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## Of Brecks thatch and sparrows

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### Summary

Based on the written records and memoirs of the Reeve thatching family across more than a century, this paper is presented by a water-reed and long-straw master thatcher and present chair of the National Thatching Straw Growers Association. It outlines his personal views on historical changes in the thatching techniques deployed in the Brecks, with poorer standards of workmanship reducing the quality and longevity of traditional roofs. The paper also looks at how the impact of House Sparrows *Passer domesticus* led to the widespread use of protective wire netting on roofs. The expense involved made thatch less economic, contributing significantly to its decline as a common roofing material.



Figure 1.  
Members of the Reeve  
thatching family, from  
left to right: Tom  
Reeve, John Reeve,  
Les Reeve and Bert  
Reeve.

### Introduction

The Reeves were a family of master thatchers based in Bridgham and East Harling, and the collection of manuscripts and other records held by B.S. ("Bert") Reeve, the grandson of Peter Reeve, the first member of the family for whom there are records, constitutes a unique archive of thatching-related material spanning three generations between 1860–1968 (Fig.1). This remarkable resource shines a light on a sequence of seemingly unrelated events that conspired to change a way of traditional country life and alter the rural built environment, not only in the Brecks,



but throughout England. Of particular significance are those records pertaining to the 19th century, when it was a rare thing for a thatcher such as Peter Reeve (who was Bert's grandfather) to be literate and to use these skills to record the details of his working life.

### The decline of thatch

It is estimated that by 1800 close to one million buildings in England and Wales were thatched. The vast majority (c.90%) had straw roofs which, in most of England, consisted primarily of threshed wheat straw, with combed wheat straw forming a different tradition in Devon, Cornwall and Somerset. Thatch made of 'water reed' (Common or Norfolk Reed *Phragmites australis*) was rarely seen many miles from substantially sized reedbeds, due to the difficulty and cost of transportation.

Historical records (see Letts & Moir) indicate that the number of thatched buildings declined between 1800 and 1862. At the beginning of the 19th century between 35-40% of the population lived under thatch, and of the 957,246 thatched buildings recorded then, just over half were barns and outbuildings.

Figure 2.  
A view of Hockham  
in 1938, when many  
Brecks villages still  
had thatched houses.  
Image © Norfolk  
Museums Service  
(Ancient House,  
Thetford).



Figure 3.  
Once thatched,  
Thetford Warren  
Lodge was destroyed  
by fire in 1935. Only  
the central (and  
oldest) section  
survives, now  
unroofed.  
Image © Norfolk  
Museums Service  
(Ancient House,  
Thetford).



