

# More men of straw, please

Not only are thatchers in short demand but so is their traditional material. **Simon Brooke** reports

**T**o move from a career in electronics to thatching might seem deliberately perverse – a step back from a job in a cutting-edge industry to an ancient rural craft. But since Bob Boulton made his unusual career move nearly 30 years ago, he has hardly looked back. Like wheelwrights and tallow-makers, thatchers may be part of a picture-postcard world – but demand for them is strong.

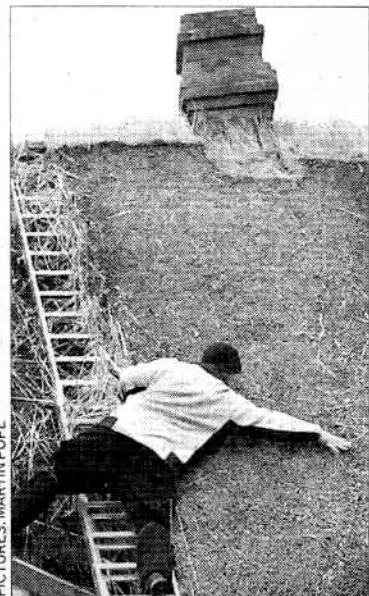
With more than 50,000 thatched buildings in Britain and more cottages being bought and restored by those moving away from towns, some thatchers are being booked up to two years ahead.

Such is the increasing gap between the demand for this ancient skill and the supply of qualified thatchers that a "Thatch Forum" has been launched, supported by the National Trust and comprising conservation officers, thatchers and other building and heritage experts to ensure that this skill is retained and a new generation takes up thatching as a career option.

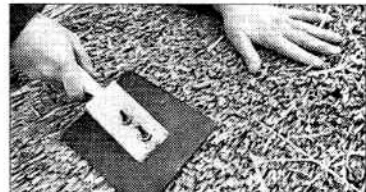
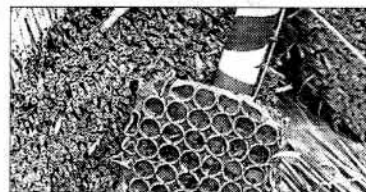
Certainly, Bob, whose son Mark has followed him into thatching, is finding business booming. Climbing on to the half-finished roof of a cottage just outside Aldworth in Berkshire, he shows me how it is done.

These days, thatchers are equipped with mobile phones and websites, but much of the actual business of thatching has not changed for centuries.

The ends



Raising the roof: a thatcher at work and (below) the finished product. 'It's very labour-intensive. It's also very physical, which is something I like'



of the bundles of thatch are cut to make a neat base and are then put on the roof and secured with small sticks of hazel or willow (known as spars). Then the bundles are put into place using a tool like a ping-pong bat called a leggett.

Now a Master

Thatcher, Bob was once an apprentice. Except that normally apprentices get paid. Bob couldn't find anyone willing to teach him the thatcher's skills. "I had to work for nothing," he says. "I even had to pay the guy."

Despite this

struggle, Bob is making his contribution to the business of bringing new people into the trade. The junior on his team, Rob Young, is following a similar path to Bob, but next spring will spend time at the thatching training centre at Northampton.

A thatching job can take about six weeks. "It's very labour-intensive," says Bob. "It's also very physical, which is something I like. You're up and down the ladders and you end up walking a fair few miles as well."

The appeal is simple – working outside in the fresh air, as well as creating something with your hands. But thatchers do have at least some opportunity to express some creative flair.

"Thatchers have their own signatures," says Bob. "We cut a scallop pattern into our work, for instance. One thatcher puts a line of ducks on the top of the roof."

There are about 900 qualified thatchers in Britain, although more are needed. In fact, thatching is so valuable to Britain's traditional landscape and rural heritage and the skill shortage so serious that, in addition to the National Trust initiative, the Heritage Lottery has announced funding for those interested in learning the craft.

"There is such a shortage of people with these skills that we are setting up a bursary scheme to train people," says Dr Sharon Goddard of the Heritage Lottery. "We were also concerned that, with more general training being

carried out, the distinctive regional styles of some skills such as thatching and Cornish hedge-laying are at risk. Preserving the skills is just as important as funding the buildings. The two go hand in hand."

A shortage of human resources aside, another challenge to Britain's thatching industry is from red tape. For most people driving through idyllic country villages, one thatch looks very like another. But the range of reeds, their provenance and their uses are vast.

If thatching is labour intensive, it is also material intensive, too. The small cottage roof that Bob is working on will eat up 500 bundles of straw, which means that the team will get through 30 to 40 bundles a day.

**M**ost thatchers use combed long straw, although in Norfolk water reed is more popular. But, in many cases, modern farming techniques and EU rules are preventing farmers from buying the seeds they need for traditional thatching straw. Thatchers are being forced to import reed from Europe.

"This is a real concern," says Rory Cullen of the National Trust. "Because in many cases the reed is of poorer quality."

To combat this, in the past few years, the Trust has started growing organic reed for thatching from seeds gathered from 600-year-old thatched roofs.

The different reeds produce different thatching styles as well. It may not be instantly noticeable to most people as they drive past, but the wrong thatched roof in the wrong part of the country can undo centuries of thatching history and tradition.

Worse still, the old practice of thatching on top of existing roofs in most parts of the country is being lost. "This is very valuable because some of the thatching can date from medieval times," says Matthew Slocombe, deputy secretary of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, which is launching a campaign.

"We hope this will draw attention to the issue and have an influence on the use of different reeds," says Slocombe. "This is an essential part of our heritage, after all."

## THATCH'LLDONICELY

- Don't assume that because materials are slipping or that the roof looks a mess it needs re-thatching.
- Nor that a neat-looking roof (with a well-executed ridge pattern) is in prime condition.
- A thick thatch is not necessarily a good thatch.
- A thin thatch is not necessarily a bad thatch.
- The life of a thatch can be extended significantly by a timely and appropriate repair.
- Don't move around on your thatch unnecessarily, nor allow other people to do so.
- Don't let non-thatchers fit netting, flashings, etc, without advice from an experienced thatcher.

