



PICTURE: SAM CHRISTMAS

The Irish rug designer with the A-list clientele

From The Rolling Stones to the royal family, Luke Irwin's client list is an enviable who's who of A-listers, but the Dublin-born rug maker tells *Bairbre Power* he's in it for the craft, not the cachet

East London creatives, West Country aristocrats, members of U2 and The Rolling Stones. It's quite the customer base to command — but then Irishman Luke Irwin is not your average rug designer. The Dublin-born 52-year-old has built up a rich-pile fanbase of A-listers and royalty that stretches around the world. Handmade in India and Nepal, Irwin's hand-knotted, custom-made rugs can be found in locations such as the Gritti Palace in Venice as well as in the homes of members of the British royal family.

The latter is an ace card to have in your back pocket but Irwin doesn't play it.

His wife, interior designer Alice Elliot, is a niece of the Duchess of Cornwall, wife of Prince Charles. Alice's mother, Annabel, and Camilla are sisters — but whatever might lie on the floor of the Wales' homes in Clarence House or Highgrove in Gloucestershire, it is not part of the story he wants to tell.

"I've always had a thing that when someone buys or commissions a rug from me, they are buying a rug, not a PR campaign," says Irwin, who was 34 when he started his contemporary rug company. →



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→ His circuitous route to becoming one of the most respected rug designers in the interiors world has taken him across the stages of Irish theatres and beyond — a journey that was always colourful, just like his rugs, which retail from around £5,000 up to the tens of thousands.

For the less affluent, there is the opportunity to buy into his vision at the British high-street brand John Lewis, where his rugs start from around €2,000.

He grew up in Co Kildare, where his family lived in Leixlip, just down the road from the late Desmond Guinness at Leixlip Castle, and Irwin says he has fond memories of visiting there as a child.

Young Luke went to preparatory school in England, at St Ronan's in Kent, with his older brother and then it was on to Eton College in Berkshire, just like his dad before him.

However, Luke didn't take the Old Etonians' route into Oxford or Cambridge. At 16, he convinced his parents — bloodstock agent and former Goffs boss Jonathan Irwin and his first wife, interior designer Mikaela Rawlinson — to allow him to leave Eton, with an A Level in drama.

"I left school a year early and I was working with Noel Pearson at the Gaiety on *HMS Pinafore* when I was 17. My father isn't exactly a conformist. I recognise more and more of him in how I view things with every passing week," he tells me.

Working as an assistant stage manager, and later as assistant artistic director, his last job in Ireland was at the Abbey Theatre before he left for London in the early 1990s.

What followed was a total mixed bag of jobs. He was a porter in the auctioneer Christie's picture department, did stage management, then tried his hand as a theatrical agent and in the world of PR.

"I just happened to be a particularly reticent employee and never really got the quid pro quo that if you sit there between nine and six, you are paid X amount a week. I kind of felt that if I do brilliant work between nine and 12, why couldn't I go to a matinee in the afternoon?" he says.



His career path was far from straight and there was personal sadness, too. His younger brother Sam died in an accident in Portugal aged 18. He fell from a wall just a week after leaving school.

It wasn't the first family tragedy. Irwin's father, Jonathan, has lost three sons.

After his parents' marriage ended, Jonathan married Mary Ann O'Brien. Their son John died at birth. Their son Jack suffered a brain trauma shortly after birth. He lived at home for 22 months and, after he died, the couple set up the Jack and Jill Children's Foundation in his memory to provide nursing care for children in their own homes.

Family is especially important to Irwin. He chats to me from his 18th-century home in Brixton Deverill, a quiet corner of Wiltshire.

He describes it as a "magical" place and lives there with Alice and their two children, 14-year-old Otis and 11-year-old Violet, plus dogs, cats, sheep and more. Most notable is Rabbit, the dog who poses on a heap of ikat rugs on the company website. The latter earned himself the moniker of "the naughtiest dog in England" after squirrelling his way into a visiting delivery van.

Father and son share a passion for Liverpool FC. Violet is very visual — well, her mother and both her grandmothers are interior designers, so it's definitely in the genes.

Reflecting on lockdown and their time together, Irwin says it's been a blessing. "It's like stolen time, to have the children and everybody here under one roof — we will never have it again with such intensity."

He met Alice when he was working for her mother in antiques. They married in 2003, the same year he started his rug business, and in 2012 they bought their picture-perfect Wiltshire home.

Fortunately, Irwin was at home the fateful day in 2015 when builders, who were at work putting electricity into a barn, dug a trench and then shouted for him to come and see what they had found.

"I knew exactly what it meant because of the world I'm in and my love of history," he recalls.

