



# AXMINSTER *heritage*

Magic Carpets –  
the Axminster story





# Magic Carpets-the Axminster story



## Introduction

Up until the 18th century Age of Elegance, few people in this country would have set foot on a carpet.

The floors of the homes of this Isle would have been made of beaten earth covered in rushes or straw threshings, flagstones or wood. As late as 1751, a carpet was described as “a sort of covering to be spread on a table, trunk, an estrade (dais), or even a passage or floor”.

In Scotland, in the latter part of the 18th century, a flat reversible double-woollen floor cloth was becoming popular as a means of rendering the houses comfortable and as “a security against stone buildings, stone staircases and a cold climate”.

“Kidderminster stuffs”, initially used as table cloths, were adapted in 1735 as a coarse double-weave cloth for flooring, but it was not until the middle of the 18th century that the glorious hand-knotted seamless carpets were born in the market town of Axminster and spread on the floors of palaces and country homes of Great Britain and beyond.

The inventor of Axminster Carpets was a local man – Thomas Whitty – and it is his story and that of the second great weaver of Axminster, Harry Dufield, which this booklet seeks to record.

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# Thomas Whitty

## and the birth of Axminster carpets

The man who made the town of Axminster synonymous with carpets – Thomas Whitty – was born in 1716. His family had lived in and around Axminster since the 16th century. In 1737 he set up his own cloth-weaving business and shortly afterwards married Sarah Rampson, with whom he had twelve children. Sadly four of these children died in infancy.

The business prospered until the mid 1750s. In order to support his young family, Whitty travelled to London to seek a fresh trade. Here, in the warehouse of a William Freke, he saw some carpets imported from Turkey. He marvelled not only at their vibrant colours but also their size and the fact that they were seamless. For a long time he puzzled as to how they could be made.



*A Turkey carpet*

After much thought, Whitty had some ideas that he wished to try out. On Easter Fair day that year (25 April 1755), as his employees were away at the fair, he conducted some trials and succeeded in

making an eight-inch square of 'Turkey' carpet. Although excited by his success he realised that he did not know of a loom that would enable him to make them economically.

Many years later, in a 1790 letter to his sons, Whitty described how he overcame this difficulty. By chance he saw an advertisement for a carpet manufacturing company in Fulham owned by Peter Parisot, a French immigrant. He tells how he went to an inn close to the factory with the hope of making the acquaintance of some of the workers. He started talking with a man whose son was an apprentice at the carpet factory and, through him, was able to gain access to the works. Whitty wrote: "Accordingly, I obtained a view of everything I wanted, by which every remaining difficulty was removed from my mind and I was thoroughly satisfied."

Although he had seen how to make his carpets at the Fulham factory, he knew that the carpets made there were much too expensive and a cheaper method of production needed to be found. Although he reduced the number of knots per square inch, the labour cost was still too high. Thus, when he started to make his first carpet on Midsummer's Day 1755, it was his own children, under the watchful eye of their aunt Betty Harvey, who were his first workforce. Throughout his life Whitty employed mainly girls of between ten and seventeen years. His competitors

employed mainly men, so not only was he able to gain the advantage of lower labour costs but the girls' fingers were much more nimble than those of the men, giving him an edge in productivity.

Thomas Whitty's first carpet was to have been bought by a Mr Cook of Beaminster but was seen by the Countess of Shaftsbury who insisted on having it herself. Further orders followed and, in 1757 the Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (the forerunner of the Royal Society for the Arts) ran a competition for the best value carpet submitted to them. Although the carpet submitted by Thomas Moore of Moorfields was judged to be the finest carpet – being made of the highest quality materials – it was very expensive (forty guineas). The one made by Thomas Whitty was deemed the best value in proportion to its price (£15), and the prize was divided between them.

Whitty's prize-winning entry was bought by a William Crompton who, putting it on display in his warehouse in Charing Cross, received so many enquiries that he asked Whitty to supply as many carpets as possible for him to sell.

In the following year a similar competition was held and again Whitty shared the prize – this time with a Claude Passavant of Exeter. Interestingly, Peter Parisot moved his Fulham factory to Exeter in 1755 and the following year sold it to Passavant. As Whitty had observed in Fulham, the carpets made in Exeter, although very fine, were much too expensive. (The one submitted for the competition was valued at eighty guineas).

