



An Introduction to

RAG RUGS -

**Creative
Recycling**

Jenni Stuart-Anderson

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RAG RUGS:
CREATIVE RECYCLING

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WHITE OWL

AN IMPRINT OF PEN & SWORD BOOKS LTD.
YORKSHIRE - PHILADELPHIA

First published in Great Britain in 2021 by
Pen & Sword WHITE OWL
An imprint of
Pen & Sword Books Ltd
Yorkshire – Philadelphia

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ISBN 9781526780607

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is
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Printed and bound in India by Replika Press Pvt. Ltd.
Design: Paul Wilkinson

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INTRODUCTION



THERE IS A HUGE resurgence of interest in making things by hand, with many traditional crafts enjoying a comeback. Rag rug making, which was recycling of old clothes out of necessity, is now part of the – ever more creative – ‘upcycling’ movement.

Many people are keen to source things locally and there has been a realisation that we don’t need to throw things away but can transform them whilst enjoying the creative process. Hand-making things can be really therapeutic, especially now we are spending more time at home at the time of writing in 2020. Even mending and patching clothes are being featured as creative skills.

Vintage rag rugs were originally made from worn-out clothing or mill waste to provide a bit of comfort in poor, cold homes but have become a medium for self-expression, even a textile art form. However, you don’t need to be artistic to have a go – the techniques are simple and most people can enjoy making something.

I started rag rug making as a cheap, creative outlet when I was at home with my baby daughter, years ago. Since then, I have enjoyed sharing traditional techniques with many people at workshops and when I finish this book, I plan to teach online.

Doris Tunley, who taught me some traditional techniques, made rugs for her family for over fifty years and when people see me demonstrating at shows, some have shared memories of seeing it done or having a go as children. Making-do and mending was an integral part of life for many in the British Isles and people enjoy the stories, although most rugs did not survive as they became worn out. Neighbours came in to have a go and a chat, frames were passed from house to house – there was definitely a social aspect in communities where people knew their neighbours.

‘Bratty mats – my gran made them. Everyone else sat around chatting and knitting, with long needles held under their arms.’ Northumberland

'There were five of us and mum would get us to sit round the table on a Sunday evening and we'd have a go to work on the rug.'

The techniques in this book are simple to do and the projects are small so that you can finish something and, if you enjoy the technique, move on to a larger or more complex design. Starting with a large project can seem daunting – have a go first, then you will have an idea how much time a larger piece will take and how much fabric you may need.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Unless otherwise stated, photographs in this book were taken by the rug makers or owners of vintage items or by Jenni Stuart-Anderson or Lorenzo Gavarini.

I would like to thank Aileen Pringle at Pen and Sword and Gaynor Haliday for her help and encouragement when editing the book.

I would also like to thank Lorenzo Gavarini for his drawings and colour illustrations and all the meals he cooked whilst I worked on the book. Thanks also to Keith James for his photography and friendship.

I am grateful to Sally Pointer who advised me about plant fibre twine and sent me an image of nettle bast she had made.

Thanks also to all the people who shared pictures of their creations, often started in my workshops. Let's keep this craft alive!

CHAPTER ONE

RAGS – HOW DID WE GET HERE?

IT HAS BEEN A long journey from the production of the first textiles to the twenty-first century when we now buy more than we need and even throw much away.

A BRIEF LOOK AT THE HISTORY OF TEXTILES

That humans have been using cloth for millennia is evidenced by the discovery of sewing needles of antler and bone dated to 50,000 years ago in South Africa and Siberia. Further examples have been found in France, Slovenia, China and Spain.

The earliest dyed flax fibres were found in a prehistoric cave in Georgia and date back 36,000 years. Woven textile fragments were found in a Neolithic village on the Konya Plain of Anatolia and dated c. 6000 BCE, but since few other early textiles have survived the passage of centuries, it is difficult to ascertain exactly who was using what for cloth-making, and when they were using it.

Before spinning, 'yarn' was created by plying (twisting) bast fibres from plant stems, like flax, lime and nettles.

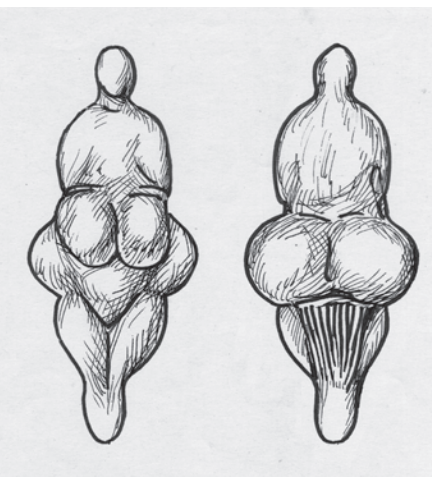
Nalbinding (needle-binding) fabric fragments (c. 6500 BCE) were found in a cave near the Dead Sea and one made from lime bast fibre was found in a Mesolithic fishing village in Denmark (c. 4200 BCE).

The nalbinding technique used a single large, thick needle for a method of knotting, which works well with short lengths of yarn (bast) and was used during the Viking Age of AD 793–1066 in Scandinavia before knitting and crochet were known.

Excavation of a late Bronze Age settlement (Must Farm: 1000–800 BCE) in Eastern England revealed fine plant fibre yarn on bobbins, and closely woven textiles remarkably well preserved through charring first, then waterlogging.

Ancient Egyptian cloth production dates from the Neolithic period; linen bandages wrapping mummified bodies show that

The 25,000 year old Venus figurine 'Venus of Lespugue' found in France in the Pyrenees wears a cloth or twisted fibre skirt.





Bast fibre twined from nettle stalk. (Sally Pointer)

linen cloth was woven from flax and other plant fibres from the First Dynasty (3150–2890 BCE). Tomb paintings show fibre preparation, plying, spinning and looms, and there are also tomb models which show weaving workshops. Spinning yarn for cloth was women's work whereas men spun yarn for nets until the early New Kingdom when they were shown weaving at vertical looms.

Bark was another plant fibre used for making cloth; in Japan, cloth fragments from bark fibres have been discovered from the Jomon period, about 1000 BCE.

The use of fibres derived from animal sources can be traced to fragments of woven silk in Zhejiang, China, dating back to 2700

BCE, and large flocks of sheep supplied the trade in raw wool which was the main source of fibre in Mesopotamia in the Bronze Age (c. 3500–1100 BCE). Camel, goat, and ibex hair was used there later, but flax linen was imported from Palestine and Syria.

The main fabric available in the Early Medieval period was wool. Raw flax and wool, spun into yarn, was bleached or dyed, then woven into cloth, although sometimes felt was also made from the raw washed fleece. The next most widely used fibre was linen, followed by silk which was imported from the east and therefore very expensive. During the Muslim conquest of the Iberian Peninsula and Sicily from AD 711, cotton manufacture was introduced to Europe. The knowledge of cotton-weaving spread to northern Italy in the twelfth century, when Sicily was conquered by the Normans, and consequently to the rest of Europe.

As the cloth and clothes-making industry grew, people started to be employed in larger numbers in factories. One example is the spinners and weavers at Lagash temple's clothing factory in Mesopotamia. They were mainly female slaves but by 2000 BCE, male weavers were also recorded, and at Ur, where 165 females

Bronze or Iron Age sandstone spindle whorl found at Tupsley, Herefordshire.



Iron Age Stone spindle whorl, found at Portway, Herefordshire.



wove in a single building, they were set output targets.

The flourishing textile industry in Greece employed up to 600 women in Pylos alone where raw materials were supplied to female textile workers. Terracotta loom weights and spindle-whorls indicate the use of warp-weighted looms and murex shellfish dyeing started in Crete after 1700 BCE.

The Scandinavians in particular valued women's role in the textile industry. According to Norse mythology, Urd, Verdandi, and Skuld were Norns – female beings who predicted the future and ruled destiny. As the Fates who spun and measured a person's life-thread, they could also cut it.

Weaving was also surrounded by superstition and magic; traditionally weaving was a skill passed from mother to daughter. According to Swedish folk tradition, one way to achieve special skills and excellence as a weaver was, at the stroke of midnight on New Year's Eve, to hold the tool you wanted to master in your hand, which would enhance your abilities.

Even in death women were expected to take their skills with them; the grave in Gotland of a high-status Viking woman included a spindle stick and spindle whorl.

By the early eleventh century, it is likely that professional weavers were using simple, flat treadle looms, although warp weighted and two beam looms would have continued to be used in the home. Wool and linen could be mixed on a loom, with the linen creating the warp threads and the wool the weft.

After Henry VIII's break with the Catholic Church in 1534, many European Protestants came to England to escape persecution in their own countries. Among them were highly skilled Flemish weavers who introduced many innovations and techniques to the British.

Cloth was used for clothing and bedding. Because its production was so labour intensive, it was mended and patched until it could only be used in strips for rag weaving of bedspreads, and later for rugs in Sweden and Canada.

Mid-eighteenth-century peasants in northern Japan used backstrap looms to weave cotton rags in strips. These were sewn into heavy kimono-style housecoats (yogi), worn in the day and used on the bed at night. These woven strips, known as Sakiori, were also sewn together as heavy coverlets called Kotatsugakes, which were placed over small traditional heaters around which a family would sit, warming their feet and hands under the coverlet. Sometimes they were also used as floor rugs.

Imported cotton became very popular in Britain in the eighteenth century, much of it from America where it was grown and harvested using slave labour. India also had a booming cotton textiles industry and its goods were the most important manufactured goods in world trade from Japan to the Americas.

On the American continent, in the early nineteenth century, 'ruggs' were made of yarn loops sewn on homespun linen or wool by French settlers in Nova Scotia and Quebec. Handworked textiles were too precious to put on the floor so were displayed on chests and tables.

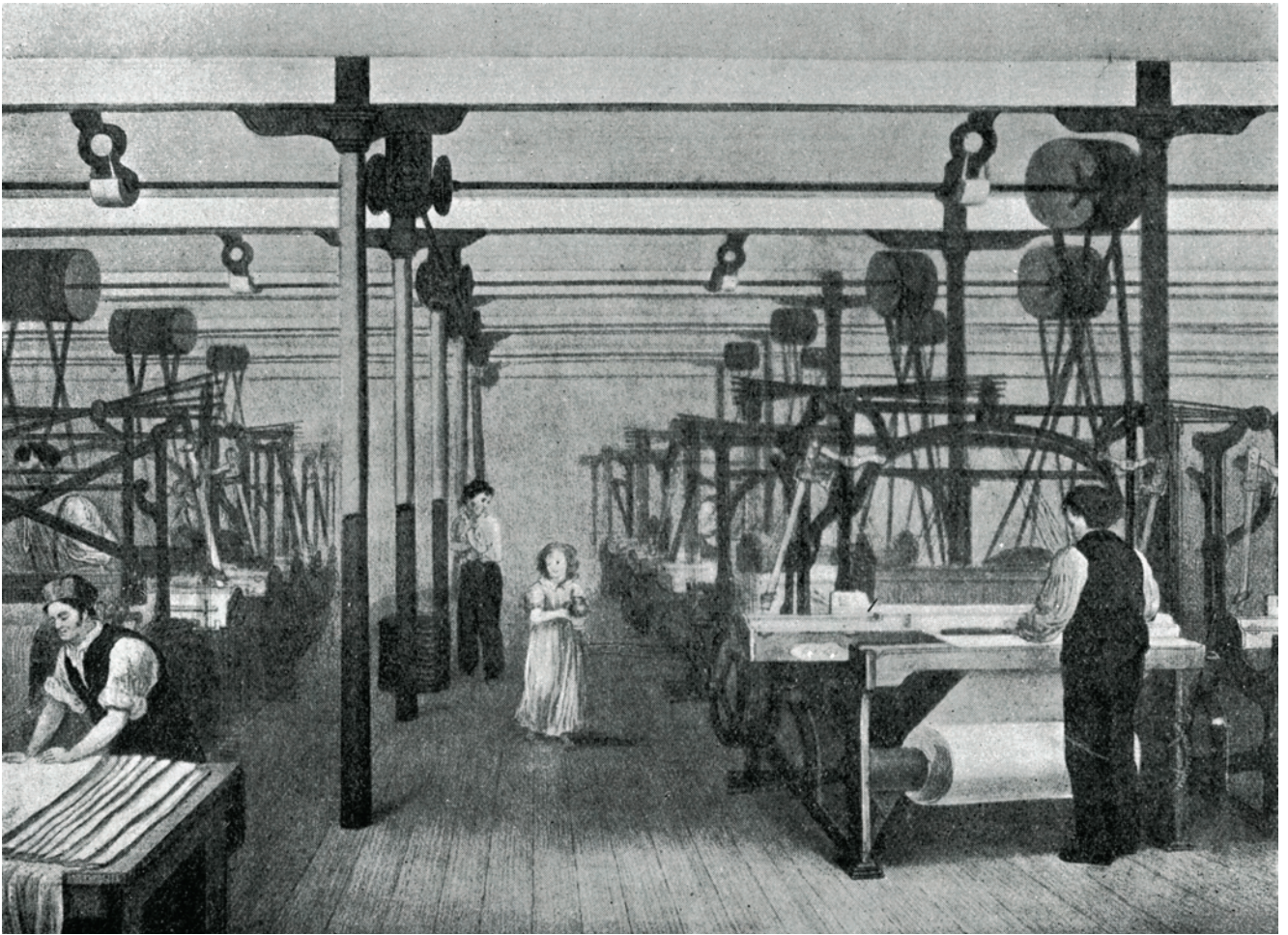
'Thrum' mats made by sailors, using short strands of yarn or rope pulled through canvas, were used in a ship's rigging to prevent chafing of ropes. Mr Hamilton Easter Field in *The Arts Magazine* of 1921, mentioned a rug in his collection made by Captain Talpey in the war of 1812. Maybe thrum mats made by English sailors, and taken home, could have inspired hearth rugs in England and Scotland, which then spread to north-east America as colonists settled there.

THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION

In 1785, Edmund Cartwright patented a loom which used water power to speed up the weaving process, the predecessor to the modern power loom. By 1850, there were 260,000 power looms in operation in England, making commercial fabrics more affordable.

The industrial revolution led to profound changes throughout society, starting in England and spreading to Europe and America. The harsh economic climate and difficult working conditions in the new textile factories generated a movement in 1811 of hand weavers opposed to the new automated looms which could be operated by cheap, unskilled labour, especially women and children, which had led to the loss of many jobs. They were called the Luddites, after militant weaver Ned Ludd. Nottinghamshire framework knitters resorted to direct action in an attempt to draw attention to their cause by machine breaking. Their resistance was not just against particular machines, but also against the factory system as a whole, seen as a deliberate assault on the textile worker's independence and bargaining power.

The unrest spread to other areas; mills and machinery were burned by handloom weavers who clashed with the army, leading to their trial, execution and penal transportation. Arguably, it was seen as the final convulsion from a class of independent craftsmen



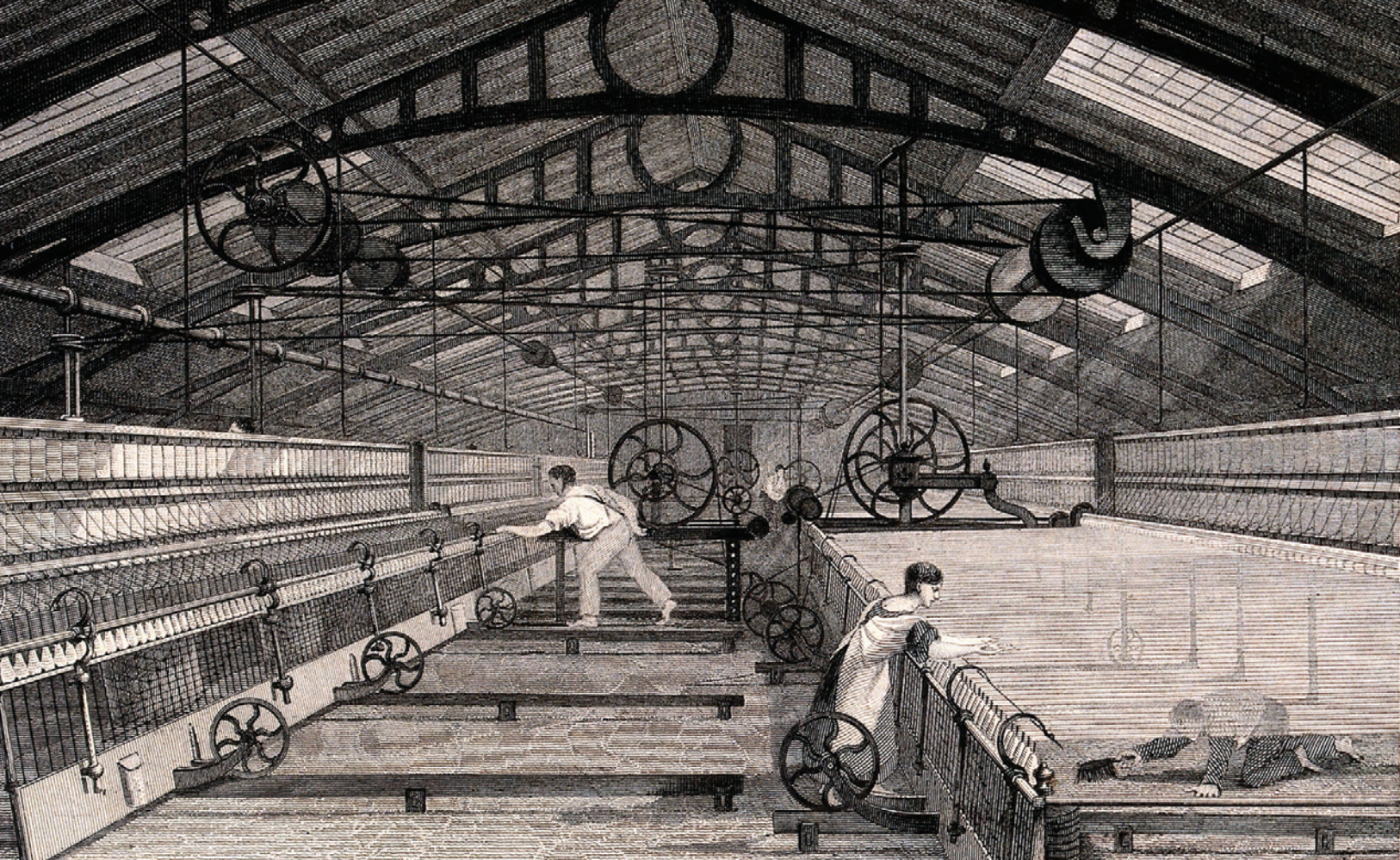
before they were roped into the culture of the sweat shop.

The adoption of power looms led to great distress for handloom weavers. The labour market was overstocked with weavers and, in a recession, the unemployed in any village could run to hundreds. The governor of a Gloucestershire prison observed that in 1840, weavers were grateful for their daily food and left prison with regret, not knowing where the next meal would come from. The most strongly favoured remedy was migration or emigration.

The youngest children in the textile factories were usually employed as scavengers and piecers. Scavengers had to pick up the loose cotton from under the machinery, which was extremely dangerous as they were expected to carry out the task while the machine was still working.

'The scavenger has to take the brush and sweep under the wheels, and to be under the direction of the spinners

Interior of cotton factory showing use of child labour. (Wellcome collection)



A belt-driven version of Crompton's mule inside an iron-framed spinning shed, workers setting machines and clearing cotton waste, etc. Engraving by J. W. Lowry, 1834, after T. Allom. (Wellcome collection)

and the piecers generally. I frequently had to be under the wheels, and in consequence of the perpetual motion of the machinery, I was liable to accidents constantly. I was very frequently obliged to lie flat, to avoid being run over or caught.' David Rowland, worked as a scavenger in Manchester.

In the 1850s, jute hessian (burlap) from India became commercially available in Europe and North America and hessian food sacks were recycled as backing for rag rugs in Britain. Rug patterns, first stencilled, later printed on hessian were produced commercially in North America in the mid-nineteenth century and in England from about 1900. Early rug makers, if they dyed fabrics, used vegetable dyes until synthetic dyes became available in the 1860s, producing brighter colours.

Rag rugs in Britain were made from pieces of worn clothing and linen by people too poor to afford woven carpets, and slim 'slip mats' were laid across doorways to keep out cold draughts. As a winter evening occupation, it involved the whole family, and the children cut rag pieces for adults to prod into the backing, usually a hessian food sack. The new rug would be laid in front of the fire on Christmas Day and last year's rug would move to the kitchen. As



they became worn, rugs progressed through the house to the back door, then to the dog kennel or compost heap. As a craft born of necessity and a symptom of poverty, it had little status and was not considered worthy of documenting and was certainly not taught to middle-class young women alongside their needlework.

A vintage hooked rug in the Lake District.

'My mother never had rag rugs in the house as she didn't want to be reminded of her poor childhood.' Cardiff

Some people remember more positive aspects: a woman who lived in Brick Kiln Road in a Staffordshire village said that when a girl in her street got married:

'Everyone in the street made a rug so the bride walked down the road to chapel on rugs laid end to end.' They poked small pieces of fabric through the backing with a pointed tool, most commonly half a wooden clothes peg, sharpened to a point, hence 'proddy' and 'poke' mats.

Young women made rugs for their dowries in the Shetland Islands which were part of Norway until the fifteenth century. There was a tradition in Norway of hooking loops through base fabric for bed rugs so that could have come to Scotland and England and developed into prodded or hooked rag rugs. Often an engaged couple made a mat together to use in their home after they had married: 'It kept yer knees warm while you were making it.'

The need to 'make-do and mend' during the Second World War obliged people to use whatever they had available for their rugs, including lisle stockings. Everything was scarce, food was rationed and people even prodded rag rugs in the air-raid shelters.

'My mum wouldn't leave the rag rug set up by the fire when the sirens went. She'd get us all in the shelter and carry on making the rug.' Liverpool

'In Sheffield the houses were built round a square and they used to sit outside the back doors making rag rugs. They got the leftovers from the mills. My mother made rugs with

Vintage rug from the Lake District.



a dark border which she cut off my dad's black coat. Every year it got two inches shorter – she sewed it up so he didn't know!'

'All the kids in the village just worked. They needed all hands to get the harvest in. Saturday/Sunday we just picked peas (Dig for Victory). I pegged my skirt into a rug and got a hiding. Eventually I pegged it all into the rug. There was no new skirt – "Don't you know there's a war on?" they said.' Nr. Evesham

Some hooked woollen rugs made in Northumberland/Yorkshire by Ethel (b.1878) and Mary Smith (b.1875) and possibly their mother Amy (1835–1908), to cover draughty floorboards. Ethel had the

Ethel and Mary Smith with brother William in 1890.



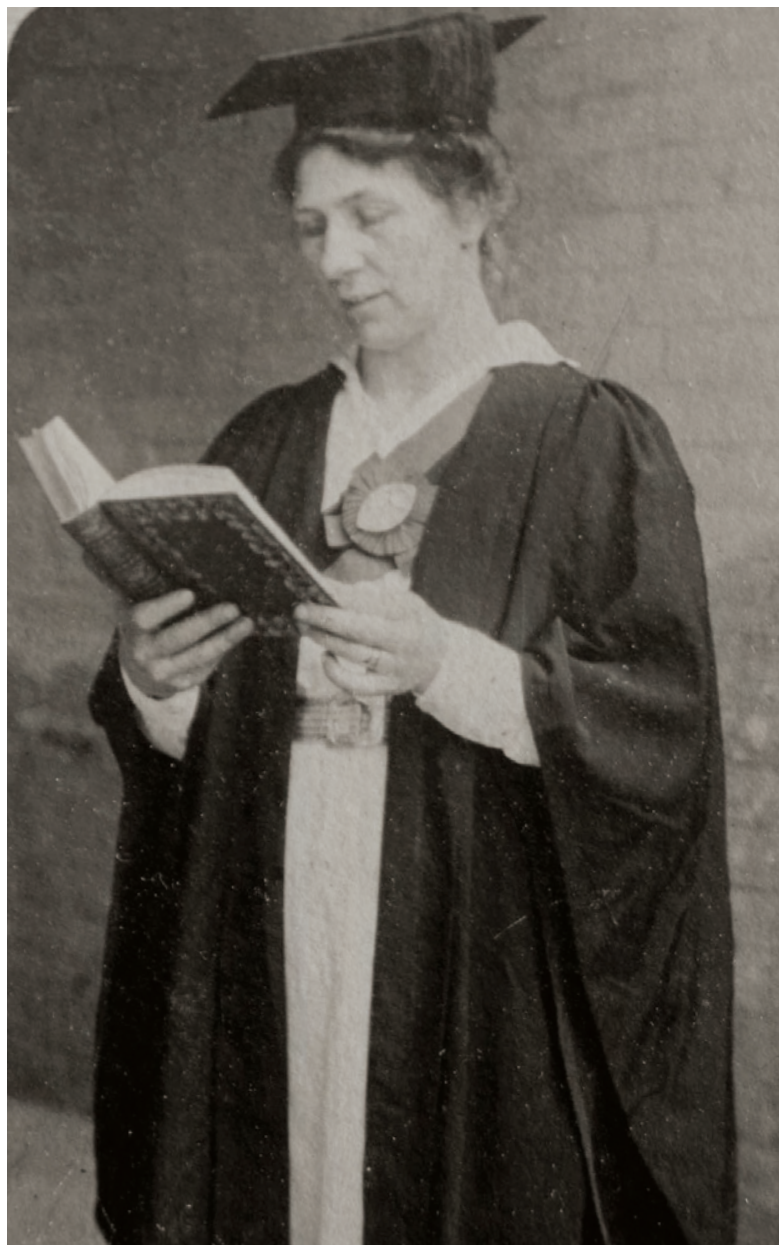
Ethel and goat in 1890.







Ethel and husband William in India.



Mary Smith 1875–1945.

rugs when she died and may have taken them to India where she spent a large part of her life. The rugs passed to her niece Elsa who left them to her son Anthony who lives in Herefordshire (which is where I heard of them).

In America and Canada, rug hooking developed into a rich folk art showing scenes from settlers' lives and some were based on designs copied from imported Turkish carpets or from patchwork designs. Braided rugs were also very popular there and still are.

