

# Thatched Roof Coverings

## Advantages and disadvantages of using thatch as a roof covering

Thatching is the most traditional of roofing methods, and has been in use for more than 2500 years. Thatched roofs have several advantages:

- The materials used, reed or straw, are often harvested locally and requires no mining or manufacturing process as with tiles and slate. Harvesting water reed for thatching is helpful to the environment as it promotes new growth and encourages local wild life. If straw is used this is a by product of farming and is in plentiful supply.
- It provides excellent insulation for the property and so is “cool in summer” and “warm in winter”.
- It provides a good degree of sound insulation.

There are only two disadvantages with owning a thatched property. Firstly, because thatch is fairly combustible, insurance premiums are likely to be higher than for a tiled/slatted roof of a similar size. Secondly, because thatching is labour intensive, cost for repairs or renewing are slightly higher than for other types of roofing.

## Different types of thatch used for roofing

The main types used in the UK are:

- **Water reed**—this is often referred to as Norfolk reed since much of the thatch came from that area, however large quantities are now imported from Europe. When this is laid on the roof only the butts of the stems are visible and it does not usually require a wire mesh covering. A thatch of water reed is likely to have a useful life of approximately 50 to 80 years.
- **Combed wheat reed**—this consists of wheat stems, but derives its name from the fact that it is laid in the same way as water reed. It is then combed so all the stems are parallel and the butts aligned. When laid on the roof slope only the butts are visible, and

the appearance is similar to that of water reeds. This thatch requires a wire mesh covering to minimise damage from birds and rodents, and has a useful life of between 30 to 40 years.

- **Long straw**—this consists of wheat stems that are not aligned and the butts and ears of the stems are mixed and clearly visible. This covering needs to be secured at the edges by “spars” of hazel, which are usually fixed in a lattice pattern on the surface of the thatch. This thatch requires a wire mesh covering to minimise damage from birds and rodents, and has a useful life of between 15 to 25 years.
- **Sedge**—whichever type of material is used for the main body of the thatch, the ridges of the roof are usually formed using sedge. This is another plant material which is harvested for the purpose and has a useful life of between 10 to 12 years. It is usually covered with wire mesh and occasionally used as a main roof covering itself.



## Regular inspections and seasonal maintenance

It is important to ensure that a thatched roof is adequately maintained as it will gradually degrade, with hollows and soft patches appearing on the slopes of the roof. The ridges of the roof will wear away over a period of about 12 years.

Natural wear and tear and deterioration can be minimised by maintenance work carried out by a suitably qualified Thatcher. Ideally an annual inspection should take place but it is important to note that careless use of ladders is likely to damage the surface and any damage should be immediately rectified.

## Regular inspections and seasonal maintenance

The main cause of deterioration is microbial action which is accelerated by the presence of moisture, so ideally the roof should be kept as dry as possible. By removing overhanging branches, moss and lichens moisture is more able to evaporate. Chemical treatments are available to help control the growth of moss and lichens. Birds also cause damage during the nesting season, by pulling out whole strands of straw.

Greater damage is caused by rodents, such as rats, mice and squirrels which chew the straw into smaller lengths. A well maintained wire mesh will help prevent a lot of the damage caused. It is also worth noting that if bats are found in the roof space it is an offence to disturb them under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. Advice should be sought from Natural England or the Bat Conservation Trust.

## Prevention of fire

Since thatched roofs are fairly combustible it is important to ensure that reasonable steps are taken to minimise the risk of fire:

- Nearby bonfires and other sources of ignition should be avoided or carefully controlled.
- Spark guards should be fitted to chimney stacks, and chimneys swept annually.
- A suitable water hose should be available for use at all times.
- Electrical installations should be regularly tested and maintained as a short circuit can easily cause a fire.
- Fire retardant treatments can be applied to the thatching materials at the time of re roofing, and if the thatch is completely removed there are fire resisting materials which can be fixed under the new thatch.

## Insurance

Insurance premiums for thatched properties are likely to be higher than for those of similar sized properties with slated or tiled roofs. It is advisable to seek insurance from a company which specialises in insurance of thatched properties, since their rates will be lower than those of the general insurance market.

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