Exeter Carpets ceased trading in 1761. However, in 1759, in the final competition, Whitty was the outright winner, and these successes ensured the reputation of his carpets and kept his factory busy for many years.

In the second half of the 18th century, carpets became fashionable as flooring in English stately homes and country houses. In order to fit the scheme of decorations, the architects of these houses often designed the carpet themselves and Whitty was often the chosen manufacturer. Thomas Leverton, James Wyatt, Robert Jones and the Adam brothers were some such designers. Many of these carpets can still be found in the rooms for which they were made, such as at Blickling Hall (Norfolk), Chatsworth House (Derbyshire), Dumfries House (Ayrshire), Harewood House (Yorkshire), Kingston Lacy (Dorset) and Saltram House (Devon).



*Courtesy of the Nation Trust*

*Dining Room, Saltram House*

Whenever a special carpet was finished it was laid out first over the pews of the church Whitty attended (the Independent Chapel in Chard Street) before being paraded through the streets of Axminster to the sound of the Minster bells.



*Laying out the Celebration Carpet*

Such was his fame that on Thursday 13 August 1789 an event occurred to make it what Thomas Whitty described as “the most exciting day of my life”. King George III, Queen Charlotte and three of their children had been holidaying in Weymouth when the King sent word that he wished to visit the Axminster carpet manufactory in two days’ time. Amid much excitement the streets were cleaned and decorated as best they could.

The Royal party alighted from their carriages at the George Inn and made their way to the factory along the street lined with cheering crowds. At the entrance they were met and escorted in by Thomas Whitty. He had picked twenty young women – no doubt the prettiest – who were dressed in white gowns with purple ribbons around their waists with the words ‘Long live the King’ inscribed in gold letters on them. The workers sang ‘God save the King’ before the Royal party walked around the workshop. They were much impressed and, before leaving, Queen Charlotte ordered some carpets

and left a “handsome sum for the workforce”.

The visit enhanced Whitty’s fame even further and many more orders flowed from it, including, in later years, some from the Prince Regent for the Royal Pavilion at Brighton.

Sadly, three years later Thomas Whitty died and was buried in the grounds of the church he had devotedly attended all his life. The chapel was pulled down in 1875 but the United Reformed Church now occupies the site. Whitty’s grave may still be seen there. The original gravestone was damaged during the Second World War but was replaced by the present Axminster Carpet Company. At the time it was thought that Whitty had been born in 1713 but it was later established that the year was 1716, although the inscription has not been changed.



*Tatton Park, Cheshire*

*Courtesy of the Nation Trust & Cheshire County Council*

The business was taken over by his son, also called Thomas. Unfortunately he died in 1799 but his two grandsons continued the trade. Prestigious orders continued, including several for The Royal Pavilion at Brighton, Windsor Castle, Tatton Park and Powderham Castle.

This last one is interesting on several counts. Powderham Castle is the home of the Earl of Devon, the President of Axminster Heritage (the charity responsible for this exhibition). This magnificent carpet, which can still be seen in the Music Room there, was made by Thomas Whitty Jnr in 1798 but not paid for until 1803 – four years after his death. Payment, with interest, was made to his widow Susannah. Delays in payment of this nature were not uncommon at that time.



*Music Room, Powderham Castle*

The year 1822 saw the making of what was probably the most magnificent of all the Axminster carpets. It was certainly the largest, measuring seventy-four feet by fifty-two feet and required thirty men to carry it in the traditional manner to the church in Chard Street. It was said to be extremely colourful, depicting a blaz-

ing sun, moon and stars. The cost was in excess of a thousand pounds, which in today's values would have been more than a million pounds. Ironically, this carpet was made for the Sultan of Turkey – carpets from whose country had so inspired Thomas Whitty nearly seventy years before. It is believed that the carpet was destined for the Deftdar Palace on the Bosphoros, which belonged to the daughter of the Sultan Mustapha III. This palace no longer exists and despite many efforts the carpet itself has not been found.

On 23 January 1828, a fire started in an adjoining malthouse that destroyed nearly all Whitty's factory, although his house alongside it survives to this day, and is currently the offices of solicitors Beviss and Beckingsale. Although the factory was rebuilt, the business never fully recovered and was declared bankrupt in 1835. The looms, designs and remaining stock were sold to Wilton Carpets the following year.