The first commercially produced rug patterns were produced in Massachusetts, die-stamped on hessian with wooden printing blocks.

Rug and family photographs kindly shared by Jeanette Kinsey



Early stamped commercial rug patterns.

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Andersson, Gunnar, *Vikings: Lives Beyond the Legends*.
 Jenkins, David (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Western Textiles*. Cambridge University Press 2003.
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Oldandinteresting.com
 www.rugsofsweden.com
 Wellcome Collection
 Wikimedia Commons

Nettle stalk fibres twined by Sally Pointer (Prehistoric Nettle Textiles, scraping and splicing/
 www.youtube.com).

CHAPTER TWO

DESIGNING RAG RUGS



DESIGN INSPIRATION

For me, nature is an endless source of inspiration: from butterflies to flowers, light dancing on water or the spiral patterns which occur throughout nature. I collect postcards and pictures of interesting things which might inform a design later.

A piece of fabric can be the starting point for a rug; either its colour, texture or interesting weave, such as tweeds. I look at exhibitions of fine art, museum collections, sculpture, posters and textiles both ancient and modern.

Observing what is around you helps to build a visual vocabulary which you can draw on for your creative work. The more you work with colours and textures, the more visually aware you become. That shell you collected could be the inspiration for a rug or hanging when the time is right. Or maybe you could make your own version of a design you like, with different materials and colours. I made a few rugs inspired by the paintings of Mark Rothko – woolly versions!

Many women have told me they are no good at art, but I think we can all put fabrics together and make something. Our grandmothers probably didn't worry whether a rug was artistic – they had a sense of achievement from having made something useful with the family's old clothes. Don't be attached to the outcome: sometimes the finished result will differ from what you intended but you can use it as a stepping stone to the next piece you create. The more you do it the better it gets. If I run out of a particular fabric and have to improvise with another one, I call that organic design!

I have made some hangings based on mythology and symbols and this lion is from a famous stone carving round the west door of Leominster Priory for an exhibition there called Sacred Spaces.



Sacred Spaces. (Keith James)

SOME INSPIRATIONAL IMAGES:

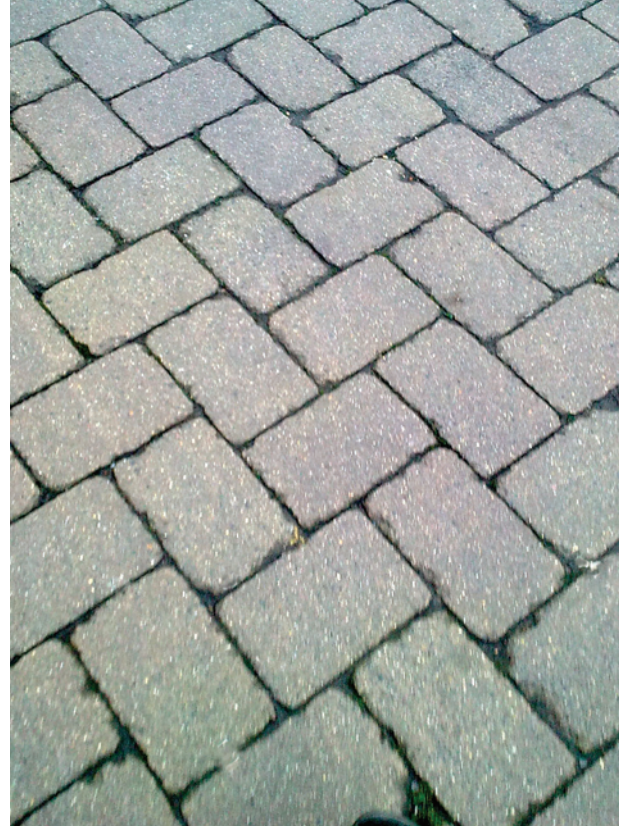




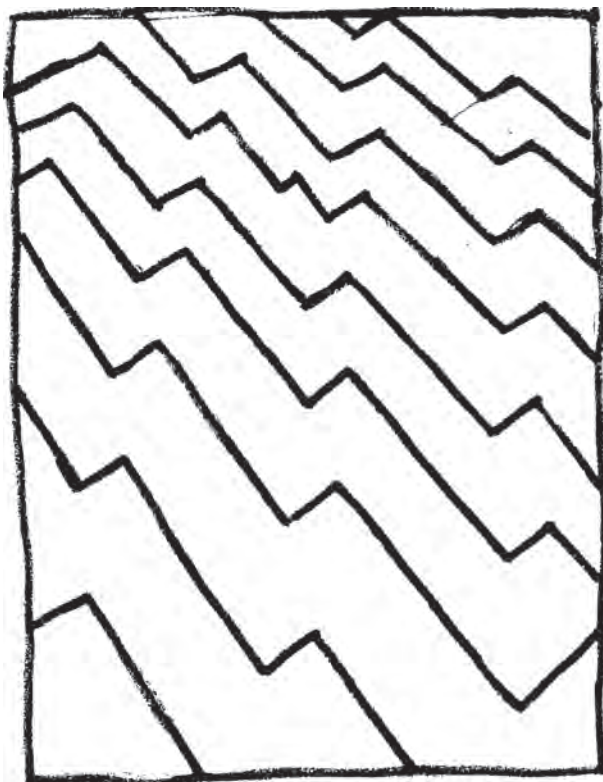
Hooked rug. (Keith James)



'Ammonite' mixed techniques.



Paving.



**'Back to the
Futurists'
progged rug.**
(Keith James)





'Cat Mat' hooked rug.



Art Deco carpet.



Art Deco curtain.



'Dragon' hooked from child's painting.

'Witch' hooked from child's painting.



Designing an ammonite rug.

DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS

To try a new technique, it is a good idea to make a small sampler that will show which materials suit the technique and the best sizes to cut different materials. If you are not sure which materials would work best for an idea, try different fabrics. They usually look quite different once they are cut and worked in a technique. If it's a question of what you can make with the tools or materials that are available, then you could improvise, which many makers of vintage rugs did.

If you want to make something to go in a specific place, this will influence the choice of materials: for example a floor rug that will get

plenty of traffic should be made from woollen fabrics as they wear better than cottons, which would be more suitable for a bedroom rug (unless your bedroom is very cold). A rug for a bathroom will get wet, so square-holed rug canvas would make a more suitable backing than hessian, which smells musty when it gets damp. Or make a plaited, knitted or Amish knot bath mat from cottons without any hessian backing.

For a wall hanging you can mix fabrics and even add embellishments like buttons, beads, sequins, feathers – anything goes if it enhances your project, as it doesn't need to be washable like a floor rug.

Another way is to make a line drawing (you could trace something you like), make copies and colour them in different combinations to see what works best. Henri Matisse used to move coloured shapes around to find the arrangement he preferred.

If you don't have a design in mind or don't feel ready to do your own, make one of the projects in the book. Experimenting with different fabrics and yarns will give you ideas for future projects.

I think enjoying the process of making is the most important bit. Making something with your hands can be very relaxing and therapeutic – plus there is the satisfaction of recycling fabrics. Even if you use a design by someone else, the choices you make of colours and textures of fabrics will still make it your own unique piece.

'My grandad had an accident down the mine and he made a rag rug which became a family treasure.' South Derbyshire

Please note that the metric to imperial measurements in this book are sometimes approximate where it seems to make more sense, and in the case of the wooden frames, I have given standard timber sizes as a guide. Also hessian weights are in ounces with nearest metric equivalent.

For those of us who grew up with imperial measurements and have learned to use metric, my friend and rag rug maker Eileen Scholes said:

*'A metre equals three foot three:
It's longer than a yard, you see.
A litre of water's
A pint and three-quarters,
And two and a quarter pounds of jam
Are equal to a kilogram.'*

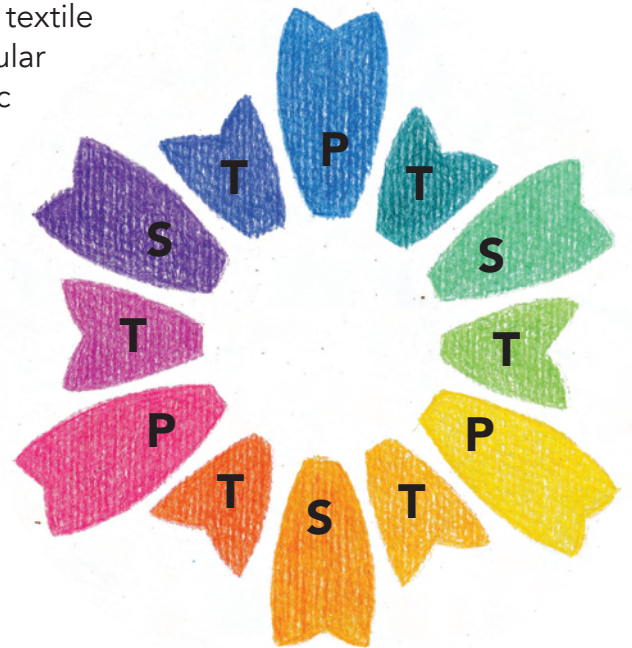
COLOUR

Early rag rug makers made their mats for cold beds and floors, and because they were poor they used worn clothes that could not be mended and patched any more. The colours were mostly dark, which would not show the dirt, and the most usual way was to make a dark border and use whatever came to hand as a random infill, saving any precious red material, if they could get it, for a diamond shape in the middle of a rug or triangles in the corners.

Nowadays we have such a choice of materials we can choose how we want to use colour in our rug designs.

Here are some basic principles for using colour and a system which will enable you to devise effective combinations, or you can choose the traditional random way.

- The colour wheel is a simple system used in the textile trades and by artists. It originates from a circular diagram of colours developed in 1666 by Sir Isaac Newton.
- White light is composed of the colours seen in a rainbow, when it passes through raindrops and separates into the visible spectrum. White and black are not considered colours: an object appears black if it absorbs all the white light, and white if it reflects all the light.
- Colours are defined by qualities known as: hue, value, intensity and temperature.



Hue is the basic quality by which we define a colour: red, blue etc.

Primary colours (red, yellow, blue) are the ones from which all other colours are derived and which cannot be made by mixing any other colours.

Secondary colours result from mixing two primaries; they are orange (red + yellow), green (blue + yellow) and purple (blue + red).

Tertiary colours are mixtures of a primary and its adjacent secondary; they can be described as yellow-orange, red-orange, purple-blue etc.

Key to colour wheel:
P = Primary,
S = Secondary,
T = Tertiary



Complementaries in nature.



Opposite colours on the wheel are called **complementaries**: they are red/green, orange/blue, yellow/purple. Seen together, complementary pairs intensify each other but can also be used to balance each other in different values and intensities.

Colours next to each other on the colour wheel are called **analogous** – e.g. red and orange, blue and green.

The **value** of a colour depends on the amount of black or white in it, which determines its lightness or darkness. Light values are known as tints; dark values are called shades.

The **intensity**, or **saturation**, is the purity of a colour – how bright or dull it appears.

Temperature refers to how warm or cool a colour appears. **Warm colours** (those in the red/yellow range) can seem to advance towards the viewer or make an area appear larger, whereas cool colours (in the blue/green range) seem to recede and appear smaller.

A colour seen in isolation will look different next to other colours, so you can affect the way a colour appears depending on what you use next to it, as you can see:

Both the fabric texture and whichever rug technique you use will affect how that fabric reflects or absorbs light, and therefore how the colour appears. When you decide on a range of colours, gather the fabrics together and try them in different juxtapositions.



The appearance of a fabric can be modified depending on the rug technique: propping softens the look of a patterned fabric, and ripping cottons instead of cutting them does the same, but plaiting/braiding shows the surface pattern of material.

You could make a coloured drawing of your design and then find the rags to match it. Having selected some fabrics, I usually start with an outline of a design and modify it as I go, depending on how the fabrics look together. Sometimes, while I'm working on a rug, I decide to add a touch of a complementary colour, or an extra line in a border, which is an organic way of making rugs, in the tradition of rag rug making. It really depends on the design and which fabrics I can get. I can also work in a more precise way, working on a drawn design, when it is appropriate. I do apply the ideas outlined in this section, but I also welcome the unexpected.

In 2019, an artist saw my rugs and asked me to copy one of his oil paintings using fabrics, which was a very interesting project – like painting with rags. He liked it and asked me to copy another one.



First rag copy.

Hooking second copy



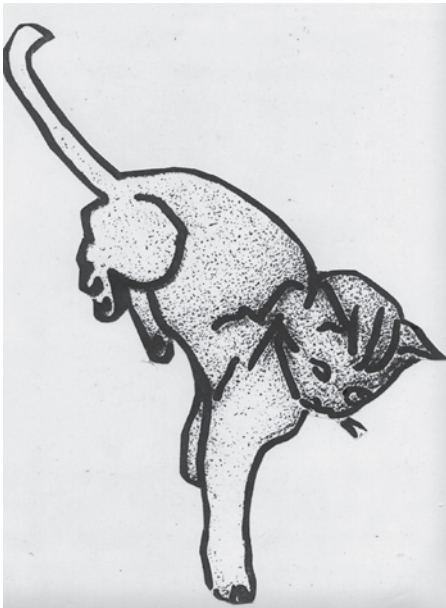
Second rag copy of paintings by Martin Callum-Loftus.



TRANSFERRING AN IMAGE

Enlarging using a photocopier

Trace the image first so you have a simplified line drawing. Decide on the finished size of the rug (measurement A). Measure the image (measurement B) and divide A by B to get the enlargement ratio. For example, if a rug is to be 1metre (100cm) wide and the image



measures 20cm: 20 goes into 100 five times, so the image needs to be enlarged to five times its size, or 500 per cent. (Or, without the maths, just keep enlarging it until the size looks right. You may need to tape photocopies together until it looks big enough.)

For this cat line drawing, I enlarged it enough to fit in the frame, traced it and cut round the traced cat shape. Then I placed it on the hessian and drew round it, cutting bits away as required. To be hand hooked.

Enlarging using a grid system

This method can be used to enlarge an image directly onto the hessian: you could use one colour marker pen for the grid, another colour for the design, and maybe another for the final drawing including any corrections.

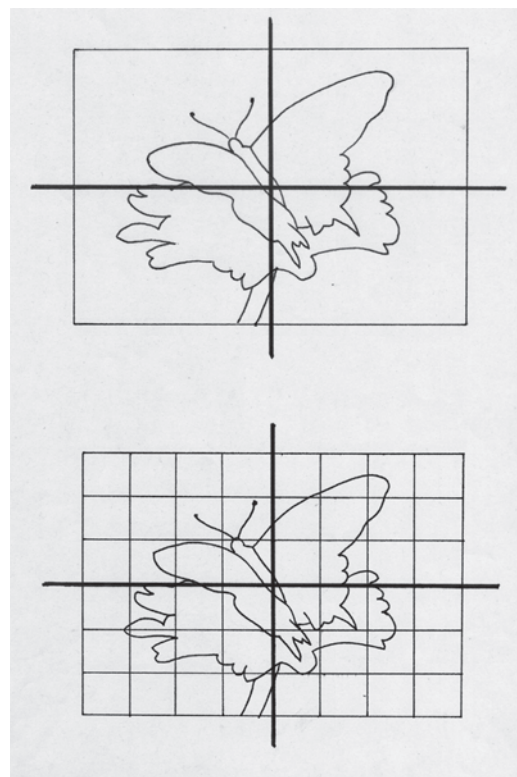
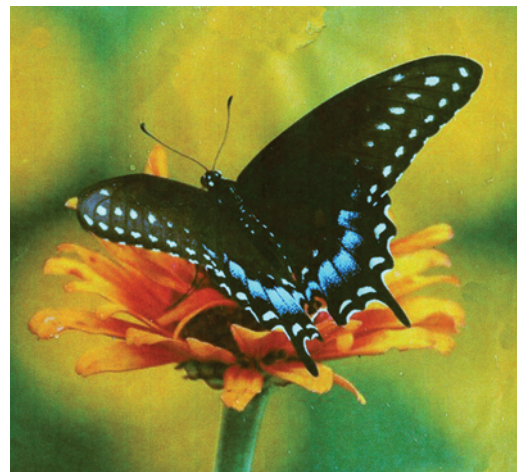
To use this system to enlarge an image you have chosen, decide on the overall finished size of your rug and how big you want the image to be inside it.

To save your original image (a photograph, for instance) photocopy or scan it. Measure the height and width of the image and divide it to give you the size of the boxes for the grid, which you can draw over the image in pencil.

To draw a grid on the image copy: measure the width of the image and divide by two, to find the centre. Draw a vertical line through the centre. Measure the height of the image, divide by two and draw a horizontal line through the centre. Divide the width of the image into round increments: for instance if the rug will be a metre (round up to 40in) wide, that divides neatly into 10cm (4in) widths.

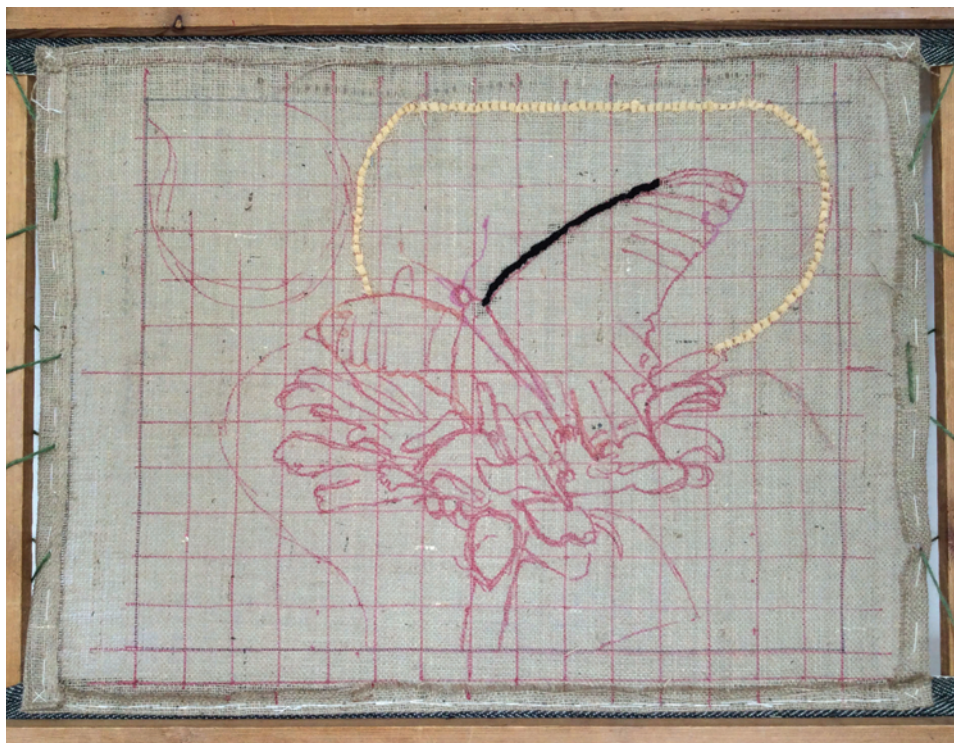
Working out from the centre lines, which form a cross, draw a grid with boxes the same size. Here there are eight boxes horizontally and six vertically (it depends on shape of the original).

Stretch the hessian on your frame and draw the scaled-up grid on it, the outline being the size you want to make the rug. Leave a border for hemming later. Look at the image with the grid and note where a drawing line crosses the grid. Make a dot at the corresponding place on your larger grid and repeat, joining the dots.



TIPS

- Greaseproof kitchen paper makes reasonable tracing paper and you can tape bits together to enlarge.
- If you are enlarging something complex (like a person or an animal) from a picture, trace the outline of it first so you then enlarge that simplified line drawing. Draw lines round areas of shadow etc.
- Remember to flip your tracing over to work a mirror image, if you will be working from the back with a speed shuttle.

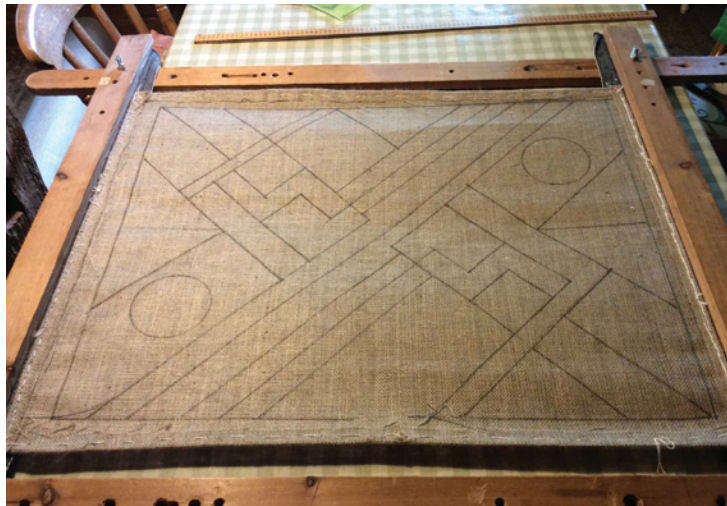
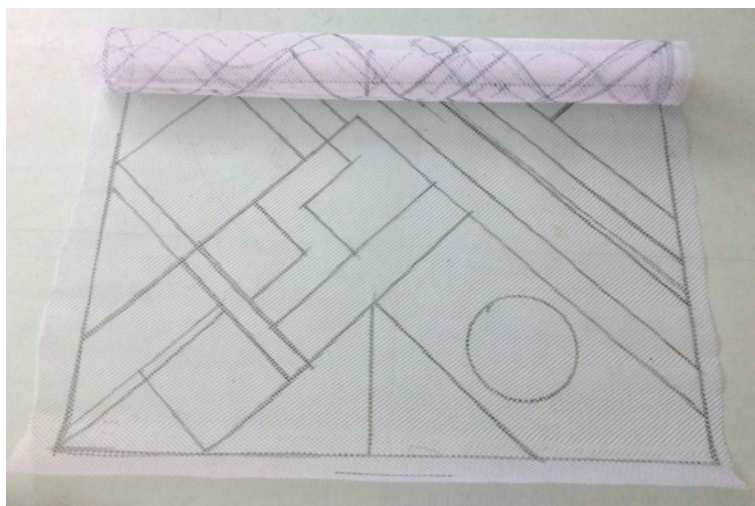


Transferred to hessian

It is easier to do than it sounds. The first time I tried it I was pleased to see how like the original my scaled-up copy was. An artist showed me this method.

Using net

I drew half of this geometric design first on paper, traced it and doubled it as a mirror image of the first half. Then I traced the finished drawing, full size, on to some net. I placed that on the hessian, flat, and drew over the lines on the net so they transferred to the hessian beneath. Later I used the same net to make another rug in different materials.





'Woolly Geometry' hooked rug. (Keith James)

'Time to Change' hooked rug. (Keith James)



CHAPTER THREE

TOOLS AND EQUIPMENT



EARLY RAG RUG makers would have improvised their tools, but now it is easier to find the right tool for a technique and you'll find a picture of the appropriate tool along with instructions on how to use it for different procedures.

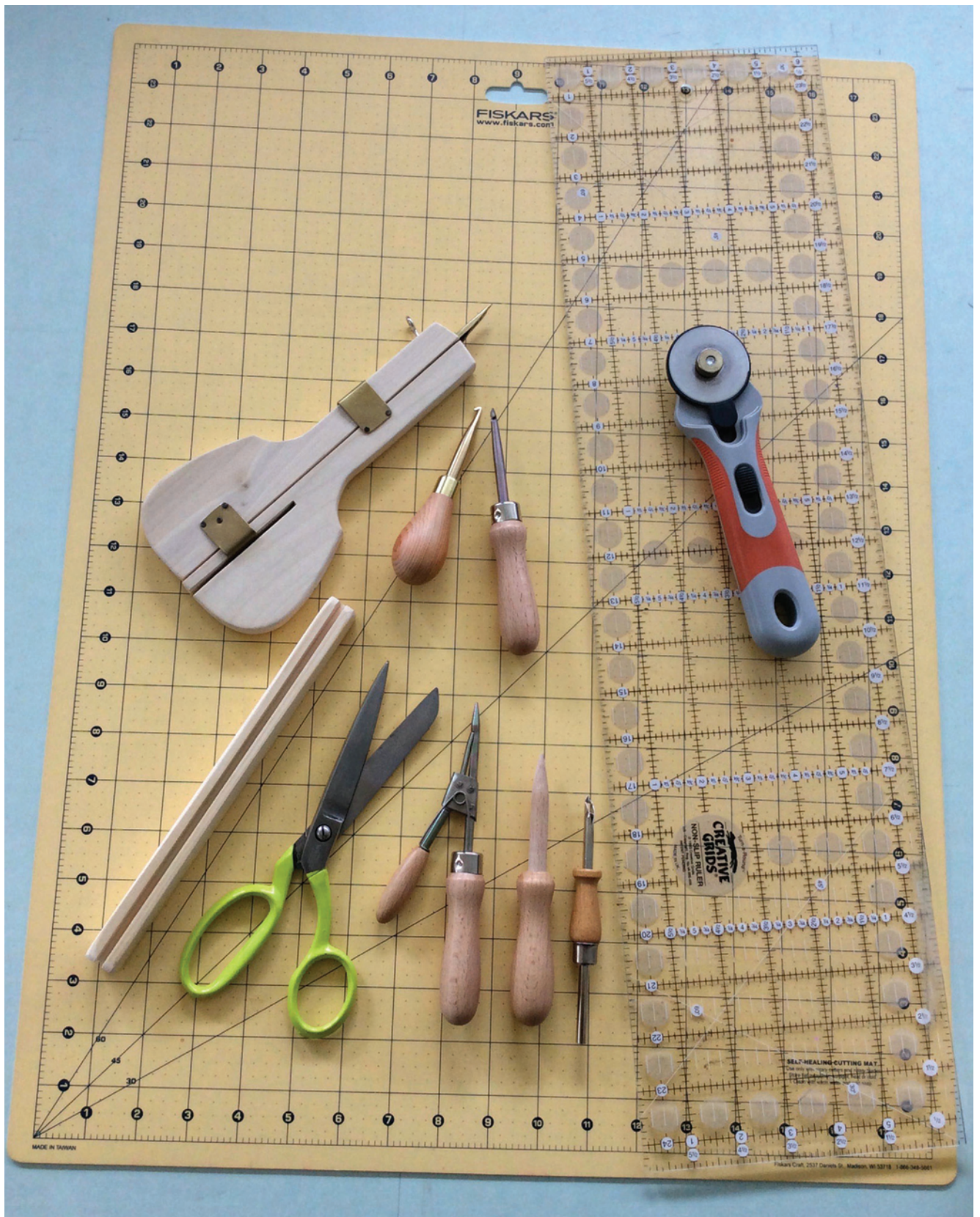
CUTTING TOOLS

I cut woven fabrics along the warp or weft threads, and machine-knitted sweaters (for hooking) in narrow strips, from neck to waist.

