



*A fine example of a pre-war embroidered and quilted bedspread, although eiderdowns were by then immensely popular too.*



*The somewhat later style; a tailored, quilted bedspread with a plain Teale eiderdown on top - typically 1950-60 era.*



*For those who disliked close proximity, matching single beds were popular; hence the enormous number of 'single' sets.*



*Made in every style and colour, here is a combination of double spread and eiderdown in white crepe silk.*



*The cream satin 'Hollywood' set from the once notable firm of J Greenhouse of Shoreditch. Very typically a pre-war style, but still in production well into the 60s.*



*Styles like this 'Stagmoss' labelled quilt, from the Carlisle-based Morton Sundour firm, were popular both pre and post-war.*

## Traditional British quilts and bedspreads

By William J Martin

Not so long ago, the average British home was at about the same temperature as the outside weather. Apart from a few living rooms where, with luck, there might be a cheerful open fire, bedrooms were most usually damp and chilly places for a good part of the year. Not surprisingly, beds were topped by some kind of quilted cover, if not an 'eiderdown' as they were commonly if somewhat inaccurately described.

Nowadays, in the wake of central heating, coupled with the remorseless advance of the 'duvet' (notwithstanding their deplorably sloppy shapelessness) the days of the carefully made bed with its stylishly tailored bedcovers have been all but forgotten. Indeed you might have to be at least fifty years old to fully remember just how ubiquitous eiderdowns and bedspreads were in the 40s and 50s and before.

Now that they have practically vanished, the few that survive have begun to acquire a quasi antique status, and a growing popularity that nobody even guessed at five years ago. Now eiderdowns and decorative bedspreads are hot items! Rarely to be found, if in anything like good condition, they command extravagant prices at antique fairs and auction rooms where once they washed up plentifully along with all the other flotsam of house sales and deceaseds' estates.

For the best examples were very fine indeed, and had a long and noble lineage. There is an often repeated excerpt from a 1584 inventory of Warwick Castle which records, among the possessions of Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester..... *A faire quilte of crymson sattin, vj breadths, iij yards, 3 quarters naile deepe, all lozenged over with silver twiste, in*

*the midst a cinquefoil within a garland of ragged staves, fringed rounde aboute with a small fringe of crymson silke, lined through with white Fustian..* Although Robert Dudley's 'quilte' was almost certainly not an eiderdown, its description could come close to that of many of the 'down quilts' being turned out nearly four hundred years later.

Peculiarly, it was here in Britain that the eiderdown proved itself so especially popular. It soon moved from being a prized possession of the rich to those of lower social orders, albeit with much cheapening, but if only on account of its essential utility. Nevertheless, the most elaborate and, of course, most expensive were without exception outstanding examples of fine workmanship and design, together with luxury and display which has never subsequently been surpassed.



*Contrasting colours proved highly popular too.*



*Black always made a powerful impact, as with this beautifully florally embroidered eiderdown.*



*Finely embroidered, tailored bedspreads were always popular in comfortable centrally heated homes where a quilt may have proved superfluous.*

The man who must be credited with the establishment of the eiderdown was one James McLintock, whose company name was to become almost synonymous with his product for almost a century. He was the son of a poor Aberdeenshire weaver who, in the early 1800s had made his way south to Barnsley, an important centre of weaving. Around 1860 James encountered some silk weavers who were discarding fluffy little balls of silk filament, colloquially known as 'noils' after similar wool trade waste. He conceived the idea of sandwiching these insulating noils between two layers of cloth to form a coverlet. It is a measure of his imagination and ambition that the 'cloth' was, more often than not silk or satin and his coverlets were taken up by the gentry. Then it was not long before he began to experiment with eider duck down instead of noils, and so the 'eiderdown' was born.

In the age of Great Exhibitions, McLintock's eiderdowns soon began to make their mark. Philadelphia (1876), Paris (1878) and at the Edinburgh Exhibition 1886 at which they were awarded yet another Gold Medal they exhibited .....*a very costly and elaborate Real Eider Down Quilt made from wine shade satin with the Royal Arms embroi-*

*dered in Gold Silk in the centre and the monogram AV in each corner.* It had been McLintock's intention to present this masterpiece to Her Majesty but for some reason he fell foul of the Lord Chamberlain's protocols and was frustrated. Rather later, Queen Mary and, later still, Queen Elizabeth (now the Queen Mother) were to be recipients.

By now the pattern was set. The eiderdown was to be synonymous with luxury and display; the finest materials - silks, satins, taffetas, covering the best and lightest goose downs - embellished with fine and elaborate embroidery and other decoration were to be the hallmarks of the best down quilts and the grandest bedrooms for nearly a century.

Right up to the outbreak of the Second World War, the down quilt industry thrived. Afterwards it tended to struggle against a tide of adverse influences which included six years of progressively tightening austerity and shortages of just about everything. Furthermore a new vogue for 'Danish' furniture design which was swiftly and generally badly copied and labelled 'contemporary', caused interior style to lurch sharply towards, what can in retrospect be recognised as the positively ugly and crude. The most un-British

thing of all, central heating, began to take hold, even in modest homes. Then people did something else new. They travelled to places like Switzerland or Austria to ski, discovering the duvet which is undeniably labour-saving.

In the early 60s, stores like Selfridges stocked McLintock quilts by the score. Harrods had their own labels sewn to the best Edward Teale produced. In 1977 McLintocks went into liquidation. Many lesser firms followed. By the 1980s hardly any survived save for a few bespoke manufacturers.

They may have been prone to wear and tear as the result of frequent handling, for a down quilt is inclined to be fragile. They were easy victims of spills, and breakfasts taken in bed, worst of all cigarette burns. They did become unfashionable for a time and largely overlooked when it seemed easy enough to replace them from the nearest store. But it cannot be denied the eiderdowns and bedspreads of a generation or two ago were, at their height, real works of art.

Who could say what it would cost to even try to reproduce such superlative material quality and workmanship today? There have been predictions of a come-back, but on balance it would seem very unlikely.



*Above and Below: The prominent firm of Edward Teale was always outstanding for the quality and execution of their embroidery design.*



*A particularly elaborate set of embroidered bedspread and an 'Embro' labelled quilt, the mark of Morris Brothers of Birkenhead.*



*Many eiderdowns had their own integral valances and in this case a separate valanced pillow cover.*



*A very fine pair of post-war embroidered satin bedcovers.*



*Above: Very many eiderdowns were made in asymmetrical or 'directional' designs. Below: The geometrical wine colour quilt is embellished with a combination of applique decoration as well as embroidery.*

