

Letter from Dr Douglas Schoenherr, retired curator of Prints and Drawings at the National Gallery of Canada, where he co-organised the exhibition *The Earthly Paradise: Arts and Crafts by William Morris and his Circle from Canadian Collections*.

Dear Councillor Clyde Loakes,

Thank you for your letter of 25 March 2007.

I was surprised that you ask for my advice. Thousands of people, including more than 5,550 signatures on the online petition, have told you that you are making a serious mistake about the proposed changes in hours and staff to the William Morris Gallery, but you have blithely ignored their advice, including very sensible local voices from Walthamstow such as Katherine Green's.

I am all in favour of making the WMG more accessible to the people of Walthamstow, but it is unlikely that overall reduced hours will lead to greater attendance. I have been following the crisis as best I can from Ottawa and I cannot decide whether you are deliberately trying to destroy the WMG or you are achieving the same result through sheer naiveté and ignorance.

Public museums and galleries belong to the public, whether in Walthamstow, Dulwich, Ottawa or Timbuktu. There is another constituency that you do not seem to acknowledge the existence of: researchers from around the world who come to the WMG to use the unique materials included in the collections. You seem to have the notion that the permanent displays and temporary exhibitions of the WMG are the only reasons people visit the place. Far from it. The collections contain many unique items in the form of paintings, drawings, prints, fabrics, wallpaper samples, manuscripts, books, and photographs, etc. that are never on display for conservation reasons, but a legitimate part of what constitutes the whole of the WMG. You have a moral and ethical duty to share these materials with bona-fide researchers from around the world.

Which brings me to the professional staff. Without the highly respected professional staff, the people of Walthamstow and everyone else are unable to understand or use the collections in the WMG. I have been interested in William Morris for many years and I can tell you that there is no one in the world who knows more about him than Peter Cormack. His profound expertise, built up over a period of almost 30 years, is more valuable to you than all the collections put together, because you need him to understand what they are all about. Without the professional staff, the collections of the WMG are just so much unintelligible bric-a-brac gathering dust.

As one of the most valuable assets of Waltham Forest, I would have thought that you have a legal responsibility and duty to maintain the fiscal health of the WMG in the best interests of your constituents. If you are unable or unwilling to support it properly through local taxes, it would seem that you should explore the possibility of allowing someone else to take on its financial responsibility. I do not know whether the National Trust might be interested, but the WMG could form a logical partner with Red House and combining programmes could be of benefit to both institutions.

As a Canadian, I do not know exactly how independent trusteeships work in the UK, but understand that many local-authority museums are going that route. I recommend that you explore the possibility of creating such a framework for the WMG. It seems clear to me that the local Council has totally abdicated their responsibility towards the institution and will not be content until the WMG is closed.

You say that the Council appreciates the value of the WMG, but your actions tell a different story. Start by listening to the thousands of voices which are pouring into Walthamstow. They might just have something important to say to you.

Yours sincerely,

Douglas Schoenherr