SCISSORS

There is no substitute for good sharp dressmaking scissors and I also use small embroidery scissors to snip strip ends when hooking.

I was delighted to buy some scissors from Ernest Wright & Co after I read their story on the Heritage Crafts Association site (now on the company website). Sheffield has long been a place of metalwork and the production of high-quality, metal tools. A quarter of the city's population was listed as metal-workers in 1379 and by the nineteenth century there were sixty steel scissor companies in Sheffield. Their products were shipped throughout the British Empire and beyond. In all corners of the globe, 'Made in Sheffield' became synonymous with high-quality, handmade scissors and shears. However, the rise of cheap, replaceable goods and a shift towards mass production throughout the 1980s, meant that by 1990 there were just two scissor-making companies left and they were struggling. An American filmed the traditional hand-making process at Ernest Wright & Co, a family owned business founded in 1902, and the video went viral. Despite a huge increase in orders



Tools I use for making rag rugs from top left to right: self-healing cutting mat and non-slip ruler, speed shuttle, yew and brass hook, steel hook, rotary cutter, cutting gauge, dressmaking scissors, bodger tool for propping, prodder, punch needle.

the business went into liquidation in 2018 but has been bought by enthusiastic new investors and the original personnel continue to produce impeccable, handmade scissors and shears. Short films on their website show the skills involved including the Master Putter-Togetherer.

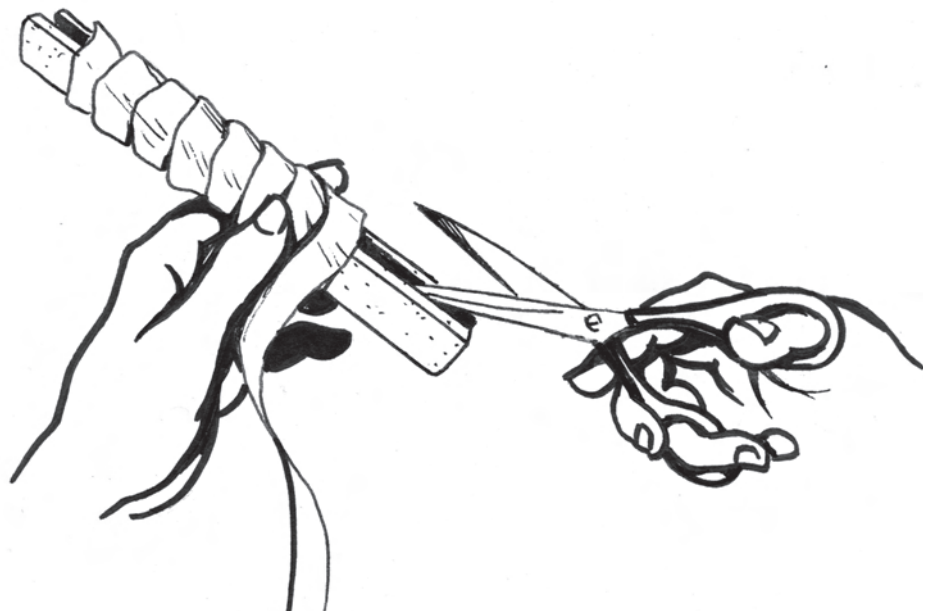
For advice on the best way to look after your scissors, see www.ernestwright.co.uk

'We are but the two halves of a pair of scissors, when apart . . . but together we are something.' Charles Dickens

CUTTING GAUGES

Cutting gauges are usually made of wood and you wind a rag strip round the gauge, moving along the length of it, then run the scissors along the groove in the side of the gauge, snipping as you go. This produces a number of same-size pieces for prodding or propping. It's a sort of low tech, mass-production technique, but don't wind the strip around only one end of the gauge, or the multiple strips will be too thick to cut through.

'We used to make them in the war – the bits were the length of a Swan Vesta box and the width the same as the narrow edge.' (Swan Vesta was a brand of matches)



ROTARY CUTTERS

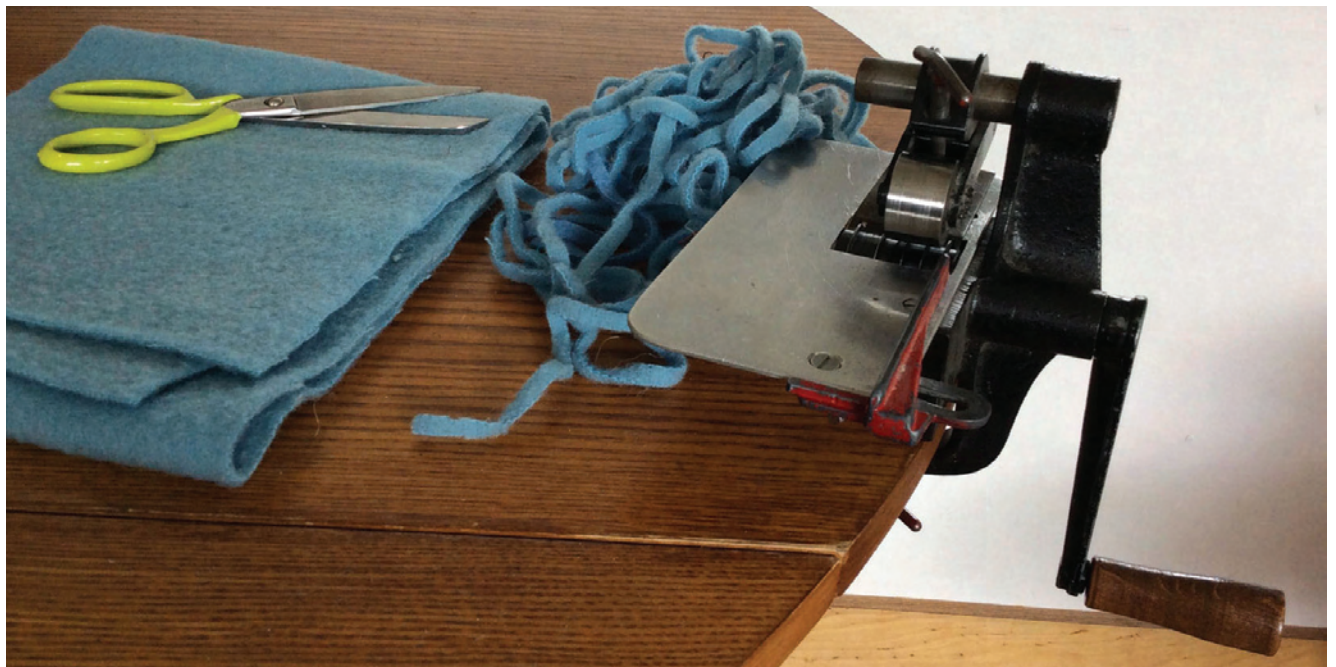
A self-healing cutting mat used with a rotary cutter and non-slip ruler is a fast way of cutting fabric into strips and pieces. You can cut through several layers of fabric simultaneously and the mat and the ruler have centimetres or inches marked on them so you can line the fabric and the ruler up with the markings. The cutter blades are very sharp and should only be used safely with the non-slip ruler and mat. A woman told me that she joined a quilting group and the first time she met with them she left her cutter on her mat without engaging the safety lock. They told her not to come back again!

CLOTH-STRIPPING MACHINES

It is only worth investing in one of the cloth-stripping machines, which cut fabric into strips, if you intend to make a lot of hooked rugs. My American Rigby Cloth Stripping Machine (see image) has cutter wheels in different widths: I mainly use the 3/8in cutter or, when cutting strips of thick matted blankets, I use the 1/4in cutter. First I cut sweaters, or fabric, into manageable-sized panels, then feed them into the cutter against the guide, turning the handle so that two strips come out the other side (a bit like a pasta machine). There are different brands but this is the only one I have tried.

However, without a cutter, you could cut the fabric strips side by

Rigby cutter, Model D and Ernest Wright scissors.

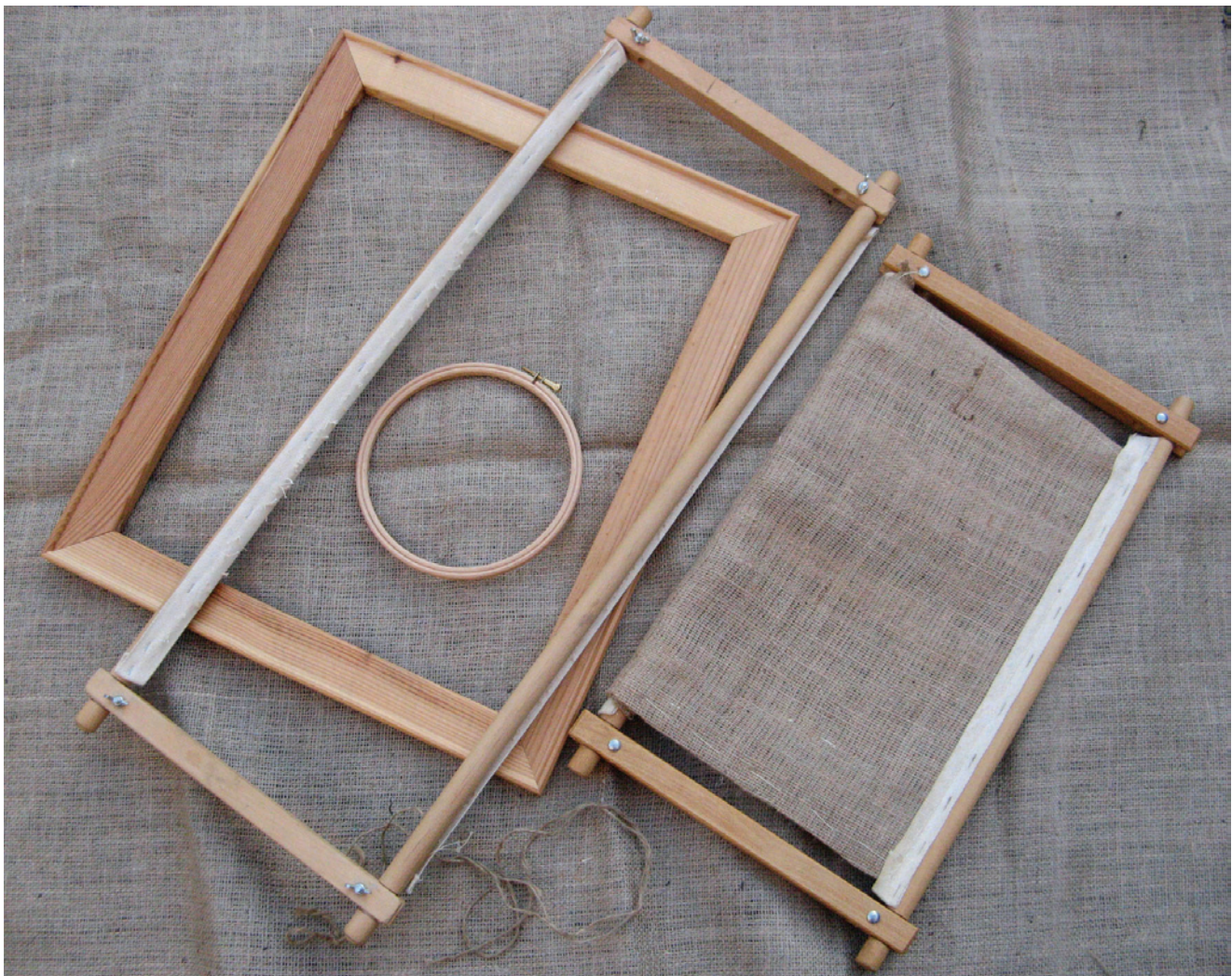


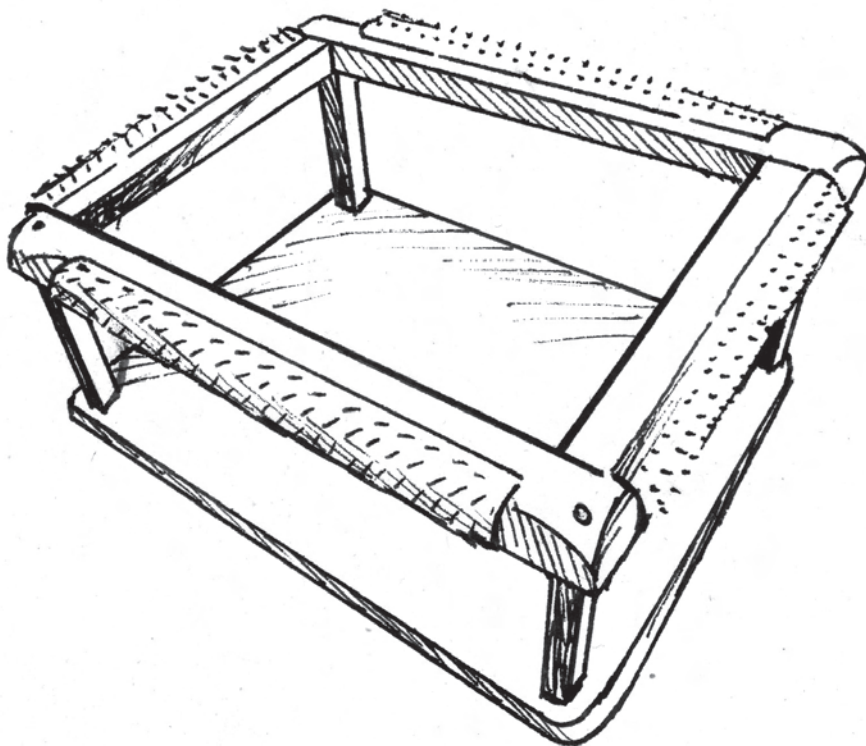
side using scissors with the fabric flat on a table. It makes a change when you are hooking, to stop and cut a pile of strips and the more you do it, the faster you get.

FRAMES

With the backing material held taut on a frame, it is easier to push in a rug hook and both hands are free if you are not holding the hessian. For hand hooking you could just staple the hessian to a simple frame like a picture frame or use drawing pins (thumb tacks). For hooking small items, an embroidery or needlepoint frame works well enough and you can roll the hessian around the rotating rods as they used to do on larger frames in the past. With my frame horizontal on the table (held steady with something heavy) with

Various small frames which can be used for hand hooking.





**Overall dimensions:
16.5cm x 43cm x 40cm
(6.5in x 17in x 16in).**

the section I am working on projecting over my lap, I can hold the hook in one hand and the fabric strip in the other. A frame for hand hooking needs to be narrow enough for you to reach the middle with one hand above and one below (see Hooking instructions). Some hookers don't use a frame.



A lap frame with gripper strips (could be carpet gripper) to hold the hessian on the top whilst the arm goes inside to offer the fabric strip to the hook beneath the backing or use with punch needle, as shown.



A piece of a stair carpet made by Elizabeth Scott in Castletown, Isle of Man. (Mike Scott)

Large rugs are really heavy, but quite a few people have told me about hooked stair carpets they remember, or ones which covered a whole sitting room.

'We had a frame in the family – the extended family, that is. We used to have it between the sink and the table and sit both sides of it. You were allowed to peg the plain until

'A photo of the only piece of my grandmother's rugs I have left. It was kept for sentimental reasons and also my wife used to use it when teaching primary children about the Victorians/Edwardians. It is a piece that used to carpet the stairs.' (Mike Scott)



you were good at it, then you could do the mixed. A real test of expertise was to do the red line. Otherwise they were black and navy. My dad used to work on his knee and didn't like using a frame. Somebody asked him to make a rug and had a frame made for him to do it. Afterwards he cut the frame up and made a stool. Recycling's not new y'know'. Sheffield

For hooking with a speed shuttle, the hessian must be taut on a large frame. I sit or stand at my frame, turning it upside down if it makes access easier to a particular area. When I am making a project, I like to see the whole thing at once, so I use a simple frame which adjusts to different sizes. I use longer uprights for a rug which is bigger than would fit in a square frame.

Components of large frame: Four pieces of wood about 150cm x 7cm x 2cm (59in x 2.75in x 0.75in) Four M10 bolts approx. 6.5cm (2.5in) long. Four wing nuts to fit bolts. Cotton carpet webbing nailed to edge of two timber pieces with webbing tacks. Holes, large enough for bolts, drilled at approx. 10cm (4in) intervals.



PUTTING HESSIAN ON A FRAME

To use a speed shuttle you need to stretch the hessian on a frame which then stands on the floor and leans against a wall while you work. These instructions are for a frame which has webbing attached to the two horizontal pieces; my frame is 1.5m (about 5ft) square. I thread the frame before marking the design on the hessian. As the shuttle pokes the loops into the hessian from the back you must work a mirror image of your design. For some designs, it doesn't

matter which way round you hook it, but with a portrait or writing, you need to reverse the image. To do this, trace the full-size drawing, flip the tracing paper over and transfer the reversed image onto the hessian (see Transferring an image in the Design section).

These instructions for threading a frame are for right-handers; if you are left-handed, reverse the directions when appropriate.

HOW TO THREAD A FRAME

1. Lay the frame flat on a table, with the bolts or pegs holding it in a rectangle that allows for the design plus at least 15cm (6in) around the design.

2. Cut a piece of hessian as wide as the aperture formed by the frame, and 10cm (4in) longer at top and bottom, so it overlaps the top and bottom bars (a).

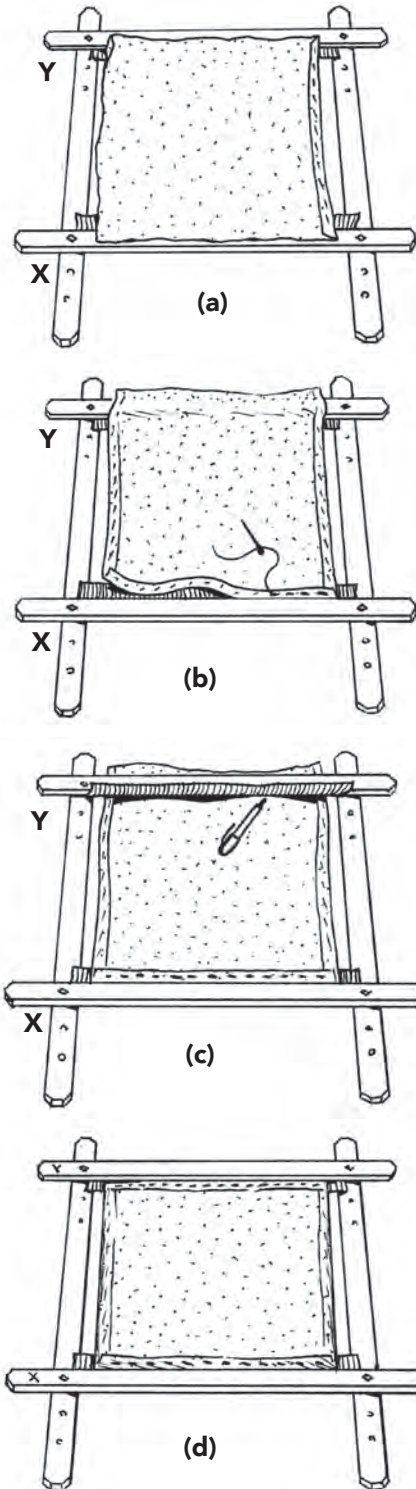
Fold over about 3cm (1.2in) of the two vertical sides of the hessian, and tack (baste) them with strong thread (b).

3. Slide the frame towards you so that the bottom piece X projects beyond the table about 15cm (6in), and fold the nearest horizontal edge of the hessian over 1cm (0.4in). Holding the right-hand edge of the fold on the frame's webbing (b), stitch the folded edge of the hessian to the webbing, keeping the fold against the frame as you stitch. Work from right to left, using back stitch and strong thread.

4. Before you sew the hessian to the frame at Y it has to be cut to a size which will ensure that it is stretched between sides X and Y. Push the loose end of the hessian under the frame at side Y and, using the inside of Y as a ruler, draw a line on the hessian with a marker pen (c). Cut along this line and fold the edge over 1cm (0.4in).

5. Slide the frame so that side Y projects beyond the table (I move round to the other side of the table). In order to sew the hessian to the webbing, as you did at side X, you'll need to undo the bolts through side Y and carefully slide Y towards X, just enough to enable you to sew all along the webbing as before (d). Check the measurement between sides X and Y as you go, to make sure they remain parallel while you sew or the stretching won't work properly.

6. Now you can put the bolt back on one side of Y. You will find that you need to pull hard to get the other side of Y over the second bolt, which assures that your hessian is stretched taut.





Hessian stitched to one side of frame, ready to stitch opposite side and stretch it.



Ready to start speed hooking.



Rug being hooked with shuttle from the back (tea break)



'Geometric' finished rug 66cm x 50cm (26in x 20in).
(Keith James)

CHAPTER FOUR

MATERIALS

AS YOU TRY different fabrics for different techniques you will probably find you prefer some for one technique, some for another. Rag rug makers start to look at clothes in a different way (as potential rugs) – family and friends might well offer you their cast-off clothes. I had to learn to say ‘no thanks’ when my shed got too full of rags. Jumble sales and car boot sales can be a source of inexpensive old clothes suitable for rag rugs and charity/thrift shops have items too tatty to display which they may sell you cheaply, if you ask. Matted thin sweaters are good for hooking in strips; curtains, blankets and sheets provide larger amounts of a single colour for proggings. Lots of women have a stash of fabrics or sewing off-cuts, or you could breathe new life, as rag rugs, into clothes you never wear.

My cat prefers woollens.



HOW MUCH MATERIAL?

If you need to calculate how much fabric you will need for a specific area, measure a small square of fabric, cut it up and hook or prog it into some hessian (burlap). Then multiply that amount by the number of times it would fit into the area you want to cover.

I prefer to estimate by eye and rag rug makers in the past just used another shade or colour when they ran out of the one they were using. You learn to judge whether a garment might be enough or how to modify your original concept by improvising with what you have. Blending shades of a colour works too. At workshops, people often say they haven't quite enough of a colour to finish the border so I suggest taking out every fifth or tenth piece and replacing it with a different shade. Alternatively, you could prog a short line, say 15cm (6in), count the number of pieces, measure your border and divide it by 15cm x the number of pieces.

Stripes are one way of spreading some interesting fabric, like tweed, across a shaggy rug, by interspersing it with plainer fabric, like a blanket.



TYPES OF RAGS

I like to use woven fabric for propping, such as dress cottons, curtains, woollen skirts, jackets and blankets. I tend to use similar fabrics in a single piece, so they wear and wash in the same way, but in some vintage rugs they mixed together whatever they could get hold of.

Any pattern in the weave or on the surface of the fabric will look blurred and impressionistic when it has been cut up and propped in. Checks, stripes, tweeds all look very different propped and provide visual/textural interest; strong prints become muted by the process. Fabrics which are printed on one side look softer in colour too, as you will also see the unprinted side in the mix



Cotton mix.



Strips and yarn.

For hooking, I like to use sweaters because they have a spring and resilience which makes them fluff out so they fill the area better than thinner materials. Medium and lightweight machine knits hold together better than loose hand knits: if the strip breaks when you tug it gently then the strip is too narrow, or not suitable for hooking. I also use yarn and sometimes mix it with woollen strips in a project.

Tweeds or patterned jumpers produce interesting effects. Some velvet adds richness to any mix and sweatshirts, T-shirts and patterned



From my stash of cottons.



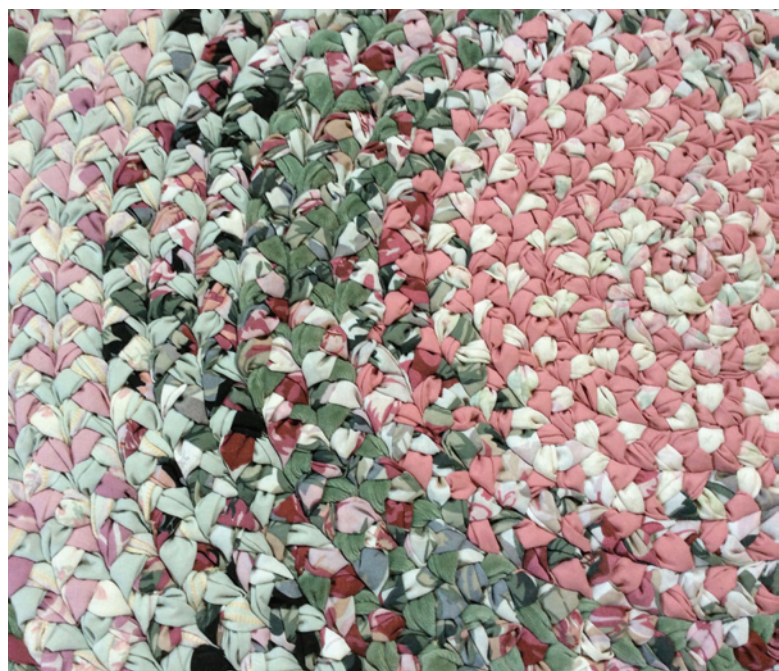
Woolens I use



Weaver's offcuts.



Washed and ready to use.



Detail of plaited rug mixing some velvet with cotton strips, by Jenni.

Cut & propped.

kids' clothes can be brightly coloured, easy to come by and they hook/prog well. I mix plain and printed cottons and sometimes add

Detail of rug hooked by author. The background hooked with strips of cream blanket and some hand-spun yarn. (Keith James)



some silk, net, synthetics or glitter fabric if it enhances a particular piece, such as a wall hanging or festive wreath.

