

THATCHING'S THE FACT

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- Long before the Norman conquest of Britain, Saxons referred to any kind of roofing as “thaec.” The act of applying it was “theccan.”
- Cereal straw, marsh grasses, rushes, heather, broom, flax, bamboo leaves, reed, wood shavings, and even potato stems have been discovered under later recoats of thatched roofs in England.
- In South Africa, Transvaal grass or Dekriet stalks are often used for thatching. The roof framing normally consists of chemically treated eucalyptus poles.
- Approximately 250 examples of original base coats on rethatched roofs have survived into twenty-first-century Great Britain from the late medieval period (1350 - 1600).
- Smoke-blackened thatch from medieval periods has preserved examples of ancient cereals and crop weeds that are now extinct. Archaeological excavation has shown up to 15 distinct layers totaling 3- or 4-ft thick.
- In July 1212, fire raged for ten days across London, fueled by closely built buildings with thatched roofs. An estimated 1,000 people lost their lives. That year, an ordinance was passed prohibiting the building of new thatch roofs and demanding the whitewashing of existing



Thatching a Gassho-zukuri farmhouse, Ogimachi Village, Shirakawa-go, Gifu Prefecture, Japan. Photo by Bernard Gagnon, 2008. Wikimedia Commons.



Thatched roof with pans and frost cloth in Holland, 2006. Photo by Rasbak.



A restored pallozo or traditional thatched house from pre-Roman days, in the Sierra de Ancares in Galicia del Camino de Santiago, Spain. The main structure is stone and is divided internally into separate areas for the family and their animals, with separate entrances. The roof is conical, made from rye straw on a wooden frame. There is no chimney, and the smoke from the kitchen fire seeps out through the thatch. Wikimedia Commons.



This thatch hut village is 20 km south of Hlotse, Lesotho, South Africa. Photo by Kevin Clure. Wikimedia Commons.



View from the cemetery of St. Peter's Church in St. Peter-Ording village, Germany, 2007. Wikimedia Commons, ES01.



Triticale grown for thatching in Great Britain is an alternative to wheat.

ones with plaster daub “within eight days.”

- Incorporating modern fire preventive measures makes insuring a thatched roof in the UK today not much more costly than a slate or tiled roof.
- When settlers arrived in Jamestown, Virginia, in 1607, they found Powhatan Indians living in houses with thatched roofs.
- Good quality wheat reed or water reed thatch can perform well for 40 years or more when skillfully applied.
- Wheat “long straw” must be cut before the stems have fully ripened to be suitable for thatching.
- Thatching begins at the eaves.
- A minimum depth of 12 to 15 in (30 to 38 cm) is reasonable for new work.
- Ridges (external wooden, straw, or sedge fixings) must be replaced every 8-12 (some say 10-15) years, even if most of the thatching material forming the ridge has not fully decayed. Often, any moss is removed at this time, and the roof is “dressed and cleaned.”
- Thatched roofs don't need gutters.



Freshly thatched roof in Westerland, Germany, 2005. Photo by Magnus Manske, Wikimedia Commons.



The entrance to Efteling amusement park, Netherlands. Photo © 2006 by Stefan Scheer, Wikimedia Commons.

- The thatch projects out far enough that it sheds water away from the walls – the main purpose of gutters.
- Most thatch looks new for about two years and then turns a charcoal gray color.
- Irish thatchers spray roofs with a solution of copper sulphate to make it look new, but this must be done regularly.
- According to the *Guinness Book of Records*, the Huis van de Vijf Zintuigen (House of the Five Senses), at the main entrance to the Efteling amusement park in the Netherlands, has the largest reed roof (48437 sq ft/4,500 sq m) in the world. It was designed by Ton van de Ven and opened in 1996. It is based on the Indonesian Rumah Gadang

style of the Minangkabau ethnic group (see photo above).

- Newly thatched roofs are often protected with wire netting from birds.
- Any roof can be thatched if it is steep enough; 45 degrees or more is ideal.
- Water reed thatch weighs 7 lb per sq ft.
- Thatchers usually work from scaffolding.
- Thatching is priced by the “square” (100 sq ft).
- In 1980, a thatcher working on a roof in East Anglia, England, found a World War II bomb in the thatch.
- There are approximately 60,000 thatched buildings in England, half of them “listed” as Heritage buildings, and, as such, under strict construction guidelines written by English Heritage. Guidelines insist on “like for like” replacement of thatch on listed buildings. Flouting regulations can bring fines of up to

Below: Thatched cottage in Hertfordshire, UK, 2005.
 Photo © by Jez Smith, Wikimedia Commons.



Traditional roof made of eelgrass in bad need of a redo. Hedvig Hus, Læsø, Denmark, 2005. Photo by Gunnar Bach Pedersen, Wikimedia Commons.

£20,000 (approximately \$30,000) and six months in prison. A shortage of appropriate crops has recently driven material prices sky high in a market where demand exceeds supply. In Dorset, the law was blamed for the suicide of a listed building owner. Apparently, it was the last straw for him. (Sorry.)

- Straw supplies are tight in England because farmers have turned to high-yielding wheat varieties with stems too short for thatching. Grain prices are soaring, prompting farmers to plant more wheat for grain and less for straw. The National Society of Master Thatchers (NSMT) has urged conservation groups and planners to approve triticale – a cross between wheat and rye – as an alternative for listed Heritage properties (see photo, top right, p. 26).
- Insulating properties of thatch are very good, keeping the building cool in summer and warm in winter.
- Thatch is the only zero-carbon roof-building material. 

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Rethatching in progress, Holland, 2006. Photo by Rasbak, Wikimedia Commons.

Home in northern Holland, near Alkmaar, with both tile and thatch on the roof. Wikimedia Commons.

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