

The

ENGLISH HOME

Celebrating the essence of English style

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COUNTRYSIDE HIDEAWAYS

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Global Gatherers

PART V: COLONIAL STYLE

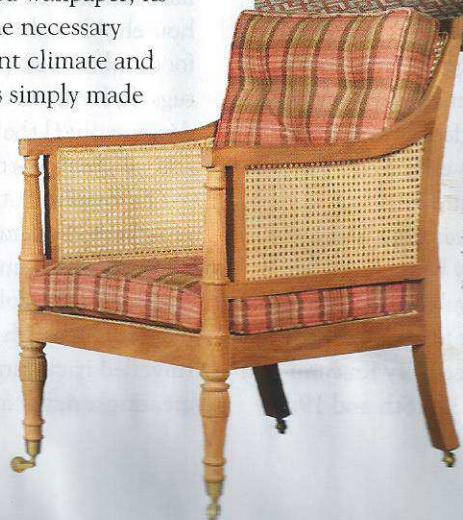
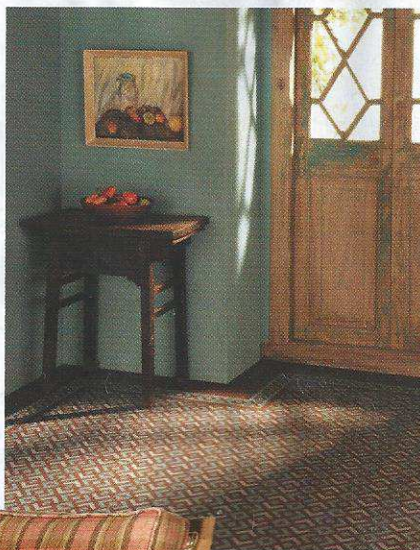
They said it was the Empire upon which the sun never set: certainly, the British Empire has been a crucial part of our history since the 17th century, and the colonies around the globe have influenced our society and culture

The addition of a simple curtain with an eastern-inspired pattern will provide a fresh touch of colonial style to any room. Kimono linen fabric in Ginger Green, £97.20 a metre, Lewis & Wood

At its peak, the British Empire was the largest in history with almost a quarter of the globe coloured pink or red to indicate British rule, from Africa to India and Canada to Australia. What began with the English settlement of North America and the Caribbean in the early seventeenth century, continued with the explorations of the English East India Company and its eventual control of India, and reached a height between 1815 and 1914, when Britain, strengthened by the new technologies of the Industrial Revolution, was virtually unchallenged around the world in war or trade. The Union flag flew over sandy plains, humid jungles, hectic towns, busy seaports, bustling trading posts and basic encampments, signifying British rule to native peoples, settled expatriates, soldiers, administrators, planters, farmers, missionaries and curious travellers alike.

For generations of British colonials, a recognisable way of life developed. India, of course, was the 'jewel in the crown' of the Empire, and thus most influential, but settlers elsewhere, from Africa to Australia, observed similar rituals and arranged their homes in similar ways. As Tricia Foley writes in *The Romance of British Colonial Style*: "Although there were minor variations from region to region, by the time of the Empire's apogee ... the colonials around the world resembled one another more than they resembled those they had left at home." They planted rose gardens and arranged cut flowers, sipped tea from china cups and gin and tonic from cut glass, paid each other social calls, worshipped in steepled churches, played tennis and polo and – for the men at least – attended their clubs assiduously.

Although the social scene and keeping up appearances were critically important, colonial domestic life could never be exactly the same as that at home. Whilst a typical living room in Victorian England might feature overstuffed upholstery, thick woollen carpets and richly patterned wallpaper, its colonial equivalent had to make the necessary accommodations to a vastly different climate and culture. Heat, humidity and insects simply made many of the customary furnishings impractical; wallpaper was likely to be eaten by ants, so walls were whitewashed; wool carpets – if they survived the climate and the insects – were meant to retain heat, so were given up in favour of wooden or tiled floors, softened where necessary with rugs ▶



