

# Turkey Red

by Ruth Higham

The River Leven runs just a few miles from Balloch at the foot of Loch Lomond to Dumbarton Rock on the shores of the Clyde. This area is the home of the Loch Lomond Quilt Show, with 10 exhibition sites between the very banks of Loch Lomond to the Riverside Church in Dumbarton. Local writer, Tobias Smollet described the Leven as “the most beautiful river in the kingdom” back in the early 18th century.



Within fifty years of Smollet writing the Leven’s fast flowing, oxygenated waters had been harnessed to serve the needs of an enormous industry whose designs would travel around the world. When in the early 19th century the Glasgow factories producing Turkey cloth found the Clyde and rivers feeding into it were too slow

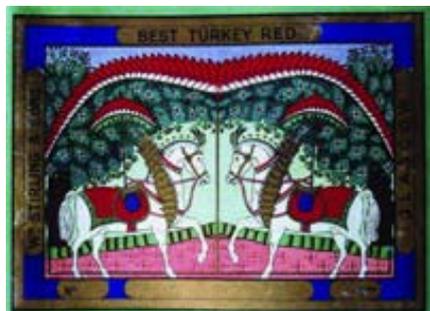
flowing and the air of the city too polluted, it seemed natural to move fifteen miles to the west to the Leven valley. Soon the banks of the Leven were filled with huge factories, most belonging to the two Orr-Ewing brothers, John and Archibald, and to William Stirling.

We are all more familiar with Turkey-red than we may think. Images of 19th Century European expansion would be incomplete without it - whether the red handkerchief of the emigrant, the sailor’s all-purpose bandana or even David Livingstone’s bright red undershirt! Since the beginning of manufacture, scraps of Turkey-red have found their way into quilts. While the colours around them have faded, the red remain fresh and vibrant.

Although the final product is a delight to the eye, dyeing Turkey-red fabric is not pleasant or simple and the secret process took a long time to discover. In 1765 two Greek dyers from Smyrna were lured to Rouen by the French government. They possessed the valuable secret of dyeing linen and cotton a vibrant, non fading shade of red. The process was brought to Glasgow by Rouen dyer Pierre Jacques Papillon in 1785, who was introduced to Glasgow by George Mackintosh and David Dale.

Thirty eight different ingredients including rancid castor oil, alum, tin, calcium, ox blood, dung and madder root were transformed into a permanent startling red dye. It was a lengthy, foul smelling, steamy

process known as “the craft” by the local workers. In his seminal text on Madder Red, Robert Chenciner details the method Pierre Jacques Papillon used. Six separate steps take place before the actual dyeing can start, then fabric is boiled in a dye bath containing “2 gallons of Ox blood, 28 pails milk-warm water and 25 lbs of dried madder”. Fixing and brightening would then follow.



Cloth was produced in enormous quantities. By 1886 William Stirling and Sons' nine works employed 7,000 people who dyed and printed 160 million yards of cloth and 20 million pounds of cotton yarn a year. Orders were dispatched to India, Japan, China, West Africa and the USA. Glorious labels were designed for each of the different export markets. They featured peacocks, elephants, goddesses and mythical animals as well as factory building and industrial images. Labels from West Dunbartonshire Council Collection.

The patterns were outrageously bright and complicated. New patterns were always being produced, influenced by fashions in Paris, traditional Indian textiles, Polynesian designs and simply by the bright colours available.



By 1900 synthetic dyes started to take over. The change was slowed down by World War I, but the introduction of the new dyes signalled the end of the massive Turkey-red production in the Vale of Leven. By World War II the factories were largely gone but even in 2008 we met a woman who recalled working in the Turkey-red industry in the 1960s.



Although the factories are gone a few glimpses of the Turkey-red industry remain: Jamestown Parish Church still has Turkey-red dyed altar curtains; quilts have been found locally featuring Turkey-red fabrics; wonderful pattern books and archive material are owned by West Dunbartonshire Council. There are still local people who worked in “the craft” and who have fabric and pattern books tucked away. Renton residents are known locally as “Jeelie eaters” (jeelie = jelly or jam) as factory workers would have red hands and arms from the dyeing process.

The waters of the River Leven run clean again, new houses are being built on factory sites and local people work in new industries. The story of an amazing heritage in Turkey-red is partly told but there is so much more to discover and piece together.

Seeing Red: Scotland's Exotic Textile Heritage A catalogue containing images and three essays from an exhibition curated by Liz Arthur at the Collins Gallery, Strathclyde University, Glasgow.  
Email:collinsgalery@strath.ac.uk for details on buying a catalogue.

The Red Dyes: Cochineal, Madder and Murex Purple by Gosta Sandberg. Pub: Lark Books. This tells the stories of red dyes. (Although the author incorrectly sites the Vale of Leven in north/eastern Scotland)

Patchwork, Quilting and Applique by Caroline Crabtree & Christine Shaw. Pub: Thames and Hudson. This has a small section on Turkey Red quilts.

<http://www.colour-experience.org>  
<http://www.scottishtextiles.org.uk>  
<http://www.gla.ac.uk/archives>