Last November we learnt the sad news of the death of John Kay. All Morrisians have cause to be grateful to John. For the planning and provision of the William Morris Society's premises in the basement of Kelmscott House and the adjacent Coach House, was very much his project. The splendid accommodation the Society now enjoys is, to a great extent, the result of his efforts, his expertise and his taste.

In his work as an architect John achieved considerable distinction, becoming a universally respected senior member of his profession. After training at the AA School, military service (Captain, Royal Engineers), and brief periods in private practice and at the Building Research Station, he joined – in 1956 – the Architects and Building Branch of the Ministry of Education. From that time he pursued his architectural career within the Government department, becoming Chief Architect to the Department of Education and Science in 1984. Following his retirement in 1987, he served on the Council of the RIBA.

John was associated with a large number of post-war schools and higher education building projects, many of which were innovatory, setting new standards in design and accommodation. He was acknowledged as a leading expert in the field of the lighting of buildings, both by natural and artificial light (a subject for which he had the most tremendous enthusiasm). He was the author of numerous technical papers and articles regarding the design of educational buildings, and the joint author, with Professor R. G. Hopkinson, of a standard text on lighting.

John’s decision to pursue his career as an architect in public service with the Department of Education stemmed directly from his socialist principles. He was a committed socialist, initially a member of the Communist Party, and subsequently a founder member of the Democratic Left. Of this decision he wrote:

I believed it offered an opportunity to influence – even if only in a small way – an important sector of public building and to help create buildings and methods of work that I hoped would be suited to a Socialist Britain.

John’s progressive principles were very much reflected in the manner in which he worked. To quote from his article, ‘Old Times New Times’:

We [building professionals] should try and work in ways that are as far as possible co-operative, not hierarchical and provide equal opportunities, and are directly in touch with the users of the buildings concerned.

In his professional managerial responsibilities he was a pioneer of group working methods, and was also particularly supportive of women practitioners.

John and his wife Ann were founder members of the William Morris Society. For almost 50 years he was a very active member, serving on the Society’s committee in the 1950s and 1960s and again in the 1980s. Over the years, he helped organise
many of the Society's events and ventures. He was associated, on behalf of the Society, with a number of major projects including the William Morris 1984 ICA Exhibition, and the highly successful touring exhibition 'William Morris and the Crafts Today' (1996), which was undertaken in co-operation with the Society of Designer Craftsmen.

During the late 1990s John worked on a number of enthusiastically received educational projects with Morrisian themes for Hammersmith schools. This work was undertaken by John, on behalf of the Society, in co-operation with the Hammersmith and Fulham Urban Studies Centre, ACAVA (a west London arts charity involving local artists and crafts workers, of which I was a founder), and the local education authority. John derived very great satisfaction from this work. The promotion of education, in its widest sense, was always very much a central theme running through John's activities and interests.

John served as the Chair of the Kelmscott House Trust from 1985 until the time of his death. Before he took on this responsibility, there had been a sad history of bitter dispute and antagonism between the then Chairman and Trustees of the Trust and the Society. With John at the helm things changed dramatically for the better. It was always his conviction that the sole and proper purpose of the Trust was to support the Society and to facilitate its work. Under John's stewardship the Trust was dramatically transformed from a perverse body with scant resources to an effective organisation with substantial assets. In recent years John became convinced that the Trust had served its purpose, and that the time had come for it to be wound up and for its assets and undertaking to be transferred to the Society. He spent much effort and many long hours endeavouing to persuade a majority of his fellow Trustees to support this policy. Most regrettably, this final endeavour still remains to be achieved.

John was a person with many achievements and many accomplishments. As well as being a fine draughtsman, he was also a gifted designer. The Eric Heffer memorial bookcase in the Coach House is his work, as, of course, is his family home in Crescent Grove, Clapham. In retirement, he became an accomplished craftsman. The year before last, he exhibited a most beautiful and exquisitely delicate clavichord, entirely his handwork, at the Society's Crafts Fair. He was a valued and influential member of many societies, including in particular his local amenity group, the Clapham Society, the Clavichord Society, and the SPAB.

And most of all John will be remembered for his personal qualities. He was one of the fairest and the most decent people I have ever met. Always courteous, always considerate, always committed to the commonwealth. An exemplary Morrisian, he is greatly missed.