

# Historic wallpaper

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## ABSTRACT

*Wallpapers can provide a wealth of information to help understanding the development and use of an historic building, but they are also valuable and often beautiful objects in their own right and as such need both appreciation and care.*

**Keywords:** *wallpaper, conservation, history, development, flocking, hand blocking*

## INTRODUCTION

Wallpaper may seem quirky, mildly interesting but essentially peripheral to the main business of conservation within the historic house, but nothing could be further from the truth. In common with research into architectural paint, it has been proven to be a powerful tool in understanding the development, archaeology and use of historic buildings. Research and identification of original wallpaper 'finds' has informed many conservation and refurbishment projects and exciting discoveries have even pro-

vided the inspiration for sustainable re-use.

As well as being used forensically to identify and date structural additions or alterations, surviving wallpaper can also reveal the social history of the house by highlighting the taste, status and aspirations of a succession of occupants. In a wider national context, it also provides evidence for the development of style and fashion, the availability of materials and the march of technology from the simple block printing and stencilling of the late 17th century to the digital revolution of the present day.<sup>1</sup>

With each new discovery we are learning more about this intriguing and multi-faceted material, expanding our knowledge and increasing our understanding of its development and use over four centuries.

## HISTORY AND CONSERVATION

Although wallpaper is often dismissed as being merely a cheap imitation of the finer stuffs of textile and tapestry, it does have significant advantages over both: it is relatively durable, easy to acquire, fast to apply and is instantly replaceable to accommodate changes in fashion or function.

The earliest English 'wallpapers' date from the 17th century and were simple, multipurpose designs that have also been found lining deed boxes, furniture, cupboards and case instruments. Usually imitating black Irish or Spanish embroideries, wallpaper sheets were small, the scale limited by the size of the single sheets of paper used as the substrate. Most

were printed in carbon black ink from a hand-carved wooden block. Any colour was usually applied by hand or through a leather stencil.

During the early 18th century wallpaper was perceived as a desirable modern alternative. Stylish flock wallpapers were considered clean, hygienic and brilliant alternatives to heavy textile hangings, particularly when used in dining rooms where smells could accumulate. Chinese (or 'India Papers')<sup>2</sup> provided a delightful alternative to dour Jacobean panelling, bringing lightness, femininity and exoticism to the decoration of many 18th century private apartments. The fashion-conscious aristocracy used large-scale, expensive papers extensively, while smaller, patterned flocks and distemper papers were popular among the growing middle classes — not just for reasons of cost, but also because they provided instant impact and could enliven and enrich even the most unpretentious of houses. Robert Dossie in 'The Handmaid to the Arts' (2nd edition, 1764) wrote:

The paper manufactured for hangings is of several kinds, some being made in representation of stucco work for the covering of ceilings or the sides of halls, staircases, passages etc and others in imitation of velvet, damask, brocades, chintz and other such stuffs as are employed for hanging rooms. The principal difference in the manufacture lies however in the grounds, some of which are laid in varnish and others in the common vehicles of watercolours and the raising of a sort of coloured embossement of chopped cloth. This embossed cloth is called flock paper, the art of making which is a very late invention and is a great improvement on the manufacture of paperhangings both with regard for its beauty and its durability.

## FLOCK WALLPAPERS

By the end of the 17th and early 18th century designs were becoming more ambitious.

Many shamelessly imitated textiles, such as large-scale silk damasks or cut velvets using block printing, sumptuously enhanced by sprinkled woollen flock and varnished to give the lustre of silk. As some of these grand designs are over a metre high, an innovative, but anonymous manufacturer joined several smaller paper sheets together before applying the ground colour and printing, thus inventing the 'roll' of wallpaper.

Large-scale flock papers were popular in the extravagant 'show rooms' of both town and country houses, such as in the Prince Regent's bedroom at Clandon Park, Surrey, and the Long Gallery at Temple Newsam House, Leeds. Few major houses can have been without at least one example and Clandon had at least six, all dating from *circa* 1730 when the house was built by Leoni.

Smaller-scale flock wallpapers have been discovered in the formal rooms of many middle-class homes and the townhouses of the burgeoning merchant classes, such as Gungreen House, Eyemouth or the Ancient High House, Stafford. These aspirational wallpapers reflect the fashion for flocks in the more aristocratic households, but are scaled down to suit interiors with more modest proportions. Crimson reds, rich greens and dramatic blue backgrounds with darker blue or black flock were the colours of choice.

