

MASTER Thatcher Bob Boulton, referring to his genuine perma-tan that would turn Robert Kilroy-Silk green with envy, explained: "I like to think it is a weathered, rugged look."

His son and fellow thatcher Mark quipped: "More like an old Greek woman."

We are standing beside a chocolate box cottage in one of those villages sprinkled alongside the busy B4000, but the mature garden that surrounds this delightful thatched home could render us anywhere in the heart of rural England.

Bob is explaining the healthy glow that comes from a man who has spent most of his working life thatching the roofs of West Berkshire.

He has dabbled with being an electronic engineer and a builder before he realised he wanted something more. "I knew I wanted to do something different. I looked at being a blacksmith or a thatcher and found an opening in thatching, so that made the decision. It was hard work to get an apprenticeship and I did lots of work for free."

How times change. Hungerford-based R. J. Boulton, master thatcher, is a member of the Oxfordshire, Berkshire & Buckinghamshire Master Thatchers Association, and runs two teams of thatchers.

"Every job is different and that's the beauty of

thatching; no two roofs are the same. I love the bird's eye view you get – up there you can see so much more. We were in Upper Lambourn a while back when they

found a Roman burial site in the garden. Now that was something to watch.

"I like that most of the tools are still hand-made – the same as they would have been in centuries past. We do use an electric drill and work crooks – long nails with hooks – have been replaced with screw ties. Both hold the thatch in place, but it is easier driving a screw into an oak beam rather than trying to hammer in an eight or nine-inch hook, causing damage inside the roof.

"I also love the way we discover places you simply would not see. Most houses we visit are going to in a nice location simply because of where people built thatched cottages, but we are always discovering new spots that so few people get to see."

As thatchers, surely they must find artefacts from



Bob Boulton outside a 'chocolate box' cottage which he has just re-thatched

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A happy day's work on a thatched roof perch

when the thatch was originally laid? "Not so much," said Bob. "When you thatch a roof, you rarely take it right back; you only go down to a solid foundation, so you tend not to see what the first thatcher saw, but you do find things.

Mark explained: "Thatchers often leave tobacco tins in the roof with a newspaper cutting inside. We find those sometimes and that is interesting. I found a cat's skull once and the stories go they used to enclose a cat to kill all the mice."

What about spiders? Aren't they particularly fond of thatch? "Spiders are in the thatch," said Bob. "But they are in all roofs – what we do come across are wasps' nests, and that is definitely not fun. We were doing a job in East Garston one hot summer – Mark must have been aged about eight. I was in just shorts and boots when I pulled a big clump of straw off

and, with it, came this big old wasps' nest – and, boy, they were mad.

"I couldn't go anywhere but back through the nest and I got stung so many times."

Bob says the worst jobs to do are not down to bad roofs; it is more down to access. "People have added conservatories or extensions and it is hard to reach the thatch," he says, "and we've had to put our ladders in rivers before now. The worst things when you are up there are high winds and lightning. It is not much fun being up an aluminium ladder when there is lightning about!"

On the cheerier side, he says: "You can get an endless supply of cups of tea and cakes on some jobs and mostly people are lovely."

Bob has been thatching for 27 years now and is only just returning to homes he has thatched in the past. The ridge needs doing every 10 to 15 years, but depending on whether long straw or water reed is used, a roof might not need doing for between 20 and 60 years.

"I'll carry on as long as I enjoy the job," Bob says. "You get real job satisfaction from seeing the way you can transform a house. Combine that with being outdoors and it's not a bad job."