

Top of the pile

A new spirit of creativity is kick-starting an exciting revival in carpet, says Amelia Thorpe

THE CONNAUGHT hotel might be associated with some pivotal moments in history, most famously when Gen de Gaulle stayed there when he made a broadcast imploring his countrymen to fight the Germans after France's surrender. However, it also plays a similarly important role in the renaissance of the fitted carpet; it was here that designer India Mahdavi took the decision not to lay—hold on to your hat—patterned carpets, a choice associated more with Wetherspoons pubs than West End hotels.

As is so often the way with hotel design, the scheme proved hugely influential, inspiring confidence in something that had long gone the way of avocado baths and macramé plant hangers.

If the entries for next week's International Wool Carpet & Rug Awards are anything to go by, the renewal of interest has precipitated a frenzy of creativity and innovation on the looms at Kidderminster, Wilton and Axminster. 'We're seeing the most extraordinary collection of innovative new carpet designs, in colours, textures and patterns,' says Bridgette Kelly, Interior Textiles Director of the Campaign for Wool.

Take one look at the inspirational patterned effects of the latest designs and it's clear that carpet can add instant vitality to a space, banishing those pub patterns to the past (as well as usefully hiding marks). The vibrant Liberty Fabrics designs encapsulated in Alternative Flooring's Quirky B woven carpet or the sophisticated geometric, trellis and ornate plasterwork patterns of the Royal Borough Wilton Collection from Axminster Carpets are evidence of that, as are the joyously colourful stripes of Roger Oates's flatweave runners. The marled, as well as solid, colours of Anta's Benbecula carpet would add a certain softness to many a modern rustic interior.



If you prefer something natural, several manufacturers now offer undyed carpet, celebrating the variety of colours of wool from different sheep breeds. Light Grey Herdwick from the Graphite range by Wools of Cumbria Carpets deserves special mention: it's made from all-natural fibres from sheep grazing on the fells, undyed and untreated and manufactured from raw material to end product within 100 miles of the centre of Cumbria.

Texture is adding plenty of interest to the mix, too. Consider the eye-

Above: The Quirky Dotty carpet in Damson from Alternative Flooring (£104.80 per metre; www.alternativeflooring.com).

Above right: The Coburg bar in The Connaught

catching chevrons in Crucial Trading's Fabulous collection, with its graduated pile depth and rippled effect underfoot, or the wire-weaving employed in Sculpture from Wilton Weavers, which uses a single-coloured yarn to create a high-low textural effect.

The other reason, of course, that carpet may be enjoying a renaissance is its comfort, warmth and softness underfoot. Compare it to a cold stone floor or bare floorboards and carpet scores high, but is it less forgiving in a busy home? Arguably,





yes, but as a natural, sustainable fibre, wool bounces back after pressure from feet and furniture, retaining its good looks. Carpet also offers good insulation that's perfect for the draughtier abode and absorbs sound, making it a particularly good choice for stairs, landings and hallways or a house with several floors (and thundering children and dogs).

In the bedroom, carpet is hard to beat for sumptuous luxury and it's good to see even the 1970s favourite shag pile getting an update from Bronte Carpets with its 100% wool version, offering pile depths up to an impressive 40mm (1½in) for an ultra-luxurious feel.

Wool also ticks the sustainability box: as long as there is grass to graze on, every year, a sheep will pro-

duce a new fleece. At the end of its life, natural wool fibre takes a very short time to break down, releasing valuable nutrients into the ground, unlike synthetics, which are typically very slow to degrade.

According to the Carpet Foundation, some 75% of all wool produced in the UK goes into carpet. Ten years ago, there were 21 million breeding ewes, but, today, there are only 14 million, so it follows that buying wool or wool-rich flooring should help slow the decline of sheep numbers.

Carpet has a history dating back 2,000 years (the world's most ancient pile carpet is the Pazyryk rug, dating back to the 4th or 5th century BC). Good news indeed that it now looks set to enjoy a fresh lease of life. ↗



Fabulous Ruby, £154 per metre, Crucial Trading (020-7376 7100; www.crucial-trading.com)



Houndstooth in heather, £69.99 per metre, Brintons (01562 635665; www.brintons.net)



Flaxman Ruby, £127 per metre, Roger Oates (020-7351 2288; www.rogeroates.com)