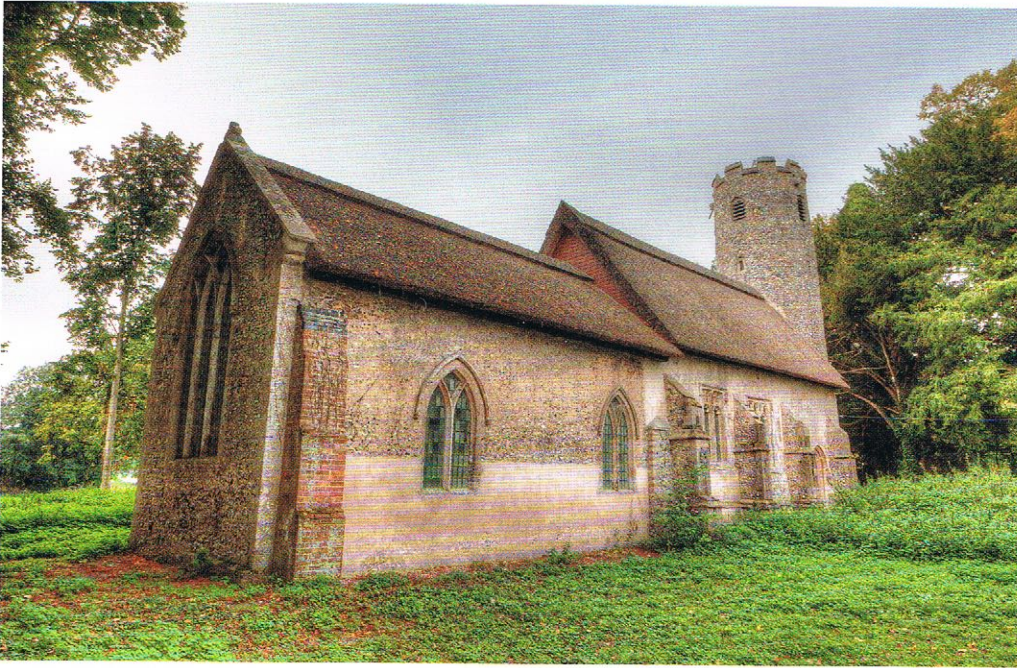


Figure 4.  
St Mary's Cranwich  
is one of several  
thatched churches  
in the Brecks. It has  
been thatched by the  
author.  
Image © Nick Ford.

By 1862 only around 15% of the population lived in thatched dwellings, less than half of the 841,861 thatched buildings of the day. The most significant loss of thatch continued between 1862 and 1960, although not at a steady rate – there were periods of accelerated decline. Straw thatch suffered the most between 1880 and 1914, with hundreds of thousands older, more poorly constructed properties demolished and more substantial properties having their thatch stripped and replaced with tiles or slate. Between 1914 and 1945 this decline seems to have slowed, and the use of water reed thatch even witnessed a resurgence during the 1930s, becoming fashionable again as the royal family thatched their properties with reed during this period. Between the Second World War and the 1970s, the destruction of straw thatch began again in earnest, most examples being stripped for replacement with tiles, but some being replaced with water reed thatch instead. Today there are approximately 50,000 thatched properties in Britain (Figs 2, 3 & 4).

What caused such a dramatic loss of thatch during this 150-year period? The decline during the first half of the 1800s could be explained by the removal of thatch from within small towns as a result of the many municipal improvement acts passed to lessen the perceived risk of fire. From the 1850s onwards, the expansion of the railways enabled different building materials to be distributed more widely, but the uptake of slate and tiles for roofing remained slow in rural areas for at least three decades. However, in order to understand better the subsequent decline in straw thatch between 1862 and 1960 it is necessary to look more closely at how the straw used for thatch was harvested and how it was used to construct roofs.

Throughout much of England, wheat or rye crops for use in thatching were cut with a scythe and, latterly, with a reaper-binder. With the growing mechanization of harvesting, storage in barns was increasingly replaced by the assembly of corn ricks, which required thatching in order to keep the weather out for the few months prior to threshing. This practice led to an increase in a temporary form of thin thatching, only 10–15cm thick, which covered an area quickly and cheaply. The crop was subsequently threshed by flail, which eventually gave way to horse- or steam-driven threshing machinery. The resultant threshed straw was not aligned, instead being stacked with the ears and butts jumbled up.



### Changing practices

The agricultural depression caused by the importation of cheap grain from the Americas, following the 1846 repeal of the Corn Laws, meant that farmworkers were looking for work. Poor harvests in the four years following the eruption of Krakatoa in 1883 compounded the situation. Some of these workers turned their hands to thatching houses, using techniques based on corn rick thatching. These resulted in a less tight long-straw thatch, which was susceptible to being pulled out by birds and rodents.

