

The rise and rise of the Baker business

G.P. & J. Baker, that most English of English textile firms, is the subject of an exhibition now at the V & A. Peta Levi tells the remarkable story of this family concern

G.P. & J. BAKER, one of the most famous names in British textiles, celebrates over a century of business this year with an exhibition at the Victoria & Albert museum, entitled, *From East to West*, which is open from now until October 11.

The combination of the Baker family's business acumen and its keen interest in horticulture has resulted over the years in the creation of a unique Baker style — very floral and very English. The family's understanding of the way that plants grow has been reflected in many of Baker's textile designs. A new floribunda rose, 'G.P. & J. Baker', specially bred by R. Harkness & Co, makes its debut at the Chelsea Flower Show this year and is featured in Baker's latest textile collection.

For two years, four curators in the V & A's textile department have been researching into the Baker family history and their textile archives. The resulting exhibition contains over two hundred and fifty objects — textiles, pattern books,

documents and photographs — covering the Baker family history, their historic collection of documents, and two sections covering the development of textiles from 1893 to 1914, and from 1914 to the present day.

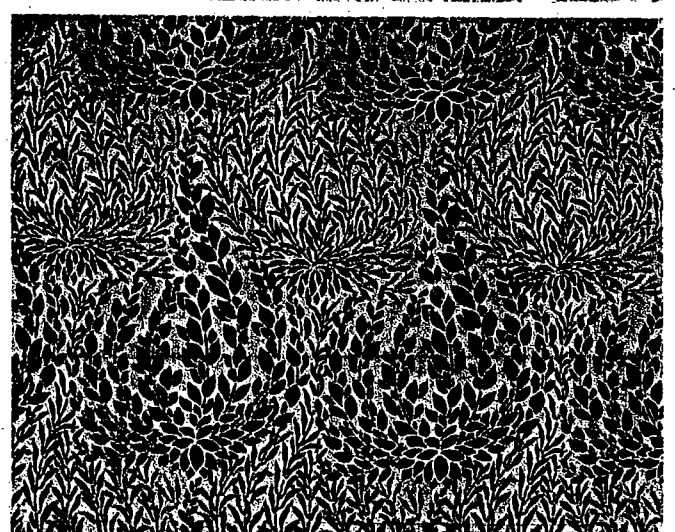
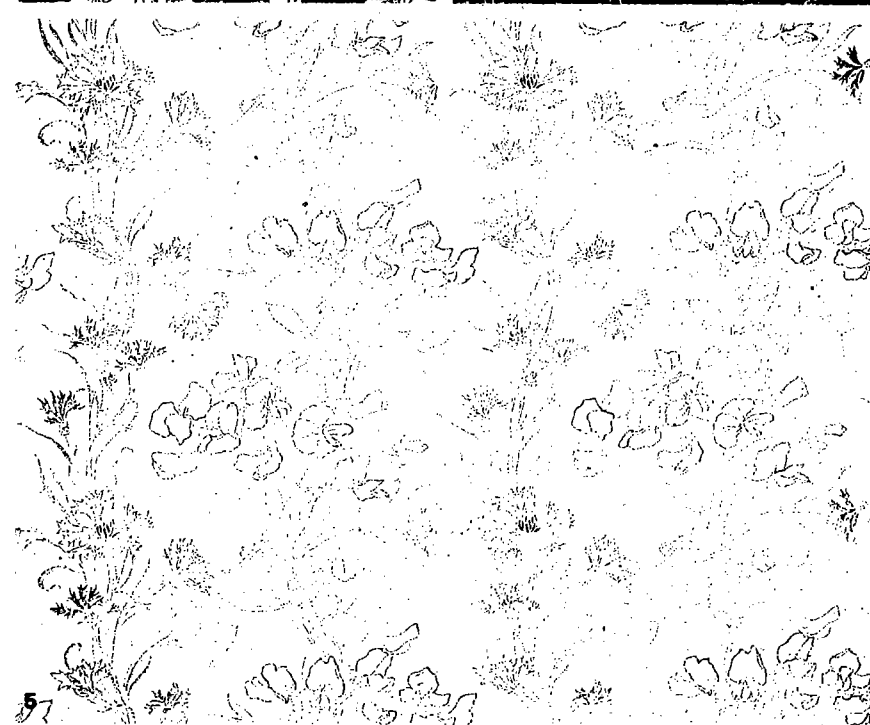
It is a remarkable story. The founder of the first Baker business, George Baker, who was born in 1822 and lived until he was 95, came from a humble background. A gardener's son, he left school when he was ten to follow his father's trade. He went to Constantinople in 1847 as part of a team to lay out the gardens at the British Embassy's summer residence at Therapia. However, George was obviously a born businessman with considerable personality, able to surmount the barriers of both the British and the Turkish social hierarchies. It was not long before he was selling cuttings and soon afterwards he started importing linens through his brother James in England, which he sold to the ladies in the British Embassy. By



