

A Life in the Day



WORDS OF WISDOM

BEST ADVICE I WAS GIVEN

It was direct, simple and given to me by my wife: "Stop drinking."

ADVICE I'D GIVE

Don't fear failure — if you do, then you will never succeed

WHAT I WISH I'D KNOWN

Life is not a fairy tale, but there is magic, astonishing characters, triumphs and disasters, and good and evil

Luke Irwin

The royal family's rug designer on how he weaves together his work and family lives

Irwin, 50, was born in Dublin. He went to Eton, but left at 16, then worked in theatre, PR and antiques before launching a business making bespoke hand-knotted rugs in 2003. His clients include the royal family and members of U2 and the Rolling Stones. He divides his time between his studio and shop in London and his home in Wiltshire. He lives with his wife, Alice Elliot, the niece of the Duchess of Cornwall, and their children, Otis, 12, and Violet, 8.

“ The alarm goes off at about 6.50am and, like every house on a Monday morning, it's chaos. Children, dogs, cats, chickens. I'll stumble around for 20 minutes not making much sense. I spend Monday to Wednesday in London, so the week starts with a scramble to take the children to school and

then get to the station. I'll do emails on the train and read a book, and if Liverpool won at the weekend, I'll read the sport pages.

I get to the office in Belgravia at about 10. I have breakfast, usually something dull like a yoghurt. The shop and office run themselves now, so I'm more engaged in the design side. There is a skill in recognising what you are bad at, like VAT returns. I'm a terrible employee, so it's a good job I set up my own business. The idea came at a family lunch in 2002: I was next to a 12-year-old boy whose father was a Tibetan master weaver, which sounded wonderful. I hit on the idea of doing crop circles on rugs — a very modern graphic.

Early on you worry how you'll pay your rent. I had an American buyer who had placed an order for \$250,000, but he didn't pay. To make myself feel better I got a guy from Sunderland to call

him up every Tuesday for a year.

The rugs are handmade in Rajasthan. An 8ft x 10ft rug with about 120,000 individually tied knots takes about six months to make. In the early days I didn't have any celebrity customers, so I just kept it vague saying they included rock stars, Hollywood A-listers and royalty. Nobody was going to argue with that, but it was all baloney. Now it's not baloney.

Serendipity is an overused word, but I design luxury floors in the 21st century, so finding luxury floors from the 4th century 20 yards from the front door was insane. [In 2015, Irwin discovered his cottage was built on the site of a Roman villa dating back 1,800 years.] We found it during wiring work. It's being scheduled as a national monument with the same standing as Stonehenge, and that takes an age. With all the press, I hoped some billionaire would emerge to fund it, but no. I enjoyed when Fox News likened it to a house that the Kardashians of the day would have lived in.

Lunch is always sushi. On those London evenings I stay at a flat nearby and am incredibly reclusive. When you have this crazy family life, having dinner alone with a book is a wonderful time of solitude. I'm in bed by 9.30.

On Wednesdays I'll run to get the 4.20pm train back to Wiltshire to collect my daughter from school. It's a weird feeling getting off the train, it's like you can breathe again. The rest of the week Al and I spend developing ideas. Hilariously, we also do focus groups about rugs — when you start noticing them, they either hold the room together or don't. Evenings are gentle country living. Al and I will have supper — maybe some pasta, she's a great cook. I've given up on TV. At weekends both of the children will have sports matches, often at opposite ends of the country. I try not to let work encroach into family time.

I sleep well. My rug that was given to Obama by the Irish foreign secretary in 2009 came to me in a dream. I'd decided to base it on the US flag, then dreamt that the stars from the flag turned into doves, so that's what the rug became. That's the privilege of what I do, you can turn your whimsies into tangible things. **”**

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