

Meet the supplier

WOVEN WITH HISTORY

Anna Smith of John Boyd Textiles explains why the firm is committed to weaving horsehair using techniques that date back to the 19th century

WORDS | ANDREA BALL

There is nothing rushed or hurried about the production process at John Boyd Textiles, the last surviving horsehair weaver in the UK and one of only two factories in the world still using traditional techniques.

It takes about five months for the source material – the horsehair – to arrive from Mongolia and Siberia. After the hair has been combed and dyed, it takes another month to weave 50 metres of fabric, with a silk or cotton warp, using the same looms and techniques that were developed by the factory’s founder, John Boyd, more than 150 years ago.

The hair has been sourced from outside the UK since about 1890, when the motorcar was invented. “The horsehair has to come from live animals and so has to be from somewhere where they still use working horses,” explains Anna Smith, the firm’s managing director. “Mongolia and Siberia still use horses on the land for transport. You can also get the hair from South America.”

After the hair arrives at the firm’s sprawling factory in Castle Cary, Somerset – a former mill site that dates back to the 12th century – it is hackled by hand for the weavers. Any black hairs in the tails are removed, also by hand.

The firm only buys natural-coloured hair and the hair is dyed to order. The six original John Boyd colours have been added to over the



Sheraton furniture made with John Boyd fabric. Thomas Sheraton was one of the 'big three' English furniture makers of the 18th century, along with Thomas Chippendale and George Hepplewhite



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Design classics

Many architects also designed furniture, sometimes if there was a downturn in the building trade or, as was certainly the case with Sir Edwin Lutyens, they wanted to create the interiors for a house that they had designed. "Architects particularly liked horsehair, because it's quite structural," explains Anna. "A lot of their original pieces were covered in our fabrics."

Lutyens' 1919 Napoleon Chair (the original is in the V&A museum) was made with Ermine black ER/601/1 horsehair fabric, which is still produced on the same loom for reproductions of the chair made by the Lutyens family. Some of the chairs can be seen in the Theo Fennell showroom on Fulham Road in London.

"It's a similar story with Josef Frank and Svenskt Tenn, the Swedish interior design store where he worked," says Anna. "He put a horsehair fabric on his original pieces and we still supply Svenskt Tenn in Stockholm."



Lutyens' 1919 Napoleon Chair made with John Boyd's Ermine black horsehair fabric

Chippendale once wrote that you should only ever cover a chair in horsehair or leather

years, and the factory can produce just about any shade people ask for. "We work with Akris, the Swiss luxury fashion house, so we're quite used to producing custom colours – and having our own dye house gives us that flexibility."

Each of the belt-driven looms, which date back to 1870, weaves two to three metres of fabric per day. The fabric is pressed in an old cider press that is tightened with a huge spanner that requires two people to operate.

Hardwearing and durable

So what is it about horsehair that makes this protracted process worthwhile, and why is there still such strong demand for this unusual material?

"It's mainly its longevity," explains Anna. "It's an incredibly hardwearing and durable

fabric. I've seen chairs that are more than 100 years old still covered with it – sometimes the furniture will wear out before the fabric does, because the horsehair is so hardwearing.

"It's also quite stain-resistant, which is another reason why it's used. Chippendale once wrote that you should only ever cover a chair in horsehair or leather because it didn't stain or absorb the smell of food."

Horsehair also has inherent fire resistance and passes acoustic tests. It's often used for wall panelling for home interiors, media rooms and sound studios.

"If you've got an antique chair, it's the right fabric to put back on it. Thomas Chippendale, George Hepplewhite, Charles Rennie Mackintosh, Edwin Luytens, Alvar Aalto, Josef Frank – all their original pieces were covered in John Boyd fabric."

Local connections

Of the 10-12 people employed at the factory, most work in production. A full-time engineer is kept very busy keeping the old machinery running. Regular adjustments are needed because of the variations in hair and spare parts are all manufactured on site.

Left: Hair can be dyed to order on site
Far left: Anna Smith, managing director of John Boyd Textiles



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The horsehair is combed by hand at the hackle bench to prepare it for the weavers
© Jay Williams



Above: A handcrafted horsehair headboard for Savoir Beds, which supplies the Savoy Hotel in London
Right: A Biedermeier chair upholstered in John Boyd fabric

It's no surprise that Anna has a background in engineering. Her degree included a scholarship with the textile manufacturer Courtaulds which meant she worked in many different textile factories. "My interest – my fascination, really – was in how fabrics were made," she explains. "That creativity, for me, is in how they're produced from the looms."

