

# THE HISTORY OF THE WILLIAM MORRIS GALLERY

**Fellowship is life, and lack of fellowship is death.** These words of William Morris, the motto of the London Borough of Waltham Forest, greet you as you look up at Walthamstow Assembly Hall. They reflect the importance, which has long been attached to the great 19<sup>th</sup> century artist, craftsman, writer and socialist in the borough which was his birthplace.

The William Morris Gallery in Lloyd Park, Forest Road, Walthamstow, was home to Morris during his teenage years. It is therefore one of the Borough's most important buildings and its large collection draws interest from people in every corner of the globe.

Here we consider the life of the man, his achievements and his influence on subsequent generations.

## The man himself



William Morris, the third of nine children and the eldest son, was born in 1834 into a wealthy family at what was then Elm House, opposite where Walthamstow fire station is today. As a child he learned to read very early and developed a wide range of knowledge and interests that was reflected in his adult life. He developed a fascination with the medieval world and this had a great influence on his adult work and ideas.

In 1848 the family moved to Water House. It was the family home until 1856 and now houses the William Morris Gallery.

After Morris graduated from Oxford he went to work in the offices of the architect George Street, who specialised in the Gothic Revival style, but he soon left to study painting under Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Together with Rossetti, Edward Burne-Jones and other friends, Morris painted the murals in the Oxford Union, depicting legends from King Arthur. Together they formed the famous Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood.

In 1859 Morris married Jane Burden and set up home at the Red House at Bexleyheath, which he designed with Phillip Webb, a friend from Street's architectural office. Morris was annoyed that he could find no textiles or furniture to his taste with which to decorate the new home, so with Burne-Jones, Rossetti and Webb he formed a small company, later to be called Morris, Marshall, Faulkner and Company to sell the products that they designed.

Seeking to re-establish traditions of craftsmanship and simplicity of design, the company produced stained glass, wallpaper, textiles, furniture and embroidery which Morris taught himself to do.

In 1877 he founded the Society for the Preservation of Ancient Buildings (SPAB) to challenge what he saw as the often insensitive renovation of historic buildings, leading indirectly to the foundation of the National Trust.

Morris was also well known in his own time as a poet and author. His best



known works include *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems*, *The Earthly Paradise*, *A Dream of John Ball*, and *News from Nowhere*. He translated Icelandic sagas.

Morris was influenced by Turkish ceramics and Persian carpets. He saw the Islamic world as preserving hand made craftsmanship and beauty of design. In 1891 Morris set up the Kelmscott Press in Hammersmith, producing books that reflected his admiration for medieval illuminated manuscripts.

Last but not least is Morris's political activity. In 1877 the British government was considering supporting the Turkish Empire in a war against Russia. Morris joined the anti-war movement and his anti-imperialism led him to cross the 'river of fire', into activity as a revolutionary socialist. He joined the Social Democratic Federation in 1883, subsequently founding the Socialist League in 1884 and the Hammersmith Socialist Society. During this period his major works were written including many important essays on the relationship between art, labour and socialism, the most influential being *Useful Work versus Useless Toil*, *Hopes for Civilisation* and *News From Nowhere*. William Morris, physically worn out by all his labours, died in 1896. The collection held by the Gallery reflects the many aspects of the life of this remarkable man.

## The founding of the Gallery

Frank Brangwyn



The Gallery came into being not just as a memorial to William Morris and his achievements in many fields, but also because Walthamstow, as it then was, was seen as being a poor borough and all the main protagonists were keen to present a lasting legacy of art and culture to those people who might not otherwise be able to gain access to it.

Walter Spradbery



Two of the main people involved were Sir Frank Brangwyn and Arthur Haygate Mackmurdo, whom you can see mentioned in the Gallery, but you will have to look a little harder and deeper to find the main protagonist, Walter Spradbery.

