

Broadland Memories

Reedsmen of the Norfolk Broads by D. England - originally published in the Winter 1952 edition of Norfolk Magazine

REEDSMEN OF THE

By D. ENGLAND

ONE of the very oldest of Britain's country crafts, which is responsible for some of the most picturesque effects in its rural scene, warmly thatched old-fashioned cottages and splendidly thatched churches, seemed in danger of extinction early this century.

Happily, between the two World Wars, a revival set in, and the services of skilled reed thatchers, some of whom had descended from families that have produced generations of such workers, were in keen demand, one East Anglian firm with experience going back to the Middle Ages, had men working as widely separated as Penzance and Glasgow. During the past few years, too, the shortage of roof tiles for building and repair has led to the further extension of the use of thatch.

How long ago the craft of reed thatching began there it is hard to say. But at any rate the earliest mention of church roofing tells of a covering of thatch, and the Venerable Bede records that when Finan succeeded St. Aidan in the bishopric about the middle of the seventh century he

built a church on the Isle of Lindisfarne, better known as "Holy Island," that ancient and revered home of early Christianity off the rugged coast of Northumberland, constructing, after the manner of the Scots, of hewn oak, and covering it with reeds.

It is not surprising to find that the true centre of reed thatching is in Norfolk and Suffolk, that country of rivers and wide shallow Broads, fringed with thickets and reeds. As proving the antiquity of the craft, there is a firm of reed thatchers at the little market town of North Walsham, in the Broads district, which was established as long ago as the twelfth century.

One of the finest veteran craftsmen of recent years lived in the village of Ludham, lying remote from any large town, and surrounded by rivers and broads. William Grapes died at over 90 a few years back, but so bound up was his life with his work that he was known everywhere as "Thatcher" Grapes. He started learning his craft when only nine and did not retire until he was 82.

36

NORFOLK BROADS



Mowing and Bunching

Alan Savory

His ancestors were also famed as thatchers, and in fact thatching has been the profession of the family for no less than 650 years.

The reed thatcher requires only one material for the exercise of his skill—the stately reeds which grow by the million along the banks of the waterways of East Anglia. In summer the white sails of hundreds of yachts are seen dotting them, but it is when they are deserted by all except the men who know their every

mood—the eel-catchers, the mill men and the marshmen—that the harvest of the Broads is reaped.

For when the reeds stand sere and stiff, rustling gently in the keen wind, or bending to the furious gales that often sweep across the open marshland, the men of Broadland lay them low with their keen scythes. The reed harvest takes place from the heart of winter to the early spring, from December to about

37

the beginning of April, when the young reeds appear, preventing further work.

The cutters wear tall thigh boots, for sometimes they work in the water itself, and they quant their flat-bottomed boats up the shallow dykes or along the "rond"—as the bank of the waterway is called—to the site where they wish to begin work. Their task is a lonely one, yet to those who know and love this part of Britain, never does it seem more beautiful than in winter.

Few other districts can show such marvellous expanses of sky, with glorious sunrises and sunsets, and on a fine winter's day, with the sun shining out of a cloudless sky, and the river flowing gently by, the silence broken only by the gentle rustle of the reeds, the musical "swi-sh, swi-sh," of the cutter's instrument, and perhaps the call of some wild bird overhead, it fills man with a sense of peace that is indescribable.

No wonder that the marshmen declare that they love the rivers and their work, hard though it is. Almost without exception they are keen naturalists, and know the haunts of the wild birds and beasts as do few other people.

They take a pride, too, in their work, in the evenness and rhythm of their cutting, and when the reeds have fallen beneath their scythes they tie them up into

bundles or shooves with swift dexterity. These vary but little in size, so expert is the judgment of the cutters.

Five shooves have an approximate circumference of six feet, and they are sold by the fathom, which usually consists of five shooves, except in a few villages, where six are assembled to allow for the difference in quality of reeds. When he is not delayed by bad weather the marshman can cut about 200 shooves a day, and they are quanted to the stackyards to season.

Besides thatching, the reeds are employed in the making of screens, used in gardens for shielding young trees and shrubs, and large quantities are also sold for the manufacture of mats, church "kneelers," chair seats and baskets. Nevertheless, their most important use is still for the thatching of roofs, and this is a craft that has to be learned from boyhood.

In former centuries there were strict rules as to the profession of reed thatching, and an ancient document of 1665 survives in Norwich Museum stating that the law required a thatcher to be apprenticed to his trade seven years. Another enactment decreed that every freeman in the city of Norwich had to pay twopence per quarter to the headman and warden of trade in the city, and every "foreigner" had to pay fourpence.

38

When the thatcher fixes the reeds on to the roofs of buildings he lays them from ten to fourteen inches thick, and their durability is literally astonishing. Even a straw thatch is noted for its long wear, for it will probably need repair at the end of 30 years. A reed thatch, on the other hand, will last for from 60 to 70 years. Another notable feature about a reed thatch is that if it rained without stopping for a week the water would not penetrate more than an inch. Many old-fashioned farmers have a saying thatch contains a special quality for health and that cattle survive best in a thatched barn.

Thatching is necessarily slow work. Even the roof of an ordinary building will take up to sixteen hundred shooves. These are not easy to handle, for they are from five to seven feet long, and working on a roof leaves not much room to move about. The thatcher fixes the shoove skillfully by means of a long hazel wand, and when working along the eaves he is most careful to see that the bottoms of the shooves all lie absolutely level. Level eaves are

one of the signs of a good craftsman.

When he has finished his task a thatcher can view it with satisfaction and pride, for of the exquisite appearance of reed thatching above any sort of wall there can be no question. Britain's countryside would be sadly shorn if its pleasantly thatched cottages, barns and churches were no more.

As suggested earlier, there is little danger of the craft dying out, and with the gradual return to normal conditions it is likely that there will be a growing demand for the services of East Anglia's reed thatchers.

Moreover, it is probably true to say that these men to-day are even more skilled than were their forebears, for besides the purely utilitarian side of their craft, such as the thatching of barns and houses, they have evolved most attractive designs in decorative thatching (used for sports pavilions, summer houses, etc.), attaining charming effects which not so long ago would have been considered impossible.

39