ON THE ROOF

A THATCHER'S JOURNEY

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To Mum and Dad,
for everything

Author's note
Some of the names in this book
have been changed to protect
the privacy of individuals.

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Introduction

The Barn

My alarm went off in the dark, but I was already awake. I clicked on my head torch, crept into the kitchen and set the coffee maker on the gas flame. Heat spread outwards from the cooker, slowly warming the damp air of the static caravan I was living in. The thatcher had given me directions to his barn the night before. It didn't have an address or a postcode, so instead I used my index finger to trace a route across the creased surface of an Ordnance Survey map. This was the first sign that I was about to enter the realm of the un-Googlable – a place that, on this November morning in 2012, barely existed online.

The gate to the yard stood open. A south-westerly was moving across the fields, teasing the last autumn leaves from the hedges and raking the branches of an ash tree across the walls of the thatcher's barn. I parked up, crossed the yard and then stopped. I knew that the metal door in front of me – riddled with rust holes and wedged open with a concrete block – was the entrance to a new phase of my life. This was my portal to the world of thatching. Even a week ago, I would have laughed at the idea of becoming a thatcher. But here I was, for my trial day, the test to decide if I was worth taking on as an apprentice; a test that, for reasons which began and ended in the damp caravan I had woken up in, I badly needed to pass.

The din of a petrol generator. A beaten earth floor and neat stacks of yellow-grey wheat rising from it on all sides, burnished with the shine of natural silica. In the centre of the barn, a thatcher was working. Bent double over a pile of wheat, he raked the stems towards him with his fingertips, as if flicking through documents in a filing cabinet. Seeing me, he straightened up and smiled. He was blond, stocky and wore a woolly hat that kept slipping down over his eyes. The man explained that he was splitting the wheat into smaller bundles, which were easier to lay on the roof. As he spoke, strange words leapt out at me: *nitches, yealming, butt ends, spotting* – it seemed you couldn't talk about thatching for very long without learning a new language. First, I had to *yealm* the wheat, gathering it towards me with my fingers with the raking motion I had seen him use. Then I had to lift it into the crook of my arm and *spot* it – allowing the stems to fall rhythmically onto a wooden board to bring the *butt ends* flush. Spotting requires a particular coordination of movements. Hold the wheat too tightly, and the reed doesn't fall freely. Hold it too loosely, and it spills out of your grasp. Thatching, I would learn, is fundamentally about controlling the tension of your materials, and doing so requires the care of a violinist tuning a string. Making up bundles is the first step in this process.

After a few minutes of clumsy bundling, I began to develop a feel for the straw. The stems fell more smoothly onto the plywood board, and the bundles that piled up to my right were neater, more even, and a bit more like the ones the thatcher himself had made. He watched me for a few minutes more, then pushed up his woolly hat and nodded his approval. Making these bundles would be my main job for the next six months.

Now, I spend my days working on the thatched roofs of Devon. Sun-bleached or rain-soaked, tapping in hazel spars and batting

the reed tight. Laying, driving, shearing. Stripping old reed off, laying fresh reed on, repairing it when it begins to decay. I have become part of a cycle that goes on forever – or at least for as long as there are thatched roofs and hands there to thatch them.

Perched twenty rungs up the ladder, I mostly look down: down at the reed I am dressing, down at the screws I am tightening, down the line of the thatch I have laid in place. I have to remind myself to look up, once in a while, and when I do, a sight I never tire of comes into focus – a maze of rooftops and ridge lines, the green lumps of the hills, the deep creases of the lanes, and the outline of Dartmoor like a bank of cloud on the horizon. It's a strange thing, that my world is both blinkered and expansive, but the same is true of my craft. Every thatcher is immersed in the vernacular traditions of the most local scale possible – a village, a valley, an island – and also belongs to a craft that is almost endless in its reach.

If thatching is expansive, it is also opaque. Ours is a trade that most can name, few understand, and many believe to be extinct. We appear before you with our medieval hand tools, our spars and liggers and eaves-wads, as if we belong not to the present but to some dimly defined point in the past.

The word 'thatch' has its roots in the Old High German verb *decchen*, which simply means to make a roof. For millennia, thatch *was* a roof, and it was good enough for a Saxon hall, a hut by the Danube, or Japan's holiest shrine. Even today, thatch can still be the simplest way of putting a roof over our heads. If you go to the woods as a child and build a den, you cover it with bracken, grass, or leaves, and you have unknowingly become a thatcher.