The popularity of flock wallpapers proved enduring and they continued to be used throughout the 19th century and until the pared down modernism of the mid 20th century. Today, with the current trend towards ever more flamboyant interiors they are enjoying something of a revival. Unsurprisingly, given the quality of materials and printing, flock wallpapers survive almost intact in many rooms throughout the country, a testament to the work of both generations of anonymous block carvers and known designers such as Thomas Willament or A. W. N. Pugin who delighted in rich, embossed gold leaf grounds and multicoloured flock for buildings such as Oxburgh Hall, Norfolk, Charlchote



**Figure 1:** The Long Gallery at Temple Newsam House, Leeds

Park, Warwick, Taymouth Castle, Perth and Kinross, and the Palace of Westminster.

### **DISTEMPER PAPERS**

Throughout the 18th century, block-printed distemper papers were used extensively for less formal rooms, such as bedrooms and private apartments. These were printed using a water-based mixture of animal glue, whiting and/or pigments such as yellow, brown, red and green ochres, blue and green verditers, carbon blacks and chalk white. Organic pigments, such as indigo, crimson and madder had a high tinting strength, giving a showy and theatrical effect best enjoyed by candlelight. Unfortunately these colours had little resistance to light and most of the fragments discovered today give a poor impression of their original brilliance. For this reason, any attempt to recreate an original wallpaper should begin with a thorough analysis of the materials and techniques used to ensure a well-informed reconstruction.

Block printing was time consuming and, by the 19th century, relatively expensive. As

the country became more wealthy the market for wallpapers grew and technological developments in paper-making and machine printing *circa* 1830/40 enabled a mass production which embraced bright synthetic colours and large and small-scale floral designs on a staggering scale. A few iconic designers, such as William Morris, E. W. Godwin and Walter Crane, tried to stem the tide of vulgar mediocrity with exquisite art wallpapers and a revival of traditional craft-printing skills, but these were expensive and appealed mostly to a small audience of the artistic and educated middle and upper classes.

Today, there are very few skilled exponents of the block-printing tradition. These talented specialists recreate wallpapers mostly for historic conservation or reconstruction projects and the effect is strikingly different from modern screen-printed or machine-printed reproductions of the same designs. The pigment for both grounding and printing is bound in water-based animal glue rather than varnish or oil. It is thick, opaque and has a dense and chalky surface



**Figure 2:** Flocked and gold paper from the Palace of Westminster, designed by A. W. N. Pugin

and wonderful textural quality. The numerous imperfections inherent in the hand-printing process only add to its character.

### CHINESE WALLPAPER

As with flock wallpaper, a surprising number of rooms of original, hand-painted Chinese wallpaper have survived the vagaries of time, neglect or what is perhaps worse, over-enthusiastic attempts at restoration. These wallpapers, originally described as ‘India Papers’, are not part of any indigenous Chinese tradition but were made on commission and shipped as private trade by officers of the British East India Company.

During the rage for Chinoiserie during the 18th century there was hardly a house of any significance that did not have at least one room of ‘India Paper’, although it was more usual to have several of these hung *en suite* in private first-floor apartments, such as bedrooms and boudoirs. One can only imagine the delight of waking in a room filled with an oriental spring of gorgeous and fantastical birds, flowers and trees painted, jewel-like, in the finest and rarest of pigments, such as azurite blue, malachite green and carmine crimson. A delicious alternative to dour wainscot or dusty tapestries on a bleak November morning.

Designs fell into two main categories, birds and flowers, such as those at Fellbrigg, Norfolk, and Dalemmain, Cumbria, or scenes from life, showing detailed vignettes of Chinese life and leisure, including tea-growing and harvesting, porcelain and firework manufacture, gold-beating, fishing, theatre-going, celebrating and drinking, all delicately hand-painted on either paper or silk. Examples of this genre survive at Saltram, Devon, Harewood House, Yorkshire and in the boardroom at Coutts Bank in the Strand. The latter was brought back by the first British ambassador to China, Lord George Macartney (1737–1806). This magnificent set of hand-painted, non-repeating panels may perhaps have been either a gift or commissioned as a memento of what proved an unsuccessful mission to formalise trading links between Britain and China. On his return in 1894, Macartney gave the wallpaper to his friend, the banker Thomas Coutts, who hung it in his private rooms at 59 the Strand. The paper was taken down and installed at 440 the Strand in 1904, then moved again to the new Coutts boardroom in the 1970s. This last move, proved the most problematic, as the paper had become very fragile, probably due to the effects of London pollution as much as age, and was well attached to the wall. After such an unusually active life it has recently been carefully dismantled, conserved and success-





**Figure 3:** Hand-blocking

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**Figure 4:** Detail of a block-printed design

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**Figure 5:** Conserving the Chinese wallpaper from the Royal Pavilion, Brighton

fully reinstalled, thus ensuring that it survives as a significant reminder of our history as a trading nation.

