



Back-street treasure

The David Parr House

A modest terraced house at 186, Gwydir Street, Cambridge, preserves an extraordinary series of interiors. As Michael Hall reveals, they were executed by David Parr, who moved here in 1887.

Photographs by Justin Paget



Fig 1 left: The drawing room. Every surface was painted by David Parr. Fig 2 below left: Parr and his family in about 1890. The girl on the right is the mother of Elsie Palmer, who lived here until 2012. Fig 3 right: The hall. Further patterns survive under the 20th-century paint

FEW visitors to Cambridge trudging from the railway station to the colleges do more than glance at the narrow streets of Victorian terraced houses that stretch out north and east of the city centre. Among them is Gwydir Street, built mostly in the 1870s and known locally for Dale's Brewery, established here in 1900.

Well before the end of the 20th century, the street had been gentrified and university teachers and other professionals had moved into the small houses originally occupied by railway employees, carpenters, plasterers and painters. The public baths

on the corner of Gwydir Street and Mill Road were converted into a community centre and the redundant brewery buildings now house a popular cafe. Although the street's Victorian architecture has survived, the life for which it was designed seemed, by the 21st century, to have disappeared as completely as the three butchers, two greengrocers and two fishmongers who all had shops here by 1901.

In 2009, Tamsin Wimhurst, the education officer at the Museum of Cambridge, was researching an exhibition on the city's interiors to be called 'A Space of My Own'. Among the people she canvassed for ideas

was Sheila Crane, who lived in Gwydir Street. She suggested that Mrs Wimhurst might interview her neighbour, Elsie Palmer, who had lived in the same house since the 1920s.

Mrs Palmer was delighted to show it to her. 'It's a lovely piece of work,' she commented as she led an increasingly incredulous Mrs Wimhurst from room to room. Almost every surface was decorated with rich and sophisticated patterns painted by Mrs Palmer's grandfather, David Parr.

A single visit was enough to convince Mrs Wimhurst that this extraordinary monument to the life and work of a Victorian >



craftsman must be preserved. Thanks to her, a charity was established in 2014 to acquire, conserve and show to the public what is now known as the David Parr House. Mrs Wimhurst's ambitions for the house have taken a major step towards fulfilment with the news, announced last month, that it has been awarded a substantial grant by the Heritage Lottery Fund that will help pay for conservation work and an education programme.

‘This extraordinary monument to the work of a Victorian craftsman must be preserved’

Who was David Parr? He was born in Chesterton, on the outskirts of Cambridge, in 1854 or 1855. His father was a labourer and his mother a teacher, but both had died by the time he was eight and nothing is known about his upbringing until he appears in the 1871 census, aged 16, as a ‘joiner’s apprentice’. However, he was already more than that.

The church of All Saints in Jesus Lane, designed by G. F. Bodley in 1862 and now in the care of the Churches Conservation Trust, is Cambridge’s best-known Victorian church. It is celebrated for both its stained glass by William Morris’s firm and Bodley’s elaborate and well-preserved scheme of painted decoration, which was executed largely by a Cambridge firm of decorators, F. R. Leach. High up on a wall, the painters responsible inscribed their names and, among them, is ‘David Parr’, with the date 1871.



Fig 4 facing page: The back bedroom. Parr added the built-in wardrobe, corner shelves and Gothic carvings on the chimneypiece. Fig 5 above: A detail of the dining-room frieze

Leach’s large workshop, based in City Road, carried out a variety of trades, including plasterwork, furniture making and stained glass as well as painting, so perhaps Parr was taken on as an apprentice joiner, but was transferred to the painters’ department when his talent for decoration became evident.

After All Saints, Parr probably assisted Leach in another collaboration with Bodley, the spectacular decoration of the Old Hall at Queens’ College. As far as is known, he worked for Leach for the rest of his career.

The son of a house painter, F. R. Leach (1837–1904) founded one of the many firms that rose to national prominence as a result of the renaissance of crafts encouraged

by the Gothic Revival. As a boy based in his father’s workshop in Jesus Lane, he attracted the attention of High Church clergymen at Jesus College interested in reconstructing medieval forms of organs with painted cases. As a result, he was taken up by G. F. Bodley, who, in 1864, had begun the restoration of the nave of Jesus College’s chapel. This included the painting of the ceilings of the nave and transepts by the newly established Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co, which employed Leach to carry out the work. Leach’s career was launched and, by the time Parr joined him, he was working all over the country as a church and house decorator.

His employees had become used to travelling at short notice and it is telling that Parr’s next appearance in the census records him lodging in Islington, almost certainly because he was then working with Leach on the second phase of Morris’s decoration of St James’s Palace, carried out in 1880–2.

It may have been as a result of his travels for Leach that Parr met Mary Wood, a ‘cotton doubler’ in Macclesfield, where, in 1883, they were married. Four years later, they moved into 186, Gwydir Street, which was to be their home for the rest of their lives. Here, they raised three children, Mary, David (who was also to work for Leach) and Sarah (*Fig 2*).

