



will have to be rebuilt after being dismantled for their transatlantic

fibres, putting it on top makes this fabric enormously hard-wearing. Also offered

The Victorian vogue for horsehair returns with designers using it in interesting new

HORSEHAIR was never a luxury cloth, though its simple elegance is undeniable. So far as can be judged from inventories, it was towards the end of the 18th century that its virtues were being recommended by upholsterers. In the 1760s, Thomas Chippendale's bills reveal that he covered library, parlour and dining chairs in haircloth, and George Hepplewhite, in his 1789 *Guide*, suggested horsehair as the most suitable covering for the seats of mahogany chairs, in plain weaves, stripes or chequers.

Until the end of the First World War, horsehair was woven in small factories all over the country. It commended itself to the expanding Victorian middle classes because it was moderately priced, exceptionally hard-wearing and, in the increasingly hygienic mood of the latter part of the century, unusually easy to keep clean. The horsehair weavers also prospered from colonial expansion, for this is a fabric unaffected by heat and humidity, impervious to attacks by termites and their insect brethren and resistant to the rotting, fading effects of strong sunlight. Horsehair fabric for blinds was exported across the world, screening passengers from the sun on railway networks as far afield as South Africa and Australia.

Horsehair interlining, which is still made, has stiffened the lapels of generations of gentlemen's suits and the brims of countless military caps. But it is no longer used to make sieves and cider cloths or to stiffen the fashionable bustle.

Horsehair weaving is governed by the length of horses' tails. The width of the cloth will always be narrow, usually no more than 27in. The hair can be used, one strand at a time, only as the weft of the cloth. A cotton warp is usually combined with it, though experiments for warps of silk and wool are being undertaken.

Sought-after Sheen

In the 19th century, locally gathered horsehair met a good proportion of the weavers' needs. Dealers worked their rounds, visiting grooms and carters and practitioners of tail-docking, who saved every strand of hair and were paid by the weight.

Hair shed from healthy horses has a fine sheen, and that is what the weavers sought. However, hair was also bought from tanneries and knackers' yards, where tails from dead horses were put by for the dealer's visit.

The purchased hair was washed by hand, most informally we would now consider, in open streams and brooks. The shortfall in the supply of British hair was met by imports from Russia, obtained each year from two great fairs, in February and August.

The abrupt decline in the manufacture of haircloth after the end of the First World War was caused in part by the Russian Revolution of 1917. This coincided with the advent of motor transport and the consequent reduction in the horse population. The appearance

of the cloth was also beginning to be thought old-fashioned, except in the homes of the artisans and labourers who were now less able to pay the new higher price for it.

Today horsehair is mostly imported from China. It is already cleaned and disinfected and neatly bundled according to length and colour. The three basic colour groups are black, mixed grey, which includes brown, and white. White hair is scarce and highly expensive in the longer lengths because there is a demand for it from manufacturers of bows for musical instruments.

Except where natural colours are required, the hair is subjected to hot-water dyeing, after which the colour will remain fast even in conditions of strong sunlight. Even the black hair is dyed to give a consistent black, but the mixed greys are used, as they are, as weft for some of the natural-coloured cloths. Natural white hair can be dyed certain pastel colours and retain its slight colour inconsistency, but it is generally bleached and redyed to a perfect pastel.

At John Boyd Textiles, of Castle Cary, Somerset, this year celebrating 150 years of horsehair weaving, hair is bought in a variety of lengths, according to purpose. The longer the hair, the more it costs. For interlining, where the narrowness of the cloth is acceptable, a weft is constructed from 20-22in lengths of horsehair, giving a finished width of 18in. For the upholstery cloth with a weft of white or pastel hair, the maximum length of hair that can be considered economically is 26in, giving a finished width of 22in. Dark and neutral cloths using less expensive hair can go up to a 34in weft and cloth 30in wide.

One Hair at a Time

Haircloth was traditionally woven by hand. Each weaver was assisted by a child who sat beside the loom serving one hair at a time, which the weaver carried through the warp on a thin-pointed rapier. No doubt this system would have continued well beyond 1870 had not the Education Act of that year put children out of the factories and compulsorily to school. It was the spur both to mechanisation in general and, among horsehair weavers, to the invention of a device that would select and present that single hair mechanically. John Boyd's picker, dropped down from above, raised a hair from the bunch and held it ready for the shuttle to catch. Patented in 1872, this system is still used today.

The variable thickness of each horsehair is an inconsistency that has to be taken into account. The hair is thicker near the base of the tail, and tapers towards its end. To produce an even weft, a thick hair and then a thin one must be used alternately. This is achieved by clamping two bundles of hair to the side of the loom, one bundle with thick ends uppermost and one with thin ends uppermost. A picker is attached to a pivot that swings the twin bundles backward and forward so that a hair is selected from each in turn.

At John Boyd, the shortage of old looms with the essential hair-selecting capacity limits the amount of cloth that can currently be woven. The design feature that distinguishes old looms from those that weave standard cloth is the lack of a continuous weft yarn. Each loom has the bundles of hair clamped to the side and trailing in a narrow trough of water. This lubricates the hair so that it slides more easily. The residue from the bunches is recombbed periodically and rebundled. The pace of production is slow, with each loom weaving only 55yd of cloth each month.

Most of the damask patterns now woven at John Boyd have been manufactured for at least 100 years. They are recorded on slats of wood in which pegs are inserted to determine the sequence of the design. The slats, held in the right order on chains, serve a similar purpose to punched jacquard cards. The character of these damask designs, which include vertical warp stripes, horizontal weft stripes, trellises, diapers, octagons and diamonds, represents an unbroken tradition of weaving in simple, classic patterns that have survived unchanged from the 18th century.

Generally on a black-hair weft with a deep-coloured cotton warp, they have a sombre richness, though the all-black damask gives special emphasis to the sheen of the hair.

One of Two in the World

John Boyd Textiles are now the only remaining horsehair weavers in Britain and, with a French company, one of only two in the world to weave this traditional cloth. The decline of haircloth, so widely used in the 19th century, was quite sudden and well charted, making the survival of this single company, with its looms and patterns intact, a remarkable piece of good fortune now that the qualities of the cloth are being recognised once more.

Designers are finding more purposes for John Boyd's haircloth than upholstery alone. It is frequently now specified as a wallcovering, and the Essen opera house near Dusseldorf is proposing to use it to cover doors. It has been chosen for upholstery in parliament buildings and palaces in several European capitals, and been used decoratively in place of leather by a German handbag manufacturer. Nearer home, the new prestige of horsehair cloth has been acknowledged in the choice of a maroon figured damask for chairs and black sateen for benches in the Pump Room at Bath: quite possibly not the first appearance of the cloth in this historic location.

Some of the Boyd machines are more than 100 years old and none is less than 50. Current production is based on the capacity of 74 looms, with an additional 10 being rebuilt. In the past three years another 10 old looms have been acquired from Italy, as well as two rare mechanised horsehair jacquard looms, which will be in production later this year. Twenty looms made redundant in the USA have also been purchased, and