

Elizabeth Hoare

DAILY TELEGRAPH – 17 Oct 2001

ELIZABETH HOARE, who has died aged 85, owned Watts & Co, which has produced ecclesiastical vestments, textiles, wallpapers and domestic furniture for more than a century.

Elizabeth Louise Scott (always known as Betty) was born on November 17 1915 at St Marylebone, London, the eldest child of Sebastian Scott, an eminent doctor and radiologist. Her grandfather was George Gilbert Scott Junior, one of the founders of Watts & Co and the eldest son of Sir George Gilbert Scott, a wayward genius and the most brilliant of the Scott architectural dynasty; her uncle was Sir Giles Gilbert Scott, the architect of Liverpool Cathedral.

After Upper Chine School on the Isle of Wight, Betty went to Paris in 1931 to be finished, then spent a year in Germany, where she was thrilled by the Nazi rallies without being remotely taken with their politics.

In 1934 she won a scholarship to RADA and embarked upon a successful career on the stage and screen. Renowned for her great beauty, she joined the Denham Film Studios in 1937 and appeared in Alexander Korda's *Rembrandt*, and, among other films, *Fingers*, a strange film noir in which she ironed for the first and only time in her life. Warner Brothers invited her to Hollywood but she felt that her resemblance to Vivien Leigh would be a disadvantage and refused.

After her marriage to Graham Hoare, reputedly the first white wedding of the war and an event widely covered by the press, Betty Hoare continued to act as a member of the BBC Drama Repertory Company until the birth of her children. At the end of the war Betty Hoare and her husband (who had managed to bring back Hitler's telephone set from Berlin while serving as a Lt Col in the Royal Signals) took over Watts & Co.

The company was a remarkable survivor from the 19th century. Founded in Baker Street in 1874 by the architects G F Bodley, Thomas Garner and George Gilbert Scott Junior as a rival to Morris & Co, it furnished not only cathedrals and churches, but also houses. The partners called the company Watts, justifying it by saying "Watt's in a name?". It was soon leading the field in ecclesiastical and domestic interiors.

Watts stayed in the ownership of the founders' descendants, one of whom was Elizabeth Hoare. At the end of the war she took over the business. The shop remained at the Baker Street premises until the lease expired in 1950.

It then moved to Dacre Street, Westminster, from where it continued the production of textiles and wallpapers, but also moved in a slightly more experimental direction under the guidance of Keith Murray. Architects such as Sir Ninian and Sebastian Comper, Sir Giles Gilbert Scott and Francis Johnson preferred the traditional designs, and these prevailed. The modernist work of the architect George Pace was also accepted, but Betty Hoare disliked it and therefore relished the impermanence that resulted from the eccentric materials he insisted upon using.

After Stephen Dykes Bower was appointed Surveyor of Westminster Abbey in 1952 he used Watts for every decorative requirement. Commissioned by Dykes Bower, Watts undertook

the Coronation altar frontal in 1953 and did much fine work for the Abbey's 900th anniversary.

In 1965 Graham Hoare took a partnership in Hoare's Bank, the Watts shareholders sold out, and nobody wanted to buy the firm. It was only Betty Hoare's determination that kept Watts going in premises at Faith House, Tufton Street, Westminster. She saw it as an escape from the tyranny of domestic duties but for some time it barely survived. She had a good embroideress in Winifrid Peppiatt (who had been trained under Comper) and survivors from Baker Street.

She was persuaded to continue due to the continuing patronage of Dykes Bower and a diminishing number of traditionalist architects, as well as the encouragement of the young architectural historians Anthony Symondson and Gavin Stamp, and the support of Ivor Bulmer-Thomas.

By the 1970s, however, as tastes changed, Watts & Co grew more confident; and when church furnishers, tailors and convent embroidery rooms closed, Betty Hoare would take over their stock and sometimes their staff. Later still, when the fashion house Norman Hartnell came to an end, she took on its embroiderer, who exchanged ballgowns for chasubles as head of the Watts workroom.

With the arrival of David Gazeley as manager, Watts took a new direction, and although the dyes and weaves of some of the textiles were changed, he consolidated the business and created a successful American market.

This endeavour was crowned by the conferral of a royal warrant. The wallpapers and fabrics assumed a new life in Watts & Co Furnishings at Chelsea Harbour.

For years Betty Hoare had retrieved embroidery discarded by churches and convents. In 1992 her collection was accepted by Liverpool Cathedral and the Elizabeth Hoare Collection was established in the triforium where it forms one of the most comprehensive study collections in the country.

None of this could have been accomplished without Betty Hoare's poise, style, charm, humour, vigour and business acumen. Bishops, deans and clergymen were captivated by her.

A good churchwoman, Betty Hoare was a traditionalist whose achievement demonstrated that there were high standards that were worth preserving. Today Watts & Co textiles and wallpapers have been rediscovered by a new generation conscious of period authenticity and Watts has become the successful and fashionable firm it is today.

She married Graham Hoare in 1939. He predeceased her. She is survived by their son and daughter.