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LEARNING HOW

by

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third year communications

Introduction

The original subject of this thesis was Aran knitting. It is very simple to find information about the stitches used in making an Aran jumper, but I was interested in the history of it. The kind of information that is readily available is that each family had its own particular pattern, and that if one of its members was killed at sea, he could be identified by it. To find out how this custom began, and how the patterns were put together would be really interesting. But, through lack of information, this idea had to be abandoned. The first section of the thesis will deal with all the information I was (or was not) able to find.

In 1975, when I was learning to weave, one of the weaving tutors was experimenting with tablet-weaving, just to learn how it was done. It seemed to be a very complicated and strange way to weave a narrow strip of braid. But I was interested in it, and decided I would learn how to do it. In the meantime, for my final year project, I chose to illustrate a book of Irish crafts for children, including the Aran crios pampootie-making, and the St. Brigid's crosses. In the process of finding out which crafts were done in Ireland, I came across a set of tablets which were found in the 1967-74 excavations of an old Viking settlement in Christ Church Place in Dublin. This meant that tablet-weaving was done in Ireland in the time of the Vikings, and therefore, should be included in the book. The second section of this thesis will deal with how I started with a book on crafts, ending up with a booklet on tablet-weaving, and will include all the difficulties I encountered, and how the final result was obtained.

Crios-Weaving has always held a special fascination for me. After

making dozens of them, and experimenting with them and their uses, I found out that the way in which I was making them was not, in fact, the old Irish method. There is as little information about this technique as there is about the history of the Aran jumpers. The crios, like the Aran jumpers, has become a souvenir item for the tourists, or an item of clothing for young people who like the ethnic look. The third section will deal with the two techniques of crios-weaving, comparing them, with a little about the history of the crios.

Aran Knitting.

The first step in finding out about Aran knitting was to gather some books on the subject, and go through them. Most of them gave an analysis of the stitches and stated without going into any detail, that each family had its own pattern, which was never written down, but was passed on from generation to generation. Here is what four of the books had to say:-

Aran Islands of Legend - P.A. O'Siochain

".... each knitter has her own particular pattern or patterns of stitches".

"One sad feature has always been associated with the Aran gansey; it has always been an unfailing source of identification of Islandmen lost at sea".

Patterns for Guernseys, Jerseys and Arans - Gladys Thompson.

"They are like other generations of Guernsey knitters in our islands, as the patterns are never written down, but handed on in families".

Aranwear and Tweed - Linda Reade.

".... even though the complex combination of stitches used in his gansey symbolised his whole family history..."

"The traditional craft of Aran knitting is unique in that each knitter has her own particular patterns, or combination of stitches which has been handed down through her family from generation to generation".

"A young Aran girl will often undertake to knit a bridal leine (sweater) for her fiance, the stitches used symbolising her love and her hopes for the future.

"In contrast, another, grimmer thread sometimes enters the intricately worked patterns that the woman of Aran knitted for their men - the stitch combinations have always been an unfailing means of identifying islanders lost at sea".

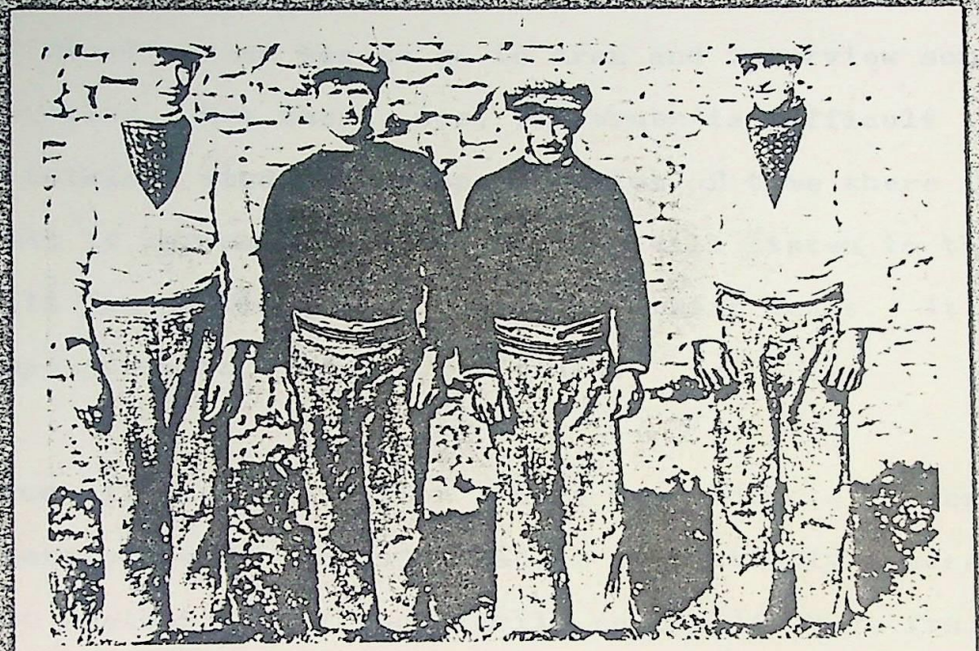
From an article the Folklore Department in Belfield sent me. "Each family had its own traditional stitches, all handed down from generation to generation. Often the fronts and backs of the sweaters differed, but there was an accepted pattern for each family".

One book, however, had quite a different comment to make:-
Inis Beag, Isle of Ireland - John C. Messenger.
"A widely held belief that each Inis Beag family had its own distinctive sweater pattern, comparable to the Scottish tartan, by which its drowned members are identified is unfounded".

This set the whole project on a new level. It would be even more interesting to see whether or not Messenger was correct. So the next step was to go to the Folklore department in Belfield and hear their views on the subject. With regards to the stitches, they were most helpful, but they knew as much as I did about the history. However, they indicated some resentment to Messenger's thesis without really being able to substantiate their viewpoint.

It seemed a good idea to try and get some visual information that dated back as far as possible. There was a film made in 1934 called 'Man of Aran', and from it some clues might have arisen. But in trying to obtain a copy, I found once again I was up against a wall. The only copy is in England.

