

The ART of CRAFT



Left virtually untouched since the 1920s, The David Parr House is an elaborately decorated and enchanting example of Arts and Crafts interior design. Alice Ryan takes a trip back in time.

Pictures by David Johnson



Seen from the kerb, number 186 looks much like any other Cambridge terrace. With its grey brickwork, slate roof, sash windows and arched doorway, complete with half-moon skylight, it's very much of its period; built in 1876, at the height of the railway-powered Mill Road building boom, it's part of the aptly named Gothic Terrace.

Look more closely and there's a faint air of neglect: the front garden is unruly; the curtains at the windows are fading. But it's when you step across the threshold that the magic happens.

Open the front door and it's as if you've walked through the wardrobe into Narnia, or fallen down Alice's rabbit hole: you're suddenly – startlingly – in a different time and place.

The former home of David Parr – a working class 'artist-painter' of prodigious skill and talent, he was employed to execute designs by the inimitable William Morris – the house is a shining example of Arts and Crafts interior design.

Almost every wall is intricately patterned with flowers and foliage; painstakingly hand-painted, in perfect repeats and the richest of colours, the overall effect is mesmerising.

"Walking into this house really is like walking into Wonderland," says Tamsin Wimhurst, the driving force behind a charity founded to both preserve and conserve what's now officially known as The David Parr House.

"From outside, if a little rundown, it looks like an ordinary terrace. But step inside and you're met with this riot of pattern and colour: it's jaw-dropping.

"The first time I visited, I knocked on the door and didn't have a clue what I was coming to. I sat in this drawing room – probably the most heavily decorated room in the house – and just thought 'What is this place? Why is it here? How did it come to be here?'. . . My head was buzzing with questions."

At the time, Tamsin, a local historian, was researching an exhibition for The Museum of Cambridge. "I was interviewing people about spaces important to them, and someone rang the museum to say 'You must visit Elsie Palmer'.

"By then she was well into her 90s, and she'd lived in the house since she was 12, which is when her grandfather – David Parr – died. She clearly felt the house was special; she'd married and raised two daughters here, but had left it virtually unaltered. >





► "Elsie lived a very frugal life, and her frugality is part of the reason the paintwork is so well-preserved. The house was barely heated and she kept the curtains pulled much of the time, which protected the colours from fading."

Along with its stellar paintwork – a tessellation of blue daisies in the kitchen, a jigsaw of giant leaves in the dining room, a trellis of climbing roses in the drawing room – the house has a singular atmosphere.

With her coat and umbrella still hanging in the hall, a tinsel Christmas tree left on the mantel, postcards of the Queen tucked behind a dado, it feels as if Elsie's just walked out the door – and could walk back in at any moment.

"One of the big questions is should we take the house back to David Parr's time, or should we preserve it as it is today, with Elsie's life layered over the top? I think we're reaching a consensus that the house should be kept as it is."

When Elsie died in 2013, at the grand age of 98, the house was purchased from her family and the charity set up to conserve and manage it. Members of the public can already visit in small groups by appointment; long term, the aim is to make the property fully accessible, via outreach work as well as open days.

Since discovering the house, Tamsin has done a huge amount of research into David Parr and the decorative arts firm he worked for, F R Leach & Sons. Famous

locally – for decorating the likes of Queens' Old Hall, Jesus Chapel and All Saints' Church, all rainbow-painted gems – the company is also acclaimed on a national level.

Executing designs drawn up by esteemed Gothic Revivalist George Bodley and the aforementioned Morris, considered a father of the Arts and Crafts movement, among many others, Leach & Sons decorated numerous buildings of import. (David Parr is, for example, documented to have worked on St James's Palace.)

Thanks to an aged exercise book, in which Parr kept a record of all works done in the house, Tamsin and her colleagues know exactly what was done when at number 186 – and how.

Most of the wall work was carried out using a technique known as pouncing: the designs were drawn up on paper, pricked out with a pin, held up to the wall and transferred to the plaster with a dusting of powdered charcoal, before being filled in with paint freehand. "In the main bedroom, you can just see the faint dotted lines in a couple of places; if it weren't for that, you'd be forgiven for thinking you were looking at printed wallpaper, because the work's so precise."

With limited time and money at his disposal – he was, after all, a working family man – Parr decorated the house over a period of four decades, as and when he had both opportunity and materials. He used all kinds of gifts and leftovers from his jobs, from paints and plaster mouldings to door handles and fingerplates: "You'll see that nothing exactly matches; he squirrelled things away, bit by bit."



Tamsin Wimhurst



The result is, however, anything but make-do-and-mend: from the gilded portcullis reliefs hanging in the corners of the drawing room, to the elegant panelled doors throughout the house, there's a definite air of grandeur.

"We can't be certain that the designs on the walls are his own – obviously they're very heavily influenced by the likes of Morris and Bodley – but I am pretty sure they are original. He certainly had the knowledge and skills to produce his own designs," adds Tamsin, opening the cupboard under the stairs to reveal Parr's impeccably packed toolbox. Like a fly caught in amber, it's perfectly preserved; dozens of teeny wraps of glass samples, door handles and brass bits and bobs are all still neatly tied up with string.

The last room to be painted was the drawing room, arguably the star of the show. "It's strange, in a way, because this style was already falling out of fashion by that point. I can only think he did it because he was so proud of this house, and so proud of his skills – quite justifiably."

