

Elizabeth Hoare

THE INDEPENDENT – Tuesday 16 October 2001

Elizabeth Louise Scott, actress and church furnisher: born London 17 November 1915; married 1939 Graham Hoare (died 1984); one son, one daughter); died London 13 October 2001.

A decade ago, in 1991, readers of *Crafts* magazine were treated to a remarkable visual confrontation in the recondite field of ecclesiastical embroidery. On the one side there was Beryl Dean, the "champion of art embroidery", holding the sort of modern mitre favoured by George Carey, the current Archbishop of Canterbury, made of some peculiar material like lurex and decorated with blobs and flashes; on the opposite page, there was Mrs Hoare of Watts & Co proudly holding a piece of old-fashioned craftsmanship made by her firm: a magnificent red velvet cope hood emblazoned with three heraldic lions embroidered in gold thread.

To those who knew Betty Hoare, this was a hilarious juxtaposition – not least because she looked uncharacteristically stern and proper in the photograph, for usually she would roar with laughter at the "frightful", crude and hideous objects designed by modern artists to spoil the interiors of Anglican churches and cathedrals up and down the land. Then aged 75, she was still at the helm of Watts & Co, the firm of church furnishers which, by an accident of history, she ran – still persuading vicars and deans to go in for something more appropriate and traditional: chasubles and frontals, copes and stoles made from some of the magnificent decorative fabrics which she could offer, to be made up by the skilled and experienced needlewomen at her command. And she usually succeeded.

The story of Watts & Co is partly the story of the recent revival of interest in one of the flourishing arts of Victorian England. Watts ("Watt's in a name?") was founded in 1874 by three church architects – G.F. Bodley, Thomas Garner and George Gilbert Scott junior – as a rival to Morris & Co. Like William Morris's more famous firm, Watts & Co offered art wallpapers based on medieval and Renaissance patterns as well as church fabrics and metalwork; unlike its rival, however, Watts managed to survive into the second half of the 20th century.

When Betty and her late husband, Graham Hoare, took over the running of the firm in 1953, two years after the Festival of Britain, it was as dowdy and moribund as the popular reputation of the Victorians. Watts could easily have gone under as well, especially as the Church of England was beginning to look in new directions. Instead, encouraged by a younger generation of enthusiasts after the 1960s and by Anthony Symondson in particular, Betty began to appreciate the value – both artistic and commercial – of the legacy she had inherited.

The modern revival of Watts & Co in its new home in Tufton Street behind Westminster Abbey, based on supplying gorgeous vestments to unmarried Anglo-Catholic clergy and decorative wallpapers to the more discerning readers of *The World of Interiors*, might be regarded as the art expression of Young Fogeyism except that, under Betty Hoare's imperious and acute guidance, it was much more serious and intelligent than many supposed.

Highly skilled needlewomen were rescued from collapsing rival firms and new historic patterns added to the collection, which inspired scholarly art-historical study. Furthermore,

Betty became passionately concerned with saving the surviving products of the great Victorian revival of church embroidery – the product of the skill of so many anonymous female fingers – to which so many distinguished designers and architects had contributed.

Owing to the fickleness of fashion as well as to the imperatives of liturgical reform, "large quantities of old embroidery, which today would be considered masterpieces, were despised, neglected and destroyed", as Betty put it:

During my travels, visiting convents, churches and cathedrals to advise on their furnishings, I was from time to time offered old pieces of embroidery on condition that I remove them there and then. This often involved my carrying enormous bundles, sometimes on my back, to the nearest railway station *en route* to London.

This story has a happy ending. Betty Hoare wanted to find a home for her collection of salvaged embroidery and eventually one was found in Liverpool. In 1992, to her pride and delight and with Mary Schoeser as curator, the Elizabeth Hoare Gallery – now the Liverpool Cathedral Embroidery Museum – was opened in the triforium of the last, triumphant Gothic cathedral in Britain. This just happened to be the masterpiece of her revered uncle Sir Giles Gilbert Scott.

Dynasty explains much about Elizabeth Hoare's remarkable career. Her great-grandfather was Sir Gilbert Scott senior, although a connection to that eminent Victorian was not something to shout about when she was young. Her father, Sebastian Gilbert Scott, a doctor and a distinguished pioneering radiologist, was one of the sons of the wayward co-founder of Watts & Co. Because George Gilbert Scott junior had become a Roman Catholic, Betty was baptised at St James's, Spanish Place, but later in life she became an Anglican. After school in London and on the Isle of Wight, she was sent off to Paris to be "finished". A little later she spent some time in Germany, later recalling how impressive the Nazi rallies seemed to an impressionable and adventurous girl.

Blessed with striking good looks, Betty made her first career on the stage. Having won a scholarship to Rada in 1934, she acted in rep until seduced by the cinema. For a time she worked for Alexander Korda at the Denham Studios, appearing in several of his films, including *Rembrandt* (1936), and was later invited to Hollywood. Her future husband, however, did not much care for this move; besides, Betty preferred the stage and during the Second World War she worked for BBC Drama, Val Gielgud becoming a lifelong friend.

Betty married Graham Hoare in 1939; it was apparently the first smart "white wedding" of the Second World War, in which her husband ended up as a Lieutenant-Colonel in Berlin (one of Betty's prized possessions was "Hitler's telephone", a black bakelite handset taken as a souvenir from one of the bunkers). Graham was the gentlest of men and cared neither to stay on in the Army, nor to take up the offer of a safe Conservative seat made by his cousin Quintin Hogg. Instead, he took on Watts & Co, joined by Betty, who was glad to escape domestic life. As she was the first to admit, much as she loved giving parties, she was neither by skill or by inclination at home in the kitchen. The crisis came in 1965 when Graham took up a partnership in the family bank while shareholders called for liquidation. Instead, thankfully, Betty decided to carry on alone. In consequence, we are much in her debt.

When, decades later, Betty began imperceptibly to withdraw from running Watts & Co, a second branch had been established in Chelsea dealing with domestic furnishings. The firm's stock of original wallpaper designs became increasingly valued both for its authenticity and as an alternative to the familiar contemporary Morris patterns; they are to be found in

National Trust houses and papers by Pugin, cleverly acquired from a defunct firm, were used by Margaret Thatcher in her office in the Palace of Westminster. Baroness Thatcher, indeed, was one of the few women Mrs Hoare admired, as she was often impatient with most of her sex. Impressive, grand and imperious, Betty could seem formidable and she was certainly preposterously snobbish. But she was immensely kind, generous and helpful, as well as funny, while being oddly lacking in confidence in her own considerable abilities.

Two years ago a big party was held in the first Viscount Astor's house on the Victoria Embankment ostensibly to celebrate the 125th anniversary of Watts & Co and to raise money for her collection in Liverpool. In fact, it was Betty Hoare's swansong. In the big opulent panelled room surrounded by an extraordinary collection of bishops and priests, architects, art historians and interior designers, grandees and tycoons as well as by her many cousins, her two children and grandchildren, Betty held court, encrusted with jewellery and looking magnificent. With her characteristically powdered white face, pencilled-on eyebrows under her high forehead and bright red lips, she might have been Elizabeth I – in a film by Korda. She loved every minute of it.