



Rush hour From left: Felicity Irons harvests rush for floor mats and baskets near Bedfordshire, England; rush matting in Pauline de Rothschild's London dining room, decorated by John Fowler.

Blade Runner

ON THE TRAIL OF ENGLAND'S ORIGINAL GRASS-ROOTS INDUSTRY.
BY CHRISTOPHER PETKANAS

In the 1980s, the distinguished but now forgotten Paris decorator Christian Badin would pose for design magazines with an old-fashioned watering can, dribbling water on the chunky Elizabethan rush matting in his apartment in an 18th-century *hôtel particulier*. While connoisseurs of the Rolls-Royce of vegetal floor coverings nodded mischievously, many more shrunk at the thought of spores, mildew and the ravishing parquet de Versailles underneath. Watering your parquet? *Quelle horreur*.

Sprinkling rush matting, however, keeps it supple, long-living and smelling great (like a barnyard filled with cucumber peels). This amusingly arcane act of home-keeping was known to the holiest of holies, Nancy Lancaster and John Fowler, and has been passed down to every one of their approximately 1.237 million disciples. Fowler famously liked things that looked simple but cost a fortune, and the hand-woven mats fit fluently into his signature schemes of “pleasing decay.” They became shorthand for English style, like Staffordshire spaniels minus the tweeness.

Only two English companies still make the mats. Waveney, in Suffolk, uses dried cultivated rush from Holland, while at Rush Matters, in

Bedfordshire, Felicity Irons gathers the raw material in the wild and conditions it herself. Both firms' products are similar, though Irons's crop-to-carpet approach gives her a green edge.

My own history with rush matting is long and, at \$256 per square meter, frustrated. I furnished six Paris apartments, a farmhouse in Provence, three New York pieds-à-terre and an 1863 house on the Hudson with Asian cornhusk matting from Pier 1 Imports. It's not a substitute. Neither exactly was signing up for one of the two-day workshops Irons leads occasionally at her studio on a 1,800-acre farm: contact with the real thing aggravated my longing, even if I made and left with my own trug.

England specializes in a certain kind of 50-ish woman who is literary, genteel, knowledgeable about pop culture and good with her hands. This is Irons's constituency. Everyone comes to weave, but the real fun is hanging out with Irons, drinking builder's tea, debating Colette, weighing the dishiness of Rufus Wainwright and learning to speak rush.

Weaving the plant for mats is a moribund craft that grew out of the primitive Elizabethan custom of “strewing” — covering floors with loose

botanicals. Today the mats are cherished for their loud crunch underfoot and chameleonlike ability to go high and low. British cottagers and castle owners never mind that generations of cat hairs and Stilton crumbs hide in the mats' depths, which attain nearly a springy inch where self-binding wraps the edges. And more than one Home Counties “It” girl has fallen flat on her face crossing Mummy's rush-fitted library in stilettos.

Seed money from the Prince's (as in Charles) Trust enabled Irons to start a business whose bread and butter is mats but that also offers planters, hats, cushions, totes and headboards. Her Moses basket, woven with lavender and lined with antique linen bedsheets, is enough to make you run out and have a baby.

At harvest time, Irons navigates the Great Ouse and Nene Rivers in an aluminum punt built by an aircraft engineer to her design. Plunging a scythe five feet underwater from a standing position to sever the stalks cleanly is certainly not for sissies. The rush, which are dried against hawthorn hedges and in stubble fields, are then woven from meat hooks in nine-strand plaits. I mastered (sort of) yanking as I wove — crucial for a tight, even result. As the rush is consumed in the plait, new strands are invisibly interwoven, yielding a continuous strip. The width is formed by sewing the strips with jute twine using a sailmaker's palm.

Among Irons's many National Trust commissions is a heroic 171-foot-by-22-foot mat at Hardwick Hall, Derbyshire's Tudor masterpiece. An unlikely Churchill authority, she made mats for the set of “The Gathering Storm,” a docudrama of Churchill's interwar years, then for Chartwell, his house in Kent. Her New York clients include the Frick Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. When I visited Irons, a blackboard was chalked with these job reminders: Lady de R, Anouska [Hempel],



Floor show Irons teaches students how to weave rush during two-day classes at her workshop.

Stourhead, [Jasper] Conran. Victoria de Rothschild's order was for a \$500 pair of slippers and Conran's for matting for his Dorset estate. Irons was late on the Conran assignment. Mildly desperate, she invented the only excuse she knew the designer, a noted snob, would accept. “I told him it was because of a job for Prince Charles,” Irons told me. “But then Jasper was invited to dinner at Clarence House, which obviously I wasn't counting on, and at one point he turns to H. R. H. and says, ‘Is it true, sir, you're the one holding up my mats?’” Since Robert Kime, the prince's decorator, had been in touch with Irons about doing something at Highgrove, the incident was written off as a charming half-truth.

Of course, the Elizabethans never imagined matting as serving a purely decorative purpose. (If you can afford it, you probably also have under-floor heating.) In “The Taming of the Shrew,” the servant Grumio reviews the preparations for the newlyweds, asking, “Is supper ready, the house trimmed, rushes strewed, cobwebs swept?” In a letter to Cardinal Wolsey's physician about the state of British floors, the philosopher Erasmus could not hide his disgust: “Almost all ... are of clay and rushes from the marshes, so carelessly renewed that the foundation sometimes remains for 20 years, harboring there below spittle and vomit and urine of dogs and men, beer that hath been spewed up.”

If rush matting is no longer a solution to domestic hygiene gone wild, it remains a “difficult” proposition, according to Richard Zolt of the New York-based Stark Carpet, which represents Waveney. “A customer spends thousands of dollars on a 9-by-12 rug, then you send them a watering can and wish them luck? Not everyone gets it. You have to be the right kind of person: old school.” ■

Essentials England

Felicity Irons's **Rush Matters** is located in the village of Colesden in Bedfordshire (011-44-1-234-376-419; rushmatters.info). In 2008, her two-day weaving workshops will be held June 28-29, Sept. 13-14 and Nov. 15-16 (about \$320). All mats are made to order at the farm; baskets and smaller items are also available from **David Mellor** (davidmellordesign.com), **Daylesford Organic** (daylesfordorganic.com) and **R. K. Alliston** (rkalliston.co.uk). Those visiting Rush Matters should stay at **Cornfields** in Colmworth, a good restaurant with five modern rooms in a hushed rural setting (011-44-1-234-378-990; cornfieldsrestaurant.co.uk; doubles from \$240). **Waveney** in Oulton Broad, Suffolk, can be visited by appointment (011-44-1-502-538-777; waveneyrush.co.uk). Its baskets are available at **Mallett** in New York (212-249-8783).

FROM LEFT: JEREMY MURCH; DERRY MOORE/FROM “JOHN FOWLER: PRINCE OF DECORATORS”/FRANCES LINCOLN PUBLISHERS.