

# Visit to the David Parr House, Cambridge and Saffron Walden Museum

Thursday 10 November 2022

Six members (the maximum allowed) met at 186 Gwydir Street, Cambridge to visit the small terraced house of David Parr (1854–1927) who, from very humble beginnings, was apprenticed in 1871 aged 17 to learn the art of painting and decorating at the Cambridge firm of F. R. Leach. The business, started in City Road in 1862 by Frederick Leach (1837–1904), soon came to the attention of leading architects and designers of the day and in 1866 George Frederick Bodley recommended them to William Morris, who commissioned them to decorate the chapel of Jesus College. This started a very fruitful relationship, and the firm was used for major commissions in churches, colleges and houses over many years, as far afield as Dundee and the Isle of Wight. The firm grew with workshops for painting, graining, lettering, stone- and wood-carving, ornamental metal work, stained glass and later, furniture making. Showrooms were opened in the centre of Cambridge and in London, with a shop in Camden High Street as well as separate carving and glass works. In the 1881 census



Oak cupboard on later stand, believed to have the initials of Sir Francis and Lady Anne Weston of Sutton Place, Surrey, who were married in 1530. *Photo Robert Williams*

Leach is listed as employing 28 men, two women and six boys.

David Parr joined the firm when it was growing rapidly, and worked on many of these commissions including the London houses of George Gilbert Scott jun. and George and Rosalind Howard (1 Palace Green), the Swan House in Chelsea and rooms at St James's Palace. Expenses for lodgings and travelling whenever he was outside a four mile circuit of Cambridge enabled him to save regularly, making his first deposit in the Post Office Savings Bank in 1876. While working on a commission in Macclesfield he met Mary Jane Wood and they married in 1883; three years later they bought the Gwydir Street house where they lived with their three children. Parr had now been working as an artist-decorator for fifteen years and for the next forty years he used all this experience on his own house, keeping a decorating notebook detailing exactly how he went about transforming it. Downstairs there was a narrow hall, a front room he called the sitting room, a back room called the dining room and a back scullery.

His first major decoration was the sitting room ceiling, started in 1894 with an interlaced geometrical pattern of leaves and a border of red stylised flower heads. The firm specialised in 'pouncing', a tracing technique using semi-transparent paper pricked with holes that are dabbed with powder to transfer the designs to the surfaces, followed by careful free-hand painting. Parr fixed a cornice and dado rails to the walls,

which he also decorated. The upper section of the walls have a pattern of scrolling foliage in shades of green with yellow flower heads, interlaced with scrolling texts of popular verse. The lower section has a repeated foliate pattern and, where it would not be hidden by the furniture, small raised gilded flower heads. He seems to have taken his inspiration for the design when working on Wickham and Elizabeth Flowers' home, Swan House in Chelsea, from window reveal panels designed by Morris. The inspiration for the ceiling ties in with a Morris & Co. design for the Ambassadors' Room at St James's Palace. It was pointed out that the Palace designs have long since disappeared, so ironically it can now only be seen in a modest worker's terraced house.

The dining room was decorated in a simpler style with a decorated cornice, frieze and dado rail for the walls and a plain ceiling. The frieze follows a Morris & Co. design, illustrated in their catalogue, while the upper part of the walls has stylised leaf outlines in red, green and yellow in the style of Pugin. The Parrs' bedroom, which has a plain panelled ceiling and similar designs to the dining room below, looks cleaner and brighter as it has been less affected by the smoke from fires and oil lamps. Parr continued decorating the house almost until his death in 1927. The decoration survived as his granddaughter Elsie, who moved into the house aged twelve to keep her grandmother company, continued to live there and married and raised two children there. Although some modernisations such as making a



One of the walls hung with sections of carving in the Saffron Walden museum store. *Photo Robert Williams*

bathroom took place, most of the decoration was preserved.

No photography was allowed in the house, but more information and pictures can be found at <https://davidparrhouse.org/discover>

We then travelled to the nearby Essex market town of Saffron Walden for lunch and to visit the Museum; founded in 1835, it was one of the very first civic museums in England. Early benefactors included wealthy Quaker families like the Frys, Tukes and Gibsons. Here we were greeted by Jenny Oxley, the Museums Collections Officer, who was to be our guide.

The furniture collection on display is small, mainly earlier oak pieces along with a series of seventeenth-century carved lion heads from nearby Audley End House. We looked at an early-sixteenth-century panelled-front oak cupboard, the upper panels having the raised carved head and shoulders of a man and woman in period dress; initials between a raised carved barrel are thought to be of Sir Francis and Lady Anne Weston of Sutton Place, who were married in 1530. Sarah Medlam, who unfortunately could not be on the visit, had told us that much of the woodwork was probably bought with encouragement from Francis Gibson, the Quaker banker and one of the early trustees. Over thirty years ago she had been allowed to read his diaries, in which he recorded trips to London, the regular route he took through Wardour Street and southwards, calling at Pratt and other dealers.

Occasionally these included little sketches of furniture, including one described as 'Henry VIII's cabinet'. He listed his purchases with prices in code, which Sarah believed could be because his Quaker beliefs made him feel they were an indulgence.

We also saw a very well-displayed collection of pottery and porcelain before travelling a short distance to see the reserve collection in storage. Here we were shown an oak carved four-panel chest, dating from the second half of the seventeenth century, with applied ebonised split turned mouldings and upper brackets, that was a gift from W. M. Tuke in 1900. We enjoyed seeing all the exhibits stored on the shelves and especially the smaller carved pieces hung from the walls, covering a whole range of dates, styles and patterns.

We would like to thank Jenny Oxley for her help and allowing us so much freedom to examine the museum collection and Jeremy Bate for arranging such an interesting day for us.

*Robert Williams*