

THE GREAT BARN, AVEBURY.

An independent report on the 2013 re-thatch in Combed Wheat Reed.

The following report arose from two questions put to Wilts C.C. Conservation Department.

Did the National Trust obtain Listed Building consent for the change of material from Long Straw to Combed Wheat Reed on the Grade One listed threshing barn before the 2013 re-thatch?

Is the present condition of the thatch a concern & are any steps being taken to establish the cause of the premature deterioration?

Later research validated my questions & exposed The Trust's failure to follow expert advice relating to the Grade 1 listed Barns thatched roof, leading to breaches of Listed Buildings Regulations.



The Great Barn before restoration circa 1960

The late 17th Century timber framed two bay threshing barn was saved from demolition by Sir John Betjeman, Lord Moyne & others in 1960.

The barn was classified as a building of exceptional interest & received a Grade 1 listing in 1966.

Now jointly managed by The National Trust, Wiltshire C.C, English Heritage & Historic England, several issues have negatively impacted the barn in recent years which the management committee seem reluctant to resolve.



1940's image of The Great Barn thatched in Long Straw

The report is presented in two parts:

Part 1: Presents an argument in support of Long Straw being the correct thatching style and material to comply with Listed Buildings Regulations.

Part 2: Presents an argument in support of poor workmanship and materials being the prime cause of the roof's failure.

Part 1: Presenting evidence in support of the argument Long Straw is the correct thatching material to comply with Listed Buildings regulations.

When considering if Long Straw or Combed Wheat Reed is the correct material, the rule “A Listed thatched building must maintain the same type of material & style of thatch as was used at the time of Listing” has been the determining factor.

The Great Barn in Avebury is recorded as being Listed Grade 1 in 1966.

The two 1970's photographs below show horizontal hazelwood strapping along the eaves & applicable only to Long Straw thatching. Wear to the block ridge & coat work indicates the roof to be approximately 10 years old. Both front elevation projections were tiled at the time of listing in 1966.



Historical context in support of Long Straw being the correct material.

1959 - 1961. A collection of correspondence between John Betjeman, Sir Francis Knowles, Lord Methuen, Lord Moyne, Baroness Violet Bonham Carter, Sir Robert Wheeler & Joan Evans President & Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries voicing their concerns regarding the poor condition of The Great Barn & confirming it was to be thatched with two coats of Long Straw.

November 1960. Letter from Lord Moyne discussing funding for the barn's restoration.

COPY

DIRECTORS' OFFICE
ST. JAMES'S GATE
DUBLIN

21st November 1960

My dear *Richard*,

Thank you very much for your letter of 18th November. I will pass what you say on to John Betjeman, Paul Methuen and the architect.

I cannot of course make any guess as to what the architect will think, but when it comes to the question of finance I do not agree that an endowment fund has anything to do with the duty of the National Trust and the Ministry to repair the Barn.

This old Barn was accepted by the National Trust in conjunction with the Ministry of Works and carries its own burden of responsibility. It seems to me that it should have been repaired in the ordinary way as an agricultural building. That is what has preserved it for us all through the centuries. Regular thatching is the only thing which can keep such a building in repair. This duty has been neglected; a great deal of false argument has been made that it needed to be pulled down for agricultural purposes. As you know, this has proved without foundation. The Trust and the Ministry in the past have failed to discharge their responsibility. If they were not prepared to keep the Barn in repair they ought not to have accepted it, neither ought money to have been collected from the public for preserving the village of Avebury if that duty was to be neglected. The remedy now seems to be to make a public appeal; as far as an endowment fund goes it is surely a matter of maintaining this old and interesting agricultural building once it is put into proper repair by simply thatching it every few years.

I know the Trust has put up new agricultural buildings for the tenant, and I do know also that the tenant finds the large covered space represented by the Barn exceedingly useful, even though so much rain now comes in through the deplorable condition into which the roof has been allowed to get.

Contd./-

I know I am repeating much of what I said before in writing all this but I am anxious to get this question of an endowment fund in its proper perspective. I know that the Trust does not usually accept property without an endowment fund, but that does not discharge from its responsibility towards property which it has accepted.

Yours ever,

(Signed) BRYAN

Copies to: The Lord Methuen,
Corsham Court, Wiltshire.