For centuries, straw thatch on cottages had been bound onto the roof timbers using stripped bramble and the like at a thickness of 30–40cm of very tightly packed, aligned straw. This resulted in a thatch coat that could last between 30 and 45 years. Once the surface wore back to the fixings it was then usual, if the thatch had not been left to decay too far, to then thatch a new coat of around 30cm thickness on top of the original coat using hazel pegs called brotches to attach the thatch. However, corn stack thatching was a different matter. It was thin, often referred to as ‘half-coat’ thatch, and loosely packed – so not as waterproof or long lasting. The increasing numbers of unscrupulous corn stack thatchers looking for house thatching work placed financial pressure on traditional master thatchers, who employed time-honoured techniques of high-quality thatching, to simply skim over with a thin ‘half-coat’ thatch when they were adding a new coat of thatch to an existing roof. While many homeowners were unaware of the difference, some clients were wise to it, as indicated by this description drawn from Bert Reeve’s account of his grandfather Peter’s time thatching in the 19th century:

“He [Peter] was thatching at Wretham when Mr Gayford, a farmer and landowner, came to see him at work. Mr Gayford perhaps doubted whether Peter was putting on the required thickness, or pulling enough of the old thatch off. Anyway he told Peter he wanted to come up the ladder. Peter promptly fastened his tools at the top, and without another word came down the ladder, and went off to the pub – Wretham ‘Stone Brigg’ it was always called, but it was officially the ‘Dog & Partridge’. Peter stayed a while, and Mr Gayford wanted to know what was wrong. Peter replied ‘Nothing, but there don’t want two damn fules on the ladder at the same time.’”

### The Reeve family records

#### **Peter Reeve**

The first of the Reeve family for whom there are thatching records, Peter Reeve of Bridgham (dates unknown) was considered in the district to be a great craftsman and was usually preferred to some of those whom he described as ‘straw throwers’ and who put the thatch on rough and thin. Records from old thatching account books and estimates begin in 1860, and include accounts listing the costs of materials used on a thatching job as well as the costs of labour, enabling me to understand what techniques were being used by master thatchers between 1860–1968. (Fig. 5)

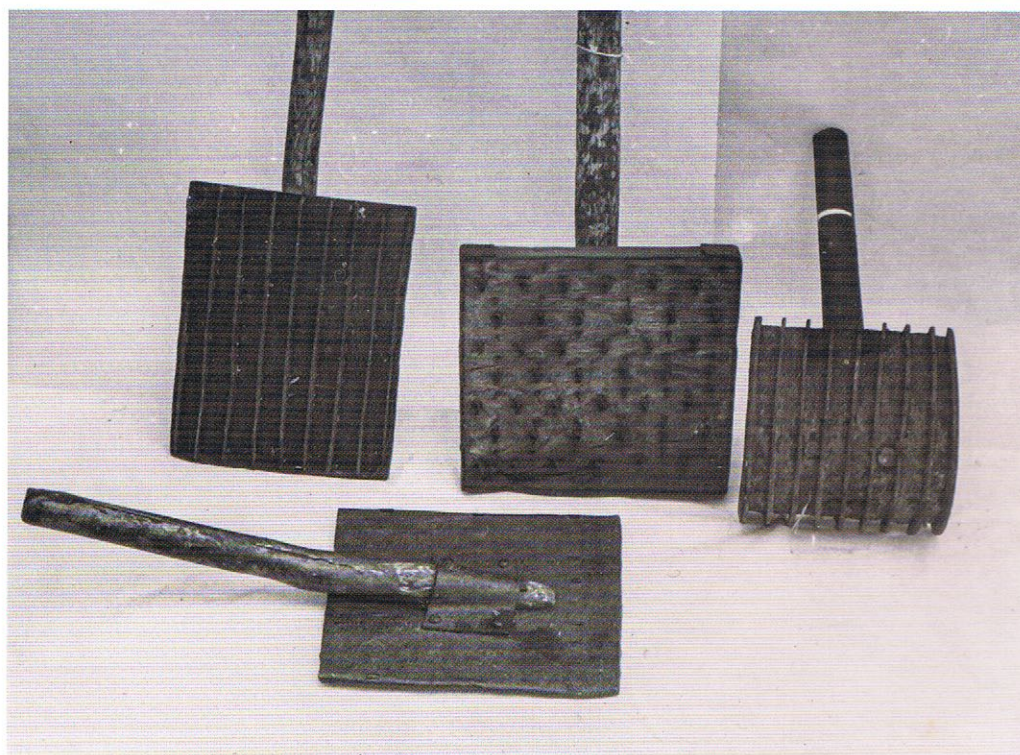


Figure 5.  
A variety of reed leggatts. From bottom, clockwise: topside steel plate showing how the wooden handle is fixed; underside of same finishing leggatt, showing welded steel bars to catch the butt ends of the reed and dress into position; general work-in-progress leggatt with horseshoe nails; curved finishing valley leggatt.