It was not until 1937 that carpet manufacturing returned to Axminster, when Harry Dutfield opened the factory that still produces fine carpets today.



*Thomas Whitty's house*



# Whitty's designs in the Age of Elegance

Thomas Whitty's genius as the unsung hero of Georgian England lay in his ability to interpret patterns to the patron's or architect's requirements as he wove his magic carpets, some of which remain to this day on the floors for which they were produced some 250 years ago.

He almost certainly drew his first pattern himself, inspired by the Turkish carpets he had seen in London and at the house of well-to-do Axminster resident Mrs Forward.

*Courtesy of Country Life*



*Dumfries House*

The earliest carpets for which we know the exact date are at Dumfries House in Ayrshire. They were delivered in 1759 and the designs are clearly based on such French carpets as Whitty might have seen

in the Fulham carpet workshops in 1755, started by weavers from the Royal Savonnerie Manufactory in Paris.

Whitty's trade card of 1760 advertised that "any pattern offered" could be made, and gave the prices as 24 shillings a yard for the "best sort", 15 shillings a yard for the "common sort", 16 shillings for Indian and Persian patterns, and 14 shillings for "Turkey" patterns.

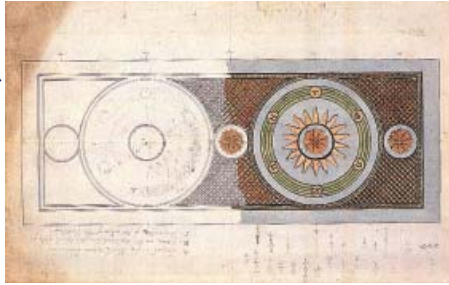
Carpets of the "best sort" included designs from many sources. In 1765, Whitty designed King George III a carpet for his Queen's Dressing Room, and mentioned being given patterns to use.

The carpet piece in the Museum at Axminster is perhaps one of the "common sort". With only 16 knots per square inch (compared with an average of 35) and a largely plain main field, it was made to fit a particular room in someone's house in the town. The flowers are beautifully drawn and illustrate perfectly what Thomas Whitty wrote, that although his carpets were cheaper than other hand-knotted carpets at the time, no one was "able to see such a difference in... goodness and beauty".

Famous architects such as the Adam brothers, Soane, Leverton and Crace designed carpets to complement the rooms they created. Lewis Wyatt was another. His design for the 60 foot carpet for the Library at Tatton Park,



Cheshire – made between 1812-1820 – included the sun's rays, stars, a crescent moon and zodiac signs. Part of the original design drawings are still at Tatton Park, and Wyatt also reflected the design in the 'Petal' flowerbed in Tatton Park's Charlotte garden.



Wyatt's design, Tatton Park

The Axminster carpet at Saltram House – woven between 1769-70 and delivered in September 1770 – mirrors the Adam-designed Saloon, with the tripartite ceiling reflected in the carpet. A letter from Saltram records its arrival: "Carpet arrived this morning and was spread on the lawn – very beautiful indeed."

All through its 80 years, the original Axminster manufactory was famed for its floral carpets. The earliest are rather formal but through the 1760s and 1770s the designs became more natural, including honeysuckle, convolvulus, harebells and apple blossom, as well as striped tulips and auriculars. Around 1800 it became fashionable to have designs with no centrepiece but flowers simply strewn all over the carpet, including more exotic flowers such as hibiscus. When dahlias and chrysanthemums became fashionable in the garden, they too appeared in the borders of carpets made in the 1820s and 30s.

The 3-D effect, as in the Attingham carpet, was also one of Whitty's inspirations.

Several visitors to Whitty's factory mention a design "peculiar to himself". This was probably what is now referred to as the 'Lansdowne' design, which was copied in 2005 for the 250th anniversary of the first carpet made in Axminster. The design combines neo-classical acanthus panels and a centrepiece of rose sprays and baskets overflowing with flowers.

Later the manufactory produced Chinese patterns with dragons and hieroglyphics, such as in the carpets for the Brighton Royal Pavillion.