The house was still new: it had been built in 1876 as part of a small development called—rather appropriately, given Parr’s business—‘Gothic Terrace’, a name echoed in ogee curves cut into the lintels of the windows. Although small—it originally had only two rooms downstairs and three bedrooms upstairs, with a kitchen, scullery and another bedroom at the back—it was on the more prosperous east side of the street (where, ➤

Fig 6: The dining room, used as a bedroom by Elsie Palmer in old age



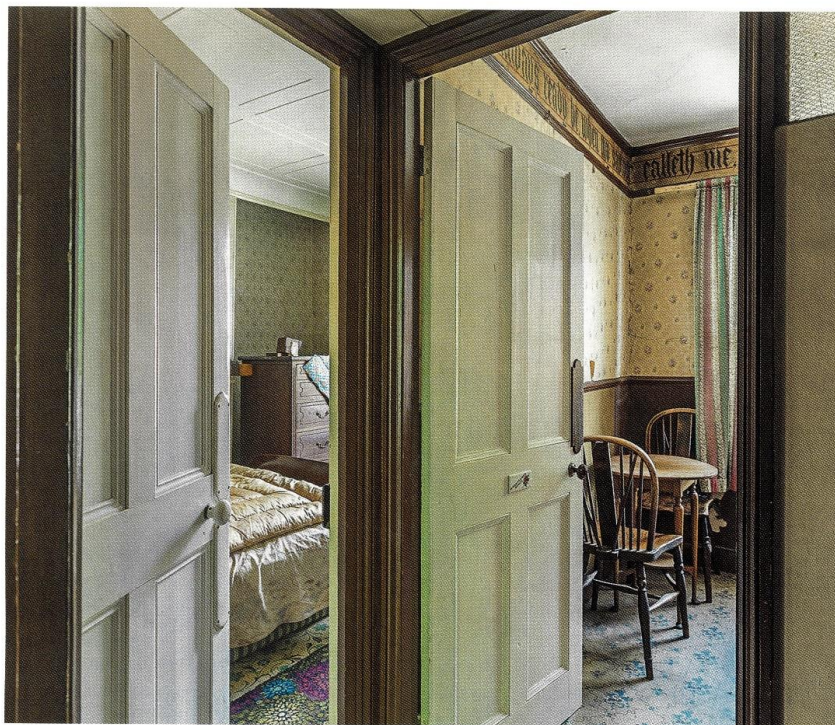


Fig 7: Looking from the landing into the front bedrooms. Parr painted an inscription in the frieze. Fig 8 below: Stained glass in the fanlight over the front door, attributed to F. R. Leach

in the 1870s, houses were let for £15 a year as opposed to £8 on the west side), a status marked externally by its small front garden. It seems that Parr almost at once got to work on transforming this modest home into a monument to his decorative skills.

What inspired him to do this? It must partly have been in imitation of the many domestic schemes Parr executed with Leach, work that has virtually completely disappeared: we have, for example, only a tantalising reference by one of Leach's sons that their family home in Cambridge

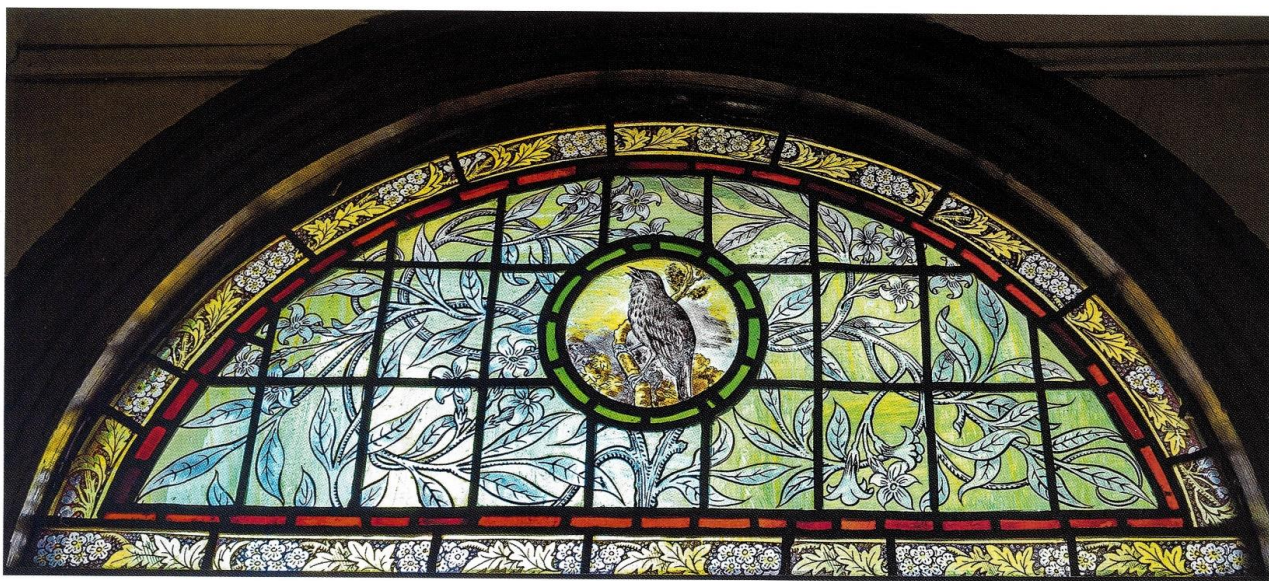
was 'decorated in Morris designs'. However, another remarkable survival, a notebook by Parr recording his work on his house, provides another clue: he carefully noted the cost of materials and the length of time he took to carry out particular elements of the schemes, suggesting that the house functioned in part as a testing ground that helped him to cost his professional work. It was also a place in which he could experiment: he notes, for example, that a green pigment used in the frieze of the dining room (**Fig 5**) has badly darkened.

