

THE HISTORY HENRY WIDNELL & STEWART (Carpet Manufacturers in Bonnyrigg, Eskbank and Roslin)

Carpet making in Midlothian started when Richard Whytock and Co, who were located at Queensberry House in the Canongate, Edinburgh, moved to St Ann's, Lasswade and established a carpet mill between 1833 and 1834.

Richard Whytock evolved the idea of using a large drum onto which worsted yarn could be wound so that colour could be applied across the width with a stick having a felt end. Large drums loaded with yarn were then used to produce the same coloured thread for several hundred carpets so involving bulk production of each design. These drums could be anything up to 72 feet in circumference. Almost unlimited colours could be used which was an advantage at the time since only Wilton and Brussels carpet types were known and the colour choice was very limited. The process invented by Mr Whytock was very labour intensive but continued largely unchanged until its demise in 1957.

In the printing process, after the warp threads were coloured, then steamed to fix these colours, they were then washed and wound onto bobbins. These were then numbered and set upon a frame, in sequence and beamed for weaving; at that stage an elongated version of the design could be seen as a warp and after weaving the correct design appeared. Beams of jute and cotton warp threads provided bulk and weight to the carpet and large shuttles carried the weft of jute and cotton in the looms.

In 1840, Mr Whytock took into partnership Mr Henry Henderson of Dunfermline and they continued manufacturing but under the name of Whytock and Henderson.

Gradually carpets became popular during the Victorian era and were introduced into drawing rooms, sitting rooms and parlours and later bedrooms and other parts of the home. It could be said that it was Richard Whytock who made it possible for millions of homes to have carpets that people could afford for the first time in this country and in many parts of the world. This was to continue into more modern times.

Whytock was closely followed by Mr James Templeton of Glasgow, who invented the "Chenille" process around 1840. This was a development from Chenille curtains and like Whytock's Tapestry process enabled limitless numbers of colours to be used.

On the death of Mr Whytock, a Mr Henry Widnell of Kidderminster joined the firm as a partner whereupon it became Henderson and Widnell.

In 1858 Mr Henry Henderson was forced to retire from the business due to near bankruptcy. The firm then became Henry Widnell & Co.

On 16th June 1859, Henry Widnell drew up a contract of Co-partnership with his son Henry Widnell Junior to operate the business in Lasswade. The firm then became Henry Widnell & Son.

It was also about this time that a group of workers headed by an overseer named Henry McGowan, journeyed to Aubusson near Limoges in France, to teach the printing process to workers of the firm of Tallandrousse de Lamornais

Some of you may have heard about Pierre Langlade, the famous carpet designer and artist who came from Aubusson and it was about this time that he returned from Paris to work again for this firm. He soon established a strong working relationship with the group of workers from Lasswade.

Langlade subsequently accepted an offer from Henry Widnell & Co to come to Lasswade in 1864 and of course later in Bonnyrigg, where he was to work for the firm as a carpet designer for more than thirty years.

Henry Widnell Junior died in September 1869 aged 40 years.

In 1871, Mr George Stewart a carpet buyer with the then well known Glasgow warehouse Campbell Stewart and MacDonald joined the firm, as a partner.

Henry Widnell Senior died on 8th December 1873 aged 72 years.

It is also recorded that on the 7th February 1879, Mr Henry Harvey Widnell, son of Henry Widnell Junior and the grandson of Henry Widnell Senior, became a partner in the business with the previously mentioned Mr George Stewart. However, this partnership was to last a mere 6 months, as Henry Harvey Widnell died on 18th August 1879, aged 22 years.

In his book "Bright and Early" J.B. Cairns tells us that there had been a most severe blow dealt to Lasswade village in 1868, when the thriving carpet factory was dismantled and removed, most of the machinery going to Roslin and the remainder moving to Bonnyrigg, [where land had already been acquired in the 1850's] and another factory was set up. The old bleach works in Roslin had been acquired to extend the carpet making production. The weavers and workers naturally moved from the village to these new factories.

Lord Melville who leased the site in Lasswade to the carpet factory was inadvertently responsible for it leaving the village because he had promised his neighbour the Duke of Buccleuch that he would not renew the lease when it expired because the Duke had complained to him about the pollution of the River Esk which flows through his grounds at Dalkeith House. The pollution, however, continued after the factory had been removed to Roslin, which was two miles further up the river. This unexpected retribution brought no compensation to Lasswade and its skilled weavers and workers.

Around 1877 also saw the beginnings of Stewart Brothers of Eskbank, this being a partnership between W L Stewart and James Stewart.

