

# LAURA ASHLEY STYLE



IAIN GALE &  
SUSAN IRVINE  
FOREWORD BY NICK ASHLEY





# LAURA ASHLEY STYLE

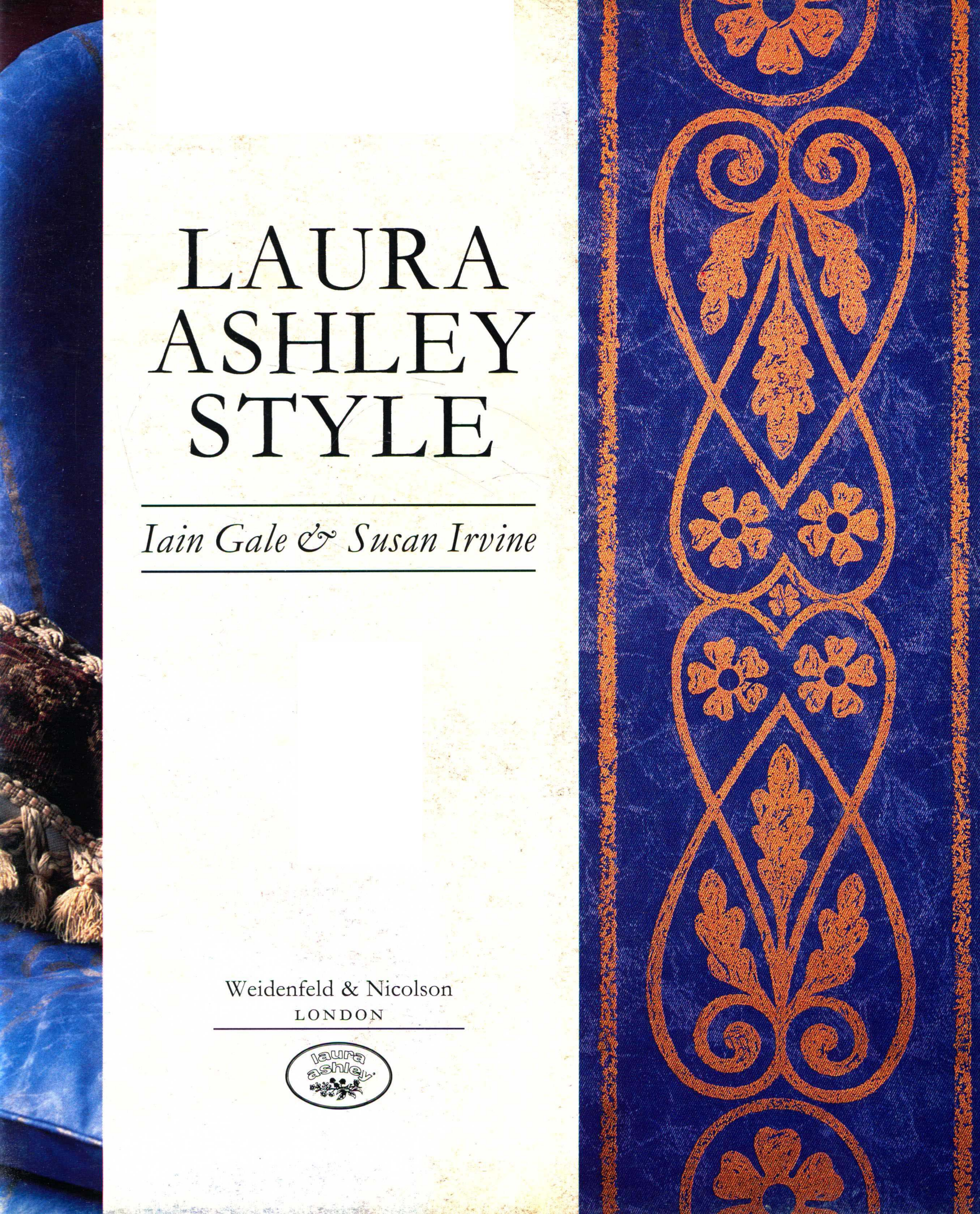
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*Iain Gale & Susan Irvine*

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LONDON

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# *FOREWORD*

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Laura Ashley style is epitomized for many by the tiny floral monoprints which have decorated many a Victorian-style bedroom, and with which the company first made its name. But as you will see from the following pages, this is just one strand of an ever-evolving story.

As a print house dedicated to reproducing the designs of bygone eras, Laura Ashley is deeply rooted in the history of art and design. We prefer to look to the past for inspiration, believing that designs that have been developed over the years have both timelessness and strength. Sections of this book are devoted to the history of design and decoration, a history that has been the inspiration for our designs – either as a direct influence or, just as significantly, as a catalyst sparking off new ideas and directions.

