor thousands must they slay,
But one and all if they would dusk the day.

Here lies the sign that we shall break our prison;
Amidst the storm he won a prisoner's rest;
But in the cloudy dawn the sun arisen
Brings us our day of work to win the best.
Not one, not one, nor thousands must they slay,
But one and all if they would dusk the day.²⁷

The press attacked Morris for his role in the funeral, but as a result of the publicity he became a recognised champion of the workers all over England.²⁸

On 17 June 1888, Morris was once again seen in Victoria Park when he appeared on the platform with Mrs Taylor, and other members of the Socialist League. He was one of the star attractions in the Park, and the authorities began to fear a recurrence of the Trafalgar Square incidents. The East End was now a hotbed of political turmoil, as unions struggled to assert their right to speak for the workers, alongside the Anarchists, the Socialist League and the Social Democratic Federation, all of which had set up branches in various parts of Tower Hamlets, all with the noble purpose of bringing political and social awareness to the masses.

The Metropolitan Board of Works, which controlled the Park, secured the consent of the Home Secretary to a by-law forbidding collections to be made in the Park. Since this was a popular way of augmenting funds, the Socialist League took the initiative and called a protest meeting on 10 June at 3.30 pm. The main speaker was Annie Besant, who was greeted enthusiastically by a crowd of around two thousand. After her address she made a collection to ensure that her name was taken down. However, the by-law was not enforced.

III

On 15 June 1888, at a meeting of the Fabian Society, Mrs Clementina Black lectured on her researches into female labour. During the discussion H.H. Champion revealed that Bryant and May’s Match Company paid out enormous dividends to their shareholders, whilst denying their workers a fair wage. Annie Besant and Herbert Burrows went to Bow in order to interview some of the girls. They were horrified by their findings: A girl of sixteen earning four shillings a week, living with her sister who earned good money, about eight or nine shillings a week. Out of the girl’s earnings, two shillings went towards the rent of one room and she lived on bread and butter and tea, for breakfast and dinner.

Annie Besant immediately published an article in *The Link* on 23 June, on ‘White Slavery in London’.²⁹ Three days later, she and Burrows stood at the factory gates handing out leaflets to the girls as they came out. Bryant and May’s threatened Annie with libel action, and demanded that the girls sign a statement refuting the allegations made in the article. They refused to do so, and three girls were sacked. On 5 July, the whole factory downed tools, and 1200 girls from the wood matchmaking department and three hundred from the box making department, marched out on strike.

This was not the first time the girls had struck. In 1886 they had attempted a strike over a wage cut, as well as unhealthy working conditions. During the recession of the 1880s, the company had cut its labour costs; any opposition or infringement of the strict work rules, resulted in fines which reduced their already minimal take home pay. The girls also lived in dread of developing ‘phossy jaw’, or necrosis of the jawbone, a debilitating disease caused by ingestion of yellow phosphorus, which caused intense pain and disfigurement, and sometimes even death. The illness reduced the rate of production, and sick girls who could not fulfil their quota would be sacked.

Annie Besant took charge of strike proceedings. On Sunday 8 July, she organised a meeting at Mile End Waste, where Herbert Burrows, Stewart Headlam and Clementina Black addressed the crowds. She also organised a delegation of twelve girls to the House of Commons, and continued to press their cause as a

national issue in letters to the newspapers, whilst organising collections to support the girls during their struggle.

The Strike, and the proceedings of the House of Lords Sweating Committee, prompted a joint radical anti-sweating demonstration on Sunday 22 July in Hyde Park, in which both the S.D.F. and the Socialist League groups from East London participated. The march began at Beckton Road, Canning Town, traversed East India Dock Road, then turned right on to Burdett Road where it was met by the Limehouse branch of the S.D.F. It then moved on to Mile End Waste where it was met by the Bethnal Green Socialist League, the London Tailors and Machinists Society, and the Berner Street International Working Men's Club.

The march continued picking up groups on its way to Hyde Park where platforms were arranged around the park from where speakers such as John Burns, George Bernard Shaw, Herbert Burrows and Annie Besant addressed the crowd. No. 6 platform was occupied by the Socialist League, and William Morris moved the resolution that:

This meeting, while protesting against the extortion practised under what is known as the sweating system, points out that this is a necessary result of production for profit, and must continue until that is put and end to, and it therefore calls upon all workers to combine in order to bring about the Social Revolution which will place the means of production and exchange in the hands of the producers.³⁰

Bryant and May, greatly embarrassed by this unwelcome publicity, caved in and ceded to the strikers' demands. The strike has gone down in history as the first successful strike by women, organised by a woman.

