

Resolving inadequate skill levels within the Thatching industry.

All industries & trades have an obligation to ensure the products they produce are of a satisfactory quality & fit for purpose.

All industries & trades provide training in their field of activity to ensure their product meets the required standards to be judged fit for purpose.

Before establishing a business, Thatchers should also have attained the appropriate skill and judgement to carry out a job and construct a roof that is “fit for purpose.”

Sadly, the lack of a thatching training school since 2012 has negatively impacted the industries’ ability to provide a fully trained, skilled workforce in sufficient numbers to meet the demands of owners of thatched properties.

The shortfall being filled by semi-skilled thatchers, to the detriment of both the buildings & the building’s owners.

There are no official figures for how many thatchers there are nationally. Online sources vary from 600 to 1,000.

Records suggest there are approximately 60,000 thatched buildings in the U.K., 45,000 of which are listed.

Taking my own District Council Kennet as an example. There are 1,150 thatched buildings of which 900 are listed.

Thatching contractors who work within Kennet District Councils boundaries, both resident & visitors from adjacent counties number approximately 50, of which no more than a dozen maintain the standards adopted by the industry in the 1960’s

<https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/o5rpvjorihdo52x3vhcbe/SEMI-SKILLED-THATCHING-WORK.pdf?rlkey=v2941f0kvvd8oitt8u3c2wbys&st=qbqodeio&dl=0>

The introduction of a mandatory standard & specification for work on Listed buildings would have a twofold effect.

- a. Encourage semi-skilled thatchers to acquire the techniques & skills necessary to qualify for work on Listed Buildings by way of improvement courses at the thatching training centre as, in many areas such as Kennet, a thatching business becomes unviable if restricted to unlisted buildings only.
- b. Affords protection for owners of Listed Buildings from semi-skilled practitioners.

Kennet introduced a scheme in the 90's restricting access to work on listed buildings to only those suitably qualified as a condition of Listed Building maintenance grants approval. However, the scheme failed to gain momentum due to the government's subsequent suspension of L.B. grants.

It would be sensible for the Insurance Industry to ensure work carried out on thatched properties they insure is of a high standard.

Before establishing a business in the U.S., a State Contractors Licence must be obtained. Presentation of the licence is required to purchase public & employers liability insurance.

A State Contractors Licence Number must be included on invoices to secure payment for work carried out.

In the UK we have no such protection. The U.K. Buildings Regulations contain no reference to specifications for thatched roofs as it falls outside their spectrum of knowledge.

It should not be forgotten, until the mid-70's thatchers were categorised as Agricultural workers with wages governed by the Agricultural Wages Board.

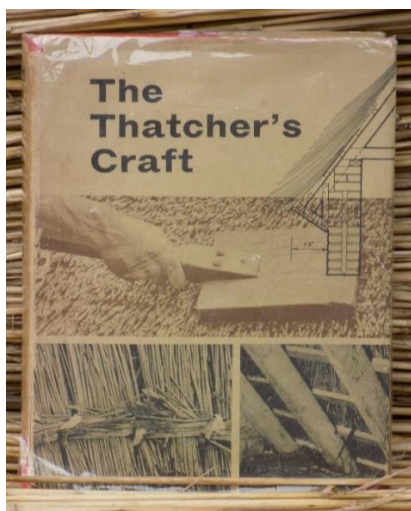
With the arrival of VAT, we were re-categorised as Roofing Contractors but thatching has little to do with construction, thatch is not deemed structural, rather a bio-degradable roof covering of straw or reed grown & harvested annually, our fixings come from coppiced woodland, not builders' merchants.

We are a small stand-alone craft mainly employed in the maintenance of Thatched Listed buildings; we receive no support from government or any sector of the construction or Heritage industry.

THATCHING INDUSTRY TRAINING. 1960 – 2012.

From 1960 until 2012 the Rural Industries Bureau, the Council for Small Industries in Rural Areas & the Rural Development Commission provided the resources to run the Thatching Industry Training College, set in the grounds of Knutson Hall in Northamptonshire.

The Rural Industries Bureau's 1960 publication "The Thatcher's Craft" perfectly describes, in concise detail, the correct methods of applying a single coat of Long Straw, Combed Wheat Reed & Water Reed to a timber roof frame.



Thus, "The Thatcher's Craft" became an essential addition to the tool box of all apprentices passing through the college.

Link to download as no longer in print.

<http://www.thatch.net/thatchers/thatcherscraft.htm>

The College also ran courses on other essential elements required to produce a well-rounded artisan such as spar making, leadwork, Harvest machinery maintenance & repair, estimating & good business practice.

<https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/a212giny8ajgssco3x59f/Knutson-Hall-school-for-Thatchers.pdf?rlkey=dit163djh8l6ybq17ahqcwgr8&dl=0>

<https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/3pnhl6q7vv2ph8b2i33qf/Thatching-courses-at-Knutson-Hall..pdf?rlkey=7ny1ygd1azonaa421r5j85p5x&dl=0>

The Thatching training school closed its doors in 2012 due to the withdrawal of government funding.

