


Cover up

AMELIA THORPE DISCOVERS THE FUTURE LOOKS WARM FOR BLANKETS



Blankets, so the story goes, date back to the fourteenth century when a Flemish weaver, Thomas Blanquette, slept under undyed woven wool to keep warm. Clive Edwards, in his *Encyclopedia of Furnishing Textiles, Floor Coverings and Home Furnishing Practices* notes that thicker merino wool 'Spanish blankets' and silk variations were used in Tudor times, while, in 1653, Cardinal Mazarin listed 'fine woollen coverlets [or blankets] from England with four blue crowns in the four corners' in the inventory of his home. Traditionally used in pairs, woven, knitted and needlefelt blankets were widely available by the mid 19th century. But although blankets have been around for centuries, the arrival of the duvet was not good news. 'The duvet has decimated the blanket industry over the last 40 years, says Julie O'Brien, Sales Manager of John Atkinson, a Yorkshire company that has been weaving blankets since before the reign of Queen Victoria.

The tradition of blanket making spreads across the world's colder climates, but some producers have fared better than others. Swedish company Klippan, which stopped making woven, felted and rugged blankets 50 years ago, has recently re-introduced them. 'We produce them in a traditional way, but apply modern designs,' explains Pernilla Roos for the company.

John Atkinson's story of survival is different. The company produces traditional, plain, satin bound,

woollen blankets at the family-owned Hainsworth mill and O'Brien believes its success is linked to the ability to produce extra-wide blankets. 'Many foreign imports are woven on narrower looms, so they don't cover a super king-size bed,' she says.

O'Brien admits the market for blankets is getting older. So how can they attract a younger audience who have grown up with duvets? O'Brien is quick to promote the benefits of sleeping under wool. 'It's a natural fibre which wicks away moisture and regulates body temperature,' she enthuses.

But it is Atkinson's orders for throws that are booming, something that Jo Riley, owner of Atlantic Blankets, is also experiencing. 'Lots of people use throws as decorative finishing touches, then find that they don't just hang them on the back of the sofa but really use them,' she says. The Atlantic Blanket Company only began in October last year and focuses on products made around the Atlantic seaboard. Riley works with family firms in traditional mills but instils a contemporary edge. Her favourites include rare breed wool throws and baby blankets made from small flocks of sheep and goats in West Cornwall.

John Atkinson's fortunes remain afloat for another reason, too: it produces traditional 'point' blankets for the Hudson's Bay Company in Canada. The term 'point' derives from the French *empointer*, meaning 'to

make threaded stitches on cloth'. When first introduced to the fur trade in Canada in about 1780, each blanket was graded according to its weight and size using a point system, then identified by the number of fine indigo lines woven into its side. Blankets vary but a classic design is white with four stripes (indigo, yellow, red and green) at each end.

Traditional products are important to another English blanket manufacturer, Early's of Witney, founded by Thomas Early in 1669. Although blanket weaving ceased in the Oxfordshire town in 2002, Early's continues to operate and retains its Royal Warrant. 'We took our weaving machinery abroad to Portugal and Lithuania,' explains Martyn Prior, director and third generation of his family to work for Early's, but the cloth is made up in Derbyshire. Early's buys its wool mainly from New Zealand, before it is blended, spun, woven, scoured and milled. The Early range includes its famous horse blankets: a true creature comfort they are designed to keep a horse warm, particularly after a race, and are made of heavyweight wool. 'They are usually striped at each end with a solid colour in between, often red and navy stripes with a gold body' says Prior.

When it comes to patterned blankets, it is Welsh doublecloth with its distinctive bold and geometric design that springs to mind. Melin Tregwynt weave

blankets and throws in this traditional way (two fabrics, each with its own warp and weft, crossed over to create a pattern), using contemporary designs and colours to appeal to a market that Amanda Griffiths, director of the company, describes as 'constantly changing'. Griffiths feels strongly about the need to preserve the skills required to produce doublecloth designs. 'They are the antithesis of surface design and digital printing. Anybody can print digitally, as all you need is suitable software, printers and no technical expertise at all,' she says. 'In contrast, to design and work in doublecloth, you need real knowledge of textile design and special equipment.' Melin Tregwynt has entered into partnerships with colleges to ensure students get some experience of this type of design and of production at the company's mill in Wales. 'Once lost, these skills cannot be regained,' she warns.

Designer Eleanor Pritchard also uses the double-cloth technique. What is it that appeals about blankets? 'It is partly that I love their generosity of scale,' she says, 'and I like the fact that they are functional.' She finishes her designs with simple blanket stitching, preferring its 'straightforward' finish to tassels and fringes. 'And I'm fussy about words too,' she admits. 'I prefer "blanket" to "throw". "Blanket" has boarding school connotations. A throw is decorative, but a blanket is made to keep you warm.' ▶



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