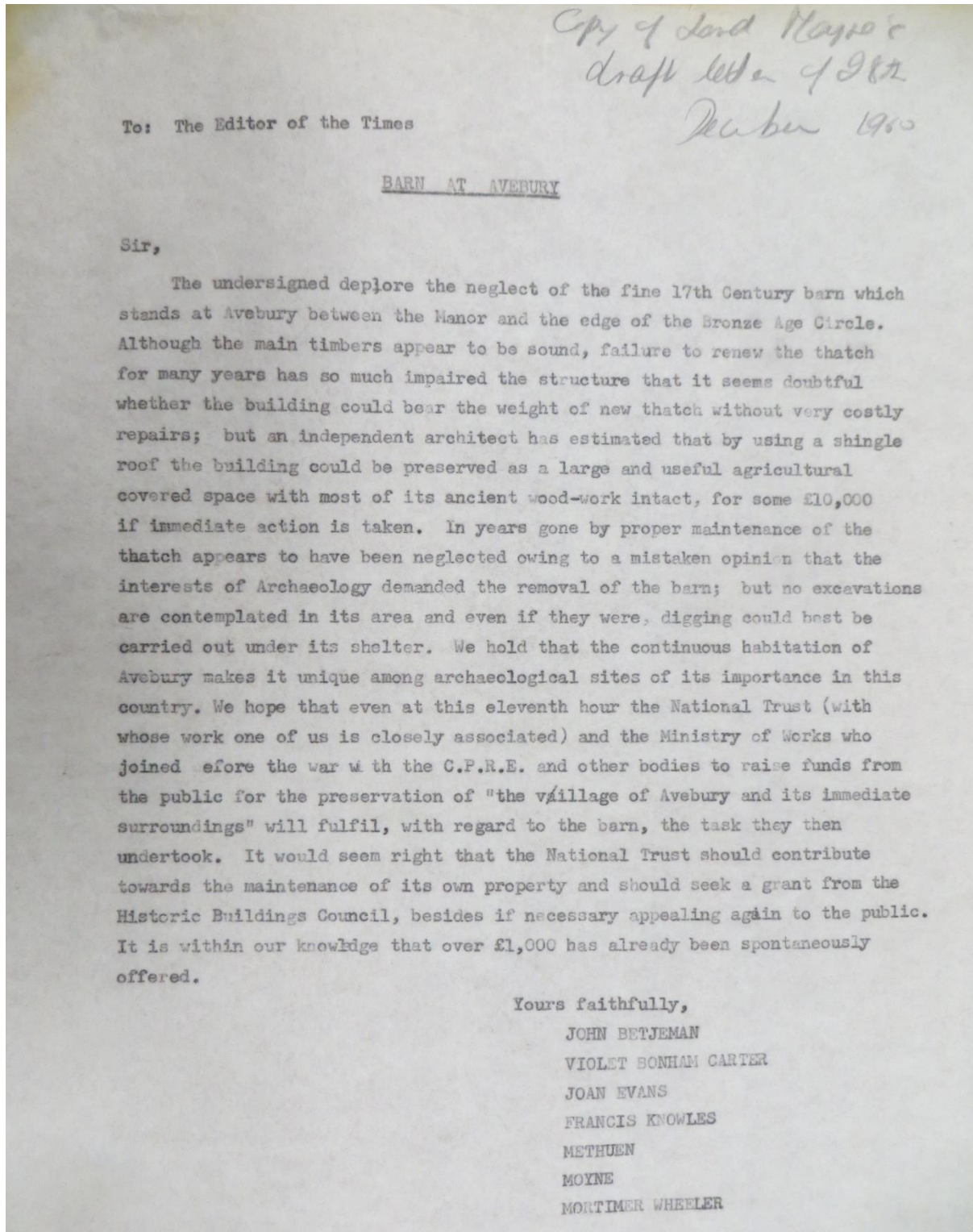
John Betjeman, Esq.,
The Mead, Wantage, Berks.

Robert Reedman, Esq.,
The Mill, Lock's Lane,
Wantage, Berks.

The Earl of Rosse,
Birr Castle,
Offaly.

CDW.

December 1960: Letter to the Editor of The Times commenting on the poor state of the barn.



February 1961: Mr. Dunning's estimate to Lord Moyne. To repair roof timbers & re-thatch the whole roof with "two coats of straw". References to strapping the eaves confirms the material to be used is Long Straw.

