

The thatcher

The thatching process he used was very precise. At certain times of the year, his work was entirely in the stackyard at the farm, and the stacks of hay, clover, barley, oats and wheat in that order had to be kept perfectly dry, because any dampness would cause the stack to heat up with possible spontaneous combustion, and nobody wanted a fire in the stackyard. After the wheat had been threshed out the grain went to the flour mill and the straw to a large barn, where some of it was needed to make chaff for cows and horses to eat. Some was used to make litter for the pigs and horses. But the best wheat straw was

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restacked in the stackyard and thatched, making a stack of straw for thatching. From that stack **Uncle Happy** would draw out straw and pitch it into a tumbrel to be carted to the place where it was needed for thatching. The tumbrel was tipped up leaving a heap of straw; he would then take out a bundle of it, enough for a morning's work, sprinkle it with water, and straighten the stalks with a wooden rake, being very careful not to bend or break any of them. Then he would collect a bundle of straw evenly laid together, and carry it up the ladder to be fixed on the roof. The thatch had to be laid in the lower rows first, each row overlapping the previous one, the small bundles laid close together making several thicknesses of the finished thatch. The skill lay in keeping the rows straight and the thickness of the thatch even.

Working his way up the roof to the ridge must have involved miles of stepping up and down the ladder; it would be interesting to estimate just how much that amounted to in a day's work, but in those days of full employment people would not have the time for "games" of that kind. A decade later there were studies of efficiency in work, when time and movement became important studies; but the working people usually hated those "interferences" with the way they did their job. As one woman worker in the biggest jam factory in the country said: "I've been making wooden pips for strawberry jam for twenty years, and nobody is going to tell me how to do my job better!" After all the thatch Uncle Happy had put in place, he would have laughed at anybody who said he could do his job better.

In putting thatch on a roof he would have to work up both sides, and put a special row along the ridge. This important finish to a thatched roof was usually worked to a serrated pattern, like a dressmaker using pinking shears. But the final row of thatch on a roof demanded much more care. In a sense it would decide the quality of the whole job. If the owner of the roof could afford it, the thatch would be held in place for a longer period by covering it with small mesh chicken wire. This would not only hold the thatch in place in a high wind, but protect it against the predations of birds and rats, both of which like to make nests in the warmth of a thatched roof.

A well-thatched cottage looked smart while the straw still had its natural colour, and Uncle Happy could stand back and look with pride at his work; all too soon the weather would make the straw turn grey, and the chicken wire would rust and break. But let us just leave Uncle Happy with his newly thatched roof, his accomplishment complete with the frustration of the predators!