Extract from The Matmaker and the Magistrate

By Richard Deeks (1980)

The weaving of horsehair had been introduced into Suffolk about the middle of the last [19th] century. At Glemsford, Lavenham and Stowmarket it found work for hand loom weavers who had been displaced by machinery in other branches of textile industry, and as no satisfactory method has yet been discovered of applying power to the weaving of hair, it was one of the chief cottage industries of Suffolk, the looms being lent out by the employers, though in many cases the workers, women and girls, are collected in small factories.
...
The textile use of coconut fibre was introduced into this country about the late 1830's. The industry was first established in London and continued there. It would seem to have been set up in West Suffolk about the middle of the 1860's, partly with the idea of supplementing other textile industries which were declining.

It was established at Lavenham (Messrs. W. W. Roper & Sons), at Long Melford, Sudbury, Glemsford (Messrs. H. Kolle & Sons Ltd.) and Hadleigh which were the earliest seats of manufacture. Messrs. Gurteen established it at Haverhill in the 1880's. The weaving of coconut fibre, like that of horse hair, was entirely a hand loom industry, but it required the strength of men, and women were employed only in the preparation of the yarn, which they used to do at home, and in the summertime in the open air affording a picturesque parallel to the open air spinning which caught the eye of the 18th century traveller in Suffolk.

Richard included in this introductory chapter the following quotation from Charles Booth's "Life and Labour of the People" (Volume VI), published by MacMillan in 1895. It gives a clear description of what the work, carried out by such a large proportion of the Glemsford people, actually involved:

... he confined his remarks to London mat makers but the description applies just as well to the Suffolk trade, and as the foregoing shows the manufacturers came from London and Messrs. Kolle & Sons were controlled from there.

"Mat making can legitimately be claimed as a metropolitan industry. Indeed for a long period, London was the centre of the trade, and supplied the world, but gradually other countries acquired the art, and this combined with the setting up of provincial factories has led of late years to a considerable decrease in the numbers engaged in the work here.

The business is now carried on by four fairly large firms and a few small ones employing altogether about three hundred men and women, besides which a

certain number of persons of either sex make small mats at home, and carry them around to sell.

The work is divided into two branches, viz. matting weaving and mat making. The material of which both are manufactured, is imported from Ceylon, Malabar and Cochin, the latter country sending the lightest and finest type. It arrives packed tightly in bales, in the form of loose coconut fibre, and skeins of coir yarn (or twisted fibre).

The yarn is first dealt with by women, who sort the loose coils, and prepare the yarn for the warp, or wind it on large shuttles for the weft. They spread the work on the rollers of their loom, and otherwise affix it so as to form a basis of their work; and by throwing in the weft or "shute" from side to side, weave it into plain matting, or work in a required pattern, which, as it runs in lines only, can be done on the same loom.

In the manufacture of mats, yarn is, as a rule, only used for the warp, fibre being employed to form the pile and "jute" for the weft. The fibre goes through a machine called a "devil" which cleans and tears it into a fine, loose, silky substance, easily manipulated with the fingers.

Seated at his loom, with a large hammock shaped sackful of the fibre at his side, the weaver, with a motion of his foot on the treadle, raises the top layer or "shade" of threads which comprise the warp, and catching up a handful or "take" of the fibre twists it deftly around each thread, so that the ends stand upright like an unkempt head of hair, thus forming the pile of the mat; he then secures it with two or three throws of the shuttle, packs it tightly by striking it with a heavy batten frame of the loom, and with a huge pair of shears trims it off evenly, and starts a fresh row, so continuing until the mat is of the proper size.

When patterns have to be made, the operative has a copy of the design before him, and introduces at the right point in each row, the coloured fibre or wool of which the pattern is formed.

Where mats have a woollen border, the wool is plaited in loops, which are afterwards cut in the centre so as to make the pile. The cutting is usually done by a woman, who also turns in the ends and binds the mats. Mats which have no borders have their rough ends secured with a binding of plaited yarn, which is sewn round them.

Subsequently the mats pass through a shearing machine, and the finishing touches are by hand, the result being to give a perfectly even surface to the smooth dense pile.

"Skeleton" or chain mats, are of a different character. They are made of coir yarn, worked into a curious but perfectly regular design. The artificer stands at a bench, and twists the stout threads in and out with a bent steel instrument known as a yarn needle.

Mats are of many sizes, patterns and qualities, ranging from the "Imperial" with elaborately worked designs crest, monogram, initials or motto, which may be seen in the hall of some great public building or stately mansion, to the most common "diamond" or little oblong bordered apology which does duty at the door of the dockers best parlour.

But all alike are distinguished above all textile goods for one quality, and that is durability. So much is this the case, that some of the operatives consider it to be one of the causes of the limited extent of their trade. "The worst of our trade" they say, "is that it never wears out"."