



Reviews

Edited by Rosie Miles

Life and Art at the David Parr House

The David Parr House is a short walk from the centre of Cambridge along Mill Road. Just before the railway bridge you take a right at Gwydir Street. Within a few yards at no. 186 can be seen a small, neat, freshly painted terraced house. A bright white sign attached to the front wall says ‘Life and Art in a Worker’s House’ (Figure 1).

I was interested to see the house after reading reviews before its recent reopening after a two-and-a-half-year conservation and stabilisation project. Here designs and materials created for the upper middle classes by Morris and Co. and other late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century Arts and Crafts designers and craftsman had been appropriated by a skilled decorator for their own small terraced house. Could there be something Morrisian about a worker ‘doing it’ for himself? The David Parr House seemed to offer the possibility of at least a partial bridging of the gap between William Morris’s mature communist politics and Morris and Co.’s business in actually existing late-nineteenth-century capitalism.

On my arrival I was greeted by Tamsin Wimhurst who opened the front door into the hall, ushered me into the drawing room, instructed me to sit in one of three armchairs – the others chairs had an assortment of covers and embroidered cushions



Figure 1: David Parr House (photo: David Mabb).

on them – and began to tell me the David Parr story. Parr was employed as a decorator for the Cambridge firm of F. R. Leach and Son. The firm worked with many of the major architects and craftsmen of the time, including George Frederick Bodley, William Morris and Charles Eamer Kempe. David Parr bought the house in 1886, and for over forty years he lived in and decorated his home, until his death in 1927. After Parr's death his granddaughter Elsie Palmer moved into the house, initially looking after her grandmother. Palmer continued to live in the house for the next eighty-five years until she moved into a care home in 2012. Tamsin Wimshurst first saw the David Parr House in 2009, eventually buying it with her partner Mike Muller and transforming it into a charity in 2014. Wimshurst is now chair of the trustees.

The house is a fairly conventional 'two up two down' Victorian brick terrace with a small extended back section. On the ground floor it has an entrance hall running from the front door into the dining room and kitchen past the staircase up to the first floor, with the drawing room off to the right. There is a bathroom at the top of the stairs, under the eaves of the extension, and originally there were two bedrooms. The bedroom at the back was Elsie Palmer's and her husband's. The front bedroom was divided to make two smaller bedrooms and a sort of lobby.

The visitor centre opened in May 2019 and occupies the house next door at 184 Gwydir Street, but when I visited, the visitor centre had yet to open, and the souvenir guidebook written by David Parr's great-great-granddaughter Anna Norman had yet to arrive. There were no labels, wall texts or leaflets in any of the rooms, and nor are there going to be. Instead, the visitor is led through the house on a tour, providing a constantly evolving narrative context and dialogue between the guide and the visitor, and special thanks go to Tasmin Wimhurst, who provided me with the tour. Much of what we discussed appears in this review article.

The tour starts in the drawing room, and it is a quite extraordinary room. The wall to the right of the window is decorated with a large painted Morris decorative design, slightly adapted, which runs around three walls of the room, with huge – at least in relation to the size of the room – flowers and leaves, and two enormous scrolls (Figure 3). It is all painted in dusky greens, pinks and ochres. The design would probably have been drawn by pouncing, a tracing technique which involves pricking tiny holes into paper so chalk or charcoal can be pushed through to create a dot-to-dot copy on the wall. This would have enabled a large consistent pattern quickly to be created around the room. Hanging on this wall are two still life paintings. In front of the wall stands a piano with candlesticks from different periods, a mug with a Union Jack printed on it, framed photos and a vase of dried flowers.

Moving around the room, passing the back of the faux painted oak and gilded



Figure 2: Drawing room, David Parr House (© David Parr House, photo by Howard Rice).

door with elaborate hinges to examine the wall facing the window (which continues the painted design around the room), there is a large sunburst ornament hanging from the elaborate architrave. Hanging below the sunburst in a glitzy frame is a photographic portrait of what looks like a married couple. Perched on a decorative shelf immediately below this is a teapot in the form of a cottage, with a small medallion containing a portrait hanging off the handle of the lid (Figure 2).

To the right in the alcove is a 1970s record player and speakers with a pile of LPs and singles, and other assorted items including a portrait of Queen Victoria on a cheap white laminated shelf. Next to the alcove on the chimney breast, painted a reddish brown on anaglypta, are chinoiserie decorative wooden shelves with an assortment of ceramics and glass. Below on the mantelpiece are objects that include a vase with ostrich feathers, a small reproduction Christmas tree with baubles, old family photographs, small plates and dishes, two large sea shells and a corn dolly.

On the ceiling there is a huge Morris-inspired decoration with a fleshy painted ceiling rose with ochre and brown tendrils and leaves expanding out across the plaster ceiling (Figure 3). This creates the sense of being under a huge Triffid-like plant.