COPY OF ESTIMATE. 6th February, 1961.

To: Lord Moyne For The National Trust.

DR. to J. Dunning.

of Tandridge, Amesbury Road,
Weyhill, Andover, Hants.

Phone Weyhill 425.

Estimate for Re-roofing The Barn at the Manor Farm, Avebury, Wilts.

Stripping roof of some of the broken 4" x 2" rafters.
Supplying and fitting new ones. Supplying and fixing
new ones where they are already missing.
Covering roof with 2" x 1" Battens.
Supplying and fixing new eave plate.
Tying on thatch to the rafters and building up ridge
another foot. Re-thatching the whole roof over again.
Supplying all straw, spars, barge, hooks and tar twine.
Supplying and covering the whole of the roof with $\frac{3}{4}$ "
wire netting. Supplying galvanised fixing wire for
holding netting wire to the roof.

Haulage of straw, wire spars and Ladders included in
the estimate. £5,500 Os. Od.

I myself guarantee this roof for a
life of 18 years. (Signed) J. DUNNING.

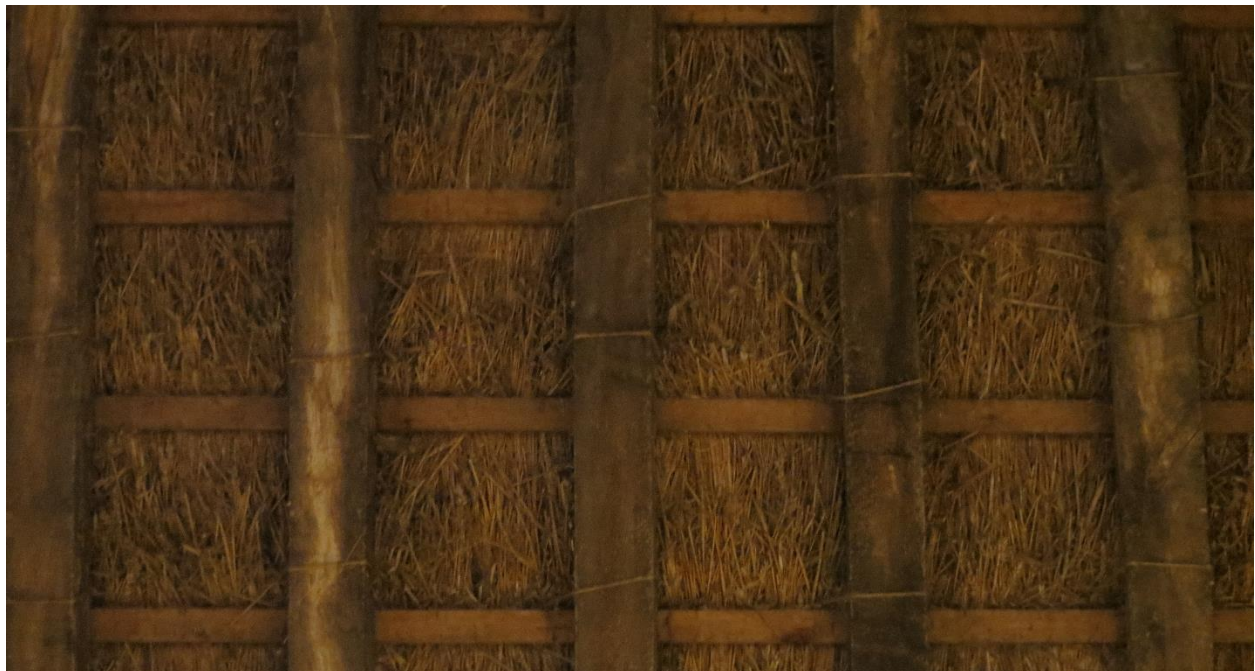
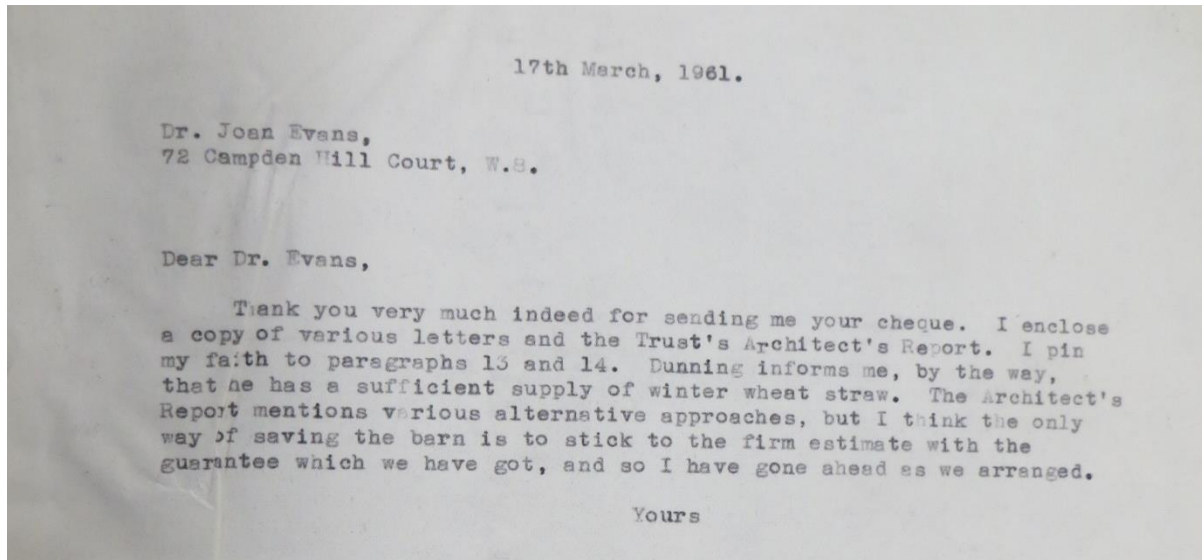
NOTE BY MR. DUNNING ON HIS ESTIMATE.

