Eleven Layers of Wallpaper from Clarendon Terrace: a reflection of social change

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There has been a recent surge of interest in the study of historic wallpapers, although many regard them as one of the least important of the decorative art forms. In some ways this low esteem is to be expected since many of the fragments which exist are soiled, faded and discoloured by paste. They are difficult to remove from the wall surface and usually removed hastily, before the demolition or redecoration of an old building. However, their study can be rewarding in spite of the difficulties; sometimes a rich and detailed record of stylistic changes and colour preferences exists for the enthusiast to examine and document.

It is not always possible to date a wallpaper by stylistic analysis alone because popular patterns were frequently reproduced. But within the context of other known factors, such as architectural information relating to the building in which the paper was used, the printing technique involved and comparison with other documented patterns of textiles, carpets and tiles, it is sometimes possible to arrive at a reasonably accurate date of manufacture.

As an illustration of this procedure, the following is a study of eleven layers of wallpaper which were recently removed from the front upstairs room at 212 Clarendon Street, East Melbourne, the northern house of the three which together form Clarendon Terrace. (fig. 1) This was originally a handsome room stretching across the full width of the house with three windows to the west and a marble fireplace at the northern end. It is assumed that it was the drawing room in the manner of many English terrace houses.

Designed by Osgood Pritchard, the building was erected in 1857-58 for Charles Lister, a wine and spirit merchant, hotel and brewery owner. Lister did not occupy the house until 1863 but before that his tenant was M.B. Jackson, engineer to the Sewerage and Water Commissioners.
The first layer reveals that this room was wallpapered in the latest contemporary fashion. (fig. 2) Although the paper was most likely of English manufacture, it shows a strong French influence. It has a white ground with wide floral stripes made up of field and common garden flowers including roses, tulips and delphiniums, block printed in twelve colours with a narrow, alternating stripe of grey leaves. Although now damaged, the opaque, bright pastel colours remain on the surface of the paper as a result of the printing process.

In terms of world fashion in the mid-nineteenth century the choice was up-to-date. Queen Victoria's sitting room at Old Balmoral, as recorded in a watercolour of the mid-eighteen-fifties, was decorated with a wallpaper of similar characteristics. 3 Floral designs of this type were imported to America from France at about the same time, 4 and in England, firms such as Jeffrey & Co. were producing floral stripes in direct competition with those manufactured in France. 5

The second layer is a splendid example of the subdued wallpapers which catered for those with more sober taste. (fig. 3) Small, regular motifs lent themselves to early printing techniques. Authorities such as Augustus Welby Pugin and Owen Jones had much to say about contemporary design and were influential in bringing about acceptance of geometric, more formal designs in place of naturalistic florals. This wallpaper is machine-printed on a very high quality paper, in shades of brown with a white background. The incomplete registration mark on the selvedge shows that the design was registered with the British Patent Office no later than 1867. Although the muted colouring resulted in a design of quiet character, it is very elegant. The leaves which form the diaper pattern are beautifully delineated, and the small motif in the centre of the scrollwork is a typical detail of the eighteen-sixties.

Since the owner, Charles Lister, became the occupant of number 212 in 1863, it is interesting to contemplate whether it was his household which preferred a simple geometric pattern to the previous stripes of gaily coloured flowers.

The third layer reveals a colour more usually associated with the Victorian drawing room. (fig. 4) Printed on paper of excellent quality and pale.

HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT, VOL 3, NO 3, 1984 PAGE 23
Figure 1. Clarendon Terrace, East Melbourne (1857-58)

Figure 2. French influence mid-nineteenth century wallpaper

Figure 3. c.1860s wallpaper
blue background, the arabesques formed of fine gilt lines enclose, in each repeat, a formalized group of three deeper blue flowers, leaves and buds. The small finial, interlocking of lines and formality of the design are reminiscent of patterns used in Christopher Dresser's styles of ornament. 6

The great variety of decoration which was used in this room during a time span of less than two decades provides an indication of the care which is required when suggesting that a wallpaper is typical of a period.

By the time the room was decorated for the fourth time Melbourne still appeared to be keeping up to date with overseas trends. (fig 5) This layer of wallpaper shows the Japanese influence which began in England in the mid-eighteen-seventies and spread to America and Europe, partly through the Aesthetic Movement. Many leading wallpaper designers, including Lewis Day and Bruce J. Talbert, incorporated Japanese motifs and characteristics in their work. In this case, semi-naturalistic floral forms are superimposed on a background of overlapping gilt scales, which together create a rather free, Japanese-influenced pattern. The original colour has faded, largely due to the following application of paste, but it is not hard to imagine that this wallpaper with its blue, white and gilt pattern, when fresh and new, would have been a suitably handsome decoration for a drawing room of about 1880.

