



Types of covering used for Thatched Buildings

When it comes to the type of materials used in thatched roofs there are a number of different options available. Traditionally, materials were selected for use because they were easily available locally. Some types of covering like woodchip which was found in Sussex and was very popular have now fallen in to disuse. Nowadays with excellent transport links, the location of the reeds is not such an important factor.

Combed Wheat Reed

Combed Wheat Reed thatch is also known as Devon Reed and it is the most widely used type of thatching material in Devon and the West Country.

Reeds are harvested whilst young, making them more hardwearing, then bundled, stacked and combed to remove the ears. This combed reed is then laid on to the roof in thick bundles with the sharp ends, called “butts”, protruding to aid carrying water away from the roof.

The appearance of Combed Wheat Reed thatching is rounded as the wheat is soft and pliable. Hazel branches called “spars” are used to hold the thatch in to place on the ridge of the roof. These “spars” are often patterned to add decoration.

Combed Wheat Reed thatch has a lifespan of approximately 25 years, but may require some repair and maintenance after 15-20 years.

It is interesting to note that not all wheat reed is actually wheat. It may also be Triticale which is a wheat-rye cross, or it may be rye straw.

Long Straw Thatch

Long Straw thatch usually uses wheat straw, although sometimes it may be rye straw or sedge can be found to be mixed in. The straw is specially cultivated so that the stems are taller than 70cm. and it is then threshed to remove the grain from the ear. It remains uncombed. After threshing the straw is shaken on to a layered bed and is made wet before shaking out occurs. “Yealms” which are compacted layers are made ready to go on to the roof. As the heads and butts lie in different directions this type of thatch has a much coarser appearance. Hazel spars are used to control the thatch and it may even be covered by netting after it has been finished by raking, hand plucking or clipping.

Long Straw thatch has a lifespan of up to 25 years, perhaps needing some repair after 15-20 years.

Water Reed

Water Reed, or Norfolk Reed, is now commonly used to thatch new roofs as well as to replace existing ones. Traditionally, this type of thatching was used in marshy wetland areas such as the Norfolk Broads and the Fens where the reed grows naturally. Nowadays the reeds may be imported from all over Europe as well as from China and Africa.

Water Reed plants grow to heights of up to 2.5 meters and are harvested low down on the stem. The bunches of reeds are very tight and they, therefore, require an even surface on which to be applied. This is usually the timber roof structure, but can sometimes also be applied to an existing layer of thatch. The bunches are applied horizontally to the roof and are then pushed up in to position so that the butt ends face downwards. They are fixed by means of “sways” which are horizontal rods. As Water Reed is not pliable the roof ridge is done with sedge or straw.

The appearance of this type of roof is even and angular as the hard stems give a straight edge. The roof is not as thick as straw ones, but as the reeds are longer and harder than wheat this type of thatch may last up to 50 years.

Heather

Heather has long been used where it grows locally, such as in Scotland and the moorland areas of England. Long stemmed heather is the most suitable for thatching and the entire plant is used. It is tied up in to bundles and fixed to the roof with the roots pointing downwards. It may further be secured by netting and, in Scotland, it is common to see ropes with weighted stones attached. Modern ways of cutting the heather rather than uprooting it can still provide thatching.

Marram Grass

Marram grass has been used as a thatching material in the Hebrides and also in exposed coastal areas. It is ideal in these places as marram grass can withstand the force of high winds which contain sand. However, cutting down marram grass can be damaging to the sand dunes that provide a natural defence against coastal erosion.

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