

Why a second Sherlock Holmes story?

NOTE:

My Sherlock Holmes stories were inspired by a wonderful photo of Frederick Leach (David Parr's employer) and his assembled workers taken, in 1882, on a day out to Clayhithe. The men are arranged in rows, like a college photo. One man stands out from all the others because of his physique and his hat. The man is tall, has a Holmesian quality, and, most importantly, is the only one wearing a deerstalker. The wearer is none other than David Parr.

Incredibly, both men were born in 1854. David Parr was born on 19th July 1854 and in Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's story 'His Last Bow', set in 1914, Sherlock Holmes is described as sixty years of age - his birthday is 6th January.



An illustration of Sherlock Holmes by Sidney Paget for The Strand Magazine

My recent research threw up an interesting connection between Sir Arthur Conan Doyle/Sherlock Holmes and the Pre-Raphaelites – David Parr and Frederick Leach worked on several prestigious commissions for William Morris, who, together with his artistic friends from Oxford, were adopted as second generation Pre-Raphaelites.

But, like all good tales, I shall start at the beginning...

February 2020, I consulted Edward Burne-Jones's (EB-J) notebook in the Fitzwilliam Museum's collection as part of my research for the David Parr House. The notebook lists the work he produced by year. It is frustratingly brief and raises as many questions as it answers, for example, his patrons are listed only by surname. More than a hundred years after the last entry, they no longer carry the same meaning without reaching for reference books. Given that the opening lines read 'List of my designs, drawings and pictures, from 1856 when I began to draw', EB-J's notebook pretty much does, as the saying goes, what it says on the tin so who am I to complain.

In his notebook, EB-J made scant few illuminating comments in respect of his work, so I was taken aback when I came across the words: '...that scoundrel Howell'. 'Who was 'Howell' and what had he done to incur EB-J's wrath?' I wondered.

Further along, under 1861, I came across ‘...Castle of Heavy Sorrow (unfinished)... gave it to that ill-omened and wicked Howell.’ The writer in me revelled in this colourful description which conjured up an image of a Victorian villain in a black suit and top hat, sporting a magnificent moustache, the ends of which he likes to twist but remain in a perfect upward curl.

At the time, I was wondering if I had pitched my ‘January’ story right. EB-J’s damning words confirmed that Morris and his circle had indeed suffered when a dubious character had crossed their path. I read on...

Under 1863, EB-J noted against his painting ‘Danae’ ‘...burnt in a fire’. Followed by, ‘Howell said it was burnt therefore it was not – or, if it was destroyed then it was by drowning.’ This seemed like an odd comment.

Caroline Daker’s book ‘The Holland Park Circle – Artists and Victorian Society’ proved invaluable in providing complete names and snippets of information for many of EB-J’s patrons. Daker wrote: ‘Charles Howell, a dealer in art and artefacts and sometime friend of Whistler, Rossetti and Murray Marks, but with an inclination to lie and steal...’.

Some weeks later, when researching Dante Gabriel Rossetti, I found references to a Charles Augustus Howell in ‘Recollections of Dante Gabriel Rossetti and his circle (Cheyne Walk life)’ written by Rossetti’s assistant, Henry Treffry Dunn.

At last I had a complete name and googled ‘Charles Augustus Howell’ + ‘wiki’. His Wikipedia entry is nothing short of astonishing as the following two extracts suggest:

‘Charles Augustus Howell (10 March 1840 – 21 April 1890) was an art dealer and alleged blackmailer who is best known for persuading the poet Dante Gabriel Rossetti to dig up the poems he buried with his wife Elizabeth Siddal. His reputation as a blackmailer inspired Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes story ‘The Adventure of Charles Augustus Milverton’...

Howell died in 1890 under strange circumstances. He was found close to a Chelsea public house with his throat slit, with a coin in his mouth – either a sovereign or half-sovereign. The presence of the coin was believed to be a criticism of those guilty of slander.’



Howell shown to be eavesdropping, while his partner, Rosa Corder, forges ‘Rossetti’ drawings
By Max Beerbohm from his ‘Rossetti and his Circle’ (a book of caricatures)

The gruesome undertaking which reunited Dante Gabriel Rossetti (DGR) with his poems also contributed to the artist's undoing. Rossetti had grappled with the guilt of his neglect, which may have prompted his wife's death, (historians are divided as to whether it was suicide or an accidental laudanum overdose). The removal of the book of poems, which had been his parting gift to Lizzie Siddal, had filled him with renewed guilt.