She was working in Germany in the early 1990s when she was introduced to the main shareholders of John Boyd Textiles. "They asked me to come over here and have a look, and then the previous MD retired and they asked me to run it," she says. "That was 32 years ago."

Anna isn't the only person who has stayed loyal to the business for many decades. "When I first started, most of our staff had been with us for 30-50 years. They were all local and we've employed several generations of the same families. You can keep the skills alive if you find the right people. It's finding people who want to learn and want to stay; that's the important thing."

Contemporary designs

Clients include interior designers, upholsterers and antique restorers as well as contract specifiers for hotels and restaurants. "We do a lot of trade shows: Decorex for the interior design industry, HIX for hotel designers, Design Week at Chelsea Harbour. And we work with agency distributors overseas."

Customers are given samples of trial fabrics so they can give feedback on potential new products. The firm also makes samples, supplies cuttings for customers to show their clients and displays trial fabrics on its exhibition stands. Trends are ever-changing but there's often a link back to the past.

"We didn't do stripes for about 10 years and they've suddenly come back into fashion. But they don't want the traditional black and white or gold and black that we used to do, they want something brighter and more modern."

"A while back everybody wanted taupe, so we did miles and miles of beige-grey fabric; now blues and greens are popular. People definitely want a lot more colour. They're bored of beige and grey now – they want a bit of brightness."

About 60-70% of the fabric is sent abroad and that heavy reliance on export markets has been more of a challenge since Brexit.

“It’s not been easy, as we do a lot of exports, but you find a way through these things. The important thing is to make people aware of our fabrics and what we do to make sure they’re used in projects and the orders keep coming in.

“We work with interior design courses to make sure they’ve got samples so they can teach about it. Showing people around and teaching people about horsehair fabric is also important. We organise tours for AMUSF members and they often bring students from the different training centres. It’s useful for them to see how fabrics are made as there are so few weavers now. It’s such an old fabric, but once you know what it is you recognise it everywhere.”

While it’s a relatively expensive material, the fabric is valued within the industry not only for its durability but also for how unique it is. The business is also motivated, ultimately, by a desire to keep these traditional techniques alive.

“We feel very strongly that these machines need to be kept running and we don’t want the factory to end up as a museum. We want to provide jobs for our staff, who are mostly local, and keep those skills going – that’s why we love what we do.”

Weaving in numbers

5 months

average time horsehair takes to arrive at the factory after ordering

1 week

time it takes to dye the black hair

6

original John Boyd colours, which have been added to over the years

30 looms

20 operational at one time (10 per weaver)

90

number of hairs in one inch of fabric

1 month

time it takes to weave just 50m of fabric

Guided tours

John Boyd Textiles runs tours for upholstery groups, including the AMUSF, the Guild of Traditional Upholsterers and upholstery collectives. For more information, visit johnboydtextiles.co.uk or call 01963 350451.



A Paul Mathieu bronze chaise upholstered in John Boyd fabric © Bill Batten

You can keep the skills alive if you find the right people. It’s finding people who want to learn and stay

Urban fabric

Castle Cary in Somerset has a long history of textile production, initially coarse count linen and rope manufacturing.

In the early 1800s, cottage workers started weaving a horsehair cloth with a cotton warp. It was the fashion at the time to crop horses’ tails, so the horsehair came from local animals.

John Boyd, a travelling textile merchant from Scotland, saw a potential

growth in demand for horsehair fabric and began weaving horsehair cloth in his cottage. By 1837 he had started to employ people and in 1851 he moved to his own purpose-built factory.

The horsehair fabrics were initially woven by hand. The weaver would stand at a loom all day, served with hair by a small child sitting in the loom with the horse tail. However, after the Education Act of 1870, which required all children to go to school, John Boyd developed and patented mechanical looms. The tail

was carefully mixed and drawn through the teeth of a large comb, after which a mechanical picker was able to tease a single hair from it.

At the end of the 19th century, horsehair fabric was so popular that John Boyd became one of the town’s main employers, providing work for more than 200 people. He contributed much to the town, building cottages for his workers and the Liberal Institute.

John Boyd died in 1890 but the tradition of horsehair weaving continues.