

Carol Johnson (1903–2000)

Joan South

Carol Johnson died on 30 July 2000 aged 96. He had been a committee member of the William Morris Society from 1960 to 1980 and a founding member of the Kelmscott House Trust.

His interests were wide and I met Carol first nearly forty years ago when my husband was Principal of the City Literary Institute (CLI) and Carol was interested in the 'fresh start' education for people in middle life then being pioneered by the CLI. It was through Carol that I came into the William Morris Society.

Born and brought up in the East End of London, Carol qualified as a solicitor at the age of 30, largely by dint of night school.

From a teenager he had been involved in Labour politics and came to a position of crucial political significance with his appointment as Secretary of the Parliamentary Labour Party in 1943.

He held the post until 1959 and was the person in charge during the turbulent period of the 1945 election landslide with its accompanying internal party stresses. His strong qualities of balance and steadiness enabled him to establish standards for the role which have continued to be acknowledged by his successors until the present time. He was appointed C.B.E. in 1951.

In 1959, he was elected to the parliamentary seat of Lewisham South which had been held previously by his friend, Herbert Morrison. Serving in the House of Commons until 1974, he was a highly respected Member of Parliament, chairing many House of Commons committees and occasionally deputising for the Speaker. He was Chairman of the History of Parliament Trust.

An early European, he served on the relevant parliamentary committee and was Vice-President of the Labour Committee for Europe. For many years he was Honorary Secretary to the British Council of the European Movement.

He had a special interest in Italy and was the driving force behind the development of the Anglo-Italian Parliamentary Group. He became a life governor of the British Institute in Florence and a Commander of the Italian Order of Merit. He enjoyed travel and visited Italy frequently. It was due to the Carol connection that the British Institute in Florence took corporate membership of the William Morris Society.

Although a Londoner, and proud of it, he had a love of the countryside and was an enthusiastic walker and climber. He was, for some years, Chairman of the Commons, Open Spaces and Footpaths Preservation Society.

Carol told me that his lifelong concern with Morris had started with political interest but he had come to embrace all aspects of Morris. Those of us who knew him remember him most as a bookman, never happier or more characteristic than when amongst his treasures or foraging with eagle-eye in second-hand bookshops.

His constantly increasing hoard was prodigious, filling every corner of his house and overflowing into any available space that might be commandeered.

Each book was known to him and I remember how deeply shocked he was on discovering that (at that unregenerate time) I kept a list of mine. It was from Carol that I came to understand what constitutes a proper relationship with one's books. Towards the end of his life, he gave the pick of his Morris books to the William Morris Gallery at Walthamstow.

Carol took his responsibilities as a committee member of the William Morris Society, and as a trustee of the Kelmscott House Trust, seriously and missed few meetings, despite in the early years having heavy parliamentary obligations. Until advanced in years, he was also a loyal attender at the Society's annual general meetings.

A man of quite exceptional material generosity, he also had a great generosity of spirit and helped others to lead richer lives. Because his own life was so well in hand, he always had time and attention to give. He was practical and efficient and infinitely reliable. He did not mind doing humble work if it was in pursuit of something he believed in. He enriched my life as he enriched the lives of many others.

In all his undertakings, Carol had the secure and informed support of his wife, Dena. Both solicitors, they married in 1940 when Carol (medically unfit for active service) was doubling as assistant Town Clerk to the Borough of Southall and Leader of Lambeth Council. Dena was to have a distinguished career in her own right as Town Clerk and Chief Executive of Morris's home territory of Waltham Forest. They celebrated their sixty years of true partnership a few months before Carol's death.