



## Historic carpets

The Worcestershire town of Kidderminster in England has long been associated with the industry of carpet weaving to such an extent that its name, until quite recently, was used generically to describe traditional woven carpet. Today, only one mill survives from the scores of factories which supported the town in the 19th and 20th centuries.

The firm of Woodward Grosvenor, established in 1790, is the oldest carpet weaver in the world and still occupies purpose-built premises alongside the River Stour. Constructed in 1850 to house their rapidly expanding facility to meet the demands of the burgeoning industrial revolution, the original hand-built looms of incredible complexity are still used today to produce their incomparable Axminster, Wilton and Brussels weaves as they have done for over 200 years.

With a unique archive of more than 20,000 hand-painted designs dating from the 18th century to present times, this collection is extremely valuable not only for restoration applications but also in terms of continuously recorded social history and the ever-changing taste of fashion.

All of these designs have now been transferred to a database enabling ready access to a vast unparalleled reference source for restoration purposes, covering every conceivable style in colour, scale and design since the very beginning of traditional carpet manufacture as we know it today. Many designs incorporate coordinated borders.

Every design has been photographed digitally and the images stored on CD-ROM. As a consequence, designs are instantly accessible, with the original artwork filed in a light-proof and fire-proof room. Designs are sourced by date, artist or style and the original papers retrieved from the archive. This archive library is a facility unique to Woodward Grosvenor.

The inherent skills and collective knowledge attaching to this mill bring to light weaving techniques and experience which have all but disappeared in the headlong rush to simplify manufacturing, now prevalent throughout the industry. It is, for example, still possible to weave integrated borders with purpose-designed corner elements to avoid awkward joins. In the case of rugs, these can be assembled by expert layers at the mill. Such a rug is known as a 'Chlidema' – a term harking back to the 19th century when such techniques were routinely adopted.

Needless to say, their range of commissions is wide and varied, including such prestigious installations as the King's Apartments at the Royal Pavilion, Brighton c. 1820 and Kelmescott Manor, Oxfordshire, home of William Morris, founder of the Arts and Crafts movement. The *Lilly and Poppy* pattern

reproduced for his wife Janey's bedroom was designed in 1875; Morris's original artwork was in their own archives since the time they had first woven the design for him.

Closer to home, they recently re-wove the carpet for the main staircase at 'Werribee Park' for the Victorian government, to an original 1880 design, as part of the ongoing restoration and conservation of this important historic mansion situated between Melbourne and Geelong.

Some designs within their archives feature Australian native flora particularly in the latter 19th century indicating their widespread activity in supplying all corners of the British Empire ■

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Pure wool early 19th century archival reweaving

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