

# **DORSET THATCHING REPORT; CODE OF PRACTICE**

## **CP1.0 INTRODUCTION**

CP1.1 In order to protect historic buildings, anyone who proposes to demolish, alter or extend any listed building in any way which affects its character as a historic building, must apply for listed building consent for the works. The interpretation of the need for consent and the policies which should apply in determining listed building applications in respect of thatched roofs have not previously been set out in detail. This may have led to some losses of important roofs or historic evidence. This code of practice clarifies the position so that owners, thatchers, and officers of the relevant Local Planning Authorities will have clear guidelines by which to act throughout Dorset. Builders, thatchers and owners are responsible if illegal works are carried out and may face enforcement action and/or prosecution. The appendix to this code of practice sets out the precise legislation in more detail but for comprehensive detail please consult the Act itself and Planning Policy Guidance Note. The following introductory notes set out in broad terms the background of the measures described by the Code of Practice.

## **CP2.0 BACKGROUND**

### **CP2.1 LOCAL STYLE**

Dorset thatch has a style that is distinct from that of other counties. One thatcher has described it as 'looking like poured custard,' but that is a slight exaggeration. Typically a Dorset thatched roof had a flush ridge and little or no ornamentation. The style actually varies across the County reflecting local climate and local traditions of craftsmanship. It is always based on successful practical application of local materials to the roof. The archaeological evidence we have suggests that thatching has been used in Dorset for over 2500 years. It is the most striking truly vernacular material still in use. Over the whole of this period, until the last 40 years, the material used to thatch buildings was of local origin. Recently however imports of water reed are being used instead of the produce of local farmers. The change in material produces changes in appearance, especially when the techniques used to thatch come from other counties whose traditions involve water reed rather than straw thatches. The pattern and form of ridges, eaves, verges and dormers, and the profile of the roof all contribute to the style of the roof.

### **CP2.2 LOCAL MATERIALS**

Longstraw thatch was once perhaps the most widely used material across the County. This name describes a technique in which the stems of wheat face both up and down the roof. The other main technique using combed wheat reed was generally found in the Blackmoor Vale and on the western side of the County but is now also seen throughout the County. In this technique the ears are kept together at the top of the bundles or yealms, and the bottom or butts form the external surface of the roof. Whilst wheat

was a main material other cereals were also used with these techniques. On the Dorset heathlands heather was used to thatch cottages, especially near Wareham. Where water reed grew in abundance at Abbotsbury, Radipole Lake in Weymouth and near Wareham and Poole, it was harvested for local thatching. Sea rushes have also been found as a thatch material on one roof and it is believed that other grasses were also used. The destruction of the evidence of this localised use and the changes which the widespread application of water reed might bring are a cause for concern. An important part of Dorset's heritage could be lost.

### CP2.3 SPECIAL FEATURES

The normal practice of thatching in Dorset is to recoat the roof. This means that a roof builds up a series of layers of material which increase its insulation value but may also protect a valuable heritage. In a number of cases medieval buildings still have smoke blackened thatch or smoke blackened wattle work on the underside of the roof. Wattle work is a woven basket-like lining usually made with hazel or willow cut from a coppice. This smoke blackening preserves the original materials. This results in roofs which contain botanical samples of great importance. Such samples are not just found in the county's oldest buildings. Some eighteenth century cottages have every layer intact spanning over 200 years. These are often laid on pole rafter roofs which are themselves a testament to the skill of former craftsmen. Losses of important botanical samples and of interesting and significant forms of construction have occurred because we have not been fully aware of their intrinsic and relative value.

### CP.2.4 FIXINGS

The use of modern materials to fix thatch to a roof is a cause of concern to fire-fighters, who may need to remove thatch in order to save lives or property. These modern materials are usually much stronger than traditional fixings and thus are more difficult to dislodge. Traditional fixing materials are an important part of the craft and have similar characteristics to the material which they fixed. They are thus easier to remove, especially in multi layer roofs, when an emergency requires speedy removal.

### CP2.5 FILLETS, FLASHINGS AND LIME MORTAR

Fillets to protect junctions of thatch and chimneys or parapets from water ingress were historically made of mortar mixed from local sand and lime without the addition of cement. This gives a porous, flexible material of a softer consistency than the brick and stone to which it adhered. The use of hard inflexible cement mortars can damage the bricks and stones. Fillets are the traditional way of weathering a chimney. The use of lead-work involves rechasing of the chimney when re-thatching, and is therefore only appropriate where the coatings are expected to remain at similar levels over a long time period. If the levels are intended to change, the use of lead-work would lead to a cumulative erosion of the historic fabric.

