

SCOTLAND'S THATCHED BUILDINGS INTRODUCTORY DESIGNATIONS REPORT 2018



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CONTENTS

I	PROJECT BACKGROUND	2
1.1	Report Summary	2
1.2	Methodology	2
1.3	Thatch and Listing	3
1.4	Scoping	3
1.5	Location of Listed Thatched Buildings in Scotland.....	5
2	HISTORICAL BACKGROUND TO THATCHED BUILDINGS IN SCOTLAND	6
2.1	Before the Eighteenth Century	6
2.2	Eighteenth Century	8
2.3	Nineteenth Century	11
2.4	Twentieth Century	15
2.5	Late Twentieth Century to the Present Day.....	18
3	REGIONAL VARIATIONS OF THATCHED BUILDINGS IN SCOTLAND	21
3.1	Highlands and Islands	21
3.1.1	<i>Orkney, Shetland and Caithness</i>	22
3.1.2	<i>Mainland Highlands</i>	24
3.1.3	<i>Skye</i>	25
3.1.4	<i>Na h-Eileanan Siar and Argyll and Bute</i>	27
3.2	Central, Southern and Eastern Scotland	29
4	REFERENCES AND FURTHER SOURCES OF INFORMATION.....	33
5	GLOSSARY	35

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Cover Image: 11 Rhughasinish, South Uist (LB18740) © Historic Environment Scotland

I PROJECT BACKGROUND

1.1 Report Summary

The purpose of this report is to inform the designations review of over 300 buildings in Scotland which are thatched or are recorded as having had been thatched. 236 of these buildings are currently listed (2018).

A survey undertaken in 2014-15 by the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB), supported by Historic Environment Scotland, identified the surviving thatched buildings in Scotland. The survey has brought into focus the variety of traditional thatched buildings and also tells us about how thatched buildings have changed over time.

A designation review will ensure that the best of our thatched buildings are recognised and protected as listed buildings. The review will provide a greater understanding of these traditional buildings and allow us to update our listed building records. This will help owners manage change to their buildings.

1.2 Methodology

The Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) (Scotland) Act 1997 allows Historic Environment Scotland to compile, approve and publish a list of buildings of special architectural or historic interest.

We are reviewing traditional thatched buildings that are currently listed as well as assessing those which may meet the criteria for listing. We will not be considering buildings that are not deemed to be traditional thatch buildings. We will also not be reviewing the thatched buildings in Fortingall Conservation Area (Perth and Kinross), as we consider these properties would be most appropriately assessed as part of a designations review of Fortingall itself.

To assess the special architectural or historic interest of around 300 buildings (listed and unlisted) we initially carried out a desk based review.

The SPAB survey has been the primary source of information for scoping the designations review. The data compiled by SPAB was gathered by carrying out fieldwork between 2014 and 2015, which identified and recorded the condition of the thatched roof and the buildings. In most cases only the exterior of the buildings was seen. The SPAB data was cross-referenced with Historic Environment Scotland's listed building data. Reference was also made to Canmore and records held in the National Record of the Historic Environment.

Following the initial sift of eligible buildings, the designation review will involve site visits (where required) and research. Historic Environment Scotland will update the listed building records and consider if a change of category is required in recognition of the rarity of this building type and their national importance. In some cases, we may decide that it is appropriate to remove the listing. We will consult on any proposed changes with local authorities and with owners, occupiers and tenants where possible. We will consider comments made to us in consultation before we make a final decision about changes to the list.

The project is being carried out in two phases, beginning in 2017 and finishing in 2019.

1.3 Thatch and Listing

236 buildings which have thatch or are known to have been thatched are currently listed. The majority of these buildings were listed during area surveys in the 1970s and 1980s.

All buildings considered for listing are assessed against criteria published in the [Historic Environment Scotland Policy Statement June 2016](#). The criteria are broadly: age and rarity, architectural or historic interest and close historical association.

In considering thatched buildings for listing the retention of thatching material as a roof covering may form part of the interest for listing but may not be the only reason why these buildings are listed. Buildings which are thatched are often traditionally built and reflect pre-industrial construction methods and materials. They may also be of further interest if the building is part of a group of thatched buildings. The interior of these buildings was often simple and where buildings have been refurbished historic features may no longer survive. The survival of historic interior features is rare and will be taken into account in any assessment. Following their assessment against the listing criteria the buildings must be considered of special architectural or historic interest to qualify for listing.

