

THREE LETTERS ON EPPING FOREST

WILLIAM MORRIS

To the Editor of the *Daily Chronicle*

Kelmscott House
Hammersmith
April 22, 1895

Sir,

I venture to ask you to allow me a few words on the subject of the present treatment of Epping Forest. I was born and bred in its neighbourhood (Walthamstow and Woodford), and when I was a boy and a young man, knew it yard by yard from Wanstead to the Theydons, and from Hale End to the Fairloop Oak. In those days it had no worse foes than the gravel stealer and the rolling fence maker, and was always interesting and often very beautiful. From what I can hear it is years since the greater part of it has been destroyed, and I fear, Sir, that in spite of your late optimistic note on the subject, what is left of it now runs the danger of further ruin.

The special character of it was derived from the fact that by far the greater part was a wood of hornbeams, a tree not common save in Essex and Herts. It was certainly the biggest hornbeam wood in these islands, and I suppose in the world. The said hornbeams were all pollards, being shrouded every four or six years, and were interspersed in many places with holly thickets; and the result was a very curious and characteristic wood, such as can be seen nowhere else. And I submit that no treatment of it can be tolerable which does not maintain this hornbeam wood intact.

But the hornbeam, though an interesting tree to an artist and reasonable person, is no favourite with the landscape gardener, and I very much fear that the intention of the authorities is to clear the forest of its native trees, and to plant vile weeds like deodars and outlandish conifers instead.

We are told that a committee of "experts" has been formed to sit in judgment on Epping Forest; but, Sir, I decline to be gagged by the word "expert," and I call on the public generally to take the same position. An "expert" may be a very dangerous person, because he is likely to narrow his views to the particular business (usually a commercial one) which he represents. In this case, for instance, we do not want to be under the thumb of either a wood bailiff, whose business is to grow timber for the market, or of a botanist whose business is to collect specimens for a botanical garden; or of a landscape gardener whose business is to vulgarize a garden or landscape to the utmost extent that his patron's purse will allow of. What we want is reasonable men of real artistic taste to take into consideration what the essential needs of the case are, and to advise accordingly.

Editors' Note: *Reprinted with permission from William Morris, The Collected Letters of William Morris, Vol. 4, edited by Norman Kelvin, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1996, pp. 268-278.*

Organization & Environment, Vol. 11 No. 1, March 1998 93-97
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Now it seems to me that the authorities who have Epping forest in hand may have two intentions as to it. First, they may intend to landscape garden it, or turn it into golf grounds (and I very much fear that even the latter nuisance may be in their minds); or second, they may really think it necessary (as you suggest) to thin the hornbeams, so as to give them a better chance of growing. The first alternative we Londoners should protest against to the utmost, for if it be carried out then Epping Forest is turned into a mere piece of vulgarity, is destroyed in fact.

As to the second, to put our minds at rest, we ought to be assured that the cleared spaces would be planted again, and that almost wholly with hornbeam. And, further, the greatest possible care should be taken that not a single tree should be felled, unless it were necessary for the growth of its fellows. Because, mind you, with comparatively small trees, the really beautiful effect of them can only be got by their standing as close together as the exigencies of growth will allow. We want a thicket, not a park, from Epping Forest.

In short, a great and practically irreparable mistake will be made, if under the shelter of the opinion of experts, from mere carelessness and thoughtlessness, we let the matter slip out of the hands of the thoughtful part of the public: the essential character of one of the greatest ornaments of London will disappear, and no one will have even a sample left to show what the great north-eastern forest was like.

*I am, Sir,
yours obediently,
William Morris*

To the Editor of the *Daily Chronicle*

Kelmscott House
Upper Mall, Hammersmith
April 27, 1895

Sir,

I heartily wish that I could admit that I was quite in the wrong about the felling of trees in Epping Forest, and Professor Fisher is quite in the right, but I cannot. On the contrary, the tone of his letter decidedly points to "improvements" and to the destruction of the essential character of the Forest. I have received photographs of the thinning (so-called) which has taken place with the last year or two, and these undoubtedly show *clearings* rather than *thinnings*, and I submit that it is the latter we want, and not the former. A very moderate amount of thinning would be enough to enable people to move about in the woods; and more than a moderate amount would destroy the pleasure which I well remember enjoying in my young days, of adventurous rambling in the hornbeam and holly thickets; and for the rest, the roads which thread the forest in all directions, and the clearings to which the growth of time has given a natural look, would surely be enough for the use of the more staid promenaders. Indeed, forty years ago there was no difficulty in getting through the densest tangles, such, *e.g.*, as in the dingles at Hale End, which, I suppose, are now bricks and mortar.

As to the matter of experts, Professor Fisher has misunderstood me; I never meant to say, and I do not think, that the Committee or the City intend dealing

commercially with the Forest, but I did and do think that the expert gets into a special habit of looking at matters from the point of view of his own profession—that of a wood-reve, *e.g.*, looks upon all trees as so much unfelled timber, and despises all trees that do not show well for timber; and in that respect, he *is* dangerous in the case of a wood, the essence of which is the aspect of it, and he must have very definite instructions and must be carefully looked after to see that he carries them out. Otherwise his professional conscience will make him destructive. Perhaps it *might* be wise to neutralise his speciality by another, and get the advice of an artist or two about such matters; but they also are often narrow enough, and care nothing for what will not make a picture. Yet I think it might be tried, for their speciality deals with what we have to deal with in Epping Forest—its external aspect, to wit.

