Winston Churchill
Memorial Trust
Fellowship

Joseph William Wykes

6th June to 27th June 2010

Premature Decay on Roofs
Thatched with Water Reed
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Itinerary

06/06/2010 - Fly from Leicestershire to Amsterdam (East Midlands to Schiphol Airport).
   Host Henk Horlings

11/06/2010 - Drive from Nijkerk to Gooreind-Wuustwezel in Belgium.
   Host: Ludo Ibens.

12/06/2010 - Antwerp, Belgium to Lubeck in Germany by eight trains and one bus
   Host: Tom Hiss.

14/06/2010 - Lubeck, Germany to the Isle of Rugan East Germany by car.
   Host: Ole __________.

15/06/2010 - Rugan to Norddeich North Germany by car.
   Host: Hans-Herman Ohmans.

16/06/2010 - Norddeich to Risum-Lindholm North Germany by Train.
   Host: Sonke Bartlefsen.

17/06/2010 - Risum-Lindholm to The Island of Aero in Denmark by car then.
   ferry. Host: Morten Petersen.

18/06/2010 - Aero to Odense in Denmark by ferry then train.
   To meet Jorgen Kaarup Jenson.

21/06/2110 - Odense to Arhus in Denmark by Train.
   Host Ian Reybekill.

24/06/2010 - Arhus to Dianalund in Denmark by train
   Host: Uwe Becker.

26/06/2010 - Dianalund to Copenhagen by train.

27/06/2010 - Copenhagen to Kastrup Airport by train. Stanstead to London
   by plane and onto Cambridge by car.
   Host: Charlotte Wykes.

28/06/2010 - Cambridge to Leicestershire by Coach. Leicester to Barwell by
   Car.
Aims of the Fellowship

To visit to Holland, Belgium, Germany and Denmark, in order to gain an understanding of all aspects of European thatching. To compare designs, constructions, methods, materials, ideas, techniques and problems with those in the UK and attempt to identify a recent trend in premature decay (soft rot), which is different to normal decay (white rot) that is affecting thatched roofs across the continent. To understand European Thatching through a commonsensical approach.

Background

I started Thatching in the late eighties, having trained at the Thatching Advisory Services in Berkshire, where I bought a franchise. The normal way of becoming a Thatcher was to get a Master Thatcher to set you on as an apprentice, but because of my age (39) this was never going to be possible.

Hence, this was a unique way of becoming a Thatcher, but never the less a very successful one developed by Bob West, an entrepreneur who was in my opinion responsible for the upsurge in thatching during the 1980s and 90s in the UK.

After starting my own business in 1990 I went on to became a successful Thatcher in my own right and was awarded second place on two occasions in the Best Thatched House Competition. Unfortunately my role as a Thatcher was ended prematurely due to a serious back injury and open heart surgery.

I acquired an enormous amount of experience and knowledge during my time thatching and felt that I wanted to give something back to the thatching industry. From my own experience, I was aware of a problem affecting European reed. When I heard about the Churchill Fellowship, I considered that this was an ideal opportunity to contribute to the trade that had given me so much.

History

In general terms roofs thatched in water reed are expected to last 50 to 60 years. Some roofs recently thatched with European reed are failing prematurely, causing this figure to be re-evaluated to 40 - 50 years. But even this estimation would now be speculative.

The performance of roofs thatched with water reed (Phragmites australis) is again causing concern amongst Thatchers. To a certain extent the causes of early degradation in thatch are understood and are well documented. In the middle of the century premature decay amongst home grown reed was at its height, this lead to Thatchers abandoning so called Norfolk reed which in turn evoked funding for a University of East Anglia project to examine reed quality and the impact of nutrient levels and management techniques on reed quality and decay (Bateman et al 1990).

Premature decay was first reported in the 1950s, but was foremost on straw roofs. In the 1980s the University of Bath showed that patches showing ‘premature decay’ were decomposing differently from the normal process of Basidiomycete-medicated (white rot fungi) decay that turns organic matter into compost.
Many investigations have been carried out, regarding the structure and strength of water reed, in an attempt to understand what effect nutrients such as nitrogen, phosphorous and potassium have on the reed, in particular by Haslam in Cambridge and a group of German researchers (Haslam 1972). Young and Davies (1990) established that thickness in the stem walls (sclerenchyma and parenchyma) was associated to the growing regime environment, affected by farming practices in particular the use of inorganic fertiliser.

Researchers in the 1990s looking into patchy soft rot decay on straw roofs, believed that because there was no evidence of this on water reed roofs, there was no link between the nitrate concentrations in dead stems and decay. It was thought that high nitrates levels contributed to a general speeding up of the natural rotting process over the entire roof, rather that the patchy soft rot that we are now seeing on water reed roofs.

Initial visits to the reed beds in Norfolk and in particular Martham broads demonstrated that poor reed bed management results in inferior quality reed entering the chain. We know that reed quality can vary dramatically across a reed bed and the diligence of the Reed Cutter is necessary to prevent poor quality reed entering the industry. Water levels play an important role in making sure that the reed beds filter any pollutants but high water levels can result in water stagnating and affecting the quality of the reed.

Research carried out trying to understand the correlations between the growing environments and the durability and strength of the reed proved very difficult to ascertain in laboratory conditions, so a more subjected approach is now favoured to use comparisons of which we know are good samples. Reed grown on slightly brackish sites, where nitrogen levels in the sediment are low and where potassium levels where high are found to have the strongest stems.

Investigations carried out by the University of Bath to ascertain what properties present in the reed and in the growing environment, concluded that nitrogen present in the dead reed stems did not affect the strength of the reed. The authors did however hypothesize that it is the ratio of nitrogen to potassium that influences the sclerenchyma content and thus the strength. When nitrates levels rise in the reed beds as it often does in reed beds flooded by waters drained from farmlands, the development of woody tissues is depressed. Ammonium irons and potassium compete for uptake sites within the reed and the fact that reed beds favour the retention of ammonium irons, which are a major source of uptake of nitrogen for a reed plant. This activity results in the potassium and lignin synthesis being depressed leading to weakened stems. The retention of these irons could be a result of poor or uneven water flow over the reed beds caused by inadequate reed bed management.
The Journey Begins

Sunday 6th July Amsterdam & Nijkerk

The first day of my Churchill fellowship began today with a flight to Holland to meet Henk Horlings. We met at Schiphol airport in Amsterdam after a short flight from East Midlands Airport.

I have never flown into Amsterdam before and the flight over Holland approaching the airport was quite amazing. I have never seen so much water in one place before. There below was a network of canals, rivers, dikes and open water, most of which is fresh water. I was informed that most of Holland is below sea level, and water levels are constantly managed so that the country doesn’t flood.

The consensus of opinion is that if global warming has its way that Holland will disappear one day.

I have heard people say that Birmingham has more canals than Amsterdam; on this evidence I find that hard to believe.

On the drive out of the airport it was very obvious how flat Holland is. The main roads have been elevated to prevent them from flooding and require enough sub structure to them to stop them from sinking. The sub soil is made up of mainly clay and in some places sand in order to give the roads a good foundation they build them on top of Polish car tyres.

I had met Henk before in Andover England at the National Society of Master Thatchers AGM in March 2010. Henk is a very charismatic guy, full of enthusiasm for the thatching industry he represents. I couldn’t help but be impressed by Henk’s knowledge of thatching; he is probably one of the most knowledgeable non Thatchers I have met. He was dressed in shorts and a tee shirt as he had just spent the weekend on his boat, of which I was to learn much about and later enjoy a short, late night sail.

Henk and his wife welcomed me into their home in Nijkerk where I was to stay for a few days and hopefully gain an interesting insight into Dutch thatching and the Dutch way of life.

Henk and his wife live quite simple lives, which surprised me a little. I expected their standard of living to be higher and the comfort of their home to be better. Their house is about the same standard as an English estate house built in the 1970’s. The front and the back gardens were quite small, again equivalent to what you would find on most new houses built in the UK. The lounge was L shaped with the kitchen placed at one end. I got the feeling that the way of life in Holland was very compatible to that in the UK and that we had a lot in common. The room that I was given used to belong to their eldest daughter who now lives with her boyfriend. The room was of a decent size and there were a lot of wardrobes in the room but no room inside them.
Nijkerk is a municipality and a city in the middle of the Netherlands, in the province of Gelderland with a population of 38,879 (Jan 2007). The name Nijkerk stems from Nieuwe Kerk (Dutch for New Church). This new church was built when the old chapel was destroyed by fire in 1221. Nijkerk was strategically located between the Duchy of Guelders (Dutch: Hertogdom Gelre) and the Bishopric of Utrecht. Because of this strategic location Nijkerk regularly was the scene of war, and in 1412 the village was completely destroyed. It was restored and Nijkerk received City rights in 1413. In 1421 the church that gave Nijkerk its name burnt down and was replaced; this happened several times, until a new church was built in the 18th century which still stands today. The organ in this church was built in 1756.

In the 18th century Nijkerk was a flourishing merchant city. Several inhabitants traveled to the New World, such as Arent Van Curler and Kiliaen van Renesseler and founded new cities.

Since World War II Nijkerk has grown fast. It lies on the border of the IJsselmer which allows for transportation of goods via ships, and the intersection of two major motorways, the A1 and A28. This allowed local industries to grow, and also caused a lot of people who work in the nearby Randstad to move to the quieter Nijkerk. Also the easy access to the Veluwe is a contributing factor to this growth.

Amsterdam is the Capitol and largest city of the Netherlands, located in the province of North Holland in the west of the country. The city, which had a population (including suburbs) of 1.36 million on 1 January 2008, comprises the northern part of the Randstad, the sixth-largest metropolitan area in Europe, with a population of around 6.7 million.

Its name is derived from Amsteldam, indicative of the city's origin: a dam in the river Amstel. Settled as a small fishing village in the late 12th century, Amsterdam became one of the most important ports in the world during the Dutch Golden Age, a result of its innovative developments in trade. During that time, the city was the leading centre for finance and diamonds. In the 19th and 20th centuries, the city expanded, and many new neighborhoods and suburbs were formed.

The city is the financial and cultural capital of the Netherlands. Many large Dutch institutions have their headquarters there, and 7 of the world's top 500 companies, including Philips and ING, are based in the city. The Amsterdam Stock Exchange, the oldest stock exchange in the world, is located in the city centre. Amsterdam’s main attractions, including its historic canals, the Rijksmuseum, the Van Gogh Museum, Stedelijk Museum, Hermitage Amsterdam, Anne Frank House, its red-light district and its many cannabis coffee shops, draw more than 3.66 million international visitors annually.

The conversation throughout my journey home and during the meal was peppered with talk about thatch and rapid decay. Henk has formed a lot of opinions about this subject over the years and although he is not a Thatcher he is convinced of his views and they
are widely respected. However, I am not the only Thatcher who finds it difficult to work out what is conjecture and what is fact regarding his views.

One of the theories that I brought with me about rapid decay, is that bad practice among Thatchers and reed producers is mainly responsible for the problem. One of the ways I intended to prove this was to give out questionnaires to as many Thatchers and reed producers as possible. Henk’s concern about this was that he didn’t think that Thatchers would be honest enough in their answers, because it would reflect badly on their companies. I suggested it could be made anonymous but I later found out that the Federation is very protective of the market in Holland and would guard against any proposals or bad press that could undermine confidence in the thatch.

Henk had a full week planned for me, starting with a day in his office to see how the Dutch Federation of Thatchers operate and how they became such a powerful organisation in Dutch Thatching. He had also planned visits to properties with roofs with known problems and to spend a day on site with a team of Dutch and Hungarian Thatchers. Then on the last day a visit to the training workshop where they teach young people how to thatch.

**Monday 7th June**

Today I visited the offices of the Vakfederatie Rietdekkers, (The Federation of Reed Thatchers) in Holland, where I was given the most informative talk on the history aims and objectives of the organisation. The Germans ran the Federation from 1926 up to the beginning of the war. They had total control over the Thatchers who could not buy reed unless they belonged to the Federation. This organisation in its early days would be a far cry from what it is today.

Henk as been in charge of the Federation I believe for the last 13 years and in that time he has totally transformed this organisation and turned it into a professional and efficient business. Part of Henk’s remit for the job was that due to a lack of funds; all projects had to be self-financing. Money required for projects had to be generated from ideas and promotions, a suggestion that in the end would transform the Federation and promote thatching in Holland to a new modern era. It changed the Federation into a powerful authority who govern their trade without interference from bureaucrats or government agencies.

In the beginning most of the Thatchers of the Federation and members of the board told Henk that he would be limited to what he could achieve, so his appointment was greeted with a lot of negativity. He had to do battle with the Thatchers who made up the board or executive, until eventually out of necessity the board agreed to some of his wishes.

His first target was to have a web site. The reason he wanted a website was because more and more builders and architects were asking for information that just wasn’t available anywhere else. This was in the early days of the Internet when hardly anyone knew what the Internet was let alone a website. Henk’s agenda started to gain support.

Prior to his endeavours he conducted a questionnaire, where he asked surveyors; architects and builders, what they knew about Thatch. The results showed that only two
of the people questioned knew anything at all about thatch. Because they had no knowledge of Thatch they were giving out the wrong information and instead of helping people to build Thatched houses, he found out that they were effectively putting them off.

I think a similar situation exists here in the U.K. where architects do not know where to go to get good information, this is born out by some of the horrendous designs we have to thatch.

The website proved to be the catalyst in the Federation’s future. The website was born 28th September 1997 and by using modern technologies and reforming to become a professional and responsible organisation, the Federation went from strength to strength.

