

Raising the roof

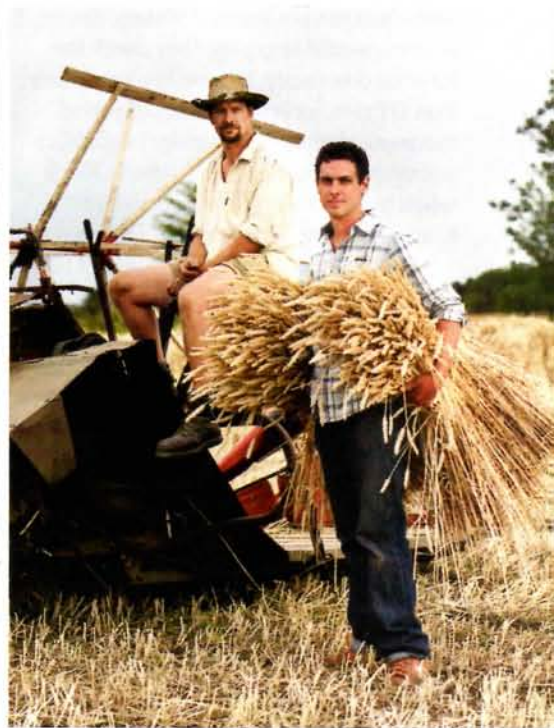
Throughout this month, craftsman-cum-farmer Dominic Meek races against the clock to harvest the traditional wheat varieties he sees from field to thatch

WORDS BY RUTH CHANDLER | PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANDREW MONTGOMERY



THESE PAGES Master thatcher Dominic Meek; the pleasing lines of stooks, once a common sight in our wheat fields; Pete O'Brien and Dominic collect sheaves from the fields





A man is lying prone in the stubble with a broken finger – but it's not his own. In the middle of a Suffolk wheat field, he's been craning his neck to see into the binder in front of him and has just discovered the fault of the machine that's stopped working. He holds the damaged 'finger' in his hand while his friend and colleague retrieves a spare part. With an assortment of tools, the equipment is repaired in minutes, ready to cut the crop once again.

Speedy fixes are essential if the men are to get the wheat in while it's at its best – they've only a week to harvest 20 acres with their temperamental vintage device. A storm would stop play; they check the forecast constantly. But neither is a farmer; Pete O'Brien, a carpenter and all-round mechanical man from nearby Laxfield, is assisting master thatcher Dominic Meek who's been growing wheat to supply himself with quality straw for four years.

"The stems have turned yellow but they still have a green node, which means they're pliable yet strong, so we cut quite early in the season," the thatcher explains

on examining the crop this July morning. The decision to farm wasn't simply born out of a desire to be self-sufficient, however. "The biggest thatching-straw producers in this area are two brothers in their sixties," Dominic says, as he squints in the almost white sunlight blotting the sky. "I suddenly realised that without them I'd have no supply." So he now rents a farmhouse in the village of Dennington with land on which to raise his own.

"By the time I use the straw for thatching we've handled it ten times," says Dominic, who became a thatcher's apprentice at the age of 23 out of sheer curiosity. "I started out as a gardener and cycled past a house with a roof in progress. The man working on it had noticed me each time I stopped and watched, so asked if I wanted to train with him." Soon after, he had the chance to learn from Stephen Letch, chairman of the East Anglia Master Thatchers Association, of which Dominic is now vice chairman, and set up on his own in 2001.

A shrinking square of wheat remains in the middle of the field, the subtle scent of oil and diesel hovers in the dust-filled air,

and beautifully tall stems of traditional variety 'Square Headmaster' oscillate in the warm breeze, their feathery tops bronze as if scorched by the searing high summer sun. At elbow to shoulder height, they're far taller than the modern strains more commonly grown and fall this way and that, protruding above the shorter, blond 'Maris Widgeon' which supports them. The weakest wind raises a meditative hush from the crop, backed by the call of a wood pigeon in the trees behind.