Just as the fashion began to wane in the early 19th century, the Prince Regent's bizarre and eclectic interiors at the Royal Pavilion, Brighton, created a revival of interest. This interest was fuelled by the invention of an eclectic orientalism devised and created by his decorators, the skilled family firm of Crace who dominated interior design and decoration in the late 18th and 19th centuries. Frederick Crace (1779–1859) and his son John Gregory (1809–1889) were also responsible for the remarkable 'Chinese' interiors at Buckingham Palace, but the firm could equally turn its hand to French or Italian styles and played a significant role in realising Pugin's robust Gothic designs for the Houses of Parliament.

Hand-painted Chinese wallpaper provided an important backdrop to this



**Figure 6:** Detail from Chinese wallpaper

revival. Style and technique had changed to accommodate commercial demands and pander to western taste, but it remained remarkably beautiful. The owners of Chatsworth, Longleat and Belvoir Castle filled their rooms with fantastical flowering trees, peacocks, pheasants, birdcages and butterflies. Blue, yellow, green and even pink backgrounds became fashionable, often using synthesised European pigments such as chrome green and yellow. The Cowtan order books, now held at the Victoria and Albert Museum show the range and proliferation of these oriental papers, which seem to have remained popular until the late 19th century when Chinoiserie was superseded by a rage for all things Japanese.

## CONSERVATION OF CHINESE WALLPAPER

Chinese papers have always been perceived as both important and valuable and as such





**Figure 7:** The Chinese Room at temple Newsam House, Leeds

have frequently been subjected to misguided attempts at restoration, sometimes by local decorators or estate workers employed to carry out annual maintenance and to 'touch up' water damage and general wear and tear. Cleaning using bread or onions was a regular practice, as was over-painting staining and damage using commercial oil-based house paint.

Although remedial work, such as surface cleaning and emergency repairs can be carried out on site, most examples of Chinese wallpaper require comprehensive and professional conservation treatment. This would normally involve complete removal and treatment in a conservation studio to reduce acidity, remove harmful glues and linings and to repair and support using conservation-quality oriental materials in preparation for re-hanging onto a prepared wall surface. Sensitive retouching can be carried out using high quality, reversible water-

based conservation paints, pastels and pencils.

## PRINT ROOMS

Print rooms were to be found in many fashionable interiors following their introduction by Lord Cardigan in 1750 and they comprised a painted distemper paper, usually blue or green verditer, yellow ochre or pink, decorated with original engravings often collected while on a grand tour of Europe. These prints would be glued to the painted paper and embellished with borders, swags, masks and bows in imitation of a picture gallery. They are both attractive and effective and served to display the taste and connoisseurship of the owners. Surviving examples can be found at Uppark, West Sussex, Woodhall Park, Hertfordshire and Stratfield Saye, Hampshire; this last boasts at least eight, most of them featuring the Duke of Wellington. Contemporary



**Figure 8:** The Print Room at Uppark, West Sussex



**Figure 9:** Les Monuments de Paris (early 19th century)

sources suggest that this was a very popular treatment and while there have been re-installations at Calke Abbey, Derbyshire, Blickling Park, Norfolk, and the Vyne, Hampshire, there is both archeological and archive evidence for many more.

### **'PAYSAGE' FRENCH SCENIC WALLPAPERS**

Like flock and Chinese wallpapers, French Scenic papers were highly sought after and a significant financial investment. As such they have often survived and been preserved,



more as moveable heritage than fixed asset, in line with furniture and other possessions.

By the end of the 18th century and the early part of the 19th century, French wallpaper manufacturers, such as Reveillon, started to dominate the 'quality' wallpaper market. These exotic imports also included the stunning, epic 'panoramique' or 'paysage' papers made by firms such as Zuber, Deltil and Dufour Leroy. Non-repeating and printed from up to 4,000 sequential blocks all requiring individual registration, the subject matter was both educational and informative. Topics included Napoleon's campaign in Egypt, Captain Cook's voyages and the tale of 'Paul et Virginie'. These papers were particularly popular in America, but English examples include papers at Wrest Park, Bedfordshire, Compton Verney, Oxfordshire, and Watlington, Kent. They offered the scope and grandeur of a mural instantly, with neither the fuss nor the inconvenience. The quality is such that only close inspection shows them to be printed rather than hand-painted.

