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BRIAN FRANKLIN

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**REPAIR OF OLD
BUILDINGS**

Consultation • Conservation • Repair

Cob walls, brick, flint & stone a specialty

Alan Shipway
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By email only: [REDACTED]

Dear Alan,

Thank you for asking us to visit Hackthorne Cottage to assess the condition of the cob. Please find attached our short report with our findings.

I hope all is clear, do get back to us if you have any further questions.

Yours sincerely,

Bernard Franklin

Cob Condition Report

Hackthorne Cottage (Grade II Listed), Durrington

Inspection Date: Thursday 8 January 2026

Prepared by: Brian Franklin & Son – Specialist Cob Practitioners

Summary

Hackthorne Cottage is a Grade II listed cob-built dwelling that suffered a significant fire in May 2025, resulting in the total loss of its thatched roof and prolonged exposure of the cob wall heads to the weather.

A non-intrusive visual inspection of the cob walls was undertaken internally and externally. While localised deterioration of the cob has occurred—principally at the exposed tops of the walls and in isolated internal areas—the extent of observed damage currently represents a limited proportion of the overall wall mass.

All the walls remain standing, broadly true and plumb, with no evidence of widespread or advanced structural failure. The damage observed is consistent with known modes of cob deterioration following prolonged exposure and moisture entrapment, particularly where impermeable modern materials are present.

In our professional opinion as experienced cob practitioners, the existing cob walls remain fundamentally viable and, subject to urgent weather protection and appropriately designed repairs, can be retained and repaired using established traditional techniques. On the basis of the evidence available at the time of inspection, demolition of the cob walls would appear premature.

1. Purpose of Report

This report provides a visual, non-intrusive condition assessment of the cob wall construction at Hackthorne Cottage following the fire of May 2025.

Its purpose is to:

- Record the observable condition of the cob walls
- Identify immediate risks arising from continued exposure
- Comment on the apparent viability and repairability of the existing cob fabric

This report does **not** constitute a structural appraisal, engineering assessment, valuation, or specification for remedial works, and should not be relied upon as such.

2. Scope and Limitations

- The inspection was non-intrusive and limited to cob visible at the time of the visit.
- Most wall surfaces are rendered or plastered; concealed cob could not be assessed.
- No opening-up works, moisture measurements, foundation inspections, or structural calculations were undertaken.
- The effects of thermal damage within the body of the walls due to fire exposure cannot be fully assessed without further investigation.
- Observations reflect the condition only at the date of inspection and may change if exposure continues.

Brian Franklin & Son are specialist practitioners in traditional cob construction and repair. We are not chartered structural engineers or surveyors. Opinions expressed are based on our experience of historic cob buildings and are offered in good faith within that remit.

3. Findings

3.1 Externally

- The external cement-based render remains largely intact and is currently affording a degree of protection to the underlying cob. A localised area of render failure is present at the east end of the cottage, where more pronounced cob decay is evident.
- The cement render and modern impermeable paint finishes prevent the cob from breathing, restricting evaporation of moisture arising from ground sources and rainfall ingress at the exposed wall heads.
- The flint plinth is also coated with modern paint, further impeding moisture movement at the base of the walls.
- Extensive cracking is present within the external render. Given the reported age of the render (approximately 20 years), it is considered that some cracking predates the fire, while other cracking appears more recent and is likely associated with increased moisture ingress and resultant movement within the cob or at the cob/render interface.
- The walls remain broadly true and plumb for a building of this age and construction. A slight inward lean above the front door on the principal elevation is considered to be historic rather than indicative of current progressive movement.
- No significant cracking is evident at the principal corners of the building, which are commonly the first locations to exhibit signs of serious instability. A minor vertical crack is present at the south-west corner and appears recent, indicating limited localised movement. Embedded wire mesh within the render may be restraining or masking movement.
- Deterioration of the cob itself is primarily confined to the exposed wall heads. Along the former eaves lines the cob is soft and locally degraded. This material is no longer structurally effective; however, the depth of erosion is relatively limited. In many areas the imprint of former rafters remains visible, indicating that substantial and coherent cob mass survives beneath the weathered surface.

3.2 Internally

- Ground floor walls are largely finished with cementitious and gypsum plasters and modern paints, further restricting breathability. At first floor level, areas of earlier lime plaster and limewash survive, though cement-based finishes have been introduced elsewhere.
- At ground floor level, the rear wall of the west end reception room exhibits significant deterioration of the internal plaster finish. Due to the unsafe condition of the fire-damaged ceiling above, closer inspection was not possible. It is considered possible that there is localised cob degradation in this area, potentially related to moisture ingress and/or additional loading from the primary floor beam.
- At high level on the west gable, internal render is bulging, with approximately 300mm (1ft) of cob decay visible above. Gable walls are particularly vulnerable, as cob wall heads are typically finished level rather than sloped, allowing render and plaster to trap moisture rather than shed it.

4. Risks and Safety Considerations

- While the walls currently remain standing and broadly stable, cob is vulnerable once saturated. Continued exposure may lead to progressive weakening and, in some circumstances, localised or more extensive collapse with limited warning.

- In its present condition, the building should be regarded as a potentially dangerous structure, and access should be carefully managed and restricted.

5. Recommendations

- Traditional cob buildings are known to perform well over long periods when provided with effective protection at roof and base level. Hackthorne Cottage currently lacks both.
- If the building is to be preserved, it is essential that temporary weather protection is installed as a matter of urgency.
- The preferred solution is a properly designed temporary roof structure that sheds water clear of all wall heads and internal spaces.
- Where this cannot be achieved immediately, robust temporary coverings to the tops of all cob walls should be installed as an interim measure, recognising that this is a less effective and higher-risk solution.
- Any subsequent repair strategy should be informed by further investigation and should follow conservation best practice, prioritising retention of historic fabric and the use of compatible, breathable materials.

6. Conclusion

- The cob walls at Hackthorne Cottage have suffered deterioration as a result of prolonged exposure following the fire, and this deterioration is ongoing.
- The observed decay currently represents a limited proportion of the overall wall mass.
- The majority of the cob walls remain in a viable condition.
- Based on established understanding of cob behaviour and repair, the damage observed is capable of repair, subject to appropriate investigation, protection, and workmanship.
- Provided that urgent weather protection is implemented and that repairs are carefully designed and executed in accordance with conservation principles, there is no inherent technical reason why Hackthorne Cottage cannot be repaired and retained, with substantial preservation of its historic cob fabric, rather than being demolished and rebuilt.