OLD PHOTOGRAPH OF MEN FROM ARAN



The National Library have a set of journals from the Folklore Ireland Society called 'Bealoideas', and I hoped that these would have some information about Irish crafts. After going through the first two volumes, it became apparent that these contained stories and legends, with no mention of crafts, and certainly nothing about aran knitting.

My final option was to go to Aran and interview some of the knitters. But there, too, the truth is difficult to sort out. A folklore student who spends a lot of time there informed me that if anyone on Aran thinks you will listen to them, they will tell you anything that comes into their heads. It would be impossible to find out the truth.

From all the information I have been able to gather, I can therefore only conclude that it is virtually impossible to find out whether or not each family really did have its own pattern. It is very sad to think that this custom, if it ever existed, has died out, and that most Aran jumpers are now made for commercial reasons, and not purely as family items with a family history in each one.

Strangely enough, from an old photo, I was given of some men wearing the Aran Crios, supposidly taken on Aran a good many years ago, two of the men have dark jumpers which appear to be plain-knit, and two have light coloured cardigans.

Tablet-weaving.

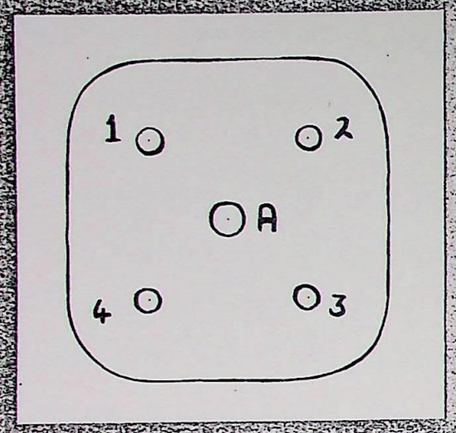
While waiting for summer assessments to finish in 1976, I took down all the information necessary about tablet-weaving from a book called 'Introducing Tablet-weaving' by Eileen Bird. I intended learning the technique during the holidays. From the pieces of mounting board left over from the assessments, I made the two inch square tablets. During the holidays, however, they remained untouched.

My proposed final year project was a craft book for children, but after discussing it with my tutor, I changed it to a book on Irish crafts for children. It would be interesting to see how many crafts were done in Ireland. The first step was to make a list - Aran knitting, Crios-weaving, St. Brigid's Crosses, Wexford patchwork quilts, and lace crochet. My tutor was able to obtain for me some very interesting information about Aran Islands footwear, called pampooties, and this was another addition to the list.

One of the college weaving instructors, who works in close contact with the National Museum, told me of a few tablets that were found in the 1967-74 excavations of a viking settlement in Christ Church Place in Dublin. Tablet-weaving was a viking craft and was obviously done in Ireland, too. As this was the most difficult of all the crafts so far, and as the tablets were already half made, I began with it. All the instructions were in my notebook since the summer.

The tablets did not take long to finish. I made a set of twelve. The book suggested rounding the corners of each square, punching a hole at each corner and one in the centre, and numbering each

TWO INCH SQUARE TABLET



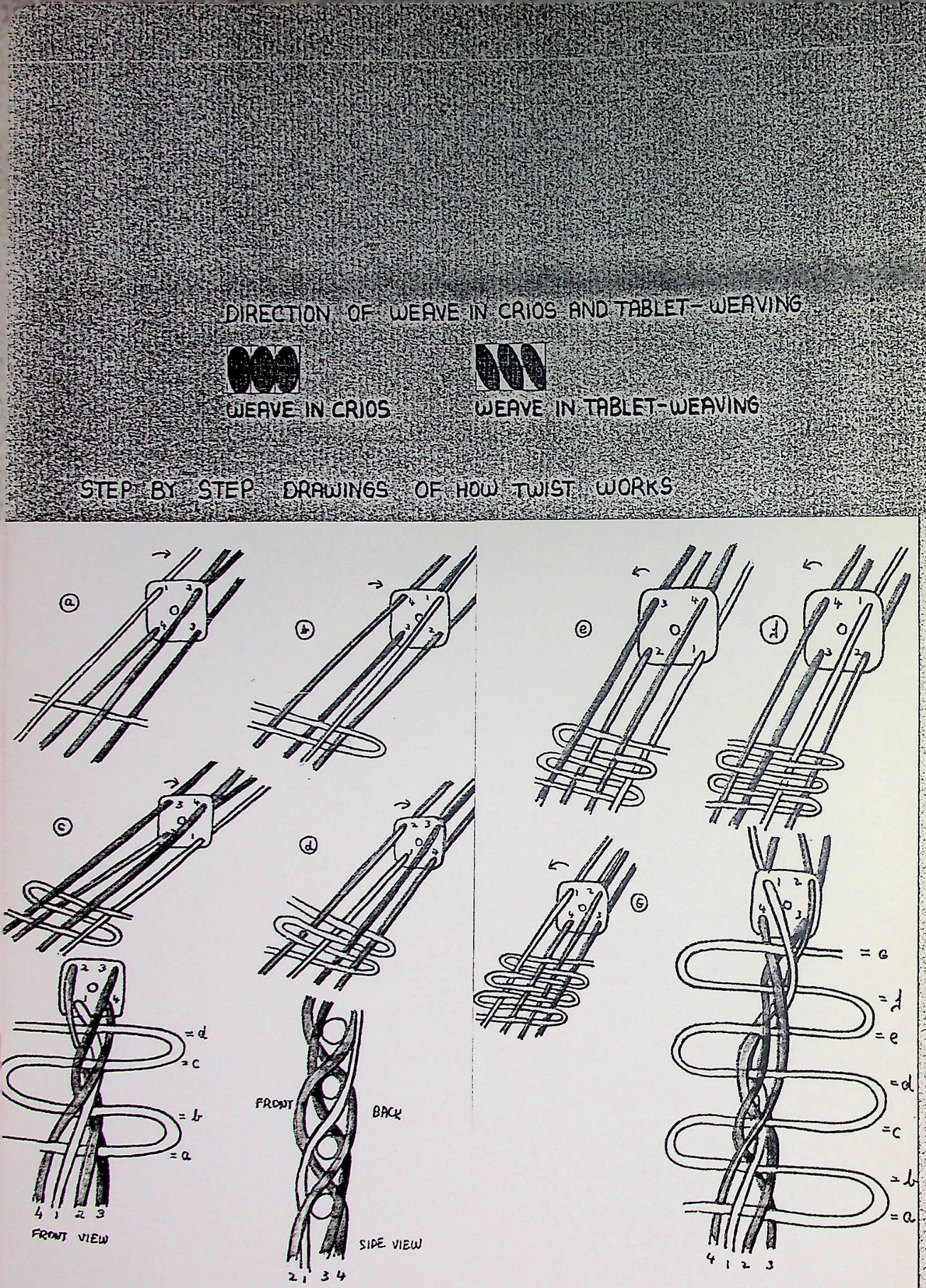
corner hole, while giving each tablet a letter.