1.4 Scoping

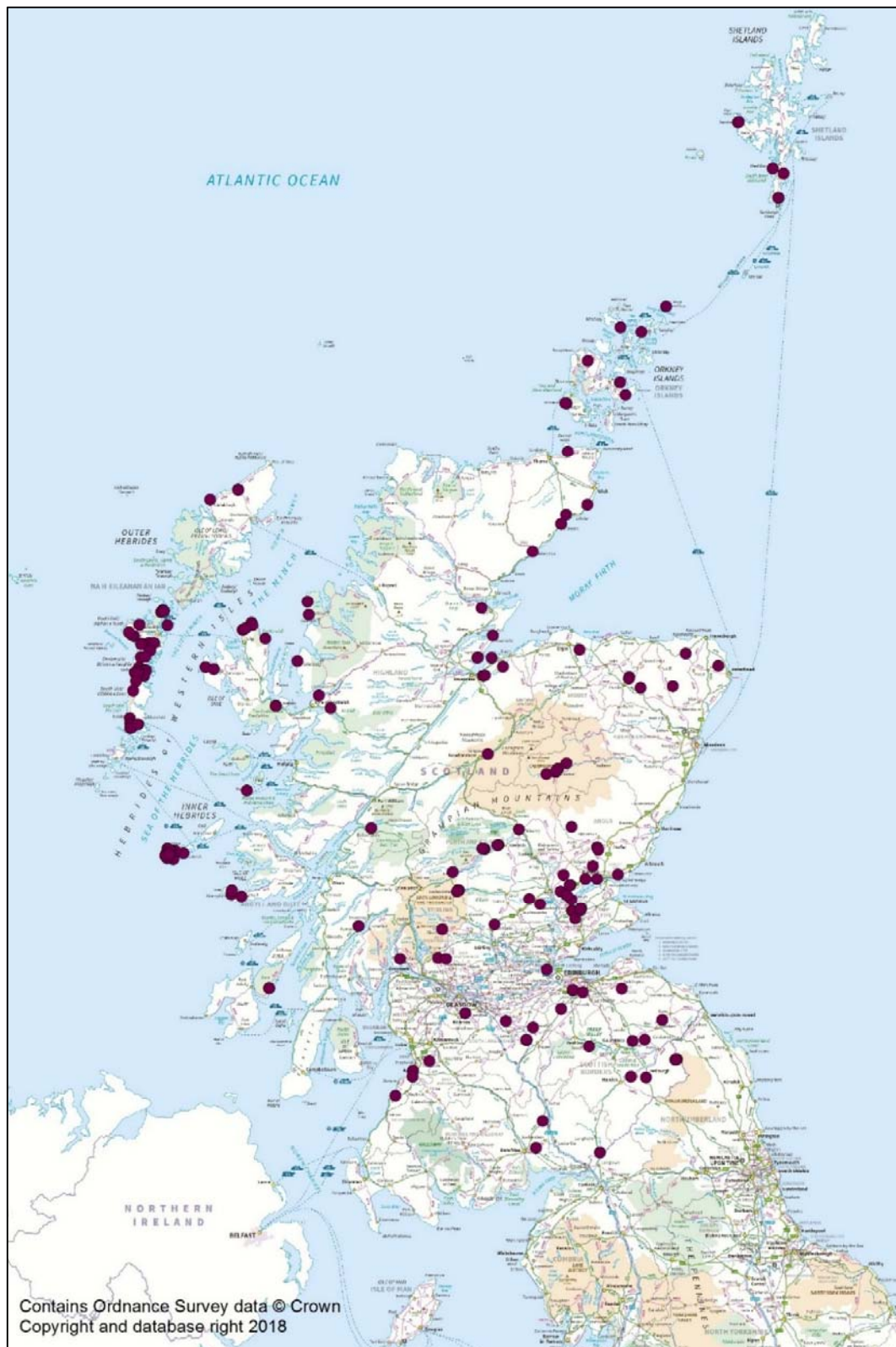
The SPAB Survey has recorded a total of **306** buildings which have thatch or are known to have been thatched. **236** of these are listed. The following table shows the regional spread of thatched buildings in local authority areas. There are generally small concentrations of thatched buildings across Scotland and there are ten local authority areas with none recorded. Of the city councils, only Edinburgh is recorded as having any thatched buildings. A higher number are found in predominantly rural council areas such as Argyll and Bute, Highland, Perth and Kinross, with the largest number found in the Na h-Eileanan Siar, where **80** were recorded by SPAB.