It is clear that Peter was primarily a straw thatcher and was perhaps not trained as a water reed thatcher until late in his career. Interestingly, his estimates show no mention of the purchase of straw; seemingly, this was left to the farmer and/or client to provide, as the following example from his accounts shows:

|   |                       |    |   |
|---|-----------------------|----|---|
| Feb. 13, 1866                                     | Peter Reeve, Bridgham |    |   |
| To: Sir Robert Buxton                             |                       |    |   |
| For straw thatching Rushford Church, Self and boy |                       |    |   |
|   | £                     | s  | d |
| 19 days work at 3/6 per day                       | 3                     | 8  | 3 |
| 3 days riveing brotches                           |                       | 10 | 6 |
| 58ft Roofen at 6d per foot                        | 1                     | 19 | 0 |
| 2 stone Rope for Binding at 7/- per stone         |                       | 17 | 6 |
| Allowance Money                                   |                       | 10 | 9 |
| 2 Binding Hooks                                   |                       |    | 6 |
| Settled   | 7                     | 6  | 6 |

Some of the specialist terms used in the above excerpt are worth explaining. Back in the day, thatchers in East Anglia used the term 'straw thatch', not 'long-straw thatch' as it is now called. This is because before the introduction of shorter varieties of wheat in the 1960s, all the straw used was long. Straw used for thatching in this region was always threshed and not combed, as was the case in the West Country. Combed wheat sheaves have the grain and flag leaf combed out by a special attachment fitted to the top of threshing machine, which produces bundles resembling water reed. To make things even more confusing, combed wheat is sometimes referred to as 'reed' in that part of England, which leads people to think it is water reed! Riveing is the splitting of lengths of hazel, which are then cut to a



Figure 6.  
Finishing a tarred cord  
fixing around a rafter  
and hazel rod, using  
a clove hitch knot to  
secure the thatch onto  
a bare roof frame.



point at each end and twisted in the middle to make a staple called a brotch, used for securing the ridge (roofen) and for fixing a top coat of new thatch over old (Fig. 6).

The use of only two (iron) thatch-fixing hooks might be questioned as being insufficient, given that many more would be used by modern thatchers. However, in 1866 tarred cord (patented 1792) was used to bind the thatch onto the roof frame, using a needle threaded from inside the roof by a boy until only a small hole was left for access through which the two hooks were driven into the rafters when the thatch was finally covered over.

Like Peter Reeve back in 1866, I have worked on Rushford Church. A few years ago I repaired the ridge of the roof, and I have often wondered how Peter Reeve with one boy could thatch the long-straw coat in only 19 days, as I estimated it would have taken myself with a boy yealmer (a prepared yealm is a straw tile) around 40 days to thatch the coat to the rafters. However, judging by the number of repair entries that occur in the Reeve accounts (until Thomas Reeve thatched the church in 1898 using water reed), I can only assume that the roof had not been thatched to Peter Reeve's 'usual' specification. In fact, much of Peter's thatching work was recorded as corn stack thatching, which was the bread-and-butter mainstay work for both master thatchers and lesser thatchers.

### **Thomas Reeve**

Also based in Bridgham, Thomas (1875–unknown) was the son of Peter Reeve and took the family thatching business to a different level after his father died. Thomas's first big job on his own account was Rushford Church, which he reed thatched in 1898. Although the information on subsequent roofs through to 1914 does not always record whether reed or straw was purchased for thatching, the accounts show a marked increase in business, especially towards water reed

thatching. Thomas would have been actively pushing his services in this direction, which meant stripping roofs of straw thatch and replacing it with water reed. Water reed became popular as transport improved, making it available across a wider area, including the Breckland. It was also more resistant to being pulled out by pests such as sparrows. Through reading Thomas's accounts it becomes clear that something very interesting has been missed by the thatching commentators of the past, namely, the use and cost of wire-netting and the reason for using it, primarily sparrows (see below)!