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP With wooden floors and pale walls, a kilim-style fabric adds a colonial touch to a contemporary room. Barnaby three-seater sofa, £1549, Furniture Village
This new interpretation of ikat and tie-dye patterns introduces an exotic element to a room, yet is wonderfully easy to use. Montauk chair fabric, £54 a metre; Matara Roman blind, £54 a metre; Sag Harbour

cushion (left), Cannanore (right), both £70 a metre; all Nobilis
Based on a model dating from 1800, this chair combines typically colonial wickerwork with a comfortable cushion on the seat and back. Bergere chair, £5,000, Max Rollitt
Choose geometric floor tiles rather than plush carpet for a cool, classic colonial feel that is so practical. Inca ceramic tiles from the Odyssey collection in light jade and dark jade on brown, from £5.23 a tile, Original Style



ABOVE Earthy colours, floaty sheers and geometrically patterned linens really set the scene for a safari mood. Of course, a view such as this helps as well. Flamingo linen curtains and patterned cushions; Traveller plain cushions, both £141.80 a metre, Decortex

MAIN PICTURE A curvy cane chair is just the ticket for relaxing at the end of a hard day looking after the interests of the Empire. Waldemar wallpaper, £69 a roll; Poppy cushions, £105 a metre, both Sandberg

made from local coir or sisal; upholstered furniture was abandoned in favour of springy caned seating. Swathes of netting were draped around beds – not just a picturesque decoration, but an absolute necessity against deadly mosquitoes.

Some furnishings from home inevitably made their way to the colonies on board ship. Chests, trunks and baskets were essential for the journey, and shipping lines asked passengers to bring their own deck chair, and so the light, folding ‘steamer’ chair was developed, with a wooden frame and caned seat and back. Soldiers and other seasoned travellers might bring ‘campaign’ or other easily transportable furniture, from folding chairs and tables to chests, mirrors, lights and more. And, of course, as many much-loved accessories as could be carried – pictures and photographs, china and glassware, silver and books – were brought thousands of miles around the world in order to make a new life away from home more comfortable and familiar.

On arrival, a colonial wife might either rent her major items of furniture, or commission them to be made by a local carpenter. The design would be basically British, but the timbers exotic and the finishing touches, often bolder and heavier, influenced by native custom. Over time, some indigenous crafts would probably be included, such as rugs, brassware, crewelwork embroidery or ivory miniatures. Paisley shawls might feature, too: the pattern that originated in 15th-century Kashmir and became enormously fashionable in 18th and 19th



century England. Everyone had a fan, either manually operated (in India, by a punkah wallah) or, later, an electric ceiling version, and a hunting household might add such things as an elephant’s foot umbrella stand, mounted animal heads and hide rugs. Indeed, as Foley says: “Eventually, a style of décor evolved that was a mix of nostalgia for Britain and colonial practicality.”

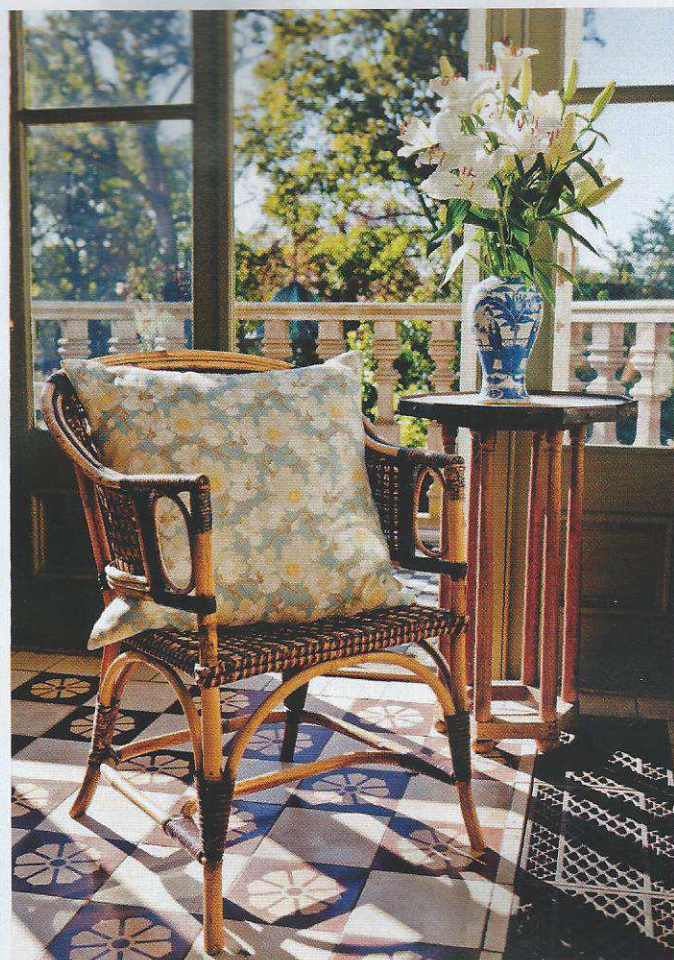
The Empire at this time was essential for British prosperity. Natural resources and native labour could be employed (some might say exploited) around the world, and the colonies provided an important market for British goods. People and products travelled backwards and forwards around the globe, creating a rich exchange of both ideas and raw



