

# How Planning Helped Dulux To Break Through the Class Ceiling



In Britain, class is the elephant in the room we all politely pretend not to notice.

When Dulux Heritage hit a growth ceiling in 2023, Planning did something taboo. We pointed to the elephant.

*"Your problem isn't your paint... It's that Dulux is the wrong kind of famous for middle-class Brits".*

Rather than following Farrow & Ball's playbook of quirky colour names and cold sophisticated comms, Planning took a contrarian approach.

Going beyond conventional research, we turned to anthropology to understand how *people themselves* signalled class – finding that education and elocution were key.

When we stepped into our audience's homes, our preparation and anthropological lens enabled us to spot something that others had missed entirely - carefully curated book collections functioning as expensive wallpaper!

Premium paint and classic literature were both being used to signal cultural sophistication and class.

This insight led to our creative breakthrough – 'Heritage Editions' – a bespoke collection of classic novels, with each cover adorned in Dulux Heritage hues that evoked the same feelings as their central theme.

Through a national campaign celebrating 'Heritage Editions', we didn't just sell paint - we sold admission to the inner sanctum of good taste and middle-class society, painted in the hues and feelings of classic literature.

The results were extraordinary: prompted awareness up 11%, brand meaningfulness overtook Farrow & Ball, and sales increased 44.8% YOY.

This is the story of how Planning helped Dulux to break through the class ceiling.

# How Planning Helped Dulux To Break Through the Class Ceiling

## The uncomfortable truth no one wanted to talk about

Let's talk about the elephant in the room of British society - class.

Everyone feels it, but no one wants to discuss it.

And when Dulux Heritage hit a growth ceiling in 2023, that's exactly the uncomfortable conversation we needed to have.

Despite 3 years of trying to crack the premium paint category, our market share was not where it needed to be commercially and had now plateaued.

By speaking with our audience, we found the problem wasn't the product. It was the brand.

Among discerning middle-class Brits, Dulux was simply the "wrong kind of famous" – the people's champion in a category where sophistication reigned supreme.

Breaking through this class ceiling wasn't just a hard thing for a brand to do in the UK – it's arguably the hardest thing *anyone* can do.

When we suggested to the client that their problem was fundamentally about class perception, the room went quiet. It wasn't just an uncomfortable truth - it was borderline taboo.

But sometimes planning's job is to name the unnameable.

In this category, Farrow & Ball were the reigning monarch. Not only were they most familiar luxury player, they were masters of cultural sophistication.

Their colour names – 'Elephant's Breath', 'Roasted Macadamia', 'Hog Plum' – weren't just descriptions but cultural signals, passwords into the world of refined middle-class taste.

Our brand tracking confirmed the challenge they posed to us:

- Our 17% prompted awareness was dwarfed by Farrow & Ball's 33%
- Farrow & Ball were beating us on brand meaningfulness by 19 points (72 to 53)

The conventional approach would have been to mimic Farrow & Ball's formula – create pretentious colour names, adopt cold sophistication in our comms, and hope to be invited to the party.

But as planners, we knew that convention would never triumph over the scale of the brand challenge we faced. We needed to beat Farrow & Ball at their own game, but in an entirely new way.

## How planning read between the lines of British class

Here's where planning really earned its keep.

We went beyond category research and competitor analysis, turning to cultural anthropology for answers – studying our audience as a distinct cultural group with their own codes and signals.

This wasn't about what people would tell us in focus groups. In Britain, people rarely articulate class dynamics openly – they signal them. As planners, we needed to decode these signals rather than rely on explicit statements.

We immersed ourselves in the seminal works of Kate Fox (author of "Watching the English") and other anthropological authors. What we discovered was fascinating: while wealth can be acquired, the two main class signifiers of middle and upper-class Britain were in fact **education** and **elocution**.



Keen to understand our audience on a deeper level, we went beyond focus groups and asking them about their paint preferences. Instead, we spent time with them and took a first-hand look inside their homes.