Interiors focus

Take to the floor

New looks in carpet, wood, stone and ceramics



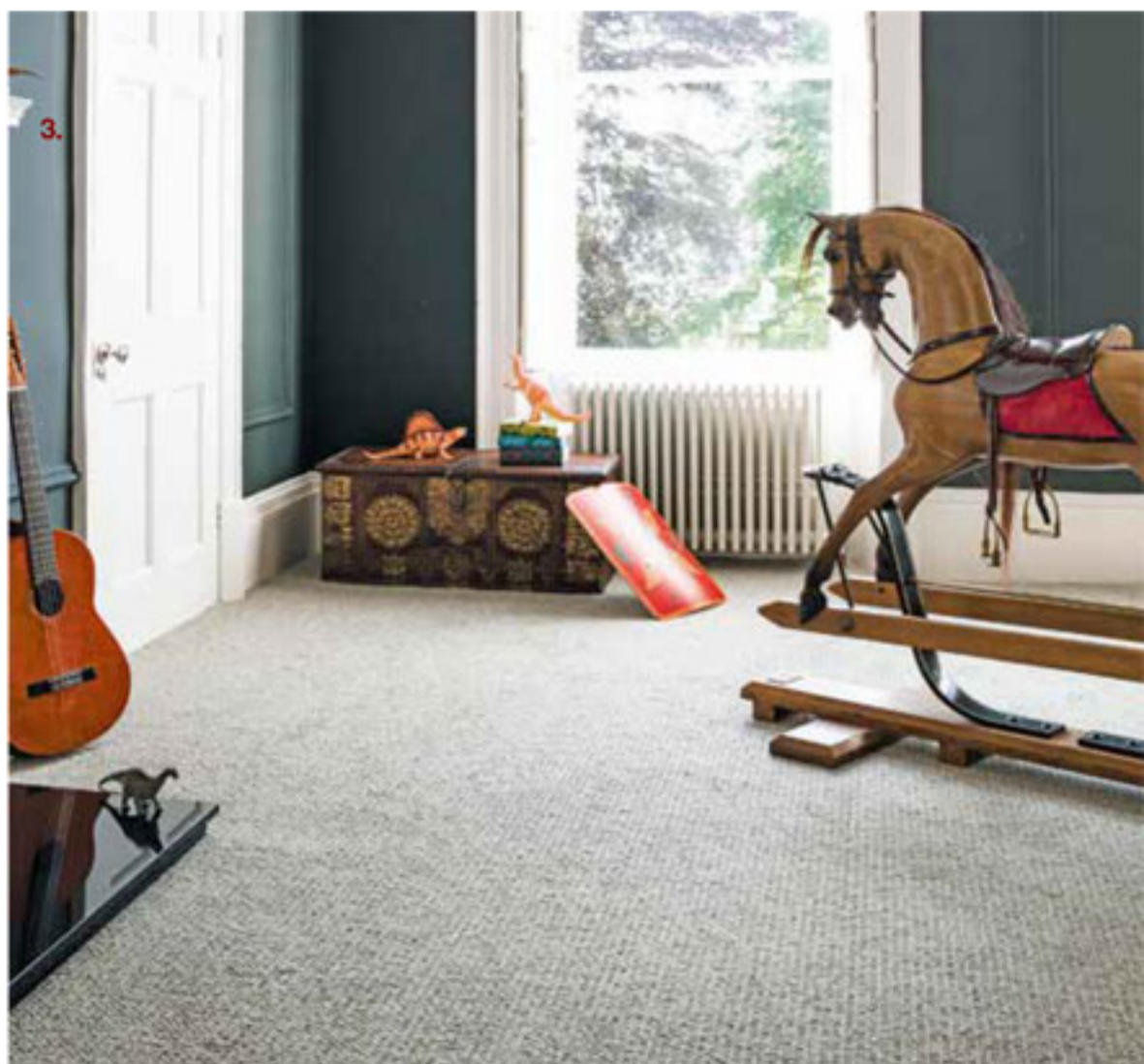
↑ In the loop

The herringbone design of this Natural Tweed Eriskay loop pile carpet gives it a modern lift. Made from 100% undyed wool, it costs £44.92 per m sq, Brockway (01562 828200; www.brockway.co.uk)



↑ Old new

Axminster carpets have been made in Devon since 1755. Proof that the manufacturer is still producing up-to-date designs comes in the form of Hazy Days, a collection of pure-wool woven carpets in soft greys and subtle patterns, including Leapfrog Swansdown, £86 per m sq, shown here (01297 32244; www.axminstercarpets.co.uk)



↑ Grey shade

The soft pile of this 100% wool Enchanted carpet, £105 per m, from Crucial Trading makes it a good choice for all rooms in the house, including bedrooms. Available in five modern neutrals—Castle Grey is shown here (01562 742747; www.crucialtrading.com)

↑ Classic grandeur

Lapicida can always be relied on for luxury, evident in this Illusion tile, made from marble and limestone to highlight the subtle beauty of the stones. Each tile measures 28.7cm by 27.1cm (11in by 10½in) and costs £474 per m sq (020-3012 1000; www.lapicida.com)

→ Good underfoot

Tone carpet in Alloy, £63 per m sq, is made of 80% wool and 20% nylon and is designed to stand up well in busy areas of the home. It's from the Fusion range by Ulster Carpets (www.ulstercarpets.com; 028 3833 4433)



Interiors focus



↑ Checkerboard

A smart take on marquetry for your floor, this Intarsia oak flooring with black-granite inlay comes in 60cm by 60cm (24in by 24in) pre-assembled pieces, £229 each, Devon&Devon (www.devon-devon.com; 020-7221 5137)

-> Subtle statement

In a striking pattern in soft grey, the Kuba rug is made of hand-knotted Tibetan wool, £520 per m sq, The Rug Company (020-7384 0980; www.therugcompany.com)

↓ Soft stone

We've seen marble-effect worktops and now it's the turn of carpets. Barefoot Marble 100% wool carpet by Alternative Flooring features a subtle stripe pattern, shown here in Morwad colourway, it costs £73.45 per m sq (01264 335111; www.alternativeflooring.com)



↑ Pattern punch

Herringbone patterns aren't limited to wood parquet, as the layout of these Moleanos Blue Honed Limestone 45.7cm by 10cm (18in by 4in) tiles proves. They cost £65.90 per m sq, Mandarin Stone (01600 715444; www.mandarinstone.com)



↑ Colour confident

Inspired by the colours of Japanese lanterns, non-symmetrical stripes combine to create a statement design that's balanced in hue and tone. Kyoto Lantern flatweave 100% wool rug, 320cm by 250cm (126in by 98½in), £2,220, Roger Oates (020-7351 2288; www.rogeroates.com)

