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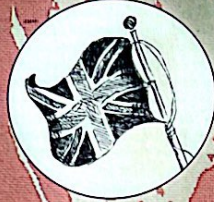
DECORATIVE TILES

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Natural selection

Drawing on her chemistry background to develop handmade dyes, Nicola Cliffe screen prints her beautiful, flora-inspired sustainable textiles from her peaceful garden studio

Words by Heather Dixon | Photographs by Jeremy Phillips

This image: Nicola and Ernie, her Parson Russell terrier, outside the larch-clad garden studio. The roll of fabric she holds is K-blossom stripe, priced £74 per metre for two colours
Opposite: A detail of the screen for her Creeping Ivy design. 'I print all of the fabric to order. What I love most about what I am doing is having complete control over the entire process,' Nicola says



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ix years ago Nicola Cliffe was teaching chemistry at senior school, never imagining for one minute that life was about to take an exciting – and completely unexpected – change of direction.

Within a few months she had left her 25-year career in the sciences to follow a dramatically new lifestyle embedded firmly in the arts, more specifically, sustainable textiles. 'Sketching, painting and sewing had always been a great antidote to teaching,' says Nicola. 'From as young as seven or eight, I've been drawing and making things, so it has always been a part of my life as a way of unwinding, but I had never considered it as a career before.'

The chance came about when she resigned from a long-standing teaching post to re-evaluate her future and explore new avenues. 'It just made so much sense,' she says. 'I was passionate about textiles and it seemed like as good a time as any to give it a go.' Before long she had secured a coveted place on an MA course at the Chelsea College of Arts and Design – fulfilling a long-held dream – and was learning all about circular economy, the organic cotton trade and the role of natural dyes beyond a niche market.



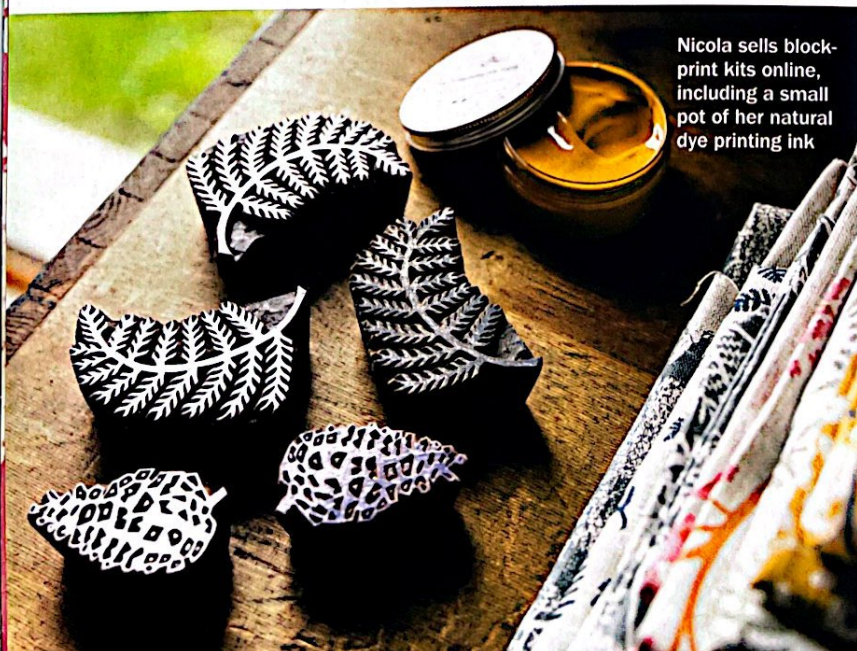
It turned out to be the 'best year' of her life. As well as understanding the broader concept of sustainable textiles, she also learned the practical elements of screen printing and repeating patterns; skills which gave her the confidence to set up her own business from her home in Stamford, Lincolnshire, as a textile designer and printer.

Madder Cutch & Co was launched on a secondhand table in the garage, later moving into a timber and steel-framed garden studio, which doubles as a home gym. The unusual name evolved from Madder (*Rubia tinctoria*) – a Eurasian plant whose roots are used to create a natural red dye or pigment – and cutch (otherwise known as catechu), a water-soluble resin obtained from certain tropical plants for tanning or dyeing.

