



The rush cutter

Felicity Irons, Britain's last full-time rush worker, is determined to keep the tradition alive

Words: David Hughes Photo: Adrian Arbib

Many Britons would regard their work as involving rush, but not in the same sense as Felicity Irons. Unlike her hurried counterparts, the word "fantastic" crops up a lot when she describes her job. Felicity cuts bulrushes from a punt on the rivers Nene, Ivel and Ouse, in Cambridgeshire, from the end of May to mid-August, and spends the rest of the year transforming the crop into baskets, bags, matting and cushions.

Originally a rush weaver, Felicity stepped in to save the harvesting tradition when the last member of Britain's only remaining family of rushcutters died in 1994. Now 44, she is passionate about life on the river.

"I couldn't dream of doing anything else," she says. "I suppose it's because it's so varied. My partner, Ivor Gibson, works with me now, and we are able to see the whole process through. It's fantastic. We spend all summer outside, working with nature."

Rush has always been a part of British history. With communities growing up along rivers, rush was used for floor coverings from the Iron Age to the

Middle Ages, while rush lights – rush dipped in tallow – provided illumination.

Elizabethans added heather and lavender to improve the smell of their floor rushes, but as mass produced materials emerged from the Industrial Revolution, the demand for rush fell into steep decline.

Rush cutting has changed little for centuries, although Felicity is happy to supplement traditional methods with modern innovations – wetsuits and thermals replace the usual shorts and vest on the river in colder parts of the

summer. She also uses aluminium punts based on the old wooden rushcutter punt design. "They don't move as stealthily through the water," she admits, "but they're a lot lighter."

The river environment itself is unchanged, although recent years have seen Britain's rivers becoming cleaner, "which paradoxically isn't good for the rush – it has less crud to feed on."

The cutting season involves long days. "We try to get on the river by eight. Then we'll cut till three, get off the river, lock the

punts up, get back to the fields by four, unload and spread out all the rushes. On a good day, we have about 100 bolts [bundles] on the trailer, and then we bolt up everything that's dry, so often I don't get in till eight, sometimes 10."

The art of cutting

Cutting the rush is an art in itself. "We have to cut when the sap's high, when the flower is in bud. Once it goes over, it's very brown and brittle, and you just can't cut it. Any earlier and it's not at its best."

Using a fearsome-looking 90cm (3ft) knife with a 2m (7ft) handle, Felicity is able to cut right down to the riverbed, often 1.2m (4ft) below the waterline. "You want a clean cut, but you also want to avoid the root structure, to ensure regrowth." Rush will grow again by the end of the summer, but Felicity won't recut an area for two years, to ensure complete sustainability.

Drying the rush is the same long, slow process as ever – it is laid out on hedgerows to allow air to circulate. The cut rush is vulnerable to bad weather – one soaking could ruin the crop. Perhaps by way of compensation, rush is a beautiful material. "It's soft, velvety, and you get fantastic natural colours such as greens, browns and purples, depending on the amount of sunlight while the rush is drying."

Today, rush is becoming a popular choice for bags, cushions and interior decoration. Felicity now supplies weavers and craft workers around the country, and installs rush matting herself in historic and modern buildings around the world.

And the future? "I hope to be still cutting rush in my 70s," she muses. "I love the physicality of it. And I'm a bit of a romantic, I suppose – I just like being out on the river." She won't be alone. "I'm training others. It's very important to pass the knowledge on."

Find out more

Felicity runs regular workshops in rush weaving
Rush Matters
Grange Farm, Colesden, Bedfordshire
01234 376419
www.rushmatters.co.uk

Tell us your story

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1 Felicity's long-handled blade allows her to cut most of the rush without disturbing the roots to ensure sustainable harvesting 2 Each bolt (bundle) has to be carried by hand from the boat to be laid out to dry. Once dry, it is stored in a timber barn