For plaited/braided rugs I use textiles with an appealing surface colour or pattern, and I have even used dress fabric, leaving the lace sewn on it for textural interest.

Unusual fabrics from faraway places can offer inspiration; coloured tights and chiffon scarves could all enliven a wall hung project, but hardwearing woollen fabrics are best for a floor rug. Knitting wool hooks well and I really like the look of hooked, hand-spun sheep's wool. As spinning is so labour intensive I eke out such precious yarn by using strips of blanket in the same piece.

STORING RAGS

I store folded cottons and synthetics on shelves and try to separate stored woollen items into different colours to make it easier to find a particular shade. The materials I am currently using, I keep in a large basket which I move to where I am working (my assistant often joins me).

To protect woollens from clothes moths, I spray them lightly with essential oils in water (lavender, citronella and mint) and store them in transparent plastic boxes or bags. I had an infestation of tiny moths which ate my wool and I used essential oils and pheromone traps to get rid of them. Putting woollies in plastic bags in a freezer stops moth eggs from hatching.



Stored cottons.



Stored woollens.

PREPARATION

I wash rags before I store them, but I don't try to felt sweaters as new wool has been treated against shrinkage and cast-off woollen clothes are usually felted by the time I get them. You could cut them before storing them, as my teacher did, but I cut them as I need them.

If you are using hessian/burlap sacks, you could steam iron or wash them before use to get rid of any possible moth eggs.

BASE/BACKING MATERIALS

Sacks

Sacks were a traditional backing for rag rugs and they can still be found where coffee beans have been imported. If you unpick the string stitching along the edges, you should find selvages and you can work right up to the selvedge having folded the two short edges over to the top to work through those two layers.



A coffee sack.

The back of a rug propped on a sack, up to the selvages.





Natural hessian and grey monks cloth on some mesh rug canvas.

Hessian

I find natural 273gm (as 10oz) common jute upholstery hessian (burlap) easy to use for hooking and propping. I have used 366gm (as 12oz) but find it harder to poke the tools into the closer weave. However, some rug makers prefer a tighter weave. You could use dyed hessian if it might be visible.

Rug canvas

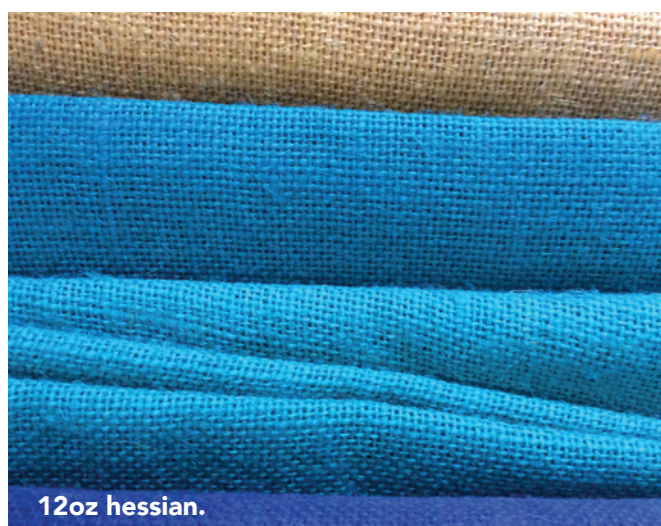
To make a machine-washable rug, I use open-meshed white rug canvas which comes in different widths and is stiffened to facilitate working on it but softens with use and washing. It is useful if hessian makes you sneeze, but it is more expensive.

Monks cloth

This is used more in America and is more closely woven than the hessian I use. It is recommended for punch needle projects but is more expensive than jute hessian.

Linen

Softer than hessian but more expensive. An option for those with hessian allergy.



TIPS ON BACKING MATERIALS

- If you need to join two bits of hessian, overlap them by at least 15cm (6in), stitch them together, then hook or prog through the two layers.
- Hessian smells musty when damp, so is not suitable for backing a bath mat but can be hand-washed carefully when it has been made into a rug.
- I don't wash new hessian before working on it, but I do wash food sacks.

CHAPTER FIVE

TECHNIQUES AND PROJECTS FOR PRODDING AND PROGGING

PRODDING

People improvised prodding tools in the past – in Britain the most common being half a wooden clothes peg, sharpened to a point. On remote farms, animal horns were made into prodders and when men worked metal, they sometimes fashioned a rug tool from a nail. A man in his eighties told me a 6-inch nail was all they could afford



**Vintage metal tool and
peg, plus a modern
prodder.**



when he was a child. Even with a rag wrapped around it, prodding rags with it hurt his hands (he joked that they were still sore!)

Prodding involves literally prodding or poking a small piece of fabric through a base material, which was usually a hessian (burlap) food sack. This was the most common technique and had different names in different parts of the country: 'pricked', 'pegged', 'proddies', 'clippies', 'stobbies' and in Scotland, 'cloodie mats'.

Old clothes were cut into strips, then into pieces often called 'tabs' or 'lists', and this was usually the job for the children in the family. One person told me they were not allowed out to play until a certain number had been cut! Another told me they used to play with the tabs under the frame (like a den) whilst the grown-



Vintage prodder used to make this Proddy rug.



Prodded Welsh rug.

ups worked on the rug. In time they graduated from cutting up to working on the rug, starting with the border, later the design.

'We pricked rag rugs on two poles with a sack stretched between.' Yorkshire

A hessian sack was stretched on a horizontal frame and the rag pieces were poked (poke mats) or prodded one at a time, from above, into the flat hessian, which would be the back of the finished rug. This method gives a shaggy, cut pile and people mixed whatever materials they could get. If people lived near a mill they could buy mill waste but usually worn clothes were used. Several people could sit round prodding together and chat as they worked. Before people had televisions, a family would sit round a frame and work on a rug. I have been told that a frame would move

from house to house and neighbours came in to have a prog and a cuppa. The new rug would go in front of the hearth on Christmas Day.

'In Barnsley market you could buy bits of material ready cut up for pegging a rug but they were expensive.' Yorkshire

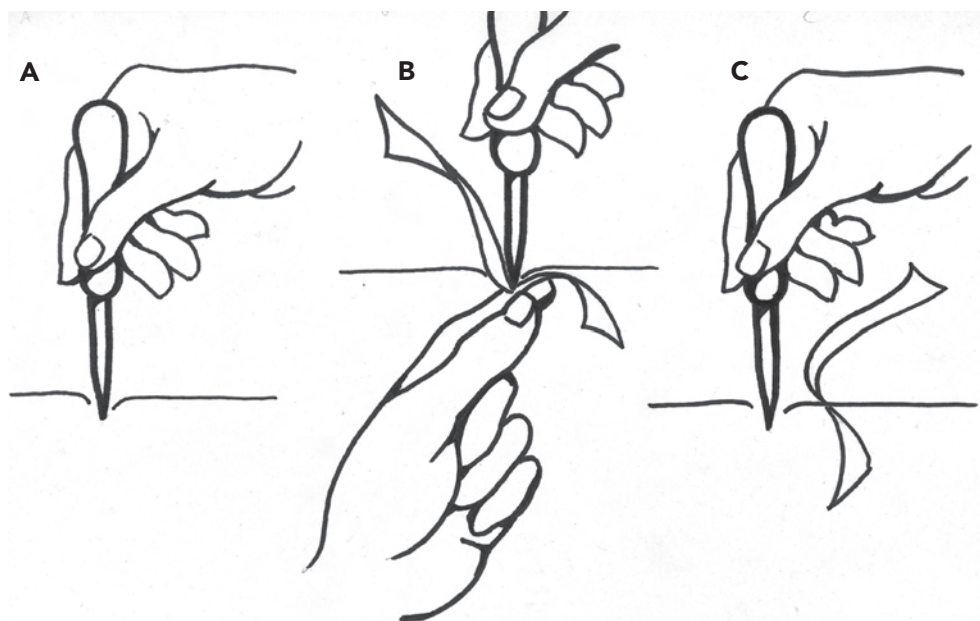
HOW TO PROD

1. Stretch the hessian (burlap) on a frame then mark the perimeter of your rug and any design on the hessian with a felt tip pen. Leave a border of 15cm (4in), outside the line, which will form the hem to fold and sew under the edge of the prodding.

2. Rip or cut the fabric, along the weave, into same sized pieces (tabs), about 7cm x 4cm (2.75in x 1.6in). You can cut the fabric with

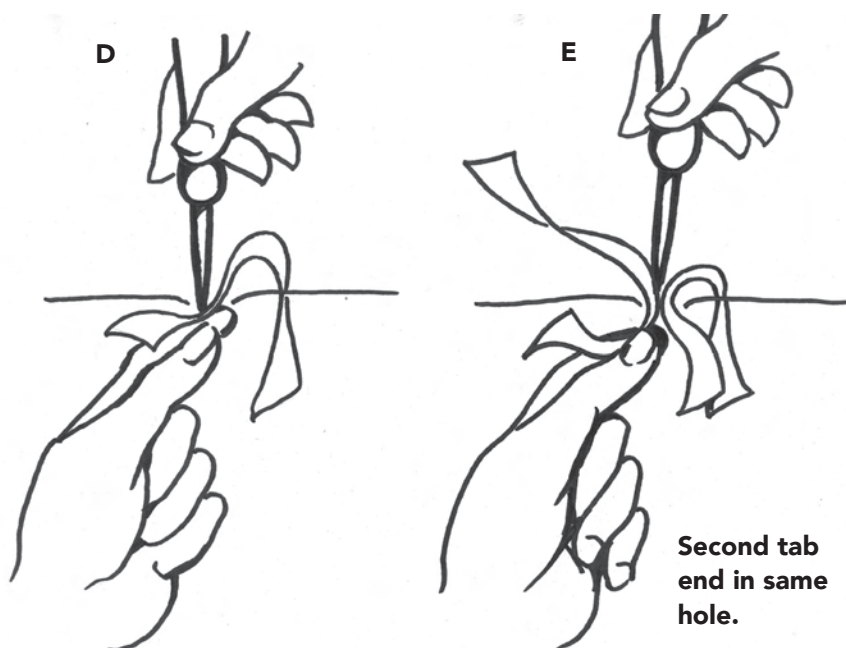
scissors or use scissors with an old-fashioned cutting gauge, or use a rotary cutter with a non-slip ruler and board (see Tools).

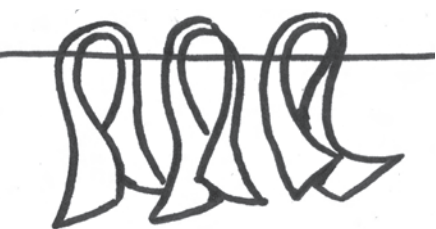
3. Work along the drawn line (from right to left if you are right-handed). With your writing hand, poke a gap between the hessian threads (a) and, using the prod, poke one end of the tab down into the gap pulling it half way through beneath the hessian with your other hand (b).



4. Make a second hole along the line, about 1cm (0.4in) away from the first (c), and prod the other end of the tab into it. Even the two tab ends by tugging them gently beneath (d).

5. Now you can choose: Single prodding, which spaces the tabs out more making a less dense rug; or double prodding, which results in a slightly thicker rug.





Single prodding.



Double prodding.

Single prodding: leave four or five threads of hessian between the prodded tabs, then repeat steps 3 and 4, so there are gaps in the line. Some people just prod the tabs in a fairly random way all over the hessian (children usually do it that way).

Double prodding: prod the first end of the second tab into the same hole as the first tab (e) so every hole has two adjacent tab ends emerging from it. Follow step 3 to finish prodding the second tab and continue along the line so there are no gaps between the tabs. Work the next line parallel with the first, about 1cm (0.4in) away from the first line you worked along the drawn line, measured



Double prodded cottons from the back.

from the centre of one row to the centre of the next row. Work in this way to outline and fill in any shape/design you are working in a particular colour. There is no need to stagger the tabs (like bricklaying). I prefer double prodding – I think the tabs are more secure.

Below is an extract from *Under the Wheels* by Jack Lawson, published in 1934 by Hodder & Stoughton. Born in 1881, Jack began work aged 12, in a colliery in County Durham, became a committed trade unionist and was elected Member of Parliament for Chester-le-Street in 1919. He became Secretary of State for War in 1945 and was made Baron Lawson of Beamish in 1950.

Although Jack calls the technique progging, what he actually describes is prodding pieces of cloth into canvas stretched on a frame. You don't need a frame for progging; it can be done with the backing on table or thigh, but since the techniques had a variety of names in different parts of the country, it is easy to see how he might have got the term mixed up. Also, at that time, prodding was the more commonly used technique in colliery towns, with frames resting between chairs and table in the living space.

Memories of Progging in a mining village in County Durham

The mat was being made in the space between the bed and the table. The large kitchen gave scope for many things to be carried on simultaneously. Mother could bake, father could bath, a meal could be going forward, and over in the corner, just by the bed, space could be used for the exercise of the pit-woman's craft – mat-making or quilting. A long stretch of canvas, ingeniously pleated to frames, which could be widened or narrowed by sliding laths or pins, the whole rested lightly on some rough support, such as chair, table, or even bed. Plonk, plonk, went the 'progger' as Mary and Jinny pricked the hole, which was deftly filled by short pieces of dyed cloth. The workers' fingers, the drive of the pricker or 'progger' into the canvas was a quick, continuous process, which made one whole. A little more staccato than tapestry-weaving, but deftness was the mark of it. All according to pattern desired, which was marked on the matting. And it was the Ross's own pattern. You didn't get it out of the Ladies Own or send to London for some special design. This pattern was a family affair. Well, another family might have been let into the secret – but there was still

TIPS ON PRODDING:

- You may need to vary the width of tabs depending on the thickness of the fabrics. Cut a couple of pieces first and prod them into the hessian. If they are hard to pull through (thick woollens), cut them a bit narrower. If they slip out when tugged gently (fine cottons), cut them wider. Or use fabrics which are similar and cut tabs the same size. I don't mix woollens and cottons except maybe for a wall hanging.
- You could cut the ends of the tabs diagonally – they will be easier to prod through.

pride in its scarcity and originality. Red, blue, greens, soft browns, all done in lines and curves with rough stuff, from old clothes, sometimes pit-clothes, washed, dyed and cut exact lengths by patient fingers. Yet the pattern would be as perfect as the pencilling of a trained artist. Indeed, these women were unconscious artists, product of generations of the craft, making soothing pictures out of waste odds and ends, and making them in odds and ends of time.

PROGGING

Progged rugs are worked from the top, right side up, and look the same as prodded rugs when finished. Rectangular pieces of fabric (tabs) are pulled through a hessian (burlap) base with a spring-clip tool with small jaws, called a 'bodger'. Whereas prodding is easiest with the backing stretched on a frame, progging is easier without one, worked on table or thigh. It is also faster. This isn't the most appropriate technique for detailed designs because the shaggy tabs produce an impressionistic effect. However, if you do want to prog pictorial detail use bold, simplified shapes and use contrasting colours to define them.

A modern 'bodger' spring-clip rug tool and a cutting gauge.





Recycled cottons.



Recycled woollens. (Keith James)

Two rugs progged by Jenni

Traditionally, shaggy rugs usually had a dark border which didn't show the dirt and because poor people generally wore dark clothes. Coloured fabrics were reserved for small details, like a red line or a central diamond, then the rest of the rug was filled in with random mixed pieces which was called 'mizzy mazzy'. Vintage rugs made 'below stairs' in wealthy households usually have more red in them. There was an abundance of black fabric when Queen Victoria went into mourning for her husband and then at the end of the Second World War when there was a lot of blackout fabric.

Precious red flannel was often saved for a diamond in the middle, known as 'the devil's eye'. If the devil looked down your chimney and saw you already had a devil in residence, he would move on!

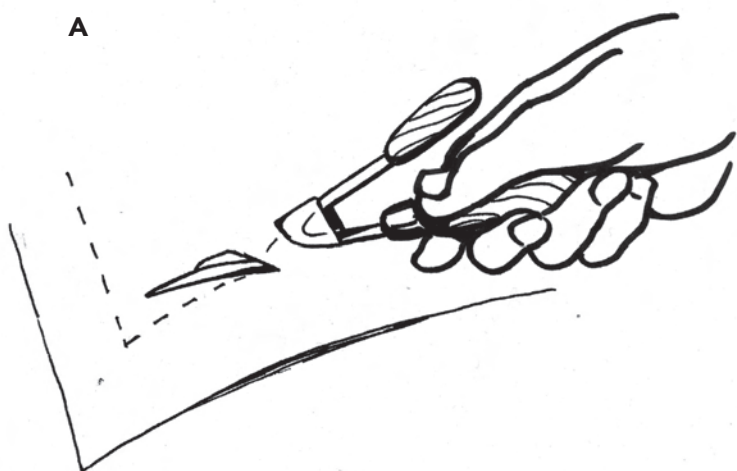
**Progged woollen rug,
61cm x 91cm (2ft x 3ft)
by Jenni.**



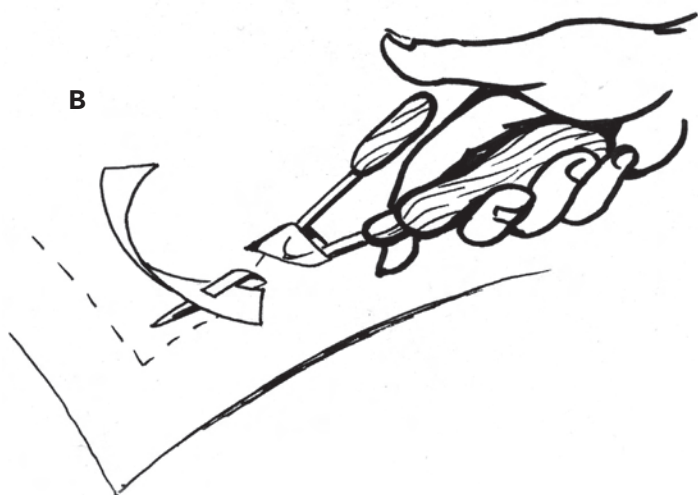


The wagoner's room circa 1870 with propped woollen rug, 91cm x 61cm (3ft x 2ft), in the manor house, Brockhampton estate, Herefordshire.

A



B



C



D



HOW TO PROG

1. Begin progg along a drawn line of your design. Holding the bodger in your writing hand, poke the point into the hessian and out again about 1cm (0.4in) further along the drawn line (a).

2. Press the lever to open the jaws of the bodger and catch the first piece of fabric (tab) by one corner (b). Pull the bodger back out of the hessian, releasing the tab so it stays with its ends sticking out like a bow (c).

3. Poke the bodger back into the last hole it made, where half of the 'bow' sticks up, and out again 1cm (0.4in) further along the line, as you did in 1. Repeat this process (d), until you have progged one line all around the border or design. Work in lines, parallel to your first line, about 1cm (0.4in) away, from centre to centre of the lines. There is no need to stagger the tabs like bricks.



Jenni demonstrating.

Starting to prog seat mat 'Air' for 'Elements' exhibition. I don't often use lace but it seemed appropriate. The four finished seat mats are shown after the seat mat project.



TIPS ON PROGGING:

- If you start by working two or three parallel rows around the perimeter of your rug it helps to stabilise the hessian, so it doesn't lose shape. My teacher used to do that and hem it so it didn't fray whilst she and her husband filled in the rest over a winter.
- You may need to vary the tab widths if you mix different thickness fabrics. To test width for fabric, cut a couple of pieces first and prog them into the hessian. If they are difficult to pull through, cut them a bit narrower. If they slip out when tugged gently, cut them wider.
- If you mix fabrics for a rug, choose ones which will wash the same and wear the same – woollens are more hard wearing for floor rugs.
- If the proggings seem too densely packed and thick, just leave a slightly wider gap between the parallel lines from time to time as necessary. The aim is not to have the base fabric visible from the right side.
- I work from right to left with the backing flat on a table or on my thigh so I can hold it steady with my left hand when I pull the tab through. (Protect your thigh with something like a folded apron.)



A rug being made by students at a school in Iceland after the teacher learned proggung at a textile show in the UK. (Images courtesy of Erna Ódinsdóttir)



SEAT MAT PROJECT

For your first project it is encouraging to make something small which you can finish relatively quickly. If you prefer to prod it, add frame and prodder and omit bodger. Here are some seat mats which I often made to demonstrate the technique at shows: simple designs, easy to make whilst chatting with visitors.

You will need for prodding (or follow prodding instructions if you prefer):

- A piece of hessian at least 50cm (20in) square
- A mixture of fabrics – T-shirts and cottons work well
- Fabric to back the prodded piece
- A bodger rug tool
- Sharp scissors
- Circular tray to draw round or large plate
- Marker pen
- Needle and thread
- Pins
- Wadding (optional)
- Cutting gauge (optional)

Seat mat – prodded cottons.



Backed with a fabric sample.



INSTRUCTIONS

1. If you are recycling clothes, remove waistbands, seams etc.

2. Place the tray or plate in the centre of the hessian and draw round it. My tray is 35cm (13.75in) in diameter which is big enough for a seat mat. If you draw round something smaller, you can prog a few lines outside the circle to enlarge it. You will need a hessian border to hem after you finish propping so make sure you have at least 10cm (4in) round your circle (allows for fraying) and don't cut the circle until you have finished propping.

3. Cut the fabrics into strips along the weave and wind them round the cutting gauge to snip. Or cut one piece and use it as a template. The shortest length I use for propping is 7cm (2.75in) and the width of the pieces is about 5cm (2in) for cottons. Cut and prop two test pieces first and check they hold in before cutting lots.

4. Following the instructions for propping, work round the drawn circle first, mixing colours if you want a random effect. Or use one colour, then change for the next circle.

You can either work in ever decreasing circles, if you like the effect, or work across the circle, dividing it into quarters, then fill them in. Propping in circles makes the hessian puff up in the centre but ignore it and fill the very centre with two pieces at right angles which covers any gap. The distance between rows is about 1cm (0.4in) from the centre of one row to the centre of the next.

5. When you have filled the circle with propping, cut round it leaving a hessian border of about 5cm (2in). Fold that under the worked area and tack it with needle and thread. Cut a circular piece of backing fabric about 1cm (0.4in) larger than the seat mat, fold that seam allowance under, pin and over-stitch all round.

You could make your seat mat thicker by tacking a circular piece of quilter's wadding between the propped piece and the backing before you join them. Or you could use a piece of blanket, if you prefer something not synthetic.

VARIATIONS

- Woollen fabrics would create a thicker, warmer seat mat.
- You could make this project on a frame using a prodder from the back.
- My teacher made square seat mats, hemmed but not backed.



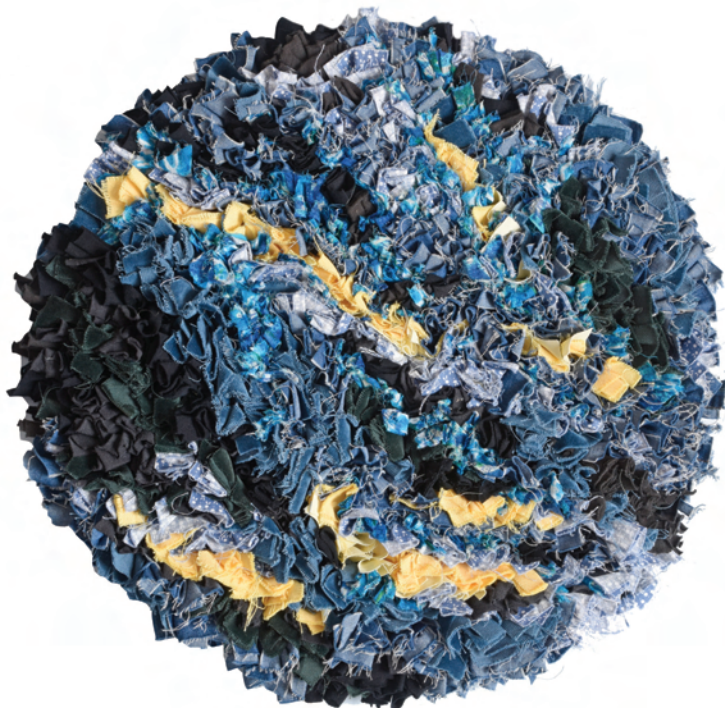
Propped seat mats for a mixed media exhibition 'Elements'.



Earth. (Keith James)



Air. (Keith James)



Water. (Keith James)



Fire. (Keith James)

TECHNIQUES AND PROJECTS FOR HOOKING AND PUNCHING

HOOKING

For pictures or fine details, hooking is the best technique to use. It is easier to do if the backing material is stretched on a frame, then a thin strip of fabric or yarn is hooked up through it to

Some vintage hand hooks.



Detail of nineteenth-century hand-hooked rug.

**Two modern hand hooks
and a speed shuttle
(speed hook).**



make a series of loops on the top – usually to outline, then fill in, the drawn design. For hand hooking I work with my frame horizontal on a table, held steady with something heavy, and projecting over my lap. This frees my hands to hold the hook above the hessian (burlap) in one, and the strip below in the other. You can improvise with a quilting frame, even an artist's stretcher or a picture frame or use a lap frame, as shown in the Tools chapter, under Frames.

Hooking can also be done with a speed shuttle/hook. It is quicker than a hand hook, but you need a larger frame and, of course, a speed shuttle.

HAND HOOKING

I have found this is easiest with a proper rug hook which fits snugly in the hand and has a shaft which grows thicker towards the handle (unlike a crochet hook). This wider shaft enables you to poke a gap between hessian/burlap threads, large enough to pull a strip through easily, to form a loop on the top.