There were many patterns given in the book, but I wanted to learn the technique through experimentation. In doing this, it would be easier to understand how it works, and I would not be influenced by the writer's method of conveying the information. At this point it would be a good idea to have a brief look through the finished booklet to understand the basic technique.

The book I was using explained that the weave was like lots of tiny ropes joined together, each tablet producing one rope of four twisted threads. It also suggested that it would be better to twist the tablets a few times one way, then a few times the other way in order to prevent the threads at the far end from getting twisted so tight that the tablets could not be moved.

With all of this information in mind, I put a different coloured thread in each corner hole, threaded each tablet the same, and set about weaving some samples. The first one was woven by twisting the tablets in the one direction. As the book had warned, it became extremely difficult to move the tablets after about ten twists. Also, because the thread being used was wool, the fibres tended to stick together and make the twisting very difficult. An unusual feature about this sampler was that when it was removed from the warp, it curled up.

The second sampler was woven by moving the tablets four times one way then four times the other. This did not curl when it was removed from the warp and by twisting the tablets in both directions the far end of the warp did not tangle.

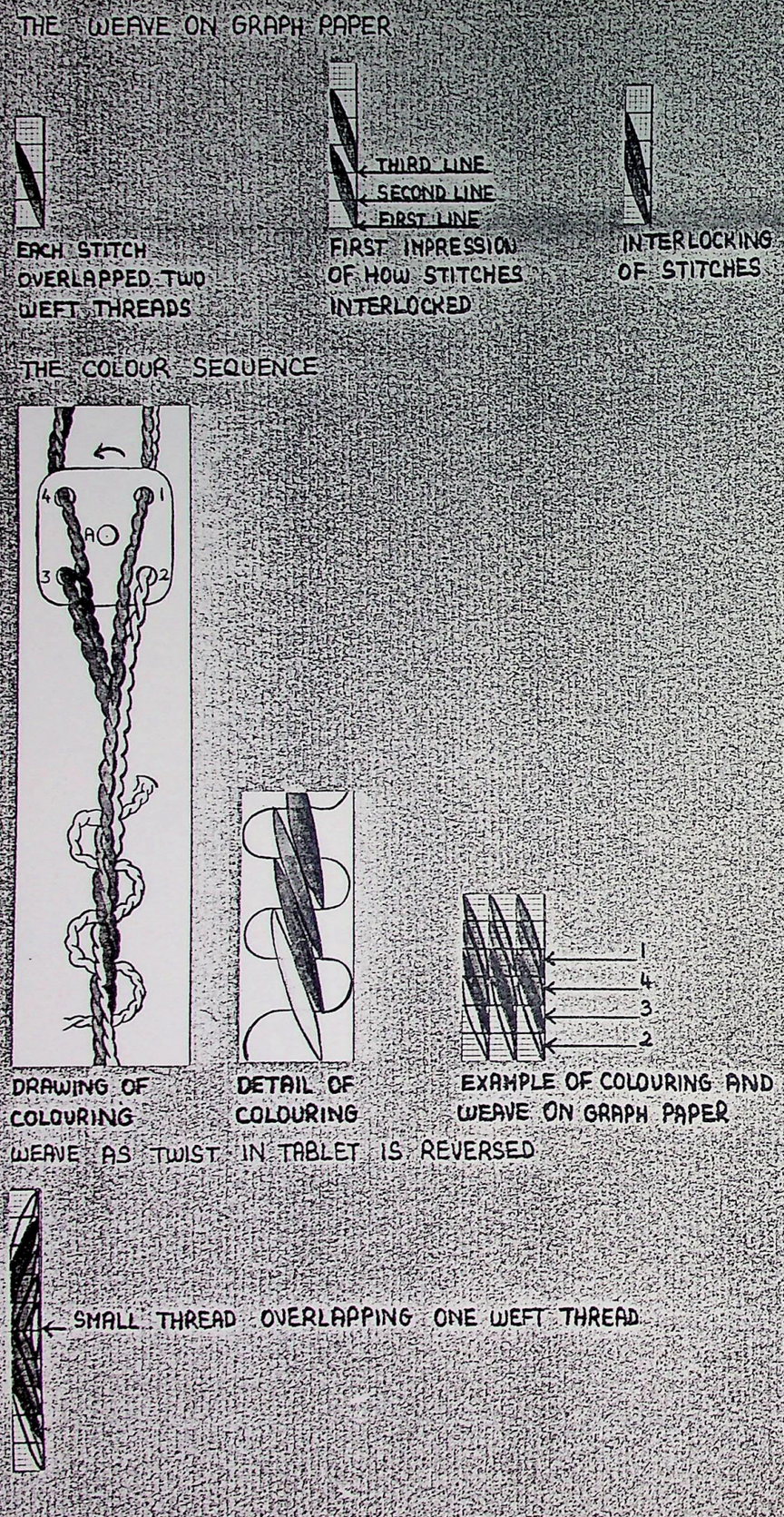


The next step was to analize the weave and find a way of writing it down on graph paper. The weave was at a slant, unlike, for example, the weave on a cross, which is upright. My first mistake was in thinking that although tablet-weaving differed from crios-weaving in the direction of the weave, they were similar in the way the rows interlocked.

