



Some of the 5,000 or so designs held in The Crowson Archive.

# A PASSION FOR PATTERN

*Crowson Fabrics Ltd was a household name in the textiles industry for over 50 years, says **Amanda Harling**. Now, Sharon Crowson is ensuring the family legacy lives on through its wonderful archive ▶*





**LEFT** Sharon Crowson and Teo Ormond-Skeaping look at documents from The Crowson Archive. **RIGHT** A small selection of the vast collection of some 5,000 design documents amassed by Derek Crowson.

Archives,' she says, explaining that the name was taken from one of several companies that Crowson Fabrics Ltd bought during a period of expansion in the 1980s. The name felt apt, she says, because the fabrics and now also wallcoverings the company produces are all based on historic, archive designs. Some, such as the classic scrolling 'Tree of Life' and the best-selling Amadour, have recently been reworked from the original 19th-century documents. 'I've changed the scale and introduced new colourways,' Sharon explains. The latest collection includes vintage designs from the historic archival brand, such as the Shala stripe, which is based on a classic Indian floral motif.

Over the last four years, the archive has been an invaluable source of inspiration for Sharon and, as such, she felt it was a resource that was too important to keep to herself. In 2019, after discussing it with her father, they took the decision to make the archive available on a wider basis. 'The whole collection has been curated and digitised,' she says. 'It was a massive undertaking by digitalisation officers Teo Ormond-Skeaping and his partner Lena Dobrowolska, who moved into the coach house next to my parents' home on their Sussex estate in order to catalogue the entire collection so even the tiniest fragment is recorded.'

It has taken over a year, but now The Crowson Archive website is active and, once a designer has registered, they can search through the varied genres, from Jacobean to Abstract, and license a design for a fee. 'Knowing that this eclectic collection can be accessed as a design resource gives my father enormous pride and pleasure, almost equal to the pleasure he derived from travelling the world and acquiring each and every example.' [crowsonarchive.com](http://crowsonarchive.com); [thedesignarchives.com](http://thedesignarchives.com)

designers and colourists. 'Talented graduates were spotted at degree shows and given their first job,' she recalls. 'We have a couple of early designs by Neisha Crosland – my father had a good eye!' It was his discerning eye, she says, on which the business was built. 'He could tell at a glance whether a design was balanced, if it flowed, if it would sell. He had a passion for creative pattern design, and over the years he acquired some 5,000 examples.' Travelling widely on business, wherever he went, from France to Japan, Derek Crowson would visit specialist dealers, textile designers and creative design studios in order to trawl through their portfolios, searching for textile artwork designs he could envisage being future ranges.

When he finally decided to retire and wind down the company, Derek Crowson's vast archive was moved to the family home in Sussex. It is now housed in the old squash court: plan chests stacked one on top of the other, each one a trove of wonderful designs.

In 2016, like her father before her, Sharon felt it was time to set up on her own. 'He gave me the experience, the breadth of knowledge and, ultimately, the confidence to start The Design

**S**haron Crowson is not a professional designer, she insists, as she reveals her latest collection for The Design Archives. But, having been immersed in the textile industry all her life, she concedes that design is part of her DNA. Sharon's father is Derek Crowson, founder of the hugely successful textile company Crowson Fabrics Ltd. Launched in 1978 on a hunch, it went on to become a household name.

'My father was about to turn 40 and, like many men, it was a turning point in his life,' Sharon recalls. 'Having worked for Moygashel, a leading textile company, for many years, he decided his days of being an employee were over.' Convinced there was a market for affordable and stylish textiles based on historic designs, he took the leap and, before long, Crowson Fabrics Ltd was selling upwards of 10,000,000 yards of fabric a year.

Sharon joined the family firm in the 1980s, abandoning her A-levels to do so. 'I couldn't wait to leave school and start work,' she says. Over the next 30 years she worked in every department, from the reception desk up. The company had its own design studio, at times employing as many as 20



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