In doing so, we stumbled across something fascinating: they were using carefully chosen, thoughtfully curated book collections as 'expensive wallpaper'.

The books weren't just reading materials – they were visible proof of education and linguistic sophistication, and a means to display their intellectual credentials to others.

### Ethnographic Snapshot: Books have essentially become 'expensive wallpaper' for middle-class homes



"I have lots more [books] in the spare room, but these are the ones I like to keep out. They add a bit of charm and they're a good conversation starter when we have people over"



"We have so many. If I'm honest, I haven't read them all – I will one day - but I like keeping them all out because they add something to the room, there's a beauty in how they look"



"I love to read. I always have ever since I was young, so it felt right to have them [books] take pride of place in our home. They're cherished moments and stories that we're displaying"



"My father used to say what you read shapes who you are, so I quite enjoy having our little collections scattered around the house as a reminder of that and who we are"



"Striking the right aesthetic in your home, your space is an important thing... That doesn't mean we would buy books just for show and not read them, no, we just buy specific versions – I might buy a copy of Orwell with a better designed or more colourful cover, read it and then display it in the lounge for example..."

Our study is more old-fashioned, so we keep our older, our more well-worn books in there because they fit"

Although a chance discovery, it was our background research that allowed us to recognise the importance and symbolism of what we had encountered.

Intrigued, we dug further and found that this wasn't mere correlation – TGI revealed that premium paint buyers were 230% more likely to read classical literature than the average Brit.

The signals were subtle but unmistakable. In these homes, well-worn copies of classic literature were not merely books – they were a badge of cultural membership. The specific book and literary theme mattered. The placement mattered. Everything was signalling, nothing was random.

In conducting a deeper analysis of these parallel behaviours, we found that premium paint choice and curated book collections shared the same social functions:




### What Premium Paint and Classic Literature mutually convey...

1. Both visibly signal education and taste in the home
2. Both convey cultural sophistication without appearing to try too hard
3. Both balance personal expression with class signalling
4. Both involve careful curation that demonstrates discernment
5. Both represent significant investment (time or money)




As planners, we had unearthed a powerful insight that no one else in the category had identified before: the parallel between how our audience used both paint and classic literature as signals of education and cultural sophistication within their homes.

With this, we saw a huge opportunity - by connecting classical literature to paint selection, we could create an entirely new way for discerning middle-class Brits to choose and perceive Dulux Heritage.

## From insight to idea

Our core insight dictated our next challenge: to authentically bridge the worlds of classic literature and premium paint

This wasn't about a marketing message, it was about creating a genuine social signal – something our audience would want to display, discuss and be associated with.

To achieve this, we assembled a cross-disciplinary team to review the wealth of classic titles available to us – our final selection consisted of 12 of the world's most treasured literary works, covering a breadth of emotional narratives while all signalling cultural sophistication.

Rather than traditional swatches, we crafted our own bespoke range of the novels – aptly named 'Heritage Editions' – with each book cover adorned with specific Dulux Heritage hues and liquid artistry techniques that evoked the same feelings and moods as the central themes.



To ensure the books would function as genuine signals of education and cultural sophistication, we pushed the execution beyond the expected – extending our craft to over 1.3 million words meticulously artworked into 4,478 pages across the collection.

We even reimagined our gifted tester cans, stripping away all references to colour and replacing them solely with descriptions of the feelings each colour would evoke – forcing influencers to engage with colour in an entirely new, evocative way.



Through 'Heritage Editions,' we inspired Brits to paint their walls with the feelings and sophistication of Moby Dick, Little Women, and Wuthering Heights – creating an entirely new way to think about and choose premium paint that felt authentic to both our brand and our audience.

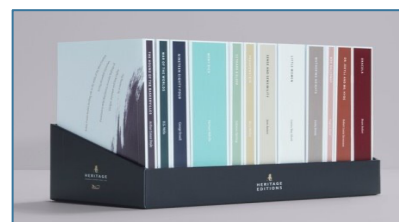
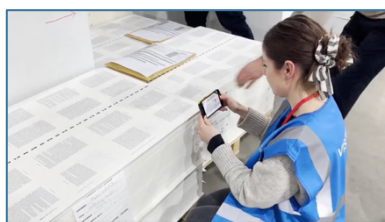
## Making it happen

Planning's job wasn't done with the insight. We knew that for this idea to truly break through the class ceiling, execution would be everything.