### **Bert and John Reeve**

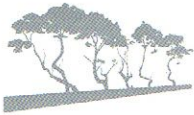
Based in East Harling, Thomas Reeve's sons (and the grandsons of Peter Reeve) Bert (1899–1994) and John (1912–68) carried on the craft up until 1968. Their accounts are numerous, describing both their top-quality water reed thatching and the occasional half-coat straw thatching they still did. The family took on reed marshes at Larling, Snetterton and Shropham Fens to cut during the winter. In 1919–20 Thomas had sold thousands of bunches of poor-quality reed for paper pulp making, which helped clear up several acres which had not been cut in living memory and thereby made it possible to start up the beds afresh for future cutting for thatching. Bert and John cut on average 12,000 bunches a year, but in later years the fens became useless after the deep draining of the nearby River Thet.

Bert records how he and his brother converted increasing numbers of remaining long-straw roofs to Norfolk reed, something that would not now be allowed under listed building regulations. Today it is rare to see authentic long-straw roofs in the Brecks, with most straw-thatched buildings roofed with a form of combed wheat ('Devon reed'); this looks similar to water reed, which has all the butts showing on the thatch surface.

Meanwhile, relatives of the Reeve family are still involved in thatching – Dominic Meek, a relative of Bert's brother-in-law Alf Meek, took up thatching as my apprentice and now works on the east coast of Suffolk with five helpers.



*Figure 7.*  
The author's former apprentice, Bodkin Willows, fixing new long straw thatch to an existing coat of thatch using hazel brotches (staples).



### Sparrows and thatch

Ongoing research by the British Trust for Ornithology indicates that the British population of House Sparrow *Passer domesticus* has reduced by over 70% since 1977. Although still widespread and fairly common in many places, the species appears to be in long-term decline and attention is increasingly focused on raising awareness of its plight (Woodward *et al*). In the past, when sparrows were much more abundant, humans were not always sympathetic to them. The birds were often regarded as an agricultural pest, particularly in terms of damaging cereal crops, and were caught by whatever means human ingenuity could devise. A bounty was paid upon presentation of their heads, at a rate of a halfpenny per head. Churchwarden accounts often mention the expense of dealing with sparrows, as in the examples below:

Extract from churchwarden accounts from Fressingfield in Suffolk:

July 8th 1772

|  |                               |
|--|-------------------------------|
| For two small cloths to clean the plate with | £0. 0. 7                      |
| For catching of Sparrows                     | £1. 17. 10 and one half-penny |

Extract from *The Common Stream* by Rowland Parker, citing parish churchwarden records from Foxton in Cambridgeshire:

|      |                            |                     |
|------|----------------------------|---------------------|
| 1787 | To Sparrows as per account | £1. 2. 8 and a half |
| 1791 | Sparrows                   | £10. 7. 0           |
| 1794 | Sparrows                   | £9. 6. 0            |

If the above rate of sparrow bounties is taken as indicative of the general situation, many sparrows must have been killed. In addition to the bounty system, local landowners and farmers would have funded the culling of sparrows to safeguard against grain losses in the fields and corn stacks, a practice that had largely fizzled out by the late nineteenth century.

Figure 8.  
Although still common in many areas of Britain, House Sparrows are much less abundant than in the past.  
Image © Ian Kirk.





### **Wire netting over thatch**

Straw-thatched roofs suffered badly from the ingress of sparrows seeking food and nesting sites. The surface of the thatch was loose and quite often contained unthreshed grain, especially during the bad harvest years seen regularly in the late nineteenth century. Such roofs were both restaurant and hotel rolled into one for sparrows and rodents alike, leaving the thatch wrecked in a short space of time.