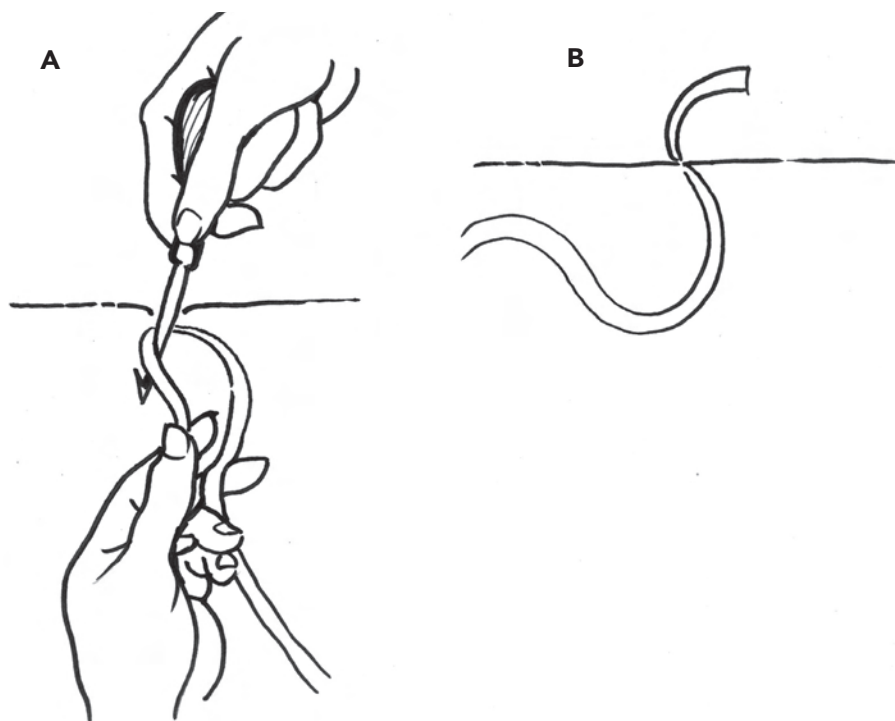
Rug hooks come in different sizes – many Americans use a small hook for really fine detail. I use a medium rug hook, suitable for

strips about 9mm (0.375in) wide, or narrower if the fabric is matted and thick. You can also hook wool (yarn), several strands together if thin, and I sometimes use different kinds of yarn alongside woollen fabric strips in a project. Improvising with what you have (in your stash) can produce unexpected results, sometimes better than you imagined.

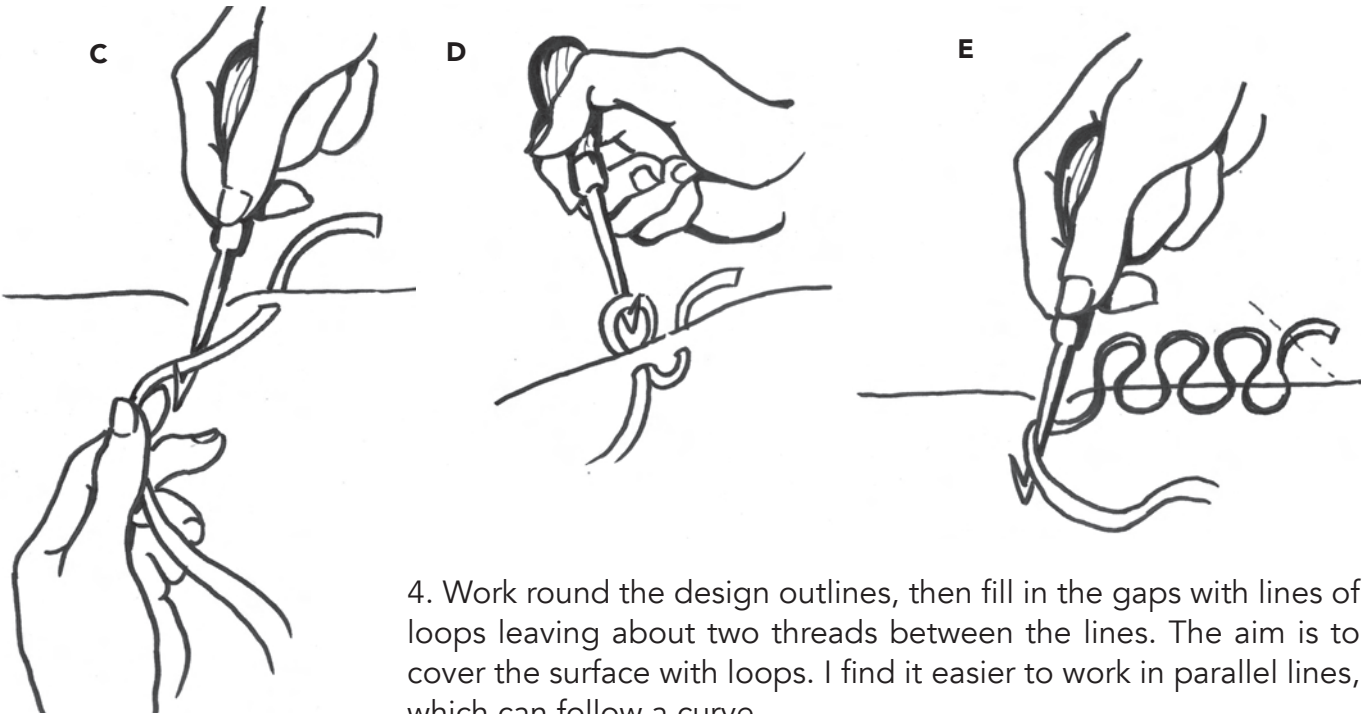
How to hand hook

1. Stretch the backing (I use hessian) on a frame and draw your design on it (unless it is larger than the frame and you are rolling it round the frame as you go, in which case, you need to draw it first). Place the frame so part of the design protrudes over your lap. (I put some books on it on the table to hold it steady). Begin hooking along an outline of the design, holding the hook in your writing hand above it and holding the fabric strip in the other hand beneath the backing. Push the hook into the backing on the marked line, inserting it to the start of the handle so the wider part pushes a gap between the hessian threads. The hook should face the direction of travel, so you don't pull out the last loop you made. Hook from right to left, if you are right-handed.

2. With your lower hand, loop one end of the strip around the hook (a), release it, then pull the end of the strip to the top of the hessian (b).



3. Two threads further along the line, push the hook into the hessian again; offer the fabric strip to the hook, underneath (c), and pull it to the top, to make a loop (d). Continue along the marked line, creating loops of an even height (e). When you reach the end of the strip, (or want to change colour) pull the end to the top and pull the end of the next strip up through the same hole. I trim the strip ends level with the loops as I go.



4. Work round the design outlines, then fill in the gaps with lines of loops leaving about two threads between the lines. The aim is to cover the surface with loops. I find it easier to work in parallel lines, which can follow a curve.

Hand hooking on a hessian bag doesn't need a frame but access is limited. It makes a lovely, unique present and when the bag wears out, you can cut round the hooked area and sew it onto another bag or something else.

TIPS ON USING A HAND HOOK

- Using the right tool for the job makes it easier. Although you can bang in a nail with the heel of your shoe, it's more efficient with a hammer! (It took me two years to make my first rug with a crochet hook before I discovered proper rug hooks – ouch!)

- I notice beginners are often timid about pulling loops up high enough: try 1cm (0.4in) loops. You could also vary the height of the loops to emphasise different parts of your design.

- Remember to plunge the hook in, don't just pick with the end or it will be hard to pull the loops up. The gap needs to be just big enough for a strip of fabric.



Hooking and propping on a hessian bag with a stiff lining (hook through it).



Hooked yarn cat on a bag.



Mixed yarn including some hand-spun.



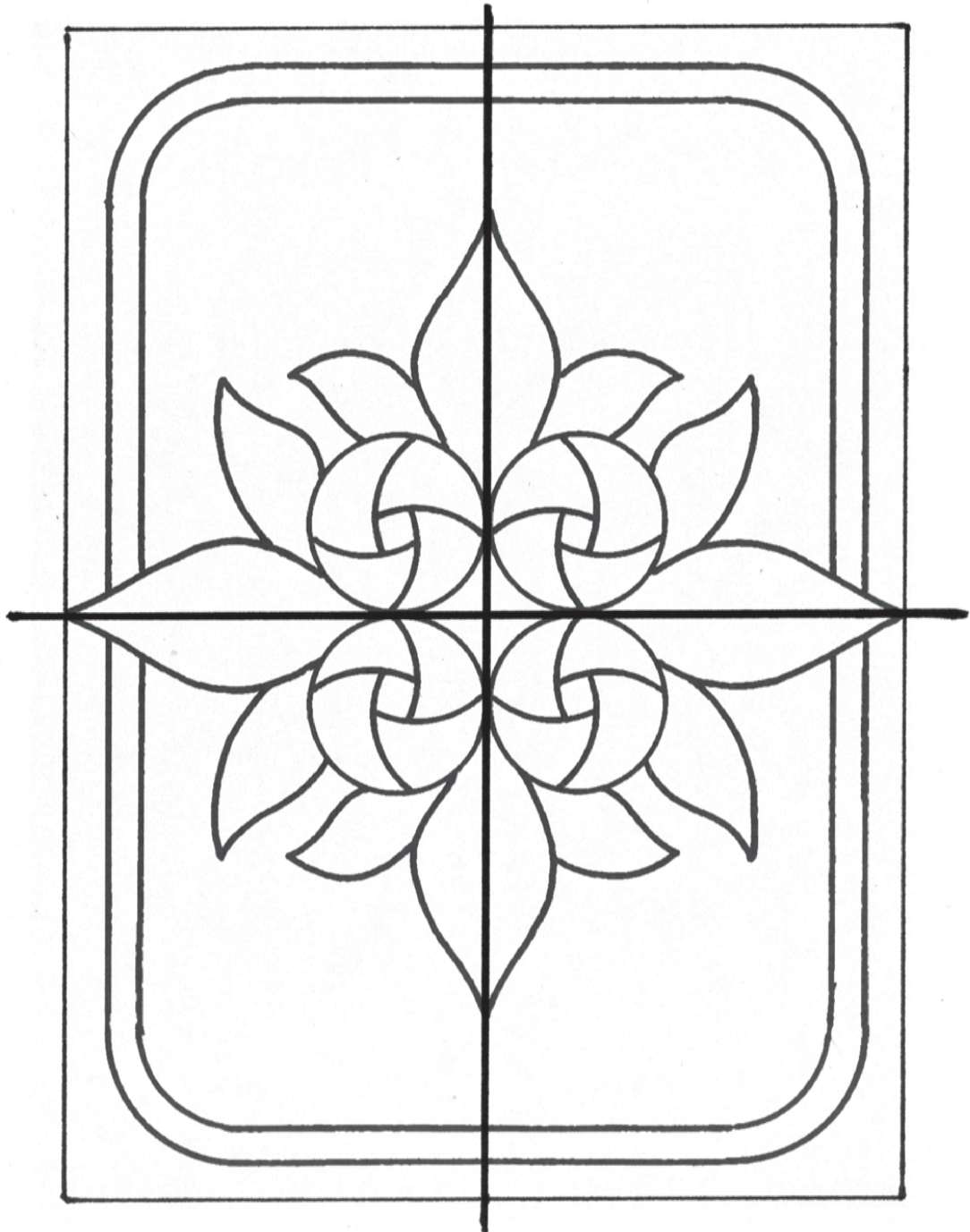
Hooked yarn badge, Extinction Rebellion symbol.



'Hot sky' 30cm x 34cm (12in x 13.5inches) Hooked demonstration piece.

A PROJECT TO HAND HOOK

You can enlarge this line drawing (see Transferring an image) onto some hessian (burlap) on a frame and hook it to make a table mat. It was inspired by a vintage printed hessian motif. A larger version could be propped, prodded or hooked to make a rug.



HOOKING WITH A SPEED SHUTTLE

With a shuttle you push a series of same-sized loops into the hessian from the back. It is much quicker than working with a hand hook but requires a frame which can lean against something, such as a wall. The hessian must be stretched taut on a frame and like hand hooking, the aim is to form a dense loop pile which covers the hessian on the right side.



A speed shuttle.



Working from the back with a speed shuttle.

HOW TO HOOK WITH A SPEED SHUTTLE

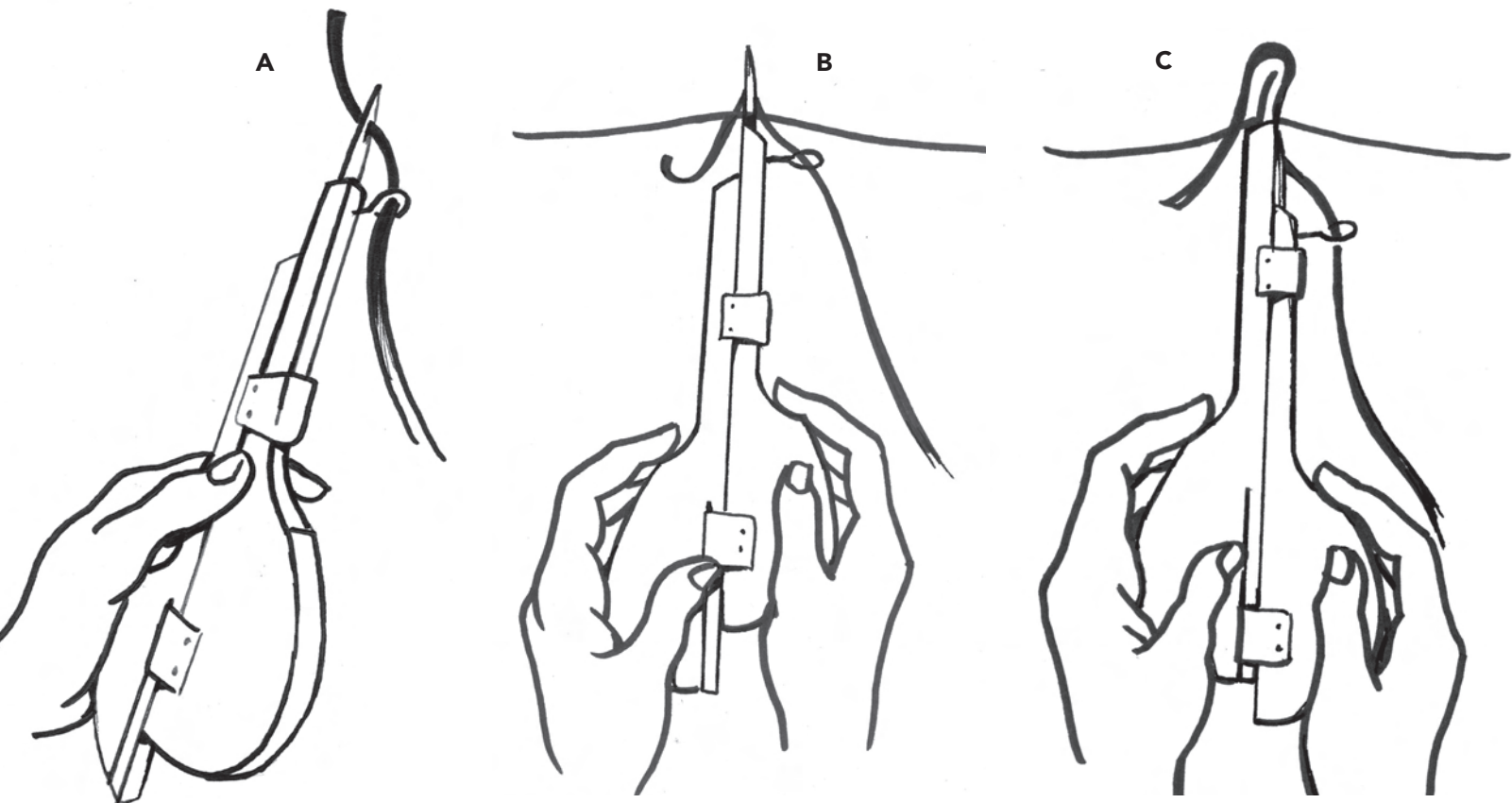
I am right-handed and work from bottom to top and left to right. Left-handers usually find it easy, but some prefer reversing the direction of travel.

1. Stretch the hessian on a large frame (see instructions in the Tools section), then draw your design on the back of the hessian. This means your design is a mirror image of what you will see on the front. Draw the outline of the rug and leave at least 10cm (4in) around the edge for the hem. Cut fabric strips about 9mm (0.375in) wide, along the weave, or from neck to waist if using jumpers, or 6mm (0.25in) wide if using matted woollen blanket. Cut one and try

it to see if width is right for that fabric, before cutting many. I also stretch the hessian from side to side with some string (see photos) which I loosen when not working on the piece.

2. With the frame leaning against a wall, work on your drawing on the back (wrong side) of the hessian. Thread the fabric strip through the small metal ring and up through the eye of the shuttle, leaving about 2cm (0.8in) dangling through the eye (a). Let the rest of the strip hang down (don't hold it).

3. You can work the border first or an outline of a shape. Hold one side of the shuttle firmly in each hand. With the needle side in your right hand, push the needle between the hessian threads, all the way (b). Now push the left-hand side of the shuttle in and pull back the right-hand side simultaneously (c), working along the line without 'walking' the shuttle. It makes its own steps, so you just push and pull, angling it in the direction you want to travel. I work from bottom to top or left to right, working the outlines of shapes first, then filling in.



4. When you've used up the strip, thread another strip and continue where you left off. I poke the strip ends through to the front with something pointed like a bodger, to be trimmed level with the loops later (d) Work in lines next to each other so the front is covered in loops.

5. When you have hooked the whole rug area and trimmed strip ends level with the loops on the right side, cut the thread you used to stitch the hessian to the frame webbing and use one of the techniques in the section on finishing.

Hooking backgrounds

If you don't have enough of one material for a solid background, you can contour hook the background with different shades of a colour. When you have worked an object or shape first, then you hook round it, line by line, working outwards to blend the different shades together. This also emphasises the shape you are surrounding. Early American rugs had backgrounds worked in meandering lines, sometimes with little shapes, like hearts, embedded in them. If you are filling an area in a single colour you can hook it in parallel lines – if you are filling in a circle, you work in ever-decreasing circles.

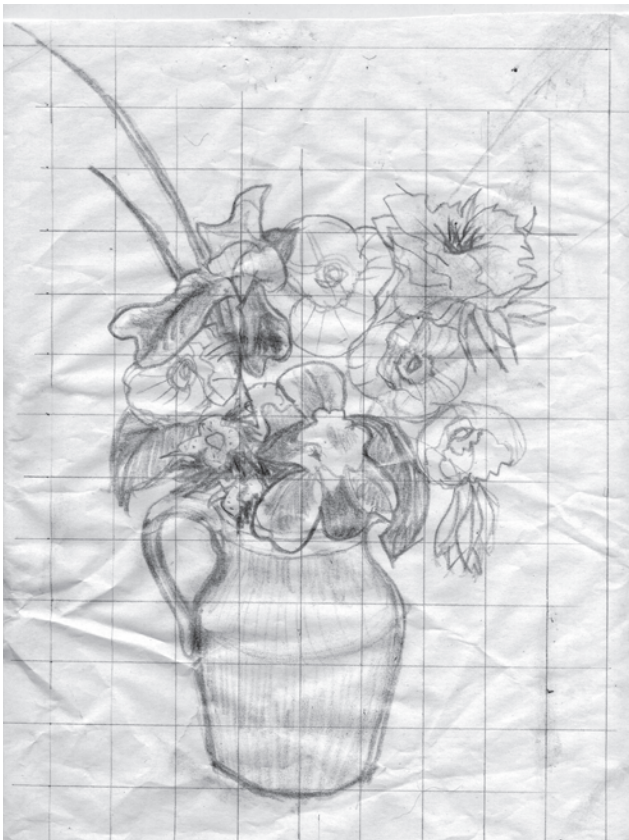
Blending colours

To make a blended transition from one colour to another you can work in one colour, then introduce a row of a second colour, then a few rows of your first colour, then another of the second fabric, gradually spacing out the first colour until you are working exclusively in the second. This technique is useful if you want to



TIPS ON HOOKING WITH SPEED SHUTTLE:

- If the shuttle is stiff to work, your strips could be too thick – it should move smoothly and rhythmically, without difficulty. Try cutting your strips a fraction narrower.
- If it's difficult to access part of the design, you can lift and turn your frame through 90 or 180 degrees, so you just work from the bottom to top or from the left to right.
- When I started using a shuttle, I kept turning the frame round every ten minutes to trim the ends and see how it looked on the right side. Now I can work large areas before I look at the front.
- Take care not to push the point against a hessian thread – it should go between the threads, angled in the direction of travel. If you break a hessian thread, you could sew on a small hessian patch which extends beyond the break, at least 5cm (2in), then work through the two layers.
- If hessian is visible on the right side between the loops, it probably means that you have 'walked' the shuttle rather than letting it move at its own pace. You can pull out the faulty strip and work it again, going more slowly and pushing and pulling the shuttle carefully so the loops are closer together.
- If you find a complex, small detail is not clear on the right side, you could unpick it and hand hook it later from the front with the frame horizontal or after you have taken it off the frame.

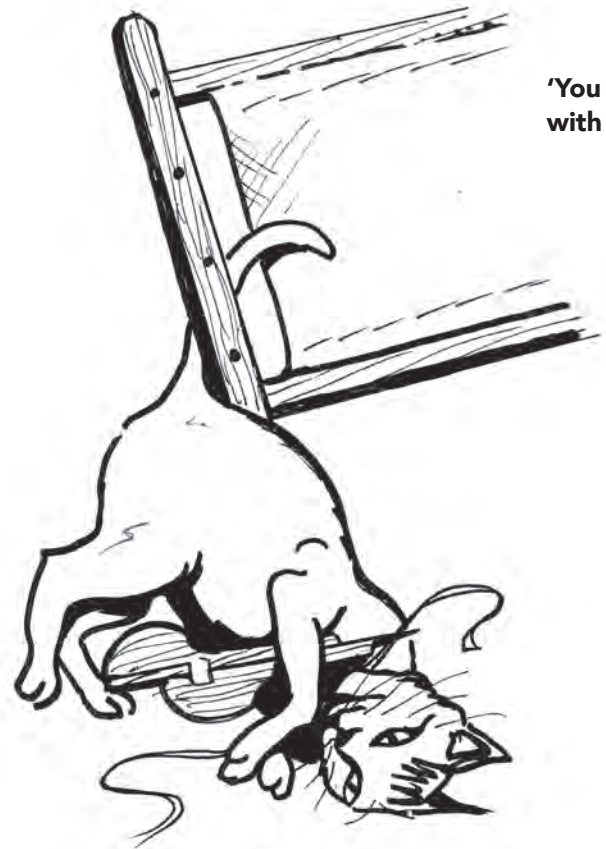


Drawing ready to scale up on hessian.

Finished rug. (Keith James)



Worked from the back.



**'You do what
with it?'**

break up a dense block of one colour, or if you don't have enough of one fabric to cover an area.

PUNCH NEEDLE

Mixed technique flower: Using Punch Needle & Prodder

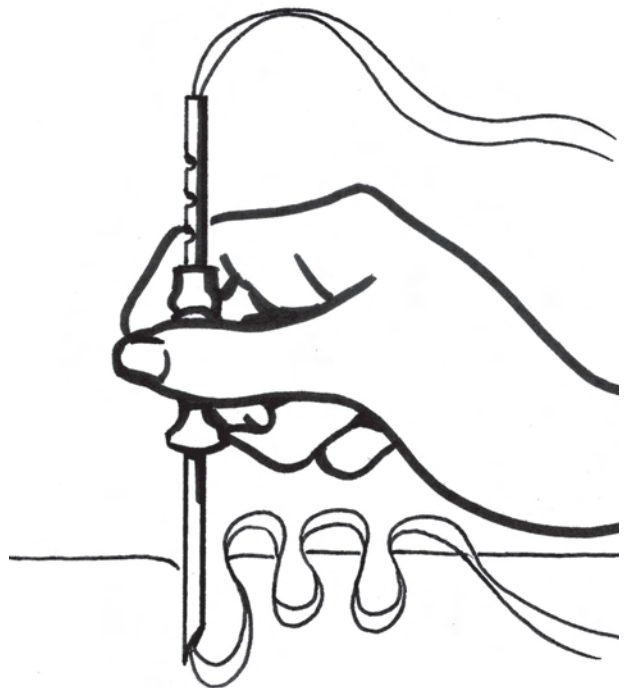
There are different punch needles which work in a similar way to punch loops – I used one with a wooden handle. This project has a circle filled with loops, made with the punch needle, to form the centre of a flower with prodded petals. You could make a small flower into a brooch or hair ornament, or sew it onto a bag. Or it could be larger to be a seat mat or wall decoration.

The backing for using a punch needle must be tightly stretched and cotton monks cloth is recommended for that (twelve holes per inch). I used a no-slip embroidery hoop, but for a larger project it can be stretched on a frame with gripper strip or DIY carpet tack (see frames in Tools section).

