

## LYLE MORGANS – MASTER THATCHER

There are a number of thatched roof houses in East Meon and many houses that used to have thatched roofs but are now tiled or slated. The way to spot the ones that were probably thatched is to look at the angle of the roofs, if they are 45 degrees or steeper then that usually is the sign. I had a quick look and spotted the following candidates: Wheelwright Cottage, Forge Sound, Barnard Corner Cottages, Heycroft House, The Tudor House, The George. Interestingly, the Forbes Alms Houses which copy an old architectural style, but were built in the late nineteenth Century, would not have been thatched. It is more expensive in terms of timber and labour to build such steep pitched roofs, so modern roofs are generally built at a shallower angle. The steep angle on thatched roofs is to ensure the rain runs down to the eaves and not to the ceilings below.

Lyle Morgans is currently working on his 5th or 6th re-thatching job in the Parish, he cannot remember exactly how many. His current project is Paupers Cottage in Workhouse Lane. He re-thatched the adjoining Malthouse Cottage a few years ago and is doing this one in the same style. Unfortunately he has made very slow progress due to the terrible wet weather we suffered from late October until the start of December, then Christmas and New Year have held him up as well and now we have had a great dump of snow – it might even be his longest job to-date! Normally an average roof will take 6 to 7 weeks to complete using approximately 5.5 ton of material.

He has previously thatched Templars Brow Cottage at the end of the High Street, Lower Farm Barn next to South Farm, White Lodge Cottage at Leydene, Malthouse and Paupers Cottages in Workhouse Lane. He is following in the footsteps of the local thatcher Steve Cleeve, who died about 5 years ago who in his turn had followed his father. Whilst working on Malthouse Cottage Lyle pulled from the old thatch a piece of the Sun newspaper dated February 11th 1987 (cost 18p!). This was probably left by Steve Cleeve, and dates from the last time the cottage was rethatched.

Lyle, who lives in Portsmouth, was apprenticed to a thatcher for 5 years before he became a master thatcher in his own right. This seems a long time to learn the basics of just thatching a roof, but it is the parts such as ridges, window surrounds, eaves and other fancy bits that take such a long time to learn. Even after 5 years you may still come across a house or cottage that has some rare design you have not come across before, but must replicate it to keep the character and obey the planning rules and regulations. He does not have a trademark signature animal like some thatchers add to their roof ridges, but is willing to create one to order if the owner requires. To date he has created pheasants, cats and even a kangaroo on a cottage on the Isle of Wight.

He happened to know an old thatcher who lived in Waterlooville, and wanting to work outside in the fresh air, agreed to become his apprentice. A number of today's youngsters also think it would be nice to become a thatcher, but not many last the course. This is a physically demanding job often carried out in extreme conditions. In summer you can be working on a south-facing roof for

hours exposed to the full glare of the sun, dripping with sweat. In winter you can be working in cold rain, sleet, snow and wind, somehow trying to keep those frozen fingers moving. On balance Lyle says he prefers the cold to the hot, though he may change his mind after this winter!

Re-thatching does not mean taking all the thatch off the roof. Usually only the top layer is taken off and replaced. The lower layer may last for years and years. The type of thatching material used roughly determines how long a roof will last, they are

**Long Straw – 20 to 30 years:** This is one of the oldest materials in a historical sense and gives a slightly rough and disheveled look. The actual material is threshed long straw and is all mixed up end on end. It can be put down very quickly. Is laid, then raked into position, but does not have that crisp look. This is the cheapest material.

**Combed Wheat Reed – 25 to 50 years:** This is sometimes known as Devon Reed, though Lyle sources his supplies from Somerset! This is the main material used in East Meon, though both other materials are in use in the Parish. The finish of this material is much neater and gives that crisp tea cosy look.

**Water Reed – 50 years plus:** Also known as Norfolk Reed and the only material grown specifically for thatching, the others being by-products of farming. This is the most expensive material, but can be more economical as it is easier to lay (less man-hours) and lasts longer than the other materials. It has a slightly coarser appearance with sharper edges than combed wheat reed.

The material life-spans shown above are for the main roof areas. The ridges, parts around roof windows etc. generally have to be renewed more often than the main roof area. The ridges generally last only 10 years or so. The window area thatch life-span is often determined by how steep the adjacent thatch slopes are, too shallow and they hold water and rot much more quickly.

Lyle uses natural materials to keep the thatch in place. These consist of hazel spars that are twisted in to various shapes. Some thatchers use modern plastic spars, but these can show and start to become unsightly as the thatch settles and deteriorates over the years. These hazel spars are produced by 'Oz' from Clanfield, from local hazel coppices. It is good to know that these old, and very environmentally friendly, trades still keep going.

The type of material used on a roof is often determined by the local authority planning department as many of the thatched cottages are listed buildings and must comply with the many and various planning requirements and regulations. The average price for a re-thatched cottage roof, depending on the complexity of windows etc. is about £20,000 – quite a commitment for all that cosiness and beauty.

As we know from a recent incident in the village, fire is one of the biggest dangers for thatch roof owners. Lyle believes this is mostly caused by the brickwork getting too hot or the mortar failing and the hot gases getting into the thatch. Apparently there are very few incidences of sparks from the chimney

setting the thatch on fire. When starting work on a new roof, Lyle occasionally gets requests from local fire services for them to come and practice ripping off the old thatch with various implements, simulating what they have to do with real thatch fires!

Lyle works over quite a wide area from Basingstoke to the Isle of Wight. He has even carried out work in Macclesfield, Cheshire. Perhaps his most exotic job was creating a heather thatch roof at the Chelsea Arts Club in London. He had to use heather thatch as straw thatch has been banned in this area since the Great Fire of London!

For more information and contact details go to Lyles website at <http://www.lmmt.co.uk> or call 07990 512808.