1862 George had given up gardening. He was invited to join Austen Layard and Richard Burton's archaeological expedition, but decided to open a shop in Constantinople as a general trader. He sold everything and started exporting Turkish goods — curtains, furniture and, most important, carpets. In 1853 George married Maria Butler, who had gone to Constantinople to be a governess. In true prolific Baker-style they had nine children, two of whom were George Percival (G.P.) and Jim (J.). At the age of fifteen G.P. started working for his father and when he was eighteen was sent to London on the death of his uncle James to take his place as agent to the Constantinople

firm. For G.P.'s twenty-first birthday present his father gave him leave and money to travel; G.P. decided to go to Persia. This was very significant, for not only did he (and his father who travelled with him) realise the potential of exporting carpets to England, but the journey also confirmed G.P.'s love of mountaineering. He climbed Mount Ararat (a lump of Mount Ararat is included in the exhibition!) and acquired a life-long interest in collecting alpine plants, which resulted in his introducing several rare species to England. By 1886 George was prepared to give G.P. and J. their heads and to see his personal empire diminish; he separated the carpet account from his own business and gave G.P. and J. £5,500 each to set up on their own. Thus G.P. & J. Baker started, importing oriental carpets, printing textiles and acting as buying and selling agents for Eastern firms. At the same time, the company rented the Swaisland Print Works in Crayford, Kent, which it later bought.

G.P. & J. Baker grew, going public in 1907. OCM (Oriental Carpet Manufacturers) was also formed and J. Baker looked after Baker's interest in this new amalgamation of carpet firms. His son Ronald joined Baker's and after G.P.'s 'retirement' in 1946 was responsible for buying historic tex-



tiles and for developing the design studio. Michael Cutcliffe, G.P.'s grandson, the only remaining member of the family in Baker's, is now one of the Export Sales Directors.

In 1964 Baker's was acquired by Parkertex, the textile division of Parker Knoll. Douglas Kitching, who had set up Parkertex in 1950, became managing director and chairman of Baker's and, on his retirement, was succeeded by his son John. He has continued to exploit the appeal of Baker's fabrics to an increasingly wide public, a development which has coincided with a growing interest in a better standard of design and greater appreciation of good quality furnishing fabrics. Over the last two years he has expanded the design studio. The eight young textile-design graduates who now work there meticulously re-draw and adapt designs from the Baker archive and produce around sixty designs a year, compared with the twenty-four which the studio produced only two years ago. Baker's export markets have grown, not only in America but in the Far East, Europe, Australia and New Zealand. At the same time as drawing on their documents to reproduce historic designs, they are also starting to look at and buy good contemporary design: a move indicative of Baker's eye for the future.

The exhibition can only give a



few glimpses of Baker's historic collection which numbers some three thousand documents. Audrey Duck, Baker's archivist, who has carefully washed many of the textiles for the exhibition, says, 'the archive contains something from virtually every country, representing design from half the world — only half the collection has been used for designs and I reckon that the archive will be a source of inspiration well into the twenty-first century.'

