

Quiet, *rush* hours in progress



Marion Welham visits a local industry that has changed little since Anglo Saxon times

SAMMY Crisp was all smiles as he ushered me into the old apple packing station.

Thankfully there are still a few people who take a huge pride in what they do and are happy to tell you so.

And there was time to share a few laughs with the gentle people at Aldeby, near Beccles, who keep alive what is probably East Anglia's oldest recorded industry.

Sammy was anxious to know if I had spotted the sample of 16th Century rush mat encased in glass on the wall.

No-one knew, he said, whether it was Henry VIII or Cardinal Wolsey who ordered a rush floor for the Pages Chamber at Hampton Court Palace but when, 400 years, later it was discovered under a false floor (almost perfectly preserved in places) it fell to the girls at the Waveney Rush Industry to replace it.

Being grouped together in the office as the kettle boiled felt a bit like the excitement in the churchyard before a wedding. We had yet to enter the hallowed space within where the "girls" weave rushes for princes, palaces and pop icons.

Christine Crisp, rush room manager and weaver (who is married to office manager Sammy) had just joined us and Kathy Cattee, the rush co-ordinator, was busy taking an order for a log basket on the telephone. Together with five full-time weavers and owner Tony Truman, they make up the remarkable enterprise of hand-plaiting and weaving that has changed little from Anglo Saxon times.

When the farmers' co-operative Waveney Apple Growers bought up the village's local rush industry workshop in 1947, it was only to keep the

when the apple business came to an end 18 months ago, Tony Truman stepped in.

"Once you go into the weaving shed you'll understand," he said. "It's got that sense about it that it's got to be carried on. There are some things you just cannot allow to die. The industry goes back to medieval times and it is anyone's guess how long it's been going in this area."



Tools of the trade, above, plus girls at work plaiting and weaving with loops of braid. Right, some Waveney Rush Weavers products displayed on a rush mat

The moment had arrived. As the workshop door swung open I caught the smell of a damp meadow on a summer's morning. The silence was broken only by the swish of the rushes, the odd clack of wood and an occasional murmur from the weavers.

I began to understand why the Prince of Wales had ordered a rush carpet for Highgrove from here and Richard Branson a set of poolside mats for his Caribbean Island.

The girls reach up to weave and plait the rushes which are hung from a seven foot high wooden beam - exhausting on the arms but they produce on average 28 yards a day of the nine-ply used for carpets. The 11-ply used for the edging is a more intricate process and all the weaving is done by hand.





have for at least the past 40 years", said Christine, who has herself been with the firm for the past 34. "It's a long time since they came from the Waveney."

"It's the nitrates in the river and they like uncontaminated water," Tony explained. "The Waveney couldn't grow the quality or the quantity to keep the industry going but it's still native to this area."

Local trials were planned, he said, although he didn't know when the authorities would get round to it.

In Holland the rushes are cut and bunched when they are green. Before they can be used they are soaked in water for an hour to soften them and make them pliable. The water is squeezed out by mangle which is the only piece of electrical equipment in use.

Unlike the much cheaper seagrass, rushes range in colour from grass green to the golden hue of straw so that each piece of work reflects the colours of nature in its own unique way.

The time and skill involved makes the end product quite costly, which is reflected in the glittering list of individual buyers - Prince Michael of Kent, the Aga Khan, Lord Vestey and Bill Wyman among them.

Fashion doyenne of the sixties Mary Quant sent in a template for two of her bathrooms. I had also learned that Fiat boss Giovanni Angelli had once placed an order for 25 log baskets to use as palm tree planters for his Italian home.

I mentioned this to Christine who looked blank for a moment.

"Oh him," she said. There have evidently been so many famous clients that eyebrows are no longer raised.

The Rothschilds are regular customers and recently had two floors covered at their home in France.

"I went and laid that one," said Christine, telling me about the chateau's grand sweeping drive and lake.

"The first time I went down there was 25 years ago. To keep the rush in good condition you're supposed to spray it with a fine misty spray but the gardener went in with the hose so it had to be replaced."

Each strip that is woven by the girls is joined on the table up to six strips wide. Then it is simply sewn up with string which Christine calls tomato fillis.

"Then it goes on the floor," said Christine, "and we finish it off on our bottoms. Each edge we cut we sew on fine binding."

The beauty of the rush flooring is that worn areas can easily be replaced. The girls at Waveney Rush recently replaced the worn areas of the 167 feet carpet in the long gallery of the National Trust's Montacute House in Somerset by unpicking the string at the back and tying in a new section.

The rush floor coverings from Aldeby ►