

Conservation

Stories



If Walls Could Talk with Dr Louise Atkinson

By **Dr Louise Atkinson**

29 August 2025

The Chinese wallpaper in the East Bedroom at Harewood House is the focus of a new project, *If Walls Could Talk*, which combines historical research with participatory art in partnership with Chinese-speaking communities in Leeds.

Led by artist and researcher Louise Atkinson, the project examines how these wallpapers were made, how they travelled to Britain, and how they might be understood today. It focuses on the connections between Britain and China, and the ways in which these designs reflect histories of trade, labour, and cultural heritage.

Originally purchased by Edwin Lascelles, the wallpaper was installed in 1769 by Thomas Chippendale's craftsmen in the Chintz Bedroom as part of a broader interior scheme. Sometime during the 1880s, it was taken down and stored in an outbuilding, where it remained for over a century, before being rediscovered in 1988.

East Bedroom of Harewood House

Following restoration by Alyson McDermott, it was reinstalled downstairs on the visitor route to coincide with the China in Yorkshire celebrations accompanying the Beijing Olympics in 2008.

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The History of Chinese wallpaper

The majority of historic Chinese wallpapers were produced for export by artisans in Canton (now Guangzhou) between the 1740s and 1790s, and catered specifically to the European market. At the time, Canton was the only Chinese port open to foreign trade under the Canton System, which restricted contact between foreign merchants and Chinese officials. Trade was confined to the months between April and October, after which European ships would return home.

While commodities such as tea, silk, and porcelain were shipped in bulk by East India Company ships, Chinese wallpapers were transported in smaller quantities. These wallpapers were usually acquired as part of the private trade allowed to East India Company officers. Their labour-intensive production, long journey times, and restricted supply of Chinese wallpapers contributed to their high value.

The trade in Chinese wallpaper, like many imported luxury goods of the time, was sustained by wealth derived from colonial systems, including the exploitation of enslaved people and profits from Caribbean plantations. The Lascelles family, who built and furnished Harewood House, were deeply involved in both the transatlantic slave economy and the East India Company network. Their fortune underpinned the purchase and installation of Chinese export art, including wallpaper.

Block printing and hand painting

Chinese wallpapers varied in method and style. Earlier examples were typically block-printed onto handmade mulberry paper using carved woodblocks to create outlines. These outlines were then coloured by hand.

Changing the current slide of this carousel will change the current slide of the thumbnail carousel that follows.



These wallpapers appear to have been produced in larger quantities and feature stylised birds, flowers, butterflies, and rocks arranged to form a continuous panoramic scene. Examples of this style can be seen at numerous country house museums across the UK, including nearby Temple Newsam House and Nostell Priory. By contrast, the Chinese wallpaper at Harewood House was entirely hand-painted and details a series of images of people engaged in scenes of rural and agricultural life.

Pictures of Tilling and Weaving

The wallpaper shows a sequence of scenes illustrating the production of four of the goods which made up the Chinese domestic and export economies: rice, silk, porcelain, and tea. The wallpaper imagery is derived from the Chinese tradition of illustrated manuals, specifically the Pictures of Tilling and Weaving or Gengzhitu 耕織圖. This series, first created in the 12th century to show the value of agricultural labour, was revived in the 18th century by Qing emperors who distributed the images as woodblock prints to promote ideas of good governance and economic stability.

The scenes in the Harewood wallpaper are directly based on this visual tradition, which is also evident in the wallpapers at Saltram House and Coutts Bank. For example, one panel shows the silkworm hatching process, with women feeding larvae mulberry leaves. Another

shows offerings made to the Silkworm Deity, reflecting customs linked to sericulture. Some elements, such as the controversial queue hairstyle, reflect the time and context in which the wallpaper was made. These details were not always understood by European viewers, but they remain important indicators of cultural meaning.

If Walls Could Talk aims to open up these histories and make space for new interpretations, setting the scene for a new augmented reality intervention in the East Bedroom in September 2025. Developed from the creative workshops, the project aims to offer new interpretations, rooted in both historical research and contemporary voices, to explore how we read and respond to the objects in historic houses today.

You can find out more about the project by following [@ifwallscouldtalk](#) on Instagram.

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Further reading and research

Harewood boasts an extensive range of learning opportunities for college and university students across the site including the House, Gardens and Grounds. We currently offer self-guided visits and a selection of tours for College and University groups. However, the team is more than happy to work with educators to develop bespoke collaborative projects.



Super/Market

Sunday 19 Oct 2025

Super/Market is an augmented reality experience created in collaboration with Chinese-speaking participants as a contemporary parallel to the Chinese export wallpaper in the East Bedroom.



East Bedroom

This room is decorated with hand-painted, 18th century Chinese wallpaper. It creates a single mural around the entire room and...



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