



THATCH FIRE PREVENTION FROM THE THATCH ADVICE CENTRE

Fire prevention is so important when it comes to thatch. It is notoriously hard to extinguish and consequently, prevention should be everyone's aim.

Thatch Fire Numbers

It is important not to scare monger, as previous statistics may have done. They counted fires in thatched properties, not thatched roof fires. They included fires unrelated to the thatch e.g. a tumbler drier incident, and so muddled the waters.

Thatched roof fire numbers are not high when compared with the total number of thatched properties. The problem is that these losses are often at great cost to both Fire and Rescue Services and insurance companies and are also highlighted in the media. Taking preventative measures is therefore a no-brainer.

Thankfully, people are now making better fire prevention choices due to greater understanding of the causes and the availability of improved advice.

Understand the main Thatch Fire Causes

Forensic investigation into thatch fires followed by Fire Protection Association research has proven the major cause to be ejected embers from chimneys, with increased risk for lined, low chimneys with wood-burning stoves.

*Above, a stunning example of a Thatch Cottage.
Photo courtesy of the Thatch Advice Centre.*

These embers may be from:

- A chimney fire (often caused by tar)
- Sparks produced when lighting or refuelling
- A burning birds nest (proven risk with no statistics on prevalence)

Also risks from:-

- Hot gases - can travel (convection) through a damaged chimney (bricks and/or mortar)
- Wood forming part of the structure of the chimney.
- Electrical and other general fire risks e.g. chip pans and smoking
- Other external fire sources. E.g. bonfires, lightning strikes and steam engines. These are not high risk but more extraordinary circumstances.

Moving on with up to date thatch fire prevention

Transfer of heat through solid brickwork (old Heat Transfer Theory) has now been deemed as unrealistic of reality (per Fire Protection Association research into chimneys, thatch and woodburners). Moving on from this older theory, based on the up to date information and proper research, makes planning useful fire prevention options far more straightforward.

Each thatched property tends to be unique, so with the knowledge of the known major causes, owners can start to understand ways to prevent fire. Remember that thatch is a flammable product and common sense is a good starting point for fire prevention.

Thatch Fire Prevention – Chimney use

Even though a proven risk is woodburner installations, there are many successful ones where fire has never been a problem. This can lead one to think that the user interaction - YOU - can affect your own fire safety by taking sensible precautions. Chimney and woodburner use and maintenance is important.

- Make sure you have your chimney (and any liner) integrity checked. Sweep your chimney regularly to avoid deposits which can cause a chimney fire.
- Look at the height of your chimney. Current building regulations for woodburners stipulate that the chimney height should be 1.8m above the thatch. Some insurers stipulate this for any chimney. Conservation departments may approve increasing the chimney height on Listed Buildings but if not, things like specialised fire retardant sprays e.g. Magma Firestop, can also reduce the risks of embers from a chimney igniting thatch.
- Take care with what you burn and how you burn it; especially solid fuels such as wood. Wood should be dry with a minimum moisture content of 20%. It is easy to get a moisture meter and check. Make sure if you buy dry seasoned wood that it is stored well. Have a look on the www.burnright.co.uk website for great information on how to not only burn sensibly to reduce emissions but also to burn more efficiently which will save money.

Below, photo courtesy of the Thatch Advice Centre.



- Burning well, at optimum temperature, with care on lighting and refuelling reduces the chance of embers going up the chimney or deposits causing a chimney fire. Should there be a chimney fire, there are specialist fire suppressants products, such as ChimFireStop, which can be used.
- Make sure there are no birds' nests in your chimney. If there is a cold snap in the spring and the chimney has not been used for a while, check before you light it (sweep in the spring). Not only is it a fire risk but a blockage causes a carbon monoxide one too!
- Spark arrestors are not recommended as they are a fire hazard when dirty and hard to keep clean.

Additional fire prevention measures

Avoid bonfires, fireworks, Chinese lanterns and other external fire sources near the property. It is important that your neighbours understand the risks that outside fires can cause too.

Prevent vermin from getting into/living in the loft space.

Make sure that any electrics in the loft space are safe and it is recommended they are in metal conduit (something which vermin cannot chew!).

Don't allow hot works near your thatch e.g. on flat roofs. No halogen lights near thatch as they create too much heat, swap for cooler LED.

Have an outside tap with a hose. Wetting the thatch can reduce the risk of external embers catching the roof on fire.

The benefits of preventing thatch fires

Thatch fire numbers although low, are costly, but with care, many can be prevented. Thatch fire prevention is hugely important to avoid the loss of our homes and heritage.

Don't worry unnecessarily about fire potential, as there are many risks in life. Understanding your own unique property, assessing the fire risks then dealing with them individually can make a difference; both to your own peace of mind, and also potentially, to your insurance premium.

Enjoy your thatched property with knowledge and understanding of thatch fire prevention.

For more information on thatch fire prevention and to download their free up to date Thatch Fire Safety Leaflet, please visit www.thatchadvicecentre.co.uk

Below, Magma Firestop application. Photo courtesy of Magma Firestop UK