### **Conservation of 'Paysage' wallpapers**

The remarkable surface quality of these papers is achieved using thick layers of printed impasto distemper, to give the effect of a chalky wall painting or fresco. To achieve this, considerable amounts of binding material are required to hold the heavy layers of paint on the vertical wall face. This organic binder is susceptible to mould attack in damp conditions, which will also cause the binding mechanism to break down causing severe flaking of the pigment film. Changes in environmental conditions will exacerbate this, the most dramatic being the introduction of central heating. Like Chinese papers, misguided attempts at stabilisation and retouching will cause further deterioration. Few consolidants work effectively and those used in the late 19th and 20th centuries have been proven to cross-link, discolour and occasionally become impermeable to water, thus causing further distortion and losses.

### **19TH CENTURY ENGLISH PAPERS**

Burgeoning demand and advances in technology inevitably led to mechanisation of the manufacturing process and mass production. By the mid century multi-colour printing could be carried out using a series of rollers adapted from the textile industry and many new pigments and dyes were being synthesised. The development of the paper-making machine increased volume and reduced costs, but the raw materials of linen and cotton were soon running short as demand for paper outstripped supply. Hand-made linen papers were replaced by machine-made, continuous-roll papers with a high proportion of processed cotton fibres. By the mid century wood pulp fibres were introduced as a cheaper and more readily available alternative to rag, which was gradually superseded in all but the highest quality papers. Although an effective paper-making material, this has an inbuilt mechanism for deterioration, becoming highly acidic and discoloured in a very short time.

Generally, increasing demand led to a proliferation of designs and ever more sophisticated techniques of manufacture, such as double flocking, highlights of gold and silver dust and satin effect grounds. Despite the idealism of William Morris who supported the traditional craft techniques of hand-printing, it was this very mechanisation that made wallpapers widely accessible to a growing market. This culminated in the embossed and gilded 'Japanese leather paper', Lincrusta, Anaglypta and the multifarious Tynecastle 'tapestries' made from paper, canvas or indeed virtually any material that would give a good effect. Every middle-class home could become a Jacobean manor and every newly built Scottish castle a venerable baronial hall.

### **20TH CENTURY PAPER**

The fashion for embossed wallpapers continued well into the 20th century. These were



**Figure 10:** 19th century wallpapers

long-lasting and robust and still survive in many locations such as Kinlochmoidart House in Scotland, and the gilded art deco paper at Quadrant 3, Piccadilly, London. Indeed, there are stories of Lincrusta paper holding up walls after the bombing of the Blitz. Used mostly for ornate friezes or below dados, these were usually supplied in 'builders finish' and painted *in situ* to match the surrounding scheme.

Stencilled wallpapers remained popular, as did the designs of William Morris, although these tended to go in and out of fashion throughout the century. The Morris company eventually closed but the designs were taken over by Sandersons in the 1950s.

Generally, with the advent of cheap paper and the proliferation of mass production, wallpaper became ever more ephemeral, reflecting the transient nature of 20th century

style: comfortably traditional, particularly after the terror of the First and Second World Wars, starkly modernist during the 30s and with space age spikiness after the 1951 Festival of Britain. Comparatively little survives *in situ* and that which does is usually in poor condition due to neglect, poor decorating practice and the use of wood pulp paper.

Recent investigation of a factory workers' tenement at New Lanark, South Lanarkshire, has revealed fragments of hundreds of wallpapers dating from 1890 to the 1970s. These are the previously unconsidered papers of the working classes, but together they tell a fascinating story of almost a century of design, innovation and aspiration. This story will be told by recreating these interiors as a virtual tour, using the latest technology to inform and inspire a new generation.





**Figure 11:** Wallpapers at New Lanark 'Museum Stair'

## CONCLUSION

Viewed in isolation, wallpapers can be admired as works of art or at the very least, the product of great craftsmanship and worthy of preservation, but they are also valuable examples of contemporary design, style, and the availability and use of both materials and technology. Perhaps, most importantly in the context of an historic interior, they play a significant role in understanding the taste, aspirations and status of the owners and the development and use of the building. Whether it be an entire suite of Chinese rooms, or a tiny fragment discovered behind a skirting board, each has an important part to play in any successful historic building project.

## FURTHER READING

### Books

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## NOTES

- (1) Wallpaper collections can be found at the V & A Museum, London; Temple Newsam House, Leeds; The Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester; and the Public Record Office, Kew.
- (2) Chinese Export Papers were usually described as 'India Papers' because of their association with the East India Company.