

# 8 *inspiring ways with* UPHOLSTERY

*Buying upholstered furniture is a big investment and requires thought. But, fear not, Alice Hancock has it covered with her guide to everything you need to know about fabric coverings*

Wesley-Barrell - a fourth generation sofa company - makes all its sofas by hand in Britain. Customers can choose leg finish, fabric and size. Here the three-seater 'Hinton' sofa is covered in 'Robert Allen Spring Mix' pattern in 'Aloe' colourway (£3,490)



Don't be afraid to mismatch colours and prints and also think about all the possible pieces that could be upholstered - lampshades, for instance. Sofa.com's 'Alderney' chair (£580) is covered in Ellie Curtis's 'Forest Jig' design for St Jude's in ochre/blue (£54 per m), meanwhile the cushion and lampshade are also 'Forest Jig' in grey/pink and blue/ochre

## 1 WHAT TO UPHOLSTER

Think of upholstery and the first thing that springs to mind might well be a cosy sofa. But fabric coverings can freshen up anything from stools and window seats to headboards and screens. The first step is to think creatively about what you have.

The benefit of upholstered furniture is that fresh padding and fabric can make an old item feel new (in look and comfort). If

you want to reupholster something really old, turn to page 87 for how to go about updating an antique.

Before choosing your furniture, ask yourself some questions. Are you looking for a statement piece to brighten a tired room? Should it fit an existing scheme? Will it be used by dogs or children? Is it near a window where it might fade? And,

think carefully about your budget. Can you afford bespoke or is it more cost effective to buy ready-made? In short, make sure it suits you. 'Go against trend-driven pieces,' advises Andrew Cussins, managing director of Sofas & Stuff. 'There's no point in buying a piece that's fashionable or looks amazing but doesn't encourage you to engage with it or relax.'



## 2 WEAR AND TEAR

Fabrics are rated by a 'rub test' (the number of times two pieces of the same material can be rubbed together before a hole appears). Upholsterers advise a 20,000-25,000 rub for heavy domestic use and 15,000 for light use. Crushed velvet and moquette are good for pieces in constant service - why they're used for public transport seating. Consider also the dirt factor. Headboards, for example, need fabrics that don't show marks.

The Sofas & Stuff 'St Denis' double bed is upholstered in 'Barra Ticking Pine Cone' (£1,562), a hard-wearing weave that is a natural colour and unlikely to show dirt



## 3 TIGHT OR LOOSE

The choice between loose, removable covers or tailored-to-fit fabric has as much impact on look as it does on use. Tailored dining chairs make for snug dinners come winter and add a neat, sharp feel. Pile fabrics should be fixed, as free movement can cause them to lose their lustre. For kitchen chairs or your everyday sofa, which risk splodges and tea stains, consider removable covers. 'Tailored or fixed upholstery shows off the shape of your furniture beautifully,' says Barney Gloyn, director of Linwood. 'But soft cushions and wider arms can suit loose covers which are easier to clean. Make sure the cover is slightly oversized for easy removal.' Don't forget to also allow space for shrinkage in the wash.

LEFT Loaf recently released a range of sofas with loose covers, such as this medium 'Mrs Smith' with removable seat cushion covers in teal brush cotton (£1,490), which is apparently so comfy it's hard to get up from

## 4 FOLLOW THE PATTERN

'Mixing and matching, and mixing and not matching fabrics is very popular at the moment,' says Sally Bell, an upholsterer with The London Chair Collective. 'Be brave and experiment.' Choosing a pattern is all about fit – both to the piece and into your scheme. Make sure that patterns are centred on the item and that the repeat is big enough to suit it. Plain walls might benefit from eye-catchingly colourful furniture. Or mismatch a few patterns together, though be careful when clustering lots of loud prints. Muted patterns make for subtle contrasts, which add depth to your decor, while a scatter cushion gives a quick burst of interest (and can easily be changed). Also consider size. Smaller pieces such as footstools suit delicate patterns while large stripes make a squashy sofa seem even bigger. Borrow large swatches from fabric manufacturers to get a sense of how it will work.

