

- 1 Alan finishes the thatch dressing on a cottage he has been restoring
- 2 Thatching tools - at the back are leggetts, used to dress the straw into place on the roof
- 3 The weeds and short straw are combed out to leave only healthy straw
- 4 After combing, the straw butts are trimmed with shears and the bundle is tied with a straw bond - it's then ready to go on to the roof



# Living the high life

After chancing upon thatching 30 years ago, Alan Jones began climbing a different career ladder. He is now passionate about preserving this ancient craft, says **Julian Rollins**

Photos: Drew Buckley

**W**hat do you take along to an interview with a master thatcher? Notebook and pen? Yes. Head for heights? Yes, definitely.

Alan Jones has spent a lifetime up ladders. Standing at the bottom of a (thankfully) short one, there seems to be one obvious question: "Have you ever fallen off?"

His answer is a shake of the head, a shrug and a grin. It's unimaginable - clearly, self-belief is a qualification for the job.

As it happens, the old cottage that Alan and Dafydd Driver (who served his apprenticeship with Alan) are working on isn't too challenging for a ladder-phobe. Sturdy scaffolding allows me to see the work at thatcher's eye-level safely.

The look of the completed sections of roof is chunky and well-covered - think bonny baby. It's familiar and seems reassuringly traditional. Except, that is, for the location.

Asked to picture the typical Welsh country cottage, most people would think of stone and slate, but the building Alan and Dafydd are thatching is in west Wales, at Bancyfelin, near Carmarthen. Forget slate, this is an earlier Welsh norm, says Alan, who explains that enthusiasm for slate is a relatively recent thing. Until about a century and a half ago, most Welsh roofs were thatched, and Alan has devoted more than 30 years to saving what he can of that tradition.

## CLOM UNDONE

Work on the Bancyfelin cottage is coming along well, but it is still clear to see that time had taken its toll. The house is a couple of centuries old and much of the structure is clom.

Or cob, as it's known over the border in England. It's a mix of earth and straw that will last for ever as long as the wet can't get

to it. As the Bancyfelin cottage fell into decay, rain did find its way into one gable end, which collapsed - bringing parts of the roof down with it.

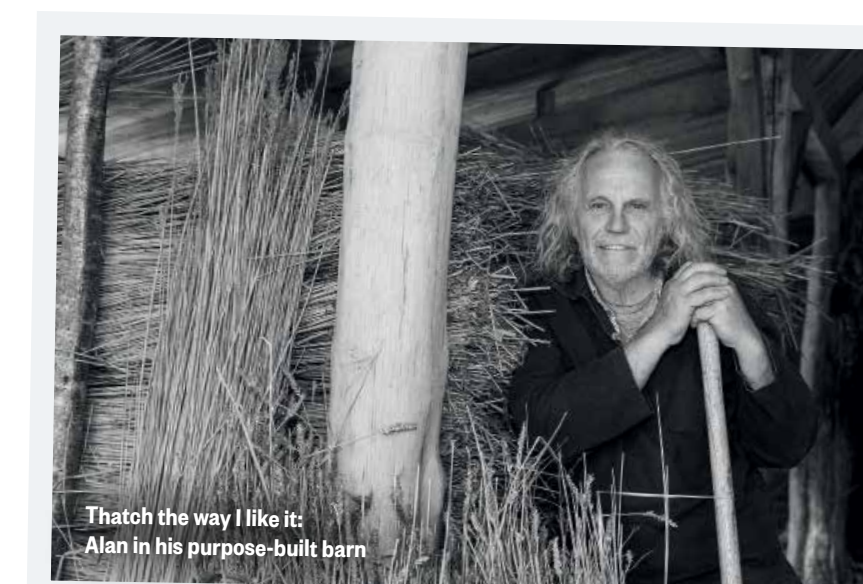
Inside, there are a few faded scraps of wallpaper. Here and there plaster has flaked away and the clom is there to see; dark, dry and fibrous, it looks like sun-dried cow pat.

Looking up at the underside of the thatch, Alan explains the basics of the cottage's new, authentically Welsh, roof. The first skin, the base layer, is tied in place with woven straw ropes. The thatch and the ropes are a rich gold, which seems to glow in the relative gloom.

In one small room, there's a pile of new spars. They're the strips of springy, green hazel that, when twisted in two, pin layers of thatch in place.

In the heyday of thatch most cottage roofs would have been DIY projects. "It wouldn't necessarily have been a thatcher who did the job, it could well have been the cottager himself," he says.

**"The thatch and the ropes are a rich gold, which seems to glow in the relative gloom"**



Thatch the way I like it:  
Alan in his purpose-built barn

## TO THATCH OR NOT?

It's a fact that living under a thatched roof is an expensive choice. A double skin of straw will set you back between £15-20 per square foot, while a single layer of reed is £10-12. That puts the bill for a three-bed house at between £7,500 and £15,000.

### PROS

- A thatched roof has great insulating qualities and filters out noise.
- It's breathable, so humidity in rooms is at comfortable levels.
- It's more environmentally friendly than many other roofing materials and supports rural enterprises in rural areas.
- It looks great and has cultural significance.

### CONS

- Thatch requires adequate upkeep. A regular inspection is recommended and even small repairs can be costly.
- Thatched homes cost more to insure. The insurer NFU Mutual says that homes with thatched roofs are no more likely to catch fire than conventional ones - but when they do, they suffer more damage.

Alan's own career started in a similarly hands-on way. The son of Welsh parents, he grew up in the Midlands but "gravitated" back home to Pembrokeshire.

Thatching came about quite by chance. A carpenter by trade, he was recommended by a friend to a local landowner who had hit on the idea of creating an Iron Age-style village on the site of a real Iron Age community close to the Preseli Hills.

