

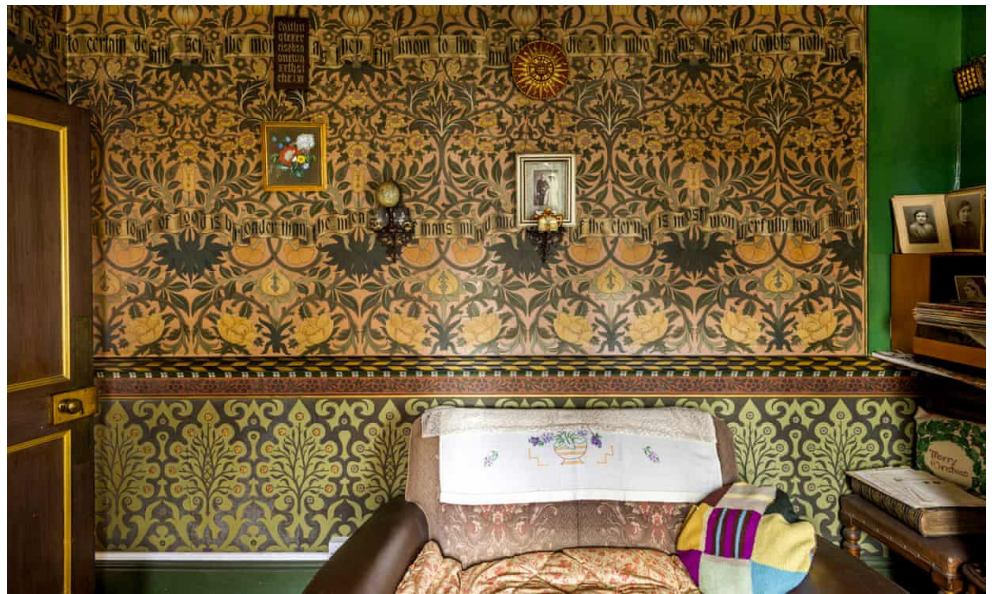
The Guardian

Labourer who turned his cottage into a William Morris showcase

David Parr was a Victorian decorator in Cambridge who brought his work home with him - now the public can see it

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A room in David Parr's modest 19th-century terraced house in Cambridge. Photograph: Helena G Anderson

To wealthy Victorians and Edwardians, David Parr was a working-class labourer, paid a pittance to decorate the imposing interiors of private mansions and Cambridge colleges with William Morris's fashionably grand designs.

It wasn't until 82 years after Parr's death that Tamsin Wimhurst, a social historian, serendipitously knocked on the door of his former house in Cambridge and discovered his incredible secret: that Parr, working for around 40 years at night by candlelight, had painstakingly decorated the walls and ceilings of his own cottage with equally magnificent William Morris designs. His humble two-bedroom terrace house was filled with all the exquisite Victorian craftsmanship, artistry and splendour he could muster.

The *Observer* was given exclusive access to the house's astonishing interior before its first ever public opening in May.

"People will be able to come here and appreciate the skills they see in this house, and the beauty of it," said Wimhurst, chair of the David Parr House Trust, which was awarded a £625,000 heritage lottery grant to restore the property in 2017. "Parr was a working-class

man. Often, in history, you only hear about the working class having these poor homes. In fact, here was someone who was aspirational and wanted beautiful things within his house. He must have been really proud that he had these skills and was able to do this to his home.”

Wimhurst and her husband bought the house from Parr’s granddaughter Elsie Palmer, who inherited it directly from her grandparents and lived there “very privately” until her death in 2014 at the age of 97. She changed little in the house, preserving not only her grandfather’s impressive hand-painted artwork, wall tiles, Edwardian lino, handmade furniture and decorative glass windows but also the ancient coal-burning stove built into the kitchen fireplace and the morbid Victorian quotes about death written on the walls in a neo-gothic script.

