Midsummer in the country once again; here you may walk among the fields, though there are fewer hedges than there were and unfortunately the sweet nosegay has been swamped by the sickly odour of the appropriately named oil-seed rape. The gothic towers and some of the cottages are still there, though some are mutilated, and although the villa-dwellers have advanced a little the old village looks much as I remember. Even so, all, or let us say most things, are brilliantly alive.

Many old elms are gone, alas! At least they were felled by disease, rather than for profit. But as I look across toward the still downs I see the old White Horse, still carved into the hillside, obviously cared for, even in these days, still bearing witness to valour and hope. He reminds me again of the Saxons and of how I thought he might become a symbol to later generations to take the trouble to defend their homes, their way of life and their peace. Was the horse really an example for folk to follow? Once more I fell to thinking of the birds and my starlings of Herefordshire and London and of the poor two-legged starlings I saw in the fields.

These things puzzle me under the elm tree and again my thoughts turn to King Alfred’s warriors and to the bystander and his poor farmer, short of workers for the hay-making. These musings bring to my mind people and events encountered a few days before not so very far away.

Walking near my beloved Thames I was attracted by the noise of great machines ravaging a hillside and a good deal else beside. Wanting to see more I took myself closer, whereupon a figure in a coat of garish yellow hue which reflected the light barred my way in most unfriendly terms. Assuring him that I was a visitor from far away and meant no harm I asked him what all this work meant. Perhaps a factory was being built in this countryside so that the workers may have clean air and pleasant views. This was not the case, apparently a vast tract of this land, its ancient places and a multitude of wildlife, fields and flowers, near the place where I now lie, was to disappear to make way for a road. But I remembered how some roads and railways were built in my own time and became a general benefit to the people nearby. Again I seemed to be mistaken: many of the local people did not want to lose their special places. The road would, as it seemed to me, save only a matter of minutes on a journey by motorised carriage for brain-sick workers hurrying to their desks. Upon enquiring about the numbers of policemen I saw I was told that they were ‘security guards’ protecting the site ‘against the weirdos in the woods’. I stood and watched more earth dug up before moving on.

Under the elm tree I recall my anger at things done by my fellow countrymen, some were surely as foolish and wanton as this, but even Gilbert Scott thought that his pale notion of gothic was beautiful, not so this highway cutting its great scar across the land. But I remember how I walked further on until I came to trees, where I was met by a cheerful young man, gaily clad and playing a whistle. I questioned him about
the events I had seen. ‘Shame!’, quoth he, ‘there’s no real need for the road and look what’s being destroyed to make way for it – there’s bluebells here in spring, badgers over there, the Celts had fields and paths here and Oliver Cromwell beat the Cavaliers on the next hill, though you wouldn’t know any of it now.’ But would the road not make life easier in the town? I was told not, for ‘cars’ – as I discovered the carriages were called – would soon fill the old road again, while more vehicles would rush down the new, belching smoke and gas. ‘Then all the big shops will be built alongside the new road, people will use their cars for shopping, and the old town centre will die. Then if you need to shop you’ll have to use the car to get there.’ I thought of the Meadow Hall and saw some truth in his words.9

My new acquaintance directed me down the track to meet his friends who, he said, had come to fight for the loveliness of this very country. Their camp was not so fine as those made by the children in Kensington Park,10 but most of the people seemed genuinely content and were at work in a variety of ways, some constructing elaborate tree-houses and walk-ways in the trees or digging tunnels.11 Their children played happily together in the sun. Upon questioning them I heard the same story that the whistler had told. These people told me that they would do all manner of things to prevent, or at least impede, the destruction of the land. Upon enquiring how they intended to do this I was told that the costs involved in evicting them, involving the full panoply of State coercion, might eventually prove so irksome to government and attract so much adverse publicity that the government might decide to call off plans for such roads.

I asked whence these people had come and it transpired that they had varied backgrounds, but I pricked up my ears when some said they were ‘travelJers’. I assumed that, like the folk I met on my first visit, these people travelled the land in summer, enjoying its variety and peace and working as they went. Again I was disabused with a mixture of sad and angry words for it appeared that various laws had been enacted against just such activities to bolster all the legislation which protected land, privilege and power in my own time.12 Others told me that they had no homes or employment and the community and strength they found here had rekindled their hope. Now all had come here, determined to defy the new ravagers of the land, as did Alfred’s folk in days past. Some others told me that they had tried to build a ‘sustainable’ village in London, not so far from my home at Hammersmith,13 but that they had been evicted, despite the fact that the land was derelict and derelict it remains, albeit in a state of semi-fortification to prevent any further encroachment on the privilege of the landlord. Saddest of all, they told me how the settlement had tried to care for the brain-sick whom no-one else seemed to want – since the evictions these unfortunates are reduced to wandering the streets and begging once again.14

They were mere shadows of Dick, Ellen and all the rest, and some were worn and old ahead of their years, but their eyes shone in the same way as my old companions. In the wood and up the trees a group was living together for each other and to a purpose. They knew what they wanted and were prepared to fight for it against the world. Indeed, they were fighting for the world, though much of the world knew it not.