W L Stewart left the business in 1890 and James Stewart ceased to be a partner in 1891.

Although the incorporation of Henry Widnell & Stewart Ltd took place in 1895, Stewart Brothers continued to trade as a separate business. However, the partners of both companies were George Stewart and his son John George Stewart.

The production of tapestry carpets continued from 1895 until 1939. There had been many developments in the industry over the 100-year period up to 1939 in the USA a Mr Erasmus B Bigelow of Massachusetts produced a power loom in 1848 capable of weaving Brussels and Wilton type carpets and in England the famous Crossley's of Halifax purchased the patents in 1851 and subsequently the use of power spread to Kidderminster. In 1878 Tomkinson and Adam purchased from Halcyon Skinner of Yonkers, New York USA, the patent rights for working a loom invented by him for making machine tufted carpets known as Royal Axminster and this was surely a tribute to a Mr Whitty who had started producing tufted carpets in Axminster, Devon in 1755, without power.

In 1895 Henry Widnell & Stewart Ltd were only making tapestry carpets but the axminster loom and the process for making this type of carpet was firmly established and the machinery was being rapidly improved. The term "Imperial Axminster" was used during and after World War II and specific qualities were known to the trade as A0, A1, A2 etc but the Restrictive Practices Court in its wisdom saw fit to decree the qualities and prices were illegal.

Development of Axminster carpet continued well into the 20th century and Spool Axminster offered virtually no limitation of colours but involved bulk production runs whilst Gripper Axminster offered limited colours and short runs per design.

By 1924 tapestry sales were still double those of Brussels and Wilton together and were still not far short of the total Axminster production being sold.

Until about this time the printed carpet was produced only as a tapestry i.e. with an uncut pile but then cut pile carpets were introduced and marketed in considerable quantities. This velvet pile type was made from wool whereas the traditional tapestry carpet was made from long fibre worsted yarns and normally using only five or six ounces of expensive worsted yarn per square yard. The carpet produced was cheap but this worsted yarn made a serviceable and reasonably hardwearing product. The woollen cut pile required more surface material. These woollen and worsted carpets were hardwearing because the yarns were not vat dyed but superficially printed and no boiling being involved.

It is interesting to reflect that carpet weaving was probably first practised in Spain long before being established in the towns of Wilton and Axminster. The weavers of these times received a Charter in 1701 giving them exclusive rights of manufacture. However, by 1860 Crossley's dominated the industry and had about 4,000 employees in Halifax.

Today Axminster and Wilton carpets come in a whole range of qualities and pile mixtures. Many modern carpet types are produced on a tufted and knitted process and others on bonded processes. The best carpets are surely those Wiltons where the wool threads remain continuously in the product being implanted into the backing when not required on the surface.

To return to Widnell's and to their production, the Company was often busy in the years between the wars and as well as printed carpets, they were weaving plain Wilton carpets on the tapestry looms. Occasionally, there was short time working but little changed and in 1939 only one other manufacturer of printed carpets remained, in Kidderminster. Production ceased for the duration of the war and the Eskbank factory became a production unit for the Ever Ready Battery Company, whilst Bonnyrigg & Roslin were storage units for various Ministries.

One important diversion of the business from the beginning of the 20th century was the production of velvet pile table covers. About 1900 several German and British looms were purchased for the manufacture of these and more were bought later. These looms were fed with printed warps of the process, very bright colours and designs featuring lions, tigers, peacocks, flowers, were produced using very fine, closely woven, pile worsted yarns and cotton backings. The looms produced two cloths simultaneously, knives cutting the pile between the all-cotton backings which were above and below the worsted.

These very attractive covers were sold for parlour tables in this country, but nothing like the extent to which they were exported to India, Nepal, Burma, Thailand and China, where the main use was as wall-coverings. These were exported in large quantities and must still adorn many homes and temples in the Far East.

Another product made in the years between the wars was the prayer mat and whilst not made on the scale of the covers, many thousands were sold in the Middle East. Most of the manufacture of covers and mats was carried on at Roslin.

After the end of World War 2, the tufted carpet industry producing at a much faster rate than woven manufacturers, had gradually made inroads into the market, but tufted factories also tumbled in the reduction of the industry. The boom of the 1960s was followed by years in which there was simply too much production and this was not helped by imports, especially from the USA where carpets made from materials based on oil by-products could be made cheaply in an economy based on lightly taxed oil, which was not so in the UK despite our considerable output of oil.

