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Fact and fiction on traditional thatch

Controversy continues about the merits of combed wheat reed thatching versus water reed, and about related issues of character and appearance.



The controversy about the different thatching materials continues. The district council has an informal thatching policy which states that a change from combed wheat reed to water reed will not normally be permitted, in combed wheat reed versus water reed. I hope that the approach taken by South Somerset District Council may prove helpful to other authorities facing similar appeals.

As far as I know, this is the first appeal decision in favour of combed wheat reed versus water reed. I hope that the approach taken by South Somerset District Council may prove helpful to other authorities facing similar appeals.

Magdalen Cottage is a Grade II listed cottage, dating from the 15th century, with a jointed cruck roof. By the early 1970s the cottage was more or less derelict. It underwent considerable renovation, which included the construction of a new roof and the insertion of dormer windows in the rear elevation, followed by complete re-thatching in combed wheat reed. The roof was re-coated in 1988, but it had deteriorated quite rapidly and was in very poor condition when the current owners applied for listed building consent to re-thatch using water reed. Their request was based on the fact that wheat straw thatched roofs had failed twice since the early 1970s and that it would be much cheaper in the long run. They also claimed that water reed could be made to look indistinguishable from combed wheat reed, so there would be no adverse effect on the character or appearance of the cottage, nor any demonstrable harm to its special architectural or historic interest.

The traditional thatching material in South Somerset is cereal straw. Although water reed does grow along the banks of streams and ditches in some parts of the district, this would only ever have yielded small quantities of reed. It is estimated that it would have already been re-thatched in water reed, it could require reed from nine miles of streams to thatch a small cottage. It is more likely that such water reed would have been used for reed-and-plaster ceilings than for thatching. The archaeological evidence also supports the case for cereal straw being traditional thatching material.



The council's case was based on several key points with which the inspector agreed. First, the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 refers to protection of the 'character' of a listed building and not to protection of its 'appearance'. In its evidence the council included a definition of 'character' from the *Collins Concise Dictionary*, which defines it as 'the combination of qualities or traits distinguishing the individual nature of a person or thing'. Visual appearance may be only one of those traits. The council asserted that the legislation was deliberate in its subtle choice of wording and that it was intended to protect more than just visual qualities. The council noted that in previous thatching appeal decisions the two words had been used synonymously, and it argued that this was incorrect. Building conservation was not simply concerned with

Magdalen Cottage: an appeal against refusal to grant consent for re-thatching in water reed was dismissed.

whether things looked right but whether they were intrinsically authentic. Otherwise the results were simply replicas and pastiches of little historical value. The English Heritage guidance note pointed out

Two types of thatch: the relative qualities of different materials is a matter of controversy.



that the appearance of a weathered combed wheat reed roof and a weathered water reed roof might be similar, but this was not to say that the character of the two roofs was the same. The use of combed wheat reed for thatching Magdalen Cottage was the continuation of a practice that had been going on for about 600 years, since the house was built to the present day, and was a much more significant part of the building's special historic interest than its appearance. Changing the thatching material would break this link with tradition and would therefore harm the special historic interest of the house.

The inspector agreed with the English Heritage guidance that the 'character of a building derives both from the material and from the style of thatching employed' and concluded that 'a change in thatching material must be regarded as harmful to the character of the building'. The vital distinction between character and appearance, and consideration of the factors that contribute to the special historic interest of a listed building, could be helpful in other cases where the authenticity of proposed materials is an issue.

Second, the council challenged the appellants' claim that 'the experts estimate that water reed lasts approximately twice as long as combed wheat reed' and that 'the argument that water reed lasts longer than combed wheat reed is upheld in every reference on the subject'. These statements are simply untrue. There is violent debate within the thatching industry about the relative longevity of the different thatching materials. The experts are very far from agreeing that water reed lasts twice as long as combed wheat reed.

Magdalen Cottage (rear). The use of combed wheat reed for thatching the cottage was the continuation of a practice that had been going on for about 600 years.



There have been no empirical studies to establish the relative longevity of different materials, and the anecdotal evidence is inconclusive.