On 18th November, a huge demonstration was organised by the Socialist League in Victoria Park, in commemoration of the first anniversary of the execution of the Chicago Martyrs. Lucy Parsons, the widow of one of the anarchists, addressed the crowd. The conservative *East London Observer* (24 November 1888) described the proceedings:

Two extemporised platforms in the shape of excursion vans were placed in position round which immense crowds soon congregated. The chief attraction at the one was Mrs Lucy Parsons, the wife of one of one of the Chicago anarchists who met his death at the hands of the law. She was a dark – almost mulatto – looking woman, attired in black, and her utterances, displaying a limited knowledge of grammar, were listened to with the deepest attention. At the other platform the cynosures of all eyes were Mr William Morris and Mr Cunninghame Graham. From both these platforms such arrant nonsense was cast forth about the 'down-trodden working men' and 'tools of the wealthy' which, of course, was cheered to the echo.³¹

The above extract leaves us in no doubt as to where the editor's sympathies

lay. (Incidentally, Morris describes Mrs Parsons as being of American Indian appearance, with speech that was pure Yankee!)³² This apart, the above newspaper account is at variance with the following letter Morris wrote to Jenny on 17 November:

I am going to Nottingham tonight to lecture tomorrow and have got to finish my lecture before I go, so I have not much time to write a long screed.³³

So, despite the newspaper's assertions, Morris was not in Victoria Park on 18 November.

The Berner Street International Working Men's Club, which joined in the Hyde Park rally, was already well known to William Morris. In 1884, a Society of Jewish Socialists had set up an International Workers Educational Club and its founders became patrons of the radical Yiddish newspaper *Der Arbeter Fraint*. In February 1885, the club took over premises at 40, Berner Street (now Henriques Street), described as a narrow slum thoroughfare off Commercial Road, where they now called themselves the International Workingmen's Educational Association. No. 40 was an old wooden two-storey building; the club room could hold about two hundred people and contained a stage. The predominantly Jewish club was open to Socialist League branches, and Morris lectured there to mixed ethnic groups. On Tuesday 27 March 1888, his play, *The Tables Turned, or Nupkins Awakened* was performed there, as part of a benefit concert in aid of the Yiddish radical newspaper *Der Arbeter Fraint*.³⁴

Morris addressed the Berner Street Club on 2nd February 1886, 22 September 1888, and again on 8 June 1890. On 17 June his *Tables Turned* was repeated to a crowded house at the Princes Square Club, after which recitations and songs both in English and German, as well as dancing, continued to a late hour. The Socialist League was a great deal more sympathetic to its alien comrades than the S.D.F.³⁵

On 9 April 1889, Morris was again at Commercial Street, this time delivering a lecture illustrated by lantern-slides on 'Gothic Architecture', at a meeting sponsored by the Guild and School of Handicraft, in the lecture room of Toynbee Hall for students of the University Settlements scheme. The Guild and School of Handicraft had been set up at Toynbee Hall by C. R. Ashbee, an ardent admirer of Morris, and one of the pioneers of the Arts and Crafts Movement in England. He was later to buy Morris's printing press, when it was put up for sale after the latter's death.³⁶

Edward Thompson makes the point that, despite Morris's earnestness in trying to fill the role of the active agitator and propagandist, he often felt that his reputation as a poet and artist-designer hindered his progress. However, his wealthy middle-class background provided an even greater divide. It would be true to say he did not really understand the people he most wanted to reach. The

working classes had hitherto been viewed from a distance, but the socialist in him now wanted to reach out to the workers who would form the foundation of the Socialist Party. But his forays into the East End only served to underline the intellectual and spiritual deprivation of the worker and this knowledge filled him with a sense of shame: 'a sense of shame in one's own better luck not possible to express – that the conditions under which they live and work make it difficult for them even to conceive the sort of life that a man should live.'³⁷

On 8 June 1890, the fifth anniversary of the Berner Street Club, the hall was colourfully decorated and illuminated and packed with workers in their holiday attire accompanied by their wives and children. At half past five, after tea was over, William Morris, in his capacity of Chairman, gave the signal for the speeches to begin. He opened the meeting with a brief but informative speech, praising the club for its endless dedication, and observing that English comrades could take an example from it. Jewish immigrants had not come to England for fun, but were driven here by despotism and discrimination, with the tragic experience of leaving their homeland and arriving here with the hope of finding a quieter and humane life. Instead they found the terrible sweating system. New troubles began for them, and they sank into further depths of despair, until the International Working Men's Club brought renewed hope to the hearts of Jewish workers – the message of Socialism. Morris's words, we gather, were well received.

