



Get a Good Hat on Your House

STORY: Sue Rawle

Devonshire folk are renowned for their sayings and readers may be familiar with the one I am going to quote now: "All cob needs is a good hat and a good pair of boots". Traditionally the hat was thatch whilst of course the boots were provided by a stone plinth on which the cob was built.

Times may have changed since these cob buildings were first built but the principle remains the same. Any house, whatever its construction, needs a roof that is weatherproof and a solid foundation, or else it won't be standing for long.

The roof of any property has a major influence on the character of the house and

immediate environment, so if you own or are considering purchasing an older property, especially one that may be Listed, then seek expert advice as to how to proceed before undertaking any repair work that might alter the look of the house.

As traditional builders, we specialise in restoring older properties, some of which are thatched whilst others have natural slate

roofs. I think it's a fair comment to say that most traditional builders will always try to work with the natural build materials of the property and this includes the roof. One would not wish to see heavy red cement tiles on a period cottage, although sad to say, we have seen that done. The work in question would have probably been carried out before the Listed Buildings act which



LEFT: Although it looks in a poor state, this roof had kept the rain out. **ABOVE:** New roof under construction.
BELOW: Despite the roof being in need of repair, this annexe has stayed dry inside.

began in 1950. Inspection of the roof space showed the rafters bowing under the excess weight of the tiles, so anyone purchasing the property would have needed to make the roof a priority. As the cottage dates back to approximately the mid 1500's, it's a fair bet the roof was originally thatched. The sheer weight of cement tiles makes them a highly unsuitable choice of material when roofing a stone and cob cottage, especially one that is Listed, and today of course this type of work would not be allowed.

To give an extreme example of what can happen when a roof has not been kept in good repair, last year we were called to undertake a consultation on a badly neglected Listed Property that was thatched, or just about! Overall, the property was in very poor condition, the roof being the worst of all.

The thatch above the kitchen was almost non-existent, so much so, the roof had collapsed along with part of the back cob

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ABOVE: The overhang of this roof has kept the cob dry and stable. **BELOW:** Slates on and Watertight!

wall, allowing the garden to encroach inside. Amongst the kitchen units were stinging nettles, ivy, and a cascade of wild clematis, it was like something out of a horror film. Upstairs, it got even worse as over the years

the rain coming through the roof had rotted part of the landing floor boards, making it unsafe to walk to the far end of the corridor.

In instances like this you need to have a deep pocket and an insatiable desire to

restore the whole of the property back to its former glory. It can be done with the right expertise but as in all things that are worth doing, it will take time and knowledge to put right half a century or more of neglect. When I see a property in such a bad state, and thankfully it's not very often that we see one as bad as this, it reminds me of another saying, "All for the want of a horse shoe nail." If the thatch had been kept in good repair, the rest of the house would have been saved from its semi derelict state and a huge repair bill.

Last year we undertook work in gutting an annexe and rebuilding it, complete with a new roof. Although it looked in poor repair, it was in fact dry inside, despite the roofing felt having numerous holes. The Cornish slates had done their job and kept out the elements over the past one hundred years. Before this the property was thatched as we saw by a very early photograph, however as it was not Listed the owners were allowed to use natural slate to replace the old roof. It's simple by design and in keeping with its environment and the neighbouring properties and of course, more to the point, protects the occupants and their home. By using vernacular methods of construction and locally available resources in a traditional T style, the roof is atypical



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of the area. Originally Cornish Rag Slate would have been used in many instances, but unfortunately it's becoming increasingly difficult to find.

Another project saw us removing an old roof and rebuilding the cob walls before we could install three new A frames which we had made especially for the roof space. In Anglo Saxon times, plain pitched roofs would have been built on cruck frames that extended down to the floor, but by the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the use of so much timber and the change in farming methods, saw the decline of this type of building. Thankfully there are craftsmen who have the knowledge and skill to still make these beautiful frames today.

We love to see the use of natural timber in old buildings and it fits so well with cob and lime mortar. Whether it's being used for beams, lintels, doors or windows, timber has a lovely warm quality that is so in keeping with older houses. Of course, like so many restoration assignments, the project can appear to be slow at the start. To begin with the old roof sat perilously on top of cob walls that were in a state of disrepair. It had been badly built and wasn't set on to



ABOVE: Before work begins removing existing roof and replacing with thatch. **BELOW:** New thatch has replaced old roof.

a wall plate but rather straight onto the bare cob. The old roof didn't have a large enough overhang to protect the cob underneath and so little by little, the cob was getting damp, disintegrating and becoming unstable.

So having first removed the old roof, we were able to stabilize the cob walls and

rebuild them up to the right level before fitting new wall plates for the roof timbers to sit on. We then installed 3 bespoke A frames, and called in a roofing specialist to lay new slates, as we are great believers in working with people who have skill sets that complement our own.





ABOVE: New Thatch and looking a picture. **BELOW:** Wood and Lime Mortar make good bedfellows.

I expect there are a plethora of roofing stories to be told, like the time we found a colony of bats which had been living undisturbed for many years. The client did say the room directly underneath often carried an odd smell- now we know why.

Birds frequently inhabit roof spaces, along with their resident food supply of spiders

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and moths, so you never quite know what you are going to find and for us, that's part of the charm.

As we see it, our job is to take a sympathetic approach to the building and do what is right for its longevity and historical value. We are happy to guide and advise customers as to the materials they should use, and why they should use them. It's very heartening to discover that possibly thanks to a resurgence of interest in TV programmes such as Grand Design and The Restoration Man; many more people seem to be aware and interested in making sure their property is renovated using the correct materials.

The moral of the story is, 'Keep a Good Hat on Your House' and it will save you a lot of expense in the future.

If your property is Listed, please contact your local authority and speak to the conservation/historic buildings officer before you begin any work as its imperative that you act in accordance with the rules that govern Listed buildings.

