

Joseph Briggs was born on 11 December 1873 at 3 Milnshaw Lane, Accrington, in the shadow of the town's huge viaduct. His father, also Joseph, was a foreman engraver, and a shareholder, at Steiner's Calico Printworks at Church, then one of the biggest firms of its kind in Britain. He owned not just his own house but the entire row, Nos. 1, 3, 5 and 7 Milnshaw Lane. (No 7 was for many years a grocer's shop – a typical Victorian 'corner shop'.)

In 1881 Briggs Snr moved his family into No 1 Milnshaw Lane after making substantial improvements, including the rare luxury of an indoor bathroom (although the lavatory remained in the yard outside). The four houses were demolished in 1972 and replaced by a large traffic roundabout beneath the viaduct.

The young Joseph Briggs was educated at a local Sunday School and then at Accrington Mechanics Institution, which then stood on the site on St James' Street now occupied by Accrington Library. Here students were taught science, including maths, and especially art, to prepare them for the town's calico printing trade. And when he was 14 Joseph joined his father and his two older brothers at Steiner's Calico Printworks as an apprentice engraver.

Engraving designs on the blocks that transfer patterns on to cloth is a highly skilled craft that ensures details and colours match perfectly when printed. The apprentices would use their newly-acquired skills in drawing as they learned the art of engraving designs on to wood blocks and metal rollers.

Joseph remained in this apprenticeship until three months before his 18th birthday when, on 12 September 1891, he sailed from Liverpool to New York on the Cunard liner *S S Servia*. Today nobody knows why he decided to go to America, although millions of Europeans – both the oppressed and the adventurous – went there at this time. Joseph was one of more than 560,000 people who landed there in 1891 alone. But it was a move that would make his name in the history of Tiffany Glass.

Meticulous records were kept so we know that on Monday 21 September 1891 after a voyage lasting exactly eight days, 19 hours and 27 minutes, the *Servia* arrived in New York harbour. It took many hours to pass through the rigorous immigration process, so that evening Joseph found a local 'doss house' and paid five cents for a bed for the night. It was a decision that changed his life.

Next morning he found himself in a room full of showmen – and that's how Joseph met Hawley Hathaway, known as Seth, a Pony Express rider in a Wild West show. They were to be lifelong friends – but more immediately Seth offered to get Joseph a job in the show.

Long before movies introduced the 'cowboys 'n ' injuns' to the general public, Wild West shows toured America and Europe, thrilling audiences with demonstrations of horsemanship, sharp-shooting, lasso twirling and re-enactments of events from rodeos to Indian wars. What Joseph did isn't recorded, but his children believe his first job in America was to hold out cards for gunmen to shoot out of his hand!

However, after two years he decided to look for a more conventional job – and fate led him to the Tiffany Glass and Decorating Company, which after many years of experimenting was rapidly expanding. It was already making stained glass windows and mosaics (pictures in glass), and in the 1890s the company began to create the vases, bowls and above all those famous Tiffany lamps, for which it is known today.

The story goes that Joseph applied for a job several times without success, but then by chance met Louis Comfort Tiffany himself, who tested Joseph's drawing skills, liked what he saw and immediately offered him a job. Naturally he had to start at the bottom, as an errand boy and general handyman, but he also taught himself how to handle brittle pieces of glass and create simple mosaics. Tiffany was impressed, and decided that Joseph should be thoroughly trained in mosaic and stained glass fabrication. In due course he became head of the mosaic department as well as personal assistant to Tiffany himself. He was also a trustee of the Tiffany Foundation, set up to encourage young artists.

In March 1898 Joseph married Elizabeth Jenkins, a mixed-race woman from Virginia, who was descended from both slaves and Scottish nobility; and over the next 16 years they had six children, although sadly the first died in infancy. Just before Christmas 1900, Joseph brought his wife and two youngest children back to England for their one and only visit; and five years later on 23 May 1906 he became an American citizen.

Over the next few years Joseph masterminded the creation of some spectacular mosaics, including a massive all-glass safety curtain at the opera house in Mexico City and a 50ft mural called *The Dream Garden* in Philadelphia. He was also involved in work for St Louis Cathedral in Missouri, and his drawings for these mosaics can be seen in the Haworth Art Gallery's Tiffany exhibition. In addition, Joseph designed and made many other Tiffany pieces, from lamps and stained glass windows to clocks and humidors carved in wood.

In 1907 Joseph took his family to Wood-Ridge, a quiet township in New Jersey but only a few miles from Manhattan, and bought a house that is now a community centre. But he had greater ambitions and in 1912 he commissioned a substantial new house complete with six bedrooms, two bathrooms and extensive gardens. And he turned it into a shrine to Tiffany and art nouveau, with magnificent stained glass windows, intricately carved woodwork, tiled fireplaces – and of course Tiffany lamps, vases and other household items.

The Briggs were soon part of the local community, and in particular played a leading role in the creation of St. Paul's Episcopal Church, for which Joseph designed a fine stained glass window in memory of his first son.

When Tiffany retired in 1919 his company was split into two, with the glassworks as a separate company. Meanwhile, Joseph was in charge of Tiffany Studios, which continued to produce windows, mosaics and lamps. Sadly, the great days were over. Art nouveau was replaced by more modern forms, sales declined drastically, and in 1928 Tiffany withdrew his financial support for the glassworks and it closed.

By the 1930s Joseph was running an ailing company, and he filed for bankruptcy in 1932. When Tiffany died a year later he left \$10,000 to his friend Joseph Briggs, but this was small consolation – by now Joseph's main task was disposing of large stocks of unwanted Tiffany glass, and he was throwing much of it away. But it is perhaps no coincidence that around this time he also started to send some of his finest pieces back to Accrington – he was probably saving them from the rubbish dumps of New York.

Joseph Briggs died in New York on 28 March 1937, aged 64 – and by the terms of Tiffany's will, the company died with him. He was buried at East Ridgelawn Cemetery near his home in Wood-Ridge, where he had bought a family plot some 11 years earlier.

Meanwhile, back in Accrington, the Tiffany collection was displayed in the town's first museum in Oak Hill Park. By this time, however, it was distinctly unfashionable and when it was sent to the Haworth Art Gallery during the Second World War it was packed away in a cupboard - for the next 30 years! But finally, in January 1976 Joseph Briggs' gift of Tiffany glass went on show – and here it remains to this day, as the largest public collection of Tiffany glass in Europe and one of the finest in the world.

