

THE WILLIAM MORRIS GALLERY AND BRANGWYN GIFT



The William Morris Gallery is the only museum in the world dedicated to the pioneer socialist and designer, William Morris. It was opened in 1950 by MP for West Walthamstow and Prime Minister, Clement Atlee, who said in his opening speech: 'Lovers of art and admirers of William Morris will come on a pilgrimage to Walthamstow to find an abiding source of pleasure.' It was a gift, given to the people of the borough for free, public, display as a People's Gallery. In the words of its donor, artist Frank Brangwyn, 'a monument to Morris, giving a little hymn to the people', and a 'humble offering to the people of Walthamstow in the hope that they will enjoy art and remember Morris.'

The Gallery is not just of local importance – it is a major national and international museum for the study of the Arts and Crafts Movement, the work of Brangwyn, De Morgan, Webb and many other artists and crafts people. It is the first point of call for anyone studying locally born William Morris and all those brilliant designers associated with his firm Morris & Co. Morris, a man not just of his time but of ours as well. William Morris was a true polymath whose political and artistic influence remains with us today. His concern for the environment had him voted the eighth most important environmentalist of all time. His stand against British imperialism in the Balkans and the Middle East still has echoes today. As a practical activist and through the Socialist League he fought for free speech in the late 1890's and was involved with the birth of new Unionism and socialism in this country. His influence on the Labour Movement in Walthamstow in the early 20th Century is everywhere to be seen. The principals of the Arts and Crafts movement, that he helped to start is providing an answer in the collapse of post modernism in the arts world.

The whole thrust of the Councils actions is to downgrade the Gallery from a specialist museum, with a collection worth tens of millions of pounds, to a local multi function facility! In the process they have proved themselves to be untrustworthy in their handling of the Gallery and collection, they have bullied staff, lied, spun, jeopardised the Gallery and Lloyd's Park lottery bid, attempted to send the collection to another museum, all in the face of local national and international opposition from experts and ordinary people alike. This petition of over 11,000 signatories from the Borough and around the world was dismissed out of hand.

There is no curator with the specialist knowledge to effectively interpret the collection; and with new and insufficient staffing there is also a question mark over the security at the Gallery. Every time they have made a cut in the service, attendance at the Gallery has dropped and this has been the excuse for further cuts. An endless cycle that, we believe, could result in the destruction of the Gallery.

The William Morris Gallery should be a major draw for the borough bringing in visitors and money from around the world. But the Council's lack the vision and imagination, their lack of commitment to the arts across the Borough, means that they just do not see this alternative. They are taking a centre of excellence and turning it into a centre of mediocrity. They hold in their grasp a vital part of our local and national heritage, holding it in trust for the people of the Borough and they are wasting it, throwing it away – by not treating either the collection, or the people of the Borough, with the respect they are due.

Dismissing those voices raised against you out of hand as being 'not representative' and ignoring world Arts and Crafts experts does not make you right, it makes you arrogant, and it is how you will lose respect and votes. It is time the council drew up a plan to safe guard the Gallery and its collection for posterity, and if they and their officers are incapable of that they should hand the Gallery over to people who can, and help form and independent trust to run it.

For details of the campaign to save the Gallery please visit; keepourmuseumsopen.org.uk/

Or write to Martin Adams, 58 Upper Walthamstow Road, London E17 3QQ.