Later, an interval collection was announced by Morris, following which May, his daughter, and Sergius Stepniak went around with the plates, whilst the choir of the Hammersmith branch of the Socialist League sang Morris's lyric: 'Down among the Dead Men'. The sum realised was £2 6s 5d. Tables were then withdrawn, and dancing commenced.³⁸

The brutal treatment of Jews and the pogroms in Russia brought a fresh stream of refugees to London. *Commonweal* and *Der Arbeter Fraint* announced a meeting on 1 November 1890, organised by the Club in the Great Assembly Hall at Mile End, in order to protest against the persecution of Jewish comrades in Russia. An impressive line-up of speakers was announced, but on the Thursday before the meeting, Charringtons withdrew their permission for use of the hall, probably on the instigation of Samuel Montagu and Herman Adler.³⁹ The demonstration took place instead outside on the Waste, and attracted a massive audience. Along with William Morris were Eleanor Marx, Edward Aveling and Cunninghame Graham. This was to be Morris's last known appearance in the East End.⁴⁰

One of the highlights of the Socialists' calendar was the excursion to Epping Forest, the vicinity of Morris's birthplace. The outing was organised by the Socialist League, and attended by various groups, but it is not clear whether Morris actually attended these excursions. Besides singing, revelry, songs in different

languages, dances and games, there were speeches, and a great deal of literature was sold. There were also a large number of police both mounted and on foot, waiting for an opportunity to perform their duty. One of the constables tried to coax a young member of the League into selling him a ticket for refreshments so that he could make an arrest for illegal trading!⁴¹

The above events describe only those occasions on which William Morris was known to have addressed the public or participated in meetings in the East End of London. *Commonweal* regularly listed dates and events organised by the Socialist League, and it is possible that Morris attended some of these occasions, but was not mentioned by name.

Although we know, for instance, that in the first performance of *The Tables Turned, or Nupkins Awakened*, Morris himself took the role of the Archbishop of Canterbury, it is not clear from the announcements listing the dates of performances by The Commonweal Company at 40 Berner Street, advertised in *Commonweal*, for instance on 28 January, 4 February, 14 March and 27 March 1888, whether he continued to take this role in some or any subsequent performances.⁴²

By 1890, the Socialist League had fallen victim to internal dissensions. Morris and others left, forming the Hammersmith Socialist Society from the Hammersmith branch of the League. From that year onwards, his forays into the East End ceased. He was becoming increasingly unwell, and his newly established Kelmscott Press occupied much of his attention. However, his socialist fervour never ceased, despite his failing health.

When William Morris died on 3 October 1896, his family doctor said of him ‘he died a victim to his enthusiasm for spreading the principles of Socialism’.⁴³ The East End of London can say with justifiable pride that they were privileged to have shared in that enthusiasm.

CHRONOLOGY OF WILLIAM MORRIS’S APPEARANCES IN THE EAST END

NOTES

DATE	LOCATION
3 January 1884	166 Bethnal Green Road, Tee-To-Tum
8 April 1884	St Jude’s Church, Commercial Street
27 April 1884	166 Bethnal Green Road, Tee-To-Tum
29 October 1884	Limehouse

- 9 November 1884 13 Redman's Road Mile End
 11 January 1885 Hoxton Academy Schools, Hoxton
 29 March 1885 110 White Horse Street, Stepney Socialist League Club
 12 April 1885 Academy Schools, Hoxton
 24 May 1885 110 White Horse Street, Stepney Socialist League (SL) Club
 26 July 1885 Victoria Park
 8 August 1885 Stratford Branch SL
 16 August 1885 Exchange Coffee House, Pitfield Street, Hoxton
 1 September 1885 Swaby's Coffee House, 103 Mile End Road, near Eagle Place
 22 September 1885 Thames Police Court, Stepney (before magistrate Mr Saunders)
 11 October 1885 Victoria Park
 24 January 1886 Hackney Branch Rooms, 23 Audrey Street, Hackney Road
 11 July 1886 Hoxton Branch SL, 2 Crondel Street
 2 February 1886 International Workingmen's Education Club, 40 Berner Street
 5 June 1886 Stratford Branch SL
 8 August 1886 Victoria Park
 24 August 1886 Mile End Branch Socialist League, 108 Bridge Street
 13 October 1886 Congregational Schools, Swanscombe St, Barking Road
 10 November 1886 Broadway, London Fields, Hackney
 6 March 1887 Hoxton Branch SL, 2 Crondel Street
 13 March 1887 Hackney Branch Rooms, 23 Audrey Street, Hackney Road
 27 March 1887 Borough of Hackney Club, Haggerston
 27 March 1887 Victoria Park
 24 April 1887 Morley Coffee Tavern Lecture Hall, Mare Street, Hackney
 21 May 1887 Victoria Park
 12 June 1887 Hackney Branch Rooms, 23 Audrey Street, Hackney Road
 3 July 1887 Broadway, London Fields, Hackney
 23 July 1887 Victoria Park
 21 August 1887 Victoria Park
 21 August 1887 Globe Coffee House, High Street, Hoxton