Punch needle

You will need

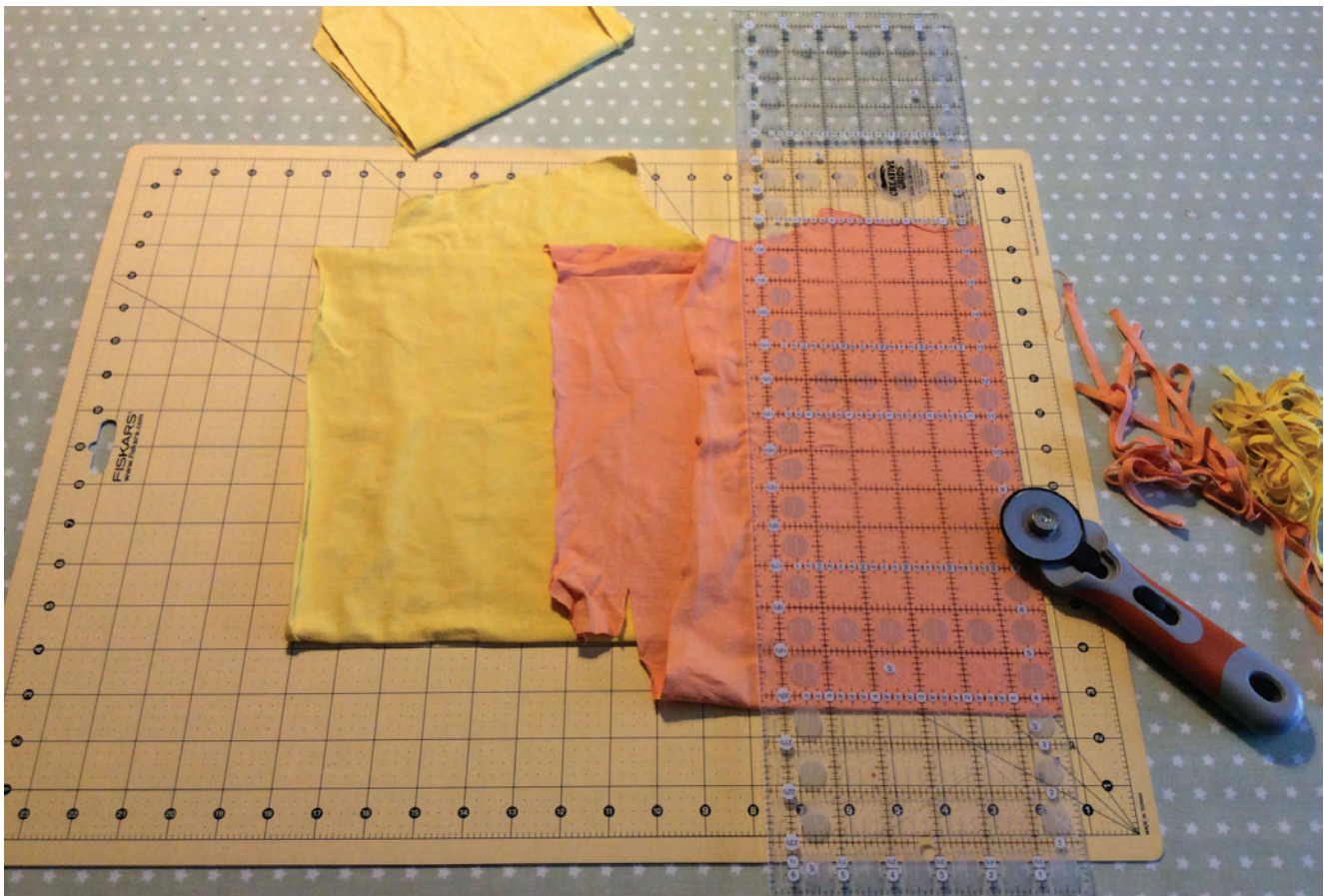
- Cotton fabric to cut into strips 7mm (0.25in) wide. I used T-shirts. Yarn works too.
- A frame
- Monks cloth or linen backing.
- A punch needle
- A threader – which comes with some brands of punch needle.
- I used a 126mm (5in) long large-eyed tapestry needle with bent tip. Or you could improvise with a long thin loop of fine wire, bound with tape.
- Sharp scissors and/or a rotary cutter, non-slip ruler and self-healing board.
- Felt tip pen and cup or plate to draw circle.





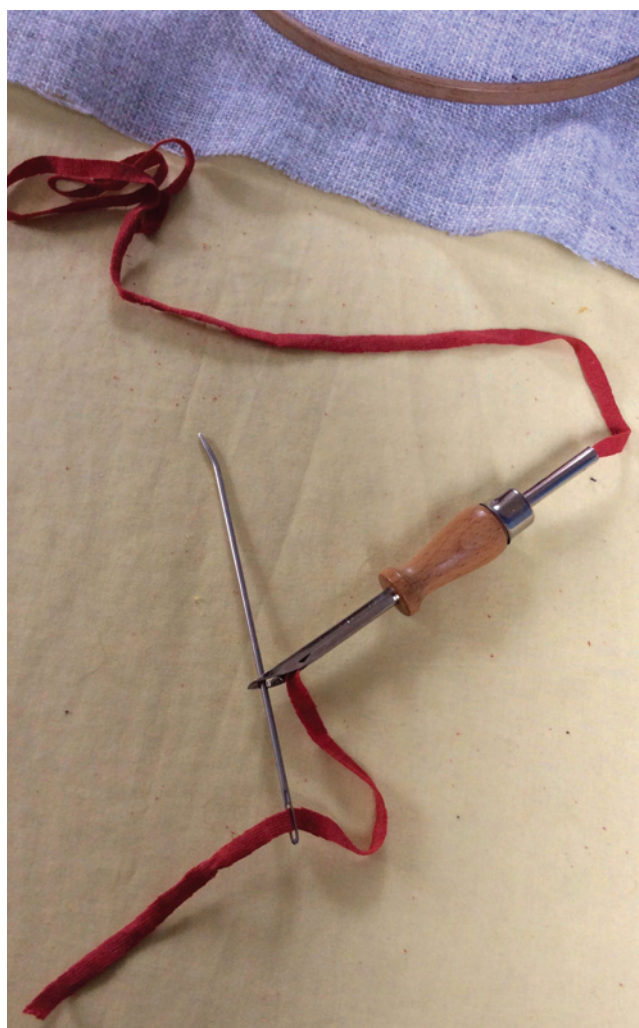
Punch needle, tapestry needle, frame, monks cloth, T-shirts.

Cutting mat, non-slip ruler, cutter, material.



Instructions

1. Stretch the backing on frame and draw the design on it with a felt pen. I drew round a cup (traditional for rag rug makers).
2. Set the loop length on the punch needle. I twisted mine slightly until it clicked in a set position.
3. Using threader or needle, thread a strip of fabric up through the punch needle and through the needle eye, where you leave a small tail with the rest of the strip down and out through the handle.



Threading the strip.

Ready to punch loops round drawn circle.



4. Working from the back, punch round the drawn circle holding the needle like a pen. Push the point through the backing, down to the handle and pull the end of the strip through to the other side,



Punching loops.



From below.



Prodding petals.



The right side.

keeping the needle inserted. Lift the needle, keeping it touching the backing as you punch loops, leaving a few strands of backing between stitches. Do not lift the needle away from the fabric surface, so you don't pull loops out.

Fill the circle with loops, leaving strip ends at the front to trim level with the loops.

Prodding the petals

5. See chapter on Prodding and prod cut pieces in two rows, from the back, around the circle using a prodder. Cut pieces about 6cm x 2cm (approx. 2.4in x 0.8in) for brooch; 7cm x 2.5cm (approx. 2.75in x 1in) for larger project.

For a brooch: Cut round the flower leaving 2.5cm (1in) border to turn under worked area, pin and stitch. Sew a circle of felt to cover the back with a brooch clip sewn to it.

Variations

- If you prefer, instead of prodding you could prog two rows of petals round the circle using a bodger, working from the front without the frame. (See How to prog.)



- Instead of a flower, you could draw a pattern or a picture, and punch that in different colours. It could be a table-mat, a hanging or seat mat, depending on size.

TIP:

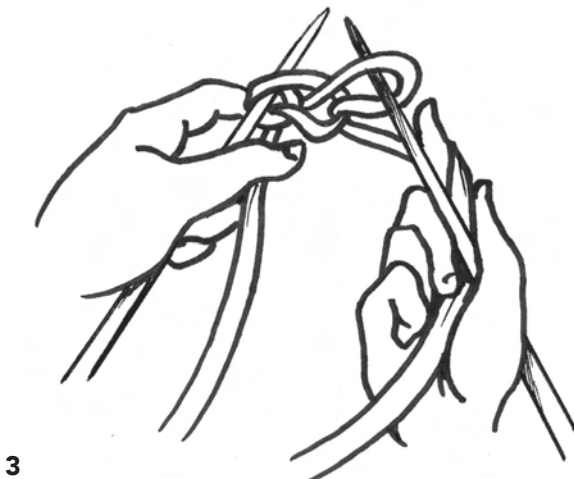
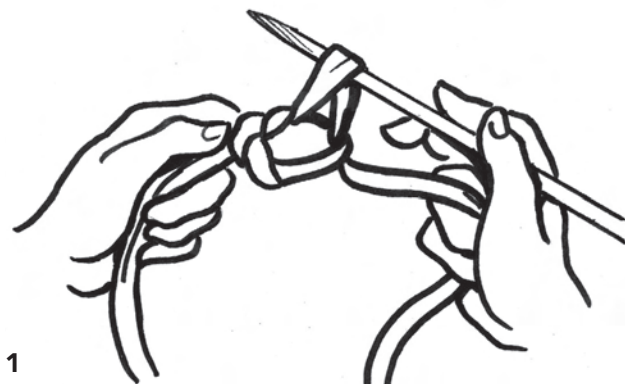
- To change direction turn the frame with punch needle in down position.

CHAPTER SEVEN

TECHNIQUES AND PROJECTS FOR KNITTING AND KNOTTING

KNITTING RAG STRIPS





KNITTING

Casting on

(If left-handed, work in reverse.)

1. With the end of the rag strip in your left hand, form it into circle and draw the strip through to form a slip loop. Insert a needle into this loop and transfer to your left hand. You can now cast on.

2. Insert the right-hand needle into the loop and take the rag strip over the point of the right-hand needle to form a new loop.

3. Draw the new loop through the first and twist it to transfer it to left-hand needle to form the second stitch.

4. Poke point of right-hand needle between the two loops on left-hand needle and into second stitch, take rag strip under and over the point as before, draw a new loop through and pass it onto left-hand needle for next stitch.

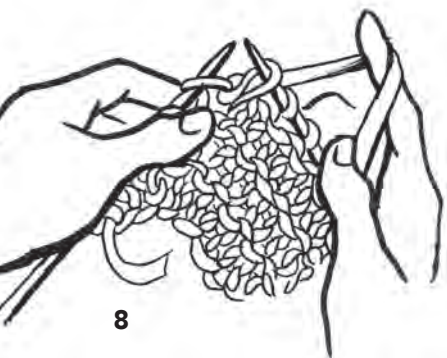
5. Repeat until you have thirty stitches.



6



7



8

Garter stitch (plain knitting)

6. Next row: with needle bearing required number of stitches in left hand, insert tip of right-hand needle into last stitch cast on left-hand needle, take rag strip round back of right-hand needle and around it to form a new stitch.

7. Bring the point of the needle bearing rag yarn through the loop on left-hand needle creating a new stitch on right-hand needle, pulling the loop off the left-hand needle.

8. Repeat, making new stitches on right-hand needle until you reach the end of the row. Transfer the needle to the left hand and knit next row, repeating until you have about sixty-five rows.

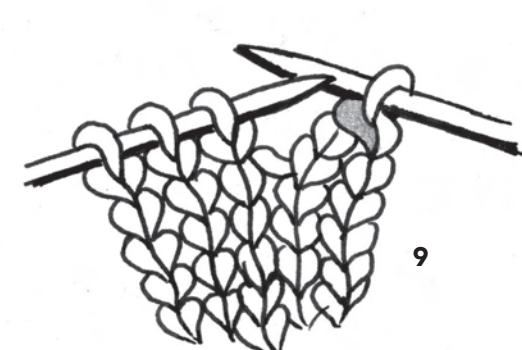
Casting off

Do not cast off tightly as it will reduce the width of the piece.

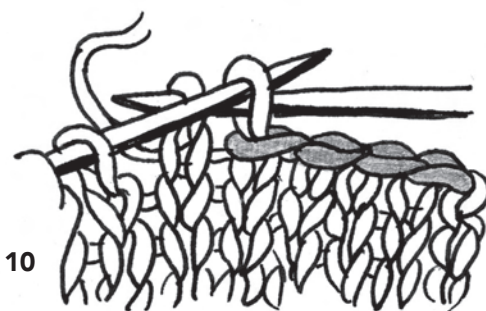
9. Knit the first two stitches. Pick up first stitch with point of left needle and slip it over the second stitch and off the needle, thus leaving one stitch on right needle.

10. Now knit another stitch to give you two stitches on right needle and slip first over second as before.

11. Continue casting off stitch by stitch until you have one stitch left on needle. Snip off the rag strip leaving a tail of about 7cm (3in) which you pass through last stitch and pull to fasten off.



9



10



11

CUTTING A CONTINUOUS STRIP

Continuous cutting

When you have knitted a small sampler to see which needles and width strips you like, you can cut a piece of fabric into a continuous strip as shown. The rug in the photograph was knitted from strips 2.5cm (1in) wide.

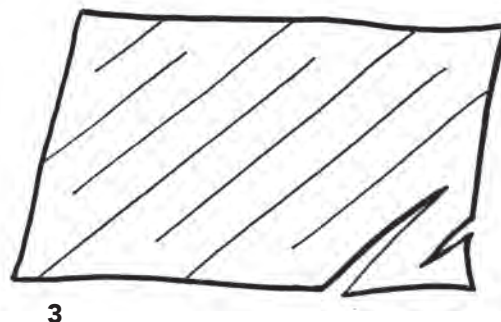
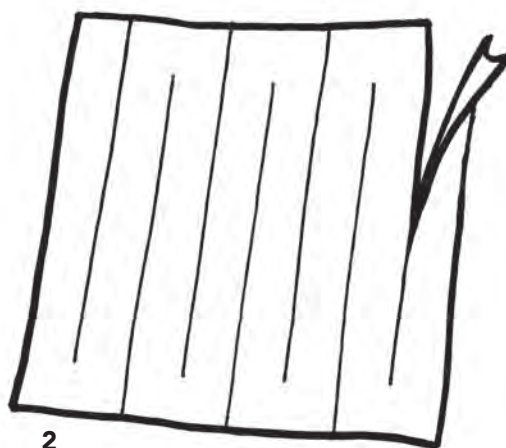
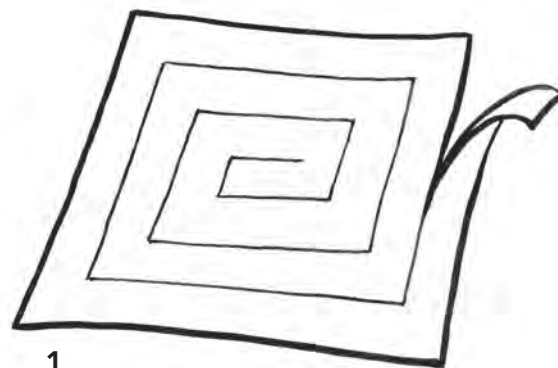
1. Start with a rectangle of fabric and, starting at a corner, cut a strip along the straight edge to your chosen width and work towards the centre of the fabric.

2. An alternative method is to cut the strip, as above, but stop about 1cm (0.4in) from the edge. Then cut a new strip from the opposite direction and keep cutting from side to side, stopping before the edge so you get a continuous strip.

Bias cutting

3. Cutting diagonally across the weave is useful for fabrics such as velvet, which fray, and it gives more flexibility to the fabric strip. If you can't tell which way the weave is, pull a thread of the fabric. To test that the fabric is strong enough, tug a short strip of it before cutting lots.

Cutting is the same as in 2, but you cut diagonally across the weave.



KNITTED RAG RUG

A knitted cotton rug can be a colourful, machine washable bath mat.

Strips of dress-weight cottons are easier to knit than thicker fabrics, but you can experiment with different width strips and mix weights that way: cut thinner fabric into slightly wider strips. The technique uses a lot of fabric and sheets make long strips which could be mixed with patterned fabric.

You will need

- Cotton fabrics/clothes to cut into strips approx. 25mm (1in) wide. Roll strips into different colour balls.
- Join strips (see Amish rug knotting technique) or cut a garment into a single spiral as shown.



- Sharp scissors
- Large knitting needles 7–10 (I used 10 because it's what I had, but see which size you like by knitting a small sampler).
- Blunt needle/bodkin and strips of fabric 6mm (0.25in) wide for joining pieces.
- I used the same fabric I used for the knitting and cut them when ready to join pieces.

Instructions

1. Cut or rip fabric into strips and roll into balls. You could knit a small sampler to find which strip width/needle size you prefer and how loose to make the stitches. Keep the stitches loose as cotton strips don't have the 'give' of yarn.

2. Cast on thirty stitches and using plain, garter stitch, knit about sixty-five rows until the length is 50cm(19.5in) or longer if you like. Cast off.



3. Make a border strip by casting on eight stitches and knitting until the strip is long enough to surround your knitted rectangle. To make sure it was long enough I didn't cast off until I had laced most of it round.

4. Tuck ends of strips into the knitting using a hook or bodger.

5. With the knitted rectangle on a table, join the border strip round it with a bodkin and thin strip of fabric 5mm (0.25in) wide, lacing

TIPS:

- To join fabric strips for knitting you can use the knotting technique as for the Amish knot rug project or you could just knot strips on the back of rug. Any loose ends of strips can be tucked into the knitting when you have cast off.

- Strips can be ripped/ cut along the weave or bias cut. See instructions for cutting continuous strips.



through adjacent loops of the rectangle and border. Join new strips with a tiny knot which you hide inside one of the loops.

AMISH KNOT TECHNIQUE

This technique was commonly worked using a toothbrush modified into a needle shape, so they were also called Toothbrush Rugs. You could use a large bodkin or safety pin to thread the loops. The process resembles making blanket stitches along a base strip.



Knotted cotton rug 66cm x 50cm (26in x 20in).

Oval knotted rug

You will need

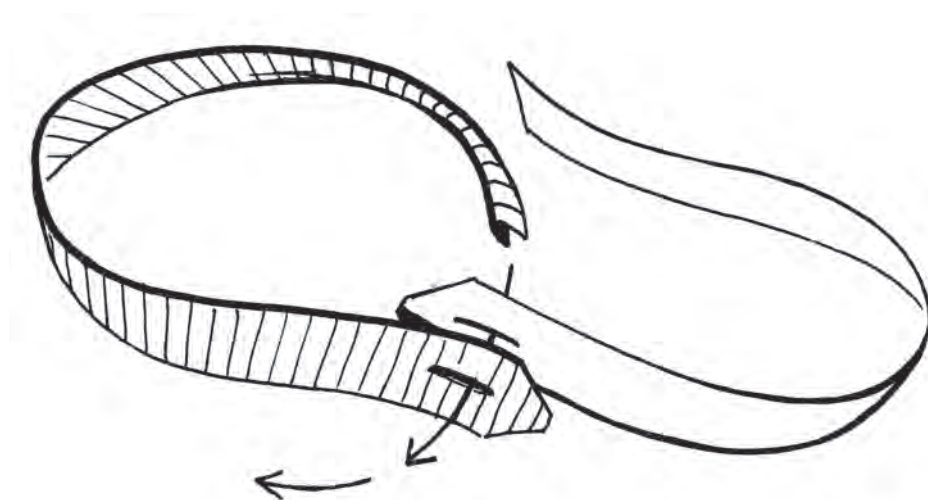
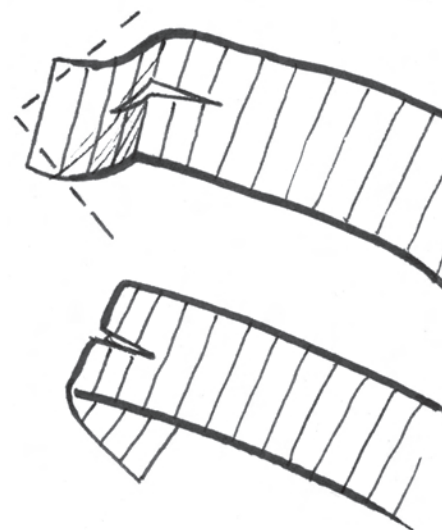
- Cotton fabrics to cut into strips about 5cm (2in) wide. Use similar weight fabrics
- Sharp scissors
- A bodkin or a flat tapestry needle or large safety pin.
- A bulldog clip or clamp to hold the strips steady for starting loops, so your hands are free. Clip knot to a cutting mat edge or clamp it to the edge of a table, or you could safety pin it to an ironing board and work on that.



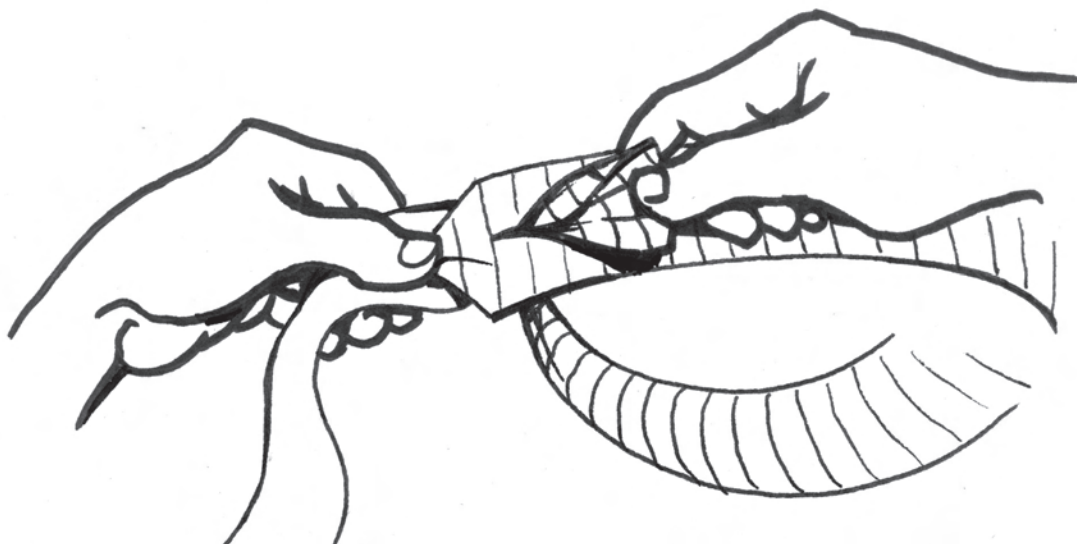
Instructions

Joining two strips with a knot:

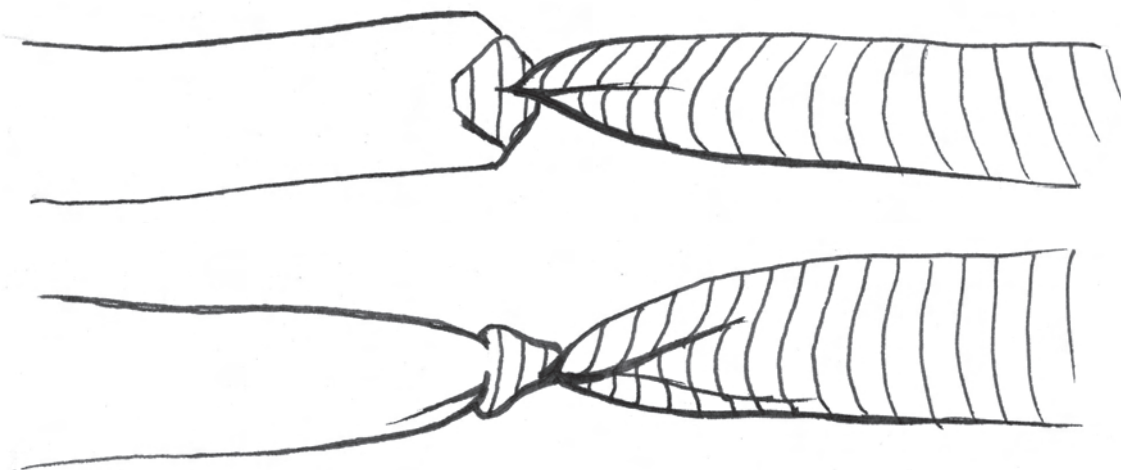
1. Cut two different colour fabrics into 5cm (2in) wide strips. Decide which strip will be the base strip which is almost hidden by the working strip formed into knots along base strip.
2. Fold one end of each strip over about 2cm (0.8in) and snip a slit about 1.5cm (0.6in) in the centre.
3. With working strip end on top of the base strip with slits aligned, push the other end of same working strip up through both slits



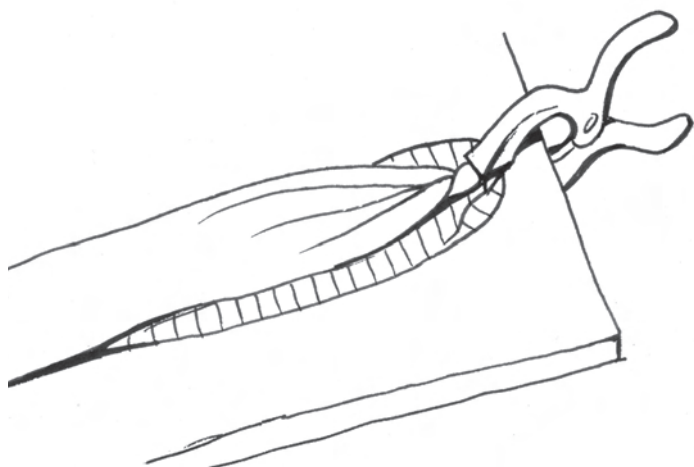
and gently pull it all the way through, whilst holding the end of one strip above the other between finger and thumb.



Then hold one strip in each hand and pull gently until they slip into a knot.



If the strips pull apart, cut the ends off the strips and try again – the knots get neater with practice.



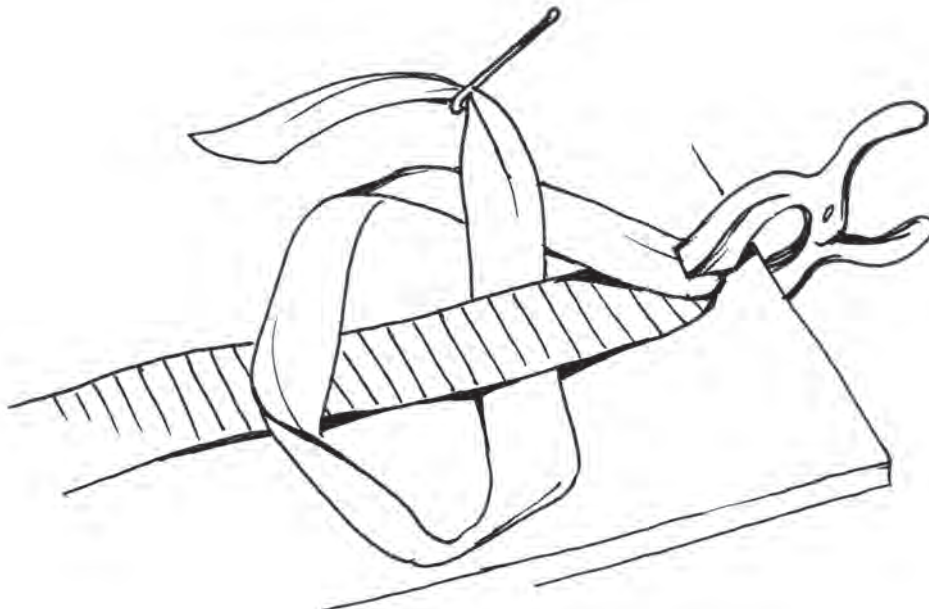
Making the loops

4. To keep both hands free, secure the knot on your work surface. It could be clamped on the edge of table, or clipped to edge of a cutting mat.

