

Up on the roof

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Having spent the last 27 years up on roofs I am delighted to say thatching is at last experiencing a comeback in Wales!

One hundred and fifty years ago most roofs in Wales were thatched. Once a poor labourer's lot, now thatch is the roof of the discerning and frankly the better off!

I've been cutting water reed each winter since 1982. Originally for a reconstructed Iron Age village I built near my home of Newport Pembrokeshire, my first trade was carpentry! And from this my interest in historical reconstruction has grown. Now, my main work includes experimental archaeology and museum work throughout the UK and Europe.

Water reed had a very small part to play in early times. The method of attaching this material on the roof usually depends on a great deal of cordage (string) and is very labour intensive to harvest and transport, leaving early settlements under defended. In contrast, wheat has a byproduct and so (as was the practice in more recent years) after threshing out the grain for food, the waste straw is already on site and can be attached to a roof without any cordage at all.

Combing/threshing machine a version of which in Wales would encourage farmers to diversify in to crops for thatching, grain for speciality baking and the waste used for straw bale buildings or biomass boilers



Mid Wales roof with water reed from Cardigan and Newport' with the straw for the ridge coming from Talgarth

This approach is borne out with my experiments at West Stow Anglo Saxon village in East Anglia, a site rapidly becoming a museum of early thatching techniques and the only one like it in the world. Here a reconstructed timber building, complete with heather base coat and straw-weathering coat, has been constructed without any roof battens, modern fixings or string, linking forgotten ancient methods with the present.

I have re-thatched a great number of historic Welsh roofs, the old thatch covered with tin being quite common. These require very specialist care to preserve and repair the fabric of the roof in order to re thatch without damaging the archaeology or

uniqueness of the building.

In order to provide hard wearing thatching straw, the COHT (Conservation of Historic Thatch Committee) of which Dafydd, my apprentice and I are members, are experimenting with a medieval land race mix of wheat. Reintroduced by John Letts, an argico botanist and historic thatch consultant from Oxford, this mixture of wheat varieties has been propagated, sometimes from only a handful of rare seed of the type actually discovered by excavating the base coats of medieval roofs. This straw has produced a wonderful mixture that has high silica /wax content the type required for longevity on the roof. The mixture can contain 120 varieties; a practice used in medieval times when pests or disease damaged some varieties but continued would flourish, thereby avoiding famine.

It's imperative that the industry is capable of sustaining itself into the future by having sources of these hardwearing thatching grade wheat varieties. Importing water reed from abroad has an appalling carbon footprint, creates no local revenue, as well accelerating the extinction of any local knowledge. I now help manage reed beds all over the UK. Every bundle of reed harvested in the UK not only helps the management of wetlands as a important habitat for wildlife, but means there's one less bundle to be dragged halfway across the planet!

It's a fact that the longevity of cheap

imported water reed is in question all over the UK and wild claims as to how long this material will last is a myth created by thatchers who care less for our heritage than making higher profits attainable by its use. A friend in Somerset recently took off a worn out old variety of combed wheat straw from a roof that had been there 40 years whereas I've recently struggled to repair a imported water reed roof in South Wales that was rotting after just 10 years! By supplying good quality straw there is no reason thatching should damage the environment and local economy.

Recently thatching crops in the UK have been below average, with a proportion of wheat falling over or "lodging". But it would appear that the land race variety currently being grown near Builth Wells in Mid Wales has valuable properties; wonderful genetic diversity for one and not falling over for another. The continued production of this crop will have a large bearing on the direction the UK thatching industry takes in the light of recent climate change forecasts.

It has become imperative to develop a viable alternative to the cheap imported

water reed that comes from as far away as South Africa and China. These imports are contributing to the loss and even destruction of many regional vernacular styles of thatching and the poverty of the villagers who harvest this reed for a mere pittance.

Forecasts are that fossil fuels will soon become scarcer resulting in soaring diesel prices which in turn will make the importation of foreign materials more uneconomic and certainly unsustainable. It is therefore unwise for a whole industry to actively rely on an imported material. If this does happen, then thatching in Britain will virtually die out, as the knowledge of home production will be lost... a catastrophe for the UK's historic thatched building stock.

Waste produced after cleaning wheat straw for thatching is straw. When converted into bales, these too can be used to construct houses with wonderful insulation properties and a low carbon footprint. The roof thatched with the straw and the grain milled into flour also makes delicious bread to sustain builders, thatchers, occupants and their children! A modest home could be made from four acres with no damage to the field.

I am happy to protect as much historic Welsh thatch as possible but do find that doing so is an uphill struggle as the Government bodies who could be involved are working in isolation and sometimes recommend imported labour and more shockingly imported water reed.

On the bright side, we have Welsh craftsmen and thatching materials and I have at least one apprentice learning traditional thatching' and together we are trying to help safeguard the future of our Welsh thatched heritage.

Harvest time near Builth Wells ,cut a little green then allowed to dry 'for three Sundays!' Wheat straw is then made in to a Rick or stored in a barn until threshing/combing, after Christmas although a little must be thrashed in the Autumn so as to have seed to plant for next years crop