They started to offer a service and information that was truthful and honest, even if it was a little uncomfortable at times. The website has now grown into a very comprehensive site with 4000 visits a month and over 25,000 pages viewed. This year (2010) they are going to spend 25,000 euros revamping it. www.riet.com

As interest in the website grew, so the Federation’s reputation among builders and architects began to gain respect. Thatch was being used more and more in Architects designs, so more effort was put into selling Thatch. As a result the Federation started to exhibit at building fares and trade shows, getting allied companies to sponsor the cost of their stands. This ability to put Thatch on sale in competition with other building materials has worked very successfully for the Dutch. Most Thatchers in the UK would love the opportunity to see their product considered in the same way as it is here, competing on equal terms.

One of the immediate affects of having a successful web site was that Henk was able to open negotiations with insurance companies and offer them advertising space. At first no one was interested, but as soon as he had secured the services of one company all the others wanted to join, but by this time it was too late for all the others.

These developments were now starting to affect Thatchers in general in Holland. Architects only wanted Thatchers from the Federation to work on their projects. This had the immediate effect of alienating any Thatchers who did not belong to the Federation, who very soon realised where the future lay. Consequently Thatchers started to join the Federation in numbers.

This was also seen as a good time to ease the financial situation and increase the membership subscription, by three fold to £700p.a. This would have been a massive increase in subscriptions for UK Thatchers but given the benefits and incentives that the Dutch Thatchers were receiving its no surprise that no one voted against the increase.

One of the big problems that face the thatching industry is fire. In order to get authorities to give permissions to build new thatched houses they have to comply with building regulations. This usually includes restraints as to how far you can build or extend from a boundary. In most countries in Europe this is usually around 10 to 12 metres. By introducing a successful closed roof construction model, that was very good at preventing the spread of fire the Dutch managed to get these restrictions reduced down to 3 metres. This would be similar to the Dorset Model in the UK, set out to give
developers guide lines for building new Thatched houses, good at preventing the spread of fire. This in itself is a major factor for the consideration of Thatched developments, because it enabled builders to construct more properties closer together.

With the acceptance of their closed roof construction it opened up opportunities for companies to sell fire retardants to the Federation Thatchers, with a percentage mark up going to the Federation. The Federation has a captive market and they use this opportunity to their advantage by promoting products that have a financial advantage for them.

Another example of this policy was highlighted when a German thatch owner published information on the web about a killer mushroom, which was affecting his roof and that was going to destroy all thatched houses. This publication had a devastating affect on public confidence regarding Thatched Houses. Together with the German Federations the Dutch had to act quickly to restore confidence. They had to pay scientists in three places to conduct scientific tests to prove that the mushrooms were not new, or of a killer species. There was no money for this program and it wasn’t fair to expect the members to fund this investigation. The benefit would be for all Thatchers, non-members alike, so they persuaded the company who makes and supplies screw fixings to add 1 or 2 percent to the cost and pass the extra revenue gained onto the Federation. This was done and the case was successfully won and the miss information removed from the Internet.

Could this be a way of tackling English Heritage or funding the NSMT? I wonder?

The development of the Federation and the role Henk Horlings has played in that, has meant the Federation has gained the respect of builders and architects alike, even to the point where Henk is now called upon by judges as an expert witness in court cases.

The Federation exercises strict control over its members. If one of the members has a complaint of poor work against him, then the member has to pay the Federation to go and visit the property and verify who is at fault, at the cost €125. If a non-member has the same complaint against them, then they have to pay more. They also give advice to Architects and builders at the same cost. It appears that they are answerable to no one and are regarded, rightly or wrongly as the authority on thatch, such is the total domination that the Federation wields.

One of the main functions that the Federation has implemented is to vet all the work carried out by the members. Peter, another non Thatcher, who just a year ago was working as a kitchen salesman, is now employed by the Federation to carry out this work. He visits completed works, to ensure they come up to standard, so they can receive a certificate of worthiness. For this the Federation charges a standard fee to the Thatcher of €125. In some cases where the thatch does not come up to standard they can order the Thatcher to re-thatch. Once again I found myself wondering how such a directive from a non Thatcher would be received here.

There are now some big thatching companies in Holland and they use a lot of foreign labour, Hungarian, Lithuanian and Polish Thatchers. Geographically they are better placed to employ these people, but the main reason they are here is because of the demand. The Federation has turned Thatching into an everyday product here,
competing with tiles and slates on an equal basis; it does not have the luxury status that it achieves in the UK.

I am passionate about thatch and to see what the Dutch have done with their inventive contemporary designs and structures makes me wonder whether we could ever do the same here. They don’t just build the occasional new Thatch; they build whole estates and projects on a massive scale. They even have a Thatched Fire Station for heavens sake.

The fact remains that the Thatching industry in Holland has gone from strength to strength, where in the UK the industry has stagnated. The main difference between the Dutch and the English is that in Holland the Thatchers Federation is the accepted voice of reason, self determined and self regulated. They have the freedom along with planners and designers to develop their industry and drive it forward. This has evolved from having a proactive organisation that provides benefits for its members and as the power to protect its craft against the bureaucrats.

I would like to think that we could emulate what the Dutch have achieved here in the UK, but I have my doubts. When I expressed my doubts to Henk he was quick to point out to me that it was like that in Holland before he started. He reminded me that Thatch was in decline here fifteen years ago, now it has increased by 15%. He also reminded me of a massive project that was started in Holland in the 1990’s by Bob West of the Thatching Advisory Service’s. He was given the contract because there were no Dutch Thatching Companies big enough to take on the project. This made me think and realise just what Bob West did for Thatching in the UK in those years. Thatching in the UK in the 80’s and 90’s was in a renaissance, made possible by affordable insurance and fire barriers, very similar to what is happening in Holland today. Bob was leading the way but now thanks to an army of agencies stunting initiatives the new build programme has fizzled out, just at the time when the new buzz word is sustainability. Well there is nothing more sustainable than a thatched roof.

This afternoon before I visited any Thatched properties I asked Henk to give me his understanding and experience of how and why rapid decay is occurring. The Dutch have done a lot of research into the subject of rapid decay. I believe they have the most knowledge about the subject but they also have most problems and because the Federation has a vested interest in keeping the industry buoyant, they have spent the most money trying to find the cause.

If there is only one thing you can say about Henk, it’s that he is totally convinced about his theory that high heat and moisture content in properties leads to rapid decay. In the UK we call it premature decay but I think their description fits better. Because when you look at a roof that is suffering from rapid decay it’s just as if time has been speeded up and the whole roof has rotted away as normal but much quicker.

Henk’s theory about is:-

That excessive heat and moisture in a property rises up through the building, passing through the floors, ceilings and roof space, permeating any membranes and fire barriers and finally entering the Thatch, cooling and forming condensation when the vapour reaches the outside of the Thatch. Later, in the drier months the top layer of thatch
would dry out, leaving a damp area somewhere in the middle, which would never dry out. The roofs that I have seen in the UK certainly fit this description, but moisture tests taken at the time didn’t confirm any excess of moisture in the middle layers, so I remain sceptical about this idea. I asked Henk if he had prescribed any moisture tests to prove his theory, he said no.

I would like to call it something else other than a theory, but without firm evidence to support it I can’t.

Some of the thinking behind this theory was noted during the building of new houses. Builders started to seal houses during construction, therefore trapping vast quantities of moisture in the building before completion. Double glazing and doors were fitted well before the construction was finished. Instead of allowing properties to dry out naturally all measures were taken to ensure the house was kept sealed.

To look for circumstantial evidence to support the theory when a property is visited notes would be taken of:-

- Was high temperature when the door was opened?
- Was there under floor heating with the combination of dogs?
- Were there washing machines or tumble driers in the bathroom?
- Did the occupants dry their washing on the landing?
- Did the occupants open the windows?

I was given one example of a Thatched house that was performing perfectly alright when suddenly after a change of owners, it started to show signs of rapid decay. The property was visited and the cause was determined to be that the new owners had dogs, and where the dogs were kept there was under floor heating, the dogs were continually knocking over the bowls of drinking water, thus causing moisture to rise through the house. I was a little sceptical of this kind of example because that would require an awful lot of water to be spilled to create this problem.

I have listened to Henk at length but when I ask for the factual evidence to support his theory, in my opinion there is only conjecture. However, I do believe that this idea does have a contributing factor on how a thatched roof performs, but is only one of many factors that lead to a Thatched roof failing prematurely. Henk also agrees that it is never just one factor alone that causes the early degradation of a thatch.

I woke this morning at 6.30 after a night of broken sleep still feeling a little uncomfortable with my surroundings and still wondering how I was going to cope with 3 weeks of travelling. I found yesterday very tiring listening to Henk and his relentless talking and bombarding me with information. He is very much the teacher and I the student and although I am 7 years older than him. I wasn’t alone in this thinking as most of his colleagues found empathy with me as they had been subject to his intensive talks. The diet of the Horlings household is very unusual; they don’t eat bread or cereals in the morning. Henk usual breakfast was eating the leftovers from the previous day’s evening meal and his lunchbox was packed with raw vegetables, peppers and courgettes. I love bread and I told Henk that bread was the staff of life and tonight I would have to visit the local supermarket and make sure I have some fruit bread and cereals to get me through the week.
**Tuesday 8th June**

Today I accompanied Henk on a grand tour of Overijssel (Dutch Low Saxon: *Oaveriessel*) a province of the Netherlands in the central eastern part of the country. The province's name means "Lands across river Ijssel".

To the southeast, the province's surface is mostly sandy, interspersed with small rivers such as the Regge and Dinkel and other brooks. In the northwest, the geology is dominated by sediments from the wetland. The highest point in Overijssel is the summit of the Tankenberg, a hill in the municipality of Losser, at 89 meters (295 ft). The lowest point is in the Mastenbroek Polder near Kampen at 2 metres (6 ft) below sea level.

We traveled around these parts on a fact finding visit to look, listen and learn about the problems facing Dutch Thatchers, especially those regarding premature decay in water reed. On the journey I was also able to compare traditional thatched buildings with modern constructions to see how they have changed and if the changes have had a detrimental affect on the life span of a thatched roof.

I also met up with as many Thatchers as possible to ask them their opinions about the problems facing the industry at the moment.

I saw many examples of thatch deteriorating at different rates. I wanted to see how the style and design of the roof here affected the longevity of the reed. As well as looking at the construction, I wanted to see how the Dutch thatch, their methods and techniques and to ascertain how and why some deteriorate more quickly than others.

The first place we visited was a thatched holiday village (Putten. Park Royal) which consisted of 35 chalet style buildings all thatched at the same time all with the same reed and all by the same Thatcher. This was the first of a number of these parks I was to visit on the same theme. The buildings had low roofs with very shallow slopes but they were in the open and not by water. I was told that the thatches on this site were about 15 years old and already some of them had been redressed. The Dutch have a way of repair and redressing that I was to see in more detail later in the Day.
Next on the itinerary was Veluwse Hoevingaarde, Holiday Park of 120 buildings in a similar style to those at Putten with a mixture of artificial thatch and natural thatch. It was strange to see these artificial thatches in the midst of traditional thatches, but they were probably the best examples of artificial thatch that I have seen. Several attempts were made to introduce this concept into the UK but apart from a few examples in theme parks and zoo’s this idea was never really accepted by the thatch owners - they wanted the real thing.

Then onto Ermelo, here we saw some very big thatched houses with very steep pitches and long eve to ridge measurements. This style was contrary to what I have seen and have been led to believe so far about thatched house in Holland. The picture on the left could almost be a photo of an English thatched house, apart from the tiled ridge which is almost universal here.

I have already mentioned about some of the radical contemporary Dutch designs that I have seen in presentations and magazines, well now I was going to see a development for real and although rather monstrous, I couldn’t help but be impressed by the shear scale of the project. Even Henk called it ridiculous. This was the first time I had seen vertical thatching. The place was “Nunspeet De Bunte” a popular tourist’s site because it is surrounded by woods and holiday resorts, with the town center located around the main market square.

Nunspeet is situated on the shore of the (Veluwe Lake) which makes it popular for water leisure. There is also a small lake called "de Zandenplas" which is a popular holiday resort.

After two hours of Henks rather manic driving we stopped for a coffee break at a place called Elborg (Old Castle in English). Henk was trying to make sure I did not miss anything and would be driving at times on the wrong side of the road with his head hanging out of the window pointing to this thatch and that thatch and telling me about the local geography at the same time.
This medieval town remains largely unchanged and now relies on tourism for its popularity. We had a coffee and some apple cake which is a custom in Holland and one I chose to repeat throughout my stay in the Netherlands. Each time it was a different variation of the same cake and was always shared by birds, landing on the table to nibble the crumbs.

After coffee we had a stroll through the town to the harbor - it seems like nearly all the towns in Holland have harbors, there down by the harbor we saw a man named Deetman, who was wearing clogs and making rope in the traditional way.

Later in the day we passed through a place where some of the locals still dressed in traditional costume. The traditional costumes and wooden shoes that The Netherlands are often associated with are hardly worn these days. Generations back wooden shoes were more in use as a cheap alternative to leather shoes. Nowadays they are merely worn by farmers if they prefer them to rubber boots. Traditional costumes are only worn in a few local communities that are frequented by tourists. I was told that the costumes depicted whether a female was single, married or widowed within the last 10 years. Which I thought could be quite useful if it was adopted by us today.

Henk is a very informative guy, a mind of information and he bombards you with information all day on many different subjects whether it is the history of his boat, Dutch traditions or their politics. Sometimes I found it hard to take in all the information he was giving me and I found myself drifting off. I like Henk very much but I found it hard to absorb so much information.

After Elborg we moved onto Rouveen where we drove down Long Street - a street with traditional farm houses, and even a thatched school. Here we met a Thatcher repairing a roof in a very unique way. The Thatcher worked for a man called Poepe Veerman - Poepe means in English pooh, I was informed.