Or you could safety pin it to an ironing board and work on that. I work from right to left. If left-handed maybe work left to right.

5. Thread the end of the knotting strip through bodkin leaving tail of about 7.5cm (3in).

6. Holding the base strip in left hand, loop the knotting strip above it and pass needle under base strip and up through the loop.



7. Gently tug knotting strip so a loop is formed on the base strip, but keep it fairly loose as you will work into it for the next row.

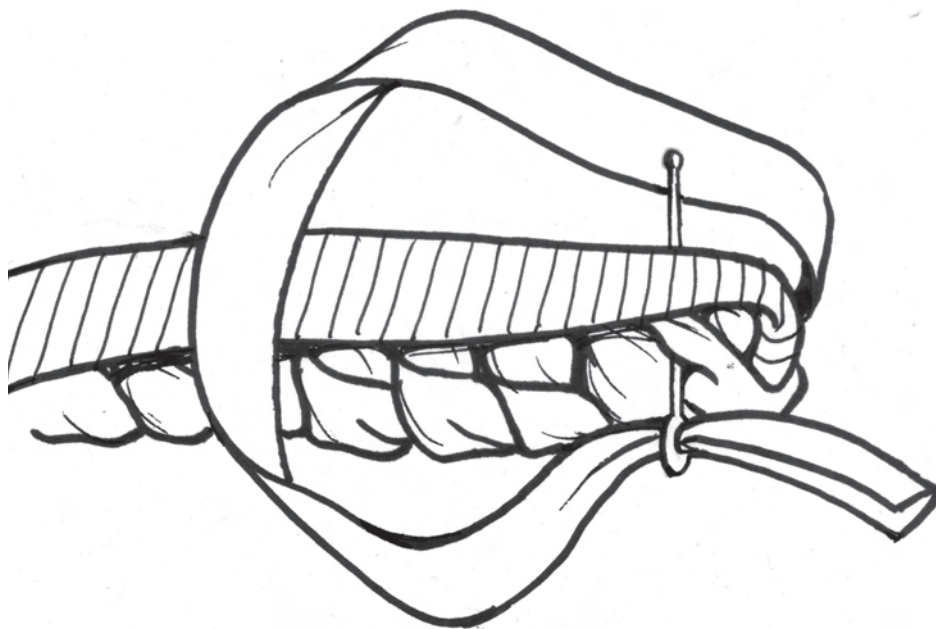


8. Repeat 6 and 7 until you have twenty looped knots along the base strip. The work does not need to be clipped to the table now.

9. The second row of knots is formed by folding the base strip back along the top of the first row of loops and pushing the needle into the last loop you made, up behind base strip and up through the latest loop.

TIPS:

- When working round a bend, make two knots in one base loop, but not in every one, so the rug lies flat. As the rug grows, this may need to be more frequent.
 - The base strip can be narrower than the working strip. Some rugs were made using a ribbon or rope base strip.
 - You could sew fabric strips end to end instead of knotting.
-



Repeat along the row of loops to form the second row.

10. At the end of the row, keep working round the end forming knots so you are making an oval shape by working around the ends and along the rows.

When either strip gets short, knot on another length which could be a different colour. Continue adding strips until the rug is the size you want.



Finishing

11. Taper the knotting strip to half its width when you are about four loops away from the finished size so those last knots are smaller. Leave enough strip length to tuck/poke into the rug so it will not come undone (about 6cm/2.4 inches).

**A sample using
T-shirt strips.**

CHAPTER EIGHT

TECHNIQUES AND PROJECTS FOR COILING, BINDING, PLAITING AND BRAIDING

COILING AND BINDING

I used Donegal tweed selvedge for this rug (66cm/16in diameter) but you could use other fabric in strips. I started with 1.5cm (0.6in) wide then 3cm (1.2in) wide strips. Wool wears best for a floor rug.

Materials.





Detail of coiled Donegal tweed selvedge rug.

Coiled and bound trivet

A trivet is a good sized project to try this technique before you make a rug. I used strips of a fine woollen scarf and some black fabric for this trivet.

You will need

- Sash cord or similar rope- one pack for trivet, 2–4 packets for a rug
- A bodkin, a large-eyed tapestry needle or large safety pin
- Strong thread
- Assorted fabric strips
- Dry glue stick or needle and thread or double-sided sticky tape



Instructions

1. Trim the end of the rope at a shallow angle to make it thinner and bind it with thread, or masking tape, to stop it fraying. Wind it into a coil, binding with strong thread, working out from the centre.

2. Cut a fabric strip and thread through the needle or large safety pin. I started with a 1cm (0.4in) wide strip, then 3cm (1.2in) wide later, as I worked outwards.

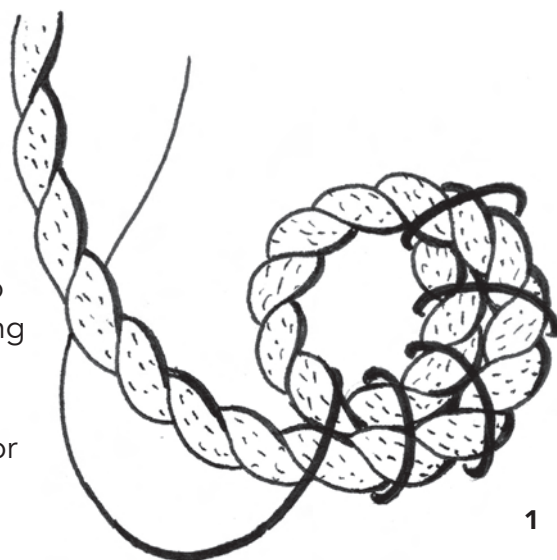
3. Either glue the other end of the fabric strip to the back of the coil, or stitch it. Take the strip up through the centre of the coil, over the front and round the back and repeat until the coil is covered with your strip.

4. Next wrap the strip once only around loose end of the rope; then wrap strip into centre of coil. Alternate such short and long stitches, coiling the rope around the centre until you complete a circle.

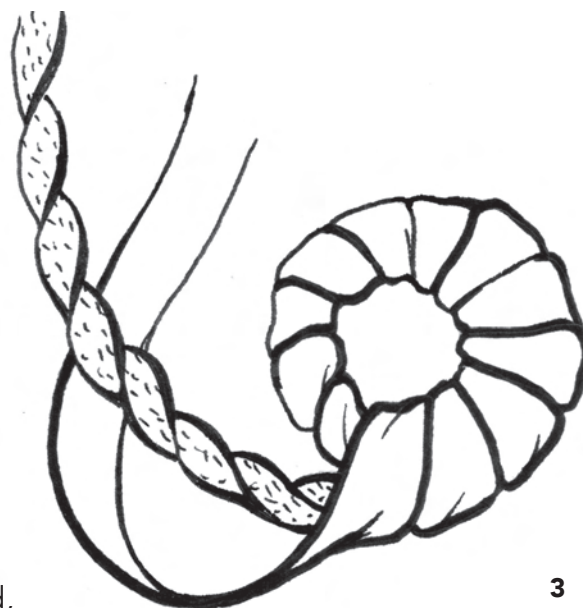
5. For the next row, wrap a short stitch round the rope as before, then take the long stitch into the previous row, not the centre. Continue working round the coil but when the strip starts to slope backward, increase from one to two stitches so that the strips radiate outwards from the centre.

6. To join a new strip of fabric, trim old strip behind last long stitch on back of coil and stitch or stick new strip on top. Wind the stitch round several times in the same space to strengthen the join. The strips can get slightly wider as you move out from the centre.

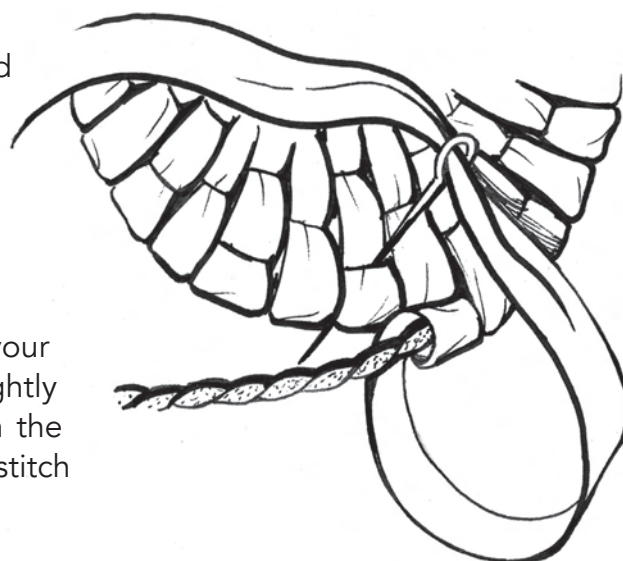
7. When your work reaches the size you want for your project, cut rope at an angle as in step 1, so it sits tightly against outside edge of your trivet. Glue or stitch the remaining strip firmly round tapered end and stitch neatly to the back.



1



3



5

TIPS:

- If you need to join new lengths of rope, taper old and new ends as in step 1 and tape, or stitch, them together neatly to continue binding.
-

Trivet in progress
showing rope
joined with tape.

Trivet.

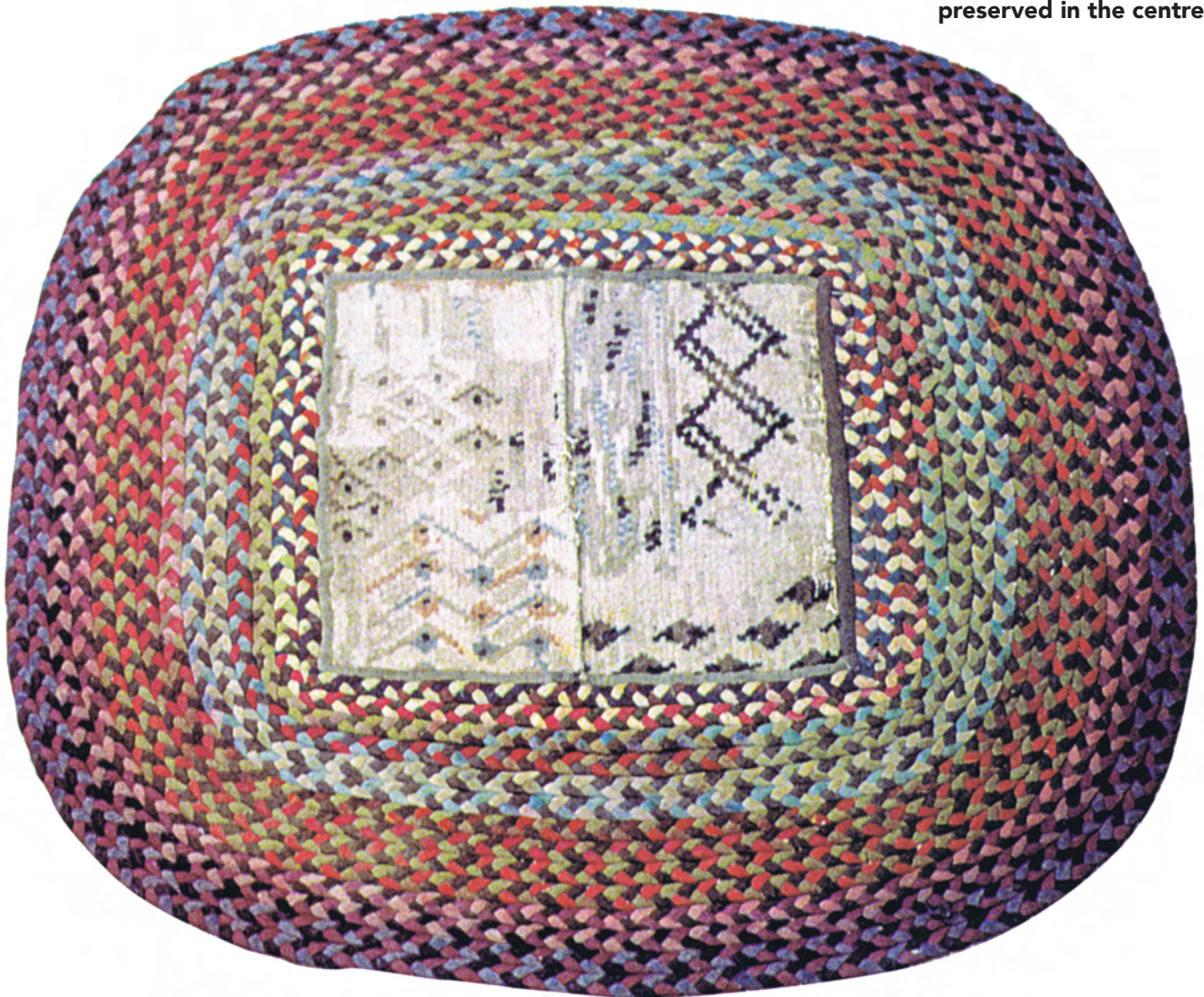


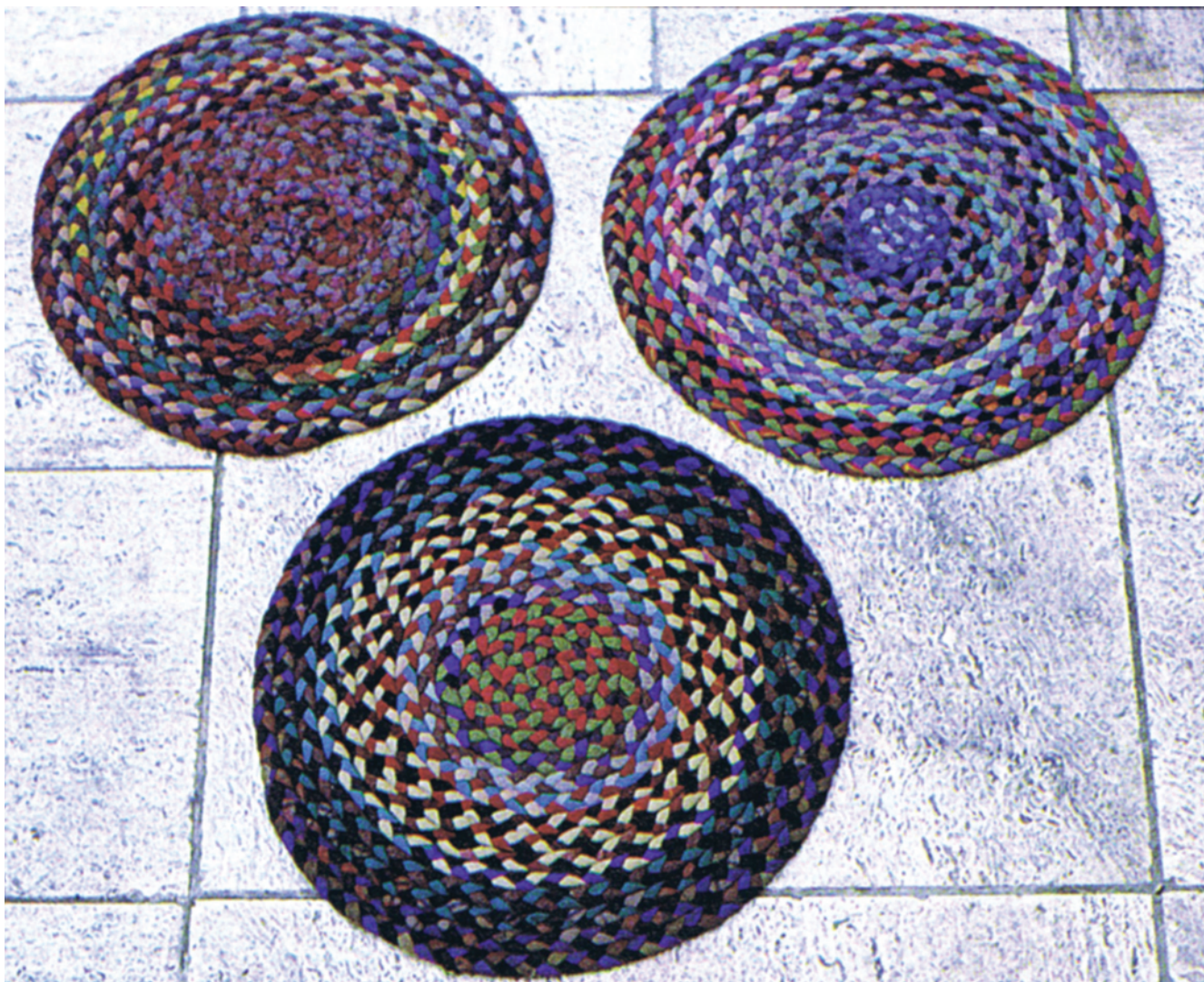
PLAITING/BRAIDING

In the Maritime Provinces of Canada they used to hook rugs using dyed silk stockings, and the practice of braiding strips of fabric to make floor rugs was common there and in North America, where they also used to make multi-strand braided borders for hooked rugs.

In the nineteenth century, the flourishing Swiss straw industry exported plaited-straw hats all over Europe, and North American settlers, who made braided rugs, would have typically worn plaited-straw bonnets and hats. Braided rugs were and still are popular in Canada and the United States where they have developed into an art form.

**Nineteenth-century
Vermont rug with a
precious piece of carpet
preserved in the centre.**



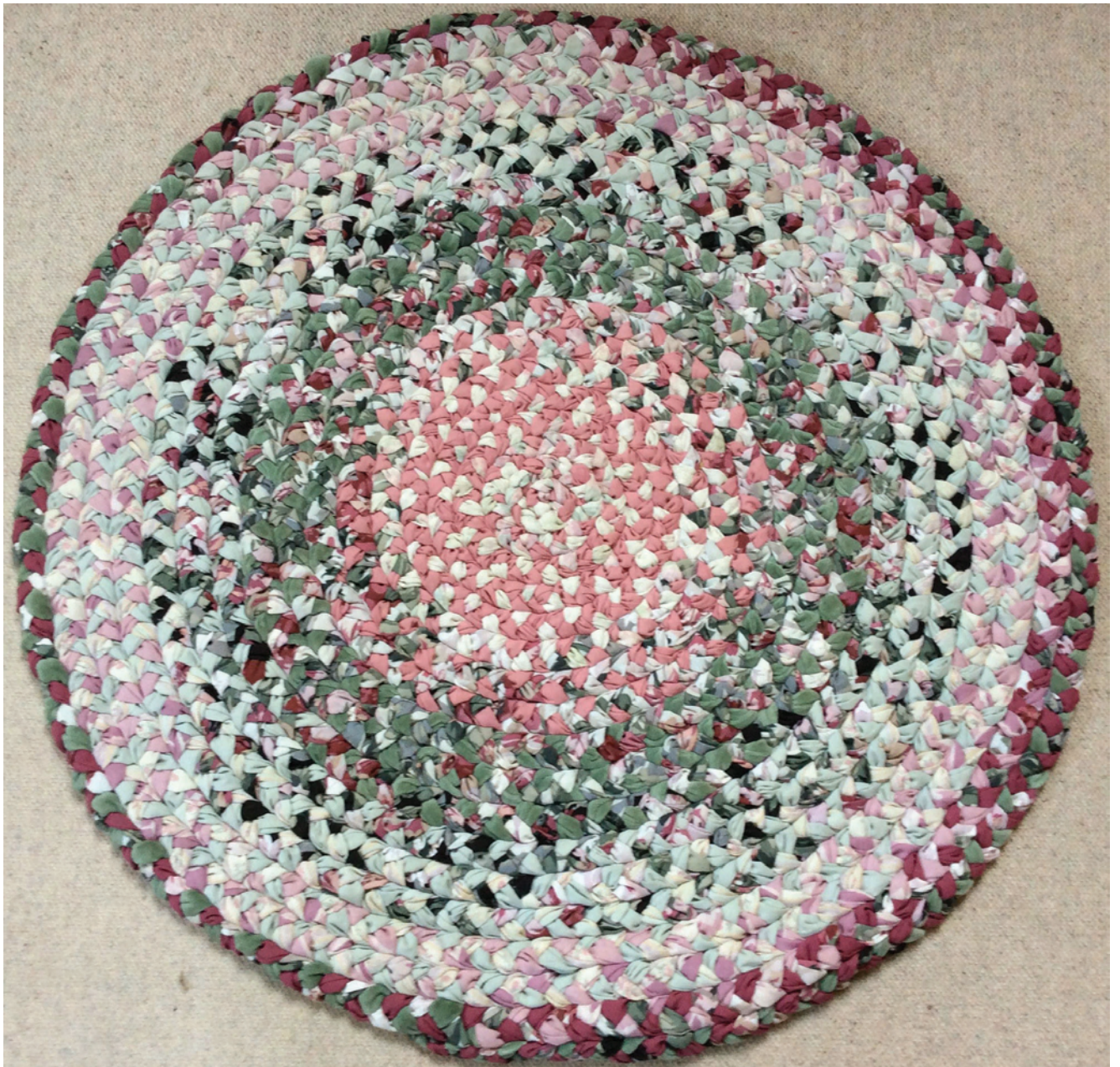


**Nineteenth-century
Vermont braided seat
mats made by Alan Last's
grandmother.**

In the British Isles, laddered silk or lisle stockings were plaited to make mats in the 1930s, but in war time stockings were very scarce, so they used whatever they could get.

Plaiting is one of the best rag rug techniques for showing off the surface pattern of a fabric, and it has its own unique charm. Plaited cottons make good bath mats, as you can machine wash them, whereas hessian backed rugs smell musty if they get damp.

For plaited rag rugs I combine fabrics that will wash evenly, such as all woollens or all cottons, although I do sometimes use different weight fabrics, such as velvet, alongside thinner cottons. For an even, straight plait using different weight fabrics, it is necessary to make a short test plait or two, varying the width of the strips (for thinner fabric cut strip wider than for thicker fabrics) until you get a plait which sits straight and looks best for your chosen fabrics. Strips



narrower than 5cm (2in) will make a very thin rug and it will be hard to conceal any raw edges.

Test plaits can be as short as 30cm (12in) – save them for future reference as to strip widths, if you plan to plait more rugs.

The traditional American way is to sew strips into tubes with the seam on the inside so the rug is reversible. For cotton strips I just turn the raw edges to the back as I plait, without sewing, so any frayed edges at the back are covered when I back the finished rug with a piece of fabric stitched around the edge of the rug and across the plaits, to consolidate them.

**Cotton rug 84cm (33in)
diameter made by the
author,**

HOW TO PLAIT

Make a three-strand test plait (or two) to decide on the strip width which looks right for your chosen fabrics.

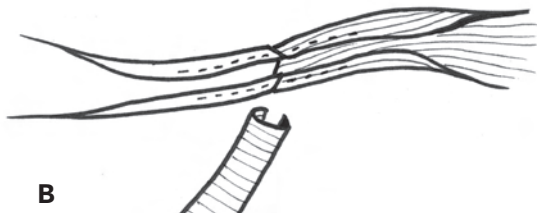


1. Cut or rip the fabrics into strips along the weave. Join short strips (e.g. from a shirt), with diagonal seams (a). If they are cut from something long, such as a sheet, roll up one end of each strip and secure it with a pin, leaving a metre (yard) to work with as longer strips get tangled as you plait. Then you unroll another bit and re-pin, as you go.

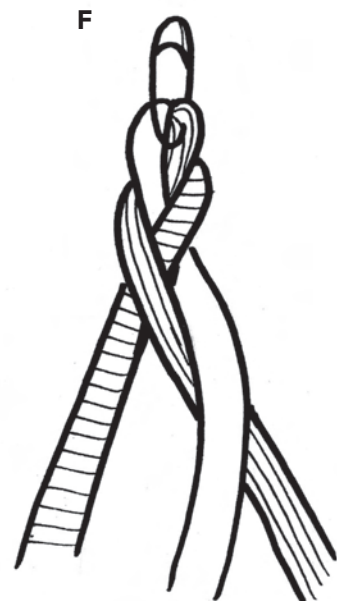
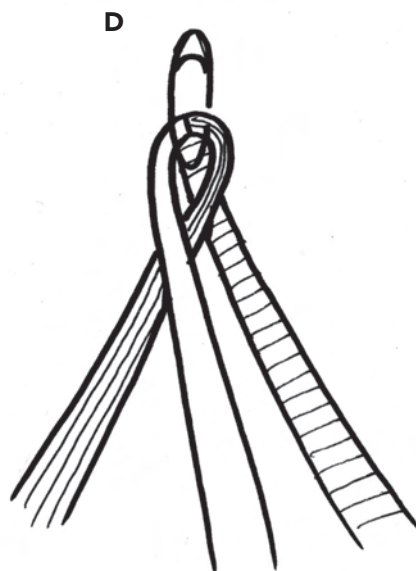
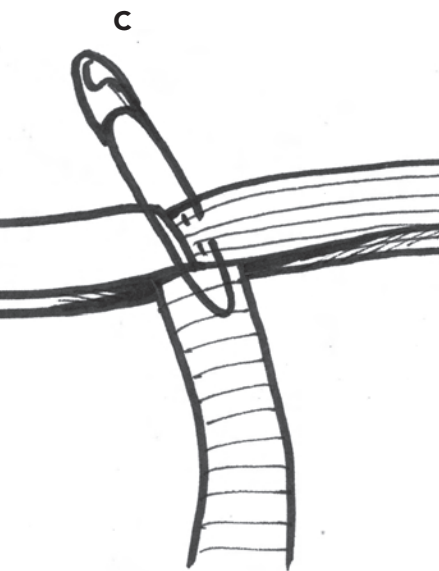
Starting with three strips.

2. *To make a spiral*, join two strips (a) and folding the edges to the middle, lengthwise, place the top of third strip in the centre (b), (raw edges folded to back) which makes a neat centre for your spiral.

