

LIBERTY

The historic and much loved Liberty store first opened its doors on May 15th 1875. Acquired by Arthur Liberty, no 218A Regent Street was half a shop employing three people, a sixteen-year-old called Hannah Browning, a young Japanese boy called Hara Kitsue and William Judd who had earlier worked with Arthur at Farmer & Rogers' Oriental Warehouse across the road in Regent Street.

With a stock consisting solely of coloured silks from the East, Arthur had only intended employing the two youngsters (it being all the business could afford at the time), but William Judd declared that he had resolved to follow Arthur's fortunes "Yea or nay, pay or no pay". The silks attracted the attention of artists and designers such as William Morris, Alma Tadema, Burne-Jones and Rosetti and, within eighteen months Arthur Liberty was able to acquire the second half of the shop at 218 Regent Street.

This was an era when the decorative arts were flourishing. At first Liberty concentrated on importing plain woven piece goods undyed: soft wools from Kashmir, filmy gauzes and fine light cottons from India together with plain woven and damask silks from China and Japan. As trade developed, Arthur, with great flair and exquisite taste, persuaded English textile manufacturers to weave fabrics similar to those that could be acquired from the East. His mission was to offer people the opportunity to buy beautiful things at an affordable price. Unlike William Morris, Arthur Liberty believed that the use of machines in textile production was essential since handmade items would always be too expensive for any but the very well off.

In those early days, a great triumph for Liberty came from the co-operation with Thomas Wardle a dying and printing firm based in Leek in Staffordshire. Together Liberty and Wardle worked on producing colourfast dyes in the tones of the Oriental textiles Liberty had sold so successfully. These were in the huge range of shades, which they called 'Art Colours', but which grew to be known as 'Liberty Colours'. The shop window, full of draped silks in gradating tints became one of the sights of Regent Street.

In 1894 Arthur Liberty made Liberty a public company with a capital of £200,000. After 1905 Arthur Liberty semi-retired and devoted more time and attention to his hometown of Chesham in Buckinghamshire. He became a Justice of the Peace, a County Councillor and finally the High Sheriff of Buckinghamshire. He received the honour of a knighthood and retired completely in 1914. He died three years later.

Harold Blackmore, a nephew of the Founder, became a Director in 1900 and was Chairman from 1936 to 1950. He built up the company financially whilst his Co-Directors, John Llewellyn (Director between 1898-1935) and William Haynes Dorell (appointed Director in 1935) devoted themselves to fabric production and established the character and tradition of Liberty fabrics. Ivor Stewart-Liberty, another nephew of the founder (Director in 1916 and Chairman between 1950-1952) worked out the main lines of further advance, little realising that it would be his son, Arthur, who would execute his plans. Arthur and Hilary's son were put at the helm on Ivor's death in 1952.

It was fifty years after the opening of the store that the Tudor building came into being. Having acquired freehold properties bounded by Argyll Place, Foubert Place, Little Marlborough Street and Kingly Street, Liberty was now able to create a store that would 'provide for posterity', a building that linked twentieth century London with the street architecture of Tudor London.

The store was designed by the architects Edwin T and E Stanley Hall, father and son. Their design was aimed at giving the appearance of a series of shops rather than a single store. The wooden construction was built from oak and teak salvaged from two old two-decker men-of-war: HMS Impregnable and HMS Hindustan. A portrait of the two original ships hangs in the store. The exterior carving was carried out on site. The stonework is from Portland (London's traditional quarry), chisel-worked from the quarry face to give the rough texture that is impossible to achieve with sawn stone. All the roofing tiles were hand-made and the original leaded windows each had a small painted picture on one pane. Above the main entrance is faithful models of the Mayflower made from gilded copper and at the doorway are the arms of Henry VIII six wives, grouped together as they never were in life. The arms of Queen Elizabeth I are on the gable facing Regent Street.

LIBERTY FABRICS

Arthur Liberty's wish was to influence the public's taste by giving them the opportunity to buy beautiful and affordable things. He became closely involved with the two key arts movements of the late nineteenth century, the Aesthetic Movement and the Art Nouveau Movement. As well as textiles, furniture, clothing, jewellery, metal ware and ceramics were produced for and by Liberty's, all of which contributed to the Liberty Style.

