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## Obituary

### R.C.H. Briggs (1924-2016)

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Peter Faulkner

Ronald Charles Hawkswell Briggs was born in West Yorkshire, and graduated from New College, Oxford. (I am impressed by his triple initials, which remind me of distinguished amateur cricketers of the post-war period). He served in the Royal Armoured Corps from 1943 to 1947, reaching the rank of Captain. He then completed a Master of Jurisprudence degree and an advanced degree in French. He became a Barrister at Law, and, following a period of practice at the Common Law Bar, he was appointed in 1972 as Legal Secretary for the independent legal watchdog organisation 'Justice', the UK section of the International Commission of Jurists. The declared mission of 'Justice' is to promote human rights and improve the system of justice.

We can see how these concerns would integrate well with enthusiasm for William Morris. Briggs had gone on a cycling tour prior to joining the army in 1943, during which he saw a signpost to Kelmscott, and so went to the Manor. 'The whole place was magical, I was hooked', he told Martin Crick in 2006.<sup>1</sup> (In writing this obituary I am greatly indebted to Crick's *The History of the William Morris Society 1955-2005*, published by the Society in 2011). The Society came into existence in 1955 as a result of a letter in *The Times* inviting those interested to become members by sending a 10 shilling subscription. Briggs was the first to do so, and so became member no. 1. The first AGM was in April 1956, when a committee was elected, with Graeme Shankland as its Honorary Secretary and Briggs as one of its twelve members. Shankland resigned in October 1956, and invited Briggs to take over, which he eventually agreed to do.

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Apart from his extensive secretarial work, in which he was helped by his wife Joan, the enormously energetic Briggs undertook many other activities associated with Morris. He was largely responsible for the Society's first exhibition, 'The Typographical Adventure of William Morris', with John Kay as designer. Printing was one of Briggs's great areas of expertise and enthusiasm. The exhibition was shown first at the St. Bride's Foundation Institution in July 1957, and then at Leighton House. It toured widely on the continent with the support of the British Council, and gained much publicity for Morris and the Society. Its Catalogue, edited by Briggs, was of an appropriately high quality.

Two events occurred during the late 1950s in which Briggs was active on behalf of the Society. When in 1958 the Air Ministry announced that it planned to erect a radio marker beacon in Kelmscott, not far from the Manor, Briggs led the opposition. The matter went to a Public Enquiry, which decided on a compromise. Then in the winter of 1959 the British Council organised an exhibition of British books at the Lenin State Library. The Soviet authorities were given a veto, which they applied to G.D.H. Cole's edition of Morris's works. Briggs protested to the USSR-Great Britain Society, and the book was returned to the exhibition shortly before it closed.

Moving with equal energy into the 1960s, Briggs completed a significant 'Handlist of the Public Addresses of William Morris' (1960), which called attention to Morris's speeches as a central and neglected part of his achievement. Early in the same year the scholar Peter Floud of the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) died suddenly; Briggs launched a memorial fund, and a Peter Floud Memorial Prize Competition was initiated, running for four years. In April 1961 Briggs and the Society supported an exhibition at the V&A to celebrate the centenary of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co. In 1962 Briggs worked on an exhibition of 'The Work of William Morris' for the Times Bookshop. The exhibition fell rather flat, but a fine Catalogue was produced. In 1962 *The Journal of the William Morris Society* was inaugurated; a subcommittee was appointed to run it, but Briggs characteristically insisted on taking editorial control. He contributed a short piece on 'Morris and Trafalgar Square' to the first issue, and in the Summer 1964 issue, in 'Letters to Janey', gave a full and valuable account of those sent to her by Rossetti, which had been placed in the British Library with the restriction that they should not be open to the public until fifty years after Jane's death. How did he find the time and energy to do all this?

In July 1969 the owner of Kelmscott House and Society member Helen Stephenson told Briggs that she planned to bequeath Kelmscott House to the Society. The committee was delighted, and Briggs used his legal skills so that the Society could be registered as a charity. On advice from the Charity Commissioners, in October 1969 the Society set up the Kelmscott House Trust to manage the house, little realising the problems that this would create. Briggs was naturally one of the twelve trustees appointed. Mrs. Stephenson died during October 1971, and although the house was in poor condition, the Society moved into its first headquarters there, with Briggs working hard both administratively and practically.

