

Address At The William Morris Birthday Party, 1993

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William Morris, whose birthday we celebrate today, was born at Elm House, Walthamstow on 24th March 1834, the son of a city businessman, with wealth – which William was to inherit – derived from a Cornish copper mine; his father even obtained a family crest – a horse's head rased argent between three horse shoes. William Morris was, then, a typical middle-class young Victorian, educated at Marlborough, then Oxford, and destined by his parents for the church – little did they know!

Yet when he died in 1896, he was a famous figure and a major influence on the birth of the Arts and Crafts movement; founder of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, whose activities and writings ultimately led to the birth of the 'Garden City Movement', the creation of the post-Second World War 'New Towns', and to the legislation for the preservation of 'Buildings of Architectural and Historic Interest'; an innovator in the art of printing and typography; an outstanding designer of wallpapers, fabrics, stained glass, rugs and tapestries; a poet of high standing; a businessman of no mean talent, who was also a revolutionary Socialist, and called himself a Communist. Morris was a visionary, though by his death somewhat disillusioned about the early attainment of his Utopian dreams – do we not know the feeling?

Today he is a world figure, especially noted for his brilliant skill as a pattern designer – though not now for his poetry – but above all for his visionary thinking in social and political matters, and in the resurgence of the Arts and Crafts philosophy in the context of modern architecture and design.

These days people come in greater numbers than ever from all over the world to see Red House; the house Morris built for himself and his beautiful young bride amongst Kentish orchards, close to Chaucer's 'Route to Canterbury'. It was in the decorating and furnishing of the house, Herman Muthesius wrote in *Das Englische Haus* in 1904, that "he discovered his true mission in life"; and there too – though for a few short years – paradise.

Today's visitors come for a variety of reasons, some as a pilgrimage, many to experience at first hand that early flowering of his – and Webb's – creative genius. Many of them too, like myself, will be or will have been profoundly influenced in their lives by this great man's thought and work. Yet it has not always been so. In the late 1940s and 50s, when the mood in Britain was overwhelmingly in favour of a new start, and to reject the decadent past and the concept of empire, socially, politically, culturally and artistically, the attitude was – in spite of the economic poverty of the country as a result of the war – 'Look to the future'; 'Britain can make

it'. The Festival of Britain in 1951 epitomised this optimism, with its light-hearted modernism. Architecture and design reflected this mood, and the heroes were designers such as Alvar Aalto, Moholy Nagy, and above all Walter Gropius, who returned to Britain its Arts and Crafts origins, paradoxically through the medium of the Bauhaus School of Design. There was an irony too in that a movement that began as a battle against the tyranny of the machine should re-emerge as a means of utilising and civilising it.

In those heady days it was not widely recognised what a debt the 'New Look' owed to Morris: and if the connection seems somewhat obscure, one only has to refer to that brilliantly perceptive phrase in his story *A Dream of John Ball* :

I pondered how men fight and lose the battle, and the thing they fought for comes about in spite of their defeat, and when it comes turns out not what they meant, and other men have to fight for what they meant under another name.

The new social architecture of the modern movement was well suited to the vast building programmes of housing, schools and other social welfare buildings, such as the pit-head baths and health centres built by the Miners' Welfare Commission (later absorbed by the Coal Board), on which I worked shortly after being 'demobbed' from the Royal Marines.

In 1954 I was designing two secondary schools in Hammersmith using traditional building materials in a modern manner, for steel, cement and constructional softwood were still rationed or in short supply; I used solid brick walls and piers, mahogany and pitch pine roofs covered with copper, sliding plate-glass windows in teak frames – luxurious materials by today's standards.

Together with glazed tiles and specially designed fabrics, I wanted to use Morris hand-blocked wallpapers in their decoration, and found the blocks in Sandersons' factory at Perivale – virtually rejected in those days of popular 'porridge' wallpaper. Earlier, trained at the School of Building and Arts and Crafts in Hammersmith, steeped in the tradition of designing and making inherited from Morris, I also became a student member of MARS (the Modern Architectural Research Group) and an ardent fighter for the new iconoclastic architecture, under the influence of the young architectural tutors who came into the studios at that time, among them a not-so-young architect/town planner refugee from the Nazis – Arthur Korn. It was through them and reading Nikolaus Pevsner's *Pioneers of Modern Design from William Morris to Walter Gropius* that I learned of the great significance of Red House to modern architecture and design.

Born in Hammersmith and taught at the School of Building and Arts and Crafts in Lime Grove at which May Morris taught in the early 1930s, I was naturally aware of the importance of Morris and what he stood for quite early on, but in a rather distant sort of way. My mother was a member of the Co-operative Women's Guild, which my wife Doris – whom I had met fresh from the Essex countryside near Colchester – also joined after the war. The Hammersmith Secretary of the Guild was Mary O'Callaghan, an elderly lady of truly Morrissian vigour, who used to regale us with tales of when she and her husband, when youngsters, marched behind Morris's gaily-painted cart up to Hammersmith Broadway, where he would 'spout' on Art and Socialism. In those days, Doris and I lived in St. Peter's Square, and it was there that former neighbours across the Square – Dick and Mary Toms – met up again with us

after the war. Sitting in our living room, looking across the Square one afternoon, dreamily discussing what we would do with our young lives, we decided: one day we must find a house like Morris did, and live and work there together.

Some years passed, and then in March 1952, I had a telephone call from an architect friend, Thurston Williams – did I know that Red House was for sale? A group of our friends were going down to Bexleyheath that week-end to see it. We couldn't, but did so on that following. Neither Doris nor I will forget that journey on the train into Kent. After passing through leafy suburbs, we alighted to walk from Bexleyheath Station, up to and across 'Crook log' – Chaucer's route to Canterbury – through the former hamlet of Upton; turned into Red House Lane at 'Hog's Hole' cottages; passed through the sturdy wooden gates and round the drive – massed snowdrops in flower; opened the seemingly massive entrance door; into the hall – the rustle of leaves that had blown in, in the Autumn – and there we were. I sent a telegram to Dick, then in practice in Plymouth: 'I've found the house'. Three weeks later we were in occupation.

Three years later, there met in the first-floor drawing room, together with Dick, Mary and ourselves, our friend Graeme Shankland, Stanley Morison, Nikolaus Pevsner, Robin Page Arnot, Edmund Penning-Rowsell and John Brandon-Jones. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss the forming of a William Morris Society. Later that year, on 13th September 1955, a letter in *The Times* announcing the formation of the Society was signed by J. Brandon-Jones, Nikolaus Pevsner and Stanley Morison. Sir Sydney Cockerell was the President and Graeme Shankland the Honorary Secretary; Freeman Bass was the Honorary Treasurer. Of these only John Brandon-Jones is still with us, but the Society – not without some problems on the way – has gone from strength to strength.

And so at the end of this address, I come to its real purpose: to salute the memory of that very great man, whose genius has brought such inspiration into all our lives. I ask you to raise your glasses to a toast to William, coupled with the William Morris Society.