

Newton St Cyres History Group

January Meeting

Many of us in Devon have experience of thatched houses, living or having lived under a thatched roof, and so there was a great deal of interest in our talk on Thursday 16th January, our first in 2014. Jo Cox, from Keystone Historic Buildings Consultants in Exeter, came to talk to us about Devon Thatch. Jo has co-authored several publications about thatch and was commissioned by Devon County Council to write a book 'Devon Thatch', with John Thorp, and then to produce the Devon County Council advisory leaflet for thatch owners. She also has a wide experience in historic buildings research throughout the country, and so we were in safe hands and very fortunate that she came to share some of her knowledge with us.



Any long stemmed plant material can be used for roofing, and has been since prehistory. Seaweed, sedge, heather, even broad bean plants have been used if they are to hand, as well as the more familiar hay and straw thatches. Furthermore, thatch does not have to be the thick and permanent roofing we are used to, but before the days of tarpaulins was often used as a thin and short-lived temporary covering, to protect farm machinery over the winter, or cover a clamp. There is documentary evidence that thatch covers were built on posts which enabled them to move up and down to protect, say, a wood pile which would vary in height as it was used, but no examples have survived here. Thatch was used on humble cottages and large houses, but in Devon there was always the alternative of slate, and in quite a few cases, a hybrid roof was built with slate edgings, to take the worst of the run-off. In fact, it is unlikely that this helped much as the thatch was prone to rotting above the slate where it could not 'breathe' properly.

England retains the strongest thatching tradition in Europe, and Devon has by far the most thatched buildings in England; however, this is more a question of what has survived than what was originally in the country, as it is estimated that England has lost 90% of its thatched roofs since 1862. The majority of these thatches would have been on farm buildings, and as thatching became more and more expensive, so it became uneconomic to replace them, although in the last 25 years, wealthier non-farmers who have bought old properties have replaced thatch.

The traditional thatch in Devon is combed straw, which was sensible to use as it was the by-product of a mixed farming economy. The combing process was done to keep the stems all going the same way and with the leaf removed, to produce a bundle, or 'nitch', of straight clean stalks. The longevity of a roof would depend on the strength of the material and the skill of the thatcher. It must be even if it is to last in a wet climate, as dips will cause pooling and rot, and Devon is in many ways unsuitable for thatch, with its high rainfall and damp winds, compared to the drier climate of the east of England. The bundles are always laid to shed the water by the shortest possible distance, so they turn at the eaves to shed to the sides. The areas round chimneys and dormers are problematic, and will tend to decay more quickly, again because the water will tend to collect in corners, and where the material changes to cob or brick or slate.

An interesting point made by Jo was that in the past roofs were very rarely re-thatched completely, as we are used to today. Instead, most farmers would patch and cover weak areas every year, so there was a continuous process of repair going on, and the longevity of a roof was not an issue, as there was always a man at hand able to patch a leaking roof. Because of this, some very old thatch remains in Devon, from as far back as the fourteenth century. There are many examples of smoke blackening on rafters and the interior of the thatch, dating from houses built without chimneys but with a central hearth, and Jo showed us a rare example of a smoke hole, clearly visible because it had been thatched over with clean material when a chimney was built and the roof was sealed in. Furthermore, the tons of ancient crop material in these old thatches forms the largest archeobotanical resource in Europe, with a record of plant material and crops grown, as well as the bramble, hazel and honeysuckle staves and ties used to secure the roof.

Twentieth century farming methods have been a disaster for thatch, because cereal varieties have been grown for high yields and short stalks, and the reaping methods also crush the stems. A reed comb attachment was developed for stationary threshing machines, and these are still used to produce thatching straw, but need 8 – 12 men to operate, and so are an expensive system. Bureaucratic control of seed sales is another restriction, making it difficult to obtain seed suitable for long straw crops. Thatching is a tiny percentage of the market, which is entirely geared to grain production, and so there is little incentive to grow the right material. Instead of being a by product of a traditional farming system, thatching straw is now an expensive commodity.

Jo pointed out at the beginning of her talk, that the study of thatch has led her into looking into farming methods, plant breeding, genetic modification, the effect of nitrates on fungal growth, the draining of wetlands, economic pressures, and other matters which all impinge on the use of thatch in the past, present and future. But the basic idea of growing your own roof is a wonderful and satisfying tradition, and Jo ended her talk with a photograph of the splendid long run of thatch on the cottages which used to run down the north side of Newton St Cyres village.

Next meetings

Meetings are usually on Thursday evenings in the village hall club room and start at 7.30pm. We have no special membership arrangements. Everyone is welcome. There is a small charge of £2 which includes tea and biscuits.

For further information contact Jean 851337 Isobel 851351

Mar 20th Main Hall Caradoc Doy on 'Plant Hunters and Veitch Nurseries'
Combined talk with Gardening Club and Friends of the Arboretum

Apr 10th Judi Binks Devon on WW1 : impact on farming, communities and women

May 15th Chris Southcott, Tim Sedgwick and Malcolm Brooks will be presenting an evening on 'Newton St Cyres and the Exeter Crediton Railway' and would be glad if anyone has photos, information or memories they would be able to contribute before that date. They will soon be giving details and contacts in the Newton Wonder.

Chris Southcott is interested in any memorabilia about the Newton St Cyres football club,