For a rectangular rug, just safety pin three strip ends together to make separate plaits.



3. Secure the strips together at the top with a safety pin (c) and hook pin over something secure, or tie it to a chair back. Plait the strips by bringing the right-hand strip over the middle strip, so it becomes the new middle strip. Then bring the left-hand strip over the middle strip (d), and repeat (e, f, g).



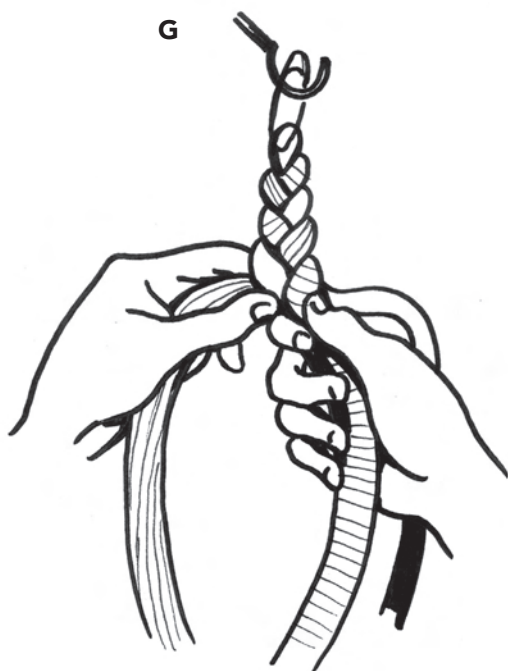
4. To make a spiral, wind one plait round and round. Join by sewing into a spiral with needle and thread until it stops trying to uncurl (about 10cm/4in diameter) then lace through adjacent plaits with strong thread in a bodkin (blunt needle), passed behind single strips of the plaits on adjacent sides so the thread is like a ladder (h). Pull the thread gently to bring the plaits together. Lace from the back so the thread doesn't show on the front, keeping the stitching fairly loose so it doesn't pull and deform the finished piece (or a circular rug could become bowl shaped). This is best done flat on a table.

For circular rugs, you can either plait and lace together the central part, then join additional strips as they run out, plaiting and joining, as you go. Or, you can make a really long plait and then lace it into shape which produces a more random result. The first way gives you control over when the colours change – start with strips slightly different lengths, so the colour change can be more subtle when you add on in different places.

To make a rectangular rug, lay some separate, same length, plaits side by side and lace together at the back.

TIPS FOR PLAITED PROJECTS:

- Wider strips make fatter plaits which grow faster, but they need more lacing/stitching as the extra weight can pull them apart.
- The 'take up' from plaiting can be about one-third of the length of strips so your plait will be shorter than the strips were before plaiting.
- If the laced plaits have some gaps between them, you could add some invisible stitching with needle and thread, from the front.



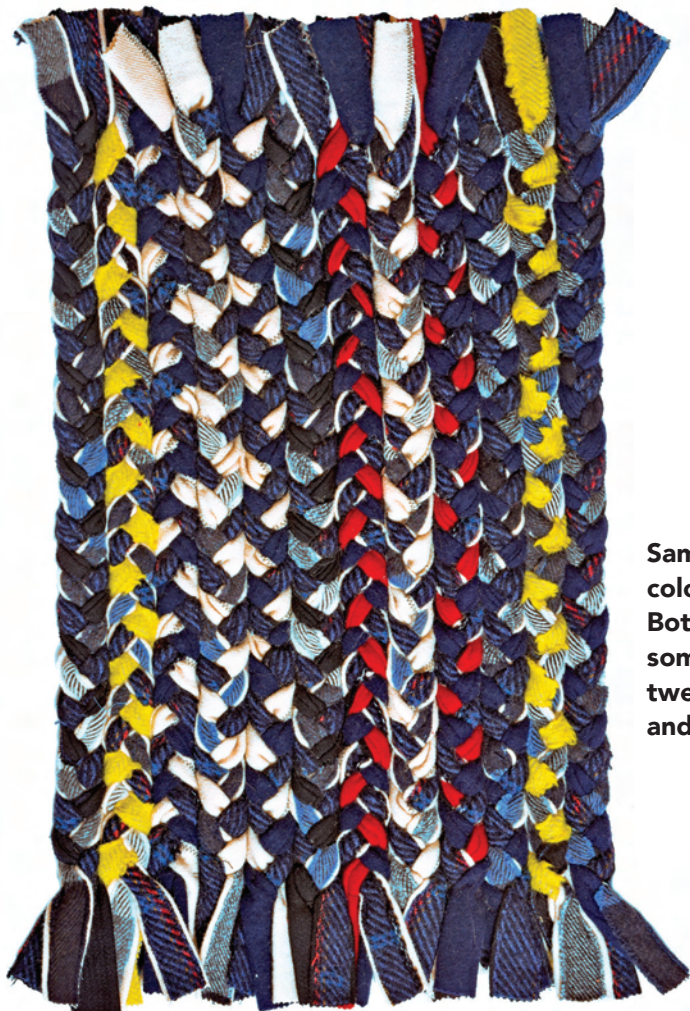
Lacing together
woollen plaits made
from sewn tubes with
seams inside.





**The rug 75cm x 45cm
(29.5in x 18in)**

Detail.



**Same method with
colour variation.
Both rugs include
some Donegal
tweed selvedge
and cream blanket.**



(Keith James)

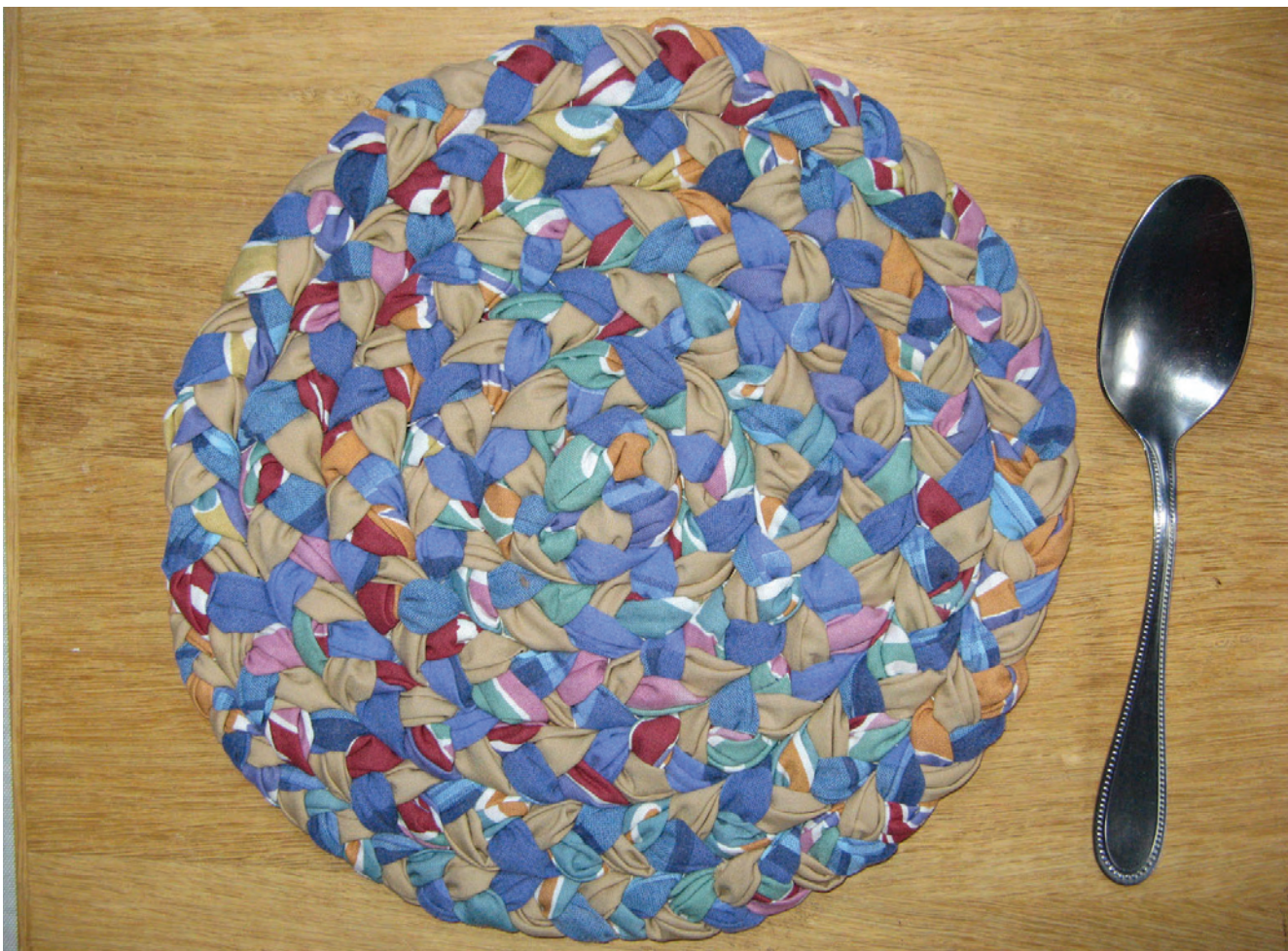
PLAITED SPIRAL PROJECTS

1) Table mat

The plaited (braided) spiral in the photograph was made from recycled cotton items in three different colours. A plaited spiral could be used as a table mat or enlarged to become a rug, or you can sew two spirals onto a plaited strap to make a bag (see 2).

You will need

- Assorted cotton fabrics for plaits and backing
- Blunt needle (bodkin or lacing needle)
- Strong thread for lacing
- A sewing needle and thread to match your fabric
- Pins
- Scissors
- Safety pin
- Sewing machine (optional) for joining strips



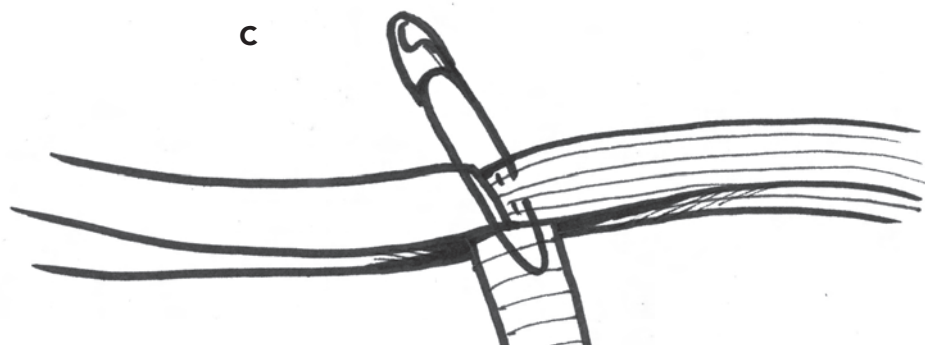
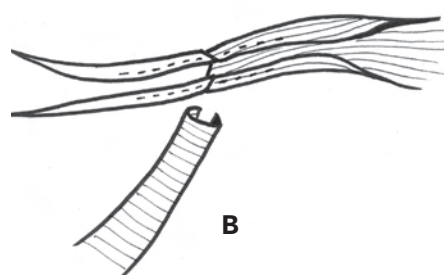
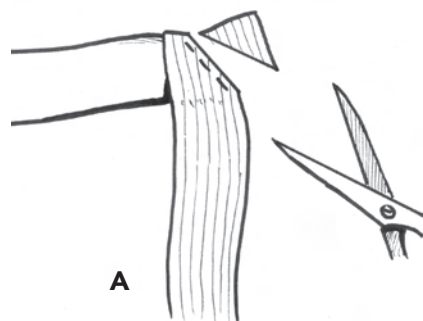
Instructions

1. To make a spiral about 23cm (9in) diameter choose fabrics of similar weight and cut or rip along the weave into strips 7.5cm (3in) wide. Join strips (a) so you get three strips at least 2.65m (104in) long. Plaiting reduces the length of the strips ('take-up') and size may vary too depending on how you plait.

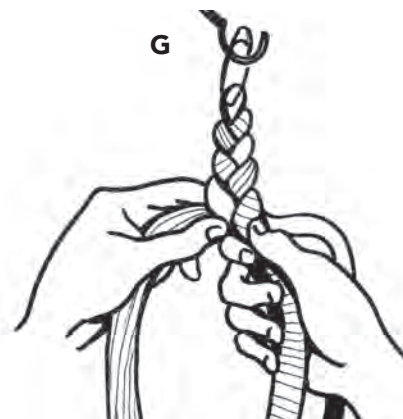
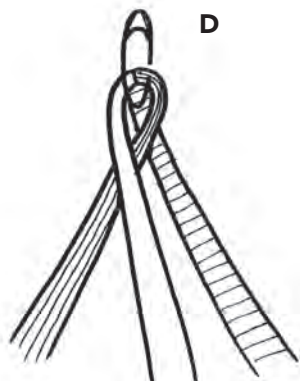
2. Roll and pin the strips leaving about a metre (1yd) unrolled, to plait.

3. Join two of the strips together (as a) and fold the edges to the middle and stitch about 15cm (6in) (b).

4. Fold the edges of the third strip to the back, place it on (b) then fold so edges meet (c). Push large safety pin through centre, hook it over something steady and



holding the three strips towards you, but not pulling them, start plaiting. The point where the safety pin passes will form centre of spiral. Turning the raw edges of the strips to the back, as you go, plait the three strips following instructions (d–g) as for plaiting/ braiding, until plait is about 302cm (119in) long. Remove safety pin.





5. Working on a table, from the right side, pass a needle and thread through the pointed end of the plait and start winding it into a spiral, securing it by stitching right through the plait, until it stops trying to uncurl, when the spiral is about 10cm (4in) in diameter. The stitches should not show on the front. Knot the thin thread to thicker thread and change to a bodkin.

6. Working from the back, start lacing the plaits using the threaded bodkin which you pass behind adjacent strips (h). Lacing should not show on the front and is faster than stitching. Work with the spiral flat on the table and keep it soft and pliable. If you pull too tightly, it will curl up at the edge.

7. Continue plaiting and lacing to within 15cm (6in) of the strip ends, then cut them so they taper to half their width so plait gets thinner. Plait and lace to the end. Tuck the tapered plait end to the back and stitch neatly.

8. Place the mat on the backing fabric and cut round it leaving a border of 2.5cm (1in). Turn the mat upside down, pin the backing on it, turning the border under round the edge. Pin and sew the backing neatly to the mat, around the edge. You now have a unique table mat.

2) Bag Instructions

1. Make two plaited spirals as for table mats.



2. Before you back the spirals, stiffen with interfacing or fusing on the back, but not right to the edge so you don't have to sew through too many layers when you stitch them to the plaited strap. I improvised with stiff denim which I already had at home. Back them with cotton fabric.

3. For the bag strap make a fatter three-strand plait. In the picture, the thicker fabric strips were 10cm (4in) wide and the thinner green fabric 13mm (5in) wide. (Or use same width strips of similar weight fabrics.) I sewed the strips into tubes and turned them, seams on the inside, so that no frayed fabric showed on the strap plait. The strips started 198cm (78in) long and when plaited they became 117cm (46in) with plaiting 'take-up' which varies depending on your plaiting. Lengths could be varied for a longer or shorter strap. Join the plait ends neatly to form a circle, using needle and thread.

4. Back the strap plait (inside the bag) with a strip of fabric to match the spiral linings, then sew one spiral to the strap, stitching neatly round the edge, leaving an opening at the top.

5. Sew the other spiral to the other side of the strap to make a



The strap plait, spiral with stiffener and the backed spiral.





The finished bag.



I used some spare curtain material for the strap.

bag. At the top of the bag opening, I sewed a thin loop of fabric with a button on top of it, plus a button on the other side to catch the loop.

TIP:

- 200cm (79in) long strips will make a 20cm (8in) diameter spiral.

FINISHING AND CLEANING RAG RUGS

FINISHING

Shaggy rugs were not usually backed so dirt didn't get trapped between two layers and the back usually looks good anyway. They used to place them upside down during the week and the best side on view on Sundays. However, one woman said her grandmother used a sack, prodded one side, then inserted dry newspapers every night to soak up the damp because people wiped their feet on the rug.

Unbacked rugs are more flexible and drape more, so a hooked wall hanging will benefit from a backing to stiffen it. I usually back hooked wall hangings but not prodded rugs, which I just hem.

It's essential to leave a border of backing material around the worked area so you can turn it under twice and stitch it to the backing. If you work too close to the edge, hessian frays, so there will be little left to hem. In this case (and I have done it) you can sew carpet tape round the worked area and then hem that.

Binding with tape

Cut off any surplus hessian, leaving a 3cm (1.2in) border around worked area. Pin cotton carpet tape, or similar tape, on the right side of the hessian and backstitch a line close to the

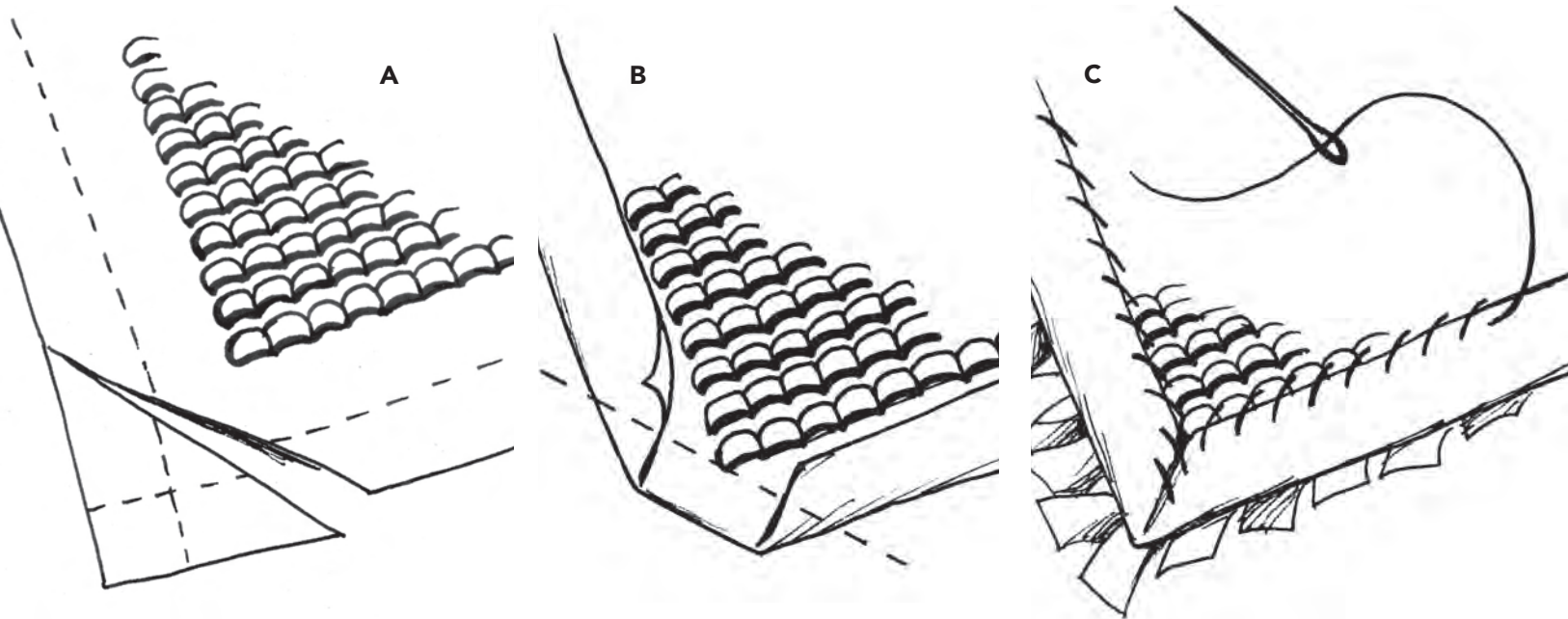


worked area using strong thread. Ease the tape round any corners or points.

Turn tape to the back, pin, and hemstitch it to the rug with strong thread. This will produce a line of binding all around the rug which shows only from the back.

Hemming

This is the simplest finishing technique. Cut about 6cm (2.4in) around the worked area and fold the edges twice under the back of the worked area, pin then slip-stitch, making sure to catch the backing fabric and not propped or hooked pieces.



To neaten rectangular rugs, the corners of the hessian can have the point cut off (mitred) (a) then be folded once (b) then the sides folded twice, pinned and stitched (c), making sure to stitch into the hessian backing, not the propped pieces.

My teacher used to start a rug by propping a border of four rows, then turn under twice and hem stitch the edges so the hessian didn't fray whilst she and her husband filled in the central part of the rug over the winter.

To make a rug which is an irregular shape, think first how you would finish the edges. Curved borders need to be snipped so the hem will sit flat, then when you fold the border back you will need



to oversee where you snipped, so the hessian doesn't fall apart. Quite tricky and not recommended for beginners.

Hemming first

Before you start your rug, you could turn the edges of the hessian over once to the top side and stitch them by hand. Then you prod, prog or hook through two layers round the edges and more layers at the corners. This technique gives a very neat finish but it is slower working pieces through two layers and the corners can be challenging to do.

Glued hessian backing

This is suitable for mixed technique pieces where the back looks a bit messy, or for hooked rugs, if they are going to be wall hung.

Cut hessian around worked area, leaving a border of at least 6cm (2.4in). Cut another piece of hessian slightly larger than the worked area to use for the backing. Spread a very thin layer of latex carpet adhesive over the back of the worked area but leaving a glue-free band about 5cm (2in) where your hem will be stitched down. Place the backing on the glued area and smooth it down with your hands.



Glue on backing, fold border over and hem stitch to back.

There should not be enough glue to come through the backing. Trim backing so it covers only the worked area, leaving the hessian border.



Glued backing on mixed technique rug



Fold the border under twice, mitring corners, and stitch as in Hemming, through the backings – it is easier to sew without glue spread right to the edges.

Fabric backing

I back seat mats with a piece of fabric turned under and stitched around the edge. They are cushion-sized and usually have a layer of wadding, or blanket, inside.

Three propped cotton seat mats backed with furnishing fabrics.

CLEANING RAG RUGS

Before vacuum cleaners, rag rugs were hung outside over a washing line and beaten with a wicker carpet beater to get the dust out, if they were cleaned at all. I sometimes vacuum rugs when I am making them if the materials shed a lot (they stop fraying – eventually). The pieces stay in if you have cut them wide enough. You could also use T-shirts and other materials which don't fray.

When I have used a commercial machine to shampoo fitted carpets, I have also cleaned rag rugs. However, I usually hand wash them in the bath, leave them to drain, then put them outside to dry flat over a ladder or netting so the air circulates, as they are too heavy to hang on a washing line, especially when damp.

I only machine wash rugs which have been propped on white, open weave rug canvas, but safety pin them inside a pillow case first. It is important that the edges have been stitched well so the action of the washing machine doesn't fray them. This works for plaited cotton mats too, which is why they make good bath mats.

In Scandinavia, people used to place their rugs upside down on the snow and walk on them, so the powdery snow acted as a dry cleaner.

GALLERY

Here are some examples of rag work which might inspire you to have a go.



Vintage rug hand-hooked in the Lake District.



'Blue Ginger' 97cm x 65cm (38in x 25.5in).
Woollen fabric strips hooked by Jenni.

'George' 50cm x 62cm (20in x 24in)
commissioned by a woman who liked my
signature dog rug background for her dog's
portrait. Woollen fabric strips hooked by
Jenni.



'Heraldic mandala' 1600cm (63in) diameter, illustrating the life stages of the man who commissioned it. Woollen fabric strips hooked by Jenni.

'Migration' 90cm x 65cm (35.5in x 25.5in) Woollen fabric strips hooked by Jenni.





'Home Sweet Home' 71cm x 50cm (28in x 20in)
Woollen fabric strips hooked by Jenni.



'Deco 3' 67cm x 50cm (26.5in x 20in) Woollen fabric strips hooked by Jenni.
 (Keith James)



'Ammonite' mixed techniques/fabrics 75cm x 65cm (29.5in x 25.5in) by Jenni. (Keith James)



Progged rag wreath by Jenni.



Hooked rug by Margaret Parkinson.



Hooked yarn and rag runner 26cm x 50cm (10in x 20in) by Erik Felker of California who said: 'I was very much inspired by your first book to start creating things with yarn and rag.'
(Kelvin Campau)

The next two images are of work by rag rug maker and teacher Debbie Siniska who uses a speed shuttle.



'Fishes' hooked rug 132cm x 92cm (53in x 36in).

'Running Hare' hooked rug 92cm x 61cm (36in x 24in).



The following pieces were made by students on my workshops who have shared their creations with me and some have shared the techniques with others.



Progged rug by Sue Ratcliffe.



Hooked and progged seat mat by Brigid Budd.



Hooked stork rug by Lindsey Malin



Hooked frog rug by Lindsey Malin.



Progged seat mat by Janet Harwood.



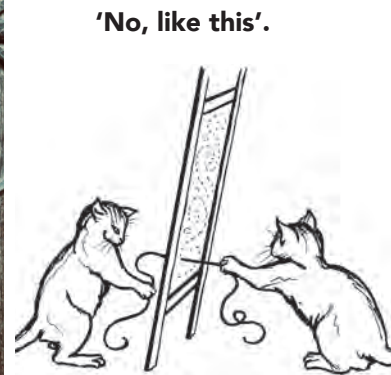
Hooked rug by Dorothy Jerome.



Progged woollen rug by Elizabeth Westerman.



Progged wreath by Bryony Moore.



Four hooked seat mats by Pamela Girdwood.

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MAKING IS GOOD FOR YOU. Exploring crafts can be relaxing and therapeutic: the projects in this book are accessible to anyone who is inspired to recycle old clothes and textiles into unique, decorative, useful projects.

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Jenni Stuart-Anderson worked in tourism, PR and architectural design. As a new mum, at home, she discovered rag rug making and got hooked. She has shared these vintage fabric recycling techniques since 1986 and believes in sourcing locally and walking lightly on the planet. *Rag Rug Making* was her first book, followed by *More Rag Rugs & Recycled Textile Projects*, aiming to keep the traditional craft alive by bringing it into the 21st century.