

THATCH FIRE SAFETY BY THE THATCH ADVICE CENTRE

Thatched properties are statistically no more likely to catch fire than other properties but, when they do, those fires are notoriously hard to extinguish. Understanding the main causes and then reducing those risks can make a huge difference to thatch fire safety.

Causes of Thatch Fires

Recent forensic investigation and Fire Protection Association research have proven that the main cause of thatch fires is ejected embers from chimneys and chimney fires. There is also a correlation with woodburners, liners and low chimneys. Fires are also more likely to occur in dry and cold weather. There is no evidence to support heat transfer as a leading cause of thatch fires.

The Thatch Advice Centre website has pages of current information and guidance related to thatch fire safety. They have also produced a free Thatch Fire Safety leaflet giving clear up to date advice on how to reduce the risks which is summarised below.

Reducing the Risks

Chimney fires and ejected embers

The main cause of a chimney fire is tar build up catching alight. Good chimney maintenance and care with what and how you burn is therefore essential in reducing the fire risk.

Guidance includes:-

- CCTV checks of chimney and liner integrity should be carried out before using
- Chimney height; minimum 1.8 m for a woodburner installation - a higher chimney will allow embers to disperse further away from the thatch.
- Ensure the chimney is swept regularly before and during the burning season and keep baffles clean
- Spark arresters are not recommended as a dirty one is a risk factor and they are difficult to keep clean.

Picture courtesy Thatch Advice Centre



- Bird guards are beneficial as a burning nest can produce large embers from the chimney.
- Take care when lighting (avoid paper or card).
- Take care when refuelling fires which can cause sparks.
- Avoid over-ventilating which can cause embers to be carried in fast-moving hot flue gasses.
- Woodburner installations to be carried out by a professional to meet building regulation and insurance requirements.
- Follow the manufacturer's instructions, avoid aggressive burning and slumbering overnight (the latter increases tar build up). Use of a temperature gauge on a woodburner means you can check it is burning at the best temperature to avoid deposits up the chimney.
- Choose seasoned and dry hardwood (maximum 20% moisture) as wet, soft or tanalised wood can also leave tar deposits.

Roof Voids

These can be vulnerable to fire as the interior thatch is dry and dusty.

- A strict policy of no open flames should be followed by both homeowner and any tradespeople.

- Loft spaces should be kept clear to allow access to respond to any fire.
- Access hatches should be minimum 90cm by 60cm, preferably with a fire resisting cover.
- A fire resisting barrier (protection from heat and flames) can be installed over the rafters and under the thatch to prevent the spread of a fire from thatch to the rest of the property.
- Fit Smoke Alarms to give early warning of a fire.
- All electrical wiring in the roof space should be at least 30cm from the thatch, inspected regularly for integrity, and enclosed in vermin-proof conduits.
- Cool LED lights are recommended in bulkheads.

External risks

There is a risk of external fire sources

- Bonfires and barbeques should be located away from the vicinity of the thatch.
- Fireworks and Chinese lanterns are not recommended.
- Check with neighbours that they also understand these risks, as burning material can travel across property boundaries.

Picture courtesy Thatch Advice Centre



Help the Fire Service

Follow the sensible fire precautions as promoted by the Fire Services, which are applicable to all properties and

- Provide an external tap with a lagged hose
- Keep access to the property clear at all times
- Know where the nearest fire hydrant or open water source is located
- Alarms with smoke and carbon monoxide detectors are essential and should be tested weekly. Smoke alarms should be fitted on all floors including the roof space.

Thatch Fire Safety Products

Various products are available which reduce the risks of a fire starting or spreading and may also reduce home insurance premiums.

- Fire resisting barrier mentioned earlier (e.g. Superlux)
- Fire retardant spray (e.g. Magma Firestop) can be applied to the exterior thatch surface.
- Specialist fire suppressants (e.g. ChimFireStop) can be used in the chimney itself.

Understand the Causes and Reduce the Risks

With knowledge, understanding and care the thatch fire risks can be significantly reduced. Many specialist insurers are improving thatch fire safety with sensible terms and conditions within their policies. Building regulations also play a part in fire safety.



*Above, Magma Firestop application
Picture courtesy of Magma Firestop UK*

Most essential to the thatch fire prevention for our historic buildings is the homeowner understanding the risks to their individual property and reducing them. It is a case of having information, acting upon it and working together to spread the up to date advice on how to preserve our thatched heritage.

For details on the **Thatch Advice Centre** please visit www.thatchadvicecentre.co.uk