The reparation seemed to me to be laborious, intensive and not very cost effective. The roof being repaired had steel fixing rods showing over the entire surface of the thatch, which normally would indicate the end of the thatches useful life.
The process required tying up two bundles of water reed in order to cut them in half with a hedge cutter, so that the Thatcher had the length of reed he necessary to perform the repair. Starting at the eve the entire course of reed would be pulled down to allow room for the reed that had been cut to be fed in. Reed was now fed in along the whole course, giving a mixture of old and new reed now protruding about 50cm out from the steel rod. The rod was then tightened, the reed dressed into place and then the whole process repeated on the next courses above until the complete elevation had been covered. I questioned the Thatchers about the cost effectiveness of this operation and they assured me it gave the customer another 15 years life span for a third of the cost of a re-thatch, I remained sceptical. This method of reparation is so popular in Holland that there are teams of Thatchers that just specialise in this technique.

Having spent an interesting hour with these Thatchers, it was time to move on to Staphorst, where we stopped for lunch - a Dutch version of bacon and eggs. It included all the same ingredients that we would use but in more of an omelette style with salad included - probably a more of healthy variation of bacon and eggs than that of ours but just as delicious.

IJhorst was next on the agenda a village with a population of 1500 people. Attractive forests and wild fields surround this pretty village. The Reest is a small creek that runs along IJhorst, remnant from the ice ages. This village is the recreational capital of Staphorst. There are several campsites and places to rent bungalows. We visited two of these Holiday Parks of De Witte Bergen with 65 thatched bungalows situated under trees, which were in a very bad state of repair.
At the other Park at Striks Erve, where the buildings were the same age as the ones at De Witte Bergen but because they were out in the open they were in much better condition. The local environment does have an enormous affect on the way a thatch roof performs.

I saw nothing on these roofs that looked like rapid decay (soft brown rot) that day or any evidence that could convince me of the vapour theory. In my understanding the biggest factor against the vapour theory here, was that these were Holiday Homes and they would only be occupied partially throughout the year. They would be occupied even more scarcely in the winter, therefore the idea that the temperature could build inside the house and cause vapour to condensate would be very hard to accept.

The thatch at the big holiday park at De Witte had some big problems with decay, but this was not the kind of decay I was looking for. These were all built in the woods and the environment proved to be very destructive for the thatch, but then most Thatchers would already know that if you put thatch under trees it will not last. This kind of decay looks like natural decay but speeded up. They were decaying faster than normal but this could be attributed to sealed construction and local environment.

We carried on our journey looking at thatch and only stopping if I saw something that caught my eye, which happened on many occasions, I saw a restaurant with a gigantic birds nest on top of the chimney; I think it was a Heron.

Holland has many windmills and many of them still working, but it still seems like a novelty when you come across a thatched one, which we did in De Wijk.
The Dutch Thatchers seem to be very good at precise coat work that is extremely flat and crisp at the edges. Their ridges are mostly tiles cemented into place, although I did see ridges made out of felt, concrete and wood or just left open with a ridge roll on top. There was a very ornate one made out of ridge rolls and placed in a criss cross pattern across the roof.

As we drove on, my concern for Henk’s driving was getting worse. As I had mentioned earlier, one minute we were in the gutter the next over the white line, too busy trying to talk and point out Thatched roofs to see where he was going. Henk told me a story about the time he showed 3 Japanese Thatchers around and he had to stop while they threw up. He said they didn’t like being driven in a car - never for a moment did he consider it was his driving. Joost however, who I was to spend the next day with, also agreed with me about his erratic driving.

I would like to say onward and upward, but everywhere in Holland is flat, it’s a cyclist’s paradise. So onward we proceeded past more and more thatched houses. I couldn’t work out whether the whole of Holland is densely thatched or whether they just took me to places where there was an abundance of thatch, not dissimilar to the UK. Our journey also took us to more Holiday parks with some very large thatched properties on them and in the most exquisite places. One of them was Waterpark Belterwijde a very exclusive park or estate with what looked like the most expensive properties.

The day was beginning to wear on and all this hopping in and out of the car to look at different places was starting to make me tired, so the next stop was a complete change to the format of the day so far. We arrived at a place called Giethoorn. Giethoorn used to be a car free town known in the Netherlands as “Venice of the North” or “Venice of the Netherlands”. It became famous, especially after 1958, when the Dutch film maker Bert Haanstra made his famous comedy "Fanfare" there. Therefore, Giethoorn is an internationally well-known tourist attraction in the Netherlands. In the old part of the village, there were no roads (nowadays there is a cycling path), and all transport was done by water over one of the many canals. The lakes in Giethoorn were formed by unearthing peat.
Henk had brought two fold up bicycles with him and this was our opportunity to cycle some of the delightful pathways around this pretty little place. It was just as if we had been transported to another country, a world within a world peppered with café’s, bars and restaurants, with tourists meandering along the footpaths that followed the canals. We ended up at Smits Pavilion at the edge of one of the lakes where we enjoyed a welcome beer before we cycled back to the car.

The last place we were to visit was Swifterband and as the day wore on weariness was setting in. We started at 7am and it would be 8pm before we returned home. Swifterband was an estate or streets with artificial thatched houses. Initially, I had to look really close, as they did look quite realistic. As we looked round them taking photos as we went, a house owner came out to question what we were doing, Henk introduced me to the guy and told him I was doing a Winston Churchill fellowship and what that was.

In return I was curious why someone would want to live in an artificial thatched house instead of an authentic one. The man simply explained he didn’t want all the hassle of repair and maintenance that goes along with a real thatch.

This is totally opposite to the opinions held in the. Where folks here would not entertain the idea of artificial thatch; they want the real thing along with all the notions of romantic idealism that goes together with living in a thatched property.

This was the end of a very interesting day in which I saw many and varied styles, modern and old, radical and traditional. I saw some unusual techniques, but most of all I was dumb struck with the amount of purpose built holiday parks incorporating thatch roofs.
Wednesday 9th June

Today I spent the day with Joost, Henk’s right hand man. Joost is an ex Thatcher, a young guy who gave up thatching to work full time for the Dutch Federation of Thatchers. I was intrigued by his decision to give up thatching for a desk job, as most Thatchers I know are hands on people, who prefer to be on the roof rather than anywhere else. His answer was less than convincing, he explained that he was married with a young family and wanted the security and stability that goes with a regular income. I had a suspicion that a part of him longed to get back on the roof again.

Joost took me to two sites to meet some really good Dutch Thatchers. The first site we went to there were three guys working on a roof, not a big roof but a typical Dutch one with slack pitches on the slopes. I spoke with the Thatchers but I didn’t see anything to interest me here. The construction was as I expected and the techniques almost the same as in the UK. I am concerned however that Thatchers in general do not take proper care of the reed on site, by ensuring it is stored off the ground and covered at all times.

This was a point in question here.

When we arrived at this site the Thatchers were having their morning break and it seemed commonplace for workmen here, not just Thatchers, to have these gypsy caravan type huts that they take with them from job to job.

We met some Thatchers at another site who specialise in the repair and maintenance of thatch. They were removing moss and algae from the surface of the thatch. The method they were using however horrified me, but it was a practice that I was to come across again and again on my journey. A hedge cutter was used to take off at least 50mm of thatch, which I agreed did successfully remove the moss and lichen, but in my opinion removed too much of the thatch to be beneficial for the longevity of the roof. Then the dressing up and brushing down of the coatwork took place followed by spraying with some kind of ammonia to kill of the spores form the moss, the spraying would then be repeated every 12 months. Joost thought this was too often and spraying just the once was sufficient, because he believed that too much chemical would start to cause damage.

An interesting fact to note here was that when the Thatcher was repairing the coatwork under the ridge tiles, he brought my attention to condensation that was collecting on the underside of the clay ridge tiles. This was in my estimation, some confirmation that the sealed roof construction was damaging to the thatch. It showed that the water vapour that existed in the roof could not escape because there was no air flow through the roof.
The problem is compounded here, because the tiled ridge actually forms a barrier to the exit point of any air flow, preventing any drying affects that prevailing winds would have.

Lunch today with Joost, provide another opportunity to try something different. He suggested I tried a Dutch treat called Croquets; they were a kind of rissole in breadcrumbs with a side salad, which I found very tasty.

After lunch we started looking at thatched properties again and we visited yet another big, water park - thatched estate at Galjoen Zuid Lelystad. This was just a very pleasant development in a very nice location. The thatched properties here were in good condition and showing no signs of any of the problems I had come to look at. Again I thought I had been brought here to be impressed rather that to look at examples of premature decay.

From there, we went on to, yes, you have guessed it another thatched village. The properties here were of very elaborate and impressive design. The real advantage of all these villages, estates and holiday parks, for me is that it provides the ideal way in which to study and monitor thatch on a grand scale. This advantage restricts variables when comparing how one property fares in relation to another and also eliminates the question of material and to a degree workmanship variation. The thatches here were all in very good condition with clean roofs except for one that jutted out over the water. On the north facing elevation of this property there was a large build up of moss on the area of the roof that overhung the water. There was also some indication of a micro climate with a nearby large tree. So the conclusion here was that the microclimate was to blame, with water evaporation causing the damp conditions on the roof. We then noticed that timber cladding on the balcony was covered in algae, whilst the rest of the building remained clean. The question was why the algae didn’t affect the timber on the timber clad walls of the house. Perhaps the overhang of the thatch above was protecting the walls or that the balcony was more exposed to rain and the elements. But no suggestion here that moisture in the property was to blame.
Thursday 10th June

This morning I travelled with Henk to Laren, a municipality and a town in the Netherlands, in the province of North Holland. Located in the region called “t Gooi” it is the oldest town in that area and one of the richest towns in the Netherlands, along with its neighbour, Blaricum. Nationally, Laren is well-known for its wide array of clothing shops. This is a very beautiful part of Holland where the poor used to live, but now it is occupied by the rich and famous.

The purpose of my trip here this morning was to spend the day with a team of Dutch Thatchers. I was taken to a building site on the middle of town where they were building the largest thatch property I have ever seen. This was thatching on a major scale, but thatching is that way in Holland, there’s thatch everywhere you look and most of it is enormous.

The idea of working on this site for the day was starting to make me feel nervous. I wasn’t afraid of my ability to thatch or to achieve the standard they required, but I wasn’t properly equipped (no boots, no work clothes, no hard hat, etc). I had been off the roof for two and a half years, after open heart surgery and my appetite for thatching on this scale, just hadn’t returned yet. I felt ill at ease, but I shouldn’t have worried as I had arrived at a most inconvenient time.

The three Lithuanian Thatchers I was introduced to by the main contractor, had just completed the section of the roof they had been working on and were busy clearing up ready to go home. They were due a 10 break after a 5-week stint. I breathed a sigh of relief then spent the morning looking around this most impressive project.

I spoke at length to the Thatchers, who were most helpful. They talked about the difficulty of thatching some of the unusual features on this roof. They were undertaking vertical and parapet thatching and accomplishing it with aplomb. They confirmed to me that it was extremely complicated to execute and in order to achievement a good job it was paramount that the reed was sorted out and the appropriate bundles were used in the right places. This kind of vertical thatching is very rare in the UK.
One of the major concerns I have when I visit foreign countries is their apparent lack of health and safety on sites. Here was a major development going on right in the middle of town, but I found unsafe scaffolding, swaying violently from side to side, as no hard hats were being worn and they were using mains electric on a wet day instead of using a transformer to reduce the power. The Dutch are in the EU the same as we are, so why is it that we always seem to follow the letter of the law when our partners see fit to ignore them?

Once again I found evidence to back up my worries about the storing of the reed. The bales had been covered with tarpaulins, but the reed had been stacked so close to the ground that water was entering the bales by capillary action.

With no more thatching to observe or Thatchers to talk to I spent the rest of the day wandering around the town, enjoying the architecture and looking for evidence of premature decay. I had plenty of thoughts and theories about what I had seen so far, but nothing that would persuade me that I was even looking at the same problem here as we are in the UK.

The town of Laren was adorned with many thatched houses of all shapes and sizes, both new and old. I spent the next few hours enjoying some time on my own just to look and reflect on what I had seen so far without feeling I had to listen to, or be heard by anybody. After four days of intensive, information packed touring, this was a welcome break and I was going to take full advantage. After touring the town I once again decided to enjoy the Dutch custom of coffee and apple cake.

Later Henk phoned to inform me he was coming to pick me up. We drove around for a while looking at some of the most expensive thatches I have ever seen, some of them costing up to 4&5 million Euros. There was nothing to say about these properties, regarding the thatch, as they were all very impressive dwellings with fine roofs. However there was one property I saw that had just been completed, which was already showing signs of decay, due mainly to poor slope and overshadowing of trees, causing decay to form in one of the valleys.

When we got back to the office they had a surprise waiting for me. It was the first day of the Herring season and they had bought me some Herring to sample. I felt like this was a bit of a bush tucker trial and they were just testing me to see if I could eat them. This is a delicacy mainly favoured by the Dutch men - the Dutch women tend to shy away from this tradition. Well I think I may have surprised them by eating the whole fish, but not in one go. It was very
oily, as you would imagine, but it is packed with omega 3 - it didn’t taste either horrible or nice, but it was the texture that put me off. I could have eaten another one but you would never here me say, “Oh I would love another herring”.

Frivolities over, we packed up and headed for Henks, this was to be my last night with them and their hospitality had been second to none so I though it would be nice to give them a small leaving present. I bought a plant for Harriet and a bottle of port for Henk. As I gave it to Harriet I said, “this to remind you of me”, but to Henk I said “this will help you to forget me”. I also gave them a card with some words of appreciation on it and a much coveted Churchill Crown and jokingly said to Henk “If you keep this for long enough you could sell it one day and buy another boat”.

