



Thatching in Wiltshire

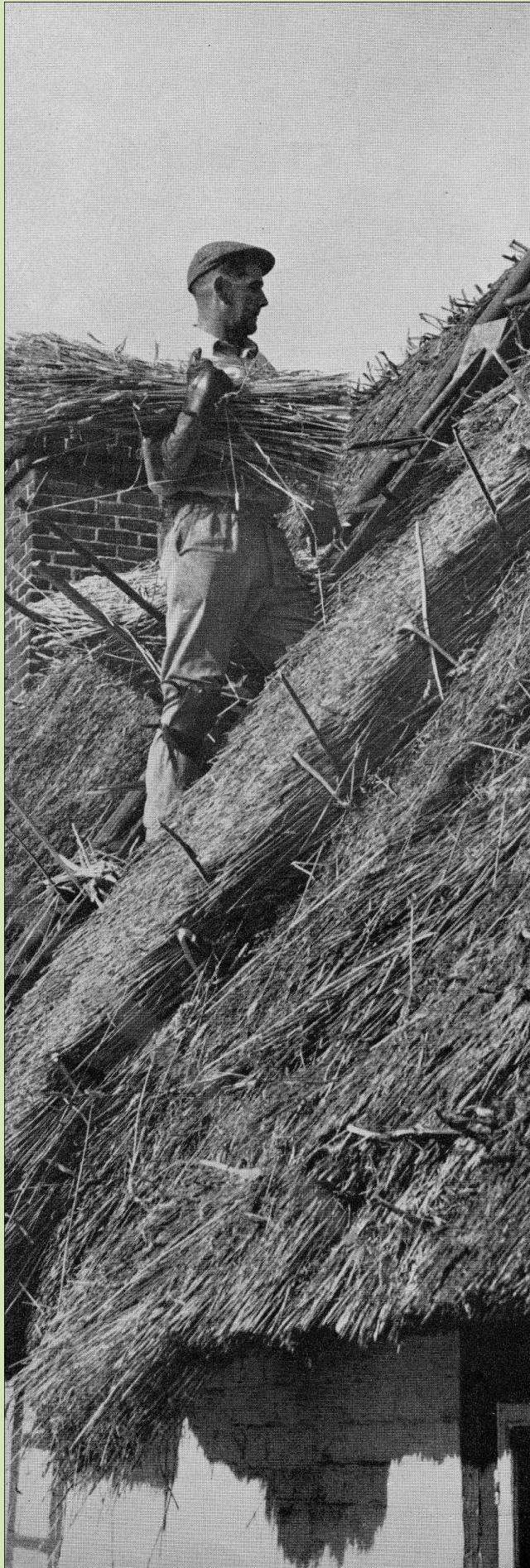
BY J. E. MANNERS

Up to fifty years or so ago the cheapest and easiest form of roofing was thatch. Village houses, barns, hayricks, etc., were all roofed in this manner whilst the manor house and those of the rich rarely if ever had it. It was the roofing material for the poorer people. Wheat straw, the type generally used, was available everywhere whilst Norfolk reed was used extensively locally. There must have been literally thousands of craftsmen. Now their numbers are down to a mere six

hundred and these are mostly getting old though it is gratifying to note the Rural Industries Bureau is promoting an apprentice scheme.

Thatchers invariably work in pairs and are usually self employed. They seem to make a reasonable living especially if disposed to work on in the wet and cold for half the year and for very long hours in the summer. On top of this most of the work is likely to be some

continued overleaf



distance off and may mean sleeping away from home. The thatcher is always working at a height and can easily fall particularly as new thatch is as slippery as ice.

Such is the demand for thatch that a waiting time of one year is fairly normal.

BANNED

The cost of thatching a house in reeded wheat straw might be £300 upwards, to nearer £500 for Norfolk reed. If properly wired to stop the depredations of birds a wheat straw thatch may last forty years and a Norfolk reed roof sixty years if you are lucky. This cost of renewal virtually means that poor cottage owners cannot afford to re-thatch and sometimes put on tiles if their roofs can stand the added weight. However, they need not despair as a tumble down thatch cottage particularly if it possesses a wealth of old beams within and without, will be eagerly snapped up at a high price, this type of property being particularly coveted by retiring businessmen. They will re-thatch the roof, put in central heating, which will shrink the beams, put a pair of coach lanterns (electrified) on either side of the front door, put in a damp course by boring holes and pouring in petrifying fluids and other refinements according to taste. Some even put gnomes in the garden. In spite of the inconvenience of low beams on which you crack your head at every turn, and the smallness of the rooms, this is many peoples' idea of bliss in retirement. The whole psychological effect being very beneficial giving the incumbent a new lease of life. The inevitable television aerial strikes a discordant note, but the day may come when an indoor aerial will suffice.

Thus is the beauty of the villages being preserved and as a consequence some look more attractive than ever before due to the injection of money. Old cottages of character are preserved and well maintained and improvements such as adding a garage, bathroom and bringing the lavatory indoors are invariably done under supervision of an architect.

The erstwhile owners are probably happier in a council house so everybody is pleased. This has happened in my particular village. Eight or so thatched houses are now occupied by professional people who have improved and looked after their properties giving the village a more attractive appearance. Thatch is an excellent insulator, being warm in winter and cool in summer.

Straw for thatching has to be specially threshed using a reeding attachment so that it is not bruised. It will cost around £50 a ton and a roof will need around three tons—spare a thought for the thatcher who has to get this weight up on the roof. Norfolk reed is considerably more expensive.

A thatched roof needs a pitch of at least 45 degrees so the rain will run off. For this reason you do not see many large roofs, though they may be long.

COST

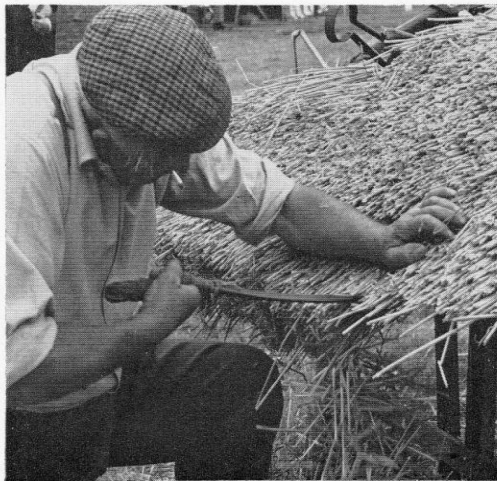
Thatch does burn and it means that the fire insurance premiums are heavier, and though it rarely catches fire from sparks it adds fuel to a fire that has started inside. It has been banned as a roofing material in a few places, notably in London some seven hundred years ago and in Marlborough following three disas-

● Carrying up a yealm of thatching straw.

trous fires some two hundred years ago. In the Wiltshire village of West Lavington there are an interesting pair of fire hooks with long handles kept hooked up in the main street for pulling burning thatch off roofs.

Not many tools are required for thatching. A wooden elm mallet sometimes called a legatt or biddle has groves on its face to bang the thatch up tight under the hazel spars. A pair of shears trim around the windows and eaves and a shearing knife is used for trimming the completed work. It virtually scythes the thatch smooth as the thatcher draws it towards himself. A thatching needle and twine are used around the sides.

Thatchers are individuals and men of character. No two work alike, they each have their own particular style with slightly different methods in different parts of the country and they can always identify their own work. Let us hope that the demand for their services keeps the industry alive and prosperous.



● Trimming thatch.

● Yealms of straw ready for thatching.



- Top: This type of place is rarely rethatched.
- Above: Hooks used for pulling thatch off a burning roof.
- Below: Beating up the thatch with a legatt.