Thatched Buildings in Scotland (HES)*

Local Authority	Thatched buildings in SPAB survey	Listed thatched buildings	% of listed thatched buildings
Aberdeen	0	0	0.0%
Aberdeenshire	12	11	4.7%
Angus	5	5	2.1%
Argyll and Bute	34	33	14.0%
Clackmannanshire	0	0	0.0%
Dumfries and Galloway	3	3	1.3%
Dundee	1	1	0.4%
East Ayrshire	1	0	0.0%
East Dunbartonshire	0	0	0.0%
East Lothian	2	1	0.4%
East Renfrewshire	0	0	0.0%
Edinburgh	6	5	2.1%
Falkirk	0	0	0.0%
Fife	18	16	6.8%
Glasgow	0	0	0.0%
Highland	53	32	13.6%
Inverclyde	0	0	0.0%
Midlothian	2	2	0.8%
Moray	1	1	0.4%
Na h-Eileanan Siar	80	51	21.6%
North Ayrshire	3	0	0.0%
North Lanarkshire	0	0	0.0%
Orkney Islands	9	9	3.8%
Perth and Kinross	31	28	11.9%
Renfrewshire	0	0	0.0%
Scottish Borders	11	11	4.7%
Shetland Islands	7	7	3.0%
South Ayrshire	9	3	1.3%
South Lanarkshire	8	8	3.4%
Stirling	9	8	3.4%
West Dunbartonshire	0	0	0.0%
West Lothian	1	1	0.4%
Total	306	236	

*The information provided in the table was correct at April 2018.

1.5 Location of Listed Thatched Buildings in Scotland



2 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND TO THATCHED BUILDINGS IN SCOTLAND

2.1 Before the Eighteenth Century

Thatch is widely considered to be one of the most ancient building skills still practised today.¹ Thatch as a roofing material in Scotland can be traced back to prehistoric times. Archaeological excavations have uncovered evidence for Bronze Age houses with low stone walls built up with turf or soil, and a timber roof framework usually supporting straw or heather thatch.²

The use of thatch for roofing houses has a long tradition in Scotland and in some rural areas heather, straw, reed, marram grass and other types of thatch remained the most common domestic roofing materials until the end of the 19th century.

The method of thatching buildings was a distinctly localised practice. Techniques and visual appearance varied from place to place and were based around climatic conditions and what materials were at hand. Materials were usually gathered from as close to the site of the building as possible. In most communities thatching was thought of as a family or community activity with skills passed down from generation to generation.



Moncreif House, High Street, Falkland, dated 1610 (LB31274)

¹ B. Walker. C. McGregor. G. Stark, *TAN 4 Thatch and Thatching Techniques: A guide to conserving Scottish thatching traditions*, (Edinburgh, 1996), p.1

² J. McIntosh, *Handbook to Life in Prehistoric Europe* (USA, 2006), p.137

The earliest documentary records in Scotland in which thatch is specifically named as a roof material are found in various burgh by-laws banning or regulating its use due to the risk of fire. These records tend to date from the 17th century onwards.³ The ban on the use of thatch in Edinburgh, for example, was enforced in 1621.⁴ Following these regulations thatch disappeared from some of the larger burghs and towns in the 17th century.

The replacement of thatch roofs with stone slates or tiles began gradually from the mid-17th century. However, the use of thatch particularly on the single-storey croft house or cottage, remained the mainstay of 17th - 19th century rural settlements in Scotland.

³ Walker. McGregor. Stark, *TAN 4*, p.1

⁴ S. Marshall. *Urban Coding and Planning*, (2011) p.34

2.2 Eighteenth Century

During the 18th century traditional farming practices were gradually replaced in an agricultural revolution as significant for the rural economy as the industrial revolution was for urban development. The result of this improvement was full-scale estate clearances which started in the mid-18th century and continued into the 19th century, contributing to a dramatic change to crofting and the rural landscape. Land and settlement patterns were comprehensively reorganised. The political background of the Jacobite Rebellions during the 18th century also had a considerable effect on traditional ways of life.

The agricultural improvements led to the decline of the tradition of communal land tenure based on the runrig system from the mid-18th century. Up until this period crofting settlements had been run on this modified kinship system where land was periodically reallocated so that each person had a share. Most occupants were sub-tenants of the tacksman, who held their land directly from the proprietor. These settlements were most common in the Highlands and Islands.

