

# Love is the rug

The Afghan Rug Shop in West Yorkshire is helping to spread a unique and beautiful craft, as well as helping communities in Afghanistan

[www.theafghanrugshop.co.uk](http://www.theafghanrugshop.co.uk)

“We are the only company outside Afghanistan, anywhere in the world, selling purely Afghan rugs and kilims,” says James Wilthew, owner of The Afghan Rug Shop. Wilthew is often asked by his customers just how fairtrade, handmade Afghan rugs have found their way from the Hindu Kush to Hebden Bridge in West Yorkshire. The answer is intriguing.

Wilthew (pictured, left), an RAF veteran of four operational campaigns, spent six months serving in Afghanistan in late 2003, based in Mazar-e-Sharif in the Northern Provinces. Part of his role was to engage with local elders in the towns and villages in order to monitor the security situation. “Whenever time allowed we’d drop into the rug shops, drink tea and chat to the locals,” he says. “This is where my love for their rugs started.”

Having bonded with one of the rug traders, his interest in the rugs and traditional methods grew. “I sent about 40 rugs back during my time in Mazar-e-Sharif,” he recalls. “I thought it would be my only chance. It was 2003, there were no smartphones and the internet was unstable, and I never thought I could buy any again once I’d left. I sold several in the mess and to friends, which helped pay for my wedding, but I didn’t give it much thought after that, as I was still serving and busy on other operations.”

About 12 years later, Wilthew’s circumstances had changed. He’d left the RAF, been diagnosed with PTSD and moved to Hebden Bridge with his family, when the rug in his home started to attract attention. When a friend asked if he could track down the maker of his rug and order one for himself, Wilthew accepted the challenge and the idea for the business was born. “It took a few months of

cold-calls to Afghanistan, social-media searches, emails to strangers and lots of Facebook messages,” he says, “but ultimately I tracked down my old friend Rafi, the rug seller I hadn’t seen or spoken to since the spring of 2004.”

After an online reunion, Wilthew quickly acquired premises in the centre of Hebden Bridge. “We had to establish imports from a very rural and remote part of the world, establish money exchanges, import tax and banking issues, but we eventually figured it all out,” he says. “There are no middle-men – these rugs come direct from the weavers’ markets. We can supply any size of rug, to suit a canal boat or a stately home. People don’t mind waiting if it’s a bespoke order either.” The Afghan Rug Shop also uses its extensive stock of “kilim” tapestries unique to this part of the world to create bespoke kilim-covered furniture, along with beautiful handmade glass from Herat and pottery from Istalif.

Now in its fifth year, The Afghan Rug Shop is proudly partnered with Turquoise Mountain, an NGO that helps the local craft industry in Afghanistan. The shop is a registered Living Wage employer and a corporate sponsor of Afghanaid, putting money directly into projects in the communities their rugs come from. Having won Highly Commended in the 2019 Soldiering On Awards for its positive impact on Afghan communities, The Afghan Rug Shop is currently a regional finalist in the FSB International Business of the Year Awards. Wilthew recently became an ambassador for X-Forces Enterprise, and is helping other veterans take their first steps in starting businesses of their own. “We are a growing business,” he says, “with a remarkable story.”