CP3.0 MATTERS WHICH REQUIRE LISTED BUILDING CONSENT

CP3.1 The following matters require consent:-

The change from one thatch material to another. Longstraw, combed wheat reed, water reed, sedge and heather are different materials.

Any change in the pattern or form of slopes, ridges, eaves or verges of the roof. This includes ridge and step technique.

Any changes to dormer windows.

CP3.2 With very few exceptions the following matters will be considered to constitute works which require consent:-

the removal of multi-layered thatch where four or more layers are to be removed;

the removal of pole rafters, and other structural timber;

the removal of wattle-work;

the removal of smoke blackened thatch.

CP4.0 GUIDELINES FOR DETERMINING LISTED BUILDING CONSENT APPLICATIONS FOR THATCH WORK

CP4.1 Changes of Material

Existing thatched roofs shall be re-thatched rather than replaced in other materials.

Thatched roofs made of combed wheat and long straw shall normally be re-thatched in similar materials, not water reed.

Except in localised areas where there is a tradition of the use of water reed, replacement of water reed by long straw or combed wheat reed will be encouraged.

When thatching becomes necessary to buildings which are linked (in pairs or longer rows) or to buildings which form a clearly defined group, the traditional materials and thatching style will be encouraged on each unit in order to achieve a traditional and coherent appearance to the whole group.

CP4.2      Shortage of Material

Where a shortage of thatching material occurs the use of an alternative may be sanctioned subject to the following provisions:-

That the material is not obtainable within reasonable time i.e. greater than 6 months to harvest from the start date for work on site; independent proof is provided of the shortage in the form of a letter from the Rural Development Commission thatching advisor; the local authority agrees that change will not be detrimental to the long term preservation of the roof; the thatcher agrees to match the style of the existing roof; he should provide photographic evidence of this. Where the work is not matched the local authority may require the work to be redone. The legal power to compel correct work can be exercised through a listed building enforcement notice.

CP4.3      Ridges and other Decorative features

The replacement of flush ridges with block ridges will be resisted.

Flush ridges will be encouraged.

Replacement ridges should be kept as simple as possible.

Where block ridges are to be replaced they should be no deeper than 4 inches.

Under normal circumstances "points" will only be accepted where there is evidence of them on the building being re-thatched.

The introduction of decorative features will be discouraged.

CP4.4      Roof structure

The aim is to preserve as much of the historic fabric as possible and to avoid unnecessary disturbance to the original thatch. If possible the roof should be repaired in situ on a like for like basis; new parts or even whole timbers being scarfed or flitched into position. Where this is not possible it is desirable to augment the structural support. In certain cases this may be limited to propping or to steel straps to provide bracing. Alternatively a separate structure may be necessary beside the old one. Only in exceptional circumstances will removal and replacement with an alternative structure be accepted.

Wholesale replacement or removal of pole rafter roofs needs to be fully justified. In a listed building consent application for wholesale removal clear evidence will be needed for replacement to be justified. In such cases Local Authorities will encourage like for like rebuilding.

CP4.5      Shape and Profile

The aim is to preserve the traditional local styles of thatching, and shape and profile are particularly important elements of this. Therefore the external shape and profile of the roof should be preserved. Typical examples of the main local styles are shown opposite.

CP4.6      Stripping

Substantial stripping of thatch will only be allowed where there is no alternative. If that is required justification must be provided and arrangements must be made for recording.

CP4.7      Fixings, Fillets and Flashings

The use of traditional fixings will be encouraged, such as hazel spars, split hazel or withy sways, tarred twine, straw bonds, and other natural rope materials. The use of metal bars as sways is particularly undesirable.

Where the depth of thatch is expected to change significantly over a long time period, new mortar fillets shall usually be made of pure lime mortar comprising one part of lime putty to three parts sand. Lime putty is to be made from slaked lime and not bag lime or hydrated lime. Mortar containing cement will not normally be acceptable.

Where the coatings are expected to remain at similar levels over a long time period because they are stripped to the same level at each re-coating, lead flashings will be acceptable.