After the First World War, Liberty's fabric buyer, William Haynes Dorell, introduced a lightweight cotton fabric, calling it Tana lawn after Lake Tana in Sudan where the cotton grew. Printed with predominantly floral designs, it became Liberty's best selling fabric.

Production of Liberty fabrics starts in the Design Studio. Here the spring and autumn dress fabrics and scarves are designed and coloured using designs adapted from the extensive Liberty archives, new designs from the studio and some commissioned free-lance designers. The ranges include a balanced mix of traditional and fashion prints, including paisleys, art nouveau style and floral patterns that Liberty is renowned for. Each design will be printed in several different colour ways.

Liberty fabrics are no longer hand block printed; this would be commercially unviable. Instead, its fabrics are printed by the screen or rotation methods, using up-to-date printing technology. A large proportion of Liberty fabrics are printed in the UK by several textile companies.

A SHORT HISTORY OF LIBERTY PRINT

Very soon after the Liberty shop opened in Regent Street in 1875, Arthur Liberty had printed the first of the soon to be famous Liberty silks. This was a hand-woven Mysore silk imported from India, which was dyed in England and then hand-printed with wood blocks. Most of the prints were reproductions of old Indian prints. The small floral designs were devised in

consultation with authorities at the newly established Indian Museum and they were given exotic names Indian names such as Tajore Lotus and Rangoon Poppy. Arthur Wardle showed a collection of these Liberty silks at the Paris Exhibition in 1878.

In 1904 Liberty's bought Littler's, a small print works at Merton which had been hand-printing Liberty fabrics since the late 1870s. The works were on the site of a pre-Reformation priory on the river Wandle in Surrey. William Morris had established a print works in 1881 downstream on the opposite bank to the workshops Liberty was rapidly taking over. So it was that the district surrounding Merton Abbey continued as a community associated with textiles that had begun when a group of Huguenots established a silk-weaving factory on the site in the early eighteenth century.

No-one could ever dispute neither the quality of Liberty fabrics nor the exceptional beauty of the designs and colours, indeed the waters of the river Wandle were of the special quality required for the rich, subtle hues of madder dyeing. Liberty commissioned many distinguished artists and designers to design prints for their textiles and the range of fabrics was extended to include furnishing fabrics.

Liberty fabrics were hand-printed using wooden blocks. The hand-block printing, carried out by skilled craftsmen, made it possible to print the fine paisley designs, which have had a continuous vogue since Liberty first, presented them towards the end of the nineteenth century. At one time there were 52 hand-block printers employed at Merton. A fine paisley shawl would take many hours to complete, with each design requiring up to 27 different blocks. Each block took two weeks to make. Because of this intensity of manual labour the process was becoming too expensive and during the 1950s screens were made from the most popular block designs. Hand screen-printing had been done at Merton since the 1930s.

Later, the machine-printing process would make it possible to market Liberty prints all over the world at economic prices. Liberty sold the print works in the early 1970s and now Liberty fabrics are printed by other British companies and in the Far East.

All the block and screen designs dating back to the beginning of Liberty Prints were recorded on paper to file in the archives together with some of the fabric samples and artwork. This archive has always been used as a design source. For example, in the 1960s following the Art Nouveau Exhibition held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Liberty Art Nouveau designs were re-drawn and coloured to form the acclaimed Lotus Collection which was used by the couturiers in London, Paris and Rome.

Even today designers for Liberty come and visit the archive for inspiration. New designs are either designed by the in-house Studio or are commissioned from free-lance designers. New designs are introduced in the spring and autumn of each year to complement the range of classic designs that are not so bound to the seasons. Some of these latter designs, such as Peacock Feather, date back to the 1880s.