Present-day Heritage Organisations, although committed to Heritage Craft training in other skills appear unwilling to consider the allocation of resources for training Thatchers.

<https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/kudxiszh2nnd9thog3ifa/SUPPORT-FOR-HERITAGE-CRAFTS.pdf?rlkey=eh7l1neog1r6aq5aycf05429v&dl=0>

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In recognising the need to re-establish apprentice training, a small group of experienced thatchers formed the Thatch Apprenticeship Group (TAG)

Thatch Apprenticeship Group.

The task of creating a thatching apprenticeship training programme has been completed, submitted, and approved via the Institute of Apprenticeships Trailblazer scheme.

<https://www.instituteforapprenticeships.org/apprenticeship-standards/thatcher-v1-0>

It is becoming increasingly difficult to find individuals with a mindset that finds physical work, often arduous, working at height from ladders in variable weather conditions agreeable.

Those who are drawn to thatching require nurturing with the correct guidance and training, not left to fend for themselves in an unregulated industry, vulnerable to exploitation by semi-skilled thatcher's whose idea of training leaves much to be desired.

The establishment of a new thatching school offering training equivalent to the CoSIRA/RDC run facility is essential if the skills & ethos of artisanship are to be instilled in future generations of thatcher's, including the semi-skilled thatcher who wishes to up his game.

The Donegal Thatching School.

Despite the fact Ireland has less than 2000 thatched buildings they have provided the resources necessary to build a new purpose-built training centre housing all the facilities required to teach Irelands own styles of thatching.

<https://donegalthatchingschool.com/index.html>

Although the Thatching Apprentice Group (TAG) have secured the authorisation to run thatching training courses, TAG lack the resources to fund a similar facility in England to teach our three styles of Long Straw, Combed Wheat Reed & Water Reed thatch plus replicate the range of courses previously offered at Knuston Hall.

The Knuston Hall facility operated successfully from 1960 to 2012, over 50 years of apprentice training thus, there is every reason to believe a new facility would teach hundreds of apprentices over the years to come & become a sound investment in the pursuit of excellence, ensuring a positive future for the craft is established.

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"While working I also studied thatching at Knutson Hall, part of the Hereford Collage of Technology National Training Scheme and gained a City & Guilds NVQ Level 3 in Thatching.

This gave me a high level of knowledge that spans the whole profession as I am able to study in detail each individual area that makes up the process of thatching

This support, knowledge and practical instruction is the reason for me being able to take on any project small or large. I am able to work to a high standard using the traditional skills."

Will Ford. A Wiltshire Thatcher.

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In conclusion, the 2013 re-thatch of the Grade One Listed threshing barn in Avebury reflects the lack of accountability, professionalism & care plaguing the industry since the demise of the CoSIRA.

<https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/yp2mc7ec7ye4scqzkhkh/AVEBURY-GREAT-BARN-REPORT-Part-One..pdf?rlkey=dt026j1j7e8hylya82mv8c28y&dl=0>

<https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/d1xgm4emm4f5g5bptrv8o/AVEBURY-GREAT-BARN-REPORT-Part-Two..pdf?rlkey=9q4ro2tbomyd6qfl5m3kz9xhu&dl=0>

The delivery of the new Thatching Apprenticeship Training Scheme by Ofqual presents an opportunity, not only to teach new entrants but also the many

semi-skilled thatcher's who may wish to improve their skill set to qualify for work on Thatched Listed Buildings and rid the industry of those that do not, ensuring events such as the Avebury Great Barn debacle are never repeated.

To this end, the Thatch Apprenticeship Group (TAG) seek to establish a new thatcher training facility, hosted by an agriculturally oriented teaching establishment such as the RAU, with properly funded support (Heritage Lottery or other) for the construction of a purpose-built facility or the adaption of an existing building for the purpose of thatcher training. This would present an ideal outcome & the first step in restoring the Thatching Industries credibility.

UPDATE June 2026.

The Thatching Apprenticeship Training Scheme previously approved by Ofqual has been transferred to a new government training initiative "Skills England".

Our concerns are Skills England intended reforms will weaken the quality of apprenticeships & lead to apprentices entering the workforce who are not competent to carry out their work because of improper assessment, leading in turn to poor quality training, in effect a race to the bottom.

It is essential skilled artisans with the right mindset are placed at the centre of any future training initiative without the shackles of bureaucracy, where training & assessment would be controlled by administrators who lack the understanding of what is required to train apprentices to the highest levels of competency.

Therefore, the focus must now be on securing corporate sponsorship for the provision of resources to provide future training, thus ensuring we maintain control of the process of producing highly skilled thatcher's for the industry moving forward.

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(Thatch Apprenticeship Group member).

May 2025.