**Friday 11th June**

I woke early this morning full of anticipation about my continuing journey, and a little nervous of meeting my next contact, who was described by Henk as the God Father of Thatching, in Belgium. I was also feeling a bit sad to be leave Henk and Harriott as they had been such good hosts and Henk an effervescent travelling companion. However, I was looking forward to moving on and meeting others on my journey and hopefully getting a little time and space to myself.

My enduring memories of my stay with Henk and Harriett, will be burning the midnight oil listening to Henk with his natural exuberance for all things, from his boat to politics, to food and of course thatch.

Goodbyes having been said I was picked up by Peter (Henks assistant) who was going to take me by car to meet my next contact, Ludo Ibens, and then accompany me for the rest of the day on my short excursion around Brussels.

Ludo lives in Wuustwezel, Belgium, and is the owner of one of the largest, if not, the largest thatching company in Europe. Ludo is an eighth generation Thatcher and his family’s thatching history goes right back to Napoleon. He employ’s 32 Thatchers, 15 Belgium, 3 Polish and 14 Hungarian, with a team of 6 Thatchers based permanently in France-where he has his own registered company.

After the indoctrination of the last few days, where I had been given chapter and verse on the vaporisation theory, it was like a breath of fresh air meeting Ludo. He was totally opposed to this idea and proceeded to give his thoughts and opinions on the problem of poor quality reed. This must have been very confusing for Peter, who has only ever heard one side of this argument. At times, Ludo took full advantage of having one of Henks right hand men available to lobby and started to challenge him over the politics and polices and of the Federation of Dutch Thatchers.

Ludo is a young man; divorced and with a passion for cars; he informed me that he goes to as many formula one races he can and once met Richard Branson in the pit lane. He had to give up the practical side of thatching due to a serious back injury; a similar fate to that suffered by myself.

He planned to take us to two of his sites today, in and around Brussels, where some of his Thatchers were working.
Brussels has grown from a 10th-century fortress town founded by a descendant of Charlemagne into a metropolis of more than one million inhabitants. The metropolitan area has a population of over 1.8 million, making it the largest in Belgium.

Since the end of the Second World War, Brussels has been a main centre for international politics. Its hosting of principal EU institutions as well as the headquarters of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has made the city a polyglot home of numerous international organizations, politicians, diplomats and civil servants.

Although historically Dutch-speaking, Brussels became increasingly French-speaking over the 19th and 20th centuries. Today a majority of inhabitants are native French-speakers, and both languages have official status. Linguistic tensions remain, and the language laws of the municipalities surrounding Brussels are an issue of much controversy in Belgium.

The work taking place at the sites we visited were both re-thatches, the roofs being replaced after about 50 years. There was nothing special about these properties or the methods that were being used. Ludo was keen to emphasize the good practice that his Thatchers employed and frowned upon some of the techniques being used in other places. In particular the practice of using a hedge cutter to clear the roof of moss and algae and blamed the procedure as one of the major reasons that the life span of a thatched roof is comparatively short in Holland. I traveled around Holland for four days and did not meet one person who agreed with me, and every other English Thatcher that I met said that the south facing side of a thatched roof wears out first. So it was with some relief when Ludo agreed, that is so, and again held the hedge cutter practice responsible for this situation in Holland.

Whilst we were on the subject of bad practice I asked him about his thoughts on the storing of reed on site. He had very strong views about this and commented that all reed should be kept well off the ground and under cover at all times and if it started to rain then thatching should stop immediately, stating that with modern day constructions moisture must be kept out of the reed at all costs.

Well, lunch time beaconed and little did I know what a treat was in store for us. Ludo offered to take Peter and I for lunch which we gratefully accepted and we ended up at a Michelin Star recommended restaurant. I shall never forget that meal as long as I live, but I shall also remember how uncomfortable I felt, as I wasn’t dressed for such an occasion. However the food was amazing and I was glad I wasn’t paying the bill, but I had to get used to this kind of generosity because this was going to be the norm from here on.

On the way to the next site the conversation quickly turned to problems within the industry. A universal complaint from Thatchers is that architects are responsible for some of the problems that we face - by designing properties with poor slopes and ridiculous features - no argument there. He was also concerned that the closed roof construction was the main cause of thatch deteriorating more quickly, but admitted that it performed best, regarding the prevention of the spread of fire. In Belgium Thatched roofs when on a building with an open construction would expect to have a life span of 30 - 40 years, but on a roof with a closed roof construction the expectation would drop to 20 - 25 years.
There are also many concerns here about the way reed is managed, cut, produced, transported and stored. Thatchers here would like to pay a little extra so that a certificated system could be introduced, to ensure that cutters and producers are held accountable. Because the climate in Europe is becoming warmer and wetter, water levels are rising in areas where the reeds grow; water levels are also being kept high, where wildlife conservation takes priority. This results in the reed being cut too high up the stem thus amputating the strongest component of the reed. Ludo’s father believes that problems with poor quality reed started when the producers started packing the reed into round bales instead of shipping it loose, but I don’t know of a Thatcher who would like to revert back to the days when deliveries of reed would arrive like this. However, Norfolk reed is still produced this way and historically we have still had the same problems with Norfolk reed that are now affecting European reed. Criticism of the way reed dealers store their reed was also mentioned. At most dealers yards, a first in last out system operates; Ludo wants to see a first in first out system adopted to ensure the reed is used in correct rotation. The reed that comes from distant sources can remain in containers for up to 60 days and it is generally accepted, that due to temperature and climate changes, both within and outside the container that this has a detrimental affect on the quality reed. This man is very passionate about his job and is convinced that pressure should be put on the reed producers to ensure better quality control, but he is only too aware of how difficult this is because of the vast difference in the culture and economical variances, from the very poor areas where the reed comes from to the rich affluent property owners of Western Europe, where they eventually ends up.

Chinese reed is currently flavour of the month with both Thatchers here in the UK and in Europe and doesn’t seem to be affected with the problems we are seeing with European reed. Ludo, is now so concerned about European reed that he refuses to use reed from Austria, Poland and Hungary and prefers Chinese reed. He considers that because the growing climate is very cold it is better for producing healthier reed. Chinese reed was also a bone of contention for Ludo with Peter, he wanted to know why the Federation of Dutch Thatchers would not endorse Chinese reed on their web site and accused them of creating doubts in the thatch owners mind as to the quality of this reed. He suggested that it was political and the real reason that they didn’t give Chinese reed their approval was because they didn’t want to upset their own reed cutters and suppliers by seemingly giving their Thatchers the go ahead to buy from the Chinese.

Overall I was extremely impressed by Ludo, he was a Thatcher like myself who uses his experience and common sense to try to understand the problems that we facing. A very diligent Thatcher, who runs his business with extreme efficiency, he steadfastly documents all of his work and has over 2000 files on record, comprising of everything to where the reed came from, to who supplied it, who thatched the roof, the time of year it was done, the weather at the time. This way, when he eventually gets an enquiry from a potential customer Ludo can give the thatch owner a complete history of the property regarding the thatch.

This idea is on similar lines to an inspiration that the National Society of Master Thatchers had in the UK, they wanted thatch owners to keep a record book or log, that stays with the property and contains the history of all the work and changes that has taken place to the property.
Just a little anecdote before I end my journey with Ludo. To put in perspective how big a status Ludo’s company has is in thatching terms, Ludo sponsored the Miss Belgium contest this year so that his companies advert would go out on national T.V.

This was the end of a very enlightening day as far as I was concerned and a very enjoyable one to boot, but there were many controversial comments made throughout the day and I wondered what affect that would have on the conversation as Peter drove me to my Hotel in Antwerp. Fortunately the Hotel was on the way home for Peter as well, so he didn’t have to go out of his way. He was very relaxed and seemed to be pondering on all that he had heard during the day-I suppose one of the problems for Peter is that he is relatively new to thatching and has no experience of his own to draw on but today’s outing certainly gave him a lot to think about and a lot to talk about when he got back to the office on Monday.

I was really looking forward to getting to my Hotel for the night and having time to relax before tomorrow’s epic train journey to East Germany. On arriving I was shown to my room on the ground floor, it looked comfortable and unassuming, but I was sure that after I had eaten it would render a good night’s sleep.

Eating alone was to present me with a bit of a problem as I continued on my journey; I just hadn’t realised how self-conscious I had become when it came to going into restaurants or bars on my own, but this is something I clearly had to deal with, or else I was going to starve.

I was very disappointed with myself as I compromised all of my standards by eating at a McDonald’s, something I promised myself I would never do again, after my eldest daughter held one of her birthday parties there when she was a small child, I remember complaining at the time about the rip off that it was and that I would never participate there again.

The streets were starting to get busy as the evening drew on and crowds were starting to gather outside the bars and cafés, as it was the start of the World cup in Africa and France were about to start what was to become their disastrous campaign. I felt alienated and couldn’t bring myself to join in; my shyness had got the better of me for now so I decided to cross the road to the train station and check up on the time of the trains ready for my epic journey across Northern Europe to Lubeck in East Germany.

Saturday 12th June

I wanted to get up early this morning so I had plenty time to prepare myself for the 400 mile train journey from Antwerp to Lubeck in Germany. This was the first time I had travelled Europe by train and I was full of questions, would I be able to understand the timetables? Would the ticket collectors speak English? Would I even get there? The first problem arose when I went into the ticket office to confirm my departure arrangements, the man behind the counter told me that this was going to be a very difficult journey today as there were works on the line and that I would have to use bus’s at certain points on the journey. He gave me a printout of all the connections I needed to make, a total of 6 in all, 5 trains and one bus and it was in Flemish (I think). Some of the times between trains were down to just a few minutes so the chances of missing a connection was a real possibility. My estimated time of arrival in Lubeck was
19.51, that is if I negotiated the journey successfully; so I couldn’t afford to mess this up or my hotel for the night would be shut, as there was no night porter.

The inevitable happened and I did miss a connection, got on the wrong train and ended up at a place called Enschede. I was befriended by a young Dutch woman (Jessica) and her baby (Angelica) on the train to Enschede, who took pity on me and gave something to eat after hearing about my misfortunes. It was really nice to have their company for the 3 hours it took to the next stop, bearing in mind that I was on the wrong train going to the incorrect destination.

After much shaking of the head the ticket lady there produced a timetable that would reroute me back to Lubeck. Unfortunately this would require another 5 trains and would not arrive in Lubeck until 21.48; this was going to be a very long day. It was now 4.00pm, I had been travelling for 6 hours and I hadn’t eaten and the chances of eating looking at the new timetable looked very remote as there was very little changeover time between stops.

I was very nervous now and looked for all the available information every time I boarded a different train to make sure I was on the right one. I decided to call ahead and warn the hotel that I was going to be late. They said as long as I was there for 11pm it would be ok.

At one of the last stops, (Ratsenburg), a party of young ladies boarded the train whooping, singing and laughing. They appeared to be drunk and I wasn’t sure what to make of them. As they proceeded up and down the train they seemed to be offering items from a basket they were carrying. It then occurred to me that it was a hen party and one of the young girls was to be married. They were raising money by selling cheap, tacky items to the passengers and encouraging them to participate by amusing them with their singing and dancing. I was asked to contribute, which I did and made it a very entertaining end to a tiresome journey.

I arrived in Lubeck in the state of Schleswig Holstein at 21.48 very tired and weary, fortunately the hotel was just over the road from the train station, so it was just a short walk to end a very demanding day. I must admit at times during the day I did feel a bit like Michael Palin. The young girl on reception was still there and after apologising for her poor English (which was excellent) showed me to my room and welcome sanctuary for the night.

Lubeck in Germany

Schleswig-Holstein
Schleswig-Holstein is the Northernmost of the sixteen states of Germany, comprising most of the historical duchy of Holstein and the Southern part of the former Duchy of Schleswig. Its capital city is Kiel; other notable cities are Lubeck, Flensburg and Neumunster, and.

Schleswig-Holstein borders Denmark (Region Syddanmark) to the north, the North Sea to the west, the Baltic Sea to the east, and the German states of Lower Saxony, Hamburg, and Mecklenburg-Vorpomern to the south.

Sunday 13th June

I just did not want to get up this morning, after my long day of travelling yesterday I slept well and felt too tired for breakfast. However I had arranged breakfast for 8.30 and I thought I should make an effort so I dragged myself out of bed. The breakfast room was very pleasant but I felt uncomfortable again as I knew I was the only Englishman here and I felt embarrassed that I didn’t speak the language. The lady showed me to the table and spoke to me in German. I apologised and said sorry I’m English, but she didn’t speak English either. She repeated what she said and I thought I will have to guess what it is. Sometimes if you think about it logically and consider the situation you’re in, you can work it out. So it was breakfast what might she be saying “do you want tea or coffee” yes I think so, I said yes then she spoke more German - what could that mean? Ah could it be “do you want milk” I thought just say yes and see what happens. I was right and there was coffee with a jug of milk. This is a simple case but I have used it in more difficult situations and sometimes if you just listen to the tone of what they are saying you can get the gist. I have a little electronic translator, which I meant to bring with me and forgot it, which has been a real annoyance for me. I know hardly any words in German except “thank you”. I just felt a little uncomfortable by the fact that the English expect everybody to speak our language and we don’t have to bother and maybe we should make more of an effort.

After breakfast I phoned Tom arranged to meet him in the middle of Lubeck a most adorable historic old city.

The old part of the town is an island enclosed by the Trave. The Elbe-Lubeck Canal connects the Trave with the Elbe River. Another important river near the town centre is the Wakenitz. Autobahn 1 connects Lübeck with Hamburg and Denmark. The borough Travemunde is a sea resort and ferry port at the coast of the Baltic Sea.

