

# Rethatching Shakespeare's Globe

By Kristen Ammerman

Anyone who has studied Shakespearean literature will remember the site of many of Shakespeare's original London productions, The Globe, of which he was part owner. In 1970, American actor Sam Wanamaker founded the Shakespeare Globe Trust to build a faithful recreation of the famous playhouse, first built in 1597-98. After decades of fund-raising work, Wanamaker's dream finally came to fruition in 1997 (four years after his death), when Queen Elizabeth opened the theater to much fanfare on the south bank of the River Thames. The building faithfully followed the original design as closely as possible.

With the 1996 thatching of the new structure, the theater became the first and only structure in London for some 300 years with a thatched roof, following banning of thatching in the city due to fire danger (see sidebar). But in October 2008, restoration work was required, so experienced Master Thatchers Phil Campbell and Christopher "Kit" Davis, who both worked on the original thatching, joined forces once more with their respective teams to undertake essential maintenance work on the iconic structure. The job took four weeks, during which 800 bundles of sedge (a grasslike plant from the Norfolk Broads), 10,000 English

*Master Thatcher Kit Davis at work, right. Photo by Cavan Pawson, courtesy of The Evening Standard.*



*Workers can be seen on the interior roof. St. Paul's Cathedral is on the far right. Photo by Pawel Libera.*

hazel spars, 2,500 feet of liggers (thatching strips), and 600 liters of fire-retardant fluid were used. (Davis's stepson Nathan Harrison, also a thatcher, graciously provided us with some of his own photos, taken on the job.)

Research into the original structure, as well as archaeological excavation of the site and that of the nearby Rose Theatre in 1989, revealed Elizabethan playhouses



*Thatcher pegging down the new ridge with hazel spars. Photo © Nathan Harrison.*




*The thatcher to the far right is stripping the old ridge off and preparing the base for new material to be added. In the foreground, the thatcher sitting astride the roof positions the sedge grass that forms the bulk of the new ridge. In the mid-ground, two thatchers working opposite each other are pegging the new material in position with hazel spars. They then apply the pattern work, which also acts to reinforce the ridge, holding it in place. The ridge should last approximately 15 years. Photo © Nathan Harrison.*





*Master Thatcher Phil Campbell (above) at the ridge of the building, alongside the River Thames. Photo by Cavan Pawson, courtesy of The Evening Standard.*

were not round, but polygonal buildings. The Globe excavation determined that it was a 20-sided building with a diameter of 100 feet. It also showed that the roof was made of water reed thatch.

For more tidbits on thatching, see “That(ch)’s Facts,” page 25 of this issue. 

#### Sources

- Bonnie Alter, “New Thatched Roof for the Globe Theatre,” [www.treehugger.com/files/2008/10/new-thatched-roof-for-globe.php](http://www.treehugger.com/files/2008/10/new-thatched-roof-for-globe.php), accessed on Oct. 29, 2008.  
[www.globe-theatre.org](http://www.globe-theatre.org), accessed on Oct. 29, 2008.  
[www.shakespeares-globe.org/abouttheglobe/background/rebuildingtheglobe/](http://www.shakespeares-globe.org/abouttheglobe/background/rebuildingtheglobe/), accessed on Oct. 29, 2008.



*Ridding nearing completion. Left-hand side of stage roof newly thatched. Photo © Nathan Harrison.*

## Withstanding Fire – and Pilgrims

There were strictures against construction of thatch roofs in London as early as 1212, following a fire that destroyed a large part of the city and killed 1,000 residents before finally petering out after ten days.

The original 1212 document, in Latin, stated, “Whosoever wishes to build, let him take care, as he loveth himself and his goods, that he roof not with reed, nor rush, nor with any manner of litter, but with tile only, or shingle, or boards, or, if it may be, with lead, within the city... Also all houses which till now are covered with reed or rush, which can be plastered, let them be plastered within eight days, and let those which shall not be so plastered within the term be demolished by the aldermen and lawful men of the venue.”<sup>1</sup>

Such ordinances were obviously not well enforced. A 1474 promulgation against thatch addressed the issue solely by fining owners of said roofs.

The original Globe was only in use from its construction in 1597 or '98 until June 29, 1613, when a cannon was fired during a performance of *Henry VIII*, catching the thatch roof on fire and burning the building to the ground in less than two hours. The following year, it was rebuilt. In 1642, the Puritan parliament issued an ordinance suppressing all stage plays, and two years later, the owner of the land demolished the structure.

In the wake of the great London fire of 1666, thatched roofs were banned unequivocally in London. But with the combination of a new chemical treatment for thatch and a special sprinkler system, the new Globe was able to secure the necessary approval to use authentic materials in the rebuilding of the theatre in 1996.

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[www.globe-theatre.org](http://www.globe-theatre.org)

1. A Source Book of London History from the Earliest Times to 1800, edited by P. Meadows, London: G. Bell and Sons, Ltd., 1914; pp. 21-22, <http://www.elfinspell.com/PrimarySource1212.html>, accessed on Nov. 10, 2008.



*The inside of the theater prior to rethatching, during a free production. Photo by Andy Bradshaw.*