I would expect the roof to last for 20 to 22 years: if anything needs
renewing before 18 years are up I will make it good free of charge. After
the 20 to 22 years I would expect that only the recapping of the ridge,
and resparring of the eaves would be necessary and that this would carry
on the roof for another 5 or 6 years, after which rethatching with one
layer of straw would be necessary. I looked round and examined the main
timbers of the building and found them quite sound and the walls and the
weather boarding all of which are in good condition. The walls seemed to
me to be as firm as a rock and I could see no trouble in their foundations.
I am quite sure that if the thatched roof is put back and kept on, the
building will be safe for hundreds of years.

(Signed) J. DUNNING

7/2/61.

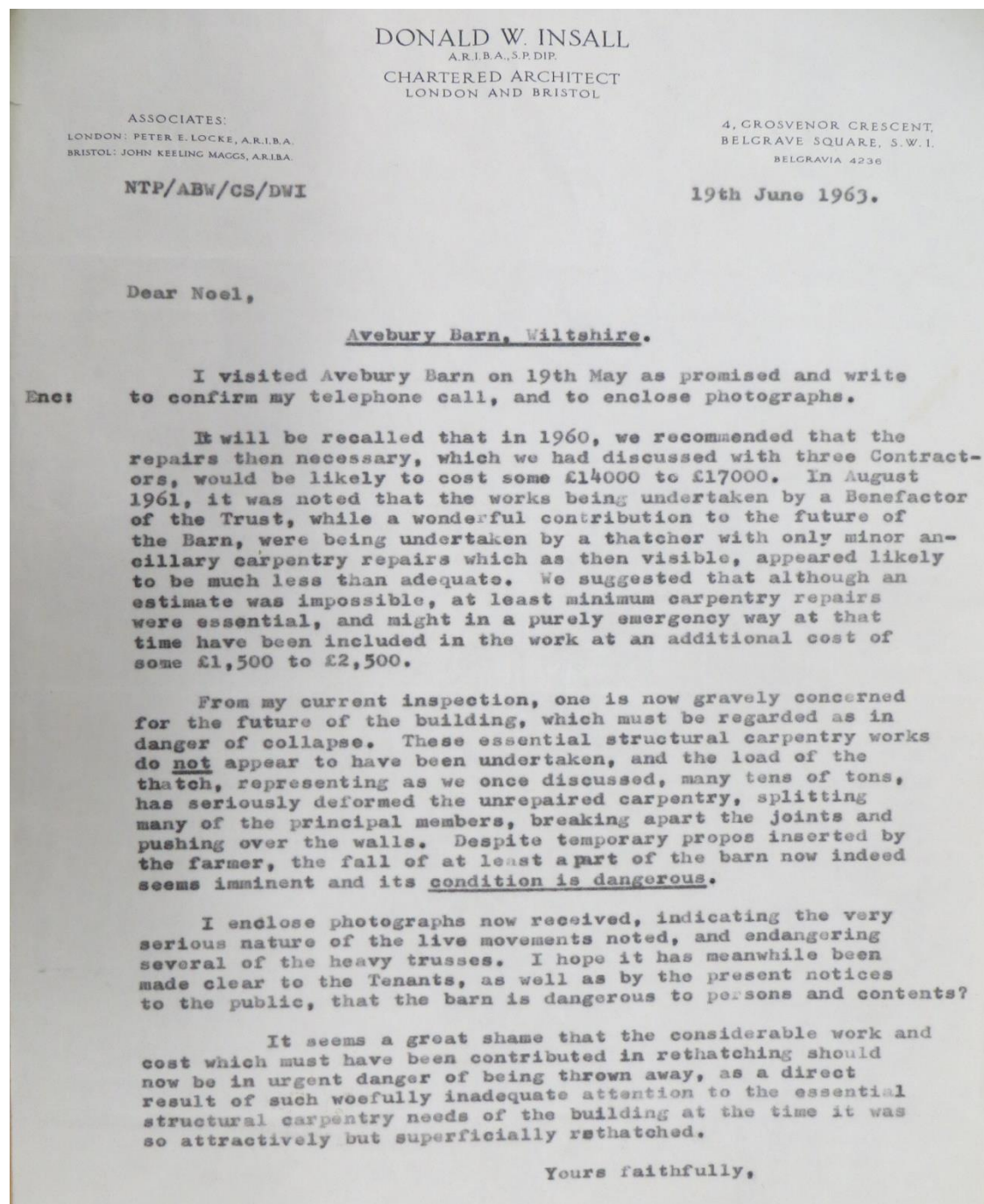
March 1961: Letter to Dr. Joan Evans confirming Mr. Dunning has straw & is contracted to carry out the re-thatch. Refers to the 18-year guarantee given by Mr. Dunning.



The image shows 2"x 1" battens with Long Straw basecoat tied to rafters using tarred twine as described in Mr. Dunning's estimate of 6th February 1961.

Further letters of interest.

June 1963: Two years after re-thatching & repairs to roof timbers. Letter to The National Trust from Donald Insall stating, against his recommendations, The National Trust chose a cheaper alternative which had failed to stabilize the structure, rendering the barn "in danger of collapse".



March 1969: 8 years after re-thatching completed. Wilts County Council Survey of Countryside "Treasures". Completed by Avebury W.I. states the thatch is leaking & the West wall is crumbling.

