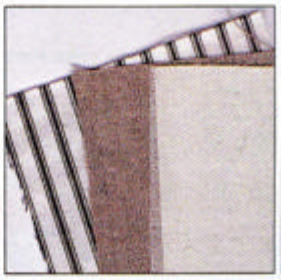
THE LOWDOWN: All you need to know about basic fabrics. By **Barbara Chandler**

Ian Mankin's Highland natural linen (£20.50 a metre) and Empire One cushions (colour, Airforce; £14.50 a metre)

Choose from Lena Proudlock's 60 denim colourways to find the right one for you. Prices start at £19.50 a metre



Ticking (£8.34 a metre), Belgian flax (£11.45 a metre) and scoured cotton drill (£4.28 a metre) from Wolfin Textiles

Lena Proudlock specialises in upholstering furniture, such as this bench. Fabric prices start at £19.50 a metre

Ticking along nicely

CHEAP means chic when it comes to basic fabrics such as ticking, calico, and muslin. Known as utility fabrics, they are available all over London, as the capital's savviest furnishers already know. Sack hessians and mattress tickings are just two of the hardwearing (and inexpensive) cloths finding smart new uses at windows and over chairs, along with canvas, calico, muslin, sheetings and even denim.

Ian Mankin

Design aficionados have been tutored (and supplied) over the years by the inimitable Ian Mankin, utility prophet, who has shops in Fulham and Camden Town.

Mankin gave the utility movement his own unique design spin, developing coloured **mattress tickings**, plus a huge choice of **natural cottons** and **linen/cotton unions**, and exclusive checks, stripes, **cotton damasks** and embroideries.

Jane Sacchi

In West Brompton is Jane Sacchi, who has her own secret sources for early French 19th century **mattress tickings** and beautiful **linen sheets**, including *bleu de pastel* from the woad plant. Use them for curtains and chair covers — Sacchi can make them up.

Lena Proudlock

Denim was developed in America as hard-wearing workers' clothing (although its name is probably from *serge de Nîmes*, meaning a serge fabric from the town of Nîmes).

Lena Proudlock, who sells a range of furniture, has a choice of 60 colours in all, including six blues, which she makes up into furnishing covers. The fabric costs about £25 a metre, with a bag of samples at £10.

Russell & Chapple

This business is a well-kept secret. It was established in 1770, when it sold drapes and awnings for Covent Garden's thriving theatres and canvas for sailboats on the Thames. Later, it added artists and scene painters to its clientele.

Today it is still in Covent Garden, in Drury Lane. It can outfit a West End theatre, no sweat, or cut a few metres of muslin to drape a bed, or a length of calico to create stencilled cushion covers. **Unbleached calico** is £1.66 a metre — and is 72in wide to boot. A variety of **unprimed linens** (natural colour and quite stiff) starts at £11.30 a metre. **Dyed hessian** is from £2.72 a metre (or only 80p for a coarse, natural open-weave cloth). **Dyed cotton duck** (ideal for covering screens) is £4.30 a metre.

Textured walls are easy. Just use Russell & Chapple's new paper-backed natural hessian at £4.90 a metre — whack it up with wallpaper paste and paint over it if you wish.

Butter muslin was originally used to wrap foods. Then, at the turn of the 19th century, Napoleonic France flamboyantly swagged muslin over arrow-headed narrow rods, lavishly trimmed with lace and beading, making an interior design statement. Now, with prices a steal at £1.90 a metre (60in wide), you too can afford to use muslin generously.

Make a slot around 5cm from the top of a sheer curtain and slide in a narrow rod for a pretty frill. Then add a slot at the bottom for another narrow rod and fix it onto the inside of casement windows or French doors for a pretty *portière*.

Or go down the romantic route: swathe a bed or use a staple gun to decorate a summer party pavilion, or "tent" a ceiling. But remember, you must always keep this delicate cloth well away from heat sources such as lamps and candles.

All Russell & Chapple's prices are cheaper for orders of more than 35 metres.

Utility fabrics do not have to be dull; cottons, linens and many other fabrics are now available in colours and patterns

Wolfin Textiles

Howard Wolfin runs Wolfin Textiles at Hatch End. His enthusiasm for utility/natural fabrics is unbounded, with plenty of samples to prove it.

Best bargain is a fine natural **linen** cloth at £18.74 a metre (213cm wide). Also popular is a soft linen with a beautiful drape for £17.56 a metre (150cm wide). A beautiful open-weave linen/cotton natural **scrim** (perfect for filtering light) is £4.70 a metre (96cm wide).

At the other extreme, a dramatic black **cotton felt** (cuts without fraying) is £8.50 a metre, plus VAT. **Mattress ticking** (with its understated woven stripes in black and white) is one of the smartest of the utilities. Wolfin has it for £6.35 a metre (142cm wide).

Reader offer

Selvedge is an informative new magazine for textile enthusiasts. Editor Polly Leonard has devoted the current issue to utility fabrics. One article (of many) explores the trend for "designer" tea towels. Too good for washing-up, these utility items are now used for table settings, or sewn together for curtains and throws. Or simply framed as art.

As a special offer, Homes & Property readers can buy a year's subscription to Selvedge for just £30, instead of the usual rate of £36.

Just log on to www.selvedge.org and enter the code E505. Otherwise call 020 8341 9721 and quote Evening Standard Offer, or you can send a cheque, with your address and credit card details on a postcard marked E505, to: Selvedge, PO Box 40038, N6 5UW.

The first 50 new subscribers will also get a copy of the Utility issue, worth £7.50, free. The offer ends on May 11 and is available in the UK only.

Top tips

- Cotton/linen utility fabrics shrink by about 10 per cent — indeed artists' canvas is designed to shrink — when washed. Some fabrics are pre-shrunk, otherwise you should wash fabric before making it up. Alternatively, do not finish curtain hems until after the first wash.
- Calico can stretch, so stitch down selvedges to a straight edge, otherwise the fabric will not hang or lie straight.
- To avoid creases, iron linen very damp, then hang it up to finish drying.
- Herringbone upholstery webbing (from haberdashers, including John Lewis) makes a good trim for plain utility fabrics.
- The standard width for furnishing fabrics is 137cm/48in, so anything more is extra value. Double-widths make creating curtains easy, as the width can become the drop, with no need for hemming.

Stockists and suppliers

- **Ian Mankin**: 109 Regent's Park Road, NW1 (020 7722 0807); and at 271 Wandsworth Bridge Road, SW6 (020 7371 8825).
- **Jane Sacchi**: World's End Studios, 132-134 Lots Road, SW10 (020 7349 7020; www.janesacchi.co.uk).
- **Lena Proudlock**: (0166 500051; www.lenaproudlock.com.
- **Russell & Chapple**: 68 Drury Lane, WC2 (020 7836 7521; www.russellandchapple.co.uk).
- **Wolfin Textiles**: 359 Uxbridge Road, Hatch End, Middlesex (020 8428 3911; www.wolfintextiles.co.uk). Parking is easy, or take a Silverlink train to Hatch End from Euston.