

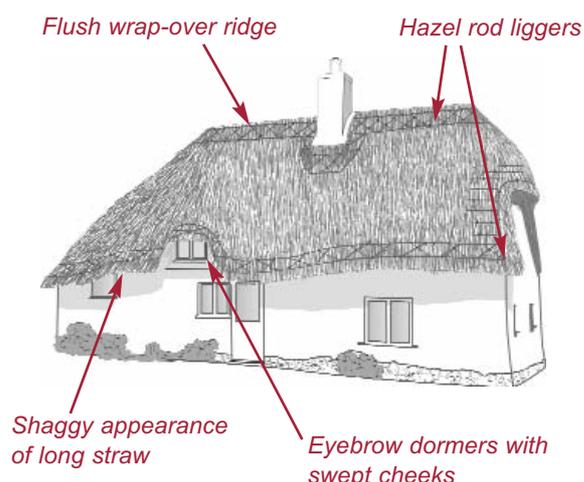
Thatching Materials and Repair

2.4

There are three main types of thatch and thatching methods in England.

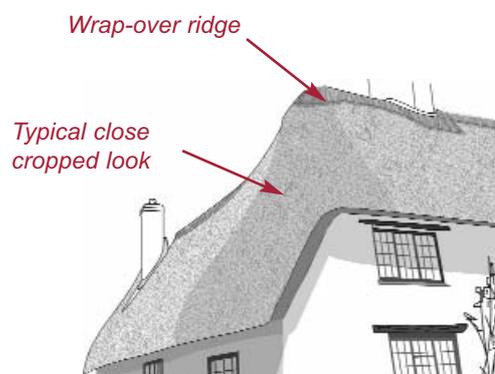
Long Straw

is traditional to the cereal growing midland regions. For the last two hundred years the term Long Straw has been used to describe threshed straw prepared for thatching. The straw now used comes from old varieties of wheat, which are taller than the modern, short and heavy yielding cereals, is threshed in a drum, slightly crushed and prepared by yealming (drawn into bundles on the ground without giving the stems a common orientation). The composition of the straw makes it necessary for the finished roof to have external fixings at eaves, verges and dormers resulting in the very visible pattern created by liggers (split rods held in place by spars). Unlike reed thatches Long Straw is not dressed into position, has lengths of straw visible and a soft, 'poured on' appearance. The ridge is flush.



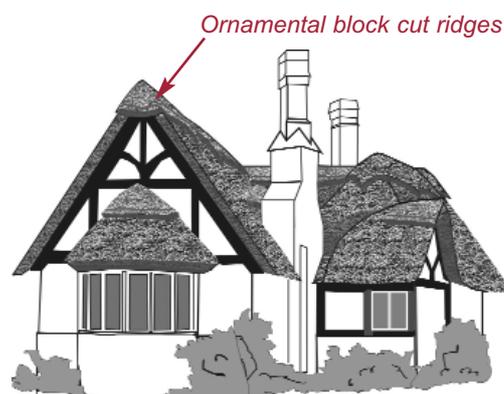
Combed Wheat Reed

is traditional to the slightly shallower roofs of the wetter West Country. The wheat stems are passed through a reed comber, which cleans the stems. They are then tied in bundles, butts together, and delivered to the thatcher. They are laid butt-ends down and dressed back in the same way as water reed. When weathered it is difficult to distinguish between water and wheat reed. However, unlike water reed the old thatch layers are not removed, resulting in a build-up of layers and a more rounded appearance. It is usual for eaves and gables to be cut to achieve a crisp finish. The ridge is traditionally flush.

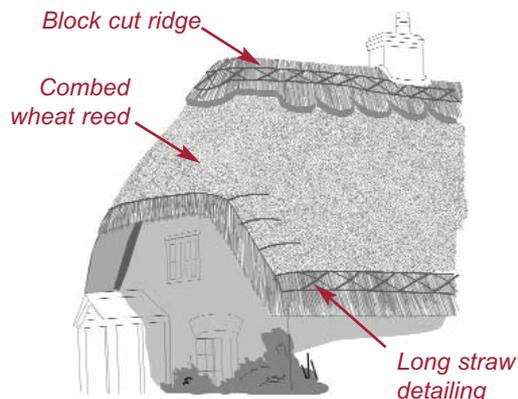


Water Reed

is mainly grown in coastal areas of Norfolk, Fenland districts and parts of Dorset. The material is laid butt-end down and dressed into place with a leggat (a flat wooden tool) so that only the butt ends show to the weather. It is too stiff to be bent for ridging and traditionally sedge or straw has been used for achieving very distinct block cut ridges. Usually all old thatching material is removed when re-thatching takes place. A few 19th century cottages and houses were originally thatched in water reed in the Vale, usually the cottage orné type, much beloved by landowners for their picturesque qualities. The finished roof gives a very crisp, clipped appearance. Today c.75% of all water reed is imported.



A hybrid thatch has evolved in Buckinghamshire, which has both CWR and Long Straw characteristics. Its origins are still a matter of debate and appear to be due to a number of different factors. Practitioners of this style use CWR bundles, but to accommodate the difficult fixings on the turns of eaves, hips, windows and barges, where the straw is thinner, liggers are used in the Long Straw tradition. The hybrid roof usually has a block cut ridge, which is not traditional to either long-straw or combed wheat reed.



Repairs

were traditionally part of a regular maintenance programme of all straw thatch roofs and prolong the lives of thatch. Owners should ensure that they do not accept a quote for total re-thatching when repairs may be more appropriate. Repairs should match the top coat in both method and material where possible.

The keeping of a house logbook giving dates for thatching is a good record for present and future owners.

Listed Building Consent will normally be required for:

- The removal of material of archaeological or historic importance, i.e. such as smoke-blackened thatch, which will usually be medieval
- A change of material between water reed and straw
- A change of material between combed wheat reed and long straw
- A change of thatching method between any of the above styles
- A change of external appearance, such as forming a different ridge

Background information

The Vale belongs to the arable counties, where long-straw thatching was the traditional method until the post-war introduction of the combine harvester, which rendered straw useless for thatching purposes. The Rural Industries Bureau encouraged the use of reed thatching nation-wide through training programmes in the first decades after the war in order to stem the large-scale removal of thatched roofs. The need to also preserve local distinctiveness expressed through different regional thatching styles was largely ignored. Long straw thatching all but disappeared in some parts of the country where strong policies were not in place to preserve this distinctive vernacular roof covering and local thatching skills. The return to Long Straw will be encouraged if there is evidence of its former existence.

Useful publications for further information

Thatch and thatching: a guidance Note, English Heritage
<http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/publications/thatch-and-thatching/>

The Care and Repair of Thatched Roofs, Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings
http://www.spab.org.uk/online-shop/process/product-details/TheCareandRepairofThatchedRoofs.html?product_code=TP10

For an audio or large print version of this leaflet, please phone 01296 585454

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