The fabrics are now all machine printed using either the flat bed or rotation methods. The fabrics are sold worldwide to manufacturers and retailers. Liberty fabrics currently available include: tana lawn, kingly cord, jersey, varuna wool and crepe de chine.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF LIBERTY

- 1843 Arthur Lasenby Liberty was born in Chesham in Buckinghamshire.
- 1862 Liberty is employed at Messrs Farmer & Rogers in Regent Street; it is the same year as the International Exhibition at Kensington in London. In the Exhibition is a section devoted to Japanese art, the first major presentation of its kind in Europe.
When the Exhibition closes, Farmer & Rogers purchased some of the Japanese exhibits to form the basis for an Oriental Warehouse, which they opened next door to the main shop. Liberty was chosen to work at the Warehouse and two years later was appointed its manager.
- 1875 The history of 'Liberty' commenced when Arthur Lasenby Liberty opened a small shop at 218 Regent Street selling Oriental goods and fabrics. As the business grew, neighbouring buildings were bought and added on to incorporate fabric, oriental carpets, curio and china. Silks in 'Liberty Art Colours' were an influential element in the Aesthetic Movement.
Liberty became the most fashionable place to shop and the clientele it attracted was exotic, including famous members of the Pre-Raphaelite Movement – Rossetti, Leighton and Burne-Jones and designers such as William Morris.
The demand Liberty created soon began to outstrip supply and Arthur Lasenby Liberty decided to import ready woven fabrics to be dyed or printed in the UK. He achieved this by using the expertise of various printing companies including Thomas Wardle of Leek in Staffordshire and Edmund Littler of Merton Abbey in Surrey, whose print works Liberty purchased in 1904.
Liberty starts selling ladies fashion. The Costume Department had its own studio and workrooms, which were directed in its first year by the architect/designer EW Godwin.
- 1894 Arthur Lasenby Liberty turns the business into a public company with a capital of £200,000.
- 1898 John Llewellyn becomes a member of the Liberty board. It was under his inspired direction that designs for furnishing fabrics and later silver- and pewter-ware were commissioned from many designers.
- 1900 Harold Blackmore, Arthur Lasenby Liberty's nephew, became a member of the board and later Chairman from 1936 to 1950. It was he who built up the company financially.
- 1924 Because of compulsory renovation in Regent Street, where the land was Crown property, the company had to compromise by rebuilding in the mixture of styles required by the authorities. On the land in Great Marlborough Street owned by Liberty & Co, the world famous Tudor building was built.

It was designed to give an atmosphere of the Elizabethan merchants. Arthur Lasenby Liberty contributed much to its layout, but unfortunately he died before the building was completed. The timbers of two great warships of the Royal Navy, HMS Hindustan and HMS Impregnable, which were broken up in 1921, were used to build and furnish the building in solid oak and teak using authentic and original Tudor techniques.

- 1939 Liberty of London Prints, the wholesale company, is formed to take advantage of the growing demands for Liberty designs and fabrics.
- 1950 Arthur Stewart Liberty and Hilary Blackmore make their presence felt. Arthur Stewart Liberty, son of the founder's nephew Ivor Stewart Liberty, guides the company through the modern era.
- 1982 Liberty is re-registered as a public limited company.
- 2000 Retail Stores plc controlled by Marylebone Warwick Balfour Group plc purchases Liberty plc.

Bibliography

Two major sources of information about the Liberty shops and design studios are: the Liberty archive held by Westminster Archive Centre at 10, St Ann's Street, London SW1 2XR and the collection of Liberty catalogues held in the National Art Library at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, which runs from 1881 to 1949.

The following books are useful to read:

Liberty's 1875-1975 (London, 1975 – the catalogue of the exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum)

Liberty's, a Biography of a Shop by Alison Adburgham (London, 1975)

The Designs of Archibald Knox for Liberty & Co edited by AJ Tilbrook & Gordon House (London, 1976)

Liberty Style by Victor Arwas (Tokyo, 1983)

Liberty Style, the Classic Years, 1898-1910 by Mervyn Levy (London, 1986)

Decorating with Fabric Liberty Style by Charmian Watkins (London, 1987)

Liberty Design 1874-1914 by Barbara Morris (London, 1989)

The House of Liberty edited by Stephen Calloway (London, 1992)

The Enchanted World of Jessie M King by Colin White (1989)

Archibald Knox by Stephen A Martin (London 2001)

E.W. Godwin Aesthetic Movement architect and designer edited by Susan Weber Soros (New York 1999)

Liberty plc also has a website: www.liberty.co.uk