The Society now aimed, with American support, to create 'an informal community of scholars' to be called the William Morris Centre, and the first Visiting Research Fellow arrived in January 1975.<sup>2</sup> The house was untidy and uncomfortable, but the young scholars who came during the next four years enjoyed its bohemian atmosphere. A real community

was achieved there, with academic colloquia on Saturday mornings, mostly chaired by Briggs and ending with lunch, “frenziedly put together” by Ronald Briggs’ as one participant remarked.<sup>3</sup> I remember some of these colloquia with pleasure, with Briggs presiding in a spirit of generous hospitality. He was at his best on such occasions, dark-suited, lively, energetic, with long sideburns and twinkling eyes, presiding from what seemed to be an elevated social position. There were also enjoyable Sunday dinners at the Centre, which all those living there took turns to cook. The many visitors often including Ronald and Joan Briggs. Those who lived at the Centre remembered Briggs as a practical man, always ready to undertake tasks about the house, no matter how lowly, as well as a lively and entertaining presence. But the Society’s financial position worsened during the mid-seventies, and in November 1979 the Fellowship was suspended owing to lack of funds, and the Centre had to close down. It would seem that Briggs and the committee, misled by the optimism that ownership of the House gave rise to, paid too little attention to the Society’s finances and those of the House.

The committee was refreshed by the arrival of new, younger members during the late 1970s, and questions began to be asked about the House, which seemed somehow to have become separated from the Society. The Kelmscott House Trustees still hoped for the establishment of a William Morris Centre there, but the committee was worried about its possible financing. The result was that Briggs was criticised, resigned as Hon. Sec., and did not seek re-election to the committee. Even those who resented what they saw as Briggs’s authoritarian manner admitted that the Society survived its first twenty-five years because of his dedication. The AGM for 1980 saw the replacement of Briggs and his friends by a younger generation, and Richard Smith from Nottingham became Hon. Sec.

Briggs’s enthusiasm for Morris never declined, but he now put his energies into the Kelmscott House Trust, which he came to see as an alternative method of serving the Morris cause. However, tensions developed between the Society and the Trust as to how to proceed – would the house have to be sold? and on what terms? In 1984 Briggs argued strongly for the proposal to turn the House into a Morris Centre, and was greatly disappointed when an official Inquiry turned the proposal down. A change in the law in 1993 brought about further tensions between the Society and the Trust over the House, which were to result, despite Briggs’s best efforts, in the dissolution of the Trust in 2002.

After his retirement, Briggs lived at Coombe Bissett in Wiltshire, and it is no surprise to find that he became a founding member of the committee of the Salisbury Cathedral Close Preservation Society, played an active role in promoting its early campaigns, served for a period as the Society’s Chairman, and continued thereafter as an active contributor. He died on 28 December 2016, at the age of ninety-two. He is survived by his wife, Joan; his children, Julian, Roland, and Jeni; and his grandchildren, Sylvie and Sasha, to all of whom the Society offers its condolences and good wishes.

When in 2000 the committee of the Society put forward the suggestion of commissioning a history of the Society, Briggs, then still leading the Kelmscott House Trust, opposed the idea, on the grounds that it would draw attention to unhappy controversies that were better left to fade from memory, soon after writing to the Hon. Sec.: “[i]t seems self-centred for the Society to indulge in this sort of thing. It’s not really what the Society is, or should be, about.<sup>14</sup> As with all Briggs’s arguments, this has some validity. But my view is

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that it is important for members of our Society to be mindful of those who contributed vitally to its existence, among the most remarkable of whom was Ronald Briggs. In his own words, he helped 'to keep the Morris flame alive'.

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1. Martin Crick, *The History of the William Morris Society 1955-2005* (London: The William Morris Society, 2011), p. 30.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 69.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 74.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 161.