

WASTE INVADERS

PEG RUG MAKING (*This information has been taken from www.craftsmadeeasy.co.uk*)

Rag rug making is one of those crafts that were started by people who wanted a finished product, but couldn't afford to buy it. It may be considered highly desirable to improvise attractive, and useful, things out of scrap materials now; but throughout most of the history of rag rugs they've been seen as a sure sign of poverty. Not very desirable at all.

Now that we're living in more democratic times the good old 'peg mat' has got a lot going for it. They look good, they're cheap to make, they're fun to make and they're based on recycling.



Their humble origins made them what they are, though, and that's why they're so practical. Different people developed different working methods. None of them are right, and none of them are wrong. Most produce a heavy-duty mat that looks good enough to be kept for a lifetime, and is tough enough that it can be.



In the days when everything that went into a rag rug had to be free, not so long ago, the backcloth was usually an old hessian sack. There are ways to weave a rag rug without the hessian backcloth, but most methods still rely on it.

Hessian, still available off a roll but not often seen as a sack anymore, is the magic ingredient in most rag rug making. It's a hard thread (jute) loosely woven. You can poke holes in it all day, if you're bored enough, and they'll all close up again. The threads move aside without breaking.

To make a rag rug you only need to pull, or push, bits of old cloth into the weave of the hessian and they'll fill up the slackness in the weave. By the time you've finished the loose and floppy hessian will be firm and taut and have a thick and soft cloth pile on one side of it.

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How you go about putting the bits of cloth in is up to you. There are only two basic essentials to remember: You have to fill the weave of the hessian and you have to protect the edge from fraying.

Inevitably there's a fiddly way to do it for free but, also inevitably, somebody came up with a tool to make it easy. The free way is to sharpen a wooden peg and use it to push short strips of cloth into the backcloth, one at a time. The easy way is using a tool to pull the bits in, in one go.

The tool was invented in early Victorian times (by a Mr. Brown, an Ipswich blacksmith) and was the favourite rug-maker for about a hundred years, until re-using old materials went out of fashion after the second world war. It wasn't long, of course, before some bright spark came up with the word 'recycling' and rag rugs were reborn. Mr. Brown's invention is now available again, as an updated version, made by Makings Handicrafts in Cornwall. It's now called a 'rag rigger' to avoid choosing one of the old popular names, and avoid upsetting everyone who used one of the many others (anything from a 'bodger' to a 'spring clip', with names starting with most of the letters in between).

There were, of course, other methods and other tools. Most of them required long strips of cloth, not so easy to get out of old clothes that have already been repaired, so they were probably started by people who were already enthusiastic enough about the craft to use bigger pieces of cloth that might, otherwise, have been used for something else.

One of the alternatives used a hook (it was called 'hooking' believe it or not) and found it's way across the Atlantic to live the American dream. You can imagine the story: A tough voyage, in steerage, ending with a moving view of the Statue of Liberty; followed by a tense wait on Ellis Island before stumbling, dumbstruck but determined, onto the mean streets of New York. Finally, hard work and frugality pay off as hooking is 'discovered' as the all-American craft. As you might expect, rag rug hooking has been making the return trip ever since; usually-travelling first class.

Getting back to basics, though, short pieces of cloth make a very thick rug that is almost irresistibly tactile. Making one isn't just rewarding; it's also very relaxing.

First of all you're going to need a lot of cloth. Charity shops, jumble sales and damaged off-cuts solve that problem. Any cloth will do. If you choose thin cloth you'll need to put in more pieces, to fill up the weave of the hessian, but the rug will still be strong and practical; and much softer.

Cutting up the cloth can seem a bit daunting, but there's a trick that makes it quick and easy. Either cut or tear long strips, about 25mm (1") wide; thin cloth could be cut up to half as wide again. Cloth that will naturally tear in a straight line is the obvious choice, but cut cloth will drop a lot less threads. Cutting long strips is quite quick using a rotary cutter, along a straight edge and on a cutting mat, if you fold the cloth first.

Of the 'tearing' materials denim makes a very solid rug; thin poly/cotton makes a very soft one. Poly/cotton dries more quickly when it's washed; cotton doesn't give off noxious fumes if a hot cinder drops on it. Of the 'cutting' materials knitted wool can be boiled, to felt it, before it's cut for a solid rug; T-shirts make an incredibly soft rug. The craft is

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versatile enough that you can use anything from plastic carrier bags to leather.

Once you've got your long strips you'll need to cut them into short pieces, about 75mm (3") long. Cutting up pockets and sleeves with a pair of scissors is, for a modern person used to instant everything, enough to make anyone bark at the moon. Using cloth that comes in decent sized pieces, that will make long strips, solves the problem. Just wrap a long strip round a cutting gauge and cut along the groove, with sharp scissors, and the job's done. A cutting gauge is a piece of wood with a groove along one side of it.