11 September 1887	Victoria Park
25 September 1887	Hoxton Church
27 September 1887	Mile End Waste
18 December 1887	Bow Cemetery, Southern Grove (now Tower Hamlets Cemetery)
27 March 1888	<i>Nupkins Awakened</i> performed at International Workingmen's Education Club, 40 Berner Street. Morris did not take part, as he was in Scotland at the time.
17 April 1888	Mile End Socialist Hall, 95 Boston Street, Hackney
17 April 1888	Workingmen's Radical Club, 108 Bridge Street, Burdett Road
12 May 1888	William Morris writes on the East End – 'Notes and News', <i>Commonweal</i> .
16 June 1888	International Club, 23 Princes Square, Cable Street
17 June 1888	Victoria Park, Morris and Mrs Taylor
30 June 1888	Epping Forest Picnic
22 September 1888	International Workingmen's Education Club, 40 Berner Street
9 April 1889	Toynbee Hall
27 June 1889	New Labour Club, 5 Victoria Park Square, Bethnal Green
8 June 1890	International Workingmen's Education Club, 40 Berner Street
1 November 1890	Mile End Waste

1. *Commonweal*, 'Notes and News', 15 December 1888, p. 397. In Nicholas Salmon, ed, *William Morris: Journalism, Contributions to Commonweal, 1885–1890*. Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1996, pp. 490–491. Subsequently Salmon, *Journalism*. James published his essay 'London', with illustrations by James Pennell, in the December issue of *Century Magazine*, vol. 37, pp. 219–39.
2. Nicholas Salmon with Derek Baker, *The William Morris Chronology*, Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1996, 292 pp. Subsequently Salmon, *Chronology*; Eugene LeMire, *The Unpublished Lectures of William Morris*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1969, provides 'A Calendar of William Morris's Platform Career', pp. 234–290, although this is not complete. Subsequently LeMire.
3. Fiona MacCarthy, *William Morris. A Life for Our Time*. London: Faber & Faber, 1994, 780 pp. Subsequently MacCarthy.

4. Norman Kelvin, ed, *The Collected Letters of William Morris*, 4 vols in 5, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984–96, II, p. 227. Subsequently Kelvin, *Letters*.
5. ‘The Lesser Arts’ in May Morris, ed, *The Collected Works of William Morris*, 24 vols, London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1910–125, XXII, p. 26. Subsequently *Collected Works*.
6. Kelvin, *Letters*, II, p. 231.
7. William Morris, ‘How I Became a Socialist’, 1894, in *Collected Works*, XXIII, p. 278.
8. *What Socialists Want*. Delivered on several occasions, the first being 6 November 1887 at Fulham Liberal Club, Fulham, London; <http://www.marxists.org/archive/morris/works/1887/want.htm> [as accessed 11 August 2009].
9. LeMire records Morris’s speech to the Fourth Annual Loan Exhibition (p. 242). He also informs us (p. 300), that portions of the speech appear on May Morris, ed, *William Morris: Artist, Writer, Socialist*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1936, II, pp. 164–9. Afterwards AWS. For Canon Barnett, see J.A.R. Pimlott, *Toynbee Hall. Fifty Years of Social Progress*, London: J.M. Dent, 1935, 315 pp, and Standish Meacham, *Toynbee Hall and Social Reform, 1880–1914*, New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1987, 211 pp.
10. Kelvin, *Letters*, II, p. 438.
11. John Edward ‘Jack’ Williams, S.D.F. activist; E.P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*, 1955, London: Merlin Press, 1977, p. 284, note 3. Subsequently Thompson.
12. Kelvin, *Letters*, II, p. 454.
13. Yvonne Kapp, *Eleanor Marx. The Crowded Years, 1884–1898, volume II*, London: Virago, 1979, p. 70. Subsequently Kapp II.
14. Kapp II, p. 70.
15. Tom Mann, *Memoirs*, pp. 48–49; in Thompson, pp. 312–3.
16. Kelvin, *Letters*, II, p. 634.
17. Kelvin, *Letters*, II, p. 467.
18. Kelvin, *Letters*, II, p. 562.
19. Florence Boos, ed, *William Morris’s Socialist Diary*, London and New York: Journeyman Press, 1985, pp. 45–6. Note 15 suggests the spelling Vanderhout, and Note 151 describes the occasion of the demonstration.
20. Kelvin, *Letters*, II, p. 686, where the letter is dated ‘Late Summer’.
21. Kapp II, p. 228. Accounts of Bloody Sunday may also be found in Thompson, pp. 488–91, and in MacCarthy, pp. 567–70.
22. Kapp II, p. 223.
23. Kapp II, p. 226
24. Kapp II, p. 236.