I had been thatching for seven years when I embarked on a journey to broaden my view of the craft. I met and worked alongside six thatchers trained in very different traditions to my own, looking to discover what it was like to practise our trade in

the Hebrides, Rotterdam or Kobe. I wanted to understand the status and value of thatched roofs in these different places, and to uncover why the reed I use every day in Devon comes from Turkey or Russia, and not from a West Country marsh or the Norfolk Broads. What, if anything, did I share with the thatchers in far-flung parts of the world, and were there things I could learn from them?

My travels took me to the thatched churches of Norfolk, and to the largest water reed beds in the world. I met the son of a lobster fisherman who harvests a precious grass in the Western Isles of Scotland, and saw how a Syrian refugee has helped to save a vanishing craft on a Baltic island. I joined a Dutchman continuing a proud family dynasty on the Hook of Holland, and heard the story of one of the first Japanese women to become apprentice to a 5,000-year-old craft.

In all of the places I visited, I found much common ground between us. For one, work schedules are the perennial victims of weather, circumstance and the availability of materials. My attempts to make a visit coincide with the thatching of a particular roof frequently failed, when work was delayed by a shortage of Danish seagrass, or exercises among the miscanthus meadows by the Japanese military. I saw that many of the same battles face a thatcher on a Hebridean island and one off the coast of Jutland, and that the techniques I learned are also used by roofers in Romania.

In the places I visited, time and again, I witnessed a trade that has undergone profound changes. The look of thatched roofs, the techniques used to construct them, the people who build them and those who live under them – all of these things are different now from what they were a century ago. Thatched roofs are not monuments, frozen in time, but are more like living organisms: each one is a web of repair, replacement and alteration, shaped, dressed and re-moulded by every pair of hands that works on

it. Thatching is not just about nostalgia. It can provide a home for the dispossessed. It can be an anchor for the uprooted. Its strangest materials hold secrets that could transform the buildings of the future. In some places I found that it has become a modern roofing business; in others, it persists as a craft steeped in millennia of tradition. It can be exploitative. Its arts can be freely shared, jealously guarded, or stolen. It can be a roof of crude functionality or baroque complexity.

On my journey I found that roofing with plants can remind us of the power of cooperation. Of our fundamental capacity to provide for ourselves with nothing but our hands. And I saw, again and again, that because our craft depends on plants, and how they grow, that the story of thatching is in the end the story of our relationship with the land, and how we have used it.

But first we need to go back to the beginning, and see how I came to arrive in that floodlit Devon barn.

PART ONE

DEVON

1

The Cott Inn

I had to get nearer the sky,
For the city was too full of rooms
And I can't be content with a window.

Margaret Tait, *A Poem for Morning*

I NEVER PLANNED TO BE A THATCHER. I grew up on a smallholding in the hills of the Scottish Borders, a mile from the nearest house, and ten from the nearest town. There were deer and badgers in the garden, and sometimes adders in the house. By the time I left school I knew how to sharpen a chainsaw and slaughter a goose, but the idea of becoming a roofer – or learning a building trade of any kind – didn't figure highly in my thoughts.

I left university with an English degree and did what seemed to make most sense: I got a job with a publishing house in London. It took five years for me to see that I was constitutionally unsuited to spending eight hours a day at a desk, but eventually I quit my job and, without much idea of what I would do next, returned to the Borders. There I got married, and picked up the hedge-planting work I had done for a local woodsman during my school holidays.

My boss was a countryman with a hutch of ferrets in his back garden, a pair of lurchers, and forearms sculpted by decades

of operating machines for the Forestry Commission. As we growled over the sparse humps of the Border hills in his Land Rover, he would always spot things I missed: a pair of crows building a nest in the crown of a hawthorn tree, a poorly built fence, a soggy field in need of drainage. He possessed the rural gaze Colette had in mind when she wrote, '*à qui vit aux champs et se sert de ses yeux, tout devient miraculeux et simple*' – to someone who lives in the fields and knows how to use their eyes, everything becomes miraculous and simple.[1] Miraculous *and* simple: a country person sees the wonder of the world around them, and by perceiving its detail, they also naturally understand it. My eyes had been dulled by years of shutting out the city. The landscape, familiar as it was from my childhood, was passing before me in a blur. As I sat in the Land Rover sipping Thermos tea on our lunch break, I lifted my eyes from my phone screen and began to look again.