This was proved wrong in the working out of the colour sequence, which turned out to be the most difficult section of all. The book stated the endless possibilities of tablet-weaving such as weaving actual letters and numbers, but I chose to keep to the simpler form.

It seemed from looking at the sampler that the thread through hole 1 would be the first in line, but it needed to be worked out accurately. The problem was to find a way of doing drawings of what I worked out. In order to see the numbers clearly, I drew the tablets from the front, but in actual fact, while weaving, it is the sides of the tablets one sees. I drew the weave from the side, and showed each weft thread as if it was a bar. It was obvious, now that the weave was not as simple as the crios, and that before the colour sequence, an analysis would have to be made of the weave.

Step by step drawings were done as if all the threads were flat on a table in order to see how the warp threads overlapped the weft. Then I threaded up a single tablet with four different colours, and drew the twists, to see it all as clearly as possible. In doing this, I had also worked out the colour sequence. I numbered the threads according to which hole they went through on the tablet, and lettered the row in order to make the drawing

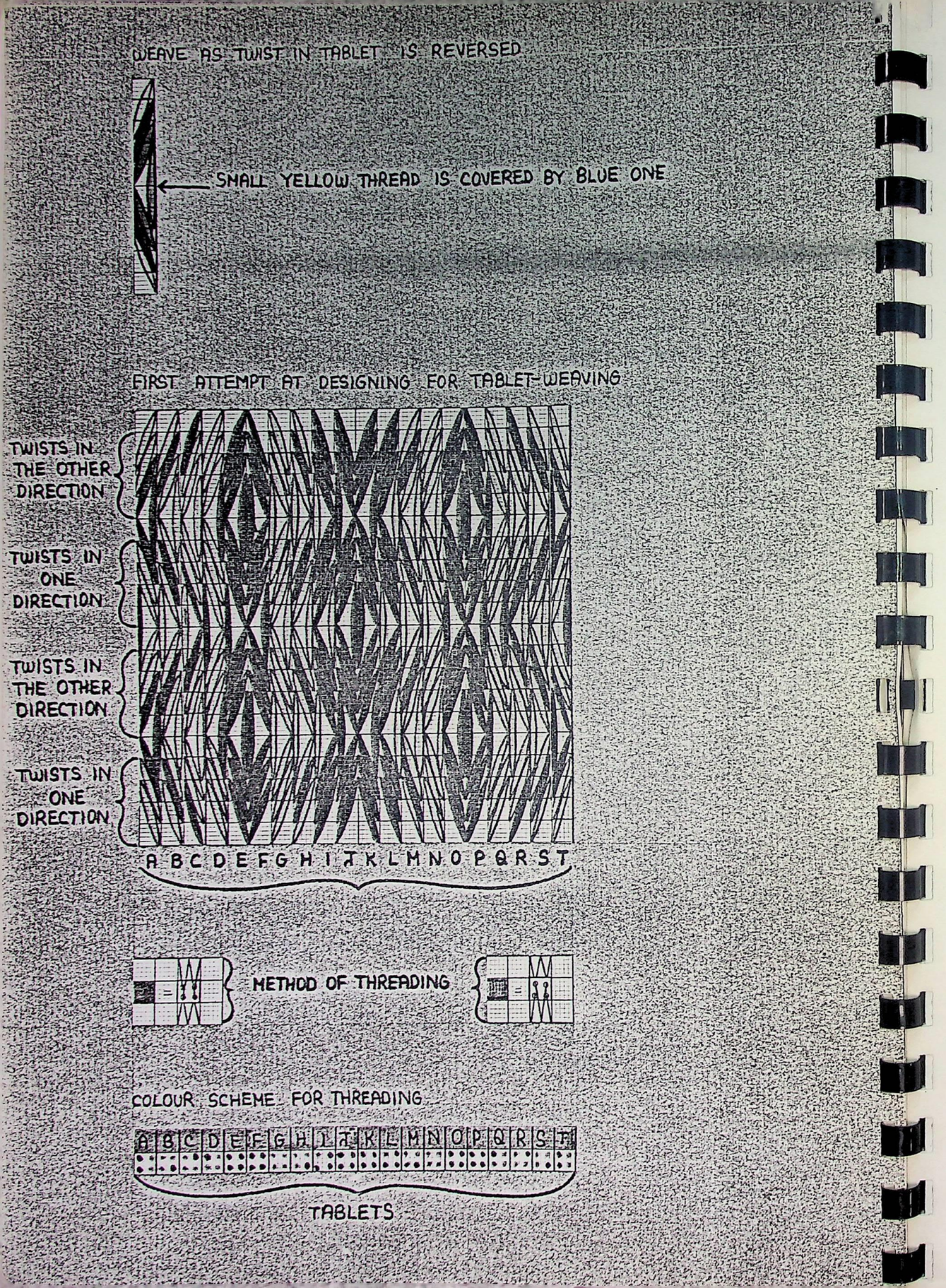


easier to read. It was difficult to find a way of writing down all this information which would make it easily understood. The book used numbers and letters and tones to explain the process, but it was too complicated.

The next step was to find a way, from these drawings, of putting the stitch on graph paper. So far I knew that the stitch was at a slant, and from the recent drawings, it became apparent that each stitch overlapped two weft threads. On graph paper, each weft thread would be represented by one horizontal line. The problem was how the stitches interlocked. At first I thought that the second stitch would come from under the third line from the bottom, but this turned out to be wrong from the original drawings. In fact, the thread came from under the second line. This was one major step taken.

The colouring works in accordance with the direction in which the tablet is twisted. The thread through the hole at the top left hand corner will be the next in line. Therefore, if the tablet is twisted in an anti-clockwise direction, the colour sequence will be 2, 3, 4, and 1.