25. Kapp II, p. 240 attributes an estimate of 120,000 to 'some journalists'.
26. Morris's speech is given in Thompson, pp. 494–5, and in MacCarthy, pp. 572–3.
27. *Collected Works*, IX, p. 124. The score of the 'Death Song' is reproduced in Kapp II, pp. 244–7.
28. MacCarthy asserts that from this time Morris became Socialism's 'grand old man'. (p. 573)
29. Anne Taylor, *Annie Besant, A Biography*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1992, pp. 207–8. Subsequently Taylor.
30. Taylor (p. 210) mentions this meeting, but makes no reference to Morris, and records that it was the 'match girls' who voted for a resolution calling for the formation of the Matchmakers' Union. Salmon, *Journalism* (p. 201), following LeMire (p. 273), records that 'Morris gave an open-air speech at an anti-sweating demonstration sponsored by various socialist bodies in Hyde Park'. Morris wrote about the victory of the 'match-girls' over 'the blameless firm of Bryant and May' in *Commonweal*, 28 July 1888 (Salmon, *Journalism*, pp. 438–9).
31. *East London Observer*, 24 November 1888.
32. Kelvin, *Letters*, II, p. 837.
33. Kelvin, *Letters*, II, p. 836. Note 1 (p. 838) confirms that Morris lectured in Nottingham on the 18th.
34. *The Tables Turned; Or Nupkins Awakened: A Socialist Interlude*. London: Office of *The Commonweal*, 1887. In *AWS* vol. 2, pp. 528–567.
35. Salmon, *Journalism*, pp. 158, 205–6, and 228 confirms these as scheduled dates, but suggests that Morris did not attend the second event as he was at Kelmscott Manor.
36. MacCarthy, p. 594; see also Fiona MacCarthy, *The Simple Life. C.R. Ashbee in the Cotswolds*, London: Lund Humphreys, 1981, 204 pp.
37. Thompson, p. 434.
38. LeMire, p. 284; Salmon, *Chronology*, p. 228.
39. Samuel Montagu, 1st Baron Swaythling (1832–1911), Liberal politician, and founder of Samuel Montagu & Co, bankers; Herman Adler (1839–1911), Chief Rabbi of the British Empire, 1891–1911.
40. LeMire, p. 284; Salmon, *Chronology*, p. 233.
41. 'I have not seen the place now for many years except once, when we Leaguers went a-pleasuring to High Beech'; James Redmond, ed, *News from Nowhere, or an epoch of rest*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970, Chapter III, p. 13. Salmon, *Chronology*, p. 150 also states: 19 July 1885; Morris gave an open-air speech on the occasion of the 'Revolutionists Excursion' to Epping Forest ... sponsored by the International Club of London.
42. Pamela Bracken Wiens, 'The Reviews Are In: Reclaiming the Success of

Morris's "Socialist Interlude", *Journal of the William Morris Society*, IX, 2, Spring 1991, pp. 16–27; p. 17 alludes to Morris as the Archbishop in the first performance.

43. J. W. Mackail, *The Life of William Morris*, 1899, London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1922, vol. II, p. 352.

Author's note: This article is dedicated to the late Mary Cable, long serving member of the East London History Society, who introduced me to the William Morris Society.

The editor would like to thank Peter Faulkner for his extensive help in preparing this article for publication.