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patience, diplomacy and attention to detail exhibited on both sides, represented in the reams of information spanning the life of the project, in a pre-computerised era that seems a world away.

A short article cannot do justice to the breadth of material contained within the Brandon-Jones papers. Whilst much of it is known and has been previously published in some way, there remain items and lines of enquiry of interest to architectural historians, particularly with respect to the relationship between architect and client, whether it be Voysey or Webb with upwardly-mobile Victorian and Edwardian clients or Brandon-Jones with public sector clients serving a post-war society with very different expectations. It has been a real privilege to gain a long-view of Brandon-Jones as a man whose architectural interests, practice and commitments were wide and who appeared to be unfailingly generous with his time and input to educate students, meet the needs of clients, save historic buildings and contribute to our understanding and enjoyment of the work of Arts and Crafts architects and designers. If I had been born a little early then perhaps I could have been one of those fortunate researchers to be warmly welcomed to John and Helen Brandon-Jones's Webb-designed home in Redington Road, Hampstead. 'He was tall and brisk, with a humorous manner of story-telling that spoke freshly of times long past.' That would have been a memorable afternoon.

The Brandon-Jones manuscripts collection is not yet available on the RIBA catalogue. However an extensive handlist is available. For any enquiries relating to the collection and requests for access, please contact the RIBA Drawings & Archives Collection directly at [drawingsandarchives@riba.org](mailto:drawingsandarchives@riba.org).

With thanks to Fiona Orsini, Curator, RIBA Drawings & Archives Collection

Unless otherwise stated, all documents are part of the Brandon-Jones manuscripts collection in the RIBA Drawings & Archive Collection at the V&A.

## The Mystery of the Dalston Hall Hanging

*Tony Peart*

As cold cases go this one was freezing, a single, scrawled letter dated January 1968 with an enclosed blurry snapshot showing two figures underneath a tree by a river. One, a dame wearing a bonnet looks to the left while a big guy carrying a sack and wooden staff approaches unnoticed from behind. As the caffeine kicked in, questions started queuing in my brain. Who were they? What was going on here? Where were they now? One thing was certain, as forty nine summers had been and gone since the click of the shutter this was going to be no walk in the park...

A detective story yes, but not of the murder/mystery variety as the letter and photograph in question relate to that rarest of all Voysey artefacts, a unique, hand-worked textile design.<sup>1</sup> First a little context, the letter dated 15th January 1968 was addressed to Barbara Morris (1918–2009) the V&A textile expert then working for the museum's Circulation Department. It was written by Trevor Pearson, warden of the Cooperative Youth Centre at Dalston Hall, Cumberland and described the current condition and location (above an open inglenook fireplace in the great hall) of a Voysey "embroidered tapestry" which Pearson estimated to be fifteen feet high. The photograph (figure 1) depicted a dark, embroidered, appliqué panel that stylistically appeared to be by Voysey and as I live only five miles from Dalston Hall I was duly dispatched<sup>2</sup> to see what I could discover.

The wording of the letter was ambiguous, had Barbara Morris instigated the correspondence and how had it come to her attention as it was hidden away in a remote, privately run youth centre (serving various local authorities)? In the meantime, a visit to the Carlisle library furnished some basic facts about Dalston Hall. A fortified



figure 1 –  
*Trevor Pearson's 1968 photograph of the hanging in situ in the great hall*



figure 2 –  
*Dalston Hall c.1900 as remodelled by Carlisle architect C.J Ferguson for Edmund Wright Stead*

1  
This is the only Voysey appliqué design I am aware of. Four different Voysey designed embroideries, all executed by Annie, wife of the sculptor and metalworker William Reynolds-Stephens, were exhibited at the 1896, 1899, 1910 and 1916 Arts and Crafts Exhibitions.

2  
The letter had come to the attention of David Metcalfe, the Society's research coordinator who kindly passed it to me.

border house with a peel tower (figure 2), it was built c.1500 by John Dalston and remained in the family until the mid 18th century. It was bought in 1897 by Edmund Wright Stead owner of Stead McAlpin, the largest textile printer in Carlisle and significantly, a company Voysey designed for. Could this be a piece commissioned for the Hall by the Stead family with the Co-op “inheriting” it when they purchased the hall for £11,000 in 1944? The Cooperative Society sold Dalston Hall in 1971 and it was converted into a luxury hotel which is how it still functions today. A phone call to the present manager confirmed the hanging was not at the hall nor did anyone have any knowledge of it. We were getting a little closer to Voysey but not to the piece itself.