I knew I couldn't go on planting hedges forever, so I started to search for conservation work. It turned out that this sector requires you to serve time as a volunteer before offering you a real job with an actual salary. After a few months of looking, a lengthy application and even an interview, I landed a role as an unpaid 'countryside intern' – no less – with the National Trust in South Devon.

We found a place to stay on Gumtree. It wasn't as cheap as you might expect, for a one-bed static caravan with a compost toilet, but it was on a slope of oak woodland on the banks of the River Dart. That bit, at least, was romantic. On our first morning I was woken early by sun bursting through the thin curtains of the bedroom. I pulled on a pair of jeans and crept outside in my bare feet. The hedgerows along the lane were busting with primroses and ramsons, insects droned between the thick-smelling flowers of Alexanders, and skylarks sang above the field by the woodland.

With the National Trust's navy-clad rangers I criss-crossed almost every piece of coastline between the naval town of Dartmouth and the city of Plymouth. I mended fences, and picked up the bags of dog shit that walkers hang like Christmas tree decorations from the hedges. I chainsawed fallen trees, and showed school groups how to hunt for dragonfly larvae in streams lined with watercress. I got to know the county's creeks and combes, but still remained, in the eyes of the old country types I began to meet, just another clueless blow-in from 'up country'. One day, in a field on the cliffs, a ranger introduced me to a septuagenarian farmer as 'our new volunteer.'

'*Volunteer*, eh?' The farmer regarded me steadily from his quad bike. 'Hasn't he got anything better to do?'

It was a fair question. I had dragged my wife first to the Borders, then into the static caravan with its leaking roof and compost toilet, so that I could work for the country's largest landowner, for free. Outside our caravan we tried to grow lettuces in a slug-infested raised bed and began each morning by picking the slimy molluscs off our face flannels. We spent our evenings in the caravan reading by candlelight and, without artificial light on our retinas, slept more deeply than at any other time in our lives. I would wake to hear the chiffchaffs calling above us, the swish and scrape of an ash branch on the caravan roof, the machine gun explosion of a wren.

One afternoon, I was on my knees sweeping the floor of another caravan owned by our landlord to earn some extra cash. It was 2012: the summer of the London Olympics and the most unrelenting rain anyone could remember in Devon. The caravan I was cleaning had been occupied by Happy Harry, a man who spent his winters in India and his summers selling incense sticks in Totnes market. When he wasn't selling incense he divided his time between puffing on spliffs and the early-adopted e-cigarette that hung around his neck. Happy Harry seemed to subsist entirely on smoke.

After a few months in the woodland, Happy Harry was moving on again, and I was being paid five pounds an hour to clean his caravan. I didn't have a Hoover so used a dustpan and brush to clean the carpet. I swept away at the thin, hard, material and used my fingers to gather up the crisp crumbs and crumpled Rizlas into a carrier bag.

Outside the National Trust's workshop, built high on the cliffs above Bolt Head, columns of rain swept in from the Atlantic. The drowned summer had given way to a wetter autumn, the schools were back and the tourists had mostly left, leaving only the visitors who the National Trust categorised – unofficially – as 'the newly weds and the nearly deads.' One of the rangers took me to one side. He had heard that some local thatchers needed an apprentice. He knew I was now looking for work: had I ever thought about thatching? I stared blankly. I had not, it must be said, thought about thatching. I had barely given a second glance to the thatched roofs I passed every day in Devon, nor did I realise that I had moved to the English county with the most thatched buildings in Britain. I also had no idea, then, how rare a chance this was – that people can wait years for the chance to be taken on as a thatching apprentice, or give up before they find someone willing to give them a chance. And yet, as I stood there among the smell of grass clippings and chainsaw oil, this job, this old country craft somehow made sense. After years spent in the world of CVs and performative displays of commitment to your career, this was a chance to master a more palpable skill – one of humanity's oldest, at that. More immediately, it might be a way out of volunteering and cleaning up Happy Harry's Rizlas.

So I found myself, a few days later, standing on the scaffolding outside a thatched pub, having got to the end of the trial day

that began in the floodlit barn bundling wheat. And the thatcher wanted to know just one thing. Did I want a job?