Having put the cutting problem firmly in it's place you can tackle making the rug; which is almost as easy. You'll need a piece of hessian about 100mm (4") bigger, each way, than the rug you intend to make, to allow for a hem. There are various grades available, including finely woven even weave. The traditional backcloth was a sack that had probably been patched, more than once. You can go for the expensive stuff if you want to, but the cheap stuff (10oz sacking hessian) will do the job well enough. Virtually all handicraft shops, and many haberdashers, will stock it.

If you're going to use a sharp stick you'll find it easier if you fix the hessian onto a frame, to keep it taut. If you're going to use a rag rigger you won't need a frame, you'll find yourself working against the tension, the easiest way to work is to lay it in your lap.

The general idea is to trap each bit of cloth in the weave of the hessian so that the middle, of the strip, passes under 2 to 4 strands and both ends stick up on the topside. If you take up too many strands the weave won't tighten up enough, especially with thin cloth; if you only take up one strand it will pull loose.

Putting the bits in won't trouble anyone smart enough to have bought Crafts Made Easy at all. If you're reading this second-hand in a dentist's waiting room: face it, it's going to hurt.

If you're using a rag rigger take up 2 to 4 strands in the hessian with the point and push it through, as far as it will go. Press the lever, to open the jaw; grab one corner of a piece of cloth and pull it back through until both ends are the same length, on the top side. Remember to let go. Just keep on putting more and more bits in; not more than 5 strands away from each other, in any direction, but not in the same hole again either. Work in rows if you want to, but it doesn't matter; as long as you fill it up you can work in any way you want to. If you have difficulty seeing, or like to watch TV as you work, you can judge spacings with the tip of your finger against the point.

If you're using a sharpened peg, and a frame, poke a hole in the hessian; put a corner of the cloth over it and push it through far enough to grab it, with your fingers, underneath (you'll find you're working from the back) and pull it halfway through. Then poke another hole 2 to 4 strands away and poke a hole and push a corner on the other end, of the same strip, through; and finish the job with your fingers again. Make sure the ends underneath are, at least roughly, the same length. Put the next bit in at exactly the same distance as you would if you were using a rigger.

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The rigger is, at least, four times faster, you work from the top and you don't need a frame; but the result is exactly the same with either method. You can push loops through, from a long strip, with a sharpened peg and cut them afterwards, with scissors, to get a result that looks the same; but you end up with two pieces in the same hole, which isn't so secure. Cloth slides against cloth much more easily than cloth against hessian. You won't enjoy cutting all the loops, after a while, either.

Fixing the hem is where rigger and peg part. Using a peg you'll have an unfilled edge left, when you take the backcloth off the frame. Turn this underneath and sew, or stick, it to the back.

With the rigger you can turn the hem in, before you start filling, on top. The rigger will easily pull the bits of cloth through both layers along the hem; just fill it up and it will be completely secure, and completely hidden. On the corners, of the backcloth, there will be four layers. The rigger will still pull the cloth through but it will be harder to push in and out again, because of the thickness. No problem, just take one end of the cloth at a time; pushing the rigger from top to bottom and pulling the cloth back. This means the corners will take twice as long, to fill, but it's only a small area; and they'll end up puppy-proof.

However you do it, this type of rug doesn't need to be backed; though you can sew a backing on if you want to. You can beat it, vacuum it or wash it. Washing will make the hessian shrink, which will tighten up the weave even more; be prepared for a mammoth drying job though.

Because the pile is so deep, about 75mm (1½"), this kind of rug doesn't lend itself to making a detailed picture. The ends of cloth move about too much. An obvious picture is fine though, especially if the subject usually has an indistinct outline; like a shaggy dog or a teddy bear, for instance. There's also the huge advantage that, as the bits of cloth aren't knotted, you can dig a point under the fold underneath and pull a piece out and change it if you want to.



If you like traditional designs an old favourite is a diamond in the middle in the same dark colour as the hem, with a lighter colour in between. This pattern appears all over the

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world and is sometimes explained as being the 'evil eye' , supposedly made to ward off malicious spirits. It also just happens to be a very easy pattern to lay out. Just fold the backcloth in half and crease it, to make a line across the middle. Fold it again, the other way, and make a second crease. This leaves a centre-line in both directions. Follow the shorter one with a line of cloth bits, stopping short of the hems, and then work in rows, on either side, putting in one piece less at both ends of every row. This makes a diamond. The original row will be the widest part. The longer crease marks the centre-line where the points should end up, so you can easily check it as you go along.



If you fancy your chances with a sharpened peg, and an improvised frame, good luck. If you want a rag rugger then any handicraft shop should have one.

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