The extract below from the Reeve memoirs shows that the need to deal with sparrows was leading to the use of a covering of  $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch mesh 'sparrow' wire netting – although, as the account shows, this was not readily accepted on grounds of cost:

“ The need for wire-netting straw thatch was proved when we included netting in our estimate for straw thatching Clay Hall Farm House, Blo' Norton, and for economic reasons the netting items were refused. However, within a few weeks of the completion of the thatching, the roof was riddled with bird holes and the owner had to have second thoughts. ”

I was working on the same roof in March 2013, when we stripped off the old top-coats of straw and thatched with a full 12-inch coat of long straw onto a surprisingly worn original of water reed thatch (the latter probably sourced at the local Blo' Norton Fen). Built around the mid 1800s, this clay lump property had four, worn-thin, half-coats of straw over the reed; presumably the Reeves had thatched one of them back then.

Interestingly, the United Kingdom and Republic of Ireland appear to be the only countries that consider it necessary to fix netting over large surface areas of thatch, whatever the thatch material used! Common sense tells us that the use of netting is a relatively new 'tradition', as we know that before the late nineteenth century thatchers and thatched property owners had to do without. So how did they manage? Was it because earlier long-straw thatches were much tighter and less prone to bird (sparrow) and wind damage? Was it the combination of corn stack thatching coinciding with sparrow plagues? Or was it simply because wire netting was unavailable?

The wire-netting industry was founded primarily by Charles Barnard in Norwich in 1844, the first netting being made by hand on wooden rollers. The first three manual machines to start production appeared in 1855, but would have been really slow and, in any case, very unlikely to be producing thatch-type netting. Machines capable of making that grade of netting may not have appeared for another 25-30 years at least.

I tried to answer this question by checking at the Norfolk Record Office for the production records of Barnard's (later Boulton & Paul) up until 1942. Unfortunately those records were apparently destroyed in a bombing raid and subsequent fire. However, it is clear that the costs of wire netting played a very significant role in the decline of thatch, as the following example illustrates:



Excerpt from a Reeve family account for September and October 1910:

Thomas Reeve  
Straw thatching Bridgham Field Barn

|                                 |            |
|---------------------------------|------------|
| 43 squares @ 5/6                | £11. 19. 3 |
| Ridging 99ft @ 10d              | £4. 2. 6   |
| Fixing wire netting over thatch | £2. 0. 0   |
| Cost of wire and staples        | £16. 10. 0 |
| Total                           | £34. 11. 9 |

The figures show that wire netting was hugely expensive, costing more than the thatching itself. Netting is far cheaper today and only accounts for around 5% of the total thatching bill. It is still used for long-straw thatch and ridges on reed roofs, mainly to stop damage from Grey Squirrels and Jackdaws.

### Conclusion

The use of thatch on dwellings declined dramatically from the start of the nineteenth century onwards, due to the factors outlined above. The perceived requirement for netting made straw thatch the most expensive type of roof, with confidence in it lost accordingly. Matters were compounded by the development of an anti-thatch lobby, through which the vested commercial interests of roofing material manufacturers and their well-positioned (and paid) commentators argued hard against retaining thatch (Letts & Moir). As a result, our rural built heritage changed dramatically in character within a few short decades. The legacy of a thatching heritage in the Brecks remains visible today in the form of steep pantile-roofed old properties with taller than usual chimneystacks: a tell-tale sign that those roofs were thatched previously with long-straw thatch.

*Figure 9.*  
Typical authentic  
Norfolk long-straw  
thatch (in Pulham St  
Mary) with a flush  
ridge finish, as seen  
commonly before the  
mid-20th century.



Documents such as the Reeve family memoirs and accounts are a gold mine of information about the craft of thatching, as they help piece together seemingly unrelated events to give a broader and better understanding as to why thatch – and straw thatch in particular – disappeared within a relatively short period of time across the Brecks and throughout England.

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