There were three of us in the thatching firm and, in our very different ways, we were all unusual – odd-shaped pieces of a puzzle shaken down though life to somehow end up in thatch. There was Alan Prince, a bearded former Royal Navy officer who at coffee break every day would read yesterday's *Guardian*, and was incapable of doing any job badly, whether thatching a roof, building a log store, or cutting oranges into identical pieces for his daily marmalade sandwich. He had a fine bass baritone, sang in the local choir and voted Liberal Democrat. He liked to introduce his blond son-in-law, Lars, as a fascist, on the grounds that he read the *Times* and voted Tory. Lars Blackwell had worked in financial services and lift-fitting in the Midlands before returning to Devon and falling in love with Alan's daughter. He still had the build of a hooker from his high school rugby days, and took delight in riffing on the impenetrability of thatching jargon.

'We call this tool a *twatter*', he once told an earnestly nodding client, before adding 'and that's actually where the word "twat" comes from.'

And then there was me, an English literature graduate from Scotland who had never worked on a building site. Thatching has room for all sorts, as long as you are able to thatch.

The freedom among the Devon roofs was instantly addictive. There were no meetings, no reports, no forms to be filled in. You just had to lay reed on the roof. The materials and techniques were ancient and mysterious, and making things with my hands had a directness I loved. I realised I had always enjoyed making things with my hands, I had just never acknowledged it, far less considered making it into a career.

Gradually, I learned to tune my eye to the subtleties of the craft: how to tell a good bunch of wheat from a bad one, how to spot a lump or dip in the thatch coat. And then, three months after picking up my first armful of wheat, I was given my first shot at thatching one into a roof – the roof of the huge Cott Inn.

Kneeling on the ladder, I ran through the instructions again. Hold the reed bundle down with your left forearm, remove the string that secures it. Press and work the wheat into place, turning the bunch from a circle into the square shape needed to continue the line of thatch on the roof. Dress it into place with the paddle-shaped tool known as a drift. Fix it with a straw rope and a hairpin-shaped hazel spar. After months of labouring, of bundling reed until my back ached, of tying knots with fingers frozen by morning frost, of counting down the minutes to the relief of a cheese sandwich and a respite from the bundling – after three months of all this, here at last was my first shot at the real thing.

From the bottom of the ladder, Lars and Alan looked up with amused interest. I shifted my weight on the ladder, and got to work. Circles to squares, hold and press, dress, dress, fix. I thatched in three bundles, handling the tools ponderously, gingerly. With a final prod of the drift, I was done.

I turned to receive my teacher's verdict.

'It looks like you're trying to do an impression of thatching, not the real thing!' spluttered Alan.

Shame and frustration flooded my cheeks. I was twenty-seven years old, with five years in a professional job behind me, but I could have been squirming in front of a headmaster.

'It might look alright from up there,' he added more gently, 'but come down here and see.' I did so, and he was right: my short effort was sending the line of the roof in a direction that bore little relation to the thatch below, or indeed to the timber structure underneath.

It was back down to ground level, and bundling wheat.

In 1800, there were almost a million thatched roofs in England. Today, there are around 60,000.[2] Thatching in this country, and across northern Europe, has gone from being the commonest type of roof there is, to one of the rarest. It is usual at this point to ask what caused the precipitous decline. More interesting is to ask the opposite question: given that more durable and less laboursome roofing materials have been around for over one hundred and fifty years, why has thatching not disappeared altogether?

At the end of the eighteenth century, on the cusp of the trade's long decline, straw was by far the most common thatching material in England. It could come from wheat, rye or oats, all of which were cut with a sickle, and threshed by hand to remove the grain. The long stems left over from the threshing – and they *were* long: unlike modern cereal varieties, they could be up to six feet tall – made a wonderful thatching material. In most of England, straw was roughly piled up by the forkful, wetted, and then 'drawn' into sausage-like bundles called yealms, a technique known as long straw thatching. In the West Country, where the weather is mild and wet, and roofs rot faster, more care was needed. Here straw was 'combed' of leaves to produce bundles with parallel stems and the butt ends brought together. These are the neat, water-shedding nitches I split on my very first day in the barn. In other parts of the country, long stubble – haulm – was left for the commoners who used it for thatching or as fodder. However straw was processed, it was both a by-product and an inseparable part of the farming system. The same land that provided you with food also gave you a roof, and when your roof began to rot you could rip it off and spread it back on the fields.