The difficulty now was to sort out what happened when the tablets were twisted in reverse. It was obvious that the angle of the weave changed. In fact, the whole thing was a mirror image of the first section, including the colouring. But the problem was the actual point where the reverse-twist occurred. On the sampler there was one thread which was straight, and which overlapped three weft threads, but from my diagrams, this was impossible. The diagrams showed a small thread right in the centre which covered one weft thread. If this was correct, the piece which overlapped the three threads would have to be at an angle. After giving it



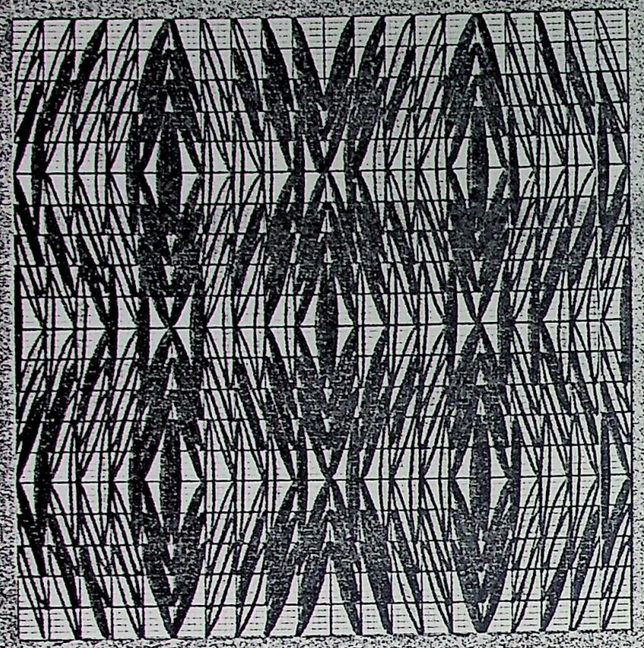
much thought, and examining the sampler carefully, it became apparent that this small thread was covered by the longer one, thereby allowing the longer thread to appear straight,

Now it was time to attempt designing and weaving a piece to see whether or not this information was accurate. Returning to the book once again, it stated that by threading the tablets from front to back instead of from back to front, the weave would be in reverse. I decided to utilize this information to obtain a diamond effect, using two colours, and twenty tablets. Five tablets were threaded one way, five the other, etc. and the whole twenty being twisted five times in each direction. In order to work out how each tablet was to be threaded, each section had to be designed on graph paper. When each section was placed side by side, the pattern could be seen clearly. Allthat was needed was to work out the colouring for the first four threads, and the rest would be a mirror image of them. The threading could be calculated by the sequence of colours.

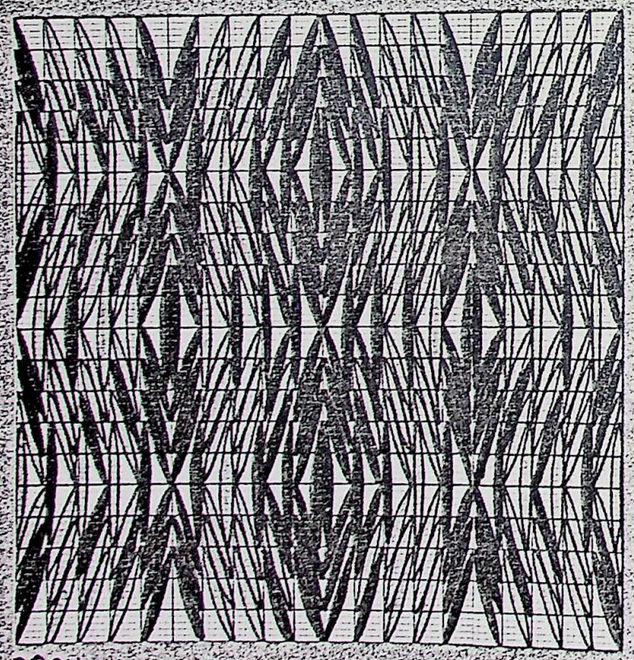
In doing all this, I had found a way of writing down the information so that I could clearly read it. It was not simple enough for a child, perhaps, but it was a start. There were two colours, pink and blue, the pink squares representing the front to back threading and the blue representing the back to front. For the thread colouring, each tablet was written down as a square on graph paper, with the colour put in each corner. They were all written down, side by side, with either a pink or a blue square above to show the method of threading

The woven piece worked just as it had been designed. I then tried out various ways of explaining, through numbers and letters, how

FRONT AND BACK OF FIRST DESIGNED PIECE



FRONT



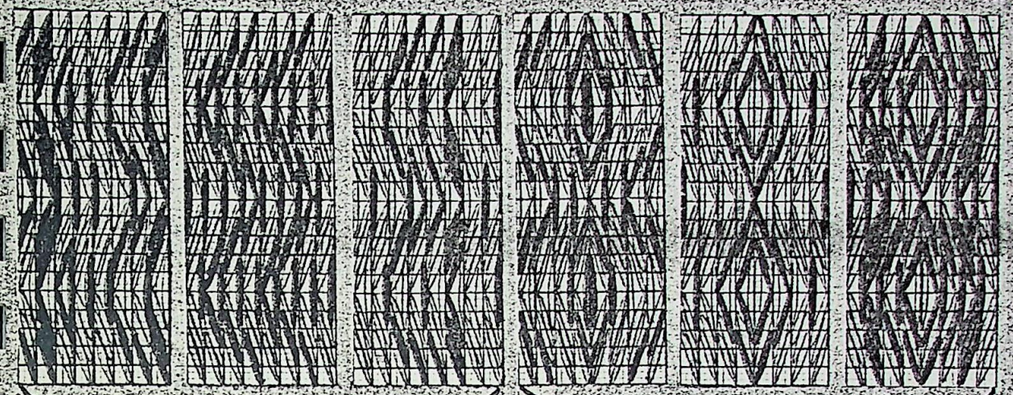
BACK

the piece had been designed. If when the weaver begins to weave, holes 1 and 2 are on top, then the thread through hole 1 will be the straight one all through the piece, provided the tablets are twisted five times in each direction. On examining the piece closely, I could see that the back and front of it was different. It appeared that the direction of the weave was the reverse, and that this was the reason. Very carefully from the piece I drew up, the front and back and stuck them together. The colouring on the front was 2, 3, 4, 1, 4, 3, 2, while the back was 4, 1 , 2, 3, 2, 1, 4. On the front, the straight thread was the thread in hole 1, while on the back it was the thread in hole 3. The thread on the top left hand corner would be the next in sequence on the front, while on the back it would be the thread in the bottom left hand corner. I also found that the weave on the back and front were not in fact, in reverse.