Rather than defaulting to a traditional integrated media plan, we purposefully designed our strategy to spark natural conversations among the right people in the right places – reinforcing the signals of education and cultural sophistication.

### Step 1. The books

We knew we had a real chance to disrupt through 'Heritage Editions', but only if we committed... And that meant real books – printed, bound and read. 3,600 limited edition books were created for public giveaways, competitions and influencers.

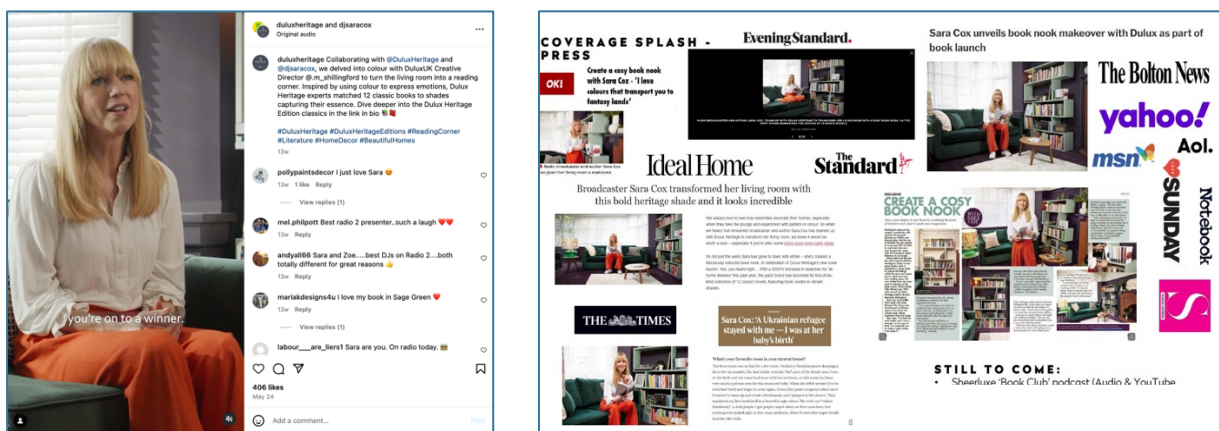


By carefully calibrating the print run, we found the sweet spot between availability and scarcity – ensuring our Heritage Edition books became not just desirable, but collectible and talked about. This wasn't just a product; it was a signal that could be displayed in homes across Britain.

## Step 2. Leveraging cultural partnerships

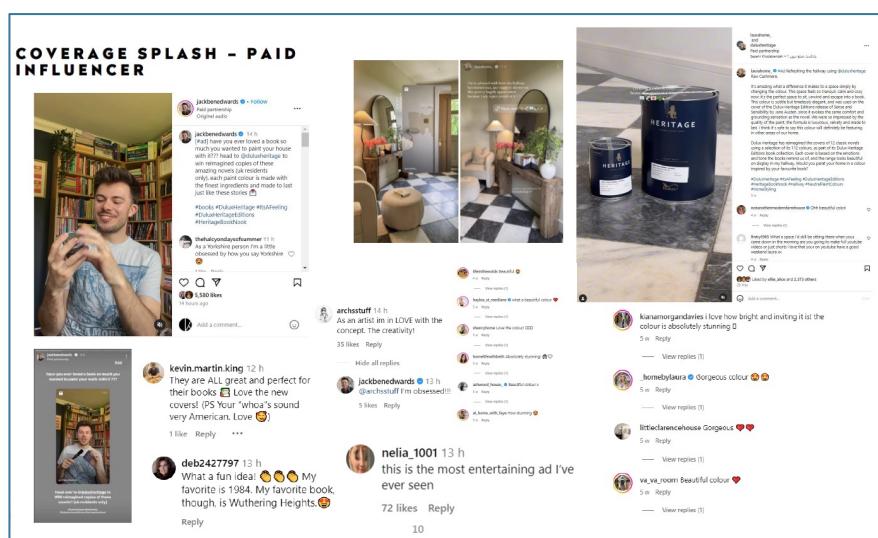
Next, we established cultural partnerships that could authentically bridge the worlds of literature and home design. Our core partnership was with Sara Cox, host of BBC's *Between the Covers* and an avid literature and home interiors enthusiast.