Straw was not the only thatching material used in England. Heather, broom, gorse and bracken were laid on roofs close to

open heaths and moorlands. And wherever there were marshes, people gathered the long stems of water reed. The same plant, *Phragmites australis*, is used for thatching from Japan to Peru. It grows vigorously and with little encouragement wherever there are wetlands, and Britain's marshland once covered a quarter of the country.[3] But as the Industrial Revolution transformed the British countryside, the use of water reed for thatching was limited to places close to major wetlands: the Fens, the Somerset Levels, the brackish leys along the Devon coast.

Everywhere else, straw dominated. For centuries, farmers across Europe had relied on 'land races': genetically unique varieties of wheat, barley or other cereals. Each variety had been developed in a particular place, by saving the best seed from the previous year's harvest. Land races were adapted to the soil and conditions of a very specific bit of ground: their yields were meagre by modern standards, but they were hardy and extremely reliable. And if you are a subsistence farmer, you'll always take security over surplus.

The arrival of mechanical reapers and threshers in the first half of the nineteenth century spelled the beginning of the land races' demise. Most of the new machines were developed in North America, and were unable to process stems longer than four and a half feet – shorter than many of the old English varieties.[4] Breeders quickly began to develop more diminutive and higher-yielding cereals. For a thatcher, short stems mean the material either has to be laid more thinly, or the pitch (angle) of the stems must be flatter, and so shed water more slowly. Both scenarios reduce the longevity of the roof. But the new nineteenth-century varieties were still long enough to make good thatch, and, being stiffer-stemmed, they may even have been easier to work with than some of the old land races.[5]

As wetlands were drained and cleared, and heathlands turned to grazing, the wild plants which had once been gathered for roofing

were lost. Thatchers adapted. As cereals were grown in new areas, so straw could be used instead of heather or reed. Nevertheless, the number of thatched roofs continued to decrease. The arrival of the railways in the mid-nineteenth century brought Welsh and Cornish slate to most of England, and slate began to replace thatch across much of the countryside, almost completely eliminating it north of Birmingham.

Just as straw roofs were vanishing like snow on a warm day, and thatching seemed certain to be consigned to a future as – at best – a curiosity in open-air museums, something surprising happened: people began to see a new value in the craft.

A month or so after my disastrous first attempt on the Devon pub, Lars seemed to have forgotten all about it, and asked me to set one of the barges. 'Setting the barge' means putting in place (setting) the first layer of reed where a roof runs diagonally up a gable (or barge). This time, with a combination of beginner's luck and furious concentration I set the barge well. It wasn't perfect, but it was neat, firm, and in that vital engineering phrase – 'good enough'.

A few days later, at the end of coffee break, Alan fished a pair of German-made shears from the toolbox, and turned them over thoughtfully on his lap.

'You might as well have a go at cutting the eaves,' he began. 'The key thing with any blade is to keep it dry, so it doesn't rust,' he went on, wiping the bright metal with an oiled rag, 'I'll show you how it's done.'

We walked down the building to the long eastern end of the roof. Standing on a short ladder, Alan demonstrated how to make two cuts to the eaves: an 'undercut' to trim out the bulk of the wheat all the way back to the wall, and a 'level cut' to give you the line.

'When you look up from below,' – he was at the bottom of the ladder now, craning up at his own immaculate work – 'the ends of the reed should look like feather quills. Right, off you go.'

He clambered back up to his work on the ridge, and I was left with the shears and a building sense of panic. The section I had to trim was on the roadside of the building, which is to say, the most visible part. It had taken Alan and Lars nearly a week to thatch; it might take me just a few minutes of shoddy cutting to ruin. I took a breath and began to cut, snip by snip, standing back every so often to check how my line was progressing. After almost an hour, I was done. I went to find Alan.

'That'll do it', came the verdict, as he ran his eye over my work. 'You've got this job now.' And my head spun with relief.

The next day I was asked to do the diamond pattern on the ridge. It is formed of pattern sticks – short lengths of split hazel or ash – which are arranged in a repeating pattern between two parallel lines of longer sticks known as liggers. This is a final flourish on the roof, and each thatcher does the pattern slightly differently, though most are variations on a diamond or, more rarely, a herringbone. A trained eye can identify a roof as being the work of a particular thatcher by the ridge alone. The pattern is both decorative and functional, as the sticks keep the ridge tightly in place. They offer perhaps the finest example of one of thatching's core mantras, which is a useful life lesson too: if you can't hide something, make a feature out of it.

