

# Peter Reed

JENNIFER GOULDING visits the Lancashire factory of the fine linens company, which has survived the vicissitudes of Britain's textiles industry for more than 150 years

PHOTOGRAPHS ANDREW MONTGOMERY

The drive from the quiet two-platform train station at Nelson to the headquarters of Peter Reed is a gentle meander through the green and hilly Lancashire countryside. There is so little to break the scene, a scattering of horses here, a short terrace or two of Victorian houses there, that a temporary spell falls. I begin to imagine our destination will be one of the nineteenth-century cotton mills for which this area was once famed, powered by droves of men and women in period costume.

Upon arrival, the spell breaks. Today, Peter Reed is based in a relatively modern building. Yet there is a romance to its survival. The company was established by its namesake in 1861, when Lancashire was the centre of Britain's thriving cotton industry. Despite a dramatic decline in the Seventies and Eighties – when two mills a week were closing – Peter Reed prevailed, continuing to make its own cloth until just 12 years ago. Although the cloth is now woven in Italy, it is still cut, assembled and finished by hand in Nelson.

Peter Reed is best known for its fine white bed linen, a reputation that was formalised in 2008 when it was awarded the Royal Warrant. Its signature is the corded border, designed in Victorian times as an indicator of quality: the more cords, the more luxurious the cloth. This enabled the servants in grand houses to distinguish between the linen belonging to the chambermaid and that belonging to the Lord and Lady.

Peter Reed linen is still a feature of grand houses, but it also graces the bedrooms of luxury hotels, such as Llangoed Hall, super yachts, exclusive holiday rentals – including those available through Living Architecture – and, of course, many private homes. 'We have very loyal customers. Often people come to us because their grandparents had Peter Reed bed linen,' says the managing director Sean Clayton.

Sean, a Yorkshireman with a dry sense of humour, joined the business in 2012, by which time it had been sold by Peter Reed's grandson to an American company. He takes enormous pride in the brand, from its ethical and environmental responsibilities to the part it plays in the community. He is also fiercely protective of its staff. 'Everything is made here by us and we never use agency

workers. We keep our team of 20 together, because they have the skill and passion to create special things,' he says.

These things, so beautifully crafted, can be made even more special with bespoke embroidery. There is no minimum order and pieces can be dispatched in just seven to 10 days. Common requests include monograms, family crests and the names of villas but there is also room for creativity, courtesy of a little-known resource.

Previously, Peter Reed had a factory specialising in hand embroidery on Madeira, which is known for the skill of its artisan embroiderers. From the Twenties to the Forties, the women working in the factory drew hundreds of designs on thin brown paper, which were dated and signed in cursive black ink. These designs, now bound in books and stored in a chest at Peter Reed in Nelson, are astonishingly varied. As well as pretty florals, there are abstract patterns – some soft and fluid, others graphic and angular; animals of all shapes and sizes – from ladybirds and dragonflies to elephants and monkeys; sailing imagery, including anchors, buoys and ropes; Christmas motifs; and even some risqué illustrations, such as a naked woman in a cocktail glass.

Customers can choose from these motifs for their linen or towels. If they wish, they can be modified, combined with another design or simply resized. It is then a matter of selecting the style of stitch and the thread. It is a chance to indulge the imagination and make something personal.

