The first known method of wallpaper printing. Recorded as having been used as early as 1509. Prior to this plain paper was pasted to the wall and then hand drawn and coloured in by artists. Continued as the only ‘real’ means of printing wallpapers until the introduction of the ‘Printing machine’ some 300 years later.

While technology may have revolutionised the print industry like no other, it has failed to produce any method that matches the tactility of hand block printing. Its simplistic beauty could not be demonstrated any better than in the manufacture of these traditionally printed wallpapers.

Historically, the wood of fruit trees, such as cherry and pear, has been used for the printing blocks as this timber offered the right balance between durability of use and the practicalities of cutting the block. Softwoods, such as pine, could not withstand the pressures put upon them by the press; whereas harder woods, such as oak or maple, whilst having excellent wear qualities, were simply too hard for cutting by hand.

However, in recent years there have been limited developments whereby other more modern materials, such as Linoleum, plastic and metal, have become available. Given that these materials are inherently more stable than wood that can twist, warp and crack, it would be a fair bet that had they been available 400 years ago, they would certainly have been used.

The look of block printed wallpapers, peculiar to itself, is not necessarily created by the materials used to make the block, but from the ‘splodge’ created by the vacuum as the printing block is pulled away from the paper.
For the process of printing, the craftsman utilises a table, padded with blankets, on which the paper is laid. Next to the table is a wooden, wall-sided tray, inside of which there is an absorbent blanket that is saturated with the coloured pigment.

The printer colours the block by lowering it down onto the colour tray, and once sufficiently inked is lifted and manoeuvred over to the paper by an arch lever system (crane) before being pressed down to create the print. Pins on the side of the blocks guide the printer in placing the block exactly into position. Accuracy and strength of colour is effectively governed by the printer’s ‘gut feeling’ on how much pressure needs to be applied to the back of the block.

After each individual colour has been laid the paper is ‘festoon’ hung for 4-5 hours to let the thick water-based inks dry, before the next colour is applied. Once all of the colours have been printed the wallpaper is PVA lacquered for protection, before being manually trimmed and individually hand wound.