A note (no. 55) in the appendix of Henry Treffry Dunn's 'Recollections...' confirms that Howell 'undertook the exhumation'. Dunn's book had been approved by Rossetti's brother William prior to publication so one can be sure of this fact.

Helen Rossetti Angeli (daughter of DGR's brother William) published 'Pre-Raphaelite Twilight – The Story of Charles Augustus Howell', in 1954. She presents a fair portrayal of Howell through family reminiscences and private letters. In her book, she states that Howell was sworn to secrecy in respect of the exhumation, nevertheless, the truth leaked out.

Angeli doesn't lay blame at Howell's feet because DGR's friend Sir Thomas Hall Caine capitalised on his association with her uncle by being the first to publish his 'Recollections...' in the year of DGB's death. She states that his publication 'gave great offence to the family'. Certainly, Hall Caine's blunt revelation of DGB's self-serving motivation for retrieving his book of poems was hardly the action of a true friend:

'Rossetti had buried the only complete copy of his poems with his wife [Lizzie Siddal] at Highgate, and for a time he had been able to put by the thought of them; but as one by one his friends, Mr. Morris, Mr Swinburne, and others, attained to distinction poets, he began to hanker after poetic reputation, and to reflect with pain and regret upon the hidden fruit of his best efforts... The success of the book was almost without precedent; seven editions were called for in rapid succession.'

Howell had pasted the correspondence he had received from the Home Secretary in respect of obtaining permission to exhume Lizzie Siddal's coffin into his scrapbook. It was bought at auction by a Mrs Troxell, who published the letters in 'Three Rossettis', thereby it was only a matter of time before the truth would have come to light anyway.

What of Charles Augustus Howell the man?

Helen Rossetti Angeli wrote, 'It would be a foolish and a thankless task to attempt to depict Howell as a plaster saint or a man of unblemished virtue. Although by no means a wastrel or a ne'er-do-well – for he was a strenuous worker and often did very well – he had something of the adventurer in his make-up; he was mendacious in the way of the romantic mendacity, and was suspect or accused of acts of knavery. He certainly had a gift for making bitter and unscrupulous enemies, who stopped at nothing to damage his reputation. Opposed to these were a few staunch friends, who swore by his good faith.'



Dante Gabriel Rossetti (on the left) at 16 Cheyne Walk, by Henry Treffry Dunn (1882)

Dunn had Howell to thank for his introduction to Rossetti, which led to his employment as Rossetti's assistant.

The following partial extract from Dunn's book shows Howell at his best, as well as highlighting that there were many fun evenings in the company of William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones and their patrons, the Ionides brothers and George Howell – men whom David Parr and Frederick Leach had met through their work:

“Dunn,” he [DGR] would say to me, “We'll have Howell here; so-and-so is slow and he shall sit next to him; he'll be sure to be amused and wake up when that droll fellow begins to pour out his Niagra of lies... But it was not really until the feast was over, and adjournment to the studio came about, that the night's enjoyment commenced... Howell was the greatest romancer of all the Rossetti Circle, and he had always some monstrous story to tell about anybody who happened to be enjoying notoriety at the time, with whom he would claim perfect intimacy. Rossetti had a keen relish for these yarns, and would roll back in his chair with delight at Howell's latest adventure.’

Angeli agrees with Dunn, ‘John Ruskin revelled in Howell's talk... That Rossetti and Whistler could listen to it for hours together speaks volumes for the quality nay the genius of his fiction, coloured as it was by hues of real experience.’

Rossetti's niece appears to have made every effort to locate extant documentation which might evidence Howell's wrong doings, leading her complain in the respect of Howell losing his position as Ruskin's secretary, ‘Words, words, words! – and we should wish for Facts.’

