

Blithe spirits

Robert S Silver visits Blithfield, where a pair of American designers are updating period textiles into practical, modern fabrics



In the three years since London fabric company Blithfield and Co Ltd arrived as the new kid on the block, it has developed a kind of niche activity that involves finding old fabrics and reworking them slightly – changing and tweaking in a process more akin to sub-editing text than to design. And the antique samples the company works from are treated with the kind of respect which historians give to source material.

Blithfield is made up of two Americans, Elizabeth Downing and Anne Dubbs, who have lived here for 15 and 10 years respectively. Their passion for their (mainly floral) source material is apparent from the minute you meet them. On my arrival they showed me a curtain. Downing explained that it was an original document found in a market. She then showed me one of their products. The wreaths of roses on the newer fabric were made up of smaller flowers and had not

been faded by time. That said, the diamonds of twisted ribbons corraling the flowers, which brought a soft geometry to the pattern, looked as if they could be superimposed on each other. The second fabric was very close to the first, more an updated mark two than an entirely new design.

The Blithfield attitude to its source material is revealed in the way Dubbs works from documents (Downing is mostly responsible for the business side of things), always trying to keep the first design as close as possible to the source. In subsequent reworkings she will change colourways but always there is the same respect for the original. 'We're not trying to take something and make it palatable,' she says. 'It isn't just the designs, it's what they're printed on, the configuration and the colour that are important.'

And are these variations on themes, these transfers from one kind of material to another,



Left, detail from Blithfield's Romsey curtain fabric. Above, Anne Dubbs (left) and Elizabeth Downing



Left and below, Caroline fabric in rose and green. Insets above, most of the company's fabrics feature floral patterns



motivated by a desire to produce top-selling fabrics? Dubbs says that is not what it's about: 'We are not trying to produce a hugely commercial product – it would be mad to think about competing with Colefax and Fowler – and we're not gearing it for Americans, either.' That said, she does admit that the company is, as she puts it, 'winging it'. It's doing well on both sides of the Atlantic, even though the two nations often exhibit slightly different tastes. (Americans, apparently, don't like birds printed on material...)

The fabrics – which are available only to the trade – have become popular with interior designers because comparatively few people have used them, and they also enjoy their rather grand look around which a whole scheme can be developed. And lots of people just like flowers – even if they don't want their home to be a clone of granny's. Which is where printing on different materials comes in.

Blithfield's book contains seven designs and 18 colourways and the portfolio is growing. It includes one design, from about 1860, that is not floral but has narrow stripes and columns of ovals. And in spite of already having a small archive of documents collected in those early days when she began buying old fabric samples for fun, Dubbs is always on the look-out for more source material.

Blithfield was born because of Dubbs' love of collecting antique textiles. She says she 'got hooked on the hunt' and then had the idea of producing her own fabrics. She found a printer in the UK, and soon afterwards met Elizabeth Downing, who became enthusiastic about the venture. They drew up business plans and applied for a loan from the Department of Trade and Industry.

Getting started sounds simple, but was, says Downing – now able to smile about it – 'nightmarish. We don't have MBAs.' Both did have



New talent



Left, Downing and Dubbs with some of their range. Below, Downing's west highland terrier, Gracie, with the pair's Romsey curtains and Dereham cushions

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some experience of the textile trade, however. Before they left the States, Dubbs worked for Cowtan and Tout and Downing had worked for Brunchwig and Fils and been a designer for Mark Hampton Inc.

Hearing the pair talk about their business, their excitement is palpable. And they are particularly enthusiastic about the two printing firms they work with here. 'If you have an idea, there are the craftsmen who are prepared to work with you on it. The printers are one of the things that are very special about England,' says Downing.

It was in 1997 that the pair took their first big plunge into the market. They printed 10 fabrics and decided to show their wares at the Daily Telegraph House and Garden Fair. It was a good move. The trade responded well and US distributor Travers & Company started placing what have become regular and

exclusive orders. Then in 1998 they exhibited at Decorex and after that they felt they were beginning to be accepted by the industry. And since then the Dutch and the Italians have got wind of Blithfield, so the range is now distributed in four countries.

As for the future, Dubbs and Downing are clearly happy with the way things are going. They have a product which is proving popular at least in part because of its element of exclusivity. And the Blithfield ranges are now being shown in the Borderline showroom at Chelsea Harbour Design Centre. 'We wanted to be in the centre to make it easier for the trade to view our products,' says Downing. Blithfield is now preparing to, as the pair say, to 'become big – in a small way'.

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