Yet while inspiration is taken from the past, Laura Ashley designs are very much a part of the present. Whether you choose to surround yourself with patterns and prints, or whether you prefer the simple elegance of plain colours, the desire is surely to create an atmosphere that is warm and welcoming – just as the bower bird creates an inviting arbour with brightly coloured pebbles and flowers. Creating the right atmosphere is fundamental to the



decoration of one's home, and for Laura Ashley the key to achieving this is comfort, first and foremost. We believe that a well-designed home is created with function very much in mind. It should complement the lifestyle of the owners and encompass all the activities that will take place there. I suggest that this should be your starting point. Whether your priorities are family, animals and health, the arts, fun or fantasy, design your home around these aspects. The individuality of your taste will then establish effortlessly a particular ambience – elegance perhaps, or prettiness. In time, as children grow up, or interests diversify, your environment will need to change too. We design our collections with an element of versatility so your decorative surroundings can evolve in keeping with a changing lifestyle.

Laura Ashley style is not about dictating a look to be slavishly imitated. It is rather about choosing a style that best suits the environment and brings out the character and essential charm of a room or house, as well as reflecting the lifestyle and individuality of the people living there. So whether you live in a rambling old house steeped in history or a modern architect-designed apartment, I hope that this book will be an enjoyable and inspiring guide to the endless possibilities of design and decoration.

*Nick Ashley.*





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*Nick Ashley.*



# THE CREATION OF A STYLE

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*The name of Laura Ashley is recognized the world over for a design concept that is at once innovative and individual. Their Oxford Circus store, with its imposing facade, is at the very heart of the West End of London, one of the shopping capitals of Europe. Opened in 1985, it shows how the Laura Ashley philosophy permeates even shop design. Inside, seasoned mahogany is used for the fittings, and arrangements of flowers and music help to create a tranquil, almost country house environment in which to browse among the racks of clothes or view the inspirational roomsets – welcome refuge from the hustle and bustle of London's busiest shopping centre.*





*'Wild Clematis', like many of Laura Ashley's early positive-negative designs, took its inspiration from the minutiae of a bygone age – in this case, the endpaper pattern of a Victorian book.*

Laura Ashley was a romantic, a sentimentalist, a traditionalist. Unashamed of her taste for nostalgia, she brought poetry and fantasy back into ordinary domestic life, liberating design from chrome, plastics and man-made fibres. 'For me the more faded and mellow the interior, the more beautiful it is,' she once wrote. 'I long for a newly decorated room to "settle down"'. Hand-made patchworks, needleworks, rag rugs, lace and white starched linens (together with old-fashioned smoothing irons) are all bliss to me. I have lived with slate floors for preference, strewn with gum boots, dogs and children, and at the same time managed to maintain the ritual of the dining room and the complete peace of comfortable bedrooms. These things turn a living environment into a home.'

Home: that was the magic word, the centre of Laura Ashley's values and philosophy. A Laura Ashley home might be simple and demure, or grandiose and daring; it might be furnished in humble cotton or the richest damask, but it should always be comfortable and welcoming. And it is appropriate that what is now a huge multi-national design and retailing business – one of Britain's great post-war success stories, in fact – should have started on the kitchen table of Laura and Sir Bernard Ashley's first, attic home in London's Pimlico, with an initial investment of £10.

The year was 1953: while Bernard Ashley went off to work in the City, his young wife Laura snatched time from looking after her children to produce tablemats and headscarves on a crude and laborious silk-screen machine, with the aim of selling them to local shops and department stores. And as the Ashley family grew – their four children are all connected in some capacity with the firm – so did business, albeit somewhat bumpily. A move into a nearby basement was accompanied by Bernard Ashley's development of more versatile dyeing and printing apparatus. Dress fabrics were now added to the repertoire. Bernard Ashley left his job to concentrate on running the financial side of matters and there was just enough money to employ Bert, a struggling painter, to help with the printing.

But for Laura Ashley a move back to her roots in the country became increasingly essential, and the family left London for an idyllic Surrey cottage set in an orchard and facing open farmlands. It was in this tranquil atmosphere, as she pored over eighteenth- and nineteenth-century print books, gathered swatches of material from old patchwork quilts, and copied motifs used to decorate ceramics and porcelain, that the Laura Ashley style began to germinate. Meanwhile, a factory was established in an old coach shed a few miles from the cottage, capable of housing larger machinery and stocks. Foreign customers began to show interest, and the enterprise prospered.

Then, in 1957, tragedy struck: a local river burst its banks and flooded the factory. Electric motors were destroyed, cloth was ruined, and the