These sounds are broken only by the engine of Dominic's tractor and the clacking sails of the 1950s binder it tows, with Pete at the controls, as they perform an about-turn and head in a new direction. The pair are cutting the crop as quickly as possible, but compared with the speed achieved by modern equipment, theirs is slow progress. "Today's combines would wreck our stems of straw," Dominic explains. "We can only produce good, long lengths with this 60-year-old piece of engineering." The sails knock the wheat onto the canvas flatbed of the vintage machine, while blades chop at the stem and a series of small metal arms sends ▷

THIS PAGE Dominic drives a 1960s tractor to pull the binder operated by Pete. OPPOSITE, TOP LEFT The machine sends out sheaves onto the stubble. TOP RIGHT Wheat is knocked down by sails before being cut. BELOW LEFT Patterdale-Jack Russell Terrier cross Diesel





PITCH PERFECT

The ridge (above right and right) is the last part of the roof to be finished. It can take from one to five weeks to complete, depending on size. In addition to being decorative, the ridge protects the roof from heavy rain as its high pitch disperses water. The straw is held down tightly by hazel 'liggers' which are then fastened by peg-like hazel 'brotches'. Once the double-diamond pattern is in place, the ridge is cut into shape with a knife. Many thatchers have a signature style particular to them and their area.





As well as restoring old roofs, Dominic is keen to reinstate the use of thatch on new builds

tall sheaves out the other side; cinched at the waist with string, they tumble onto the ground. Two pairs of men then take one bundle under each arm and stand them against each other, adding another four to make the elegant stooks of eight that decorate the stubble in their pleasing rows, catching the eyes of passing motorists as they skirt the fields.

“Any copyright on this view?” shouts a visitor with a camera slung round his neck and a delighted expression on his face. He introduces himself as Mr Welch from the nearby village of Thorndon and explains he spotted the old-fashioned harvest the day before and has returned to take some photographs. Dominic and his team are taking a break from the midday heat, so he nods at the elderly man who strides across the stubble, crunching it underfoot, to admire the resting sheaves of wheat, their fringes gilded by the sun. “I didn’t know this still existed until yesterday,” he says. “Seeing it has taken years off my life – stooks filled the fields when I was a boy.”

Despite the romantic feelings the scene is capable of conjuring, it’s physically demanding work and involves mindless, repetitive tasks. Though only in the field for three weeks, Dominic’s four stokers are keen to leave ground level to return to

the height of a thatched roof. They work a series of 14-hour days during harvest, when tempers can be lost – in no place is the phrase ‘the last straw’ so apt.

As well as being labour-intensive, cutting and binding the wheat this way requires technical know-how. Pete’s practical abilities are highly prized. The numerous large stones that dot the flint-prone Suffolk soil regularly halt progress, or there’ll be a rogue piece of string that tangles in the knotter, which he quickly re-threads as if it were cotton in a sewing machine. And as the model is out of production, he scours auctions and farm sales for spare parts. Wearing a straw hat, he tilts his head at an angle, on the lookout for variations in the soil height. “It’s taken me three years to master this,” he grins, with a steady hand on the levers that raise and lower the cutters so they don’t dig into the ground.

Once the harvest is complete, the 40 tonnes of straw are lifted for ‘carting’, when the team swells to eight. Every sheaf is gathered by hand and carried onto a trailer in dry weather – if it rains, the stooks have to be left to dry out. While some men collect the sheaves, others build stacks – a demanding skill that must guard the valuable roofing material

against weather damage. Next, the field will be ploughed and seed sown at the end of October. When the straw dries out fully, by around Christmas time, it is ready for threshing – the process that separates the stem from the head. The grain is paid to the landowner as part of Dominic’s rent; he and his apprentice will use the straw on the three full roofs (taking two months each), five ridges and other conservation jobs the following year.

With around 3,000 thatched properties in East Anglia alone, there is plenty of restoration work to carry out, but Dominic is also keen to reinstate the use of this traditional, versatile roofing material and is passionate about promoting its use on new builds – a practice that is little-observed in Britain, but one that he has admired in Holland. Although it’s not as if this craftsman is in need of more work: his diary for 2012 is filling up fast. “I’m booked up to 12 months in advance, not simply due to high demand, but by design – because I see the crop from seed to roof I need to know how much to sow in my wheat fields this autumn.” 🐦
Dominic Meek, master thatcher (01728 638048; dmthatching.co.uk) is available to carry out restoration and conservation work across the UK

ABOVE LEFT AND RIGHT Thatching materials vary according to region. Dominic uses reed rather than wheat on this cottage, a material traditionally found close to wetland, while long straw is typical of mid-Suffolk where it was once a byproduct of wheat farming