The next step was to design a simple piece to be woven by the children from the book. I decided on eight tablets and two colours, to keep the weave simple and clear. I worked out three designs with all the tablets threaded the same way, either from back to front or front to back, then three more with four tablets threaded one way and four the other. I chose one of the latter ones, and wrote it down, clearer and simpler than the earlier ones.

At this stage I understood the simplest form of tablet-weaving, and was capable of designing for it. But the one item I was not happy with was the tablet itself. The number system did not work very well, because in order to see which two numbers were on top each time, the tablets had to be tilted to one side. The numbers did not give a very good graphic effect. They appeared very lifeless. Colours would be easier to read, and certainly more pleasing to

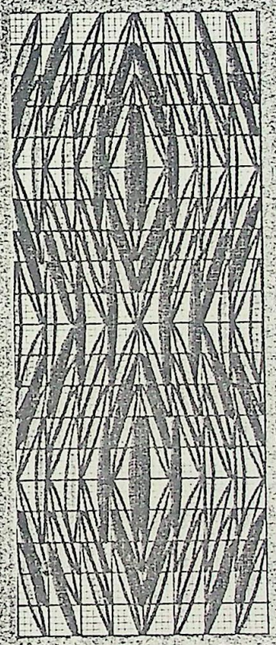
DESIGNS FOR BOOK



ALL TABLETS THREADED ONE WAY

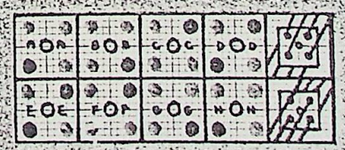
TABLETS THREADED BOTH WAYS

CHOSEN DESIGN



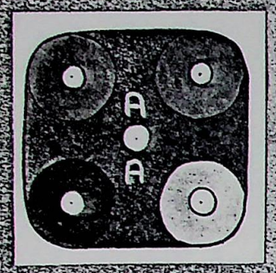
A B C D E F G H

TABLETS

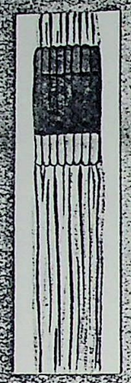


THREADING AND COLOURING

REDESIGNED TABLET



GROUP OF TABLETS IN USE



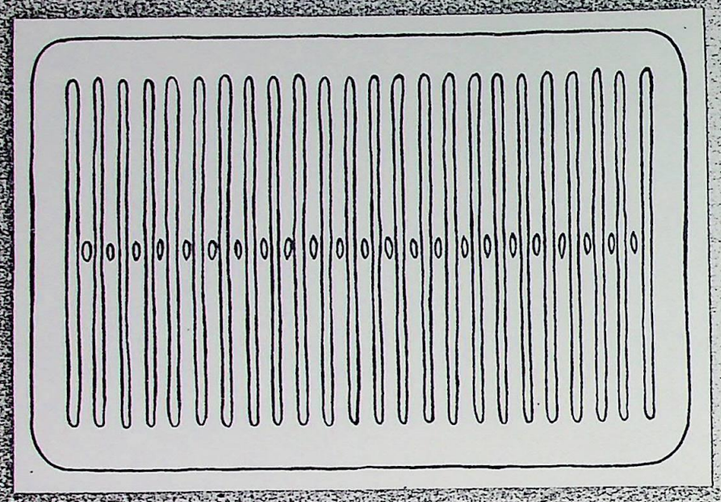
POSITION OF WEAVER

the eye. I chose red, blue, yellow, and green, and put a circle of one colour around each corner hole. The remaining white areas of the tablet were quire untidy and dirty, so I painted them in brown, and put the letter in white above and below the centre hole. To make the tablet even more useful again, I extended the colours to the sides of the tablets to make it easier to see which two holes were on top.

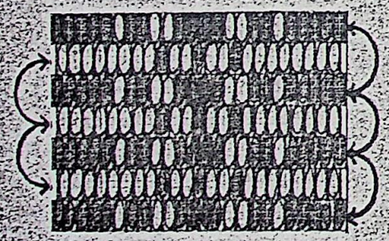
From the completed booklet, it is obvious how I overcame the problem of how to present all the information to a child, so there is no need to discuss it here. The reason for changing from a book to a booklet was one of cost. A booklet would cost less than a book, and with a set of booklets on different crafts, numerous children could do different crafts without buying a book each.

It would be a shame if this craft, which weaves such beautiful braid, ceased to be practised. This booklet is just one attempt to make it easier to understand.

