



Fire Safety for Thatch – From the Thatch Advice Centre

Reduce the risk and increase your Peace of Mind

Do thatched property fires occur more than those with conventional roofs or is it just people's perception? Statistically, homes with thatched roofs are no more likely to catch fire than those with conventional roofs, however if they do the results are often rapid and spectacular. It seems worse, mainly because thatched fires in unprotected properties usually causes severe damage and therefore receives maximum publicity.

The risk of thatch fires in old and new properties can be greatly reduced by taking sensible precautions and by utilising new specialist products to reduce the risk.

This guidance is goodwill advice and is not mandatory. It applies to all types of properties and thatch but if alterations to listed buildings are proposed then reference should always be made to the Conservation Officer of the Local Authority for the area where the premises is sited.

Main Causes of Thatched Fires

- Chimney related (90%)
- Electrical
- Lightening
- Disgarded cigarettes and outside fire sources

Source Norwich Union Risk Services - Aviva Company. Thatch burns at just over 200°C.

Precautions - General

Contact your local Fire Safety Officer to see if they will give you free advice or a site visit on your thatched property.

Normal fire safety advice applies, includes extinguishing cigarettes at night and turning off and unplugging unnecessary electrical equipment.

Any builders or tradesmen should be able to provide a document confirming that their public liability insurance provides cover for the 'use of heat' without this letter do not let works be carried out.

Keep relevant fire extinguishers readily available.



Other areas of specific advice

Electrical
Chimneys
Alarms, Detectors and Early Warning Systems
Woodburners and Open Fires
Roof Voids
External

Electrical Fire Safety Considerations for Thatch

Inspect your system every 5 years to ensure its integrity. All wiring connections to a property, including aerial leads and supply cables must be spaced a minimum of 30 cm away from the thatch and any wire netting.

TV aerials should be fitted to a free standing pole or gable end so that they are not attractive to lightening strikes. Overhead supply feeds must have ceramic type insulators replaced. Your electricity supplier should do this free of charge.

All electrical wiring in the roof space should be in conduits and fitted by a qualified electrician.

Avoid vermin damage to electrics by placing poison in the loft space.

Light fittings in the roof space should be enclosed in a bulkhead - do not use recessed ceiling lights (downlighters) on the upper floor due to overheating potential.

Outside security lights, e.g. halogen lights create a lot of heat so must not be fitted near to the thatch or underneath overhangs.



Chimneys

Have chimneys inspected at least once every 3 years by a HETAS registered chimney engineer to ensure the liner and brickwork is good. A thatcher should check the hidden section when re-thatching.

Ensure the top of the chimney pots are at least 1.8 metres above the thatch.

The chimney should be swept twice a year or quarterly if wood is burnt.

Chemical flue cleaners are available to help remove and loosen tar deposits but care must be taken. They can be used before a chimney is swept to aid the cleaning.

Spark arrestors are not recommended. This is because they can become clogged (either naturally or through lack of maintenance) restricting free flow of combustion gases and also becoming a fire hazard in themselves.

Appropriate liners are essential depending on the fire below your chimney.
Professional advice should always be sought.

Register plates - are non combustible horizontal plates fitted to close off large flues and allow a much smaller flue pipe to exhaust into them. Care must be taken and professional advice sought with the use of this method.

Alarms, Detectors and Early warning systems

Smoke alarms - should be fitted on each level and especially in the roof space. Should be tested regularly There are stand alone or linked options. Professional advice may be sought.

Fire alarms and chimney heat alarms are also useful early warning systems.

Or keep an eye on the flue temperature with a flue thermometer.

Woodburners and Open fires - Fire prevention considerations

Select the smallest woodburner for the size of your room to achieve the best burning and safest solution. Always take professional advice on the stove and flue lining and get it installed by a reputable supplier. Woodburners generate a lot of heat, even up the flue.

Check with your insurance company regarding your cover in relation to stoves and open fires.

Open fires generate less heat up the chimney but flues are still recommended as is professional advice.



Fuel

Do not burn wet or unseasoned wood as it will leave greater tar deposits which increase the fire hazard.

Roof Voids and fire safety advice

No 'hot work'. Plumbers in roof voids need to use push or compression fittings.

Frozen pipes should only be thawed by using cloths soaked in hot water and not with a blow torch, hot air stripper or hairdryer.

Do not allow smoking, or use a candle, lighter or match as emergency lights. Remember that the interior of a thatched roof is very dry, dusty and flammable.

Lofts should be kept free of storage to allow ease of access in case of fire.

Access hatches should be not less than 90 cm X 60 cm. Fire resisting covers are recommended.

External fire prevention considerations for thatch

External fires

Do not light bonfires, barbeques or discharge fireworks or Chinese lanterns where there is a risk that sparks or debris could land on the thatch.

Never be tempted to speed things up by adding lighter fuel, paraffin diesel or petrol.

Make sure that your neighbours are aware of the potential dangers of Bonfires and Fireworks and the risks they pose to your thatched property

Outside the property

Provide an outside tap with a hose connected, lagged against the frost. For the fire service, be aware of the nearest hydrant or potential source of water e.g. pond or river.

Fire Safety products for thatch

The fire risk (+ insurance premiums) may be reduced by the use of specialist products i.e. Fire retardant sprays, Fire retardant barriers, heat monitors and alarms.