materials that resulted in new influences and designs back home. India, in particular, had special significance. The Indian art and design that was shown at the Great Exhibition of 1851 had great influence on designers in the latter part of the century, including William Morris, for whom the handmade textiles represented qualities lost in contemporary mass-production. British textile and wallpaper manufacturers were inspired by the patterns of Indian chintzes and embroideries and, for some, there developed a fusion of Indian craft and the then-fashionable Medieval style that has been described as 'colonial gothic'. Imports from the colonies were absorbed into Victorian households, and returning colonials themselves brought back ►

RIGHT The simplicity of a coir carpet works extremely well with a bench seat in this spacious hallway. Coir Herringbone Natural floor covering, £19 a square metre, Crucial Trading





souvenirs of their days abroad, both exotic and mundane. Gradually, the colonial way of life, with its mix of foreign style and utter Englishness, began to make itself felt back home.

For Kit Alderson, of Alderson Antiques in Tetbury, colonial furnishings "immediately evoke a time and a place". He adds: "The furniture, together with works of art, silver and pictures, are an instant way of telling you exactly where people lived and what it was like there. Colonial pieces can often be a bit more interesting than the usual furniture from the period and, in fact, I have often sold pieces that have had notes inside from their previous owners. You are immediately sitting next to that person – it's hugely evocative. The colonial style is British, but it's not British. When we help people create a colonial feel in their houses, we are basically helping them to evoke memories of those who have worked abroad and brought items of furniture back home. We might use things that have a link to the British Raj, or from Sri Lanka, for example, so decorative ►

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE LEFT

An eye-catching element such as a rug can delineate a room.

Tufted carpet from Multan in the Punjab, £1,500, Guinevere

A cool breeze from the verandah, a sundowner drink and a rattan chair in which to enjoy it, all typical elements of colonial life.

Clematis Blue cushion, £45, Emily Burningham
Combine dark wood with simple linens for an attractive scheme.
Flamingo curtain and large cushion, £141.80 a metre; Traveller plain cushion, £194.60 a metre, Decortex

Colonial Style



chests with brass mounts, made from native hardwood, planters' chairs with their long arms, anything with a cane seat, paintings of tigers and leopards, or local scenes. It works very well in conservatories or airy drawing rooms.'

Interior designer Roselind Wilson, who was herself brought up in South Africa, points out that colonial style allowed English interiors to steer away from the formal, heavily traditional and somewhat complex approach to decoration, in favour of a more relaxed and comfortable style. Whilst colonial pieces can be rather distinctive, it is possible to integrate them into a classic English home today without going overboard. A length of paisley or an African pattern, an old travelling chest, draped sheers, some cane or coir – a hint is usually all that is necessary. "A simplified story in keeping with the Colonial period is best," Wilson adds. "What's so appealing about it is the rich, dark woods offset by pale limewashed walls. Lots of cane furniture and decorative linens create a cool, calm scheme, and elements such as ceiling fans, grass cloth or bamboo-woven Roman blinds, sisal-wrapped picture frames, a wicker reading chair adorned with a linen patterned cushion, and perhaps a paisley print throw, complete the look." ■

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT As this vintage flyer shows, a well fitted cabin was essential.

A rattan headboard makes this solid-oak bed practical and pretty.

Margot bed, from £745, Loaf

The rhythmic stripes of this double-width linen sheer are reminiscent of an African plain with its wide-blue skies.

Assouan linen sheer, £107 a metre, Nobilis

Native hardwoods were often used to make British-inspired cabinetry.

Anglo-Indian campaign chest in solid calamander circa 1820-1830, £14,500, Rose Uniacke

Pale wood floors and pared-down window treatments complement simple wooden furniture.

Sophia farmhouse table, £1,425; Camargue weathered oak dining chairs, £189 each; Venus lamp, £149, all Oka

