

ABOVE: Part of the brochure for the Stroud Valleys Decorative Trail, showing the map drawn by a local artist with the participants along it numbered. There are descriptions and details of each showroom on the reverse.

Specialists join up to launch decorative trail

Eight enterprising specialists have got together to offer visitors to the Stroud valleys a decorative trail of interiors showrooms that can be followed via an attractive map, with recommendations for a good lunch, too! Christina Gregory took to the trail

The trail follows a three-mile tring in Stroud at its apex, going south along one side to Nailsworth, then east on the other to Thrupp. While this part of Gloucestershire is just as attractive as the Worcestershire/Oxfordshire swathe of the Cotswolds, where pretty chocolate-box villages draw the tourists, it has more of an industrial working identity, and was one of the earliest cloth-



BELOW: Lewis & Wood is based on the upper floor of Woodchester Mill, a listed building and former textile mill, rebuilt after a fire.

making settlements in the country. The textile industry that developed in the steep valleys around here can be traced back to the 14th century. During the industrial revolution, wool from sheep raised in the woods was processed in mills powered by water from the fast-flowing rivers, but after peaking in the early 1800s the industry declined, losing out to competition from Yorkshire. Today several of the area's

former woollen and textile mills house other industries, or have been converted into homes, offices, showrooms and workshops.

Interior companies now occupy some of these tall red-brick buildings, and in spring this year eight specialist businesses in the locally got together under the collective banner of the Stroud Valleys Decorative Trail to jointly publicise the wealth of expertise they can offer homemakers.

Local artist
A distinctive hand-drawn map commissioned from a local artist illustrates how the stops on the trail are all within easy reach of each other, as well as showing recommended local restaurants and a food hall so visitors can make a day of it. Each of the showrooms taking part also displays a number of items corresponding to its place on the map. Visitors following the trail can find interior services and products ranging from fabrics and wallpapers, curtains and soft furnishings, paints and tiles, carpets and flooring, to furniture, kitchen cabinets and bathrooms.

Brainchild
The trail is the brainchild of Stephen Lewis, managing director of Lewis & Wood (pictured above), whose fabric and wallpaper showroom is on the upper floor of Woodchester Mill, on the Bath Road a mile south of Stroud.

With its impressive picture of the Stroud Valleys, this view of Lewis & Wood's light and airy showroom shows fabrics displayed on rolls and as large samples hanging from pegs along the walls.

All Lewis & Wood's fabric orders are inspected and quality-checked before being cut and despatched from the warehouse at Woodchester Mill.

Other companies taking part include bathroom specialist Water & Stone Bathrooms on the ground floor of the mill, and kitchen specialist Woodchester Cabinet Makers, whose showroom is further down

the road. Closer to Stroud on the same road are soft furnishings specialist Cotswold Curtains & Interiors, then stone and oak flooring company Precious Stone. Leaving Stroud on the London Road to Cirencester

are the remaining three showrooms on the trail, Eagle Mill Carpets, furniture maker Scumble Goose and Bailey Paints.

I spent an enjoyable day out last month visiting some of the showrooms on

the trail, starting at Lewis & Wood, where Stephen Lewis welcomed me to the light and airy 6,500sq-ft complex in the former textile mill the company moved to from nearby Uley a couple of years ago. Previously its

collections were distributed from warehouses in Dorset and London, but now the warehousing, offices and studio have been brought together under one roof, together with the quality control unit, where all fabrics are inspected before despatch.

Having these functions in one place has helped to improve customer service, says Stephen, who started the business as a textile printer in London with interior designer Joanna Wood in 1993. He still enjoys the process of proofing different colours and effects today, working on the large screen-printing table in the new studio with creative director Magdalen Jebb before sending off the latest designs to be produced.

"For me it's one of the most important things to get the wallpapers and fabrics as right as possible before production," he says. "Proofing all our designs here means that you don't have to make colouring decisions in a hurry when they are on the production machine."

End user customers
"We can put new designs together carefully and see how they will sit with the rest of our collection. The idea of our showroom here is to get closer to our end user customers, and so help our stockists to be more successful when selling our collections. We opened it last May, and interior decorators bring in their customers and use it as a showroom."