That was in 1982 and Alan soon found himself working with the late Dr Peter Reynolds, an experimental archaeologist, to reconstruct roundhouses. Castell Henllys, the outcome of their efforts, is now run by the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority and remains a popular visitor attraction.

After Alan had completed his contribution to the first hut, he followed the next stage closely. "Thatchers came for the first roundhouse; they thatched it and I helped," he says. "When the time came for the second roundhouse, I thatched that myself."

### THATCH MAKER

He has, he says, never stopped learning and is now a recognised expert on traditional techniques who often works for museums and heritage organisations.

A lot can be learned by close examination of old thatch, he says: the inner surface of

thatch on some old buildings can be centuries old, preserved like a kipper by smoky fires. But often it takes a thatcher's practical know-how to sort the theoretical wheat from the chaff. For example, the roundhouses at Castell Henllys were thatched with reed, the informed choice at the time.

Now, however, Alan has a different point of view. Over the years he has, he says, spent enough time in reed beds, hacking away at tough, fibrous stems, to convince him that, for Iron Age workers, harvesting would have been a thankless slog. "You have to cut reed in winter, in water. I reckon that until you had wellies nobody much was cutting water reed," he jokes.

### STRAW MATERIALS

It would have made much more sense to use straw, he says. Traditional thatching in Wales was all

about making use of convenient materials that could be found in the landscape. That could be straw, or it could be gorse, heather, sedge or even bracken.

Often the handiest and cheapest choice for a basecoat was threshing waste, the seed heads and stalks left over after grain had been beaten out of the crop. "People grew wheat just about everywhere and the by-product was a thatchable material, which was as good as free. You'd have been a fool not to use it, wouldn't you?"

That's why the Bancyfelin cottage will have an all-straw roof. However, at Alan's last-but-one project - a fire-damaged cottage near New Quay, Ceredigion - a different choice was made.

There, Alan replaced ruined timbers and rebuilt a wicker chimney. Then the roof was covered with a prickly layer of gorse over straw rope, and thatched with straw.

Not all modern thatching is as true to the old ways as Alan's efforts are, and techniques vary from region to region. In some areas, homes are thatched with just a single skin of reed, whereas the Bancyfelin roof has two layers. How long an outer layer lasts depends on a number of factors, including angle of roof, quality of materials and the sort of weather that comes its way.

**"Thatch on some old buildings can be hundreds of years old, preserved by smoky fires"**



The reconstructed Iron Age round houses at Castell Henllys where Alan learnt his craft



- 1 Alan uses a legget to create a smooth flat finish
- 2 A restored roof, with recycled and new oak timbers coppiced from local hedgerows
- 3 Splitting hazel in order to make the twisted spars that hold the thatch in place
- 4 Alan and Dafydd Driver tie a length of handmade twisted straw rope





**ABOVE** The newly thatched roof is visible on the left  
**LEFT** In 1800, there were around one million thatched buildings; today there are just 24,000 listed buildings. The rise of the combine harvester abetted this decline – the straw it cuts is too short to be used in thatching



The thatch on a roof's ridge will have to be replaced every decade or so, says Alan. But the rest of the outer layer of straw could have a lifetime of more than 30 years. "If I could thatch a roof somewhere that it never rains, it would last forever," he says.

As straw goes on to a roof, it's placed in overlapping layers, starting at the bottom and working up. Alan says individual straws all work together "like hundreds of thousands of little tiles". He waxes lyrical about straw – and wax. There's a gloss on the new thatch that is, he says, a natural wax that gives the new roof a duck's back quality.

Growing a crop in just the right way so that the straw is waxy takes the sort of know-how that Alan fears could soon be lost. Thatching has been in decline since the First World War, he explains, when thatchers went to the front to fight. Those men either didn't come back, or chose not to go back to working for little more than labourer rates.


When he's lucky he still gets to see – and record – the work of that generation of

craftsmen. "Any building with a base coat still on can tell you so much. There's so much to learn from them, but they're often just stripped off and thrown away – they're an endangered species."

Now 60, Alan works to pass on what he knows to a new generation. He is the longest-serving tutor for the Prince's Foundation for Building Community, which equips people with the skills they need to design and build sustainable environments.

As you'd expect from a man who spends so many days up a ladder, he sees thatching's place in the big picture.

"We really can't let it all go," he says.

"A crop that feeds you and puts a roof over your head. It gives people work, supporting the community. You can't get more sustainable than that, can you?" 

#### HAVE A GO

Learn thatching with Alan on a one-day introductory course organised by traditional building specialists Tŷ-Mawr Lime Ltd, near Brecon, Powys. £115. **01874 611350; [www.lime.org.uk](http://www.lime.org.uk)**



**Julian Rollins** is a Pembrokeshire-based journalist and author with a special interest in the countryside. His latest book *Wilder Wales* was published earlier this year.

## LONG STRAW

The straw produced by combine-harvesters is too short to use, so Alan grows his own. To get the right length and toughness, he uses Victorian wheat varieties such as Squarehead's Master, April Bearded and Red Standard.

These are grown by organic farmer Graham Morris in Bulth Wells, Powys. The absence of nitrates means the plants grow slower and stronger, says Alan.

The crop is harvested early. "Quality is all about when a crop is cut. Traditionally, wheat was cut when it was still a bit green in the stem," says Alan. "It also meant the grain didn't drop out of the head when you moved it."

It's then left to dry in the field. The result is a straw that has the flexibility and waxiness that Alan needs and the grain produced from these old varieties makes a flour that is full of flavour, and which artisan bakers love.