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A love of textiles and a taste for travel sparked two great passions in the life of indigo dyer Jenny Balfour-Paul

Bluenote



TOP Jenny and Glencairn relax on indigo-painted furniture. **LEFT** Rich shades of blue in beautiful tie-dye effects. **ABOVE** When the fabric strips are lifted from the vat of greeny-brown liquid, they change colour to blue as they come in contact with the air.

Travel has changed Jenny Balfour-Paul's life. She met her future husband, Glencairn, in the Middle East, and she fell in love with indigo. Both these passions are the mainstay of Jenny's life and she acknowledges it would be impossible for her to have to choose between them.

The couple share a listed, cob-walled, thatched farmhouse in the West Country with their daughter Finella, 21, and son Hamish, 20, as well as a vast array of new and old ethnic treasures. It is a house of colour and texture – a testament to their worldwide travels and Jenny's love of hand-dyed textiles. Now a world authority and author on indigo, as well as a textile artist, Jenny has a unique collection of indigo-dyed fabrics, garments, rugs, tools and lengths of cloth representing indigo-dyeing techniques from around the world.

Since university, Jenny has spent time living in the Middle East and North Africa and has travelled extensively, collecting

samples and artefacts, taking photographs, and recording dyeing methods. Her first love was batik, but that naturally led on to dyed textiles in general. In the 1980s, she met and became the assistant of well-known dyer Susan Bosence.

'You can always tell indigo dyers by their blue fingernails,' Jenny says. 'You start off wearing rubber gloves and then get excited and take them off.' Jenny is sitting on the floor of the upstairs living room, which the family call the 'diwan' – the name of the central room in Arab houses where people meet and talk. The floor is covered in vegetable-dyed kilims and rugs in autumnal colours, and a huge xylophone from Mali has pride of place. Masses of cushions are piled invitingly into a corner, each one block-printed by Jenny with patterns inspired by Yemeni architecture. Jenny brings carefully folded pieces out of a trunk, each divided by layers of acid-free tissue paper. There are skirts and jackets with superbly embroidered sleeves ►

'I didn't intend to be a collector. It just grew



TOP These concertina pages fit inside the box book, each inscribed with a poem, a ginkgo leaf or a drawing. This one is for her daughter. Alternatively, the pages can be left blank for a diary or personal notes. **ABOVE** An indigo-dyed feather nestles on the box book cover. **RIGHT** Jenny made this box book from silk noil, with an indigo-dyed jute casing inside to hold the book with a leather label and dyed feather.



from my visiting dyers and finding ancient examples'

RIGHT Where the dyeing story starts – it is hard to believe that this stunning blue dye comes from this lush green Japanese indigo plant.

FAR RIGHT Solid evidence – a lump of Indian indigo.

BELOW LEFT An intricately woven piece of dyed material with metallic fringing.

BELOW CENTRE Jenny dyes fibrous paper by using the 'clamp resist' method, where the folded paper is held by matching pairs of wooden clamps.

BELOW RIGHT This Egyptian cotton twill has been beautifully patterned with the stitch-resist method.



from the south west of China, ingenious Japanese cotton carrying squares (*furoshiki*) with reinforced quilted corners for tying to a pole, inky blue burnished jackets whose gleaming finish is achieved by rubbing with a burnishing stone, and glazed indigo cloth with beaten tin strips embroidered on it.

'One of my rarest pieces is a padded Japanese fireman's helmet made from indigo-dyed cotton,' says Jenny. 'The flap was pulled down over the face and a long flap protected the neck and back of the head. The fireman would wear a matching padded jacket and be drenched with water before tackling a blaze. It dates from the late 19th or early 20th century.'

Jenny has visited dyers around the world since she discovered the work of indigo dyers in the Yemen, where the method had been used for more than 2,000 years and is now on the verge of extinction. It was her ensuing PhD thesis entitled *Indigo in the Arab World* that led the British Museum to ask her to write

a book on indigo worldwide. Having recently exhibited in Cornwall, plans for a larger exhibition are now in the pipeline.

'I didn't intend to be a collector,' Jenny explains. 'It just grew from my visiting dyers and finding examples of ancient traditions. I used to do batik when I was in Jordan, and I set up a studio in Tunisia and exhibited there. When we came back to England I found that I was hooked on dyeing. Indigo is very universal, you can dye anything,' she says.

'I make the vats in summer, when I can be outdoors, and prepare the fabrics in winter – I use calico, cotton, silk, and wool for weaving, and I cover cushions with old peanut sacks that have been tied and dyed,' she says. 'I have two very rare conical indigo dye-extraction pots from Oman, but I actually use a big plastic dustbin. The strange thing is that the dye in the vat is not blue. It's a murky yellow-green colour. Indigo is insoluble, it's the oxygen that causes the chemical reaction ►



LEFT Woad indigo has been used to make the paint for this garden bench – just some of the collection of fabrics dyed by Jenny rest on top. **BELOW** Natural fibres in this beautiful handmade Japanese paper create a dark pattern when dyed.



Indigo is insoluble, it's the oxygen that causes the chemical reaction that turns items blue as you pull them out

that turns the items blue as you pull them out of the liquid.'

Jenny grows a variety of traditional dye plants including red madder, yellow weld, dyer's broom and the European indigo plant, woad – in fact, the vegetable garden is now rampant with the yellow-flowers of woad, which has seeded itself widely. In the meadow behind the house, indigo-dyed fabric and sacks hang drying on the washing line.

Woad was grown widely in Europe in the Middle Ages until the arrival of tropical indigo in the 17th century – woad merchants were wealthy men as woad was needed not only for the familiar blue, but also for green, purple and black in combination with other natural dyes. European woad continued to be grown in England, with the last crop being harvested in the Norfolk Fens in 1932. A synthetic method (a by-product of the petro-chemical industry) arrived this century.

Woad is now enjoying a revival and the fields of England are once more glowing with its yellow flowers. It seems that the magic of indigo is contagious. Jenny has set up a business called Woadworks and distributes artists' materials, natural pigments

for emulsion and oil-based paint made to medieval recipes in France. Jenny has confidence in the thriving revival of the industry. 'A researcher at Reading University, Philip John, has discovered a method that allows indigo produced from woad to be purified by bacteriological means,' she says. 'This means that the dye vats can be as they were in the Middle Ages.'

Jenny's love of indigo shows no sign of diminishing. 'I have always been hands-on, always grown indigo plants and enjoyed dyeing,' she says. 'I started out making jewellery and pots, but it all led to textiles, and I find that indigo and travel go hand in hand and, to me, both are addictive.'

Jenny Balfour-Paul's book Indigo is published by British Museum Press. It costs £29.95 but Inspirations readers can buy it at the special price of £24.95, including p&p. Call 020 7323 1234. Jenny is planning summer weekend courses for indigo dyeing using natural and synthetic methods, and pattern processes. For details, phone Woadworks on 01363 772104.

BY OLIVIA TEMPLE PHOTOGRAPHS MARK BOLTON