From the mid-18th to mid-19th century the majority of Scotland's runrig system townships were improved out of existence and numerous clusters of traditional thatched houses were swept away.⁵ In some places they were replaced by improvement style farms, in others they were divided into fixed lots or crofts, small individual tenancies, upon which the crofter would be able to build their house. As a result of this, the continued occupation or reuse of 18th century township buildings is very rare. The township at Auchindrain is one of the few to survive in use into the 20th century, the last people to occupy it moving away in 1967.⁶ While this period of social and economic revolution saw the disruption of settlement patterns, in the Highlands and Islands there was a relative lack of change to the building techniques and thatch continued to be used.

⁵ D. Maudlin, *The Highland House Transformed: Architecture and Identity on the Edge of Britain 1700-1850* (Dundee, 2009), p 1

⁶ <http://www.auchindrain.org.uk/about-auchindrain/>



Ordnance Survey 1st Edition, surveyed 1871-2, published 1875 © Courtesy of the Trustees of the National Library of Scotland

Across Scotland, the spirit of improvement that began in the 18th century also led to the expansion of towns and the establishment of new planned villages. In these instances the new buildings, reflecting new and improved ways, were more likely to be roofed in slate or pantiles rather than thatch. However, outside of the larger towns and burghs and in most rural areas, smaller houses and buildings associated with agriculture would continue to be thatched well into the 19th century.

The mid to late 18th century saw thatch being considered for the first time as a decorative, rather than simply a practical, roofing material. As part of a new interest in Romanticism (in architecture a romanticised view of building traditions of the past), thatch was used for its rustic appearance and picturesque qualities as the roofing material for summerhouses, cottages and follies in the gardens of large estates. An example of this is the 'Rustick Hut', built with a thatched roof in the ground of the Newhall House estate in Penicuik (LB14647) in the late 18th century. Robert Adam designed a number of structures with thatched roofs although few of these were ever built.⁷ At Barony House, Midlothian (LB7398) a thatched wing was added in the cottage orné style around 1781 by John Clerk.

⁷ R. White, *The Cottage Ornés: The Charms of the Simple Life* (London, 2017), pp 147-148.



Rustick Hut (above Habbie's Howe), Newhall House, Penicuik, late 18th century (LB14647)



Barony House, (formerly Lasswade Cottage) Lasswade Midlothian, around 1781

2.3 Nineteenth Century

The agricultural revolution of the late 18th and 19th centuries permanently altered the rural landscape and settlement pattern in Scotland.

The beginning of the 19th century saw the establishment of the crofting system of tenure. Although this saw the abandonment or clearing away of many existing settlements, the tradition of thatching continued in this area as new cottages or croft houses were built.

Landowners did make attempts, however, to encourage improvements to their property through estate policies or legislation. In the 1830s Lord Seaforth instructed his tenants on Lewis to erect partition walls in their houses to separate themselves from the animals in the byre.⁸ In some cases the improvement of cottages discouraged the use of thatch, as it was perceived as wasteful and damaging to the environment. Landowners encouraged the use of slate for roofs, as thatching material could be used as feed for cattle.⁹ Other interventions by the landlords to prevent the thatching of houses was to place a ban on the cutting of divots for the underlay of thatched roofs by claiming that doing so damaged the land.

Regulations by estate owners gave impetus for crofters to make alterations to structures on their lots. However, up until the passing of the Crofters Holdings (Scotland) Act in 1886 crofters had no right of tenure. This meant that the landowner was entitled to terminate the crofter's tenancy at the end of any year and take back the land, including any buildings and other improvements that might have been made on the croft without providing any compensation. The 1886 Act gave crofters security of land tenure. As a result crofters were much more likely to invest in improvements to their croft through additions and new structures. In some cases this improvement and modernisation would have included the removal of thatch roofs.

It was common in many crofting communities in the 19th century to alter, move and rebuild houses on crofts and few buildings were lived in for more than 50 years.¹⁰ As a result of this structures surviving relatively unaltered from before the mid-19th century are rare. This can be seen in the aerial photograph of Arnol on Lewis with the characteristic thin strips of croft land and remains of generations of cottages and outbuildings.