From 1946 Widnells soon became the last tapestry carpet manufacturer in the Britain and probably in the world having been the first. It was decided that the vacated Ever Ready factory at Eskbank should be largely rebuilt and become a Spool Axminster works. This was an expensive and ambitious project and building licences and well as new plant and machinery were difficult and slow to obtain. Gradually progress was made and eventually 12 ft wide looms were imported from the USA to augment the plant. The company continued to operate satisfactorily and survived a phenomenal spiral of wool prices in 1951 and a severe economic recession of the carpet trade in 1952.

It had been easy after war to sell the output in markets starved of carpets and Widnells and since Widnells had their new Spool Axminster plant they were in a better position to develop this side of the business.

In 1956 another recession suddenly brought the carpet trade almost to a standstill. Considerable contraction in production became necessary bringing in its wake a wide spread reduction in labour requirements.

In 1957 trade improved but the company then suffered two further serious unrelated setbacks.

Export sales of Tapestry carpets, which had been contracting gradually, came to an abrupt end and this included the Australian business which had been very substantial indeed. Worst of all however a flood of Belgian cotton carpets at prices below the cost of the raw materials in this country finally killed large scale demand for tapestry carpet.

The suddenness of this had not been anticipated and unfortunately matters became worse by yet another credit squeeze imposed on the industry by the Government in another attempt to resolve the Balance of Payments problem. As result of all of this, the Tapestry carpet production greatly reduced and with it went many jobs.

Widnells however survived and emerged from the crises with a well-known Axminster quality, an A1 all wool carpet known as "Muirfield". The Widnell's Board and the major shareholders who were the Stewart family were severely shaken after the setbacks and talks which had been taking place in 1955 with AF Stoddard and Co Ltd of Elderslie were resumed in 1958 and this led to the entire capital of the company being acquired by Stoddard in 1959. Whilst this was accepted by shareholders there was unhappiness with the loss of company independence. Widnells as a company had always been on friendly terms with Stoddard, a substantial larger company with valuable yarn spinning facilities at Kilmarnock and Galashiels. The Chairman of Stoddard was Sir Robert MacLean, a leading industrialist who took a keen and kindly interest in the acquisition of Henry Widnell & Stewart.

The early 1960s brought a swing in the industry away from traditional all wool carpet in favour of wool and nylon carpet. Many qualities appeared in the market place containing nylon content and others appeared in various mixtures of wool and synthetics. Acrilan also made an appearance and had a price advantage that came to stay. Widnells remained loyal to the all wool Axminster Muirfield carpet but eventually replaced the pile content of wool with a mixture of wool, rayon and nylon to give a bulkier, if cheaper pile. The most famous design in this quality was "Pick a Stick" being an abstract blend of greys which sold hundreds of thousands of square yards. At the same time Widnells were gradually increasing sales of a heavy domestic all wool quality known as "Edinburgh" and it was found that this gave excellent appearance retention and wear, even in contract locations.

The old Tapestry looms augmented by 12 ft & 15 ft wide looms imported from the USA, where tufted carpet now dominated the market, were used to weave a curly twist Wilton carpet, in plain colours, known as Dunedin and this was for some years a great success. The Company also continued to make cheap Brussels, uncut carpets. A carpet called "Cramond" was made with an all-rayon pile and another called "Norman" was made in a wool-hair-rayon mixture pile.

The company's chief designer for many years was George Brown and under his direction there were produced several enormously popular designs. For example, Venezia and Verona, which in various colouring sold millions of square yards in this country and overseas, notably the USA.

The Queen and Prince Philip visited Bonnyrigg and the Widnells factory there on 29th June 1961. The company also received a visit from Lord Snowdon and because of his interest in industrial design he proved a most popular visitor with management and workers alike.

Widnells arrived in the difficult 1970s and by the middle of the decade, across Scotland, a number of other manufacturers, large and small, traditional and tufted were closing but Widnells struggled on. Companies such as Templetons, Grays of Ayr and Meikle of Dysart had gone. Thousands of jobs also disappeared in England, with many companies going into liquidation, even Crossley's of Halifax, a major manufacturer of fine carpets ceased production.

Widnells ceased production of Wilton and Tapestry carpets in 1977.

It has been said that one time, Henry Widnell & Stewart Ltd employed some seven or eight hundred people in its factories at Roslin, Bonnyrigg and Eskbank.

Roslin had been closed for some years previously and Bonnyrigg closed in 1976, as Eskbank was extended by a fine new building to accommodate the warehousing and finishing departments.

The economic climate in 1981 forced centralisation of production at Elderslie, although warehousing, design, sales and administration remained at Eskbank. The end for Widnells finally came in 1982 and with it the end of 150 years of carpet making in the Midlothian.