"It's not really a 'shop' shop – it's only open from 10 till 4 on three days a week," he adds, "but it does allow us to show all our collections in one place. It's interesting to see what people pick up, as I think our visitors are typical of our customers across the country. The plan is to test new ideas: in this market it seems to me to be an enormous mistake to go for

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Art and design
The day was hosted in association with English Home magazine – readers were invited to learn more about the process of art and design, with talks by designers, a good lunch and an opportunity to try screen-printing. It was voted a success by all who attended, and more are being planned for autumn.

The events are organised in the same spirit as Stephen Lewis' concept of the decorative trail – to offer people interested in interiors a pleasant day out with a focus. He hopes the trail will help to raise the profile of participating showrooms, both locally and further afield. "There are a lot of creative people in the area, and the trail is a celebration of this," he says. "There is no crossover in what each showroom offers, and with the trail we all have a format to invite more people to see what we do. I am really pleased that it seems to be working, and I'd like to keep going for the next eighteen months or so," he adds.

Lesley was brought up in a family who enjoyed sewing – her mother taught City & Guilds soft furnishings courses, and she began as a dressmaker, training at the London College of Fashion. One of her early clients who was moving house at the time asked her to make her a pair of curtains as well as a suit, and Lesley found that soft furnishings gradually overtook the dressmaking work. Initially her business was based in premises in

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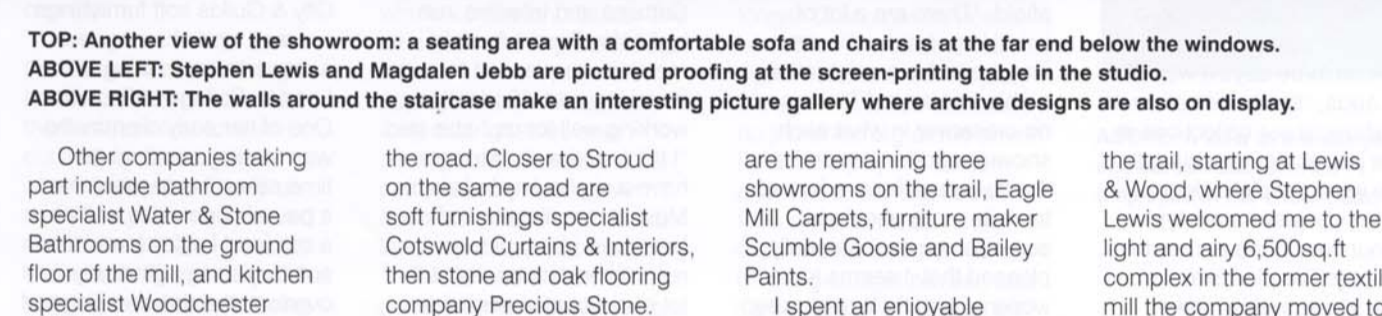
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TOP: Another view of the showroom: a seating area with a comfortable sofa and chairs is at the far end below the windows. **ABOVE LEFT:** Stephen Lewis and Magdalen Jebb are pictured proofing at the screen-printing table in the studio. **ABOVE RIGHT:** The walls around the staircase make an interesting picture gallery where archive designs are also on display.

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BELOW: Lesley Duro pictured in the Cotswold Curtains & Interiors workshop. **RIGHT:** The exterior of the showroom, with its trail number on the wall, and a bright summer display in the window, showing different fabrics on the panels of umbrellas.

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Lesley had always liked the Cotswolds while living in London, and she relocated the business first to the outskirts of Stroud, then when the lease came to an end three years ago, moved not far away to the present showroom. The white-painted building benefits from being on the main road, with an eye-catching window that

is regularly changed. When I visited, Lesley and her assistant Kath had covered individual panels of umbrellas with different fabrics for a bright summer display with a big happy sun in the background – the previous spring window had been filled with a huge pink fabric bow.

Fabric swatches
Every bit of space inside the showroom is made the most of. In the area behind the window there are hundreds of fabric swatches, hangers and samples for clients to choose from, plus curtain accessories such as window poles and finials. The other part of the ground floor reflects Lesley's 'hands-on' approach, with three-metre long cutting tables and sewing machines where the curtains are made up. An open staircase in the centre leads up to the office above.

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