

**Suffolk Preservation Society Autumn Conference**  
**Fire and Thatch: a burning issue**

**Lavenham, 15 October 2011**

Following the first cold snap in Suffolk and the sickening sight of the first thatch fire of the season, the SPS hosted their timely conference. An audience of over one hundred property owners and a distinguished group of experts, including the insurance industry, English Heritage, academics, research scientists as well as representatives from industry, the fire service and the thatching craft, gathered at Lavenham to discuss and debate the current theories on the causes of thatch fires. The Experts gave timely advice on risk management; including insurance and maintenance. The Society had been conscious for some time that the frequency of such fires represented a significant heritage loss to the country. Not only did old traditional roofs vanish, but also their entire timber framing in many cases, not to mention the distress to owners and the added burden of rebuilding.

Delegates were informed that thatch fires had been increasing in recent years, and it was paramount for thatch owners to understand the risks. These fires were, almost always, impossible to control once ignited, and the results devastating. It went without saying that it was important to understand the hazards and to follow safety precautions but there remains much controversy over chimneys, flue linings and wood burning stoves. The audience were told that over 90 per cent of thatch fires related to chimneys and the use of wood burning stoves; involving heat transfer. Modern enclosed solid fuel appliances were designed to burn efficiently, cleanly and at very high temperatures. Such appliances when connected to old chimneys create a potential for heat bridging from the flue, where there was potentially only an intervening four-inch thickness of brick. Thatch is especially vulnerable to the risk of heat build-up within the flue and laterally between the brick and the thatch. Concerns were also raised regarding the build-up of multi-layer straw around the base of the chimney stack, inappropriate flue liners, blocked or tarred spark arrestors on chimney pots, and chimney stacks not high enough above the thatch ridge. The many factors identified gave delegates something to think about. An alternative theory, derived from forensic investigation, suggested that sparks ejected from the chimney could be a significant cause. The use of inappropriate woods, paper and other fuels that yield sparks and tapers was highlighted as a potential hazard.

However, help was on hand with eleven trade stands available to assist thatch owners to understand the range of products and services and delegates departed with a keen sense of the remedial steps required to safeguard their homes. It was sobering to understand that whilst there were 23,000 thatched listed properties in the country, including Grade 1 churches, and some schools, many of these would not have a valid claim in the event of fire, unless they complied with the letter of their insurance policies. The Suffolk Preservation Society's Conference was overdue and a wake-up call to halt the destruction of East Anglia's wonderful thatched heritage of early buildings.