We worked together to redecorate part of her home as a book nook using Dulux Heritage colours from the curated collection – generating enormous PR coverage while creating content that felt more editorial than advertising.



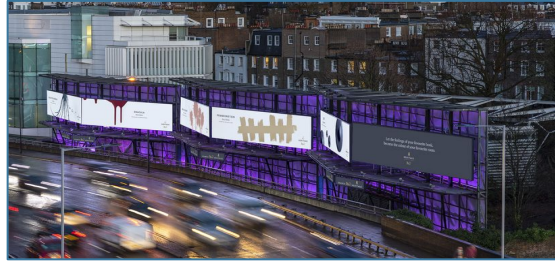
We also partnered with 2 x macro influencers whose passion areas and content were relevant to our audience and creative strategy (@JackBenEdwards 'the internet's resident librarian' and @LauraHome\_ an interiors influencer).

Each were sent a set of the books alongside tester paint cans, creating a wealth of rich and engaging content for us in return – elevating our cultural positioning.



### Step 3. We strategically amplified our campaign across multiple other touchpoints

**Advertising turned public art that adorned the largest and most striking OOH canvasses** – forcing people to think differently about both literature and colour.



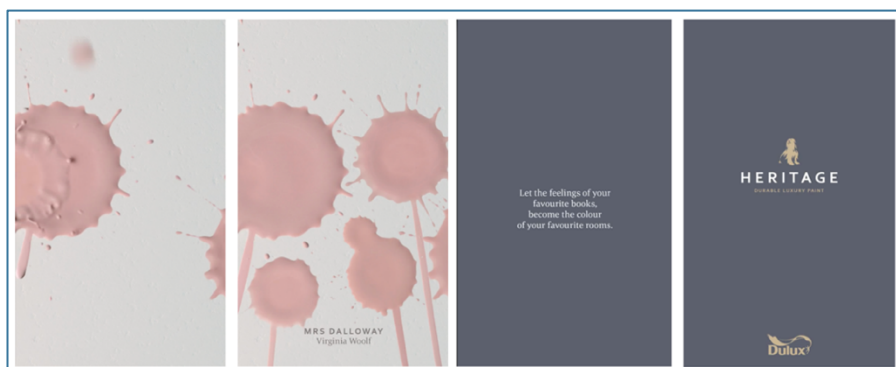
**'Book cover' ads within major home and interior design magazines** – becoming part of the curator's journey through what anthropologists call 'taste-making rituals', rather than just another advertisement.



**Spotify and podcast partnerships** – leveraging behavioural science, we chose audio to honour the power of words in painting both feelings *and* colour in the mind through vivid descriptions.



**Pinterest and social videos of the paint being applied to books via our liquid artistry techniques** – this wasn't just 'content', it was a series of 'self-expression' and 'status permission' slips to share with others and to signal their own interests and sophistication.