The primary aim of the restoration project was to save the house - water was getting in and it was damp, Wimhurst said. But during the conservation process, precious new discoveries were made, including hidden patterns beneath a coat of paint in the hallway and a century-old toolbox full of original gilded-pattern ornaments used for decorating. “I think Parr squirrelled materials away from the jobs he was doing. For example, every handle and every fingerplate on every door is different.”

Another important revelation emerged when Wimhurst, a volunteer who has spent up to 70 hours a week managing the two-year project, traced some of the patterns to Swan House, a Grade II* listed townhouse in Chelsea, London, known to have been completely decorated by Morris. Other pattern similarities can be seen in the decor of St James’s Palace.

Morris was a socialist, she points out, who “died a failure, feeling that he hadn’t been able to bring beautiful objects into the working-class home”. In her opinion, Parr has realised Morris’s dream: “This house shows that, by skilling people like Parr and educating them in the widest sense - not just in the mind but also in their hands - everyone could actually have beauty in their home.”



David Parr bought the property in 1886 and worked on it tirelessly until his death in 1927. Photograph: David Parr House

A notebook of Parr's meticulously details the materials he used, the time it took him to complete each task, the cost of his materials and the tiny monetary value of his labour - a sorry indictment of the industrial age he lived in. Some decorations took him 85 hours, others more than 30 years. He bought the Cambridge property in 1886, and worked on it tirelessly until he died in 1927. In several rooms, the sayings he inscribed on the walls emphasise the swift and valuable passage of time, and the need to seize every moment.

Wimhurst discovered the house in 2009. She was curating a local museum project about private spaces, and someone rang up and said she should interview Palmer about her home. "I knocked on the door of 186 Gwydir Street, expecting to go into a normal terrace house. This elderly lady showed me into her front room and my jaw sort of dropped. I couldn't quite believe what I was looking at and to tell the truth, I didn't understand what I was looking at.

"It's only after we got the house that we began to uncover the connections with people like William Morris. Back then, I just felt: this is a place that needs to be saved, and opened to the public."

She said the biggest challenge of the restoration had been working out how to open such a

small house to the public while simultaneously maintaining and conserving its decor. Only 2,000 visitors will be allowed inside each year, and already tours of the house are booked up until mid-July.

The trust has deliberately tried to conserve Palmer's 20th-century decorations, possessions and furniture as well as Parr's 19th-century decor. "Elsie's layer makes it feel like a home, rather than a staged house," said Wimhurst. "It gets you as a visitor closer to the people who have actually lived here. I think that 20th-century collection of just a normal person's life in a terraced house is what we don't keep, what we don't treasure.

"I think that is as important as these other great collections we do keep."

From homes to museums

The Tenement House, Glasgow Once the home of a shorthand typist, Agnes Toward - who lived there for more than 50 years, through two world wars - this extraordinary property is a "time capsule" of life in early 20th-century Glasgow. It features working gas lights, box beds, a black ball of soap and a jar of plum jam from 1929.



Kettle's Yard house and art gallery in Cambridge. Photograph: Martin Godwin/The Guardian

Kettle's Yard, Cambridge The house was the home of Jim Ede, a curator at the Tate Gallery, London, between 1958 and 1973. Works by famous artists he was friends with, including Ben Nicholson and Henry Moore are arranged next to his china, the bed he slept in, the books he read and the pebbles he collected on Norfolk beaches.

Dennis Severs's House, London This quirky house at 18 Folgate Street in Spitalfields, east London, dates back to 1724. In 1979 the American eccentric Dennis Severs moved in and over 20 years refurbished the rooms as though a fictional family of Huguenot silk weavers called Jervis had lived there during the 18th and 19th centuries, arranging the rooms as if the occupants had only just left.

Tenement Museum, New York These apartments in 97 and 103 Orchard Street, in the Lower East Side neighbourhood of Manhattan, pay homage to the Irish, Prussian, Jewish and Sicilian immigrant families who lived there between 1870 and the 1980s.

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