Tom is a very friendly unassuming man with a delightful family, who gave me a guided tour of the city including a sightseeing trip around Lubeck by boat. The tour guide was
speaking in German so Tom asked him, for my benefit if he could speak in English, he said no, but he would speak much slower, in German!!!

The Hanseatic City of Lübeck is the second-largest city in Schleswig-Holstein, in northern Germany, and one of the major ports of Germany. It was for several centuries the "capital" of the Hanseatic League ("Queen of the Hanse") and because of its Brick Gothic architectural heritage is on UNESCO’s list of World Heritage Sites. In 2005 it had a population of 213,983. Situated at the Trave River; Lübeck is the largest German port on the Baltic Sea.

In 1937 the Nazis passed the so-called Greater Hamburg Act, where the nearby Free and Hanseatic City of Hamburg was expanded, to encompass towns that had formally belonged to the Prussian province of Schleswig-Holstein. To compensate Prussia for these losses (and partly because Hitler had a personal dislike for Lübeck after it refused to allow him to campaign there in 1932, the 711-year-long independence of Lübeck came to an end and almost all its territory was incorporated into Schleswig-Holstein.

During World War II, Lübeck was the first German city to be attacked in substantial numbers by the Royal Air Force. The attack on 28 March 1942 created a firestorm, that caused severe damage to the historic centre and the Bombing of Lubeck in World War II destroyed three of the main churches and greater parts of the built-up area. A POW camp for officers, Oflag X-C, was located near the city from 1940 until April 1945. Lübeck was occupied without resistance by the British Second Army on 2 May 1945.

On 3 May 1945, one of the biggest disasters in naval history happened in the Bay of Lubeck when RAF bombers sank three ships which, unknown to them, were packed with concentration-camp inmates. About 7,000 people were killed.

The Boat trip was followed by a visit to Niederegg's a very famous Marzipan coffee shop and restaurant where I sampled a piece of walnut and marzipan cake. A fine dining experience and I must say a much more pleasant experience than eating the raw herring.

Lübeck is very famous for its excellent marzipan industry, and according to local legend, Marzipan was first made in Lübeck possibly in response to either a military siege of the city, or a famine year. The story, perhaps apocryphal, is that the town ran out of all foods except stored almonds and sugar, and used these to make loaves of marzipan "bread". Others believe that marzipan was actually invented in Persia a few hundred years before Lübeck claims to have invented it. The best known producer is Niederegger, which tourists often visit while in Lübeck, especially during Christmas time. Niederegger was founded by Johann Georg Niederegger on 1 March 1806 in Lübeck and is since famous for their marzipan
for about 200 years. The company is a family-owned limited private partnership. Niederegger marzipan is classed as 100% marzipan and contains much less sugar in comparison to other marzipan makers.

Much of the old town has kept a medieval look with old buildings and narrow streets. The town once could only be entered by passing one of four town gates, of which two remain today, the well-known Holsteinor, (City Gate 1478) and the Burgator (1444).

Much of the old town centre is dominated by seven church steeples. The oldest ones are the Lubecker Dom (the city’s cathedral) and the Marienkirche (Saint Mary’s), both from the 13th and 14th century.

Like many other places in Germany, Lübeck has a long tradition with Christmas market in December, which includes the famous handicrafts market inside the Heiligen-Geist-Hospital (Hospital of the Holy Spirit), located at the north end of Königstrasse.

After lunch I made my way back to the hotel for a short rest and relax before I rejoined Tom and his wife for a family barbeque prior to watching Germany’s first game in the world cup. Rested and showered I walked back through the City towards Tom’s house to meet with his family and neighbors for a somewhat chilly barbeque. I remember his wife complaining about the cold summer so far and how she wished she was in Rumania where the climate was warmer and then Tom commenting that they now talk about the weather just as much as the English. Already crowds of German supporters had started to gather, this was going to be an awkward night for me having to show favor towards the German team, something that I am in stringently opposed to. The barbeque was very good and I was made most welcome. They all spoke English which was a real blessing for me. Well Germany beat Australia 4-0, I tried hard to hide my disappointment and attempted to give stifled congratulations and hoped it came across as sincere. On the way back to my hotel the German fans were out celebrating in force, with their vuvuzela’s in full volume. The atmosphere in town was amazing, but by the middle of the night I had become a little intolerant of their party mood and the result, especially after our (England’s) dismal 1-1 draw with America the night before, I just hoped that we didn’t have to play Germany in the early stages and not while I was here in Deutschland. I just wanted to SLEEP.
I met Tom outside the hotel after breakfast for the short drive to his yard and offices, where I was introduced to Ole Jedack who was to be my escort, guide and companion for the next two days. Tom Hiss was the second reed dealer I had met on my travels in Europe. He informed me that he started dealing in reed when his father died (aged 65), after a car crash in 1920. The business started when they went from supplying grain to reed. Hiss Reet is a traditional Germantown-based international trading company for thatched roofs, water-reed, natural building components and garden products. Hiss Reet has evolved since foundation in 1833, become the leading supplier of water reed in Germany. They now supply in excess of 2 million bundles of reed each year to the German market alone. Tom has subsidiary companies in Turkey, Romania and Hungary where they harvest and process finest European water reed for thatching and ecological construction.

I was quite impressed by the attention to quality that was being used here. There was already a certificated system in place to identify the source of the reed and all the deliveries of reed are tested for moisture content upon arrival. If the reed is found to have high levels of moisture then it is returned to the supplier. Moisture checks are again taken when a delivery is taken to the Thatchers. Tom points out that the method of testing is not accurate but it gives a rough indication the moisture content. Tom is also concerned that nitrate levels in reed are increasing in general and so carries out checks for this too. There is a conviction here to that Thatchers have to become more vigilant and start to do their own basic checks for moisture and nitrate content. The benefits documenting their work should also be considered, so that they have reference points to identify the source of poor quality materials or workmanship.

In the offices I met a gentleman named Philippe who gave me a CD which had a comprehensive guide to thatching in Germany. He was a very knowledgeable young man with whom I shared a very interesting conversation before meeting the famous Professor Slicter, who was at Tom’s yard this morning, he was there to carry out mandatory checks for moisture content, on a new consignment of Hungarian reed that had just arrived. The Germans do not allow reed to be used unless it has been checked and passed by the professor. As far as I could work out this is just paying lip service to the rules, because his statement usually consists of the following, “normally this reed would be fit to use but it is up to the Thatcher’s discretion as to its suitability”, no ducking the issue there then.
Thatching in Germany had taken a set back however; due to a report that was published on the internet about a Killer Mushroom that was going to destroy all thatched roofs. This was a very damaging report that I mentioned earlier but the effect it had on the German thatching industry was immense, people lost confidence in thatch and it has taken a long time to recover from this misleading report.

The next couple of days were out of my hands as regarding my scheduled itinerary. I had no hotel booked for the night and I was wondering where I would actually end up. Tom however had taken care of all this and I was in very capable hands of Ole. Ole was a former dental technician who loved what he was doing but when he saw an advert for a job with Tom Hiss decided to take a change in direction and become a reed dealer assistant. He was to take me to the Island of Rugan Germany’s biggest Island. The journey there was an education and Ole was a most informative guide. Driving with Ole was like being in a mobile office with Ole multi tasking every step of the way, answering calls, writing notes, checking his sat nav and telling me about his views on life, history and geography, but I liked him very much.

We passed through a town called Wismar where Ole told me about a famous folk law story about a pirate who was born there. A large number of myths and legends surround the few facts known about Klaus Störtebeker's life. Störtebeker is only a nickname, meaning "empty the mug with one gulp" in Old German. The moniker refers to the pirate's supposed ability to empty a four-litre mug of beer in one gulp. At this time, pirates and other fugitives from the law often adopted a colorful nom de guerre or name of war.

According to legend, in 1401, a fleet from Hamburg led by Simon of Utrecht caught up with Störtebeker's force near Helgoland. According to some stories, Störtebeker's ship had been disabled by a traitor who cast molten lead into the links of the chain which controlled the ship's rudder. Störtebeker and his crew were ultimately overcome and brought to Hamburg, where they were tried for piracy. Legend says that Störtebeker offered a chain of gold long enough to enclose the whole of Hamburg in exchange for his life and freedom. However, Störtebeker and all of his 73 companions were sentenced to death and were beheaded. The most famous legend of Störtebeker relates to the execution itself. Störtebeker is said to have asked the mayor of Hamburg to release as many of his companions as he could walk past after being beheaded. Following the granting of this request and the subsequent beheading, Störtebeker's body arose and walked past eleven of his men before the executioner tripped him with an out-stretched foot. Nevertheless, the eleven men were executed along with the others. The senate of Hamburg asked the executioner if he was not tired after all this, but he replied he could easily execute the whole of the senate as well. For this, he himself was sentenced to death and executed by the youngest member of the senate.

Another place we passed on the way was Peenemunde, which was the site of one of the most modern technological facilities in the world between 1936 and 1945. The first launch of a missile into space took place here in October 1942 and it was here that the famous unmanned V bombs were invented and used during the war. The sole intention of this place was to achieve military superiority through advanced technology. Some people now believed that by the end of the war the Germans were in the advanced stages of inventing a flying saucer.
In 2004, construction of a new bridge over the river Strelasund commenced, called the Strelasundquerung 2. The German Chancellor Angela Merkel opened the new bridge on October 20, 2007. The name of this new bridge is the Rugenbrucke (Rugen Bridge). The connection has a length of 4.1 kilometers (2.5 mi), the new bridge is 2,831 meters (9,288 ft) long and the center pylon is 128 meters (420 ft) tall.

We crossed the bridge that took us over to the Island of Rugan and once again what a lovely place it was. Rügen is located off the north-eastern coast of Germany in the Baltic Sea. Rügen is one of the most visited holiday destinations in Germany. Rügen was a major summer holiday destination in the German Democratic Republic. Rügen remained a holiday island after German reunification; it has now surpassed Sylt as the most popular German island again.

In February 2006, dead swans found on Rügen and tested positive for the first known case of H5N1 (Bird Flu).

During the day we met some Thatchers on the island, Stephan Orolinski, Grob Zicker and Burkhrd Erch. Burkhrd was a real character who was treated like a celebrity by tourists and locals alike. For 20 years he was a former merchant sailor and got into thatching after the reunification of Germany.

Most of what I saw here was as expected; I saw no signs of premature decay or any methods or practices that would concern me. There is a large amount of thatch on this Island of Rugan and the Germans like the Dutch are promoting it for the development of Holiday parks. These holiday homes must not be confused with what we think of as holiday homes, these buildings are all large detached houses with large gardens.

I had some pre-conceived ideas about East Germany, I thought it would be run down and a bit impoverished, but on the contrary, it was very modern and up to date. The Germans had obviously spent a lot of money reconstructing the East. Our hotel for the night was a good example of that, with very high quality accommodation.

The world cup was now in full swing and after our evening meal we watched another game on one of the big screens erected in the square while we enjoyed a beer named after the famous pirate I mentioned earlier (Stortebeker).
This morning I woke feeling very tired and jaded after hardly any rest and much travelling over the last 10 days. Also my concerns are starting to grow over the lack of opportunities I have had to record any of my findings down on the laptop. I hope that when the time comes I will be able to decipher my rough notes.

I went down to breakfast where Ole was already seated and eating and wondering where he was going to take me today. As we started off he told me we were going to meet a Thatcher called Reiner Carls who was the chairman of the local Master Thatchers association. Reiner is also responsible for writing the German rulebook, for Thatching, along with some others. This is good idea because it gives a definite standard set by Thatchers for Thatchers and much better to do this for ourselves than have authorities impose it upon us as I am sure they will one day. There are 20 members in the association and 40 Thatchers in the region who do not belong to their Federation. Reiner was a merchant seaman before he decided to become a Thatcher. After the reunification of Germany there were plenty of thatching jobs around because they were being grant aided by the German government.

We drove into this pretty village, which had many thatched properties of enormous size; one can only imagine that this must be a really expensive area to live. This guy was Thatcher who had a team of 6 men and was thatching a kindergarten with an area of a 1000 square metres; 3 months work even for 6 men, he told me. He told me of some of the problems he had with underlying asbestos and how he has the permission to remove and dispose of it because he had the necessary training. I have had similar problems with jobs that I have undertaken in the UK. I believe the standard of health and safety requirements in the UK are better than most of the places I have been to and this situation would not be permitted in the UK. In the UK the building would have been sealed off and a specialist team would have been employed to remove the asbestos under very controlled conditions.

There was nothing new to see in the methods they were using, but I was impressed with the care and attention he was using. The entire reed was stacked off the ground and covered. The reed was sorted or graded into sizes for quality and any defective bundles were cast aside, and would be compensated for by the dealer on his next delivery. I know that this is a ploy set to some extent by the dealer to ensure the Thatcher returns but I think it is a good way of building up trust between Thatcher and supplier.

The only fault I could see here is that he had no covers on the roof in case of rain and water could enter the top course if not prevented. The consensus so far is that the reed must be kept dry at all times and this includes stopping thatching when it rains. I was impressed with Reiner because he was an old fashion Thatcher who was on the roof working with his men keeping an eye on quality and coaching his men.

In Germany Thatching is a proper science and anyone who wants to be a Thatcher has to go to Thatching school for three years and then he has to do two years learning about the technical side of the building trade; all before he sets foot on the roof. After that he has to take, what I have been told are very difficult exams. I think this is good because it make sure that they all “sing from the same sheet” but I cannot imagine how you can
spend three years training someone and not see how they perform on the roof. I have trained 2 Thatchers and I know from my point of view that when I give a lad a chance to have a go at Thatching, I know within one hour if he is capable of doing the job. Ludo Ibens of Belgium, I, and most other Thatchers would agree that we can tell more or less straight away whether a prospective young lad would make the grade as a Thatcher.