**RIGHT** Try both matching and mismatching cushions for a bold mix. Here, Sofa.com's 'Sophie' double headboard (£525) and cushions are covered in 'White and Purple Wisteria' fabric by Occipinti, accented with a silk ikat scatter cushion in 'Galata' (£49)



## 5 PADDING IT OUT

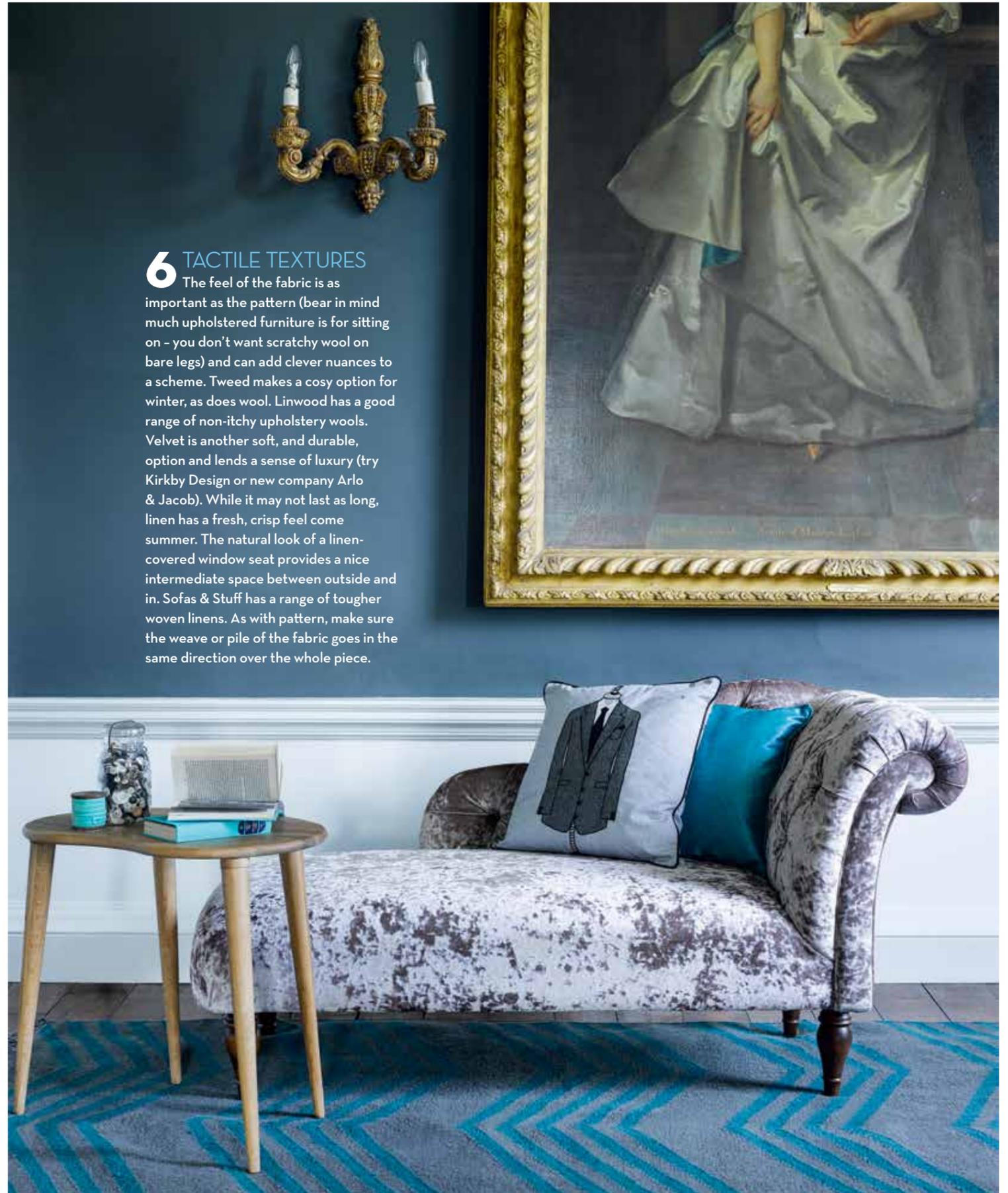
In all the excitement of choosing material don't forget to attend to what's underneath. 'The old adage "never judge a book by its cover" is certainly true when choosing a sofa,' says Juliette Barrell, marketing and sales director at Wesley-Barrell. 'The construction and materials used to make the frame will determine a sofa's comfort, durability and longevity.' When buying, be clear about the materials being used. Traditional fibres such as hogs hair, cotton and wool require skill and time to apply but will last. They are also, by nature, flame retardant. Many modern sofas will contain foam, which can be three to four times cheaper. If reupholstering bear in mind that many modern frames won't be strong enough to hold traditional stuffing. Springs range from high-end individual coil springs to more affordable elasticated webbing. A good quality modern suite should contain spring units that last at least 10 years.