<p>WILTSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL Survey of Countryside Treasures Questionnaire</p>	<p>Parish of <u>Avebury</u>..... Item No: Date of <u>March, 1969</u> Survey:</p>
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1. Brief Description or Name:
Great Thatched barn at Avebury Manor Farm

2. Location and how to find it:
Behind the church and dove-cote
National Grid Reference:

3. Owner and/or Occupier: Owner: The National Trust
(Names & Addresses)
(if unoccupied, please say so) Occupier: D. Farthing, Esq.,
 Manor Farm, Avebury

4. Is it already protected - e.g. ~~A-listed building / A-scheduled ancient monument /~~
~~Owned by the National Trust / Subject to Tree Preservation Order or Building~~
~~Preservation Order / Etc.~~
Not on the given list. Presumably protected, as
belonging to the National Trust.

5. Condition:

(a) Is it Good, Fair, Poor:- Fair.

(b) Is it in need of attention now:- Yes, roof is leaking.

(c) Does anyone look after it now? If so, who:- ?

(d) If it is an ancient monument which is an earthwork in a field,
is the field in arable cultivation or pasture? Arable/Pasture

(e) Any additional comments as to its maintenance:-

6. Any other Comments:
The oldest part of this building is the sarsen wall at the western end, which is already beginning to crumble & fall. Needs attention soon if it is to be kept in reasonable repair. Much money was spent on thatching the roof, but only after the roof timbers had been open to the sky for some time.
This is the last barn of its kind in Avebury, which once had at least six.
Signed: Avebury W.I......
over →

Conservation Guide Notes: Thatching. - (Kennet District Council 2007).