Under the Elm Tree I recall these things and I look across to the old White Horse. Though I dreamed and maybe only half-believed it seems that maybe a new Ashdown is being fought in England’s fields. The Horse looks down as he has for centuries and sees all, but who knows what new White Horse will look down on the homes of the wise, and comradely and happy people.
Anyone familiar with recent environmental protest in Britain will recognise elements of various direct actions in the 1990s. It has already been argued elsewhere that Morris was a pioneer ‘Green’ and even the Victoria and Albert Museum’s 1996 exhibition drew a direct parallel between his commitment to and feeling for the land and the activities of anti-road protestors at places including Twyford Down and Newbury, where a group of people who see themselves as disenfranchised and despised have taken up the struggle against state-endorsed vandalism and pollution backed up by repressive policing. These groups have also encouraged and connected with local dissent and opposition who are seeking to defend their own special places. Elsewhere other constituents of this alternative community have been instrumental in campaigning for access to Stonehenge at certain times of the year for neo-pagans and in exploring sustainable communities. In May 1996 a squatter settlement was established on derelict land at Wandsworth in London, where the group ‘The Land is Ours’ ‘reclaimed’ unused space to publicise the need for sustainable social housing and jobs.

While one can see common cause between Morris’s socialism and these groups, which can both be seen as strands in the long English tradition of primitive communism, it is important to recognise that Morris would probably have had reservations about aspects of the protest movement. The movement contains within it aspects of New Age paganism, old-style hippy ideologies as well as nihilistic anarchists epitomised by the ‘Brew Group’ – the name is taken from the strong beer Special Brew – who join protests looking for confrontation and violence. This protest movement also includes the free festival scene which seeks the freedom to arrange unlicensed music festivals, and it can be argued that these gatherings are detrimental to the countryside, causing noise pollution and litter. Like many people I suspect Morris would have applauded the inventive use of non-violent direct action, but would have seen much to sadden him in the activities of groups on the fringe of the protestors. ‘New Age’ philosophies would probably have appalled him, and while he would probably have supported the rights of assembly and access at Stonehenge, he would have been concerned about the risks of erosion and damage at the monument and the archaeologically rich landscape surrounding it.

Today, Morris might well be heartened to see people organising themselves to defend the environment from misuse and destruction, developing systems that encourage participation and real democracy, while at the same time caring for unfortunates foisted on them by an over-burdened system of social care. Indeed, he would probably have argued that the mental problems and the drug abuse which were seen at the Wandsworth settlement were inevitable by-products of modern capitalism. The idealism and commitment of many individuals would have encouraged him, as, no doubt, would the creativity and courage of protestors in the face of government, police and money. The White Horse of Uffington is still there and the struggle goes on.

NOTES


The White Horse of Uffington is now thought to be of late Bronze Age origin (c.700BC), but it is traditionally said to have been cut after the Battle of Ashdown in the 9th century AD. King Alfred’s victory here was seen in Victorian England as the decisive moment in the defence of English rights and liberties against the Viking ‘barbarians’. D. Miles and S. Palmer, ‘White Horse Hill’, *Current Archaeology*, 142 (1995), pp. 372–8.

Reflective jackets and hard hats are worn by all site staff, including security, on major road schemes. They are seen by some protestors as the enemy uniform.


Such staff are employed at low wages and with few rights. They are predominantly young, working-class, under-educated and long-term unemployed males. Hearsay evidence is that they are sometimes unofficially encouraged to harass and physically intimidate protestors.


Such methods of impeding evictions and progress on the developments has proved successful both in slowing work, but also in gaining valuable publicity for the cause. ‘Swampy’, a tunneller at a road protest in Devon, has become a minor celebrity in the British media and had been able to exploit this to create further publicity for the anti-roadbuilding lobby.


C. J. Stone, *Fierce Dancing* (1996), pp. 118–190. Stone presents a ‘warts and all’ picture of an anti-road protest by one who was deeply involved in it.


G. Monbiot, op. cit.