

Veedon Fleece

Weave come a long way

Adam Gilchrist's bespoke rug and carpet-making business has led the way in creating a sustainable industry in Nepal as well as exquisite, timeless objects for the western consumer. He weaves a good tale too. By KATE PATRICK



ADAM GILCHRIST is one of life's natural entrepreneurs who has followed his instincts – often against others' advice – and the courage of his convictions to create a business that looks good, feels great and works commercially. What an achievement for our muddled-up times!

The simple fact of what the business does is to produce the best handmade carpets in the world. Full stop. If you want a testimonial, ask Madonna, Robert de Niro, the Bannenberg yacht designers, Bentley Motors or the guardians of Chatsworth: the sort of clients you know a good thing when they see it and don't mess about.

In a sense, though, this is only half the story, because Gilchrist has such an acutely developed social conscience that he has made the wellbeing of his weavers and their families in Nepal an absolutely uncompromising, integral factor in the way his business works. No grandstanding; nothing skin-deep just to impress the fair trade lobby. He believes utterly in what he does

– and this is what makes it such a compelling lesson for luxury.

But first, the name. Veedon Fleece, you may recall, was the name of a Van Morrison album from 1974. No, I didn't recall it either. And Adam Gilchrist was told by a friend that most companies with stupid names go out of business within a year. That was 20 years ago and, in a way, the fact he stuck with a name that represented the quest for perfection, and simply struck a chord, was symptomatic of how the business would proceed.

Gilchrist's background was in fine art at Sothebys; but it was when he was standing at the head of the Cresta Run in St Moritz at 6.30am that he made the contact that was the equivalent of a 'eureka' moment. Alex Norman, who headed down the run just before him, had written a biography of the Dalai Lama and was working on a new book about his consciousness. At the bottom of the run, they talked further about how Gilchrist had wanted to start an ethical carpet company in

Nepal, making new carpets, but not using children to make them. "Modern carpets," he explains, "were badly made by children in Nepal, Turkey, Pakistan. I wanted to send the children to school instead. The carpet industry laughed at me."

The author ultimately led Gilchrist to his opening managing director, a Tibetan running a carpet factory in southern India who wanted to go to Nepal. He remains MD of the Veedon Fleece operation 19 years on. "My duty is to his family for life. His duty, from the start, was to make beautiful carpets of extremely high quality that had never been seen before – carpets using only the best materials and not children to weave them or shoddy (re-used) wool."

Nepal's carpet-making tradition had begun in the 1960s when the Swiss set up an aid project to give Tibetan refugees something to do. Out of the Tibetan plateaus also came a ready supply of wool. In order to achieve his goals, Gilchrist had to be prepared to own the whole operation: control was key. So he found himself with a carpet factory in Nepal (and ultimately the largest loom in the kingdom, a huge steel frame the size of a house, nicknamed Ganesh) and a plethora of weavers who worked in family groups. One family requested to have their child work there: they left when Gilchrist insisted she be sent to school first. "In a way the industry was right to laugh – it was certainly blazing a new trail."

Gilchrist started kicking down the doors of interior designers and, by showing up close that he meant what he said about the quality, achieved some success. David Collins became a client, as did Antonio Citterio. Fashion houses started putting his carpets on their precious floors, Ungaro and Valentino among them. "I'd been in business for four years when suddenly the rest of the industry stopped laughing and started to realise that the reason we were doing so well was because we were looking after people in Nepal, they loved us and the quality was amazing. That was when other shops started opening and suddenly Nepalese rugs were everywhere."

To differentiate the Veedon Fleece business from the rush of imitators, Gilchrist started to describe it as a custom-weaving house, most of whose work was a one-off, bespoke commission in a variety of luxury fabrics including pashmina and silk. This remains the company's preferred modus operandi today: when a carpet takes 15 people an entire year to complete, you would need to know exactly which space (and owner) it was destined to fit. It's an emotional moment when a piece like this finally leaves the factory.

Interestingly, Gilchrist has discovered of his wealthy customers that it is not ethical considerations that swing their decision to buy. "They are interested in quality, in the colours and shapes, the fact that something is being made for a specific room. And the wealthy want things that no one else has. They like the fact that what they are getting is one-of-a-kind. They are

well-heeled and well-advised and know what they want."

As with the superyacht business, which appeared to weather the economic storm visited on the world in 2008, Veedon Fleece appears relatively recession-proof. Big projects are in the pipeline in Qatar, Kuwait and Abu Dhabi. "We're in negotiations to provide carpets for the largest palace in Saudi Arabia, currently being built." Yet, he maintains, his prices are not as astronomical as you might expect for something handwoven with 100 knots a square inch – the end product usually costs between £10,000 and

£20,000 to the customer but 90% of business is conducted through interior designers. This is, therefore, where he has traditionally concentrated his marketing budget, showing examples of classic and contemporary designs at Decorex (including Decorex UAE), 100% Design and Masterpiece London.

"American interior designers shop in London anyway – it's considered the capital of the design world – and they seem to enjoy coming to me. We do enough work in Moscow to warrant having a rep there."

Gilchrist loves nothing more than to talk about the process that goes into creating these pieces of passion. As part of being a master, bespoke weaver, Veedon Fleece limits the meterage it produces a year. "Large companies can churn out 5,000m a month – we restrict ourselves to 5,000m a year with double, or even quadruple, the number of knots – even though we have around 200 weavers. Once I've finished the design work it goes to Nepal. We could make a short cut by scanning the designs for the

weavers to follow, but in my experience every short cut leads to a fall. So when we create a carpet we don't make short cuts. The managing director picks the exact weavers he knows will respond well to working on a particular design. The point paper artist then draws out the design with the sensitivity of knowing the personalities, the strengths and weaknesses of the weavers who are going to weave it. We are trying to weave the antiques of the future."

So, company chairman, designer, ethical crusader: how does Adam Gilchrist characterise himself? "Hopelessly romantic dyslexic! Or maybe renaissance man. But we do pride ourselves on the huge detail we put into everything. We've even made carpets in a war zone: they tried to make us leave the country. But we went there to do something good and wonderful, we kept our nerve and realised that if all the good people left the country it would fail. We just stayed loyal to Nepal."

www.veedonfleece.com

