

THATCHING CHURCH COTTAGE (based on HLNews 2014)

INTRODUCTION

Church Cottage used to have a modern single storey extension with a red tiled roof. A few years ago, this was demolished and replaced by an extension in keeping with the main house. The new thatched roof across both old and new parts was made by Ladbroke's Master Thatcher, the late Andy Crompton.



Thatching is a skill that requires many years of practice, Andy had put in 30 when I interviewed him. The first four years or so he worked as an apprentice to a Master Thatcher, then he spent some time as a Journeyman working for a number of different thatchers, before becoming his own boss and a Master Thatcher himself.

Church Cottage with its new extension was the largest domestic job that Andy had done. At the other end of the scale Andy had thatched summer houses and even a bus shelter but his smallest thatched roof was on a village sign.

What does thatching involve? Most of Andy's roofs, were made of Combed Wheat Straw or, like this one, of Water Reed. This can be obtained in small quantities from Norfolk but it is harvested commercially all over Europe and China. Church Cottage roof used approx 4000 bundles of reed (13 tons), sourced from Hungary.

The two main parts of a thatched roof are the COAT and the RIDGE (think of an overcoat providing most of the protection and the ridge like the collar giving more at the top).

A good thatched roof does not absorb the rain, instead each reed acts like a long thin tile, providing a surface for the water to run along. It only runs off the ends slowly though, which is why you see icicles hanging from thatched roofs in cold winters. Good coats last between 50 and 100 years but the RIDGE is a sacrificial and decorative layer and only expected to last about 15 years.

COAT

Starting at the bottom of edge of the roof a few bundles of reed are laid on, cut edge downwards and the cord tying each bundle together is cut. The reed is initially held in place using a temporary SWAY (fixing) made from a few horizontal reeds held by metal hooks. The side edges of adjacent bundles are blended together by hand, the technical term is to FIRKLE (that's a good one for Scrabble) and then the cut ends are tapped into position using a metal tool or THE REED IS DRESSED USING A LEGGET if you speak thatching jargon.



Finer detailing of the base of the reed, eg near dormer windows, is created using a narrower wooden bat called a DUTCHMAN. Once the reeds are in the correct position they are fixed using a thin steel sway. Layer upon layer is built n this way.



The top of the coat or OVERSAIL (the part that gives the roof-in-progress a punk mohican look) has to be trimmed off. Then long rolls of reed are placed along the apex of the roof to SET THE SKYLINE, evening out any irregularities and ensure the ridge has a steep pitch



RIDGE

The ridge is not made from water reed like the coat but a different natural material. There are several reasons for this: the stems have to bend over the apex of the roof and also they are cut to form the decorative lower edge of the ridge. In previous eras sedge (marsh grass) was used for thatched ridges but nowadays it is English wheat straw. Up close the straw included ears which have had the grain thrashed out, but small amounts remain. This explains why birds and rodents, especially squirrels, on the look out for a free lunch will pull the thatch apart given half the chance.

The tools needed to make the ridge are very simple – a ladder, shears, wooden mallet and a good eye, plus the usual thatcher's protective equipment of knee pads and gloves. The ridge is composed of three layers, the first, called the SKIRT is laid cut-end down and forms the bottom of the pattern. The next or FILLER layer is laid ear-end down, it gives the ridge more bulk but isn't seen when the roof is finished. The top or WRAP OVER layer has the ears and cut ends mixed and, as its name suggests, is stretched over the top of the roof, before the stems are bent in the middle and the ends feathered into the skirt on each side.



The second main difference from the coat is that while the coat is held in place using metal sways, the ridge is entirely fixed with split green hazel! Autumn is the best time for cutting coppiced hazel as the sap is down and, since it has to be used in-the-green, within 2 to 3 weeks of harvesting, Andy used English hazel. The first fixing or CROWN LIGGER is a continuous line of hazel lengths held by hazel fixings; the design below that depend on the pattern but again it's all made of split green hazel. It took about 4000 hazel spars to hold down the ridge of Church Cottage. Each of these spars is made by hand, the hazel is split with a SPAR HOOK down the grain and then has a three strike point made on each end. Apparently some retired thatchers do this skilled job as piecework at home making up to 2000 spars per day and, like good knitters, they do not have to look at their work but can do it by feel, watching TV as they work. As fixings are needed, the thatcher bends spars into thumb-width hoops.