**LEFT** Foam padding is a good option for a window seat as it won't obstruct the view. This one is covered in Linwood's 'Sakura LF1684C/3 Poppy' fabric **FACING PAGE** A chaise longue cries out for a soft and opulent fabric. Here, this Fishpools 'Charlotte' chaise is covered in 'Indulgent Oyster' (£620) set off by a Jeff Banks 'Kilim Modern Zig Zag Grey and Teal' rug (£345), also from Fishpools



## 6 TACTILE TEXTURES

The feel of the fabric is as important as the pattern (bear in mind much upholstered furniture is for sitting on – you don't want scratchy wool on bare legs) and can add clever nuances to a scheme. Tweed makes a cosy option for winter, as does wool. Linwood has a good range of non-itchy upholstery wools. Velvet is another soft, and durable, option and lends a sense of luxury (try Kirkby Design or new company Arlo & Jacob). While it may not last as long, linen has a fresh, crisp feel come summer. The natural look of a linen-covered window seat provides a nice intermediate space between outside and in. Sofas & Stuff has a range of tougher woven linens. As with pattern, make sure the weave or pile of the fabric goes in the same direction over the whole piece.





## 7 ALL THE TRIMMINGS

Depending on whether you choose ready-made or bespoke, you may or may not have a say on the trimmings but do pay attention to the details. Some pieces require braid or piping to cover the tacking of the fabric. It is also another way of adding texture and interest. Buttons, metal studs (make sure the frame is strong enough), tassels and contrast piping look good on fitted pieces or try fabric ties for a relaxed feel. Mix and match materials such as fabric with a leather trim for an updated look. More traditional pieces look good with a braid. 'Pretty much anything goes,' says Sally Bell of The London Chair Collective. 'Look at the shape of the piece and experiment.'

Loose covers are ideal for experimenting with trimmings. Try contrasting prints with patterns. Here, the chair cover has Sanderson's 'Josette' toile (£52 per m) teamed with 'Bramley Check', also Sanderson (£25 per m). Add a pleat or try complementary studs and buttons for a neat finish

## 8 MADE BY HAND

**BELOW** A hand plane is used to smooth, shape, flatten and reduce the thickness of a rough piece of wood  
**BOTTOM** If you can afford it, buy handmade. Though prices are less than you might expect. Employees at Wesley-Barrell's workshops (where this image was taken) are trained for two years in traditional upholstery skills

As with so many things, buying upholstered furniture is a question of cutting your cloth to suit your budget. Sofas, for example, range from off-the-peg showroom buys to traditionally upholstered seats made by an artisan with options in between, such as choosing a standard shape and adding your own pick of fabric and trimming. If you can, buy handmade. 'A handmade sofa will almost certainly be made to order,' says Juliette Barrell of Wesley-Barrell. 'You can choose from a range of styles and thousands of fabrics as well as tailored options such as seat depths, cushion interiors and leg finishes.' A handmade piece should also last longer. Wesley-Barrell guarantees its frames for 15 years. And, as Andrew Cussins at Sofas & Stuff says: 'A sofa should be a true heirloom with the potential to be passed on.' That said, if you move home a lot, a machine-made piece may well be lighter and, with a lower price tag, less likely to be as precious if it gets bashed. Plus, it's more likely to come with matching pieces if you want the set.





# Make old into new

Do you have an heirloom or antique in need of an update? Here's how to make sure it will last as long again

You can tell if an old piece needs reupholstering from the seat, as it usually gets the hardest wear. On screens or headboards, look for areas where the fabric is wearing through. 'Beware that a piece can often look fine but it may be rotten underneath,' says upholsterer Daniel Fowler. 'And if the springs are poking up, it definitely needs redoing.'