Curiously, in stark contrast to her generous opening and closing statements, Angeli included letters, which cast a light on Howell's financial irregularities and shady dealings. One such example is a letter to DGR, dated 16th March 1976, from Clarence E. Fry, who was an eminent photographer at the Baker Street firm of Elliot & Fry – the letter is one of five from Fry to DGR and are held in the Bodleian Library's collection. In it Fry states, ‘...Howell also came to Watford one night about Christmas time & asked me to give him a cheque for £200 (I think) not sure without referring in exchange for a cheque of his for the same amount, but asking me not to present his cheque for a week. I obliged him, but at the end of 8 days his cheque on presentation was dishonoured...’.



Charles Augustus Howell photographed by the Baker Street firm of Elliot & Fry

So how did Charles Augustus Howell incur Edward Burne-Jones's wrath?

In addition to the descriptions of Howell in the works by Dunn and Angeli, there are several pages devoted to him in *The Whistler Journal*, (also published as 'The life of James McNeill Whistler' - edited by E. R. and J. Pennell), which is laden with more examples of Howell's shady dealings.

Moreover, Howell was seen by Dunn to pocket a Rossetti drawing on Dunn's first day as Rossetti's assistant, which was never returned. Worse, Howell used Whistler's portrait of his mother as security in order to obtain £200 from the proprietor of a picture shop, and he made off with some of Whistler's prints. Therefore, it is a fair assumption that Howell had stolen two paintings from Edward Burn-Jones as EB-J claimed in his notebook.

If you've read this far, it's probably because you're burning to know what Helen Rossetti Angeli was able to find out about Howell's death...

Before I get to that, check out the following link as I am not able to reproduce the image here for copyright reasons – it is of Frederick Sandys's portrait of Charles Augustus Howell and must have been completed close to when he died.

<https://www.ashmoleanprints.com/image/440561/frederick-sandys-portrait-of-charles-augustus-howell>

Rossetti Angeli found the following account by Thomas J. Wise in the 'Swinburne Library Catalogue' in the British Museum, which Wise had published privately in 1925:

'Howell's days ended in sordid tragedy. He was found early one morning lying in the gutter outside a public-house in Chelsea. His throat was badly cut, and a ten-shilling piece was

tightly wedged between his clenched teeth. He was removed to the Home Hospital, Fitzroy Square. Here he lingered a few days, sufficient to render it possible for the cause of death to be mercifully certified as pneumonic phthisis, from which disease he was suffering at the time. This prevented the scandal which an inquest would have involved...'

Rossetti Angeli was unable to find any evidence to support Wise's account, no newspaper reports, no published reminiscences, no contemporary letters. More tellingly, the Death Certificate 'makes no mention of any act of violence or other auxiliary cause of death'. It simply states: 'Died of Pneumonia Phthisis Asthenia'.

Rather fittingly for my 'April' story, Charles Augustus Howell died on 24th April 1890, and Dante Gabriel Rossetti died on Easter Sunday of 1882, which fell that year on 9th April.

Returning to **Sherlock Holmes**, observant readers will have spotted that both my 'March' and 'April' stories were set in **1891**.



Holmes and Moriarty at the Reichenbach Falls – by Sidney Paget for The Strand Magazine

'**The Adventure of the Final Problem**' was published in the December 1893 issue of The Strand Magazine. The story, set in **1891**, introduced Holmes's archenemy, the criminal mastermind Professor James Moriarty and was written by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle in order to rid himself of Holmes, but, it only proved a temporary hiatus as Doyle eventually bowed to pressure and resurrected Holmes in 'The Hound of the Baskervilles'.

In 'The Final Problem', as Doyle's story became re-titled, Holmes has been tracking Moriarty, the criminal genius behind a highly organised and extremely secret criminal force. On the brink of snaring them all and delivering them to the dock, Moriarty turns up at Baker Street. He says to Holmes:

'You crossed my path on the fourth of January... On the twenty-third you incommoded me; by the middle of February I was seriously inconvenienced by you; at the end of March I was absolutely hampered in my plans; and now, at the close of April, I find myself placed in such

a position through your continual persecution that I am in positive danger of losing my liberty. The situation is becoming an impossible one... You stand in the way not merely of an individual but of a mighty organisation, the full extent of which you, with all your cleverness, have been unable to realise. You must stand clear, Mr. Holmes, or be trodden under foot.'

Clearly, April 1891 was already a testing time for Sherlock Holmes without me adding another case to his workload.