⁸ T. G. Holden, *Research Report: The Blackhouses of Arnol* (Edinburgh, 2004) pp.11- 21

⁹ TCGP, *Winds of Change*, p.10

¹⁰ Holden, *Research Report: The Blackhouses of Arnol*, p. 1



Oblique aerial view of Arnol, Lewis © HES (John Dewar Collection)

While the crofting tradition is reported to have had its heyday in some areas of the Highlands and Islands around 1890, and thatched buildings remained common, the situation by the end of the 19th century in central, southern and eastern Scotland had changed and the use of thatch was becoming increasingly rare.¹¹ Evidence of the decline in the use of thatch across central, southern and eastern Scotland in the 19th century can be seen in contrasting depictions of the town of Jedburgh in the Scottish Borders from the beginning and end of the century. In a painting of the village from 1800 by Thomas Girtin almost the entire village is roofed in thatch. By 1890, a photograph of the village shows a group of thatched buildings remaining on the High Street but slate roofs were now the majority.

¹¹ Ibid, p 19.



The Village of Jedburgh, Roxburgh, 1800, Thomas Girtin © National Galleries Scotland



View of street in Jedburgh, titled: 'The town head' c. 1890 © HES

The improvement in transport during the 19th century, with the introduction of railways making the transport of materials to formerly rural areas cheaper and more accessible, had a significant impact on the use of thatch. In some places this led to the mixing of skills and styles between regions with thatchers serving wider areas. By the end of the 19th century in central, southern and eastern Scotland the majority of buildings were no longer thatched. The tradition endured in this region in some towns and rural areas possibly due to the availability of skilled thatchers or a preference for the style.

Just as the tradition of thatching was disappearing in all but the most rural areas of Scotland the use of thatch saw a revival in the late 19th century as part of the Arts and Crafts movement. The Arts and Crafts Movement celebrated traditional craftsmanship, simple forms and promoted an anti-industrial approach to design and manufacturing. In Perthshire, central and southern Scotland a range of Arts and Crafts style houses and cottages were built with thatched roofs. Non-traditional thatching materials were used, often in a style more closely associated with the thatched traditions in England. For example, the use of angled thatch forming an overhang at the skews was not a common detail in Scotland because of its vulnerability to wind damage. Although this style celebrated the simple materials and craftsmanship of traditional thatch, the Arts and Crafts houses did not attempt to recreate local thatched building traditions in either form or scale.



Norman Cottage, Mellerstain Policies, late 19th century (LB2125)



Menzies View and Mr Todd Kirkton Cottage, Fortingall, 1889 (LB12295)

2.4 Twentieth Century

While the practice had started to recede, traditional thatched buildings were still being built in the Highlands and Islands, and in a few sparse rural communities on the mainland up until the Second World War in much the same way as they were always built.

During the 20th century, improved communications and transport links to remote areas in Scotland allowed for the introduction of alternative and cheaper roofing materials and this led to some change in local building traditions. For example, in the north and Na h-Eileanan Siar the use of heather or straw rope, made by hand to secure the thatch was replaced with coir (rope made from a fibre extracted the husk of a coconut). Other imported materials such as chicken-wire netting became popular.¹²



People thatching on Eriskay, South Uist in the 1930s-1940s © National Museums Scotland. Licensor www.scran.ac.uk.

Thatching was a labour intensive activity and a skill which was gradually declining. Many communities began to experiment with new materials. The most popular alternative, in Tiree particularly, was the use of felt over wooden sarking which was tarred annually. The removal of the thatch allowed the occupants to insert small windows into the roof space and gave them a more habitable upper-floor. By the beginning of the 20th century huge numbers of thatched buildings in Na h-Eileanan Siar had been converted to have tarred roofs.

¹² Walker. McGregor. Stark, *TAN 4 Thatch and Thatching Techniques* p.5

Elsewhere in Scotland many of the remaining thatched roofs were gradually replaced with slates and tiles.

In some cases where roofs were covered by other materials such as corrugated iron the thatch survives underneath. Sunnybrae Cottage, Pitlochry (LB39866), Cruck Cottage, Fingask Drive, Kirkhill (LB52377) and Moirlanich Longhouse, Killin (LB8263) are examples where thatch survives today under later corrugated iron roofs and they are very important for the evidence they provide of earlier techniques and materials.

In parts of mainland Scotland the use of thatch saw a revival in a series of late Arts and Crafts style houses in the 1930s. The thatch was used to cover large villas such as Drumwhirn in Stirling. In the same way as the Arts and Crafts houses of the turn of the century the thatching style of these buildings did not attempt to imitate local traditions.



