

TRANSCRIPT OF LETTER FROM NATIONAL SOCIETY OF MASTER THATCHERS

Dear Sir,

I would like to add to Ben Obese-Jecty MP's recent question put to Secretary of State for Housing and Planning Matthew Pennycook MP, on Monday 20th January in the House with regard to the enduring thatching straw shortage.

Over the last few years we have been seeing a trend of continuing shortages of thatching straw. This has been putting thatchers to the test to manage their materials and order books, to ensure their customers can get an acceptable service.

Recent information suggests that thatching straw will run out around March leaving several months without the resources needed to maintain the thatched properties of the country. In fact many suppliers cannot fulfil orders now.

The straw shortage has been due to recent changes of weather patterns where we are seeing over wet conditions when sowing and germination are expected, drought condition in spring when growth should be at its best and then a return to the wet conditions when harvesting should be carried out. This is resulting in poor quality and less than the necessary quantity of straw needed to sustain the industry.

The effect this is having on the industry is many fold. Customers are having to wait for unacceptable periods of time which is causing unnecessary damage to their properties. Thatchers are considering early retirement or entering different employment. Straw producers are considering their futures growing such a risky crop. Training of new thatchers is at risk of stopping. The heritage buildings of Britain are now at risk of irreparable damage due to their roofs failing to protect the history underneath.

Thatch has evolved over the centuries and has had to survive many changes. Climate, the industrial revolution and mechanisation of agriculture. Thatchers are good at adapting when they have to and have been doing that throughout time doing what is best for each property. We don't mean removing thatch to have it replaced with tile or slate. Thatchers are passionate about their craft and are proud custodians of this area of heritage.

Thatchers have used many different materials throughout history with a list that includes heather, marram grass, gorse, Norfolk reeds and sedge. Each material having different characteristics but resulting in an organic roof covering, skilfully applied to protect the property beneath from rain damage and other elements. Not all of these materials are in common use today because the expectations of home dwellers have also changed with the times and the more durable of the materials have taken pride of place. Now straw thatch is at risk!

Straw for thatching is generally a winter wheat or a hybrid of wheat and rye which produces a straw of around 1m long. The varieties grown are usually from farm saved seed sown in the autumn. Having a long growing season results in a strong stem. If this stem is subjected to strong wind or drought then the stems could lodge, blow over if the roots are insecure in sodden soil or have irregular growth which causes doglegged straw which is of little use for thatching.

Water reeds grow on the wetlands and marshes around the country often in areas where conservation groups work hand in hand with reed cutters. The reeds are harvested during the winter to avoid disturbance to nesting birds and damage to the new shoots of the next years growth. Because Britain only produces 3-5% of the water reed needed for thatching, much is imported from overseas. Although imports are not an

ideal situation it is giving a breathing space to increase British production and keep the tradition of thatching alive. The actual material is *Phragmites Australis* and is the same material seen across the globe. There are plentiful supplies in Eastern Europe, Turkey and as far away as China.

Both Cereal Straw and Water Reed have been the usual thatching materials used in Britain for many decades due to their availability and durability but both are at threat in the UK for many various reasons.

There is a serious risk that thatching and Thatched Heritage Assets are at risk of becoming a museum collection.

Is there a solution? Well, simply yes.

We could use Water Reed. As supply is good, what is stopping thatchers from using water reed thatch? Because thatch is often found on listed properties or in conservation areas and the like, a change to the thatching material requires Listed Building Consent and this is rarely given. Changing from straw thatch to water reed thatch is deemed to change the 'character' of these heritage assets as set out in the National Planning Policy Framework.

The actual work involved for a thatcher to change material requires a small amount of the existing thatch to be removed, in the same way as a thatcher would do if thatching with straw, and covering over the historic layers beneath to protect them for future generations, with a layer of water reeds. Thatchers don't believe this to be detrimental to the value of these fine vernacular buildings and far less damaging.

The National Society of Master Thatchers has been working with Historic England (the advisers to the government) since November 2024, to find a way that Listed Building Consent can be relaxed temporarily and application for change is readily given. However, this is proving more difficult than they expected.

It is our hope that Matthew Pennycook MP can act swiftly to enable this request for temporary relaxation to save thatching and thatched heritage buildings. If this is another stage in the evolution of thatching perhaps we should welcome it rather than fight it.

Yours faithfully

Andrew Raffle and Nigel Turton - Directors of National Society of Master Thatchers Ltd