The district council's independent thatching consultant knows of cases in the south west where combed wheat reed has lasted an exceptionally long time and other cases where water reed has failed after only a few years. Similarly, not all references to thatching materials state that water reed lasts longer than combed wheat reed. In particular the two most thoroughly researched publications on thatch, the English Heritage Research Transactions on *Thatching in England* and Devon County Council's publication *Thatch in Devon* do not uphold that view.

The appellants also placed considerable importance on the 'authoritative advice' published by the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, which stated 'a water reed roof made by an expert thatcher will last up to 80 years in eastern Britain and 50 years in the wetter south west... the next most used material is cultivated wheat straw (which lasts for 10-20 years) (*Commercial uses of wild and traditionally managed plants*, RBG Kew, 2002). I contacted the author of the book and asked her on what evidence she had based the statement. She said they had simply copied it off a local authority web site and had made no effort to verify the information. She subsequently agreed to remove the relevant statements from their website but could do nothing about the published book.

The inspector accepted that research was still being undertaken into the longevity of the two thatching materials and stated that 'no firm conclusion can in my view be drawn on the time that a water reed roof is likely to last on this building'.

Third, the council considered the sustainability of using imported thatching materials and in particular the desirability of conserving the wider historic landscape, referring to PPG15. Paragraph 2.26 states: 'Plans should protect [the wider historic landscape's] most important components and encourage development that is consistent with maintaining its overall historic character. Indeed, policies to strengthen rural economy through environmentally sensitive diversification may be among the most important for its conservation'. The use of combed wheat reed for thatching is linked to several farming and landscape management practices; the production of wheat straw for thatching provides a means of diversification and income for local farmers; and coppicing of hazel to make spars, liggers and sways provides employment and maintains a centuries-old tradition of woodland management which contributes significantly to the landscape of South Somerset.

The inspector accepted that combed wheat reed of

sufficiently good quality might have to be imported in order to re-thatch Magdalen Cottage but concluded that 'a refusal to allow the use of water reed in this case could well help to foster the production of combed wheat reed in this area, and to sustain the local tradition'.



A thatch repair at Avebury Barn.

The appellants and their thatching consultant provided and fast information regarding longevity of thatching. Numerous quotes from published sources in support of their case. Figures published in the 1960s are relied on. Many of them were used out of context, and when the full and repeated ad nauseam. sentence or paragraph was read the author's meaning was often found to be quite different. Several of these quotes were included in their full context in support of the council's case. It is certainly worth checking the context of quotes used by appellants and their advisors, and even occasionally challenging authors. I was staggered when I discovered that the Kew statement was completely unsubstantiated. I, like the appellants, had assumed that such an institution must know what it was talking about. I think this is indicative of the lack of hard



A dormer in thatch. Planning inspectors accept that the choice of material may have impacts well beyond the building itself.

I think that another important factor in winning this appeal was that, in accordance with the English Heritage guidance, we had employed an independent thatching consultant to advise on the initial application, as well as to help with the appeal. I believe that his advice carried significant weight. He was able to provide detailed technical advice and that such an institution must know what it was talking about. I refute claims made by the appellants' thatcher. We also had a letter of support from English Heritage. It was good to see that the inspector gave considerable weight to the English Heritage guidance note, as this has not been the case in some other thatching appeals.

This decision has consolidated the council's approach to thatching, and has given officers and members greater confidence in dealing with similar requests for a change of thatch material. Last autumn members deferred consideration of a further two applications for consent to replace wheat straw with water reed until the outcome of the appeal was known. They subsequently refused consent. As I write, there are six days to go before the expiry of the period in which the applicants can appeal. It has been hard typing this with my fingers crossed.

The IHBC's technical subcommittee has had a very good response to the Thatching Policy Questionnaire sent to all local authorities earlier this year. Thank you to everyone who replied. The results are being collated and analysed, and will be presented in a future issue of Context. It is not too late to send in your form if you have not got round to it yet. All completed questionnaires received by the end of July will be entered into a draw to win a set of the English

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Heritage Research Transactions on thatch. We are also keen to hear about recent and future thatching appeal decisions: please send copies to Alison Henry at SSDC, Brympton Way, Yeovil BA20 2HT.