The ridge pattern is roughly cut with a knife and large shears and then fine-tuned with manicure scissors, well it looked like that from the ground but close to I could see they were small topiary shears. Church Cottage's ridge has a traditional *points and scallops* pattern and once a section is finished wire netting is fixed over the thatch to protect from hungry beaks and mouths.

DECORATIONS

The straw decoration on thatched roofs acts as each thatcher's signature on their work. Andy's sign was a peacock but he did others by special request. You may have seen that Attwood Cottage, opposite The Bell Inn, has not only a peacock on the gable end but also a chicken reflecting one of the owners' hobbies. The cat on the roof near the traffic lights in Dunchurch is also one of Andy's creations.



THATCHING THE COTTAGE (HLNews 2020)

The roof of *The Cottage* in Ladbroke has been transformed. You may remember its dark weather worn appearance, now it is once again golden and pristine, thanks to a team of skilled craftsmen, led by Master thatcher, Dan Quartermain. They started work in May and are due to finish at the end of June

Thatching is an ancient craft and the tools of the trade have changed little over the centuries – you need ladders, a few basic hand tools and that’s about all, plus the raw materials of course. For *The Cottage* that meant 10 tons of combed wheat straw and 20,000 hazel spars.



Nowadays most wheat is grown for the grain with short varieties giving the best yields and standing up better to the weather. Thatching requires long stems, so it uses heritage wheat breeds such as Maris Widgeon; Dan gets his directly from a farm near Glastonbury. The method of harvesting is also old fashioned. Rather than use a combine harvester to separate the straw from the grain in the field as our local farmers do, for thatching it has to be cut, stooked to dry and then threshed to remove most of the grain from the head, which still remains in place at the top of each stem.



Preparation is key to a good finish. First of all the top layer of the old thatch is removed and any irregularities evened out, otherwise the top surface would look lumpy (anyone putting roll-out icing over a rough cake surface will know what I mean). It’s also critical and very laborious to get the straw flat and even.

Each sheaf is split into armfuls, any crooked, damaged or upside down straws are removed before the cut ends are trimmed and it is tied up with string. Then it is “butted out” i.e. hit repeatedly against a board to get those cut ends neat, once again removing any substandard pieces.

Up on the roof, once an armful is in position the string is cut off and the straw is blended into the adjacent section and held loosely in place with a few strands of straw held down by bent hazel spars. After several armfuls have been added the position of the cut ends is fine tuned using a leggett and the hazel spars are hit home in their final position. These rows of fixings are not seen as they are hidden by the layer of straw above. So it goes on across and up the roof until the top is reached.



To increase the angle and improve water run off, after all that's the point of the roof, the top of the ridge is raised. It has a thick central roll of water reed with bundles of combed wheat straw bent over it, once again held down by hazel – long straight pieces called liggers, with shorter ones forming the diagonal pattern, all held down with more bent hazel spars.



There are 2 main types of ridge and Ladbroke has examples of both. *Church Cottage* and *Attwood Cottage* have a raised ridge with a patterned cut edge while *Sarah's Cottage* and now *The Cottage* have the more traditional flush ridge. To make this, the bottom of the ridge is cut off with a thatcher's scythe and then manicured with shears so it appears to flow seamlessly into the main coat.

Then it's on to the final touches – netting is critical as birds and animals such as squirrels love to dig around in the straw looking for a free meal. Neighbours have been entertained throughout this job by a dozen or more of our resident jackdaws fossicking around for grain after the thatchers have gone home for the day.

Many thatched roofs have a decoration on them, sometimes it is the maker's mark like the peacocks on *Church Cottage*. However I have it on good authority that the modern art installation “Ladders” is only used for works in progress!