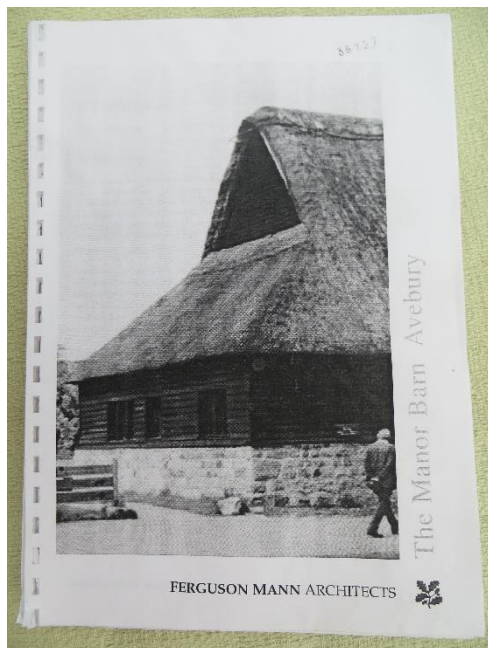
“Within the Kennet district the council has agreed a steady trickle of roofs restored back to their original long straw appearance, including a National Trust project at the Great Barn in Avebury.” Ian Lund. Conservation Officer, K.D.C.

<https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/le756x01e4mvtlwt5r9le/KDC-Thatching-Committee-Draft.doc-Ian-Lund..pdf?rlkey=9e4t43f13k9emeeos8bkrszcq&dl=0>

THE MANOR BARN, AVEBURY. Ferguson Mann Architects report.

1998. Ferguson Mann Architects comprehensive 54-page report clearly states:

“The current thatch on the roof is combed wheat, with a raised ridge which was laid in the late 70's. The thatch indigenous to the area is long straw and the ridge would originally have been flush with the roof. Both the material and the style should be re-instated when the barn is rethatched.”



Copies available from Wiltshire Buildi

<https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/e19g2rlptgu650uyhd51d/FERGUSON-MANN-ARCHITECTS-REPORT-Avebury-barn.pdf?rlkey=21pv4axxzsgk5xlu2wl5hfupw&st=g197grz2&dl=0>

Email exchanges with Wilts C.C. Conservation Dept. seeking clarification regarding the recent change of materials on the Grade 1 listed barn from Long Straw to Combed Wheat Reed & raising concerns regarding the thatched roofs current poor state of repair.

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Email of 3 June 2021: From Wilts C.C. Conservation Department stating a) the Ferguson Mann report clearly records evidence the barn had been entirely thatched in Combed Wheat Reed, probably introduced in the 1960's and b) the quality of work carried out on a Grade One Listed building is something that cannot be controlled under Listed Buildings Regulations.

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Thu, Jun 3, 2021 10:45 am

Garside, Helen (Helen.Garside@wiltshire.gov.uk)

Dear Alan,

Thank you for your email. I hope you are well?

I know we have corresponded previously with regard to the Great Barn at Avebury which was added to the List in 1966 and is currently listed at Grade I. It is not, however, part of the scheduled monument – whilst it lies within the mapped area of the Avebury Henge monument, the scheduling clearly states that “Excluded from the scheduling are all road and paving surfaces, boundary fences and walls, standing buildings, sign posts, septic tanks and other modern features, although the ground beneath all these features is included.”

You will recall that I carried out research at the time of the thatching work in 2013. The files for the late 1990s programme of repair and refurbishment of the Great Barn included a supporting report compiled by Ferguson Mann Architects which clearly records evidence that the barn was one of those buildings which had been entirely thatched in combed wheat reed, probably introduced by the 1960s. The 1999 consent allowed for the change of the south slope and east hip to the more locally distinctive long straw style, the other slopes not requiring immediate attention at that time.

Your enquiry relates to the legitimacy of thatching works which were carried out in 2013 in combed wheat reed. In considering potentially unauthorized works, a key date in the legislation is the date of listing and no enforcement action has the power to return a building back to a state which it was in previous to listing ie prior to the date at which works to the building were first brought under control. In this case the building was entirely covered in combed wheat reed at the time of listing and for a considerable period thereafter and the National Trust could legitimately have taken the decision not to implement the consent granted in 1999 for a partial change in style – they could simply have continued to re-thatch like for like in combed wheat reed as existed at the time of listing. On this basis the Council did not consider (based on legal advice) that it would be expedient to attempt to pursue an enforcement action to seek the removal of the new thatch which has been applied in order to require a return of the south and east slopes to long straw.

