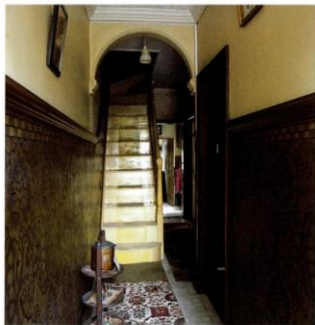




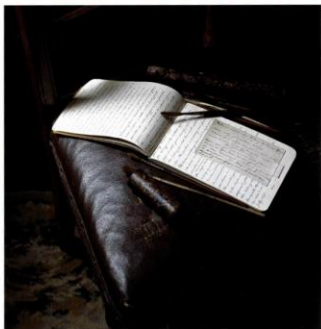
MR PARR'S PATTERNS

The Victorian decorator David Parr lavished on his own modest home all the skills he applied professionally to churches and colleges. From the exterior, it looks like an unremarkable terraced house on a Cambridge street; inside, as Jane Phillimore discovers, it is an astonishing Arts and Crafts time capsule, preserved intact by his granddaughter, who lived there for 80 years. Photography: Jan Baldwin

David Parr painted the drawing room in 1912-13. The walls bear quotes from Shakespeare and the hymn 'There's a Wideness in God's Mercy'. 'I like to come and sit in here and be quiet,' said Elsie Palmer, David's granddaughter, in 2010



This page, clockwise from top left: the drawing-room door was wheel-grained to imitate mahogany; Parr painted the ceiling in 1915; Elsie's coat and umbrella still hang in the hallway; close inspection of the white upper walls of the hall reveals that the patterned paintwork below once stretched to the ceiling. Opposite: the Victorian whatnot above the fireplace is filled with souvenirs and memorabilia of the family's 120 years in the house



This page, clockwise from top left: the leaded and silvered kitchen window may have been designed by FR Leach & Sons; completed in 1920, the delicate, Morris-inspired design in the kitchen was Parr's last wall painting here; his notebook meticulously details his work on the house over almost 40 years; a fragment of original Lino shows an encaustic tile pattern. Opposite: the view from the scullery, installed by Parr, across the hallway



Top: the bedroom chest of drawers contains secret compartments labelled 'David' and 'Emma', while the bag marked 'House' held cash for a rainy day. Above: the house is one of three that form the Gothic Terrace, built in 1876. The front door and guttering are original. Opposite: the front bedroom walls, now papered, were originally distempered to match the greenish-blue Lino. Under the bed is a chamber pot – there was no upstairs loo

grandmother company, and by some miracle stayed for the next 85 years. Elsie married Alfred in 1945 and brought up two daughters in the house, yet always trod lightly on the imprint of her grandfather's past. Electricity was installed, but not heating (the wall paintings thank her for it). The family used the sitting room only at Christmas and on special occasions, so it was mostly kept dark (another blessing). Some things changed, though. 'When I moved in the whole house was painted,' Elsie said in 2009, four years before she died. Today some of the walls need stabilisation. But as Elsie said: 'It's been a privilege to be living among all this lovely painting. I shouldn't have liked to have done anything to it.'

And so the David Parr House, against all odds, survives as a time capsule of 20th-century family life within a Victorian Neo-Gothic curiosity. The textiles and furniture – the 1930s leather-effect, hard-backed sofa and chairs, piano and occasional tables in the front room – the pictures, pots, ornaments and memorabilia, layers upon layers of them, are mostly Elsie's, collected and loved (or maybe just tolerated) over nine decades. And yes, Elsie *did* use that wall oven – no wonder she hated cooking – perhaps while listening to that yellow plastic 1980s radio. Royal memorabilia is dotted around the house, mingling with black-and-white family photographs, paint-by-numbers koala bears and swans, holiday and anniversary souvenirs. Elsie's 1950s dark-blue Crimplene coat with its enamelled butterfly brooch still hangs in the hallway. It's as if she just walked out the door.

Now the house is entering its third age. Historian Tamsin Wimhurst first visited in 2009, to ask Elsie (and her front room) to take part in an exhibition at the Cambridge and County Folk Museum, aptly entitled *A Space of One's Own*. 'I walked in and it was a riot of colour and pattern – so different from the modern-day idea of design, where everything matches and is tastefully coordinated,' she says. She was hooked. 'The walls look like wallpaper, and then you realise they're painted, often freehand. You look at the woodwork and it is hand-grained. Then you discover that none of the door handles or plates or hooks matches – the beauty is in the incredible detail, and your mind appreciates the skill and dedication Parr must have possessed to create all this from salvaged materials. You want to know, why did he do it?'

Soon after Elsie left in 2012, aged 97, Tamsin took over the house and, with the family's blessing, set it up as a charity run by volunteers. The aim is to give people access to the 'Parr experience' in creative ways, without damaging the fabric of the house.

Now comes the hard work. Restoration is needed to stabilise the painted walls, the house's contents must be catalogued, and historical research begun. Tamsin and the team are battling with the complexities of curating: what story do you want to tell; should the walls be restored as Parr intended them; should the decay caused by time be eradicated or embraced as a vital part of the experience? Money is desperately needed: grants are to be written, private funders approached. Undaunted and excited about the future, Tamsin quotes William Morris: 'Worthy work carries with it the hope of pleasure in rest, the hope of the pleasure in our using that it makes, and the pleasure in our daily creative skill.' You can almost hear David Parr cheering ■

For more information about going to the David Parr House (by appointment only), or becoming a patron, visit davidparrhouse.org