A search of the online V&A collections finally confirmed Voysey as the designer. Here were two watercolour designs <sup>3</sup> almost identical to the hanging, one against a white background (figure 3) the other against dark blue. Described as: “C.F.A. Voysey - embroidered appliqué panel showing two peasant figures beneath a tree 1903” both are signed on the reverse and dated February 1903. The accession number indicated

figure 3 –  
The original, watercolour design for the embroidered appliqué panel © Victoria and Albert Museum, London



<sup>3</sup> E.197-1974 and E.198-1974. The iconography could well personally relate to the Morton family, symbolically representing James (carrying a bolt of cloth on his back) returning home to Beatrice from one of his many, lengthy selling trips both at home and abroad.

that they came to the museum in 1974 as part of a large donation of designs (including many others by Voysey) from Morton Sundour Ltd. The firm of Alexander Morton & Co (which eventually became Morton Sundour) was, like Stead McAlpin, also based in Carlisle and was the major manufacturer of Voysey’s woven textile designs. A return visit to Carlisle library furnished the information that Dalston Hall had indeed been bought in 1936 by Sir James Morton (1867–1943) and his wife Lady Beatrice who, on his death in 1944, sold it to the Cooperative Society. It was James Morton who understood the commercial importance of embracing contemporary design trends and actively sought to commission work from leading designers such as Voysey. The commercial success of the designs that Voysey created for Morton’s was such that by 1897 they had entered into a five-year contract, renewed thereafter on a yearly basis, where for the sum of £120 per annum Voysey would provide a minimum of ten original designs and his exclusive services in the field of all woven textiles other than carpets. Between 1900 and 1902 over forty new Voysey designs were introduced into the firm’s tapestry ranges making him the most important freelance designer working for the company at that time. It seems highly likely the appliqué design was a private commission to decorate the Morton’s recently acquired Carlisle residence Homeacres, a large, early Victorian property set in its own grounds.<sup>4</sup> Following the fashion of the time for the lady of the house to be actively involved in the production of embroidered decorations and furnishings, it seems highly likely the hanging was worked by James Morton’s wife Beatrice and probably arrived at Dalston Hall in 1936 when the family moved there from Homeacres.

Frustratingly, a search of photographs held at the Carlisle local studies centre taken of the interior of the hall (during the time it operated as a youth centre) revealed no trace of its presence although interestingly, an image of the great hall taken only three years before the letter and photograph in question were sent, clearly show it had not yet been



figure 4 –  
The great hall photographed c.1965. The appliqué would later hang high on the wall above the inglenook fireplace. The central vase on the mantel shelf is the same one that appears in Figure 1

<sup>4</sup> Coincidentally, Homeacres now houses the senior management team of The University of Cumbria Institute of the Arts – my place of employment.

moved to its final position over the inglenook fire in the great hall (figure 4).

Another internet search revealed that the Cooperative Society holds an extensive national archive at Holyoake House, Manchester. Encouragingly, this includes material relating to various properties (including Dalston Hall) owned and run by Co-operative Youth Centres Ltd. Items that caught my attention included annual reports and a complete inventory of the contents of the hall recorded on the eve of its sale in 1971. An appointment was duly booked but sadly no reference to the hanging could be found. It is not mentioned in any of the annual reports, however, the document listing the hall's contents (down to the number and location of toilet rolls) made one thing certain, by 1971 the hanging was no longer at the hall.

Thinking the appliqué panel might have been on long-term loan to the Co-op from the Morton family I asked the Society's research coordinator if he could contact the Morton's descendants, now living in London, to see if it remained in the family. We waited patiently for an answer.

In the meantime, the visit to the Co-op archive had revealed that the writer of the original letter Trevor Pearson had left the Co-op's employ to become the bursar of St John's College, Durham. Yet again, the intervening years meant that the college no longer has information relating to Mr Pearson or his immediate family, another dead end.

A final trawl of the Co-op archives revealed that committee minutes for the Youth Centres and a selection of photographs were also held in Manchester and so, on my next visit to the City, I booked an appointment. Disappointingly the photographs were mostly taken outside the hall and those few of the interior contained no clues – not a promising start. However, a long, detailed scrutiny of the committee minutes paid off with the following two, brief and tantalizing revelations:

“Management committee meeting, 2nd February 1967 Manchester. Dalston Hall Centre.

Resolved: (viii) That enquiries be made regarding the disposal of a piece of embroidery acquired when the Hall was purchased and which, according to the previous owner, is likely to be of exceptional value as a work of art.”

closely followed by:

“Management committee meeting, 18 March 1967 in Peterborough. Matters arising: (iii) Dalston Hall Centre – Disposal of Tapestry. It was reported that the Warden was in touch with the Victoria & Albert Museum and also that the former owner of the tapestry was not well disposed to any suggestion of sale. Resolved: That we take the necessary steps to sell the tapestry.”

Finally, much of the back-story was revealed. The Co-op had been made aware of the significance of the hanging (and its potential value) by a member of the Morton family. This is most likely to have been Jocelyn Morton (second son of James and Beatrice) the former

chairman of Morton Sundour Ltd. who, at the time, was still living in Carlisle and actively engaged in researching and writing his epic family history *Three Generations in a Family Textile Firm*.<sup>5</sup> The approach to the V&A could well have been with a view to them being a potential purchaser although there is no record of it entering their collection. Exasperatingly the later Co-op committee reports fail to mention its subsequent fate – perhaps Jocelyn Morton had bought it back due to its strong sentimental value? Sadly and rather predictably, when we did hear from the current generation of the Morton family they had no knowledge of it. All we can conclusively say is that in 1968 a Voysey designed appliqué hanging briefly emerged from obscurity only to rapidly return there. On a positive note we now know it was considered to be of value, fully attributed to its designer and therefore most likely to have been sold not simply destroyed as had been the initial fear.

The search continues...

<sup>5</sup> Morton, J. *Three Generations in a Family Textile Firm*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971.