This way of learning to thatch through the German rule book reminded me of a film I saw when I was young “The Magnificent Men in Their Flying Machines”. In the film a German was sitting in an aeroplane and his partner asked him how they were going to work out how to fly it. With the book in front of him, he said, “Ze same vay as ze Germans learn to do everyzing, from ze instruction book”.

I asked Reiner if he had any experience of problems with thatch deteriorating too fast. So he took me over the road to look at a Thatch that Reiner had done 13 years ago. The north facing side was covered in very thick moss and lichen but when he told me he had cleaned it once already with a hedge cutter I became more interested. This is a common practise with the Thatchers I have met so far and it could be the answer to one of the questions that has puzzled me so far. They all agree unanimously that the north facing side of the roof wears out first and in the UK we are all in agreement that the south (sunny) side wears out first. The foreign Thatchers think that it is most important (so does professor---) to clean the roof of all algae and moss so that it allows the roof to breath, so every few years, because the moss returns they clean it with a hedge cutter and remove 4 to 5 cm of thatch. That is a colossal waste of thatch in my opinion, where we would probably, in most cases only clean the roof when the property is re-ridged, every 12-15 years. We would only then remove the growths by hand, or by Leggett (a Thatcher's dressing tool) and bush off with a broom. I asked Reiner why he thought that this roof had large moss deposits on it and no other roof in the village had. In his opinion he said it was due to the trees overhanging the roof, but in my estimation these were to far away to cause such heavy deposits. However I had to admit it was the only reason I could see at the time. All the roofs I have seen in Germany are of the open construction with foils at the eve and 80mm gaps under thatch to permit airflow through the roof to allow it to dry out.

We left Reiner and drove off towards Kiel where there is a canal pass which allows big ships to take a short cut across this part of Germany and save many thousand of miles. The Canal makes a passage from the Baltic Sea to the North Sea and carries more shipping than the Panama Canal. According to the canal's website, it is the most heavily used artificial seaway in the world; over 43,000 vessels passed through in 2007, excluding small craft. We are going to a place called Insel Riems, which means Small Island. The region to the east of here is called Mecklenburg Vorpommern. In this part of Germany there are two regions know as Angol and South Saxon, and people from these two areas got together and invaded Britain and they were known as Anglo-Saxons from who we descended. This whole region is very flat; they say that when you have a visitor here, you see him one week before he arrives.

In St Peter Ording we met Hans-Herman Ohms, chairman of the local thatching organisation of Schleswig-Holstein, and Katherine Jacobs, a Lady...
Thatcher, who runs her own company and employs 6 Thatchers. She is also a Master Thatcher in her own right and bears a remarkable resemblance to Kate Glover, an English Lady Thatcher, who is the vice Chairman of the National Society of Master Thatchers.

Hans-Herman is a very amiable man with a very big smile; you can’t help but like him. He is the type of man who you would imagine would make a very good grandfather.

He told me a little story of when he went to Eire for a Holiday. Hans had been learning to play the guitar and one of the songs he was practicing was an old German folk song. During a night out in one of the bars in Eire he was encouraged to join in with the locals and their rendition of an old local Irish folk song and low and behold it turned out to be the same one he had been practicing at home.

He took Ole and I to some local sites to give us an idea of the Thatching that was being done in the area and although a little different from what I had seen before there was no new evidence or clues to help me understand the problems of rapid decay. The more I see the more confusing the picture becomes. I can’t be as sure and as confident as Henk and be absolutely confident of each property and the reasons they have problems.

Hans-Herman expressed the frustration he has at the moment because he wants to start a magazine, but can’t fund it unless he has the support of all the Thatchers. At the moment one section of the Thatchers doesn’t want to contribute.

I asked Hans about the practice of using a hedge cutter to clean a roof and he said he would never use this method and only recommends cleaning the thatch by hand and only when it is dry.

Later that afternoon we stopped for a welcome coffee at the Friesemkate Restaurant in St Peters Ording. The four of us sat there chatting about Thatch and many other things until evening arrived, so we decided to eat there in the warm evening sun. Because the weather had not been so good Hans told me about a folk law tale, saying if someone comes to see you and they bring sunshine they are angels with wings. That’s a welcome I have never received from English Thatchers.

All the foreign Thatchers, that I have visited or met, are fascinated with our straw ridges. Everyone wants to know how we construct them, how long they last, and how we make them look so pretty. Katherine asked if I could arrange a Thatcher exchange for three to four weeks so we could learn each others techniques and methods.

At the end of the evening Hans-Herman paid for the meal and we agreed to exchange NSMT magazines and information about some of the topics that we had talked about.

Hans then took me to my hotel for the night, which was one of the most superior that I have ever stayed in and insisted on paying the bill the next morning. I will never forget the generosity, kindness and hospitality that I have been shown and I hope that one day they will visit me and I will be able to return the warmth of welcome I have received.
**Wednesday 16th June**

The next day signalled the end to my short but most enjoyable time with Hans-Herman and as he drove me to meet Sonke Bartlefsen I thought how hard it is to keep meeting these nice people and then just when you’re starting to get to know them you have to say goodbye.

Sonke lived in the most amazing house with the most beautiful garden, in which stood his office, in the shape of a large round house.

We enjoyed a coffee and mid morning snacks with Sonke and his wife in his house before I bid farewell to Hans-Herman.

This was an added departure to my itinerary that was arranged by Hans-Herman.

Sonke has a large team of 24 Thatchers. He also undertakes slate and tiled roofing.

Sonke Bartlefsen; a man in a hurry, if you ask me, was under no illusion of the seriousness of the problems that face the Thatching industry in Europe. He was quick to inform me that he had problems with all roofs and materials. He said “reed may be good with hard stems but he still can’t say for definite if this would produce a good thatched roof, guaranteed to last”.

He has a big problem with a roof he thatched recently. The roof is only two years old and although it is showing no signs of rapid decay and looks perfectly fine, it is giving off a very strong pungent smell of mushrooms. The owners have complained and in order to prevent any loss of confidence in thatch he has agreed to re-thatch the property. However he knows that the results could be just the same in a couple of years.

I think this is a very big step in the wrong direction and I don’t think there would be Thatchers in the UK willing to go as far as this to keep a customer happy. I do believe that this decision is fuelled by the controversy over the killer mushroom saga that erupted in Germany and is still making Thatchers nervous, as to whether they will be sued.

I visited another property with Sonke where his men were carrying out some repairs to the coatwork. The surface had become really crumbly and powdery but the cause of this was not obvious. How had the water penetrated to cause this decay; they have no straw ridges like we do, so the problem isn’t caused by down hill spars. This made me think about their use of Biddles; could the over use of Biddles to gain access to the roof be causing this problem? I suggested that as the Biddles are pushed into the roof that the spikes could buckle a piece of reed and take it deep into the roof on the end of the spike, thus allowing rain water to follow the bent reed and penetrate the roof in localised areas. Could the problem be thermal pumping an idea which has not been scientifically proved but needs to be looked at? It was not a new roof so I could rule out the kind of decay (brown rot) that I was looking for.
We drove to the station where we caught the train to the Island of Sylt in Westerland. The train was absolutely packed with tourists making their way to this very popular part of Germany.

The island of Sylt is shaped a bit like an anchor attached to the mainland. On its west coast, the fierce surf of the North Sea gnaws mercilessly at the changing shoreline. The wind can be so strong that the world’s best windsurfers meet here each September for the final Surf World Cup of the tour. By contrast, Sylt’s eastern Wadden Sea shore is tranquil and serene. Twice a day the shallow ocean retreats daily with the tides, exposing the muddy sea bottom. On Sylt’s north, you’ll find wide expanses of shifting dunes with candy-striped lighthouses above fields of gleaming yellow rape flower, as well as expanses of heath.

For the past 40 years, Sylt has been the preferred playground of the German jet set, providing gossip for Germany’s tabloid press. These days, the couplings and tripling are more discreet than they once were, but the glut of fancy restaurants, designer boutiques, ritzy homes and luxury cars prove that the moneyed set has not disappeared.

As you can imagine this was another very exclusive part of Germany with very expensive houses and posed the question of why is Sonke taking me here? I am afraid that I came to the conclusion, that once again they were trying to impress me, cynical or what?

On the Westerland peninsular, I saw the most amazing Thatch property that I have ever seen, but it would be classed as a Thatchers nightmare, because of the amount of Dormer windows present, over 20 in all. The thatches here are finished off with heather ridges. These ridges are purely aesthetical and only last 3-5 years. The construction of the ridge bares no resemblance to the way our ridges are made. Firstly the top of the roof is protected with bitumen felt, and then the ridge is formed by stuffing heather under wire mesh, which is attached to the top of the roof. I was worried by this technique, because they had gone to the trouble to ensure that they had an air flow through the roof then potentially sealed it off with the felt. The Germans seemed to have developed some very strange ideas about how to ensure air flow through a thatched roof. One which is included on all new build constructions, is to have breather pipes leading form the eve line all the way to the top of the roof on the underside of the thatch. It then passes through the ridge and is vented by a pipe that sits on top of the ridge. These breather pipes are positioned about every 2 metres across the roof. As far as I could see all this did was take air from the eve along the pipe and let it out at the top and in actual fact not affecting the thatch at all. The eve line of the thatch is vented also by a specially formed mesh that sits between the wall plate and the brow course; this I do think is a good idea, so much so that I brought a sample home with me.

We caught the train for our short journey back to Sonke’s house where for the first time on the trip my schedule was going to go astray. I should have been arriving in Aero today to meet Morten Petersen, although Sonke and his wife explored every avenue, it was too late now to get me to the ferry. They had even more bad news for me, because
of where they lived the train journey to the ferry the next day would be very difficult and complicated. I was starting to get nervous; I didn’t want another day of endless trains and buses. They started to speak to each other including their son in German and although I couldn’t understand them it was obvious they were trying to persuade their son to take me to the port in Fynsav the next day. I was right and after about an hour of trying to find me a hotel for the night this ended up being the plan.

**Thursday 17th June**

Sonke’s son picked me up the next morning at 8.30 for the 2 hour trip to the port of Fynsav. He was a very pleasant young man who was enjoying the opportunity of driving his dad’s Mercedes Benz, perhaps this is how they persuaded him to take me, I don’t know but I wasn’t complaining.

The big news on the radio that day was that the Opal car factory in Germany was closing with many redundancies expected.

I was now in Denmark, the last country on my itinerary, a place I was really looking forward to seeing. The more you hear about a place the more you build up a picture of what you expect that place to be like. I expected Denmark to be a very clean, expensive and cultured country, a place where they do things right and they are not encumbered by outside influences. The 70 minute ferry journey to Aero gave me time to relax and have a welcomed cup of coffee.

Ærø is 30km in length and 8km wide and has a population of almost 7000. Ærø has the world’s largest solar power plants, with an area of 18,365 m². It provides a third of Marstal's power consumption.

Ærø is the only island among the larger Danish Baltic Sea islands that is not connected with a bridge.

Ærø is endeavoring to become self-sufficient in energy, and in 2002 a figure of 40% self-sufficiency in renewable energy was reached. The initiatives have attracted high international recognition and Ærø is considered to be one of the world's leaders in the field.

Ærø’s three district heating systems of solar collectors have won international acclaim. With the recent expansion, the system in Marstal is now the world's largest solar collector system for heating.

In 2002, three modern wind turbines were erected. The wing tip of these turbines is 100 m (330 ft) above the ground and between them the mills cover 50% of the island’s electricity consumption.

I was met by Morten at the port, who wondered why I was a day late, after my explanation he told me that I missed the BBQ he planned for me last night, which was a bit disappointing. He then drove me to the site where he was working just in
time to join his fellow workers for lunch. This is how I remembered lunches on site, Thatchers all gathered round a table, bantering and scoffing, sharing tales from previous jobs. This visit was going to be completely different from the previous encounters; Morten was a Thatcher in work mode and very focused on the enormous project he was thatching at Skovsgard.

After lunch I decided to go and observe how they were working and the first thing I saw horrified me, Morten was dressing the new coatwork with a chain saw, now even if you can justify using a chain saw on old moss covered thatch, you can’t have any claims that this practise is good for use on a newly thatched roof.

The roof was a traditional roof with open timbering with the thatch being fixed with wires tied around the battens. This is a very labour intensive way of fixing the reed, because it requires having a person on the inside of the roof to pass the wire back out to the Thatcher on the roof. Because it was a conservation project Danish reed was used although the consensus of the people on site is that Danish reed is not very good. I was told it tends to be short in length, a bit on the soft side and dog legged.

Once again the practise of shaving old roofs down to remove the moss was prevalent, and with the short reed and slack pitches on the slopes, this meant that roofs would only have a maximum life span of 30 years.

I noticed something here that I have noticed on many occasions back home, but I have never understood. Reed curls up on certain parts of some roofs, in the sun. I have often wondered why this only affects some roofs and not others in the same area. Does it happen when the weather is hot and dry? Is it because the reed is very short and the butt ends are too exposed? Or is it poor quality reed?

I decided to check the difference between the pitch of the thatch compared with the pitch of the reed on one of these roofs. The pitch was 47 degrees on the thatch compared with just 14 degrees on the actual reed. This was a measurement I was to repeat on the rest of my trip and the conclusion was that the shorter the reed the bigger the difference between the two measurements. I think that this combination also affects the curling of the reed.