Wallpaper layer number five again reflects the fashion for formalized floral designs, although the species of flowers are almost always recognizable. (fig. 6) By the eighteen eighties some of the design principles preached by William Morris influenced many artistic products even though Morris's own work appealed to a limited intellectual market. In this example tiger lilies and blossoms bloom from the same vertical, upward thrusting stems. In the manner of Morris, who considered it important to mask the construction of the pattern, the repeats are not immediately obvious. Examination of protected areas shows that once again a blue background was chosen, although today the colour is difficult to discern.

To some extent, popular taste reacted against the creative and interesting designs which resulted from the use of two-dimensional, flat patterns, and the sixth layer of wallpaper reflects this attitude. (fig. 7)
Figure 4. c.1870 wallpaper

Figure 5. c.late 1870s wallpaper

Figure 6. c.1880s wallpaper
Figure 7. c.1890s wallpaper

Figure 8. 1910 wallpaper
Clarendon Terrace belonged to the Marks family and its executors from 1875 to 1917. Members of this family, which operated jewellery, watchmaking, electroplating and optical businesses in the city, occupied the northern house until 1889. After this date the house was let, and it is interesting to note that the wallpaper, after this time, is of quality inferior to that of the preceding layers. One can surmise that the readily available, cheaper papers which flooded the market towards the end of the nineteenth century were considered to be of a quality suitable for a tenant.

The sixth layer was probably of cream or drab background when new, but has browned during the intervening years, resulting in an unfortunately dull impression. The American wallpaper expert, C. L. Frangiamore, explains that 'expanses of paper browned by the acids of the wood pulp used in its technologically advanced production still prejudice many against the whole subject of late nineteenth century wallpaper'.

Typical of the naturalistic designs which found favour at the end of the century, this sixth layer has full-blown, cabbage-like roses, amongst other flower varieties, growing from curving stems. Such wallpapers were often hung in a room which used other floral patterns in carpets and fabrics, all combined in a free and uncoordinated way, helping to create the picture of the typical Victorian interior which still lingers on, somewhat incorrectly, to this day.

Art nouveau designs, proved to have been very popular in Melbourne during the early years of the twentieth century, have been bypassed in this room. Layer number seven is a design which was registered at the British Patent Office in 1910. (fig. 8) It shows some vestige of art nouveau influence, with flowers arranged in groups of three and encircled by formalized leaves, set out in a diaper pattern on a strong green background. The colour is representative of the early twentieth century and the quality of the paper is poor. It uses the background colour of the paper as part of the design, a practice often adopted in the manufacture of cheaper wallpapers of the period.

The last four papers are less spectacular than those which preceded them. Perhaps this shows the decline in popularity of wallpaper from about the
nineteen-twenties, and particularly the decline of their importance in decorating schemes, since they were usually produced in shades of drab, fawn or brown. After the building was let in 1917 it became a boarding house in 1926. The inner residential areas which surround the heart of Melbourne suffered a social decline for some years and this is reflected in the quality of wallpapers in this room.

Layer number eight has an undistinguished, loose floral pattern combined with some form of festooning, all on a pale green background partly obscured by a later coat of paint. (fig. 9) It was covered by layer nine, a cheap quality mottled paper in light brown. (fig. 10) This was followed by a nineteen-twenties floral in a blurred design of uniform depth of colour, resulting in an even, dark, overall pattern typical of the period. The eleventh and last layer is again an undistinguished mottled fawn paper, dating from the nineteen thirties. The last three decorative schemes were austere in both cost and quality.

The wallpapers discussed were used in a time-span of about eighty years so that each change in decoration of the room averaged out at slightly less than ten years. It is possible, therefore, to trace the decorating fashions and the decline in social significance of the building.

It was only possible to salvage one frieze - a geometric pattern used with the tenth layer. However, it could be expected that most papers, from at least the eighteen-seventies, would have been finished by a frieze beneath the cornice. No dado appears to have been used in the room, but this is understandable since it was considered less necessary to use one in a drawing room than in a hall, passage or dining room.

The collecting and separating of layers of wallpaper is a tedious and difficult task, but when they reveal a range of decorating styles and reflect social changes, as in the case of Clarendon Terrace, the task is well worthwhile.
Acknowledgement

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References

1. C. Kellaway, research notes, National Trust of Australia (Victoria), 1979.
2. ibid.