Parr was clearly a passionate advocate of the Arts and Crafts ethos. As the experts at London's V&A put it: "It was a movement born of ideals. It grew out of a concern for the effects of industrialisation: on design, on traditional skills and on the lives of ordinary people.

"In response, it established a new set of principles

for living and working. It advocated the reform of art at every level and across a broad social spectrum, and it turned the home into a work of art."

Being from a working class background – his father had part-time jobs as both a bricklayer and agricultural labourer, while his mother, who died when he was 5, was a teacher – Tamsin says Parr left "almost no paper trail".

Her efforts to research him via F R Leach & Sons have also been somewhat blighted: the firm's records went up in an East Road fire, and its City Road factory has been demolished.

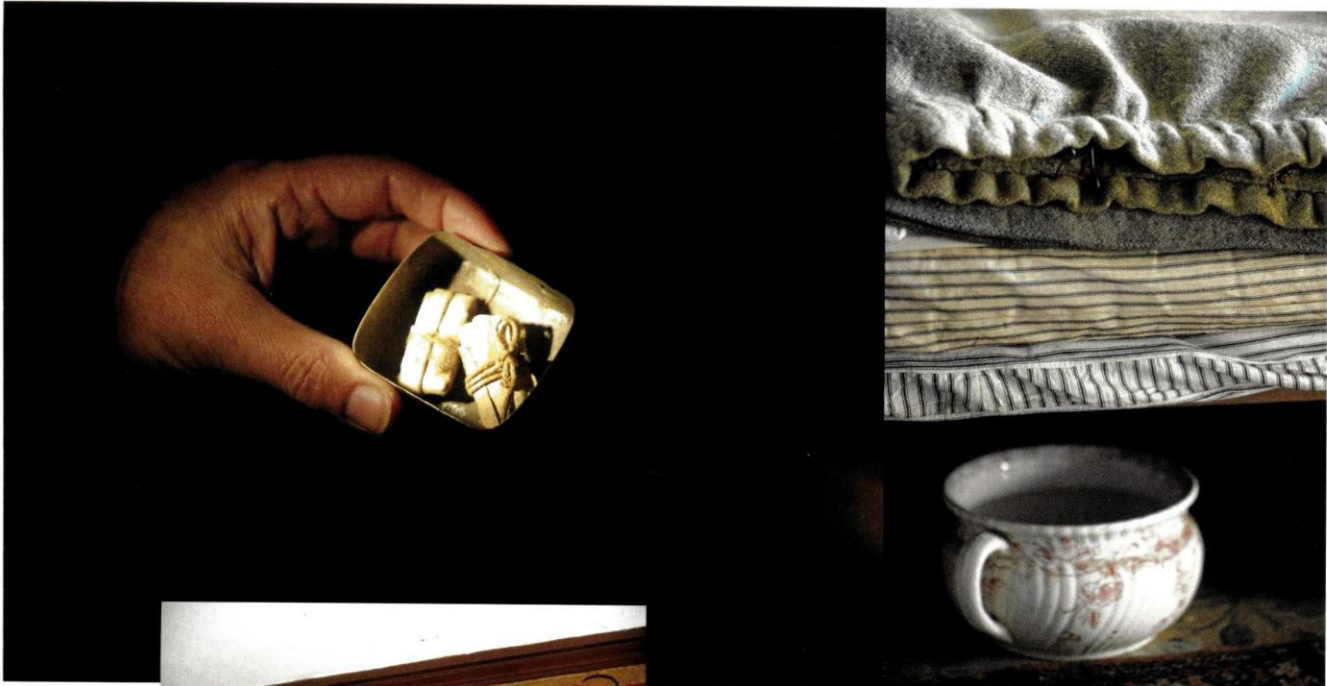
Just prior to demolition, though, Tamsin went on a recce. One memorable find was a plasterwork fleur de lys, which exactly matched those on the exterior of the old Leach & Sons showroom on St Mary's Passage – now the clothes shop Sahara.

"That's one of the joys of working on a project like this," says Tamsin. "When you find another

piece of the jigsaw, it's just wonderful; little by little, you build up the bigger picture."

Waiting to find out if they've secured a Heritage Lottery Fund grant, Tamsin and her team – journalist Jane Phillimore, marketing expert Susan Miller and historian Shelley Lockwood – estimate it will be five years, even slightly longer, before The David Parr House is fully open to the public. >

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► Paint conservationists have already been drafted in to assess the situation. Some areas of plaster are bloated with damp and patches of ceiling are peeling or falling in – but even the damage has a kind of beauty to it; a faded glory.

The David Parr House is, as far as anyone can tell, unique. The National Trust has two other ‘time capsule’ properties in its keeping: Mr Straw’s House in Worksop, which belonged to a grocer and was decorated in the 20s, and 575 Wandsworth Road, erstwhile home of Kenyan-born poet Khadambi Asalache, who embellished every inch of the place in the 80s. But neither is an example of Arts and Crafts design – arguably at its best.

“There are so many layers to this house, it tells so many stories,” says Tamsin. “It tells the story of a Cambridge painting and decorating firm, of a working class Victorian man, of Elsie and her husband Alfred, of the building itself.

“And we want it to tell another story now – to have a new chapter.”

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