Morten is the current head of one of the Danish Trade Federations, a position he is intending to relinquish. He wants the new head to model their Federation on the same lines as the Dutch and have someone in charge that can generate money for his or her own wages and for training. There are two organisations in Denmark who unfortunately do not see eye to eye with each other.
Some Thatchers have tried over the years to reconcile the differences between the two with no success. The Federation here do have a training scheme for apprentices and part of their appraisal at the end is to produce a model showing what they can achieve. The model that Morten’s apprentice produced was proudly on display outside his farmhouse.

There was only so much to see and learn here so I decided to take up Morten’s offer of using his cycle to ride around the Island to look at the thatch and get an overview of the place.

This was the most enjoyable day of my trip so far. To be able to cycle around this very pretty little island was an absolute delight. I had no idea how big the Island was, but when I looked at the map I had almost cycled from one end to the other. There is an enormous amount of thatched properties on this little Island and almost all of them are holiday homes, which were remarkably cheap by our own comparisons.

The evening consisted of sharing a meal with Morten and his children. I was told by Morten that they wanted to practice their English on a real English person. Well I’m not renowned for my dialect or my expertise in the English language, so I told Morten to warn them not to get their expectations too high, about what they may learn from me. As I expected, his two children spoke very good English but, as with most of the Danes and other northern Europeans they spoke it with an American accent, mainly because most of them learn English from American films shown with sub-titles.

Tonight was going to be my first night sleeping under a thatched roof. Morten lived in a thatched farmhouse which he was busy renovating. The construction of this roof is a closed construction and as far as I was concerned the main benefits of living under a thatch were lost. During the night I felt stifled, although the bedroom window was wide open; it wasn’t a particular hot night, but it still felt hot and stuffy. The modern construction methods have ended the pleasant, cool when hot, warm when cold, climate within the thatched dwelling.

Friday 18th June

This morning I resumed my bike ride around the northern part of Aero while Morten went to work. After lunch he proposed taking me on a guided tour of some of the thatched properties on the Island, before he dropped me off at the ferry for the journey to my next destination of Ordense. Soon I was greeted by wonderful fields of poppies with a thatched house at the bottom of it. On the theme of flowers I noticed that many of the
thatched houses had plants over the door way, this I was informed was, as the plant droops it indicates that the roof had become too dry and was at risk of fire.

Another quirky feature I noticed on some of the roofs here was vertical gables, a feature I have not come across before and probably not one that I would like to undertake. In the afternoon we looked at many thatched houses all of which seemed a little worse for wear. The style of the thatch here was consistent, with low roofs, slack pitches, timber framed and mostly with dormer windows in the thatch. This was a small Island but they still had some very large thatched house to show off and although I thought the standard of thatching on Aero average, I didn’t see any problems with premature decay only Rapid decay brought about mainly by poor practice and inferior reed.

The rest of the buildings on Aero were quite colourful, painted in yellows, pinks, orange, blues and greens, it all seemed a little like toy town but very nice place to visit and one that I would certainly think about revisiting for a holiday at some point.

We shared a coffee and ice cream before it was time for me to go and wait for the evening ferry back to the mainland of Fyn and then catch the train to Ordense, the birthplace of Hans Christian Andersen.

The ferry was packed, it was Friday night and everyone was trying to get home for the weekend. I too was weary, the trip was taking its toll on me and I knew I was going to be arriving late at my hotel that night. I was also hungry and so I decided to eat on the boat, I knew it would not be a delicacy I could relish, but I couldn’t stand the thought of arriving late then having to find somewhere to eat.

I had planned the location of my Hotels so that they were never far from the train station I would be arriving at. However when I arrived in Odense I completely lost my bearings and found myself lugging my case around the City in confusion. The sat nav on my phone kept taking me to the location of Hans Christian Andersen’s birthplace instead of The Hans Christian Andersen Hotel. I saw two young women out for the night and asked them if they knew where it was and much to my surprise they didn’t. They were very apologetic and assured me that they should know where it is. They asked a passing guy who did know where it was and then they gladly escorted me there. On the way they told me they were students and that Odense was a really boring place. I was here for a weekend break from my investigation into premature decay and I was hoping it was going to be an interesting place for me to visit; especially as I remember the tales of Hans Christian Andersen from my childhood and that of my children’s upbringing with such fondness.
When I arrived at the hotel, I was amused that the TV program Coach Trip was at the same hotel, recognisable by the Union Jack on the roof of the coach and also on the wing mirrors. It is a programme I had started to watch recently and I was hoping to catch a glimpse of Brendan the host.

**Saturday 19th June**

The next day was spent as a tourist rather than a Thatcher, it was a very wet day so I spent most of it looking round the Hans Christian Andersen Museum and his birthplace. Although I knew of his stories and fairy tales I didn’t know much about the man himself and what an interesting character he was, although it was said that Charles Dickens though he was a “Bore”, mmmmm.

**Sunday 20th June**

Today I had arranged to meet a well known Danish journalist and TV presenter, Joergen Kaarup Jensen for lunch. He specialises in writing books and making programmes about thatch and was in Ordense for an interview for the job of running and promoting the Thatching Federation in Denmark. After lunch he took me to a recreation of a thatched peasant village, Den Fynske Landsby, similar to the one at the Weald and Downland Museum. The village reflected the life and times of peasants during the 19th century. Nearly all of the buildings here were thatched including a thatched Hospital and an open air theatre and of course a thatched windmill. The walk back to my hotel along the river Ordense was most enjoyable and ended a rather enjoyable day.

**Monday 21st June**

Time to head off again, so with my bags packed I got on the train for the short 1½ hour journey to Arhus on the Island of Jutland, where I was to meet Ian de Reybekill; a funny name for an Englishman.

Ian went to live in Denmark when he was fifteen, having had an unpleasant childhood living in Birmingham. Ian started thatching when he was sixteen, after seeing someone thatching and
decided that’s what he wanted to do. He started to learn how to thatch with Earling Petersen, who we were to meet later in the week.

Aarhus is a city of growth. With a population of more than 300,000, Aarhus is Denmark’s second largest city. It is at heart, however, also Denmark’s youngest city when you consider the average age of its habitants which is far lower than anywhere else in the country. At the University of Aarhus alone there are nearly 35,000 students, and there is a total of 25 educational and research institutions in the city. But Aarhus is also a city with clearly visible roots, founded, as it was, by the Vikings in the 8th century.

A brand new city in the making

Aarhus is at present expanding dramatically. During the course of the next ten years the entire inner section of the Port of Aarhus will be transformed into a new and exciting urban area with houses, businesses and educations institutions. As in Hamburg in Germany and Malmo in Sweden the urban harbour areas will be Aarhus’s new face to the outside world with spectacular buildings and attractive canal areas. Within the next few years some 7 - 8,000 new Aarhus residents will move into the new urban area. In parallel with this, the Lisbjerg quarter to the north of the city will also be an area of quite astonishing growth and it will be connected with the city centre by means of a new light railway, passing through Denmark’s largest hospital area, the ‘Skejby Sygehus’ Aarhus University Hospital.

1250 years of city history

At the same time Aarhus is a city which is also very conscious about its roots. Aarhus could well be Denmark’s oldest city; evidence has been found which shows that there was a Viking settlement here as early as the 8th century. The Vikings settled by the mouth of the river – at the very spot where the Cathedral today rises into the sky with its tower soaring to more than 90 metres in height. The ‘Bispetorv’ square was also the centre of the town 1250 years ago, and in The Viking Museum in the basement of the Nordea Bank you are standing right next to the rampart which the Vikings built around Aarhus in the 10th century.

Tuesday 22nd June

Today it was Ian’s turn to show me around some of the thatched properties he had earmarked for me and probably for the first time on the trip, I was shown examples of thatch with brown rot. These samples matched exactly with what I have seen back home and what I was hoping to see more of on my travels.

Ian is involved in producing a magazine for the Society
for the protection of Thatched Houses in Denmark. He informed me that he has written reports on this problem and has got himself into trouble by accusing some Thatchers of poor practise, but believes that some of the blame must lie there.

The Thatcher’s choice of reed and where they place it on the roof, along with the problems of fixing it too firm, is some of his main concerns. With what seems like an abundance of short fine reed coming onto the market especially from the Hungarian reed beds, Ian believes that all Reed deliveries should be treated as suspect and examined thoroughly before being accepted.

There is a consensus of opinion starting to emerge, amongst the Thatchers I have spoken with; although it’s not a consensus that gives a clear insight into what is happening with the reed. So far we know that this problem affects all roofs and reed from all sources, with the belief that no longer is there a reliable source of reed, with the longevity that it has historically been associated with. It has become unstable and quality varies far too much to trust it implicitly. The demand for reed is seen as the biggest factor here, with demand being high; less desirable reed is making its way onto roofs that would have otherwise been rejected.

Many Thatchers also think that the customer needs to be re-educated, as to what contributes to the aesthetical appearance of a thatched roof. Most customers would prefer their roof to have a very clinical pristine appearance, this requires fine straight reed, however Thatchers are starting to accept that reed that is dog legged or bent makes for a better roof. Although the appearance of the roof is inferior, the bent reed permits the surface to be more open, allowing for better airflow through the reed and thus assisting the drying out of the thatch.

The development of roof constructions that help prevent the spread of fire is also seen as major factor in contributing towards rapid decay, but not brown rot.

We visited Ian’s thatched holiday home; 6 bed roomed dormer type house in half an acre of land which was valued at just £30,000 before we headed back to meet his family, where I shared a BBQ with his wife and their two sons.

**Wednesday 23rd June**

The next day we went to meet Earling Petersen, an ex Thatcher who now makes a living manufacturing screw fixings and has a passion for English pubs. He has 8 machines working 10 hours a day and says that he can only just make it pay and then adds that no one else will be able to do this now because with the cost of the machines, no one will be able to get a return on their investment.

Earling surprised me by agreeing with Henks water vapour theory but is not so sure about his facts and where they come from. He believes
that the problems with reed started with the reunification of Germany, when the demand for reed was at an all time high and the development of the closed construction for fire protection. He remembers looking at problems as far back as 1990.

We visited a large manor house just before we got to Earlings and he confirmed to us that he was concerned about the roof because it was sucking up water. This reminded me of a theory that was given some credence here about thermal pumping; in which after a heavy rainfall the sun comes out with very strong warmth and causes the water too travel up into the thatch.

He has some unusual thoughts on which side of the roof will last longer; on normal roofs where there is no build up of moss and lichens and says the north side will last longer. I am sceptical of this because I think this is another case of where there are moss and lichens growing they will shave it off with a hedge cutter. More interesting however he does agree with me that it is never just one reason why a roof fails it’s always a combination of a few factors, but says he has examples of both poor and good quality reed lasting a long time.

Earling lived in a thatched house, he is a passionate man, who was fervent about his craft, but he was restless and wanted another challenge, he expressed a longing to do something else.

Before we left, we visited a thatched retreat hut Earling had made in the nearby woods and saw his artistically thatched mushrooms.

Our next visit was to a Danish reed dealer, Carlo Christian, what a colourful character he was, the type of person you take an instant liking to. He was an ex Thatcher with very outspoken views on Thatchers and materials. When we met, he greeted me by telling me that I wasn’t the first Englishman to visit him on a Churchill fellowship. He swiftly produced a newspaper cutting from February 1991; featuring the late Christopher White; a former chairman of the National Society or Master Thatchers, on his Churchill Fellowship. Carlo also gave me a warning and told me to be careful, because unfortunately Chris died shortly after completing his Fellowship with septicaemia and he didn’t want me to suffer the same fate.

Carlo believes all the problems that Thatchers face lies with the Thatchers. Thatchers are the ones to blame, not the materials. He can take any reed and make it last on the roof, because he makes sure the right reed goes in the right place. Thatchers do not sort the reed properly and position badly chosen reed in unsuitable areas on the roof.
controversial opinion from a reed dealer but hardly surprising. He had a very unusual analogy of this problem, He said “if you have a woman and she is good in bed then keep her there and get a housekeeper, if you have a woman who is a good housekeeper then keep her there and get a whore for the bedroom!!!

Carlo believes its time for Thatcher to go back to basics and for German Thatcher to ignore the rule book that govern the Federations. Concern should also be paid to large thatching teams and the attitudes of different companies of putting profit before quality.

I was shown an example of a thatched roof by Carlo, which was sited under trees. The property a slack pitched roof and was thatched with poor quality reed - it was four years old and surprisingly enough it was dry. However I still would not have the confidence to predict that it would last longer 25 years.

Carlo deals with mainly Hungarian reed and was very concerned with all the flooding that had taken place this summer. The reed had got wet and he was worried that this reed would still find its way into the market and poor unsuspecting Thatcher would have to cope with the consequences.

I walked with Carlo around his yard and premises, his house was thatched but not to a very high standard in my opinion The reed looked like poor quality Hungarian reed which had probably been rejected by some Thatcher and was used up by Carlo on his own house.

I was invited to a party later that evening, the locals were celebrating Sankt Hans aften, which can be translated as, the evening before the day of Saint John the Baptist. It reminded me of a street festival, where all the locals would bring out tables, chairs and food and sit round a bon-fire eating and drinking.

Those who know that Denmark is a protestant Christian country may wonder why people would honour the predominantly catholic custom of celebrating the day of an individual saint such as John the Baptist. Actually, this tradition has its roots in ancient, pre-Christian folklore, but it was adopted and quietly transformed by the church, when Christianity became the official state religion back in the year 965.

After the reformation of 1536, when Denmark adopted the protestant faith, the desire among ordinary people to celebrate Sankt Hans was still strongly desired, that an act outlawing the tradition in 1743 went by unobserved and was quickly withdrawn.

Originally, the cause for celebration of midsummer arose from a pagan belief that in the period around summer-solstice nature would have reached a peak in the sense that humans, plants, soil, trees and even springs were filled with energy coming from the sun and that from this point on nature’s energy stores would deteriorate as the hours of daylight and sunshine gradually decreased.

