



South Northamptonshire Council

Thatching



Supplementary Planning Guidance

THATCHING

Introduction



*Tudor Cottage,
Grafton Regis*

Thatched roofs are a characteristic of many historic buildings in South Northamptonshire. There are over 260 listed buildings with thatched roofs in the District. The traditional form of thatching in this area is **long straw** thatch, which has certain distinctive features which contribute to the historic and architectural character of the listed buildings.

Since World War II, for a variety of reasons, thatchers have been switching from long straw to combed wheat or Norfolk reed thatch. Both combed wheat and Norfolk reed are applied to a roof in a manner which creates a style of thatch significantly different to the traditional South Northamptonshire thatch.

A recent survey by the County Council showed that long straw roofs are being rethatched in combed wheat or Norfolk reed at an alarming rate, and within 30 years (the average life of a straw roof) there would be no long straw roofs remaining if the trend continued.

SNC's Thatching Policy

South Northamptonshire Council has adopted the following policies in order to retain the traditional character of its thatched roofs:-

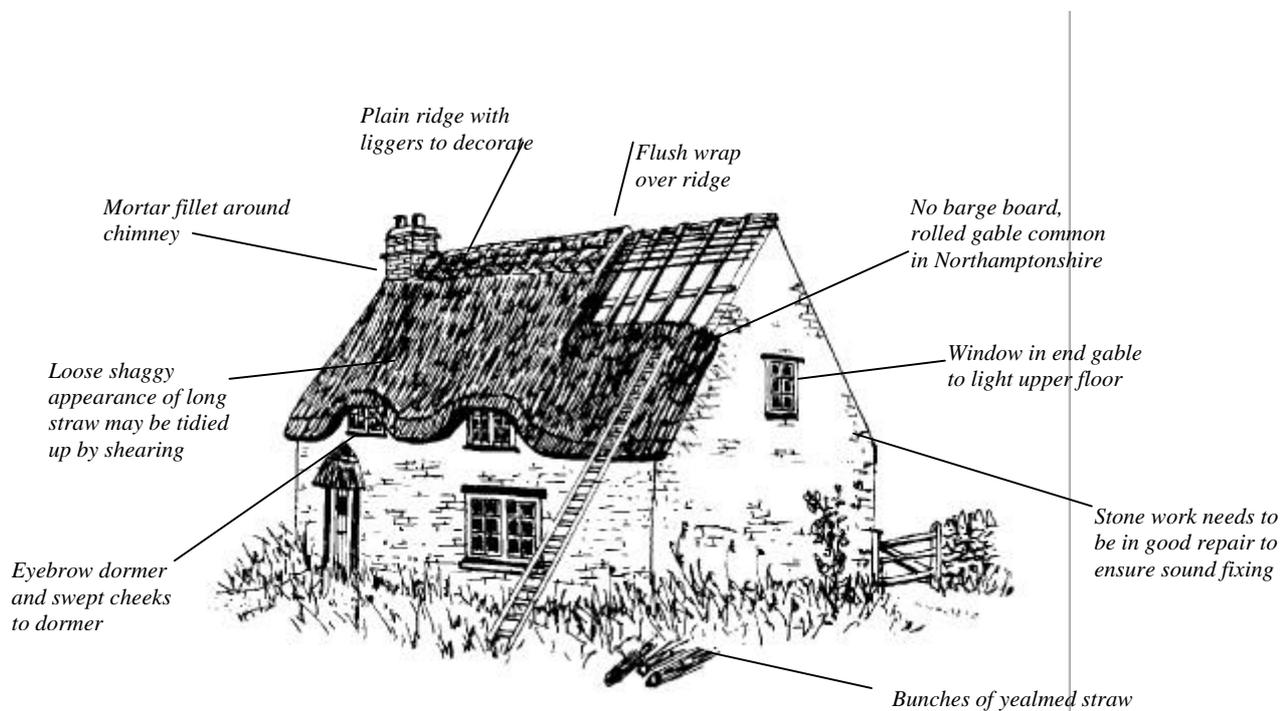
- ❖ **If the building is listed, an application for Listed Building Consent will be required for the replacement of one type or style of thatch with another;**
- ❖ **Listed Building Consent will not normally be given for a change from long straw to another form of thatch;**
- ❖ **Grants will only be offered for 'like for like' thatching or for reinstatement of long straw. This applies whether the building is listed or not.**

Types of Thatch

Long Straw - Long straw is the traditional form of thatching in South Northamptonshire. Long straw is winter wheat, which has been threshed to remove the grain.