You have also referred to the quality of the thatching works which were carried out. This has, in your view, since resulted in premature deterioration of the roof. Unfortunately, this is not something which can be controlled under listed building legislation - it is a matter between the contractor and the procurer of the works, in this case the National Trust, and I would suggest that you contact them directly if you wish to discuss this matter.

Kind Regards,
Helen Garside
Principal Conservation Officer

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Email of 31st Aug 2021: Requesting a copy of The Ferguson Mann report and a site meeting to discuss the standard of workmanship & quality of materials used on the 2013 re-thatch & show evidence in support of the argument the barn was thatched in Long Straw at the time of listing.
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Sent: 31 August 2021 10:03
To: Garside, Helen <Helen.Garside@wiltshire.gov.uk>
Subject: Re: Glebe Barn Avebury Thatch.

Dear Mrs Garside,

Thank you for your reply,
I would be grateful if you could supply copies of the files referred to below of the 1990's repair & refurbishment of the Great Barn, including the supporting report compiled by Ferguson Mann Architects, which records evidence that the barn was entirely thatched in Combed Wheat Reed at the time of listing.

Other issues with the 2013 re-thatch are:

The destruction of the old Long Straw method of forming a weather tight seal between the original hardwood cutting board & wall plate by removing original Long Straw wadds & replacing with crudely formed Combed Wheat Reed rolls loosely tied with crimson polypropylene baling twine.

The addition of a softwood 3"x3" arris rail fixed over the original hardwood cutting board which has been crudely fitted and unnecessary.

The removal of the old long straw eaves & gables, originally secured with split Hazelwood rods & Stockholm tarred twine & replaced with eave wadds of Triticale loosely secured in position with steel rod & polypropylene baling twine.

Surely this is something that should not be condoned by the local authority conservation department, as it constitutes a 'change of material/method of construction on a Grade 1 listed building.

With regard to your final paragraph. I am led to believe, if a member of the public brings to your attention a change of material on a listed building it is your duty to investigate regardless of who is the owner of the property.

The lack of a detailed specification of works the thatcher (who is a member of both the National Society of Master Thatchers & the Dorset Master Thatchers Association) is obliged to follow under Listed Buildings regulations is not an excuse for the use of incorrect materials & shoddy workmanship on a Grade One listed building.

Therefore, I would be happy to meet you at the Great Barn at your convenience to point out these issues so you may determine whether this work constitutes a " change of materials". I am of the opinion that it does but am happy to listen to your argument that it does not.

Kind Regards,

Alan Lewis.

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10th Sept 2021: Email from Wiltshire C.C. Conservation stating the Ferguson Mann report was no longer available and is unable to visit the site or engage in further discussion on this matter.
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RE: Glebe Barn Avebury Thatch.
Fri, Sep 10, 2021 2:46 pm
Garside, Helen (Helen.Garside@wiltshire.gov.uk)To:you + 1 more Details

Dear Mr Lewis,

Thank you for your email

I am afraid that I am unable to provide you with copies of the documents requested. Whilst these were available in 2013 when this matter was being investigated, you will appreciate that this is 8 years ago now and there have been considerable changes in our document storage/management arrangements and this is no longer the case.

I also refer you to our previous correspondence in respect of these works which advised that investigation at the time had determined that consent was not required for the works undertaken and that the enforcement file was closed. I would reiterate that issues regarding quality of workmanship are matters between a contractor and the procurer of the works, in this case the National Trust, and you should contact them directly if you wish to discuss this matter.

In view of the need to make best use of the Council's resources at a time when we are particularly busy, I am afraid that I am unable to visit the site or engage in further discussion on this matter.

Kind Regards,

Helen Garside
Principal Conservation Officer
Economic Development and Planning

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31st May 2022: Email to Historic England's Head of Building Conservation drawing attention to & questioning why the recommendations laid out in the Ferguson Mann report had not been implemented.
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Tue, May 31, 2022 10:48 am

Dear Alison

I am contacting you as my local conservation officer has stated she is unable to engage in further discussion on the matter.