Spoiler: Sherlock Holmes's knowledge of 'Baritsu' was used to explain how Holmes had managed to avoid falling into the Reichenbach Falls with Professor Moriarty - the martial art of Bartitsu [correct spelling] existed in Britain around the time of Doyle's 1903 story 'The Adventure of the Empty House' in which Holmes returns. Even though Holmes was supposed to employ his 'Baritsu' moves in my story, Holmes has an 'Indiana Jones' moment and abandons his sword stick in favour of his catapult – why break a sweat if it can be avoided?



A portrait of E.W. Barton-Wright, demonstrating Bartitsu self-defence techniques
Source Wikipedia

One of this month's themes was the Holland Park circle (aka Holland Park set) of artists and patrons, with whom the Pre-Raphaelites - first and second generation - became associated. Every April Sir Frederic Leighton opened his studio to the public and held an annual evening of music - note: Sir Frederic Leighton became Lord Leighton the day before he died in January 1896.



Sir Frederic Leighton's studio in 1895 with the paintings he intended to submit to the Royal Academy that year – 'Flaming June', his most iconic picture, can be seen on the far right.

Leighton wrote in a letter, 'I am hand-in-glove with all my enemies the Pre-Raphaelites.' Yet, '...he shared similar attitudes in respect to nature, poetic idealism and a mutual rejection of the conventional narrative aims of early Victorian art.'

The Pre-Raphaelites' work was rejected by the Royal Academy in 1857. In response, they created their own exhibition and, later, founded the Hogarth Club in London. The Hogarth Club was operational from 1858 and folded in 1861.

In those same years, Leighton was also struggling to become an associate of the Royal Academy. 'Cimabue's Celebrated Madonna', the first work Leighton submitted to the Academy was, not only selected, but bought by Queen Victoria and Prince Albert. Then, for a decade, failed to build on his early success, yet, Leighton went on to become the President of the Royal Academy in 1878.

Dante Gabriel Rossetti met Valentine (Val) Prinsep and invited him, as well as Edward Burne-Jones, William Morris and three others, to work on the Oxford Union's 'The Old Library' ceiling. Through his acquaintance with Prinsep, Rossetti was the first of the Oxford friends to discover Watts and insisted Edward Burne-Jones must meet him.

(The Holland Park circle was centred around the Symbolist artist and sculptor George Frederic Watts, but I intend to discuss him more next month.)

The Holland Park circle and their patrons, some of whom became William Morris's friends, had large wallets and large houses built on land which had been sold off by the heir of Holland House to pay off his inherited debts or in neighbouring roads. Many turned to Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co. for wallpapers and furnishing fabrics.

In her book 'The Holland Park Circle – Artists and Victorian Society, Caroline Dakers mentions in her introduction, 'Delicate painted friezes designed by George Aitchison and Albert Moore, elaborate gesso-work by Walter Crane, stencilled designs by Morris & Co.'. They produced the designs and often only applied the finishing touches, as studio assistants

were employed. As for Morris, he liked to commission decorators to carry out his work – Frederick Leach headed his preferred company.

I was able to glean from Dakers' research that the following artists and patrons ordered wallpapers and, in many instances, furnishing fabric from Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co.: Valentine Princep, Luke Ionides, Stephen Winkworth, George McCulloch, Luke Fildes, Colin Hunter and Sir Frederic Leighton. Aside from ordering wallpapers and curtain fabric for her Kensington house, Naworth Castle and Castle Howard, Rosalind Howard also purchased Arts and Crafts pottery. Together with numerous commissions from the Church, the Holland Park circle helped to promote the Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co. brand in and around London and beyond.



Sir Frederic Leighton – painted by George Frederic Watts in 1881

Can David Parr and Frederick Leach be linked to the Holland Park circle?

Research is being conducted behind the scenes at the David Parr House, which may answer this question.

What is not in doubt is that, in the execution of various commissions, both Leach and Parr would have encountered William Morris and his patrons and may have encountered Edward Burne-Jones and Walter Crane.

In the BBC programme, 'Scandal & Beauty: Mark Gatiss on Aubrey Beardsley', Gatiss highlighted that a defining experience, which influenced Beardsley's style of drawing, was his visit to Frederick Leyland's house in **July 1891**. He (& his sister) saw Leyland's collection of Rossetti paintings and his famed 'Peacock Room'.

