

Address to the LBWF full Council meeting on the delivery of the on-line petition regarding the William Morris Gallery, 20th March 2008.

William Morris was a true polymath whose political and artistic influence remains with us today. He drew inspiration from nature and from Islamic art. 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 and was involved with the birth of new Unionism and socialism in this country. 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. He was a true intellectual giant from whom we can all still learn lessons.

The William Morris Gallery was opened in 1950 by local MP 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 is now the world's premier collection for William Morris and a major world collection for the Arts and Crafts movement. A major international, specialist museum that had an internationally respected staff.

The whole thrust of the Councils recent actions is to downgrade the Gallery from a specialist museum, with a collection worth at least 60 million pounds, to a local multi function facility! In the process you have proved yourselves to be untrustworthy in your handling of the Gallery and collection, you have bullied staff, lied, spun, jeopardised the Gallery and the Lloyd Park lottery bid, and attempted to send the collection to another museum, all in the face of massive local national and international opposition from experts and ordinary people alike..

There is now no curator with the specialist knowledge to effectively interpret the collection; and with new part time, casual staffing there is also a question mark over the security at the Gallery.

You were repeatedly told that if you run the museum down you would not get a Heritage Lottery grant, lo and behold to get a lottery grant you are having to reverse the cuts you have made. Not just reverse but inject double the money you have cut. But you have left us without the specialist staff required to run the museum, and even with the rumoured increase in hours we will have a gallery with reduced hours and insufficient, unqualified staff. Not bad for a £50,000 increase in funding, reduced hours and reduced staff.

Our confidence is not increased by the lottery grant to the Vestry House. You obtained a grant to house the Bremmer car then moved it out of the building you built for it with dedicated lottery money to use the building for other purposes. Who did you think you were fooling, certainly not the Lottery people. Is it any wonder that we have the lowest amount of external funding of any borough in London.

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

If you cannot run the Gallery as it should be run turn it into a trust and enable others to run it properly.