Each element was strategically orchestrated to feel less like advertising and more like a cultural moment that sophisticated people naturally wanted to be part of... **Ultimately delivering a disruptive, impactful campaign with our strategy and creative idea at the heart of it all.**

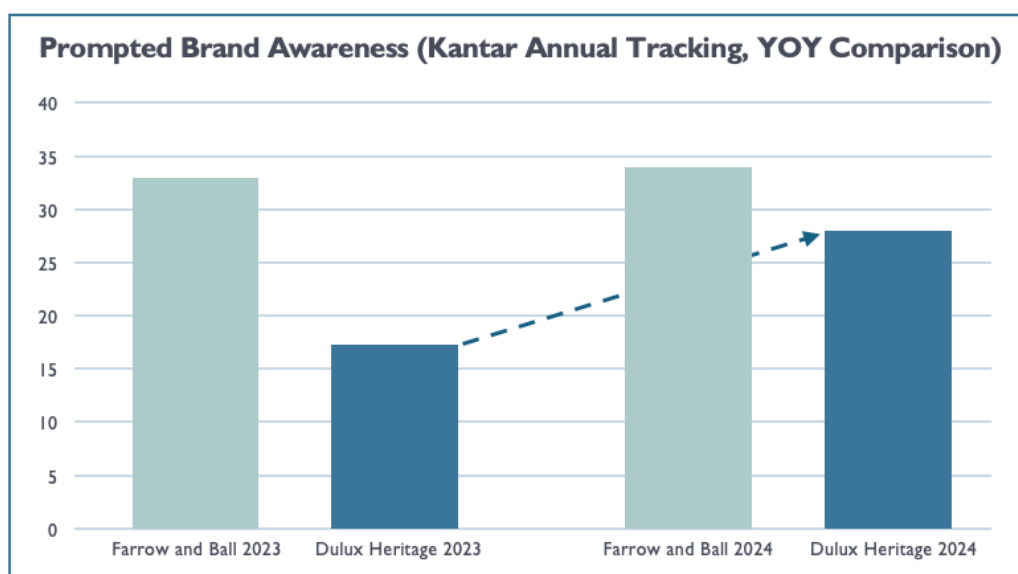


## Breaking through the class ceiling

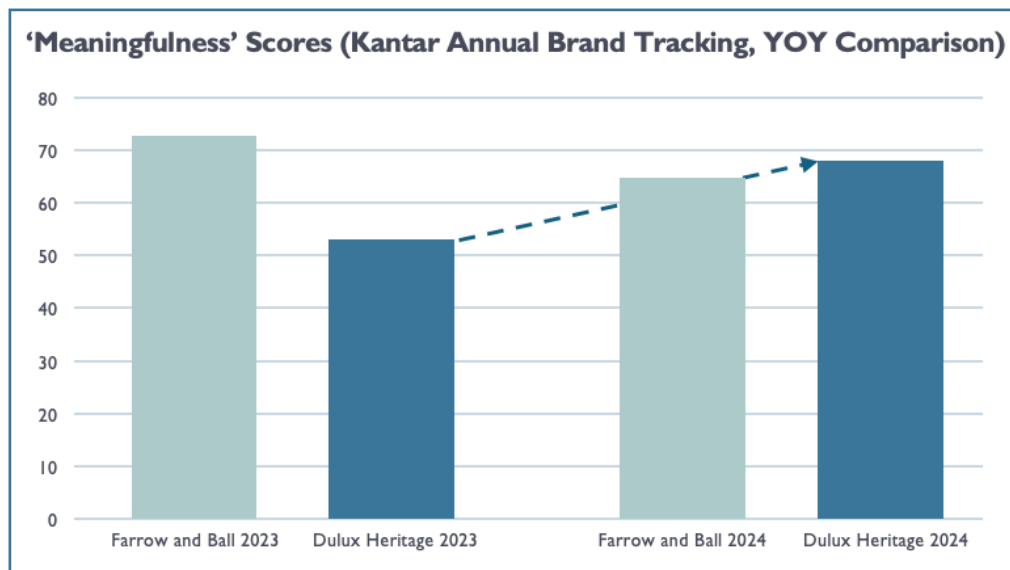
The results were transformative for both the brand and for sales.

By connecting classical literature with premium paint, we had created a cultural 'class-sensitive' signal – something people *actually* wanted to talk about and be seen to know about.