For pagan mystics the days around summer-solstice were thus the best time to go out in the countryside and cut herbs and plants for use in their concoctions. After Christianity had made its entry into Denmark, such activities were generally frowned upon, and
people tended to believe that gathering together and lighting huge bonfires would be a good way to ward off evil spirits and witches, who might otherwise bestow evil curses upon their land or their animals. At the same time, however, many people believed that this night proved a particular good time to visit one of the many holy springs of the countryside, as the water was supposed to be charged with very special healing qualities on this night. Several other rituals including dressing up the livestock with special decorations made out of leaves and twigs were carried out by superstitious farmers in order to protect their cattle from incursions of evil spirits.

Over time, the tradition of lighting bonfires became dominant and other rituals gradually withered away as people preferred the cosiness of gathering around a warm fire. Songs and music had always been a part of this tradition, but during the 19th century the traditional folk songs were replaced by patriotic songs. The most well-known of these is "Vi elsker vort land" ("We love our country") also known as the "Midsommervise" ("Midsummer song"). It is sung at every Sankt Hans-celebration across the country and is thus very important to know of. It was written in 1885 by the Danish poet Holger Drachmann, and the original version had music by P. E. Lange-Müller. In 1979 the Danish pop icons in the band "Shu-bi-dua" composed a new melody for the song, and since then either version has been in use at Sankt Hans-celebrations all across the country. In the links section of this review you will find pointers to lyrics and the music from the traditional version.

In the beginning of the 20th century, it became common to affix a figure resembling a witch on top of the bonfire. This tradition came from Germany, and some Danes regard this particular part of the tradition with mixed emotions as it evokes memories of the horrible persecutions and "witch"-burnings carried out in Denmark and other European countries in the 17th century. However, this custom is only a little part of the overall tradition, and it is easy to forget about the negative associations once you immerse yourself in the general atmosphere of cosiness surrounding the celebrations.

The most recent addition to the Sankt Hans-celebrations is the custom of the recent high school graduates to meet up at the bonfires to throw their lecture notes into the fire and to generally enjoy their last party before going on summer holidays. In the weeks before Sankt Hans, these students will have finished their last exams and will have been celebrating at numerous parties with their classmates. They are easily recognisable as they will be wearing their traditional white caps with red or blue rims and a black peak for the last time on this evening.

I was asked to try a traditional sweet or pudding on the night; a BBQ banana with whiskey poured over it and then covered with cream, what a treat.

**Thursday 24th June**

I left the vibrant city of Aarhus today after visiting the Old Town. This tourist attraction is a collection of old houses that have been dismantled and reconstructed on
this site. Every house tells a story, whether it be the post office or the clock maker and inside are all the relics that belong to that era.

On the way to the station I was entertained by students celebrating their exam results. All week I had been wondering why so many of the young people were wearing these sailor type hats. I just thought it was the fashion here, they were a bit geeky and I could never see them catching on in the UK. Then I was told by Ian, that these hats with their different colours represented the subject at which the student had achieved a pass and if you met one, it was polite to offer your congratulations.

These celebrations were going on all over the country with students going round in open top vehicles, whooping and cheering, tooting their horns, jumping into fountains and getting drunk, but it was all very good natured.

This city with all its ancient history is a young person’s city and I felt envious of their youth.

Once again onto the train, to visit my last contact Ewe Becker, who lives on the main island of Zealand at a place called Dianalund.

Once again an interesting journey on a crowded train in which I managed to occupy a reserved seat - nearly three weeks of trains and I still can’t work them out. It did not seem to matter what time of day or night you travelled here the trains were always crowded, especially with young people sitting on large quantities of beer in the gaps between the carriages - they all seemed to be heading for the summer rock concerts that I had seen advertised.

Ewe picked me up from the station in his really old Toyota Land Cruiser, which I soon realised was the noisiest, draughtiest and slowest vehicle around, much to the annoyance of the following traffic.

We drove straight to site where Ewe was re-thatching a house with Rumanian reed. The reed was very fine and very hard. Ewe uses Polish reed as well, but the reed he uses all comes from seawater areas. Reed from saltwater and brackish (mixture of fresh and saltwater) areas tends to be better quality, but suffers from dog-legged stems, which gives a much rougher look to the thatch than fine straight reed. This would be OK from thatch, with a clinical finish. I think we are approaching the point where the customers have to choose between longevity and appearance, and it is time for us to educate the customers as to the benefits and downfalls of aesthetics appearances.

There was nothing new to see on the roof that was being thatched by Ewe, apart from some regional variations traditional to Sjaelland, which gave the roof a kind of ski slope appearance. Oats were used on the ridge instead of straw and the gables were constructed slightly different.

Ewe lived in a large thatched farm house in very open
and beautiful surroundings. This was to be second time on this trip that I would sleep under a thatched roof, but much to my disappointment it was a very uncomfortable night sleep. It was far too stuffy and hot and once again I could not help but think that we have lost the comfortable aspects of living under a thatch in order that they comply with fire regulations.

**Friday 26th June**

This morning Ewe took me to Reerso a tourist area and famous for its fishing, another very beautiful part of Denmark. Here we had many examples of Danish thatch, but unfortunately none that would reveal any clues to the problem of premature decay.

It was also famous for its Reerso cats - cats with no tails, just like the Manx cats.

We had lunch in a thatched restaurant that Ewe had thatched. He took me into the back of the restaurant where the cook was skinning and gutting eels that had been swimming in a large tank of water. The cook wanted to know if I wanted eels for lunch, I hesitated as I had never eaten them before and I must admit that it would not have been my first choice. I decided to be adventurous and go for it and I was pleasantly surprised by how nice they were.

On the way back to Ewe’s farm he told me the story of Harold Bluetooth a Danish king who was reputed to be a good communicator, so they named the way that modern communicating devices connect to each other, after him.

Visiting Ewe was like going back to the 1950’s when no one locked their doors, and everyone was good neighbours, in fact Ewe told me that, once, when they were going on holiday to Australia they couldn’t find the key that looked their back door and had to leave with it unlocked.

This was the end of a very enjoyable time with Ewe and his wife and now the time to move on to my last destination was beckoning.

**Saturday 25th**

I was woken this morning with the news that Ewe’s mother in law had been taken into hospital and that he would have to take me to the station earlier than he first planned. This wasn’t a problem as I was looking forward to spending the last night in Copenhagen and I had the world cup football to look forward to on Sunday (England v Germany)

I had plenty of time to wander round this old city and once again I was entertained by the students celebrating their exam results. It was time to relax and do a bit of site seeing, enjoy a beer in the warm summer sun, take in the atmosphere and reflect on my journey.

I did visit the Rundetaan,(The Round Tower) which is the oldest functioning observatory in
Europe, which was built during the reign of King Christian IV (1588-1648).

But most of all I was looking forward to going home and now it couldn’t come quick enough. I felt like I was just biding my time.

**Sunday 27<sup>th</sup> June**

I was awake most of Sunday night listening to students honking horns and hollowing, yes still celebrating, I was getting rather tired of this now, and matters were made worse by the fact that I had also managed to catch a cold.

I had a long day in front of me as my flight wasn’t until 10pm but this now seemed like an age away. The trip had taken its toll on me and instead of enjoying my last day in Copenhagen I was feeling miserable and jaded.

The only highlight of the day quickly turned sour, when England got thrashed by Germany in the World Cup and sharing a bar with a load of Germans celebrating their win was not the ideal way to end my travel.

After the match I collected my bags from the hotel and made my way to the station to catch the train to the airport. Still nervous of my earlier mistakes of getting on the wrong trains I was continually looking for signs to confirm that I was on the right train. This one would end up in Sweden so if I messed this up I could be in for a long night. Not to worry the Swedish guy who sat next to me confirmed that this was the right train.

I landed at Stanstead airport, where my daughter was there to meet me and take me back to her house for the night, before catching the National Express coach in the morning to Leicester. The journey from Cambridge to Leicester along the A47 was an absolute delight, to gaze over England’s rolling countryside and just to feel at home.

I shared many experiences over this trip, I met some wonderful people, I saw how they lived, I shared food, experiences and their homes with them, I was treated to astounding hospitality and generosity and even if by the end, I was a little fed up with all the travelling, I shall remember and treasure the memories of this trip for the rest of my life.
CONCLUSIONS

Comparing The Problem

I quickly realised during my visit to Europe that what I regarded as premature decay was entirely different to what I was being shown.

The Europeans call the problem Rapid Decay and that’s just what it is, there. It’s as though the whole roof has gone into a time warp and has aged before its time.

Here in the UK we call the problem premature decay, but what we are talking about here is isolated patches on the roof that wear out before the surrounding areas of thatch. These patches seem to have the ability to soak up water and remain wet all the time, but do not spread outside of their confines.

I saw very few examples of this kind of decay (apart from two examples in Denmark), to be able to form any opinions or compare any data to evaluate what is happening.

Causes

I was unable to take samples and send them off for testing because I simply did not see enough examples of the problem.

The fact that isolated bundles rot while neighbouring reed is not affected, suggests that those bundles that rot are predisposed to do so because of some factor in their growth or storage, before they were placed on the roof. It seems implausible that atmospheric conditions could cause certain bundles to rot, while leaving others unaffected.

I did however, see some circumstantial evidence to make me believe that this problem cannot be attributed to just one cause and it is more likely to be a combination of things that contributes to this predicament.

Thatchers all know of the eight major factors which are needed in the consideration of producing a good thatched roof.

- Location/ Environment
- Design
- Construction: open/closed
- The pitch of the roof
- Maintenance
- Material Quality
- Workmanship
- Use of fire retardant chemicals

I would now like to suggest that where we only used to consider these as single factors they now can be multiplied many times. For instance poor workmanship can cover a multitude of sins, an almost endless list, which relies totally on the integrity of the Thatcher.
Due to pressures and demands on the small thatching companies, sometimes corners are cut in order to ensure a profit and the same goes for the reed producers and sellers. Demand as been great, as of the last 20 years and it is almost certain that bad practices have crept in at all levels.

If just for instance we can recognise just 6 factors in each of the main 8 categories then all of a sudden we have 48 reasons why a thatched roof could fail before its time.

But if you believe as I do, that we only need 2 or 3 of these reasons to combine together, then the permutations become even greater for failure.

Diligence by all involved is required to ensure that thatched properties continue to have the long levity we expect from them.

Above all the most worrying signs I saw on my travels across Holland, Belgium, Germany and Denmark was the trend towards closed construction roofs. Whilst these thatched roofs perform very well in the respect of the prevention of the spread of fire, they under perform drastically in terms of long levity, so the customer cannot be fooled or informed into believing that the roof is also going to last at least another 50 years.

I have seen enough evidence and spoke to many Thatchers who agree that if you stop the roof from having airflow, then the life span of the roof will be reduced.

Some attitudes towards practices we were taught years ago and currently, also have to change because together with closed construction methods and the over fixing of reed, these two combinations that will have a detrimental affect on the life span of a roof.

The idea that dog legged reed is bad reed just because it is dog legged is no longer acceptable. Some of the hardest and most durable reed I saw came from brackish areas, which tend to be dog legged. The customer has to be re-educated as well as the Thatcher, because in some cases the appearance of the roof has to take second place to the long levity of the roof.

Reed dealers in Europe are aware and concerned that nitrate levels are rising in the reed beds. This seems to be more of a problem in the eastern European countries such as Hungary, Poland, Ukraine and Romania. The argument here is complex, but I identify the problem as being the same one that we had in the UK back in the 1960s. Farmers were putting high concentrations of nitrate fertilizer on their crops which was working its way into the reed beds and thus affecting the quality of the reed. With poorer countries coming into the EU, receiving agricultural grants I speculate that they may be carrying out the same practise.

The problems originating with reed harvesting and production are much harder to identify and to resolve. There is such a massive cultural gap between the people producing the reed and the affluent thatch customer. In the poorer countries many of these workers earn meagre wages and I cannot see how further demands can be made of these people. The reed dealers themselves are well aware of all the problems that exist and if they are limited to what measures they can take to ensure good quality reed reaches the thatchers, then the rest of the industry has even less chance.
Since the early 1970s there has been a steady fall in background sulphur dioxide levels across eastern England due to the decline in coal-fired power stations, heavy industry and of domestic coal fires, along with stricter emission controls.

In general, our atmosphere is less acidic, but as a result we now have higher nitrate concentrations in the air, so when it rains it falls to the ground as a fertilizer. Along with this, milder conditions that have developed over recent decades will provide an environment in which organic materials will rot more quickly.

**Recommendations**

Firstly I must say that the thatching organisations in Europe are coming into line with that of the Dutch and starting to employ people to run their organisations in a much more professional manor. This enables them to have more financial clout, and better equipped to deal with bureaucracy that restricts the UK market. This enables them to generate money to pay their own wages as well as to fight their cause and develop their organisation into the voice that is heard above all the others.

Designers must be educated as to what a good design is and what is not, keeping thatch simple with no complicated features.

If we are to adapt close constructions for new builds then the customer has a right to know that the thatch’s life will be considerably shorter.

Materials must be checked on arrival at site, kept off the ground and covered. Suspect reed must not be used and returned to the dealer.

It would serve Thatchers well if they kept a log of all their work and document all relevant data, i.e. source of reed, the supplier, date of the work, who worked on the roof, ect.

Keeping a record of work would also identify whether some methods and techniques work better than others, but this would be more of a long term strategy.

Money has to be found to conduct scientific research into the problem of premature decay. Maybe it would be a good suggestion if all the thatching organisations in Europe got together and met to discuss a way forward for this to happen.

I know there is a will for cooperation on these matters as I was invited to return to all the countries I visited with an extended invite to all the Thatchers from the National Society of Master Thatchers.