

Dick Smith

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Dick Smith was the third Honorary Secretary of the William Morris Society, following Ronald Briggs in 1980 and serving for the decade thereafter. He missed the first May Day of the new century by a few hours, dying on April 30th 2000 in Nottingham, where he had lived with his family for over forty years. Although his health had deteriorated over the past five years, and we had ceased to see him at Society functions in Hammersmith, he kept up his membership and was always eager for news of the Society's doings.

Morris had been his hero from boyhood. It was his pride and joy to have been born in Walthamstow, William Morris's birthplace, to have been educated there, and to have started his working life as an assistant in the Vestry House Museum, in the heart of the old village.

In the early 1930s, in the dark days of the Depression with its three million unemployed and ill-reported threats from Germany, Dick joined the Young Communist League. Here he met the beautiful Elizabeth Gravenor. In 1934, the Morris Centenary Year, Walthamstow made much of its local celebrations and as a young curator librarian Dick had his official duties; but more important to him and Elizabeth was an unofficial performance by the YCL of Morris's *Nupkins Awakened*. This gave expression to Morris's real thought and hopes, in contrast to the banalities uttered by Stanley Baldwin, George Bernard Shaw, G. K. Chesterton and others assembled in the Borough. Maybe Chesterton struck the lowest note with his comment 'Morris was a great Distributist . . .' So too were the Norwegian black rats of the fifteenth century.

Dick studied for his first degree at London University. When the War came Vestry House was closed and he went to work in the main Library until he was called up in 1940 to the RAF. This took him to Scotland for most of the duration of WWII, where, although he never flew, he was an aircraft instructor. The trainer planes were Ansons, great survivors of the sticks and string era. In 1942 he and Elizabeth married. In the 1920s and '30s there had been much talk of ideal childless marriages which would leave partners free to develop individual genius, or social service, but Elizabeth made clear to Dick that she wanted at least four children! They achieved 75% of this aim: Richard, Helen, and Jane.

As their children grew, the Smith family took holidays in France, visiting the great cathedrals. These appealed to, and in part created, his love of architecture. But it was not the great glass windows, nor the fanciful carvings and great sculptures which most drew him; for Dick the soaring structures and subtle planning were the important matters, also praised by modernists such as Le Corbusier in *When the Cathedrals were White* and more recently in Jean Gimpel's *The Cathedral Builders*.

Most of Dick's working life was spent in Nottingham as Librarian of the University, and he played a major part in the design of the present Library. He

was fortunate in his time of service, a time when with expanding Higher Education, libraries also underwent great expansion.

Dick retired in 1977, the same year that his wife died, and he began to be more active in the William Morris Society, to which he gave so much of his later life. When we reorganised ourselves in 1980 he was nominated Honorary Secretary, and it was as fellow members of the Committee that he and I developed a friendship of a quarter of a century. My first meeting with Dick was at one of the 'Colloquies' at Kelmscott House in 1977 or '78, when Professor John Fleming of Princeton University spoke on Morris and Dr Elizabeth Brewer on Kingsley as an influence on him. I exchanged words with my neighbour, who turned out to be Dr Sheila Smith of the English Department at Nottingham University. Over lunch she introduced me to Dick. A visit to Nottingham at Sheila's invitation to talk to her students about Morris and the Pre-Raphaelites – a talk to which Dick came – was followed by an evening of good food and wine and much more Morris talk. This established my friendship with both and later led to the setting up of the East Midlands Group of the Society. We felt the need for the Society to extend out of London and with Peter Preston (a later Honorary Secretary) we arranged a Morris weekend under the auspices of the University's Extra-Mural Department. Eighteen enrolled and at the end of the weekend they wished unanimously for more Morris. About a year later I took over Editorship of the *Journal* which brought Dick and myself into yet more exchanges on Morris matters. Visits began between us: he invited me to explore Nottingham under his guidance, and I invited him to Sussex, a county which I think he would never have wished to live in, least of all Brighton, whose famous Pavilion raised in him much the same reaction as Morris.

In the last few years we saw nothing of each other, but we exchanged letters and spoke on the telephone. Gradually his hearing failed and attempted conversations became agonising to him as he struggled to hear and recognise. At last he became very ill and after barely a month in hospital left us, whom he had served so diligently.