HEDDLE



EXAMPLE OF WEAVE



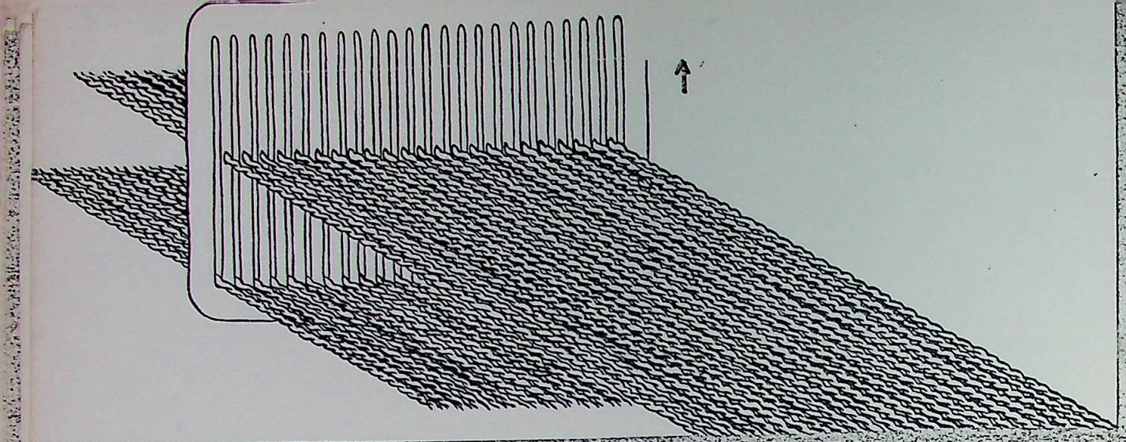
EVERY SECOND ROW IS THE SAME

Crios-weaving

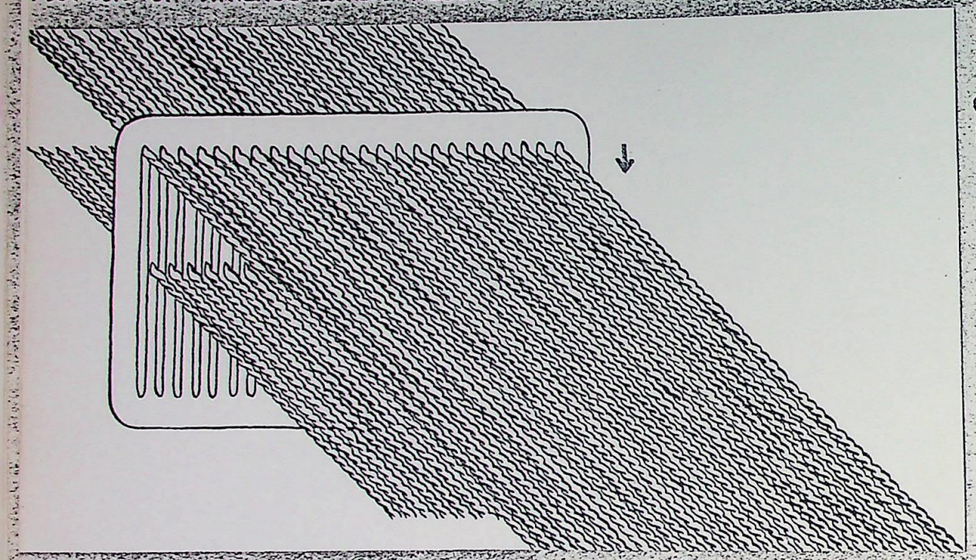
Crios-weaving is a very simple form of making a braid or a wide band which can be used for either decorative or utilitarian purposes. They can be made on a loom, but here I will be dealing with more primitive techniques using simple instruments. The earliest form of dividing the threads was done using wool tied around every second thread, and a stick round which was tied more wool which in turn was wrapped around every other thread. The next technique used a heddle, which was a flat rectangular structure in wood or metal, having needles and spaces carved out of it to divide the threads.

In designing for these two techniques, the method is the same, as in both cases every second row is the same. If you were to take one design and weave it first using the old way, then using the more recent way, you would find that the former braid would be more flexible and loosely woven. The reason for this is the tension at which the warp is held. It is imperative to keep the warp very stiff when the heddle is used, otherwise it would be impossible to manouver it up and down. This is achieved by tying one end of the warp around the waist, and the other around a firm object. The farther away you lean from the object, the tighter the warp is pulled. Very little tension is needed for the older technique. One end of the warp is tied around the foot, while the other is held under the elbow.

One of the main differences between the old and the new forms of weaving the crios is the dividing of the threads. At this point I will explain this difference in more detail. The reason for the

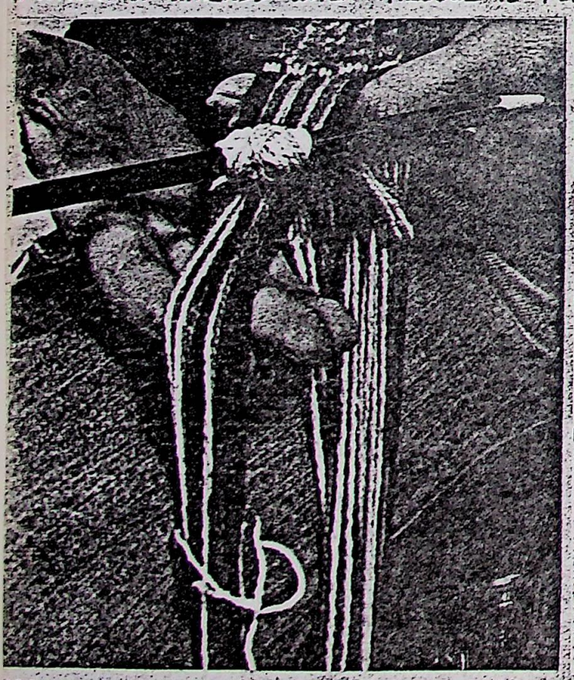


POSITION OF THREADS WHEN HEDDLE IS LIFTED UP

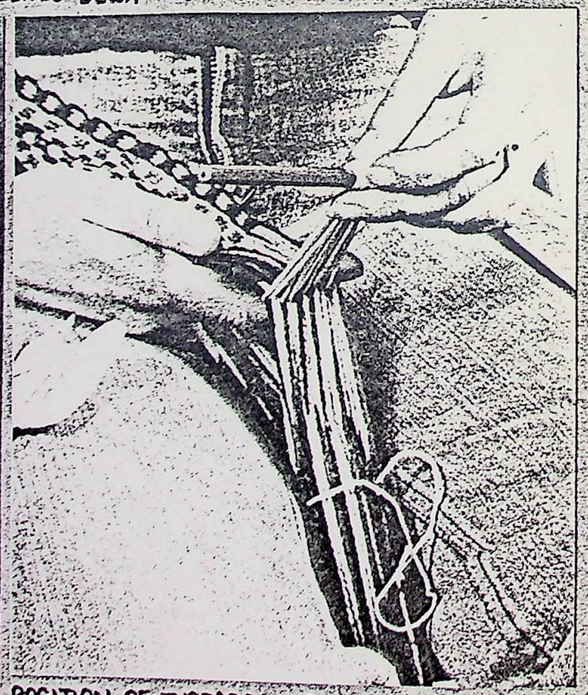


POSITION OF THREADS WHEN HEDDLE IS PUSHED DOWN

COMPARISON BETWEEN OLD AND NEW TECHNIQUES



POSITION OF THREADS WHEN LOOP IS LIFTED UP.