Courtesy of the Royal Pavillion, Brighton

Music Room , Royal Pavillion, Brighton

# The Weavers' Tales celebrations

Mirroring a tradition established in the late 1750s, on 21 June 2005, a piece of history was re-enacted in Axminster.



*Parade of the Carpet, 2005*

The Minster bells rung, people lined the streets and, as part of a larger pageant, a replica Whitty carpet – The Celebration Carpet – was paraded through the streets from the United Reformed Church in Chard Street to the Minster Church of St Mary the Virgin in the town centre, where it was blessed at a special service and accepted on behalf of the Queen by the Earl of Devon. At the same time, two new church bells – the Thomas Whitty and the Harry Dutfield – were dedicated.

This celebration, along with other events, was the culmination of three years' work by The Weavers' Tales committee – which included local councillors, professionals and businessmen – and was formed to explore ways of marking the 250th anniversary of the first carpet to be woven in Axminster. The Patron was Sir Neville Marriner and the chairman Dr John Church.

The first event in the programme was a musical play about the life of Thomas Whitty performed on the site of the old carpet factory. The play was written, produced, directed and performed by people from the Axminster area. Children from local schools featured prominently in both the street parade and musical, which were featured in the local press and television, and aroused tremendous interest.

In addition, a Dyer's Garden containing many of the plants originally used to make carpet dyes was established in the centre of the town adjoining the Arts Café. The week-long series of events also included a children's street party, a Weavers' Meal and a Summer Ball, all of which saw the local community coming together to pay tribute to the industry which put Axminster on the world map.



*Parade of the Carpet, 2005*

# Harry Dutfield

## and the renaissance of Axminster Carpets

The town of Axminster saw no carpets made for about 100 years after the closure of the original manufactory, although its name remained synonymous with carpets worldwide.

An enterprising young man whose father was steeped in the carpet industry in Kidderminster happened to stumble over this fact and, with encouragement from local Axminster worthies, the renaissance of carpet making in Axminster took place. The founding of the modern manufactory took place in the dining room of Castle Mount, Axminster, in 1937 with a capital of £15,000 and the goodwill of some local businessmen.

The first carpet to be made in Axminster for 102 years was produced in May 1937 and went on show in a local shop window. The new enterprise was successful and, just prior to the Second World War, twelve narrow looms were in operation. However, with the onset of hostilities these looms were mothballed and the factory turned out stirrup pumps and aircraft engine parts instead.

Following the end of the war, wool yarn was in short supply so in 1950 Harry bought a rundown spinning mill at Buckfastleigh which had been used for cloth and blanket making, and transformed it into a woollen spinning mill, providing a reliable supply to Axminster. It is now one of the most modern plants in the country. Meanwhile

modern broadlooms were installed in the carpet factory and orders flowed into the home of carpets. 'Axminsters from Axminster' became the mantra for quality and consistency in supply.

In an effort to extend the supply chain from fleece to floor, Harry became involved with the breeding of Drysdale sheep in New Zealand and, in the late 1960s, imported 30 ewes and two rams as the nucleus of a new flock. From a commercial point of view, the small quantities of wool produced never satisfied the carpet looms, as in the UK the farmer makes his profit from the carcass, not the clip.



*Casino de Deauville*

*Courtesy of Axminster Carpets Ltd.*

The word of Harry Dutfield was his bond and the 'guvnor', as he was affectionately known, made carpets for palaces, castles and country houses, just like his predecessor Thomas Whitty. After the fire at Windsor Castle the new carpets came from Axminster. Osborne House has also



been graced by a modern Axminster and the circular Royal Albert Hall provided a particular challenge which was successfully completed in 1999.

Harry died in 1991 but he had handed on the baton to his son Simon, who has continued the development of this friendly family firm. This year, Harry's grandson Josh joined Simon as joint managing director, and so the warp and weft continues for those magic Axminsters from Axminster.

Courtesy of Axminster Carpets Ltd.



*Room of the Dons, Mark Hopkins Hotel, San Francisco*

## Modern carpet design

Carpet design has not changed dramatically from the days of Whitty; just the tools that produce the design.

Until 1990, carpet designs were still being drawn in charcoal then transferred to point paper with the squares then painted by hand. The advent of computers enabled designers to draw and produce designs five times faster than using the traditional method, as changes in colour and layout could be made with

the click of a mouse and approved by the client electronically. However the designer still needs inspiration from Persian and Turkey carpets, architects and the world of nature.

