

Hans Brill (1930–2001)

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Hans Brill died in a car accident in France on 24 July 2001 aged 71. At the time of his death he was President of the William Morris Society and Chairman of the Kelmscott House Trust. He had been a trustee of Kelmscott House since 1987 and Chair of the William Morris Society from 1979 to 1987. Scholar, man of action, enthusiast, embracer of challenges, Hans Brill was at the centre of the William Morris Society and the wider Morris world for more than 20 years. He was a leader who did not mind rolling his sleeves up and cheerfully spent a good many of his 20 years of service in such humble activities as making sandwiches and washing up. He had genius for organising excursions and special occasions and members will remember him for his hard-working ability to make the William Morris Society a pleasant place to be.

I met him first in 1970 when we became members of the Society within a month or two of each other. We both came on to the Committee at approximately the same time in the later 1970s and thereafter we were close working colleagues for a number of years, in particular with reference to the battle to save Kelmscott House for Morris purposes. More recently we have once again worked closely together as Chairman and Honorary Secretary respectively of the Kelmscott House Trust.

Born in Vienna on 17 May 1930, Hans came to Britain with his family in 1939 in the aftermath of the Anschluss and settled at Penarth in South Wales where he began his lifelong love affair with the sea. Despite parental opposition, he insisted on signing up as a boy entrant to the Royal Navy at the age of 14 and by 1957 as in command of one of the then new X-craft midget submarines. He famously succeeded in taking his submerged craft up the Thames past the Embankment as far as Teddington Lock in order to enable the Royal Navy to demonstrate to top brass its potential for penetrating enemy defences.

By then about to marry and ready for a new career, Hans bicycled around the Oxford colleges and persuaded Worcester College to take him in. He graduated in Modern History in 1961 and went on to take a post-graduate diploma in art and architectural history at the Courtauld Institute. He carried out major research on Venetian Renaissance sculpture under John Pope-Hennessy before moving on to his primary vocation which was books.

Hans made his name with the building up from scratch of a distinguished library at Wimbledon School of Art and went on to become Librarian and Senior Tutor at the Royal College of Art. There he enlarged the Library and brought it into central focus in the College: he wanted the Library to be opening up vistas for people. He raised funds to buy a unique collection of works on colour which he made into a national resource. On Tuesday nights Hans closed the Library and set up a life class to which people came from all disciplines and all departments. He established the Royal College of Art studio in Venice, enabling hundreds of future artists to have the experience of living and working in Venice. After leaving the

RCA in 1987 he developed the Design Library at the Design Museum, Butler's Wharf, and the Slade Duveen Library of Modern Art at the Slade School. He also advised the European Visual arts centre in Ipswich on the establishment of a contemporary art library and was archivist of the Chelsea Arts Club.

Hans's passion for Venice led him to Ruskin and it was through Ruskin that he came to Morris. He took a global view of the importance of Morris and had a significant influence on the shaping of the William Morris Society at a critical stage in its development. His concern was to keep a balance between meeting members' needs and the responsibility of the Society to look outward to a wider public. He had a large vision for the Society and saw Kelmscott House as part of that vision. As Chairman of the Kelmscott House Trust he was still battling to put Kelmscott House on a secure footing at the time of his death.

As a colleague Hans was inspirational and dynamic and always full of constructive ideas. A free spirit, he resisted regimentation: something which sometimes caused difficulty with committees. He did not like to be answerable and there was a mischievous side to him that kept him from toeing the line. Yet, projects he took on were approached with minute attention to detail and a frugal care for resources (a whole week of meticulous on-site advance preparation, for instance, prior to the legendary William Morris Society trips he took to Northern France). When he died suddenly and without warning the large and complex workload he had on hand for the Kelmscott House Trust was found to be immaculately shipshape, the records up to date and all bills paid.

In his own life he was a man of warm family affections and a devoted father and grandfather. Hans was magnificent with children, not only his own children but other people's too. I remember gratefully his generous response to my own son. He leaves his wife, Sue, to whom he had been married for 43 years, and two daughters and a son. He was fearless physically and thought danger was character-forming, especially good for children. He liked testing himself and enjoyed mountain climbing and cross-country skiing. To mark his 60th birthday he set off from Blackheath on foot to walk solo to Australia and, closer to his 70th, he sought to emulate Byron by swimming across the lagoon from Venice to the Lido.

Hans was elected a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries on 2 May 1991 and from 1991 until his death he was Editor of *Art and Architecture Journal* which dealt with the bringing together of art and architecture (art in public places). He had just sent his final edition to the printer when he left in his little Citroen Dyane for his usual summer holiday with his family in Venice and met with his fatal accident. He died in hospital in Dijon.