Arthur Mackmurdo



Mackmurdo was an architect, designer, founder of the Century Guild of Artists and social reformer who was influenced by, and in return influenced, William Morris. Brangwyn, a prolific artist and committed social reformer, gave away most of his works and collections specifically to assist galleries in depressed areas. He designed the murals for the House of Lords that now reside in Swansea, the Rockefeller Centre in New York and many more places. Some of his paintings can be viewed in the refurbished William Morris Gallery

Walter Spradbery was the local man. A friend of Mackmurdo, he grew up in Walthamstow, went to William Morris School, taught at the Art School, helped found and ran the Walthamstow Educational Settlement and the Walthamstow Antiquarian Society (now Walthamstow Historical Society).



Although a conscientious objector, he was an official War Artist in the First World War. His work can be seen at the Imperial War Museum, at the London Transport Museum where you can buy many of the 60 posters he produced and at the Epping Museum.

From around 1908 the Antiquarian Society had envisaged the idea of a gallery in Water House, given to the borough by the Lloyd family in 1898.

In 1929 the Borough adopted the motto 'Fellowship is Life', a quote from the William Morris novel about the Peasants Revolt *A Dream of John Ball*, but there was no public monument to Morris.



*Brownies* (c1890), stained, painted leaded glass by Selwyn Image (1849-1930)

Both Brangwyn and Mackmurdo were willing and eager to help found a museum to honour Morris and used their influence to gather a collection. The collection given by Brangwyn for free and public display was phenomenal and wide ranging. It is one of the best collections of early Arts and Crafts exhibits in the world, and the foremost collection of William Morris anywhere in the world, even though a large percentage of it is held in reserve where it can be viewed by students and researchers. It is a truly international inspiration that has attracted visitors from all over the globe.

The William Morris Gallery and Brangwyn Gift, as it is properly titled, was opened on 21st of October 1950 by the then Prime Minister and local MP, Clement Attlee, for whom Morris was an inspiring figure. Later in the year Queen Mary visited the museum and was enthralled by the displays.

The Gallery is about a vision, a wide ranging collection of Arts and Crafts and 19th and 20th century art for the people to enjoy. Described by Spradbery's son as 'a beacon of artistic hope and

a salvation for the future', it is in the words of Brangwyn and Mackmurdo, 'a monument to Morris... giving a little hymn to the people... a humble offering to the people of Walthamstow in the hope that they will enjoy art and remember Morris'. And in truth it is an offering to the world at large.

## Here come The Friends

The Friends of the William Morris Gallery were formed in 1987/88 at a time when the then government forced local authorities to cut their budgets by 20 per cent. There was a real risk that the local authority would close the gallery and it was to fight for its continued existence that the Friends came into being. It is rare, if not unique, among such groups in that it is independent



and a registered charity.

The Friends continued to flourish over the years and now, thanks to its own database and the power of the internet, can quickly muster support not only from the local community but from other bodies and individuals across this country and indeed the world.

On a practical level, the Friends have raised around £150,000 to help buy exhibits for the gallery and display facilities and continue to do so on a regular basis.



When the decision was taken to develop and expand the Gallery and modernise its displays in 2010, the Friends committed to and succeeded in raising over £1 million of match funding to the Heritage Lottery grant and the funding provided by the London Borough of Waltham Forest, which owns the Gallery. The Gallery reopened in 2012 and has proved to be a major national and international attraction with its expanded displays featuring more of the collection than before. The extension houses a temporary exhibition gallery, a smaller room also housing exhibitions, an attractive tea room, new toilets

and a lift to the upper storeys. The third floor has two rooms devoted to children's education and activities and a meeting room.

The Gallery won the coveted national Museum of the Year award in 2013 in the face of competition from larger and more famous institutions. The award was accompanied by a £100,000 Art Fund grant, part of which has gone into enhanced educational facilities. As well as attracting adult scholars, there has been a significant increase in the number of children attending for school visits and regular crafts sessions.

The Friends are committed to supporting and protecting our very special gallery and ensuring that it flourishes well into the future – and we urge you to support us.



<http://www.friendsofthewmg.org.uk>