A four-month archaeological dig confirmed the news. The dazzling basket-weave mosaic floor which had winked up at the surprised builders belonged to the biggest Roman palace in Britain.

"You could not set this up," the rug designer laughs. "You find a luxury mosaic floor from 1,800 years ago and it is 15 yards from your front door."

Dating back to between 175 AD and 220 AD, it is now known as the Deverill Villa. The walls confirm that it was three storeys high, it measured 200 metres in length and width, and it had underfloor central heating.

Irwin's Irish honesty shone through in the find.

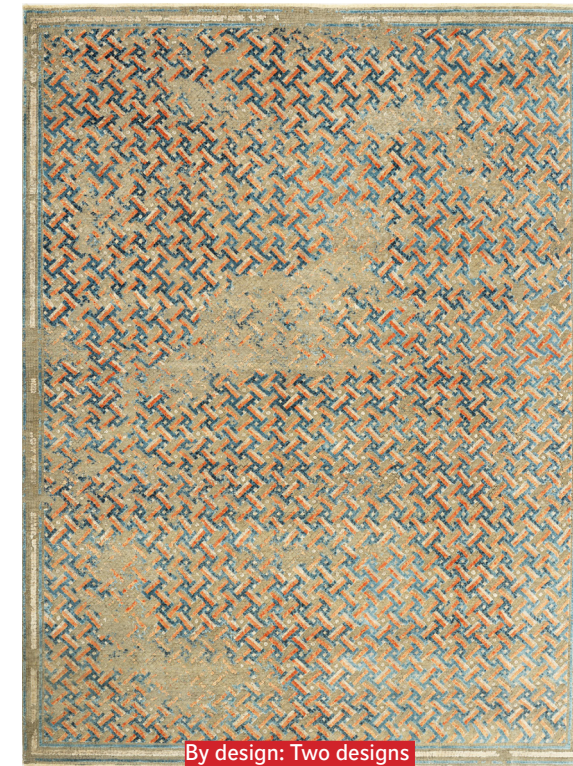
"After the builders called me to come look, I called the Wiltshire County Council archaeological department, and what was kind of sad was that their first emotion was gratitude. It would suggest that a lot of people would have slipped the builder 50 quid and said, 'Just cover it up and say nothing.'"

There are clues to the way Irwin approaches life in what happened next. A late starter in business — and with an emerging rug company on his hands at the time — he admits that he "hummed and hawed" about using the mosaic find as inspiration for a collection "because it was blurring the lines between home and professional life".

Thankfully, he saw sense in the end.

The Roman remains inspired his Mosaic Collection, his most famous to date. It has been incredibly popular, just like his debut range, which was inspired by crop circles, and his Botanical Collection. However, with critical success comes the inevitable homages.

"The way of protecting yourself is to make the next collection you do a complete departure from the one you did before. Nobody knows what you are going to do next. That gives you a 12-month headstart on anybody else, and every-



By design: Two designs from Irwin's Mosaic Collection, left and above; his Seat of Power chair, below left

one is a jump away from where you were before. And that also is sort of how my head works," he says with a chuckle.

Irwin speaks with the smarts of a man who took his time to find out what he loved doing, and learned about life along the way.

The lad who suffered with presenteeism has matured into a businessman whose rugs are eagerly collected around the world. Little point asking about Kate Middleton and Jemima Khan owning them — because Irwin will stay shtum.

He has about 11 or 12 of his own rugs at home. The hall is painted a fabulous malachite green, and the other walls are painted in neutral tones to allow the paintings, rugs and textiles to speak for themselves.

His latest creative project has been his Seat of Power chair. His first foray into furniture design, it is, he tells me, "an allegorical piece, a conversational piece to start a dialogue about the changing power of nature".

"The frame is a hammer and sickle, and the upholstery is a rug design I did in 2008, where stars turned into doves and fly across the stripes," Irwin explains. One of the rugs was presented to Barack Obama in the White House on St Patrick's Day.

So, what makes for a good rug?

"The key is its colour and size," Irwin says. What causes him frustration is looking at pictures of rooms in an estate agent's window "where the rug is totally the wrong scale. Usually too small." A solution to this issue, he recommends, is to lay out newspapers to see what size looks best.

He says the skill of a designer is to make a rug that has a flow and a coherence, in the full knowledge that people will be putting an armchair, sofa and coffee table on it.

Irwin laughs that he always knew he was not going to be a stockbroker or a lawyer, but now, as a rug designer happy to offer advice, he observes, "When talking to clients, you almost feel like a GP — trying to draw out of them what their symptoms are so you can give them a diagnosis."

For more information, see lukeirwin.com

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