As to Professor Fisher's challenge about my knowledge of the present state of the Forest, I frankly confess that I know little of it, though I have been there some nine years ago, and before that, perhaps some ten years, on the latter occasion taking a long ride from Leyton through Sewardstone and the cross road south of the Theydons to Loughton, and thence to Chigwell. This I admit does not amount to much, though the olden times of the Forest are indelibly fixed in my mind. However, since I have stirred the matter again, and right or wrong I think I was bound to do so, I consider myself also bound to take up Professor Fisher's challenge, and as soon as I can manage it I will carefully go over all of the Forest that is left, and report it to you, Sir, if you will allow me, as to the contrast between the present and the past there. And I need not say that I will give the City and its deputies credit for all that seems to me well done. I must, finally, dissent from Professor Fisher's view that the committee are not responsible for the action of two of its members; I think that the public will agree with me that the committee are fully responsible for whatever is done in their name; and if the action of the two members was taken by them as individuals, they were clearly doing what they had no more right to do than you or I. Has the committee brought them to book?

*I am, Sir,
yours obediently,
William Morris*

To the Editor of the *Daily Chronicle*

Kelmscott House
Hammersmith
May 8, 1895

Sir,

Yesterday I carried out my intention of visiting Epping Forest. I went to Loughton first, and saw the work that had been done about Clay Road, thence to Monk Wood, thence to Theydon Woods, and thence to the part about the Chingford Hotel passing by Fair Mead Bottom, and lastly to Bury wood and the wood on the other side of the road thereby.

I can verify closely your representative's account of the doings on the Clay Road, which is an ugly scar originally made by the lord of the manor when he contemplated handing over to the builder a part of what he thought was his property. The fellings here seemed to me all pure damage to the forest, and in fact were quite

unaccountable to me, and would surely be so to any unprejudiced person. I cannot see what could be pleaded for them either on the side of utility or taste.

About Monk Wood there had been much, and I should say excessive, felling of trees apparently quite sound. This is a very beautiful spot, and I was informed the trees there had not been polled for a period long before the acquisition of the forest for the public: and nothing could be more interesting and romantic than the effect of the long poles of the hornbeams rising from the trunks and seen against a mass of the wood behind. This wood should be guarded most jealously as a treasure of beauty so near to "the Wen." In the Theydon Woods, which are mainly of beech, a great deal of felling has gone on, to my mind quite unnecessary & therefore harmful. On the road between the Wake Arms & then King's Oak Hotel there has been again much felling, obviously destructive.

In Bury Wood (by Sewardstone Green) we saw the trunks of a great number of oak trees (not pollards), all of them sound; and a great number were yet standing in the wood marked for felling, which, however, we heard had been saved by a majority of the committee of experts. I can only say that it would have been a very great misfortune if they had been lost; in almost every case where the stumps of the felled trees showed there seemed to have been no reason for their destruction. The wood on the other side of the road to Bury Wood, called in the map Woodman's Glade, has not suffered from felling, and stands as an object-lesson to show how unnecessary such felling is. It is one of the thickest parts of the forest, and looks in all respects like such woods were forty years ago, the growth of the heads of the hornbeams being but slow, but there is no difficulty in getting through in all directions, and it has a peculiar charm of its own not to be found in any other forest; in short it is thoroughly *characteristic*. I should mention that the whole of these woods are composed of pollard hornbeams & "spear"—i.e., unpolled—oaks.

I am compelled to say, from what I saw in a long day's inspection, that though no doubt acting with the best intentions, the management of the forest is going on a wrong tack; it is making war on the natural aspect of the forest, which the Act of Parliament that conferred it on the Nation expressly stipulated was to be retained. The tendency of all these fellings is on the one hand to turn our London forest into a park, which will be more or less like other parks, and on the other hand to grow sizeable trees, as if for the timber market. I must beg to be allowed the short quotation here from an excellent little guide-book to the forest by Mr. Edward North Buxton, verderer of the forest. (Stanford 1885). He says, p. 38:—"In the drier parts of the forest beeches to a great extent take the place of oaks. These 'spear' trees will make fine timber in future generations, provided they receive timely attention by being *relieved of the competing growth of the unpicturesque hornbeam pollards*. Throughout the wood, between Chingford & High Beach, *this has been recently done to the great advantage of the finer trees . . .*"

The italics are mine, and I ask, Sir, if we want any further evidence than this of one of the verderers as to the tendency of the fellings. Mr. Buxton declares in so many words that he wants to change the special character of the forest; to take away this strange, unexampled, and most romantic wood, and leave us nothing but a commonplace instead. I entirely deny his right to do so in the teeth of the Act of Parliament. I assert, as I did in my former letter, that the hornbeams are the most important trees in the forest, since they give it its special character. At the same time, I would not encourage the hornbeams at the expense of the beeches, any more than I would the beeches at the expense of the hornbeams. I would leave them all to nature, which is not so niggard after all, even on Epping Forest gravel, as, *e.g.*,

one can see in places where forest fires have denuded spaces, and where in a short time birches spring up self-sown.

The committee of the Common Council has now had Epping Forest in hand for seventeen years, and has, I am told, felled in that time 100,000 trees. I think the public may now fairly ask for a rest on behalf of the woods, which, if the present system of felling goes on, will be ruined as a natural forest; and it is good and useful to make this claim at once, when, in spite of all disfigurements, the northern part of the forest, from Sewardstone Green to beyond Epping is still left to us, not to be surpassed in interest by any other wood near a great capital.

*I am, Sir,
yours obediently,
William Morris*