

Why thatching is back

Tom Allan left a job in London to train as a thatcher. He meets others keeping the tradition alive

Rural life

On the Roof

A Thatcher's Journey

by Tom Allan

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Patrick Galbraith

In Kenya when those who have almost nothing come into a very modest amount of money, one of the first things they do is tear off the thatched roof on their hut and replace it with a tin one. In many ways this makes perfect sense. Metal doesn't leak and you never have to replace it. And in the Netherlands there is an expression that translates as "this guy is under the tiles". It means that somebody has risen sufficiently in the world that they no longer have to live under a thatched roof.

Yet right across the globe, as Tom Allan's extraordinary journey from Norfolk to Japan shows, thatching is far from disappearing. Although there are only 60,000 thatched roofs in England, compared with almost a million in 1800, there is a new-found appreciation of the craft. It is more than just an old-fashioned way to put a roof over your head. Allan writes that "thatching is a way of cheating time. Its rhythms force us to slow down, just for a while. For as our hands follow its arcane techniques, we feel a connection to the past."

It took Allan five years of sitting at a desk, working for a London publishing house, to realise that he was "constitutionally unsuited" to office life. He quit, moved back home to the Scottish Borders and heard, quite by chance, of some local thatchers who needed an apprentice. He didn't realise it, but his luck was in. Not only can thatching in modern Britain be fairly lucrative, but apprenticeships are rare.

That opportunity was not



The last straw Nicolai, a 72-year-old reed cutter from Romania. Right: a shop roof in Devon

merely a lifeline for Allan, it set him on a path that has led to this excellent book. *On the Roof* is a thoughtful appreciation of a British craft that will leave readers with a comprehensive understanding of the thatching process, from "dressing" reed, to "yealming" (gathering wheat into a bundle), to fixing "spars". But it is so much more than that. It is really a travel book that uses thatching and the challenges thatchers face, from Norfolk to Holland to Romania and even Japan, to understand rural culture.

It is fascinating to learn that in Romania the reed-cutting business is generally controlled

cutting in the area – it's a national park – but he arrived by bicycle and cuts by hand so his environmental impact is negligible. Then he is found by a park ranger, who has the power to fine him a whole season's earnings. We find ourselves wondering, what matters more? Nicolai earning enough money to travel to hospital or the reed beds being managed in a way that has been cooked up by environmentally conscious bureaucrats?

Sometimes the book strains under its range. Allan's time in Romania could have been a book in itself, for instance, but he manages to bring all his chapters alive with his vivid writing. "Mr Hiromichi is a slim man with a high voice. He has a habit of pursing his lips and holding his chin up high, which would give him a haughty air if everything about his face wasn't so amiable," tells us a great deal in very few words.

Although he has a romantic attachment to tradition, Allan is no reactionary. He is interested in how thatching has always evolved. He has a healthy respect for how over the past two decades the Dutch "have transformed thatch into a modern roofing material", building 1,500 new thatched homes a year. This boom is why – shock, horror – he might use Turkish reed on a Devon cottage. Thatchers "will find new things to borrow or steal, search for ways to keep the thing going", says Allan. Good thing too. Thatch is beautiful, not just a roof for those who can't afford anything better.



The Dutch are building 1,500 new thatched homes a year

by the mafia. In the section on Japan, which touches on everything from saké to beer worship, we learn of the cultural difficulties faced by a young woman, Saori, when she decided to take up thatching. It took her months to tell her parents because in Japan roofs are traditionally considered "unclean" and women were forbidden to set foot on them.

Allan furnishes his subject with arresting human detail. One character we meet in rural Romania on the Danube delta is Nicolai, a 72-year-old reed cutter who has a hospital appointment the next day to treat his painfully swollen eye. We learn that he shouldn't be