CP5.0      GUIDELINES FOR THE SUBMISSION OF APPLICATIONS FOR  
CONSENT FOR THATCH WORK

CP5.1      An application for consent should contain details of the existing roof and of the proposed works in the following form:

A written description of the existing roof containing notes of what the existing materials are and how many layers there are. The ridge, eaves and verge pattern and profiles and treatment of fillets, flashings and any decorative details should be described, especially where these details are to be changed. It is also important to describe whether any particular features survive such as wattle-work, or smoke blackened thatch, or pole rafters. If the building is part of a group then the description should also contain a description of the traditional material and style for the group.

Photographs, minimum size 5" x 7" but not Polaroids, of all relevant aspects, both detailed and general of the building and the roof.

A detailed specification of the work including descriptions of the amount of existing thatch which is to be removed, the thatching

material to be used, ridge, eaves, and verge patterns and profiles and the treatment of fillets, flashings and of any decorative details. Some of this information can be given by photographs of other equivalent work.

Where changes to the roof structure are proposed, drawings of the existing and of the new roof structure and/or repairs with, in certain cases, a structural engineer's report to justify the replacement.

#### CP6.0 GUIDELINES FOR RECORDING HISTORIC THATCHED ROOFS

CP6.1 In exceptional cases a full archaeological excavation of the roof thatch may be required, resulting in the production of a published report of the excavation.

CP6.2 In other cases where survey and sampling are desirable a smaller scale investigation will generally be appropriate.

#### CP7.0 GUIDELINES FOR GRANTS AND LOANS

CP7.1 Grants and loans should be used to promote traditional craftsmanship, the use of traditional materials, the preservation of the local styles and character of Dorset's thatched roofs, and the recording of their historic interest and value.

#### CP8.0 GUIDELINES FOR POLICY ON UNLISTED THATCHED BUILDINGS

CP8.1 In all circumstances the retention of existing thatch will be encouraged. Planning permission may be required for removal of the thatch.

CP8.2 Where existing thatch is retained authorities will encourage the use of traditional materials, local styles and the retention of important historical features.

CP8.3 Developers will be encouraged to consider constructing new thatched buildings as and where appropriate in association with the use of traditional materials and local styles, particularly in conservation areas.

#### CP9.0 GUIDELINES FOR OWNERS

CP9.1 Owners should check which consents if any are needed for the proposed works with their Local Authority and should check again if work is changed during the contract.

CP9.2 It is important to obtain any necessary listed building consent, conservation area consent, planning permission or building regulation approval for work to proceed before the thatcher starts on site. Thatchers must be instructed about any special conditions attached to the consent or of any conditions attached to an offer of financial help. Financial aid is unlikely to be offered retrospectively.

CP9.3 Owners may wish to check with their thatcher whether value added tax needs to be paid.

- CP9.4 Owners should feel free to report to the Local Planning Authority any important finds during work to the thatch so that these can be properly recorded.
- CP10.0 GUIDELINES FOR THATCHERS
- CP10.1 Thatchers should check with the local authority whether a building is listed or is in a conservation area, whether the appropriate consent has been obtained for the work proposed and should check again if work is changed during the contract. The thatcher should advise the local authority immediately if any amendments to the work are necessary.
- CP10.2 If a new building is to be thatched, thatchers should remember to check if planning permission and building regulation approval have been obtained for the work.
- CP10.3 Thatchers should have seen the drawings or other information which has been approved and should confirm to the owner that they will comply with the approved scheme.
- CP10.4 Thatchers should check the requirements for Value Added Tax with the Customs and Excise Office especially exemption for work which has been granted listed building consent.
- CP10.5 Thatchers should report the discovery of any important historical features, found during the work, to the owner and the Local Planning Authority and seek advice on the implications in terms of the effect on approvals previously granted.
- CP11.0 GUIDELINES FOR LOCAL AUTHORITIES
- CP11.1 Local Authorities should develop the most appropriate ways to advise owners and thatchers of procedures and requirements for any necessary consents, grant and loan schemes, and VAT requirements in respect of thatching.
- CP11.2 Local Authorities have a responsibility to administer applications for planning permission, listed building consent, conservation area consent, building regulation approvals and for financial assistance fairly and efficiently.
- CP11.3 Local authorities should check that thatching work has been carried out in accordance with approved drawings.
- CP11.4 Applications for financial assistance to local authorities contain private and confidential information and this information is exempt information under the terms of the Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985. It is not therefore available for consultation by members of the public. The resultant offer of help is however a matter of public record.