Computers have helped Axminster Carpets Ltd to produce large patterns that were not previously imaginable. The curved borders for the Royal Albert Hall, a 36x121 ft rug simulating water for a European Hotel and many reproductions of historic carpets for the National Trust and English Heritage, have been made possible by the use of computers.

The tools in a digital age have changed but the craftsman's art reigns supreme. No doubt Whitty would agree that drawing a design is easy; the real challenge is to produce one that lasts.

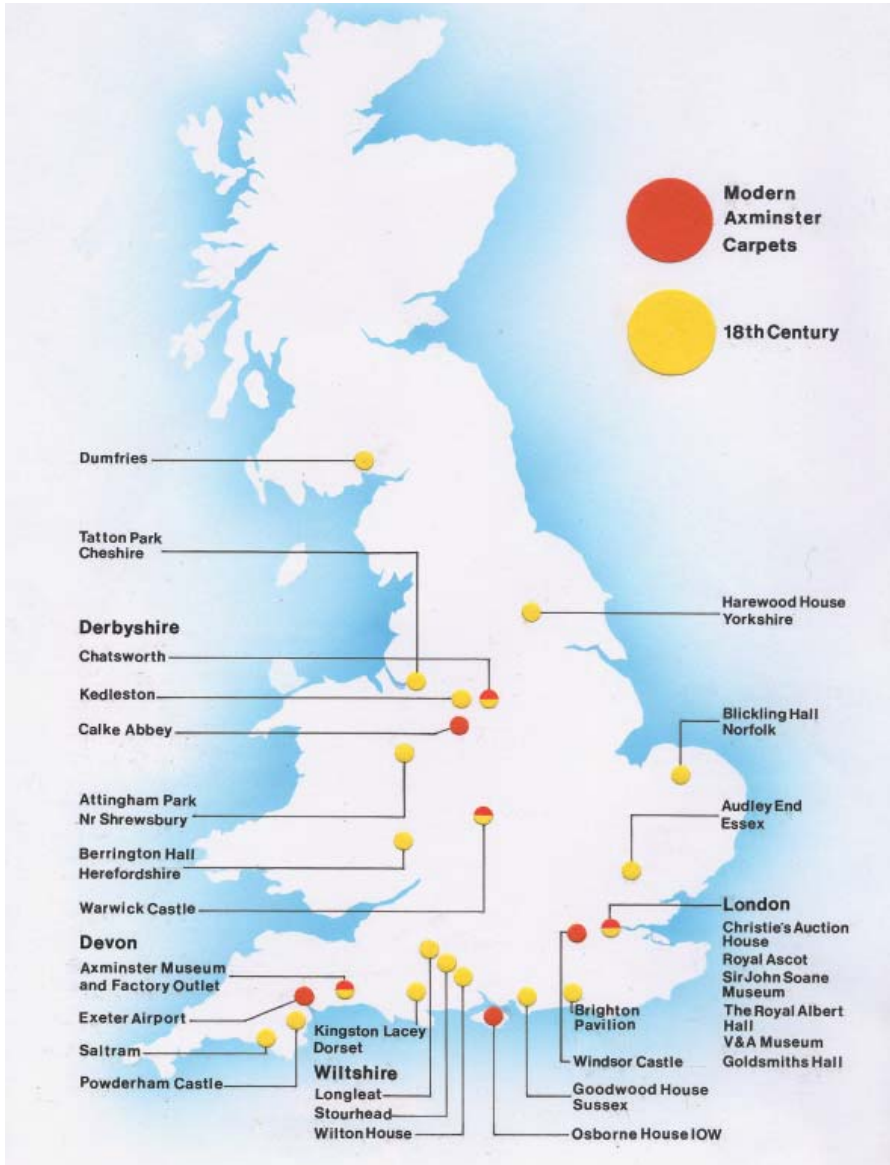


*St. George's Hall, Windsor Castle*

Courtesy of Axminster Carpets Ltd.

# Where are they now?

There are many examples of the work of the famous Whitty manufactory surviving to this day. This map shows where you can still find original Thomas Whitty carpets as well as those from the modern carpet company.



