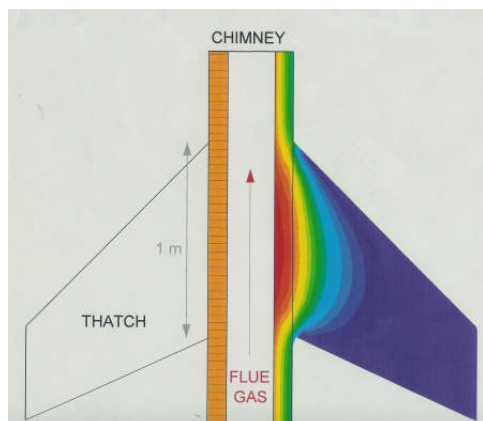


Fire in Thatch

Summary of advice for Home Owners, Conservation Officers, Insurance Companies, Chimney Engineers & Thatchers



Every year, over 50 historic thatched buildings out of an estimated stock of 24,000 listed properties are destroyed and lost through preventable fires “mysteriously” breaking out in the thatch. The reason has been understood for a number of years, but still the losses remain constant.

Many thatch fires are chimney-related. Modern enclosed solid fuel appliances are designed to burn efficiently and cleanly. Connecting these to old chimneys, where there is only a four-inch thickness of brick, makes the thatch especially vulnerable to the risk of heat build-up between the brick and the thatch. At the end of 2005 sales of these appliances were running at an all-time high as is the incidents of fires in thatched properties.

The danger zone for heat transfer and thatch ignition, (shown in red in the diagram) is associated with older and/or listed properties

any two or more of the conditions highlighted below:

- A deep multi-layer wheat straw thatch where the thatch is over one metre deep—a guide to the depth of thatch can be assessed in relation to the level of visible chimney. Originally chimney height would have been about two metres from the ridge.
- Regular use of a multi-fuel or wood burning stove or an open fire with an inappropriate liner.
- Central chimney surrounded by thatch or a house that is part of a terrace.
- A blocked or tarry spark arrestor will increase the risk associated with the points above.

Many stove shops and chimney lining installers do not understand the special risk associated with thatch. Badly fitted and inappropriate liners constitute a higher risk than no liner at all and fitting too large a stove for the size of property also increases the risk.

Traditionally, combed wheat reed and long straw thatch is repaired or maintained by fixing new coats over older layers. The depth of thatch increases over the years, and where the thatch abuts the chimney can easily reach depths of 1-2 metres. In this way, a considerable surface area builds up against the chimney making the thatch more vulnerable. Fire in thatch is not an inevitable occurrence but it should always be remembered that thatch is an organic material, subject to different behaviour patterns depending on its surroundings, treatments and choice of materials or styles. It has a finite life span, measured in tens rather than hundreds of years. And above all it is combustible.

It is the combination of deep thatch and a central chimney in conjunction with the use of multi-fuel stoves that put properties most at risk. The majority of fires that are chimney related occur from late September to Early April. As an example there have been 76 known serious thatch fires between January and April 2006

Prevention is Essential – Detection is always too late and invariably devastating!!
If in doubt, ask and don't use any chimney related appliance until you are SURE it is safe!

For a health check, advice & more information some useful contacts include:

The National Society of Master Thatchers Limited
Playle Russell Special Risks
Local area fire prevention officers
Other general fire safety information
Flues & Fires
Heatcraft (Anglia) Limited
John Albion & Partners Insurance, publication 1:735
Conservation issues & advice

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