Drumwhirn, Stirling, (LB48267)

After the Second World War the decline of the tradition of thatched buildings accelerated across Scotland. Improved communications, cheaper more efficient building materials, higher general standards of living as well as the loss of skilled workers came very close to ending the tradition of thatching. As owners of thatched buildings moved to modern houses

thatched buildings were often abandoned or converted to stores or animal shelters.



Photo showing a Boeing B-17E Fortress IIA of 220 Squadron RAF coming in to land at Benbecula airfield over a traditional croft in 1943 © Imperial War Museum. Licensor www.scran.ac.uk.

2.5 Late Twentieth Century to the Present Day

The importance of thatched buildings to the social, cultural and economic history of Scotland was recognised in the later 20th century as examples of traditional thatched buildings were taken in to the care of national heritage bodies. The Blackhouse at number 42 Arnol, Lewis was taken into the care of Scottish Ministers by Historic Environment Scotland's predecessor in 1962 and The National Trust for Scotland acquired the traditional thatched buildings Moirlanch Longhouse in Glen Lochay, Killin in 1992 and Cottown Old Schoolhouse in Old Madoes, Perth in 1993. These acquisitions, among others, showed the concern for the rapid disappearance of these types of buildings and the resulting loss of knowledge about the history and development of the thatching tradition.

In the late 20th century some new thatched buildings were built in order to recreate historic structures for the purposes of education and experimental archaeology. The Crannog Centre on Loch Tay was built in 1996 as an attempt to recreate an Iron Age Crannog (a type of ancient loch dwelling found throughout Scotland and Ireland) based on the archaeological evidence of a site at Oakbank. As no evidence of a roof has been found at the Oakbank site, the thatched roof at the Crannog Centre is a key part of the experiment and the investigation of how this material might have been used historically.

