

Raising the roof

Often mistakenly considered to be a dying craft, the art of thatching is actually thriving, discovers Tessa Waugh

BRITAIN has more thatched buildings than any other country in Europe—there are between 55,000 and 60,000 in England alone—and, like it or not, the chocolate-box image of a thatched cottage is as much a part of our national identity as Buckingham Palace or the Houses of Parliament. Behind the scenes, and occasionally glimpsed up a ladder, there are some 900 thatchers (forming roughly 300–400 thatching businesses) who work to construct and maintain Britain's thatched roofs.

Steven Dodson and his twin brother, Stuart, are third-generation thatchers from Cambridge-shire who run the company set up by their grandfather in 1954. They now employ 16 people, and Dodson Bros Thatchers Ltd is one of the biggest

thatching companies in the country. Steven says: 'I'm so fed up with hearing that thatching is a dying trade, because, as long as the houses are there, we will always need people with the skills to thatch them.'

The pride that the Dodsons take in their work is borne out by the number of awards they've won over the years—in 2011, they won the National Society of Master Thatcher's best thatched house award. Their clients include the National Trust and the Church of England and they have put their stamp on prestigious jobs such as Enid Blyton's house in Bourne End, Buckinghamshire, and Queen Charlotte's cottage in Kew Gardens.

For Steven, the advantages of his work are manifold. 'I'm an outdoor person and I like being out in the fresh air. The work is physically demanding, but every day is different and you're always learning because there are different problems to overcome on each roof and these vary depending on the materials you use.'

One of the worries for the industry is that thatching might not offer an attractive way of life today. Steven receives quite a few enquiries from young people, but he's quick to add that, sometimes, their expectations aren't realistic. 'They imagine themselves out there in the summer with a beer in their hand, but, as we all know, working outdoors in Britain, even in the summer, can be tough. The truth is that the work is hard, it can take seven years to learn the skills and you're never going to make millions doing it.'

News from the National Society of Master Thatchers is positive, however.

The society introduced its apprenticeship scheme in 2006 and some six people a year are coming through, taking 3–4 years to complete the course. This number might sound

small, but the society has no cause for concern. A representative, Marjorie Sanders—whose book *Thatches and Thatching: A Handbook for Owners, Thatchers and Conservators* with a foreword by The Prince of Wales, was published in 2012—explains: 'This number balances the people who are retiring, so, as far as we are concerned, it's an equilibrium.'

She echoes the words of Steven Dodson when she says: 'Thatching is very much alive and dynamic. It's always people outside of the industry who claim that it is a dying craft.' In fact, in some areas of the country, numbers of thatchers are burgeoning. Mark Constable, a thatcher who works between Swindon and Oxford, has seen competition for work increase dramatically during his working life: 'When I started 26 years ago, there were about four thatchers in this area; >

Wherever there are thatched houses, thatchers will be needed: at work in Midhurst, West Sussex

‘I'm so fed up with hearing thatching is a dying trade,’





now, there are more like 50 or 60.'

Tim Hyde, from south Wiltshire, came into thatching through his father. 'I grew up on a farm and we had a cottage that needed thatching. We had cut our own thatching straw on the farm, so we thought we'd give it a go. I was 22 at the time; I tried it and decided that I enjoyed it.' Tim went on to find an apprenticeship, through a spar maker called Graeme Coombes, with a company called Conway Freeman near Banbury and learned his trade in Northamptonshire, Warwickshire and Oxfordshire, but there were so many offers of work at home he moved back to Wiltshire.

‘Thatched houses are a vital part of the landscape of this country: people like to see them ,

Due to the nature of the roofs in Mr Hyde's area of the county, he tends to work in wheat straw. 'I do push the traditional side of it and I like using old varieties of wheat straw that date back hundreds of years because some of the buildings I work on are up to 800 years old.' He's adamant that the value of Britain's thatched houses to the country as a whole should not be underestimated: 'They're a vital part of the landscape of this country: people like to see them and that's a great bonus for tourism.' As for the future of his trade, Mr Hyde feels positive: 'I like to think there will be a job for my eight-year-old son Thomas when the time comes.'

A subsidiary to the thatching business is the production of thatching materials. In Britain, the most commonly used are water reed and cereal straw and the latter can be applied to the roof in two styles (combed wheat reed and long straw) which create different effects. Each area of the country has its own distinct regional style and, in the past, the materials that thatchers used were determined by what was available in their area. These days, local planning authorities have the final say on what materials are used and they tend to favour those that are traditional to their area, so as far as possible thatchers are encouraged to replace like with like. In his area of north Wiltshire



and Oxfordshire, Mr Constable generally uses Devon combed wheat straw, a crop that's grown specifically for the purpose. He says: 'The great thing about straw is that it insulates you during the winter and keeps you cool in the summer.'

In Norfolk, houses thatched with water reed are the most common as this is where the majority of the plant was grown. It's the most durable of the materials used for thatching and we used to grow a lot of it in Britain.

Above Harvesting reeds on Reedham Marsh in Norfolk. Below A 19th-century thatcher would have no trouble recognising the tools of today

In the past 20 years, the amount of water reed grown for thatching has reduced and a large proportion now comes from Turkey and Eastern Europe. 'Twenty years ago, 60% was imported—now, it's 90%' says reed cutter Richard Starling, who's chairman of the Broads Reed & Sedge Cutters Association (BRSCA).

His organisation is working with the Broads Authority to halt the decline in commercial reed and sedge cutting in this region of Norfolk. Their work involves talking to landowners about the benefits of the crop, with the aim of extending the area of commercial cutting from 15% to 25% within the 2,000-acre Broads area. Mr Starling is pleased to report that the majority of landowners consulted were behind the scheme. The BRSCA's long-term aim is to achieve the necessary conditions for a sustainable reed-cutting industry within the Broads.

Next time you pass a thatched roof, look at it carefully, think of the work that has gone into it and be confident in the knowledge that this long-established craft will be around for years to come. 🐦

If you own a thatched house and need a thatcher, the National Society of Master Thatchers (01530 222954; www.nsmlltd.co.uk) is a good starting point. Its website will provide you with a list of approved thatchers in your area



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