It wasn't long before Nicola's beautiful creations caught the attention of Helen Cormack, founder of London fabric boutique Tissus d'Hélène, who loved Nicola's concept of using natural plant dyes to create beautifully designed linens.

'Helen was coming to Stamford and asked if she could drop by and see me,' says Nicola. 'It was quite an extraordinary feeling to have Helen in my house, looking at my designs, but she liked what she saw and asked me to go back to her with some new designs. It was her positive response and enthusiasm that encouraged me to build the studio and create a website,' explains Nicola.

By 2018, she was taking regular orders and starting to expand her products – with the help of youngest son, Bertie – offering pots of handmade dyes, hand-sewn pencil cases, plant holders, cushions, block-printing kits, zip bags, notebooks,



Nicola sells block-print kits online, including a small pot of her natural dye printing ink



memo boards and other creative gift ideas alongside her growing collection of beautiful textiles.

'I love gardens and drawing flowers in their natural form,' says Nicola. 'It's not just about drawing plants for me, though. Sometimes I find an old sketch or drawing I have done and instantly see how it could work in a pattern. My favourite design is 'Achillea Ground Small', which came out of my college days. It was the first print I did that actually gave me hope that I was doing the right thing. It was printed in indigo on a natural linen background. I shall keep that sample piece forever.'

Although Nicola followed a science-based career from leaving school, she never once lost sight of her creative skills and was constantly inspired by the countryside around the village where she grew up on the outskirts of Stamford. She skipped O level art and went straight to A level, maintaining an active interest in drawing and sewing alongside her studies for a joint science degree at Nottingham University, a PGCE teacher training course, and raising a family of three boys - George, now 28, Ted, 25 and Bertie, 18, with husband Jonathan, a dentist.

'I have always been a do-er as well as a thinker,' she says. 'My father taught me practical things like wallpapering and basic carpentry, and we even changed a car engine together. This was back in ►

Clockwise from far left: Nicola sketches ideas for designs in her notebooks; she holds a full-sized screen ready for screen printing; she mixes her own natural dye printing paste, which she also sells on her website; the printed Creeping Ivy design; Nicola needs

the help of her friend and assistant, Helen Taylor, to manoeuvre the six-foot-long screen, over the top of which the ink or dye is passed using a long squeegee that then presses the ink through the open areas of the stencil, imprinting the design on the linen





Clockwise from above: Rolls of Nicola's hand-printed linens in various designs, including Achillea Foliage, Olive's Room and Blossom, are laid out on her seven-foot printing table – a new collection, inspired by Chateau Dumas in the south of France, where Nicola has

attended workshops, is due for release this spring; Ernie is her regular companion in the garden studio, which Nicola describes as 'a big box built on a stainless-steel frame and clad with vertical larch timbers'; her fabrics are made into a range of products



the days when cars were just an assembly of mechanical parts. I learnt to sew at primary school and really got into using a machine when we had our first home. Working with my hands was a way to give my brain some down time during my teaching career,' she adds.

Nicola's professional switch from chemistry to art was not, however, quite as radical as it first appeared. The use of unregulated chemicals in the textiles industries overseas, and Nicola's knowledge of Azo dyes, combined with a fascination for the work of William Morris and the chemist Henry Perkins, created a sound and varied basis for developing her range of natural plant dyes and sustainable textiles.

Ever the teacher, Nicola is also hoping to develop work experience opportunities and continue running workshops over the coming year, so that she can encourage others who want to pursue a career in art and textiles.

'When I was at school we had to choose between sciences and art, and it was generally accepted that I would have greater success following a science-based career. Art-based careers were never really encouraged,' says Nicola. 'Now the tide is turning, and I think we are seeing a resurgence of artisan makers and small, home-based businesses, especially where there is an eco element involved.'

'It's a very exciting time to be involved as I think everything is gradually turning full circle. The demand for eco-friendly products is huge and natural dyes on linen are definitely the way forward in textile design.'

To find out more about Nicola's work and textile designs, visit maddercutchandco.com