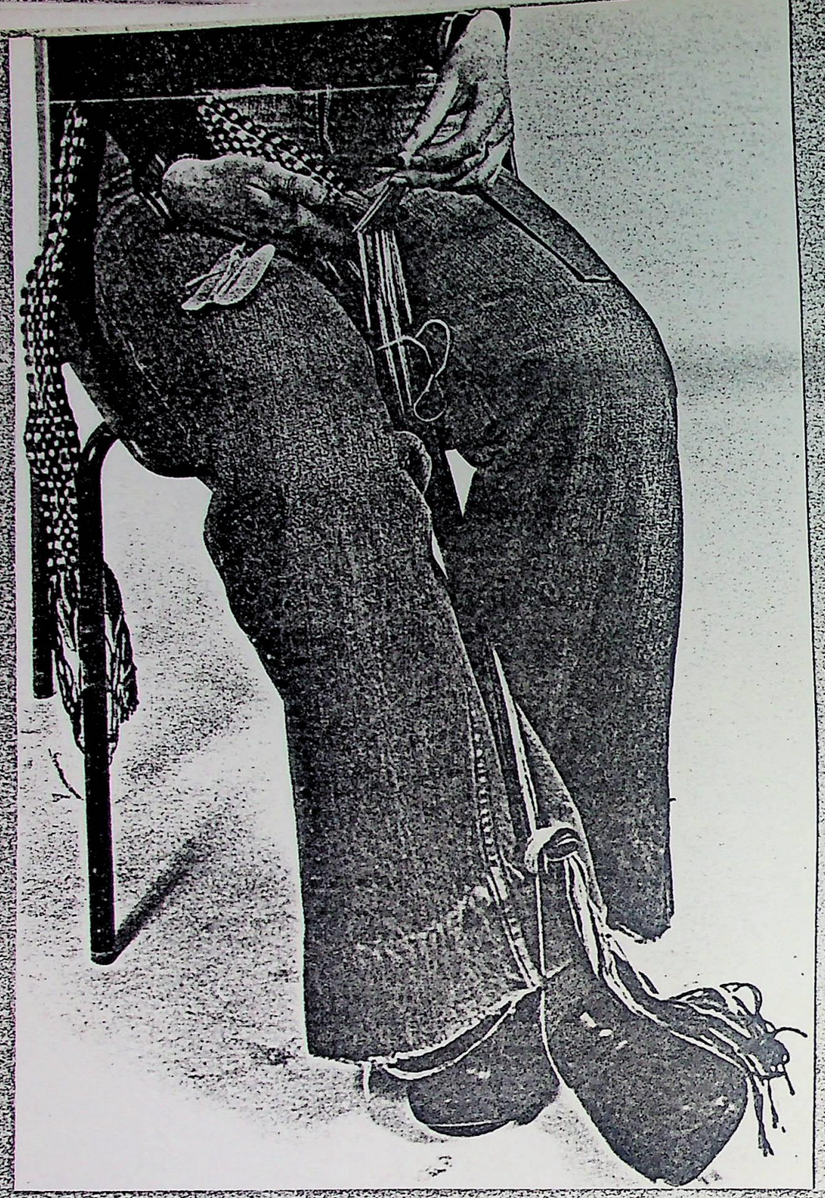


POSITION OF THREADS WHEN STICK IS LIFTED UP.

slits and needles in the heddle is to divide the threads into rows. All the threads through the slits will make up one row, and all the threads through the needles will make up the next row. When the heddle if lifted up, the threads through the slits will slide to the end of it, and those through the needles will be on top. A weft thread is then passed through the dividing space. When the heddle is pushed down, the threads through the slits slide to the top, while those through the needles remain in the same place, and are now at the bottom. The weft thread is then passed back through the space.

In constrast, the older way is more complicated, but the principal is the same. Every first thread is picked up and a piece of wool is tied loosely around them. This would be the equivalent of the threads through the slits on the heddle. Another piece is used to tie all the other threads around a stick. They are all tied singly , in contrast to the first group which has one loop around the whole group. These are equivalent to the threads through the needles. When the loop is lifted up, all the threads contained within it slide through the wool around the other threads, and the weft is brought through the space. When the stick is lifted up, the threads through the loop slide down, and the other threads come up. Again the weft thread is brought through the space. As you can see, the principal is the same, but the method is different.

The main difference, however, is the actual position of the weaver. The older technique needs no other equipment but the weaver. The far end of the warp is tied in a knot, and a piece of cord is slipped around it, then around the foot. The weaver sits on a chair, and does most of the weaving on his knee. The elbow is used to hold the



POSITION OF WEAVER WEAVING A CRIOS IN OLD METHOD

OLD PHOTOGRAPH OF LADY WEAVING A CRIOS IN OLD METHOD

near end of the warp and prevent it falling.

The more recent method can be done sitting on the floor, or on a chair. A piece of cord is slipped through one end of the warp, and is tied around a firm object. The other end has a cord slipped through it also, and it is tied around the waist.

The Aran crios was made originally by the men and later by the women ('Aranwear and Tweed' - Linda Reade). They were used as belts to hold up the trousers and skirts. Each family supposidly had its own pattern, but, like the Aran jumpers, there is no information available on the subject. In fact, there is no information at all about the original Aran technique. All my information came from old photographs or pictures, and from experimentation. Tablet-weaving and crios-weaving are two crafts which were done in Ireland years ago, and if this thesis has simply made someone aware of them, it has achieved a great deal.

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