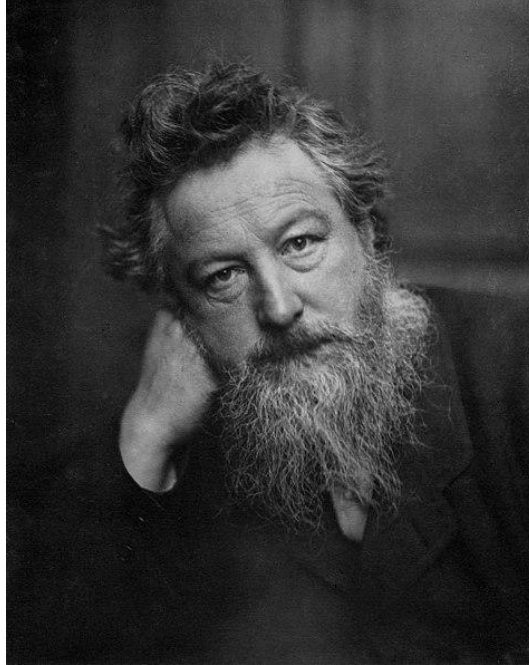


William Morris 1834 -1896

Chris Tranchell, committee member



I first learned about this amazing local man, who was multi-talented and an innovative craftsman designer, a renowned Victorian poet and a significant Pre-Raphaelite artist. Both of these periods were remote to me.

But on a visit to Kelmscott House on the Upper Mall Hammersmith, I found he was also an active champion of what is now referred to as “levelling up”. His energies seemed boundless. “Work should be rewarding. The products we make must be beautiful or practical; ideally both. To give hope to the many oppressed and fear to the few oppressors – that is our business”. He said “I have seen in England the triumphant rule of the swindler in private and public life, the rule of hypocrisy and so called respectability.”

I needed to know more!

I visited his childhood home in Walthamstow, now a Gallery and award-winning Museum.

I appreciated the fully researched exhibition and introduction to his early influences riding alone on his pony in Epping Forest. More important to me was his 18 years in Hammersmith and his home here, overlooking the Thames and that Bridge!

The main house is leased out but the adjoining Coach House and the basement is run well by the William Morris Society – a rare gem to explore and discover more about his skills and creativity. The list of remarkable colleagues who gathered in the Coach House include Friedrich Engels, Georgiana and Edward Burne Jones, Rossetti, Prince Kropotkin, George Bernard Shaw, the Webbs, Eleanor Marx and William De Morgan the tile maker and ceramicist who joined him on this voyage.

The Expedition of the Ark

Although Morris was hard working with increasing responsibilities he had a great sense of fun, “Wot Larx!” he wrote in 1880 when he planned a trip on the Thames from Kelmscott House in Hammersmith to Kelmscott Manor in Lechlade, Oxfordshire. He took friends and family on a boat that was “odd but delightful: imagine a biggish company boat with a small omnibus on board, fitted up luxuriously inside with two shelves and a glass rack and a sort of boot behind this ... room for two rowers in front and I must say not many more.”

The Party embarked at the water gate opposite his house having delayed to catch the tide.

The Ark was accompanied by the Albert, a small boat that Morris and Cornell Price rowed to Kew. There were over 40 locks to navigate. Sometimes the Ark was pulled from the tow path by a dray horse. They kept a logbook. Jenny Morris wrote “a noteworthy feature of this journey is that everybody perpetually gave orders in a very loud voice. And that nobody ever paid the slightest attention to them”. (I thought that was delightful.)

On another occasion Morris delivered a lecture on “Art under Plutocracy”. The recent Hammersmith and Fulham Arts commission set out to evaluate Art and its Influence in the Borough but it didn’t see the legacy of Morris as something distinctive to flag up... had he lived in the States there would now be a town named after him.

In “News from Nowhere” we experience an extraordinary Dream of Morris of waking in a renewed cleaner, greener Hammersmith, a loving and peaceful place. He was an early environmentalist - that would bring a smile to Greta Thunberg?

“What kind of account shall we be able to give to those who come after us, of our dealings with the Earth which our forefathers handed down to us. Still beautiful in spite of all the thousands of years of strife and carelessness and selfishness?”

The historian EP Thomson wrote “The transformation of the eccentric artist and Romantic Literary man into the Socialist agitator for justice and peace may be counted among the great conversions of the world.”

I am proud to know I live in the same part of London as William Morris and I am keen to find ways to celebrate and share his great legacy. Something even more inspiring than the name of a Pub, or the carved sign on the Street: “William Morris spoke in this Square”.

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