Who designed these patterns? It seems likely that they are Parr's adaptations of schemes he had executed professionally. Leach's ecclesiastical work was based on a revival initiated by Bodley and his circle of the medieval technique of decorating walls in imitation of textile patterns. Two elements of Parr's schemes are immediately recognisable as part of that tradition, the dados in the hall (**Fig 3**) and front parlour.

The dense pattern used in the dining room (**Fig 6**) and, in a different colourway, in the back bedroom (**Fig 4**) is also freely derived from the medieval or Renaissance silks that inspired Bodley. In the house's *pièce de résistance*, the drawing room (**Fig 1**)—as Parr named it in his notebook—even the ceiling is decorated and the walls are painted with a boldly scaled pattern of twining foliage and flowers threaded through with inscriptions on scrolls (**Fig 9**).

This recalls painted schemes of the 1880s by Morris (in fact, designed by his assistant J. H. Dearle), such as Stanmore Hall, Middlesex. An element that is likely to be of Parr's own devising is the choice of inscriptions for the scrolls. One contains an anonymous verse beginning 'Swiftly see each moment flies,/ See and learn be timely wise', which Mrs Wilmhurst has observed was used on 19th-century ceramics associated with Freemasons. Leach was a Mason and perhaps Parr was too.

Parr's ingenuity and ready access to craftsmen and materials in Leach's workshops are evident in many details throughout the house, including cleverly designed built-in furniture, stained glass in the fanlight over the front door (**Fig 8**), decorative window glass in the kitchen, Gothic carvings added to fireplaces and corner shelves that, it has been observed, are derived from medieval moulding profiles and so were probably based on templates used by Leach's carvers (one can be seen on the left of **Fig 4**).



At every turn, Parr is a presence, not least in yet another remarkable survival that is still in the house: his workbox and tools.

The preservation of Parr's legacy so intact is due to the other major figure in the house's history, Elsie Palmer. Born in 1915, she was a daughter of Parr's eldest daughter, Mary. When Parr died in 1927, Elsie moved into the house to be a companion to her grandmother, who lived until 1949. Elsie married a Yorkshireman, Alfred Palmer, who had moved to Cambridge to work on the railways. His particular pride was the garden and he recorded his work on it in a diary, another valuable piece of documentation of the house's history.

The Palmers had two daughters and it is a testament to Mrs Palmer's standards of housekeeping, as well as the quality of her grandfather's work, that the decoration has survived so intact, only lightly overlaid by some repainting, notably the upper walls of the hall, and wallpapers in the smaller bedrooms (Fig 7).

‘The house is precious for the unique light it sheds on the craftsmen of the Gothic Revival,’

In old age, she converted the dining room into a bedroom for herself, but, to the end of her life, the drawing room retained its role as a room for special occasions. ‘We only ever lit a fire there at Christmas,’ she told Mrs Wimhurst. In another link to her grandparents she was a member of the congregation at the neighbouring St Barnabas, Mill Road.

In 2012, Mrs Palmer moved into a home, where she died a year later. With the encouragement of Mrs Palmer's daughters, Mrs Wimhurst and her husband bought the house and transferred it to a charitable trust, created to preserve these fragile interiors and show them to the public.

The house is precious for the unique light it sheds on the craftsmen, mostly anonymous, who made such an important contribution to the great buildings of the Gothic Revival. In addition, as a house open to the public, it has a particular significance in a city in which wealth and privilege are so conspicuous: this extraordinarily well preserved working-class house tells a story of lives that have usually left little trace in the historical record. ↪

Acknowledgements: Tamsin Wimhurst and Shelley Lockwood. For information on visiting the David Parr House, visit www.davidparrhouse.org

Fig 9: A detail of the inscriptions in the decoration of the drawing room