In looking at Baker's own history of design, the 1893-1914 section of the exhibition also contains a fascinating general summary of fashionable furnishing fabrics of the time. The surviving pattern-books of

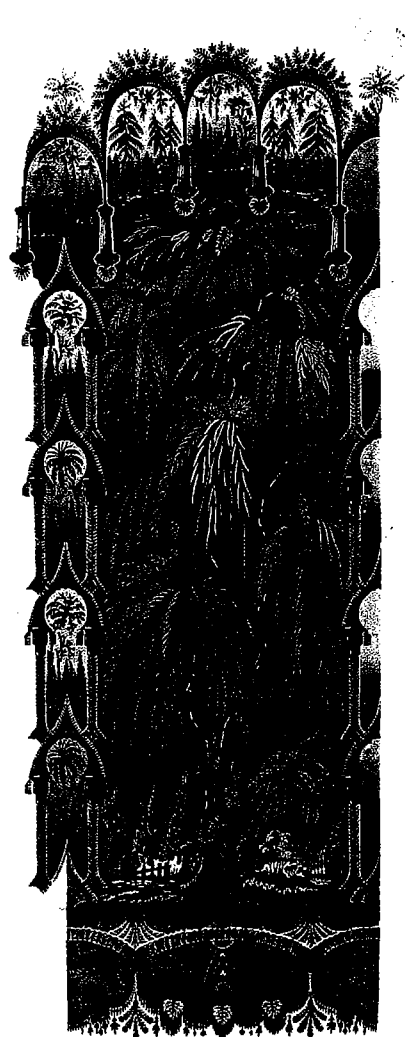
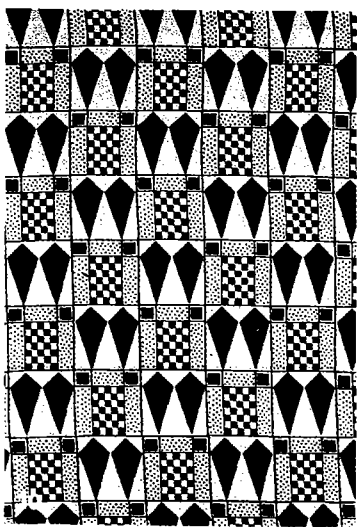
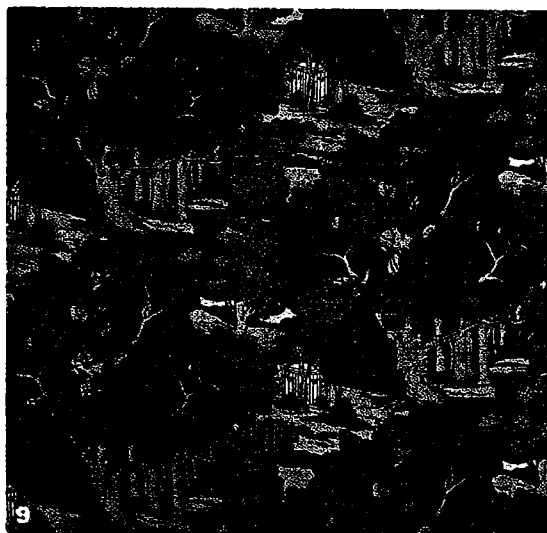
hand block-printed textiles include other retailers' prints, for although Swaisland was owned by Baker's, it continued to print the work of other companies, such as Liberty, Heal's and Story & Co. Some of these textiles were reproductions of earlier designs, while others were influenced by the Greek and Turkish carpets and embroideries which Baker's imported.

However, this period was also one of Baker's richest in terms of acquiring good contemporary designs. Baker employed fifty-seven designers, including some of the leading names of the day — C.F.A. Voysey, Lindsay Butterfield, Harry Napper and Charles Haité. The most prolific of them was Voysey,

- 1 George Baker and Maria Butler at the time of their marriage in Constantinople in 1853.
- 2 The five Baker sons: G.P. seated centre, J. standing right.
- 3 Design by C.A.F. Voysey, c 1893.
- 4 'Phoenix' block-printed linen, 1918, designed by William Turner.
- 5 'Effingham' roller-printed cotton, c 1898.
- 6 'Birds and fruit' plate-printed cotton, c 1770, Nixon & Co. Given to the V & A by G.P. & J. Baker.
- 7 Block-printed cotton designed by G.C. Haité, c 1900.
- 8 'Harebell' stencilled linen, 1929, designed by Bruce.
- 9 Block-printed cotton and linen, c 1910.
- 10 Block-printed linen, Viennese design, c 1908.
- 11 Copper roller-printed linen, 1920.
- 12 Design for printed linen by Harry Napper, c 1907.
- 13 Design for a printed shawl, c 1851/2, designed by G. Meynier for Swaisland.

and although the exhibition contains only a small section of his designs, Baker's have books full of interesting and lovely designs by him and the other designers.

