

Shropshire Fire and Rescue Service

Fire Safety Advice Sheet

Thatch Fires

Introduction

Statistically, homes with thatched roofs are no more likely to catch fire than those with conventional roofs; however, if a thatched roof does ignite, the fire will spread rapidly.

Owners are advised to implement the following recommendations in order to prevent fire or reduce the spread of fire in thatched roofs. It is appreciated however, that not every precaution is either practicable or possible in every case.

Chimneys and Flues

Research has shown that around 90% of fires in thatched roofs are caused by faults in the flue or chimney.

- Ensure that the flue outlet (chimney pot) is a minimum of 1.5 metres (5 feet) above the thatch, allowing sparks to escape and die out before they settle on the thatch
- Regularly have the chimney checked for poor jointing and staining, both outside and inside the property (especially where it passes through the thatch). Having your chimney lined is a sensible precaution
- Where heating is provided by the burning of solid fuels, it is best to avoid those that emit sparks or produce a lot of soot and tar. Wet or unseasoned wood should not be used as this will leave greater deposits in the flue.
- Have the chimney swept regularly to prevent a build up of soot. Intervals between sweeping will depend on the type of fuel burnt and the duration of burning but should be a minimum of twice a year.
- In older premises, timbers were often built into the chimney with little or no separation from the flue. Over a period of time it is possible for these timbers to ignite. Such timbers should be insulated from the heat or removed (if possible), however, removal of timbers should only take place following professional advice
- When installing a stove, make sure you employ a professional with experience of thatched properties to carry out the work.

Other Common Causes of Fire

Electrical

- Where electrical supply cables are above ceiling joists and under rafters in the roof space, they should comply with BS 6207 Pt:1 'Wiring Systems using Mineral Insulated Cables' or, alternatively, 'Wiring Systems using PVC Insulated Cables enclosed in a Conduit' conforming to any of the following, BS 31, BS 4568 Pt:1 or BSEN 50086 Pt:1.
- If the thatched roof is covered with protective wire netting, this must not come within 300mm of any electrical cables unless adequate insulation is provided.
- Electric light fittings in the roof space should be of the enclosed type, either bulkhead or well-glass. Similarly, external security lighting, particularly the halogen type which get very hot in use, should be sited well away from the thatch.
- To prevent damage from lightning strikes, television aerials should not pass over or under that thatch. Aerials should be fitted to a free standing pole at least 7m from the roof. Where this is not possible, aerials can be fixed to a gable end chimney and the lead taken down the wall, avoiding any contact with the thatch.

Bonfires, Fireworks, Smoking Materials

- Avoid lighting bonfires near thatched property. Take into account wind direction and strength before setting up a bonfire. Consider damping the thatch if there is a threat from fireworks or a neighbouring fire
- If contractors are carrying out work in the roof space, ensure that they do not use blow torches or other equipment which could create sparks. Plumbers for example, should only use compression joints in the roof space.
- No naked lights or smoking should be permitted in the roof space.

Restricting Fire Spread

All thatched roofs should be separated from the roof void by a fire resisting barrier in the form of fire resisting board. The boarding can be applied to either the underside, between or preferably over the top of the rafters and should be made as airtight as possible by sealing all joints between the boarding and adjacent surfaces with good quality plaster.

Access to roof spaces should be from the inside via access hatches of not less than 900mm x 600mm serving each space. Any hatches should be capable of resisting the passage of fire for a minimum of 30 minutes. Combustible materials should not be stored in the roof space.

In the past, the practice was to soak new bundles of thatch with a fire retardant solution prior to installation. However, for reasons of practical difficulty, on site quality control and fears that the treatment would shorten the service life of the roof, the practice has largely died out.

The process has generally been replaced by a sprayed external surface coating of fire tested silicon based compounds. However, due to the leaching effect of the weather and natural wear the life expectancy is only guaranteed for ten years, with a possible retreatment after five years.

It is advisable to have an adequate length of non-kink garden hose permanently connected to an outside tap, with a water supply of sufficient pressure to provide a jet of water that will reach all parts of the roof from outside. This can be used to dampen the thatch in the event of a fire without endangering personal safety. Although this would not be sufficient to extinguish fire that had taken hold, it could help prevent a disaster.

Smoke Alarms

Protect the household by fitting and maintaining smoke alarms. A smoke alarm should be fitted at the highest point of the roof space and linked to other smoke alarms in the property. A fire in the roof space will be detected and a warning will be given throughout the property. Smoke alarms are recommended for all rooms except bathrooms and kitchens.

In Case of Fire

In the event of a fire call the Fire & Rescue Service immediately by dialling 999. Give the precise address of the property together with any helpful landmarks and the nearest main thoroughfare. When calling the Fire and Rescue Service include the information that the fire involves a thatched property.

In especially remote areas, the six figure ordinance survey map grid reference will allow the property to be located quickly. It may also be useful to consider sending someone to the junction of the nearest public road to direct responding crews.

Ensure access to the property is wide enough and free of overhead obstructions to allow a fire appliance to approach close to the property.

It is recommended that you establish a fire plan detailing what you and other members of your household would do in the event of a fire. Consider how everyone would escape from their rooms and discuss this with them, particularly where children or elderly persons reside with you.

Do nothing that will increase the draught inside the roof space or the building. Keep all doors and hatches closed.

On no account attempt to remove thatch from the roof as this will only fuel the fire.

For further advice and information can be obtained from:-

- The Thatching Advisory Service Ltd
The Old Stables
Redenham Park Farm
Redenham
Andover
Hampshire
SP11 9AQ

www.thatchingadvisoryservices.co.uk

Or for general fire safety matters, Shropshire Fire and Rescue Service can be reached on **01743 260260** or via our web site at **www.shropshirefire.gov.uk**