

8 May 1921 – 15 April 2018

# Karen Finch, Walthamstow, & William Morris

My mother-in-law Karen Finch was born Karen Sinding Møller on a farm just outside the village of Rødding in Jutland, Denmark, in 1921. She resisted pressures to become a farmer's wife and during



the war years she was trained as a weaver at the Kunsthåndværkerskole, the Copenhagen School of Art, an institution in the vanguard of Danish design, which today in fact houses the Danish Design museum. At the end of the war she married a British soldier, Norman Finch, and they moved to auster Britain. Karen was offered work at the Royal School of Needlework and then in the conservation department of the Victoria and Albert Museum. Finding herself in conflict with the rather hidebound approach to conservation at the V&A, Karen set up on her own in the downstairs of her house in Acton, but despite the limited space available was soon being sent students from all round the world, attracted by her ground-breaking methods. In 1975, after intensive lobbying for a national centre, the Textile Conservation Centre was set up in Grace and Favour apartments at Hampton Court

Palace, and the following year Karen was awarded an OBE. She retired as director of the TCC in 1986 but continued to travel, write and lecture into her 80s and received many other awards along the way. The TCC

moved to Southampton University's Winchester campus in 1986 and has now been rehoused and renamed as the Centre for Textile Conservation at Glasgow University, under the direction of one of Karen's former students Frances Lennard.

## Karen in Walthamstow

*The Times* obituary informed us that 'in later retirement Karen moved to Walthamstow, northeast London, where she made friends of all faiths and ages'. I want to focus on her connections with Walthamstow and in particular with Walthamstow's most celebrated native, William Morris. Karen moved in with us in 2004 because she was suffering from severe spinal stenosis, which meant that she could only walk short distances and had found it increasingly difficult to look after herself. She sold the house in Ealing which had been bought to accommodate the growth

*'One must remember that pioneers are of necessity steeped in that which they are reacting against, or else they would not have had the need to change, and pioneer new ground'. 5 May 1981*

**Karen Finch,**  
Founder of  
the *Textile*  
Conservation  
Centre, OBE, D  
Litt, FIIC, FRSA





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of her conservation and teaching enterprise prior to the establishment of the TCC, and ploughed some of the money into redesigning our house in Upper Walthamstow so that she could have a self-contained but connected unit downstairs.

As well as being better placed to receive visits from old friends and colleagues, and members of her Danish family, she indeed made new friends in Walthamstow, both from among those involved in her care, and our own existing circles. But she also had a lively appreciation of Walthamstow itself, precisely because it is so steeped in history. She liked nothing better than being taken out in her wheelchair, especially by her grandsons Joshua and Jacob, to the forest near our house, or to look at the overgrown graves surrounding St Peters in the Forest, or to Walthamstow village; and I have lost count of the times we visited the Vestry House Museum and the William Morris Gallery. The latter in particular was more or less a ritual whenever we had guests staying with us, and Karen had no hesitation in becoming a benefactor – you can see her name on the board by the front door. In her 90s, along with her friend Madeleine Ginsburg, author of a number of volumes on the history of dress, she also got involved as a volunteer at the Vestry House, helping the museum to classify its collection of historic costumes, and making new friends among the curators and her fellow volunteers.

#### **Finch and Morris**

So what about her connections to William Morris? I don't think she was always a great fan of Morris's designs, although she did value his experimentation with traditional dyeing techniques, and she was involved in the conservation of part

of the Holy Grail tapestry designed by Edward Burne-Jones. And of course, both Karen and Morris were weavers who had a high regard for the art of tapestry. But the connection can be seen most clearly in their approach to the theory and practice of conservation.

Karen would never have claimed to be a socialist, but I think that she and Morris did share some conceptions in their attitude to their work.

In his obit Philip Sykas points out that one of the key reasons for her departure from the V&A was its rigid separation between manual and 'brain' work. She always insisted that conservation could not be seen as a purely technical issue – although she also pioneered the application of rigorous scientific techniques to conservation work, becoming relatively late in life a student of chemistry. Rather, it demanded the development of a deep understanding of the history of the objects being conserved, of their role in social life. This is why she found it perfectly ridiculous that, in those days, the rules at the V&A barred 'hand workers' from accessing the library to research the objects they were working on.

For his part Morris devoted a good part of his life to denouncing the division between manual and intellectual labour, understanding, along with Marx, that it was central to the whole system of class exploitation. His emphasis on the recovery of 'artisan' skills that had been swept aside by the capitalist factory system was not simply based on nostalgia for the past, but looked forward to the horizons opened up by the abolition of the wage labour system, where labour would no longer be a torture but "life's prime want" as Marx put it, and the producer could once again be engaged in the whole process of production rather than in a crippling restricted segment of it.



But perhaps even more striking was their common approach to the question of conservation itself. Karen always got annoyed if her work was described as restoration rather than conservation. Her whole aim in the repair and preservation of historic textiles was to make it possible for contemporary generations to appreciate the skills of the past, to understand the objects themselves, and not in any way to 'improve' them or make them look brand new, which was precisely what the term 'restoration' had come to mean. And if we look at the manifesto of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, written (by Morris and Philip Webb) as a polemic against the mania, in his day, for 'restoring' the buildings of the past (i.e. imposing the latest 'Victorian values' on them), we find exactly the same starting point:

'It is for all these buildings, therefore, of all times and styles, that we plead, and call upon those who have to deal with them, to put Protection in the place of Restoration, to stave off decay by daily care, to prop a perilous wall or mend a leaky roof by such means as are obviously meant for support or covering, and show no pretence of other art, and otherwise to resist all tampering with either the fabric or ornament of the building as it stands; if it has become inconvenient for its present use, to raise another building rather than alter or enlarge the old one; in fine to treat our ancient buildings as monuments of a bygone art, created by bygone manners, that modern art cannot meddle with without destroying'. <https://www.spab.org.uk/about-us/spab-manifesto>

Compare this to a paper delivered by Karen at the 12<sup>th</sup> ICOM Conference, Mexico, 1980, where she argues in favour of the conservation of 'ancient textiles as historic documents without destroying any evidence of their past

and the information which they may provide for further research.'

### **An international vision**

Contrary to the sublimely ignorant Waltham Forest councillor who, during the debate over whether to keep the William Morris Gallery open, referred to Morris as 'an old white imperialist', Morris was a thoroughgoing internationalist who first got involved in political activity in opposition to the wars of the British Empire. Again, I am not suggesting that Karen shared Morris's views at this political level, but what was virtually a part of her being was a profound conviction that the work she was involved in transcended national divisions and was part of humanity's common heritage. The TCC was always made up of students from all over the world and she had no time at all for any kind of discrimination or prejudice.

A final point of contact between Karen and William: their love for the sagas and the myths of the north. Karen always considered herself to be a bit of a Viking and insisted that they have always had a bad press on account of their overseas business enterprises. In the words of her grandson Jacob's rap, delivered (on a boat) on the occasion of her 80<sup>th</sup> birthday: 'they were just poor farmers, never meant to harm us'. Karen would really have liked a Viking funeral but they work out rather expensive these days, so she settled for a common or garden cremation at the City of London cemetery. We have divided her ashes in three parts: one part has been put in a wooden box and buried in the church in Rødding next to her parents; a second part will be interred next to Norman's ashes in their local church in Ealing; a third part will be scattered in our nearby woods – in Walthamstow Forest.

*Alan Cohen*