G.P. was a serious botanist and horticulturalist, largely remembered for his hybrid irises. He wor



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several Royal Horticultural Society awards and was a founder-member of the Alpine Garden Society. Not surprisingly, he was interested in Butterfield's and Haité's beautifully-drawn, delicately-stylised designs for garden flowers. Between 1900 and 1905, Baker's used more designs by these two than any other artists, thereby helping to develop the style characteristic of this period.

While Voysey and Butterfield would sell the same design to more than one client, the Silver Studio sold exclusive designs to Baker's, and produced some of the finest original contemporary designs. Linda Parry, the V & A curator who specialises in this period and researched the Baker family history, says, 'The most popular designs printed by Baker from the mid-1890s to 1910 show naturalistically-drawn English garden flowers and fruit, and the development of this style is their trade-mark today. Early examples show a stylisation in the positioning of the leaves and stems around the flowers, in very simple yet pleasing repeat patterns with pure, flat col-

ours often outlined in black. Sometimes a deliberate stencilled effect with subdued colours can be seen, which enriches the overall effect. Flowers chosen also follow the current fashion in gardening with emphasis on trailing plants and those often used in herbaceous borders. Tulips, roses, geraniums, ivy, tiger lilies, fritilleries, pinks, vetches, marguerites and climbing alpine plants are all represented in these designs. I admire Baker for sticking to their guns and continuing to produce finely drawn and controlled floral patterns.'

The English Art Nouveau style at the turn of the century was quite different from the Continental. Fresher and simpler, it is exemplified by Butterfield and Napper, whose exaggerated and elongated flowerheads drawn in bright colours with great economy of line are very attractive. (Baker have always seemed willing to try anything new, whether printing textiles with Egyptian motifs in 1922, when the Tutenkhamen tomb was discovered, or buying avant-garde Viennese designs after the Wiener Werkstatte in Austria made geometric patterns and natural

yarns fashionable.) For a few years after 1918 textiles had rich, deep colours with bold, stylised patterns — this was partly due to new synthetic dyes, to a reaction against wartime austerity, and to influences such as Leon Bakst's designs for Diaghilev's ballets. But, by the mid-'20s, Baker's had become well-known for their traditional English floral furnishings and, with slight alterations and new colours to suit current fashions, many of them (such as Phoenix, which was first shown in Paris in 1925) have been in production for sixty years.

By the 1930s, Baker's had an international reputation and sold direct to interior designers and wholesalers throughout the world. In recent years Baker's have drawn increasingly on their document material, particularly to cater for the growing interest in period furnishings. In the 1970s and 1980s patterns from embroideries and from woven and printed fabrics were freely borrowed, scales altered and design elements re-arranged, such as the 'Emperor's Robe' fabric adapted from fragments of an early eighteenth-century Chinese silk robe in the Baker archive. Two other popular fabrics are 'Bosonova', from a fourteenth-century Peruvian weave, and the 1930s

'Feathers' design re-drawn and re-coloured. Baker's turnover has increased steadily, particularly over the last two years and the appeal of their fabrics to the interior designer and decorator market has grown enormously. To accompany their range of unions, twills, linens, cottons and chintzes are co-ordinating weaves, wall-coverings and carpets.

Also included in the exhibition are some of the technical developments in printing textiles. These include block printing (the last blocks were made in 1951), in which thirty colours and a hundred and fifty different blocks might be used, copper roller-printing which was used for smaller pattern-repeats (which required greater mechanical accuracy, and only fourteen colours could be reproduced), and, finally, wooden roller printing and stencilling which was superseded in 1932 by screen-printing. Screen-printing is today the most important method of printing textiles. The fully automatic rotary screen printers, first used in 1963 in Holland, are becoming increasingly sophisticated and Baker's are always looking at new and better ways to print.

This exhibition is a must for anyone interested in interior design, textiles or, for that matter, gardening ●