

Laurence Hodson

In September 1894, the writer and artist, printer and all-round Renaissance chap, William Morris, was on his travels from his Oxfordshire base. "After Banbury," he wrote to his daughter, Jenny, "the country gets worse and the building more so. From Birmingham you run through the Black Country to Wolverhampton, which is a doleful abode..."

Welcome to the real world, Mr Morris; it's not all holy grails and strawberry-eating thrushes.

Luckily for Morris, the person whom he was on his way to visit lived on the green side of Wolverhampton in the direction of Bridgnorth, "which begins to get rather pretty".

Indeed, it does. The west side of the city has always attracted the wealth. This is where the lovely Wightwick Manor lies, and a host of other fine properties at high prices. And it was here that Laurence Hodson resided, just a few minutes' walk away, at Compton Hall.

Built for a Black Country hardware merchant in the mid-1840s, Compton Hall had already seen half a dozen owners, including the mayor of Wolverhampton, who had been accidentally knighted by Queen Victoria, when she was wasn't concentrating. In the 1890s, however, Compton had come into the hands of the Hodsons, who (as father and son) were directors of the Springfield Brewery Co., off the Cannock Road. Laurence W. Hodson (1864-1933) now ruled this roost.

Now, you probably have a preconception of what a brewery owner would be like. Set that to one side. Mr Hodson was just as much a lover and patron of the arts as were his neighbours - the Manders - up the road at Wightwick.

Indeed, the sole reason for William Morris venturing into Wolverhampton's doleful abode was to take up Hodson's commission to re-design the interior of Compton Hall. I was relieved to find the house was not sham aesthetic, wrote Morris snootily to Jenny, "so something can be done with it."

Better than that, the very last wallpaper William Morris designed – he died just two years later, in 1896 – was made for this very abode, and named "Compton" in its honour. You can still buy the pattern as a scarf, a wallpaper or even as an inappropriate case for your iPhone.

The one thing you can't do is drink Laurence Hodson's beer. The brewery burnt down in 2004.

The commission from William Morris was only one of Hodson's significant investments in the arts in Wolverhampton. At the same time as he commissioned the wallpaper, Hodson purchased a set of the Grail tapestries by Morris and Burne-Jones to hang nearby.

Seven years later, in 1902, Hodson served as Chairman of the Fine Art Committee for the ambitious Wolverhampton Art and Industrial Exhibition, and employed the future poet-laureate, John Masefield, as his secretary.

For the length of his employment, Masefield rented a house on the Tettenhall Road. It was one of the first decent jobs Masefield had managed to find in England, having previously spent two gruelling years, working in a carpet factory in the States. The salary Hodson paid him allowed the poet to publish his first collection of verse – Salt-Water Ballads – which included "Sea Fever", Masefield's best loved poem.

It's the only link I can find between Wolverhampton and the sea, which doesn't involve Rhyl or Llandudno.

Not content with filling his house with Morris, Dodson then turned to the Scottish artist, William Strang, to paint a series of ten large mural paintings on the theme of Adam and Eve for the library at Compton Hall. Strang is best known as a portrait painter, with Masfield himself, along with Thomas Hardy and Vita Sackville-West amongst his sitters. The Compton commission gave the artist an opportunity to spread his wings rather wider, and paint history's very first celebrity couple.

And alongside all of this, Laurence Hodson was filling the shelves of his library too. He owned a significant early 15th-century edition of Chaucer, woodcuts by Durer, engravings by Hogarth and 16th-century copies of Mantegna's Triumphs of Caesar, made for the ducal palace at Mantua, but later snapped up by Charles I. Add to that a complete set of volumes from Morris's own Kelmscott Press, many printed luxuriously on vellum, and 87 glass slides of Burne-Jones's illustrations for the Kelmscott Chaucer. No wonder Hodson thought his library was worth decorating. Sadly for us and for Wolverhampton, Laurence Hodson did not have pockets as deep as Charles I. In 1906 (despite the continued success of the Springfield Brewery) he got into financial difficulties, almost certainly caused by his lavish expenditure on Arts and Crafts. Compton Hall had to be sold, and much of Hodson's private collection along with it.

The four winds have since scattered the Compton Hall treasures far and wide. Hodson's private papers are now housed in Harvard University library; one of the Strang Adam and Eve panels is at the Tate and another in New York.

The riches of Hodson's collection were demonstrated in two auctions held at Newbury and in London back in 2013. The Newbury haul concentrated on Hodson's rugs, wall hangings, carpets, curtains and furniture, while the London auction dealt with the Kelmscott editions, the Burne-Jones slides and a whole lot more. Among the other lots were letters from William Morris and John Ruskin, and an autograph copy of a sonnet by Oscar Wilde. The London sale alone amassed a tidy £1.3 million. So the next time you hear someone describing Wolverhampton as a "doleful abode", buy them a pint of beer and tell them about Mr Laurence Hodson.