Modern varieties of wheat have been bred to be shorter stemmed to assist mechanised harvesting and reduce wind damage. Farmers have also been encouraged to apply nitrogen fertilisers to increase grain yield. This has led to premature decay of the straw when used for thatching. These problems are now better understood, and farmers are growing wheat especially for thatching.

The long straw is best cut when slightly green, and threshing must be done carefully to avoid damaging the stems.



Typical South Northamptonshire cottage, with its distinctive features of material, construction and appearance – long straw thatch, plain wrap over ridge, simple A truss with pole rafters and riven purlins

To prepare the straw for use, the thatcher makes a bed of straw which is wetted to make it more pliable. It is then 'yealmed', that is the straw is gathered into bunches about 18 inches wide by five inches thick, during which process weeds and other waste are withdrawn. The yealms are then carried onto the roof in a yoke where they are fixed to a sound layer of the existing thatch with spars, which minimises disturbance to the existing roof. The covering is built up from the eaves in courses, each yealm overlapping the one beneath so that water is guided down the straws and off the roof at the eaves.



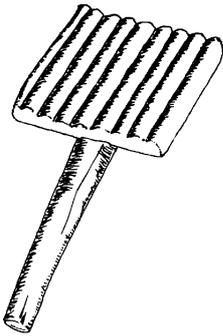
*Cut and patterned
wrapover ridge*



Flush wrapover ridge

The eaves, verges and ridge are secured using wooden 'liggers' and cross rods which are visible on the surface of the thatch. Because the straws lie randomly, ears and butts are both visible on the surface. This gives a distinctive shaggy look to the roof. Long straw roofs are always protected by netting.

The ridge is traditionally finished with a wrapover ridge, flush with the main coat of the roof, and not cut or patterned. The eaves are cut using a sharp knife to give a neat edge. Some thatchers also cut the thatch at the gable. In some cases, where a roof is being rethatched over a sound base coat, a rolled gable is used to get over the difficulty of fixing the new thatch to the gable. This gives a very attractive rounded look. A worn long straw roof can be repaired by stripping off the top coat and overcoating with a new layer.



Combed Wheat - (sometimes confusingly called combed wheat reed). Combed wheat is basically the same material as long straw but it is laid on the roof in a manner more akin to Norfolk reed. Combed wheat is winter wheat which instead of being threshed or flailed, is processed by passing it through a comber. This machine removes the ears of grain and leaves the stems largely undamaged, and all aligned in one direction - i.e. butts all at one end.

The combing process is more expensive but it involves the thatcher in less on-site preparatory work. Because it does away with the back-breaking yealming which long straw requires, most thatchers prefer to work in combed wheat.

As all the butts lie in the same direction, it can be laid on the roof like Norfolk reed, and the butts dressed back with a leggett to produce a neat, close-cropped finish more like Norfolk reed than long straw in appearance. Hence it is sometimes referred to as combed wheat reed. The eaves and gables of combed wheat have to be cut to shape with a knife, which together with the close texture of the main coat, gives a much more regular, sharply defined character to the roof than the traditional long straw. Combed wheat can be over-coated like long straw and is always netted.



Nevitt's Lodge, in the grounds of Castle Ashby House, an example of a cottage orné.

Norfolk Reed - *Phragmites australis* grows all over the country in wet areas but is only cropped in East Anglia. Norfolk reed is a hardwearing thatching material which is attached to the roof using a completely different technique to long straw, and can last for 50 years.

Norfolk reed is typically around 4' - 6' long and relatively thick and stiff. Generally speaking Norfolk reed is attached to a bare roof although some thatchers 'spar' it over a straw base coat. Normally, the existing thatch is stripped back to the roof structure and the new coat is fixed using tarred cords or hooks and sways so that the butt ends only are visible on the surface. The thatcher then dresses the reed by batting the butts with a leggett to give a tight, brush-like consistency, whilst creating sharp edges at eaves, verges and around dormers, where no cutting is needed.

The texture and appearance are thus significantly different from long straw, and bring about a distinctive change in the appearance of the roof being rethatched, especially around the eaves and dormers.

The roof is capped with sedge, which is rare in wheat thatch, the ridge then often being extravagantly decorated, usually in the thatcher's own unique style. The roof may need strengthening to take a Norfolk reed thatch, for which Listed Building Consent is needed.

Norfolk reed thatch is not traditional to Northamptonshire, its



Dormers

Many cottages have been extended at some time in their history by creating dormer windows in the roof space. The traditional solution to this problem was for the thatcher to gently lift the thatch over the dormers, which are set flush with the main wall of the dwelling; this is commonly called an 'eyebrow dormer'. The gentle curve of the dormer, and the swept skirts which enclose the window, are characteristics of this area, and are a perfect accompaniment to the informal, 'poured-on' appearance of the long straw roof. Alternatively, the roof would be left undisturbed and a window inserted in the gable.