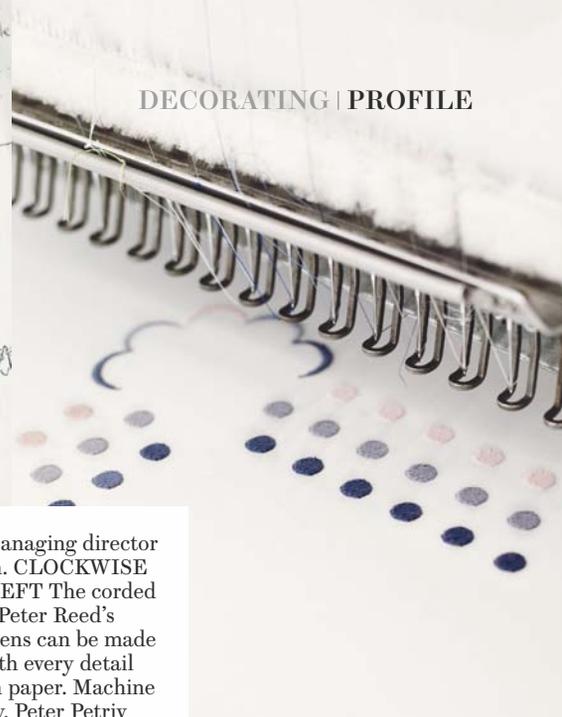
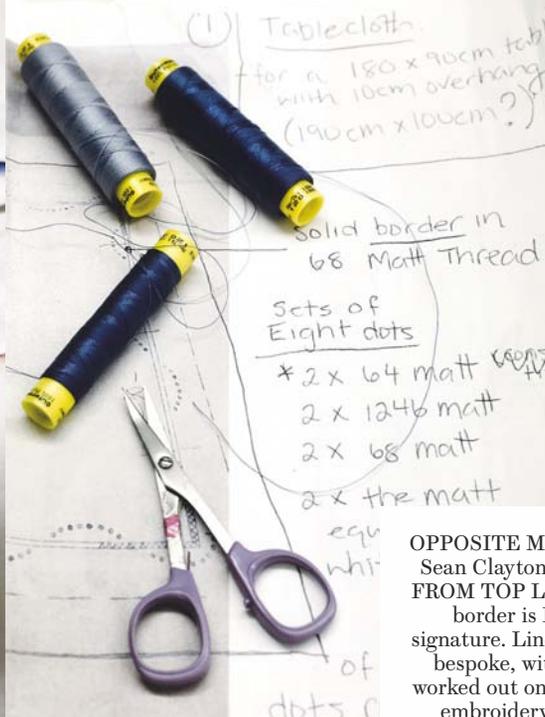
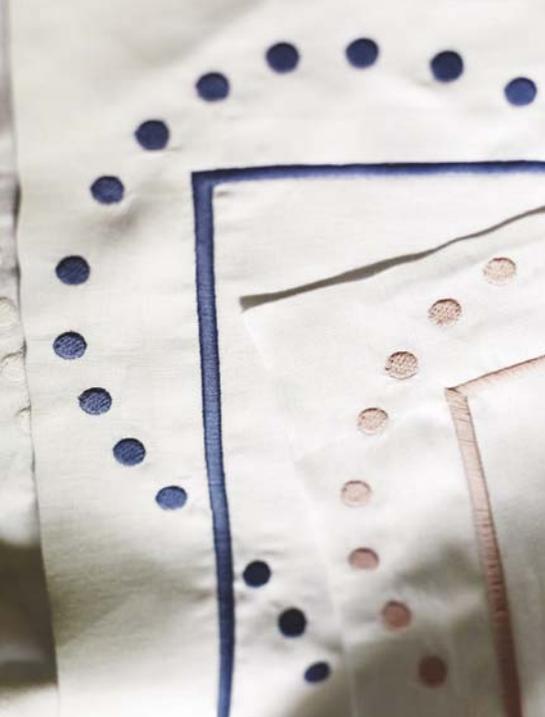
In future, Sean plans to digitise the collection, so customers

can search through the designs online. It is an obvious practical solution, though the pleasure of running a finger along the delicate drawings, so evocative of another time and place, will be lost.

The embroidery itself is now done by machines working at speeds of up to 1,000 stitches a minute. Overseeing this noisy endeavour is Peter Petriv who, as well as ensuring the smooth running of the machines, reworks the designs so that each one is proportionally correct and aesthetically pleasing. He is a modest man, so it falls to Sean to boast on his behalf: 'We can do absolutely anything.' Strong words, but he has not regretted them yet □

*Peter Reed: peterreed.com*





OPPOSITE Managing director Sean Clayton. CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT The corded border is Peter Reed's signature. Linens can be made bespoke, with every detail worked out on paper. Machine embroidery. Peter Petriv checks for quality, using a glass. Cloth is hung while waiting to be made up into linens. The 'Cloud' design. Hand finishing a table cloth. Archived embroidery designs