It goes like this. When thatching a roof, you start at the bottom and work upwards, laying the reed in overlapping layers known as 'courses'. Each bundle of reed is fixed to the roof (using a variety of different methods) at least halfway up its length, so that the fixings are hidden by the reed of the course above it. Look at a well-thatched roof and you will see a smooth, seamless surface – the fixings are invisible, as are the individual courses that constitute it. It looks like the thatch has been painted on.

When you reach the top of the roof, you have a problem: the outermost ridge fixings cannot be concealed, because there is no more thatch to be added. So instead they are turned into a feature: a thing of beauty, and a maker's mark.

My first attempt at the pattern sticks was a success. I was slowly becoming a thatcher. My fingers were getting stronger, the callouses on my palms were becoming thicker, and my back had been rounded by the hours of bundling. Just before Christmas, on the wettest weekend in all of that wet year, we left the mouldy caravan for a flat in town. Our estate car broke down again, so we moved our damp possessions in a borrowed matchbox-sized Ford Ka that had no suspension and even less boot space. The lane flooded, so we had to do a six-mile detour on each three-mile journey. But we moved. When the final box was in, we stood and looked around us, dazzled by the space and light of the one-bed flat, two floors above a Totnes everything-shop that sold reduced price bread from Ukraine and German Christmas stollen in July.

The ridge of the Cott Inn was over a hundred feet long, and its long western side was full of eyebrows, too – those rounded features that arch quizzically on the face of a building and which provide interest to the viewer and a technical challenge to the thatcher. It took us six months to finish and by the time we had done so it was spring, and Alan had had enough of thatching. In my last memory of him on the roof he is perched high on the ladder, grey-bearded in blue jeans, brown leather ankle boots and a soft cotton shirt of bright turquoise, which stood out like a flag against the blue spring sky. He worked, as ever, with the ease and economy of a true craftsman. Without seeming to move much, his hands performed a kind of entropy-in-reverse, bringing order out of the chaos of natural materials, as they worked with magician deftness along the roof.

2

The South Hams

The nut-stick yealm-twist's got into his soul

Ted Hughes, *Sketching a Thatcher*

On a still day you could hear the waves. Their roar was carried over the fields and up the combe towards the hamlet where Lars and I were thatching, tucked deep into a fold in the hills. It was November. With all the holiday cottages dark and shuttered, life in the village was reduced to the presence of a retired builder, who walked his spaniel along the lane each morning. He was tall, with a full head of white hair, and a powerful stride inherited from his father, who had been a Devon champion at the mile.

Before beginning the next section of thatching, we needed to check the soundness of the roof timbers from inside the attic. The retired builder was eager to join us for a look. We pulled off our boots at the door and padded upstairs. While he held the stepladder, Lars and I wriggled through the hatch into the loft, and clicked on our head torches. It was my first time inside a really old thatched roof. The noise of the outside world was extinguished, and the air smelled of dust. I looked around. Old thatch coats spilled over the roof timbers, cobwebs draped down like dusty curtains, and from each side

the pointed wooden ends of hazel spars jabbed through the thatch. I reached out to touch a worm-eaten piece of hazel and it crumbled in my hand. The wheat, when I touched it, was as hard and smooth as seasoned timber. And it glistened with soot like a coal scuttle.

The underside of a thatched roof should never get wet. Water penetrates just the outermost inch or so of the thatch: the rest stays dry. Over time, decay works its way up the stems, gradually eating through the roof. If the re-thatching is done in time, the decay does not reach the innermost part. In much of England, especially East Anglia, re-thatching means removing all the old material right back to the timbers. But in the West Country, a technique known as 'overcoating' is favoured. Here, new thatch is laid over the top of the existing thatch, or 'coat'. As the life of the house goes on, two, three or more old coats of thatch may build up on the roof. On some buildings you can stand beneath the eaves, look up and see them: the coats lie there like geological strata, stacked one on top of the other.

Base coats can be as old as the house. The very oldest, like the one I am looking at in the attic, are blackened with smoke. These date from a time before chimneys, when the house's central hearth sent fumes and ash upwards into an open roof space. This thatch is a unique historical record, whose importance was only fully uncovered by the work of an intrepid Canadian-born archaeo-botanist, John Letts. What Letts discovered, as he researched the smoke-blackened thatch of English roofs in the late 1990s, was that they contained examples of plants and crops used in the Middle Ages. These were almost unique. Five-hundred-year-old timber or stone in a building is nothing unusual, but to find well-preserved examples of organic materials like straw, broom and heather of this age is extremely rare. News of a treasure trove of late medieval plant remains might not immediately quicken