On grander buildings of the yeoman type, thatch was still used, but the main gables would be carried up in stone, making it easier for the thatcher to thatch into the abutment. If the roof space was subsequently occupied, instead of an eyebrow dormer, a smaller gable on the main wall would be carried up, again with a thatched roof.

Where there is no alternative to an opening in the roof slope, it should be kept as small and inconspicuous as possible. Care is needed as it may require the purlins to be cut, affecting the structural stability of the roof.



Small dormers in the roof slope at Denton.

Thatched Buildings and the Law

Listed buildings are buildings of architectural or historical interest which are protected by law. South Northamptonshire Council as the local planning authority is responsible for administering these laws and for preserving and protecting the listed buildings within its area.

The consent of the Council is required for any works to demolish or alter a listed building in such a way that may affect its character, either internally or externally.

It is a criminal offence to demolish or do work to a listed building which affects its character without first obtaining Listed Building Consent. The penalty is a heavy fine or imprisonment and the offence applies even if the Council would have subsequently approved the works.

Conservation Area Consent is required for the demolition of any building or part of a building in a conservation area.

Before undertaking any work on a thatched roof it is advisable to consult the Council's Department of Planning and Development, for advice on the best way forward.

South Northamptonshire Council has a selection of useful leaflets on historic buildings (see page 11).

Building Regulations

In general, Building Regulations approval is not required for the repair or renovation of an existing thatched roof. However where considerable alteration (replacement of roof timbers for example) is proposed, then approval may be required. Where it is proposed to replace slate or tiles or corrugated iron with thatch, approval will almost certainly be needed. It is advisable to consult the Council's Building Surveyor at the outset in all cases where thatching works are proposed.

Grants

Historic Building Grants are available through South Northamptonshire Council to assist owners to repair historic buildings in accordance with good conservation practice. This includes unlisted buildings.

Housing Improvement Grants may be available through the District Council in certain circumstances.

For further details please contact the Heritage Unit of the Department of Planning and Development on Towcester (01327) 350211 ext 421

Choosing a Thatcher



As with all building work, standards of thatching work vary. Some thatchers specialise in working with particular types of thatch. Not all thatchers may be able to rethatch your roof in the style or material required. If you have a long straw roof establish at the outset whether the thatchers you are inviting to quote for the work are experienced in long straw work. If possible get two or three quotations for the work, and try to ensure that each thatcher is quoting for the full specification needed to complete the work.

There is no point rethatching onto a defective roof structure. Thatch can hide a multitude of sins, so it is always advisable to have a surveyor look at the roof before the thatcher quotes, to enable you to get a full picture of the work required.

A comprehensive list of registered local thatchers is available from the Master Thatchers Association in Northamptonshire. Contact the Secretary, Roger Scanlan Tel. (01604) 499555.

Further Information

Several books have been published on thatching in the national context:

Peter Brockett and Adela Wright
The Care and Repair of Thatched Roofs
Published by S.P.A.B.

Michael Billett
Thatching - a manual for owners, surveyors, architects and builders
Published by David and Charles

The Thatcher's Craft
Published by Rural Industries Bureau

Robert West
Thatch - a manual for owners, surveyors, architects and builders
Published by David and Charles

If you require any further information on thatching in South Northamptonshire, please contact:-

South Northamptonshire Council's
Conservation Officer: Clair Vint
Tel: (01327) 322316
or
Northamptonshire County Council
Conservation Manager: Mr Michel Kerrou
Tel: (01604) 237242

Useful Addresses

Heritage Unit
Planning and Leisure Division
South Northamptonshire Council
Springfields
Towcester
Northants
NN12 6AE
Tel: (01327) 322316

Northamptonshire Heritage
Northamptonshire County Council
P O Box 287
27 Guildhall Road
Northampton
NN1 1BD
Tel: (01604) 237242

The Society for the Protection of Ancient
Buildings (SPAB)
37 Spital Square
London
E1 6DY
Tel: (0171) 377 1644

Northamptonshire Master Thatchers Association
c/o Roger Scanlan
Tel: (01604) 499555

Other Publications

South Northamptonshire Council produces a series of free leaflets which provide guidance on a range of planning matters. Titles of interest include:-

Listed Buildings

Nature Conservation

Trees and Development

Shop Fronts

Advertisements

Farm Diversification

Satellite Dishes

Windows and Doors

Traditional Farm Buildings

Repair and Repointing of Stonework

Sources of Local Building Stone

Register of Craftsmen

Historic Building Grants