Similarly, visitors with letters of introduction were given tours by Frederic Leighton of his home. It was also accessible to other visitors, including the poor, but they were not given a tour by Leighton himself, and they were only allowed to view the downstairs, which included the Arab Hall.

Given the fame of Leyland's 'Peacock Room' and Leighton's 'Arab Hall', did David Parr and Frederick Leach see them? If so, out of curiosity or out of professional interest, or both? Leach had a good working relationship with his patron William Morris, but did Leach approach him for a letter of introduction, and did he extend the request in order to secure one for David Parr? Unfortunately, we may never know the answer.



The Peacock Skirt – Aubrey Beardley, 1893
Woodblock print used in the 1st edition of Oscar Wilde's play 'Salome'
Original drawing – Fogg Art Museum at Harvard University

In terms of socialising with Morris, his friends and patrons, Rossetti's assistant Henry Treffry Dunn fared better than Leach and Parr. Dunn had studied art but had ended up working as a clerk in a Cornish bank. He gave up his steady job in the hope of pursuing a career as an artist. His risk taking was rewarded with a position assisting Rossetti, lodgings at Tudor House, Cheyne Walk (Rossetti's home), and invitations to sit at the same table as William Morris, Edward Burne-Jones, Frederick Leyland (owner of the 'Peacock Room' and paintings by Rossetti), George Howard (later 9th Earl of Carlisle, who inherited both Naworth Castle and Castle Howard) among others – according to Dunn, '...the dining table could accommodate at least twenty'.



Frederic Leyland's living room – the paintings on the walls are all by Dante Gabriel Rossetti

Aside from revealing the inspiration behind my stories, one of the reasons for producing my 'Afterword's is to illustrate aspects of Victorian society etc. in which Leach and Parr lived and worked, to give context. I have four pages of notes of who was connected to whom, starting with G. F. Watts at Little Holland House and spreading out, and they aren't exhaustive. For example, the names of Pre-Raphaelite members William Holman Hunt, John Everett Millais and Dante Gabriel Rossetti are familiar to most, yet, there were another six members! As so much information is impossible to condense, let alone present as an entertaining read, I tried to convey this tangle of acquaintances in my story by highlighting the various affairs.

This seems an unsatisfactory conclusion to 'April's Afterword, but there is an alternative method of illustrating the wide-reaching social connections...

Let's play '**Six degrees of separation**'! (Six degrees of separation is the idea that all people are six, or fewer, social connections away from each other). Applying this rule, I can connect Leach and Parr to Queen Victoria in five degrees:

William Morris > George Frederic Watts (who painted William Morris's portrait) > Sir Frederic Leighton (Watts and Leighton were good friends for decades) > Prince of Wales > Queen Victoria

Alternatively, one can also link Leach and Parr to Queen Victoria in five degrees as follows:

William Morris > John Everett Millais (who painted Lillie Langtry's portrait) > Lillie Langtry > Prince of Wales (propriety prevents me from revealing the link between Langtry and royalty) > Queen Victoria



Above: John Everett Millais and Lillie Langtry photographed by Rupert Potter in September 1879
V&A collection

Note: Millais is wearing a deerstalker!

Below: Millais's portrait of Langtry 'A Jersey Lily' (1878) – collection unknown



There are less degrees of separation between Leach and Parr to a prime minister and a famous author:

William Morris > Edward Burne-Jones > Georgiana Burne-Jones (his wife) > she was aunt to Stanley Baldwin (he was Prime Minister three times) and Rudyard Kipling.

One could play this endlessly, so just one more example. Leach and Parr can be linked to Lord (Mad, bad and dangerous to know) Byron in four degrees:

William Morris > Dante Gabriel Rossetti > Rossetti's uncle (John Polidori, a young doctor who travelled with Byron and wrote the short story 'The Vampyre' in 1819) > Lord Byron

Finally, Sherlock Holmes had a bearskin hearth rug at Baker Street. I thought any Sherlockians amongst the David Parr House readership might appreciate an image of James

McNeill Whistler's 'Symphony in White, No. 1', which must have one of the finest examples of a bearskin rug in a painting.



'Symphony in White, No. 1' – James McNeill Whistler

1861-1862 - National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.