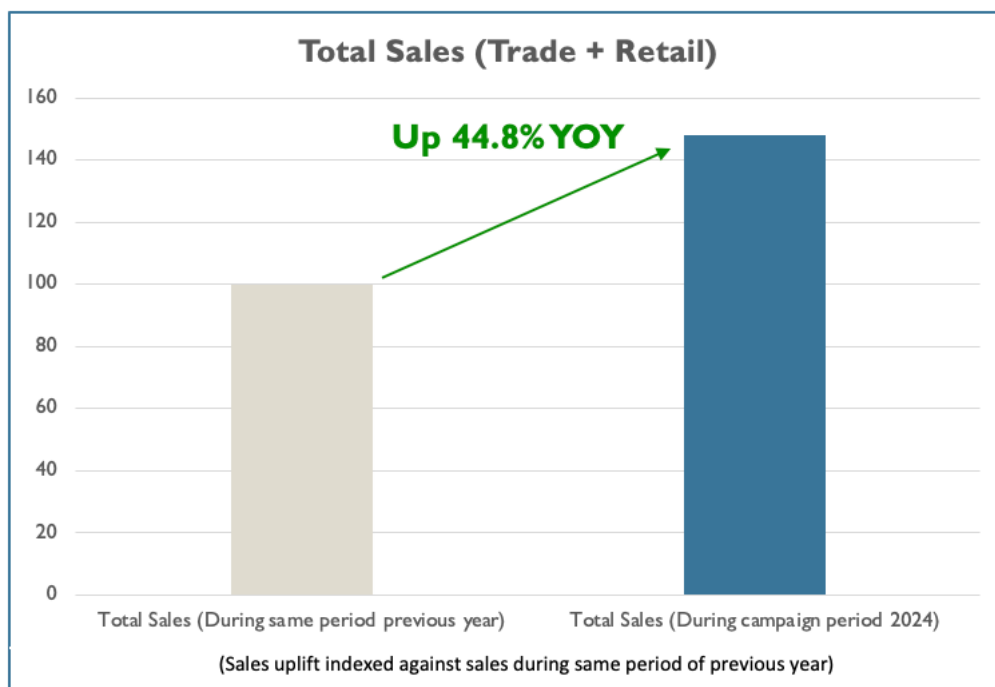
**Our brand tracking showed an 11% surge in prompted awareness** – now punching up against Farrow & Ball's established position.



**While our 'meaningfulness' score soared 15 points – actually overtaking and dethroning Farrow & Ball as the top dog in premium paint for meaningfulness.**



**Most importantly though, 'Heritage Editions' led to huge commercial success – driving an extraordinary 44.8% increase in total sales YOY during the campaign period.**



**Our campaign delivered Dulux Heritage's highest ever market share – growing 2.3 percentage points in the first month after launch, while continuing to climb a further 2 percentage points over the next six months.**

## **What planning learned: 'Chance favours the prepared mind'**

There's a moment in every great planning story when everything changes.

For us, it wasn't when we were sat in a research debrief or a workshop – it was standing in someone's living room, staring at their bookshelves.

That's when our eureka moment struck. However, this wasn't just good fortune.

As Louis Pasteur famously said, "chance favours the prepared mind".

By immersing ourselves in the cultural anthropology of British class, we had acquired the necessary lens to recognise those carefully arranged classics for what they truly were - they weren't simply reading materials, they were social signals of sophistication (serving the exact same social functions as premium paint in affluent and aspiring homes).

Through 'Heritage Editions', we didn't just sell paint – we sold a place in the inner sanctum of good taste and middle-class society, painted in the hues and feelings of classic literature.

And in doing so, we achieved one of the most difficult things for any person (let alone a brand) to do: we broke through the class ceiling... and supercharged Dulux Heritage's growth in the process.

The most valuable lesson wasn't some grand theory about consumer behaviour – it was simply learning to look for signals, not statements.

In Britain, where class is felt but rarely discussed openly, what people display in their homes reveals infinitely more than what they'll say in a focus group.

So the next time you're faced with a seemingly insurmountable brand challenge, remember the most powerful insights might be hiding in plain sight – you just need the right lens to spot them.