A difference of opinion has arisen with regard to whether the Grade One Listed Great Barn in Avebury was thatched in Long Straw or Combed Wheat Reed at the time of Listing in 1966.

Wiltshire County Council's Conversation Department are of the opinion Combed Wheat Reed was the material used to re-thatch the barn during its restoration in the early 1960's citing a report compiled by Architects Ferguson Mann in 1998 as evidence. However, on requesting a copy I was informed it had been deleted from the database.

By chance, I came across a copy of said report and can find no reference to my local conservation officers claim "The report compiled by Ferguson Mann Architects clearly records evidence that the barn was one of those buildings which had been entirely thatched in combed wheat reed, probably introduced by the 1960s"

On the contrary, the report supports my assertion Long Straw is the correct material and should have been reinstated during the last re-thatch to comply with the Conservation Plan directives as the following extracts from the Ferguson Mann's 54 page report state .

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Conservation advice.

Summary of Existing Condition of the Great Barn.

The character and quality of the building has been partially eroded by a series of minor alterations and additions; these include:

- The use of combed wheat reed for thatch and the elevated ridge.

Comments on Proposals and Statutory Consent.

Policy 4.1 The requirements for a Grade 1 Listed Building/Scheduled Ancient Monuments should be met by submitting a consent application to the Conservation office of Kennett D.C.

Maintenance of the Building

Policy 5.1 The building should be cared for by a planned maintenance and repair programme based on a complete knowledge of the building and its materials.

Exterior

Thatched Roof

The current thatch on the roof is combed wheat, with a raised ridge which was laid in the late 70's. The thatch indigenous to the area is long straw and the ridge would originally have been flush with the roof. Both the material and the style should be re-instated when the barn is rethatched.

Policy 6.1 The roof, when re-thatched, should be done in a manner corresponding to The vernacular of the area.

Policy 6.3 Care should be taken to ensure that any technical problems associated with The provision of necessary replacement fabric for the roof is resolved well in advance of requirement.

Summary of Proposals

Conservation of existing fabric

Re-thatch south and east slopes of the barn roof in long straw thatch in accordance with specialist report.

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In 1998 a comprehensive and no doubt costly report commissioned by The National Trust to prepare a conservation plan formulating conservation policy for the barn going forward, including the re-instatement of a Long Straw thatch has been completely ignored by those responsible for the barns planned maintenance. In addition, my own research to date confirms the barn was thatched in Long Straw at the time of Listing & refer you to the attached documents as follows:

IMG1538/9 - Letter of 21st November 1960 castigating the National Trust over their failure to deal with their responsibility to maintain the thatch on the barn.

IMG1546/7 - Estimate of 7th February 1961 from J. Dunning of Weyhill to re-thatch using "two coats of straw". With no mention of Combed Wheat Reed. States "Re-sparing the eaves after 20 years. Confirming the use of Long Straw as the thatching material when the re-thatch was carried out in 1961/2.

IMG1544 - Letter of 17th March 1961 to Dr. Joan Evans confirms Mr. Dunning is to carry out the re-thatch.

IMG1548 - Letter of 19th June 1963 from Donald Insall Architect, reporting on the inadequate state of structural repairs carried out by Mr. Dunning at the time of re-thatching. (so much for the 18 year guarantee) Condemning the building as structurally unsafe.

IMG1549 - Wiltshire County Council survey questionnaire. March 1969. Section 5(b)
Condition: States the roof is leaking. (within 7 years of being re-thatched strongly suggests substandard workmanship)

With overwhelming evidence in support of my assertion that the barn was thatched in Long Straw and no evidence being presented to support the theory it was thatched in Combed Wheat Reed at the time of Listing, the question arises, why was the decision made to ignore the findings & directives of the Conservation Plan & re-thatch the barn in Combed Wheat Reed without Listed Building Consent and why has no enforcement notice been issued by W.C.C. Conservation Department to remove the Combed Wheat Reed and re-instate a Long Straw thatch in accordance with the present W.C.C. directive "A listed thatched building must maintain the style of thatch & type of material used at the time of listing"?

I look forward to your reply,

With kind regards,

Alan Lewis.

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This concludes the argument in favor of Long Straw being the correct material to comply with Listed Buildings regulations.

Alan Lewis.

www.alanlewis-masterthatcher.co.uk

MARCH 2025.