# Looking to the future

We hope you have enjoyed your visit to the exhibition. The Grade II listed building in which it is held is the old factory where Thomas Whitty wove many of his original carpets.

Our long-term objective is to purchase the whole of this building and create a Heritage Centre that represents the complete history of Axminster, of which the carpet industry has been a leading factor.

The ground floor will house the major attraction: a unique national collection of 18th century Axminster carpets, with the objective of retaining them in the UK rather than them being sold overseas. In addition there will be some interactive displays.

We also plan to have a children's area showing how to create a carpet, with hands-on spinning and dyeing opportunities and tactile, sound and smell features. The ground floor might also house a gift shop and the nearby Tourist Information Centre.

On the first floor we will devote areas to non-carpet-related items that have played an important role in the history of Axminster. A cafeteria is also proposed, together with a conference area that can double as a classroom for school visits.

The upper floor will become a reference centre and computer design room, where students can browse early documents

and written works on Axminster carpets. They will be able to design their own carpet patterns.

Longer term it is planned to develop visual links to the current factory so visitors can see old and modern carpet-weaving techniques.

We want the proposed Heritage Centre to appeal to all: young and old, residents and visitors, able bodied and not so able bodied. For every visitor it should be an exciting experience.

To accomplish our vision, we need an estimated £1,250,000 to purchase, refurbish and equip the building.

By buying this booklet you have helped us on our way to meeting that target. If you would like to help some more, for a small annual subscription you can become a 'Friend' of the Axminster Heritage Centre.

We look forward to seeing you again.

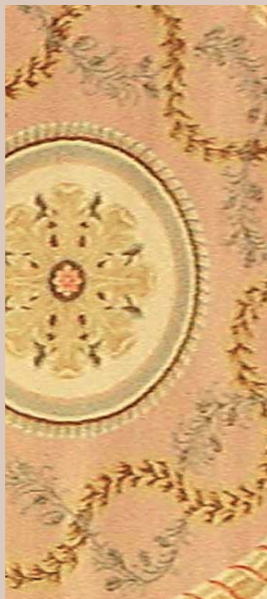


*Planning for the future*



# Chronology

<b>Thomas Whitty born</b>	1716	Thomas Gray, poet, born
	1721	Robert Walpole becomes Britain's first prime minister
Whitty commences weaving cloth	1737	
Marries Sarah Rampton		
Son - Thomas - born	1740	Song 'Rule Britannia' first performed
	1746	Last battle on British soil fought (Culloden)
<b>Whitty makes his first carpet</b>	1755	Johnson's English Dictionary first published
Society for Arts Awards for carpets -	1757	
Whitty joint recipient		
Society for Arts Awards for carpets -	1759	British capture Quebec
Whitty outright winner		
Carpets made for Dumfries House		
	1760	George III becomes king
Rockbeare carpet made	1769	Richard Arkwright patents a spinning frame
Saltram House carpet made	1770	James Cook lands in Botany Bay
	1772	London Stock Exchange founded
	1776	American Declaration of Independence
	1779	Samuel Crompton builds his spinning mule
	1785	First London to Exeter mail coach
Royal visit to Axminster	1789	French Revolution
<b>Death of Thomas Whitty</b>	1792	Deaths of Robert Adam & Richard Arkwright
Carpet made for Powderham Castle	1798	Income tax first introduced
Death of Thomas Whitty Jnr	1799	Death of George Washington
	1805	Battle of Trafalgar
	1815	Battle of Waterloo
	1820	Death of George III
Largest ever Axminster carpet made for the Sultan of Turkey	1822	Egyptian hieroglyphics deciphered
	1825	First railway - Stockton to Darlington - opened
Original factory burnt down	1828	Duke of Wellington becomes prime minister
Factory rebuilt	1829	Levi Strauss, American clothing designer, born
	1832	Reform Bill passed
<b>Business becomes bankrupt and closes</b>	1835	John Nash, architect, dies
		Fox Talbot exposes the first photographic negatives
Harry Dutfield born	1908	Ian Flemming born
<b>Carpet manufacture recommences in Axminster</b>	1937	Coronation of George VI
		Patent issued for nylon



*Front cover illustration- The old factory, Axminster  
Inside front cover illustration-Newby Hall, Yorkshire  
Courtesy of Country Life*

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Produced by **Magazette Media**

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