

## John Letts

### Description of the historic thatch.

We have the rafters coming up and down, connected up to the ridge pole above us and they're all blackened, so all the woodwork, so the batons running horizontally and rafters are all fairly heavily blackened by smoke; there are a lot of cobwebs, 500 year old spiders! But the first thing you'll notice is these fixings coming through, and these are wooden twisted hazel, or some of them possibly willow bonds and those are the bonds that are tying that first base coat to the roof, the first course ever applied. And if you notice this side is more the medieval side, and what you'll see here is, you see the butt ends of rye here, the base coat that you see is all rye, so the first thing you do is put a lining, as they call it, of fairly tall long rye right up against the batons, and you lay that in courses with the butts up, starting at the bottom and so when you put your next course you hide the ears behind those butts, because these roofs were seen from ground level, obviously there's no ceiling, there's no first floor, so when you look up you want to see a very smooth neat base coat of the thatch with no ears popping through, and that's all then covered with soot, so it would be a very, very uniform dark roof.

*So how rare is this particular example of thatch?*

Well there are about 225, thereabouts, of smoked blackened base coats of thatch that I know of. Devon has about 85% of all the roofs, so to me it's very rare.

The ancient tradition is to first of all tie on a base coat to the roof timbers, so you have your new roof with your open rafters, you tie on a base coat, that is then a permanent base coat that is never removed from the building, and it's not a weathering coat; you then spar coat layers of weathering thatch on to that base coat using twisted hazel or willow, look like hairpins really, so the weathering coat is applied onto that base coat and that coat may last 20, 30 perhaps more years, depending on the material and how it's put on; and eventually as it wears back you obviously have to replace it with another weathering coat and so on and so on, so you get an accumulation over centuries of these weathered, semi decayed weathering coats; and it builds up a considerable thickness of thatch and the key is that the base layers, the original base coat that was put on perhaps in 1450 or whenever the building was built, that is never replaced and is kept perfectly dry, 'cos obviously you have heat in the house, and you also have the, well at least in the early phases you have



the smoke, the soot from the open fire from the medieval hearth and it comes up and coats all the thatch with soot, so the base layer, the material in the base layer is extremely well preserved and then its obviously protected from the outer layers, so it survives beautifully in tact and it's the oldest best preserved ancient plant material in Western Europe, I'd say the world.

*And why is it tatty this side?*

Well that side's been rebuilt for whatever reason, but obviously the medieval rafters are still there, you can still see the blackening, the battens, they put in some pine or something, some soft wood anyway, roughly cut round stuff and so that thatch put on is wheat.