Try and choose an upholsterer who is a member of the Association of Master Upholsterers and Soft Furnishers as they will have been approved and are periodically inspected. Richard Ranklin, manager of the association, recommends agreeing to what you want done on

paper. 'And be aware of the difference between reupholstery, which is stripping everything back to the frame, and recovering, which is stripping off the old cover and putting a new one on,' he says.

Ask the upholsterer to check the structure of the frame – the back joints of dining chairs, for example, are often loose where people lean back on them. A good upholsterer should be able to strengthen it and, while you're investing, it's worth having the work done.

Finally, allow time. Having a single dining chair 'stitched and stuffed', as the trade calls a traditional upholstery job, can take between eight and 10 hours.



**SAFETY** Upholstery made after 1950 in the UK must comply with the Furniture and Furnishings (Fire Safety) Regulations 1988. The basic test is that fabric should resist a burning cigarette or match when covering flammable foam. Check with your supplier if you are unsure.

## Directory

### TRY A COURSE

#### ■ **The Upholstery Workshop.**

**01722 710274;**

**upholsteryworkshop.com**

A week-long course near Salisbury that gives a thorough grounding in basic upholstery.

#### ■ **Wendy Shorter Interiors.**

**01727 824358;**

**wendyshorterinteriors.co.uk**

An award-winning centre in Hertfordshire offering everything from short two-day courses to full qualifications.

#### ■ **Cornhill Upholstery Studios.**

**01337 810724; cornhillcourses.**

**co.uk** Offers a range of courses led by upholsterers with over 30 years experience, run from a converted watermill near Fife.

#### ■ **The Traditional Upholstery Workshop.**

**01994 232124;**

**traditionalupholsterywork-**

**shop.com** Two tutors lead week-long upholstery classes for a maximum of five students at this training centre in the Carmarthenshire countryside.

#### ■ **CASS. 020 7320 1842;**

**thecass.com** London

Metropolitan University's school of applied arts has 30-week upholstery courses suitable for beginners and those with basic knowledge who want to improve.

### RECOMMENDED READS

■ **The Essential Guide to Upholstery** by Dorothy Gates (Murdoch, 2000)

■ **Quick and Easy Upholstery** by Alex Law (CICO Books, 2008)

■ **Upholstery** by Malcolm Hopkins (New Holland Professional, 2008)

■ **The Beginner's Guide to Upholstery** by Vicky Grubb (David & Charles, 2015. Available to pre-order)

❖ **For stockist information see page 169**

# Swatches mood board

From on-trend geometric to archive patterns from the oldest cloth houses, take inspiration from a selection of the best upholstery fabrics on the market

## ARCHIVE INSPIRATION



**Rose-tinted** 'Pink and Rose',  
£52 per m, Morris & Co



**Pineapple express** 'Pineapple Frond'  
in 'Indigo', £150 per m, Soane



**Proud as a peacock** 'Hera Feather',  
£75 per m, Liberty Arts Fabrics

## TOUGHER TEXTILES



**Time-honoured tweed** 'Multicheck'  
in grey, £47.95 per m, Moon Furnishing



**Hardy horsehair** 'Selle II' in natural/linen/  
grey, from £120 per m, John Boyd Textiles

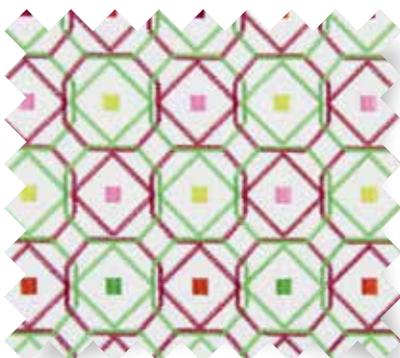


**Vision in velvet** 'Crush' in 'Raspberry',  
£42 per m, Kirkby Design

## GRAPHIC GEOMETRIC



**Chic chevrons** 'Chevy Black and Linen',  
£125 per m, Tori Murphy



**Tropical trellis** 'Karuba Tropical',  
£55 per m, Prestigious Textiles



**Eye-catching ikat** 'Ithaki',  
£71 per m, Osborne & Little