The overall effect is quite overwhelming in the sense that it is far too much to take in. The description above barely touches on the detail and complexity of Parr's decoration and just some of the objects in the room. The environment is intensely packed with material from different cultural and historical contexts. There is



Figure 3: Ceiling and wall, drawing room David Parr House (© David Parr House, photo by Howard Rice).



Figure 4: Dining room, David Parr House (© David Parr House, photo by Helena G. Anderson).

something strangely surreal about seeing this appropriation of decorative designs, usually found in larger houses, in the close proximity of a small room. When Parr works for himself, rather than for his employers, the result is a heady, trippy visual experience, where conventional rules of scale have been surpassed. Spending half an hour in the room is not really enough to get anything but a slight grasp on how the juxtapositions of things and surfaces interlace, mingle and collide. It would be possible and desirable to spend an afternoon just looking and reflecting on this room alone.

It is in this mode of very limited selective observation that I will try to describe some different rooms in the house. The dining room is significantly different from the drawing room, the main wall decorations being less flowing and more mechanical. The decoration is painted on a light ground with fruits alternating in deep red and khaki green. Above the picture rail is a beautiful painted shallow strip of rolling flowers, fruits, stems and leaves in golden and dark browns, ochres and yellow creams that are very Morris-like. The architrave has richly painted notches, waves and small flowers in pinks, red, ochre and black. Hanging on one wall there is a dark-framed woodland scene. In one corner a dark wood-polished shelf is fixed directly above the dado rail. Placed on it are family photos and a child's green toy steam train. The chimney breast is covered in a thick textile paper, which was originally used to cover damp emanating from the chimney (Figure 4). The decorative patterning is like a 1950s modernist abstract painting with crosshatched lines and scratches. On the creamy gloss-painted mantelpiece are an assortment of objects, including a couple



Figure 5: Bedroom, David Parr House (© David Parr House, photo by Helena G Anderson).

of plain brown pots, two photos, a postcard and a decorative tea caddy.

In the kitchen the most noticeable feature is a beautiful wall painting above the mantelpiece which is reminiscent of Morris's *Willow Bough* design, but with the addition of large delicate pale blue flowers. Other parts of Parr's kitchen decoration have been painted over, particularly the dark faux painted wood cupboards, which were painted at a later date, presumably to make the room lighter. The rest of the kitchen has been left as it was after being fitted out in the 1950s and 60s.

Upstairs in what is now the largest room at the back of the house is Palmer and her husband's bedroom (Figure 5). The walls are painted in a large, bold geometric leaf pattern. The headboard of Palmer's 1970s bed has a brown smudge where the white fabric got stained with her husband's hair oil, probably Brill Cream. No real attempt has been made to clean it. On one level it is slightly disgusting; on another it is rather liberating, as lived reality bursts out. Covering the mattress is a 1970s flannel sheet in a modernist Bauhaus-style colour grid in muted pinks, lemon yellows and light baby blues. Resting folded up on the sheet at the bottom of the bed is a crocheted blanket in bright colours.

What becomes apparent is that the house has been very closely preserved to be as it was when Palmer lived in it. Being in the bedroom is like intruding into private space. Indeed, it looks as though Palmer has just popped out the door, not yesterday, nor even last year, but sometime during the 1980s, as that is the period of the latest household objects in the house. The contents of the rooms span from the 1880s through to the

1980s, which distinguishes the Parr House quite significantly from many heritage houses. Most of the house and rooms have not been ‘restored’ to a certain period; instead, the project has been to conserve what existed, interestingly along the lines of Morris’s original idea for SPAB. This conservation is carried out fairly consistently across the house, and indeed the house works best where this principle is rigorously applied, and where no sanitising of the past takes place. What occurs is a layering of one history on, in and around another. One life, that of Elsie Palmer, is nested inside another, that of David Parr – although it is not exactly Parr’s life as much as his decorative interior which Palmer’s everyday life has been layered upon.

The Parr house has none of the calm stability that one can experience in visiting large houses previously belonging to the upper middle or ruling class. Instead there are exhilarating juxtapositions of scale, resulting from large decorative designs being embedded within such small rooms.

There are also strange juxtapositions of decorations and objects from different moments in design and cultural history – but many of these result not from David Parr’s original decoration but from the continued interventions into the house’s visual dynamic by Elsie Palmer and presumably her family.

In presenting Palmer’s lived reality embedded and entwined within Parr’s vibrant decorative appropriation, the visitor is given a feeling of being transported into an often cosy but simultaneously unstable world of possibility. Rather than the visitor passively receiving a distanced, hermetically sealed and lost past, the Parr House asks us to think of ourselves within a constantly evolving past that we both belong to and will continue to be part of. The house suggests that rather than the past being fixed, the past was and continues to be malleable, and that the visitor contributes to this by their presence; or to quote Morris’s Preface to Robert Steele’s *Medieval Lore* (1893): ‘the past is not dead, but is living in us, and will be alive in the future which we are now helping to make’.

David Mabb
