

The enduring appeal of thatched cottages

Despite being expensive to insure and maintain, they remain a solid British classic, discovers
Graham Norwood

The thatched cottage is as quintessentially British as the Last Night of the Proms or a royal wedding. But are we slowly falling out of love with this national icon?

There are 60,000 thatched homes in Britain; almost all are period cottages, but some are modern. They come with a lifestyle for those who want to embrace everything thatch: there's an owner's club, a magazine and a raft of specialist websites. If you buy one, expect to be photographed too, as they are surely the most Instagrammable property type.

But along with the cachet and the charm come costs and risks. Thatched roofs must be replaced every 25 years, for £20,000 to £50,000, depending on the size and type of thatch or reed used.

The work usually requires up to eight weeks' work by a qualified thatcher. Occasionally, costs escalate further because of problems with hidden lower layers of thatch, or rotting roof timbers beneath, which can only be discovered at the time.

Worse still, specialist insurer NFU Mutual says there are an average of 50 major thatched roof fires each year, some resulting in the entire property

being destroyed. As a result, insurance charges are high, a fact often overlooked by buyers in love with thatch.

So do the pros outweigh the cons? It depends on who you ask. Those like Alan and Anita Sprague, who own a 19th-century cottage on the edge of Bath, think it's unbeatable. "It's a classic type of home, but it has modern, almost eco-friendly advantages. It's cool in summer, warm in winter, and made of sustainable materials," says Alan.

The Spragues' main home, in Ealing, west London, is a traditional brick house with a slate roof. "The cost of insulation for that house was enormous, yet it's still not as warm as the thatched cottage, which means heating bills are far higher each year," he adds.

Their enthusiasm is not universally shared, however, and for the first time in years, agents report that few thatched cottages carry a price premium, because they are now less popular.

"Buyers tend not to be drawn to thatch. It's to do with lack of light, lower ceilings, and dated configuration more than maintenance and insurance. Demand is lower than it has been," explains Christopher Bartlett, a buying agent at Stacks Property Search in Devon, a county he calls "thatch-heavy".

Another buying agent, Robin Gould of Prime Purchase, says the thatched cottage remains a trophy purchase, but they are generally shunned by younger buyers with families. "They are very expensive and layouts don't always work well, with the bathroom of-



ten on the ground floor. Thatched properties are usually bought by early retirees, downsizers, the middle-aged and second home-owners.”

But at least one developer is trying to give thatch a new lease of life, perhaps with an eye to the older and more affluent buyer. Spitfire Bespoke Homes has put thatched roofs on some of its houses at three new schemes near Stratford-upon-Avon and at Ettington in Warwickshire and Long Crendon in Buckinghamshire.

The company says thatch gives “rustic appeal”, and provides an exterior that contrasts with contemporary open-plan interiors, addressing the layout shortcomings often associated with traditional thatched homes.

Most modern versions use imported reeds, which not only costs less than the traditional English wheat straw found on older properties, but is also considered easier to bring up to today’s more stringent building regulations and safety standards. Reeds also allow a “cleaner” and sharper edge to roofs,

whereas traditional straw gives a more artisan look.

It is with an eye to those properties built in centuries past that Historic England, the preservation body, has recently issued guidelines in a bid to reduce the number of fires.

It offers advice for thatched roof owners who use open fireplaces, such as sweeping chimneys to prevent tar and soot building up, checking the gap between chimney pot and thatch, fitting bird guards to prevent nesting and installing a suitable flue liner. There is also a warning about that very contemporary accessory, the wood burner.

“We know many people love wood-burners, but they pose a risk to thatched buildings, and we recommend they are not used,” says Alison Henry, head of building conservation and research for Historic England.

This advice regarding wood burners could be the final nail in the coffin for thatched properties. But while they

fell from fashion in the Eighties and Nineties, again after a spate of fires and insurance premium hikes, they returned to popularity a decade ago.

Now they are on the wane again. But as most thatched cottages have lasted 200 years or more, who’s to say they won’t enjoy another renaissance? Watch this roof space.



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Rabbit's Corner
in Kent, main,
£795,000, and
Little Salterns in
Hampshire, right,
£4.25m, both with
Savills; Old Pyles in
Oxfordshire, above,
£725,000 with
Strutt & Parker

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