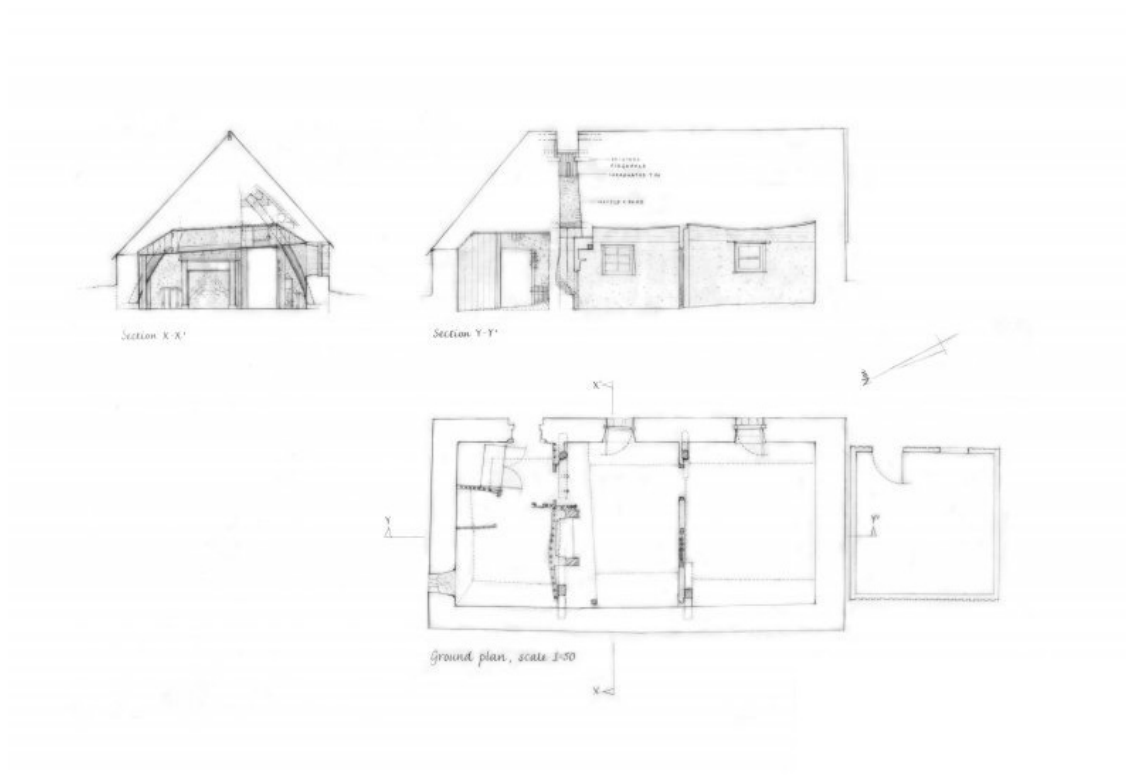


The Scottish Crannog Centre, Aberfeldy, Perth and Kinross

During the listing surveys of the 1970s and 1980s a number of buildings with surviving thatched roofs were listed for their special architectural or historic interest. The survey carried out by SPAB in 2014 and 2015 illustrates the extent of loss of thatched buildings since the 1980s as a number of buildings recorded as being thatched at the time of listing no longer have a thatched roof. Of the 236 thatched building in Scotland that are currently listed 22.5% of these are on the [Buildings at Risk Register for Scotland](#). In some cases the thatch has been replaced by corrugated iron or other materials and the buildings are still intact. Once the most common roofing material in Scotland, today thatch is known to survive on just over 200 buildings.

In assessing buildings for listing the retention of thatch, as a now rare roofing material, is one of a number of factors taken into account in determining special architectural or historic interest. Many thatched buildings in Scotland were historically single storey cottages or croft houses. The survival of this building type into the 21st century is now extremely rare and those which retain authentic materials, traditional plan forms, construction techniques and interiors may be of special interest in listing terms.

Detailed survey drawings of Cruck Cottage, Fingask Drive, Kirkhill (LB52377) in the Highlands undertaken by HES in 2016 depict a number of features which are notable in terms of the building's special architectural and historic interest. Within this seemingly modest building, there is the retention of the plan form and traditional construction methods such as the cruck-framed roof and 18th century interior fabric. These features are rare survivals and are significant for what they can tell us about building techniques and past ways of life.



Kirkhill, Fingask Drive, Cruck-framed cottage, later 18th century (LB52377), Plan and sections © Crown Copyright: HES

While authenticity of material can be an important factor in assessing the significance of thatched buildings, buildings which have been repaired over time (perhaps with new roofing material or rethatched) can also be listed. The retention of the overall traditional character of vernacular buildings is therefore important in determining their special architectural or historic interest.

The building's setting, and its possible relationship to a group of buildings, will also be a factor in its assessment. The existence of a thatched building within a rural setting or within a group such as a farming settlement can illustrate its historical function and may also be an important factor in considering the special interest of these buildings. In some cases thatched buildings may also have a close historical association with people or events of national significance such as Burns Cottage in Alloway built in 1757, (LB21476) which is the birthplace of the poet Robert Burns.

3 REGIONAL VARIATIONS OF THATCHED BUILDINGS IN SCOTLAND

This section looks at the surviving thatched buildings and notes regional variations in the style and techniques of thatching traditions. A division is made between thatched buildings found in the Highlands and Islands and the central, southern and eastern regions of mainland Scotland.

Across the whole of Scotland the majority of remaining thatched buildings are single storey cottages. Other common building types associated with thatch are outhouses and byres. Thatch is generally only found to survive on larger buildings of two storeys or more in those late 19th and early 20th century examples of Arts and Crafts houses. There are exceptions from the 17th and 18th century such as Moncreif House in Falkland (LB31274) and 165-173 High Street in Newburgh (LB38530).

3.1 Highlands and Islands

This region broadly covers the current local authorities of Argyll and Bute, Na h-Eileanan Siar, Highlands, Orkney Islands and Shetland Islands. Together these account for 56.1 % of all remaining thatched buildings in Scotland.

While there is a large number of variations in thatched buildings in this region, it shares a geographical and historical context that has shaped how the buildings have developed and survive to this day.

The historical settlement patterns and way of life in this region were greatly affected by the agricultural revolution of the 18th and 19th centuries. However, the tradition of thatching survived for much longer in this region than the rest of Scotland and thatched buildings continued to be built here well into the 20th century. This was in many ways due to the establishment of the crofting system of tenure in the early 19th century which is still in place today.

The exposed location and harsher weather conditions of this area have also had an impact on the way the thatched tradition developed. This can be seen in the building profiles and thatch fixing mechanisms developed for the buildings.

3.1.1 *Orkney, Shetland and Caithness*

The thatched buildings in this area, like many others across Scotland are usually single storey and low profile dwellings, made up of two or three rooms. The walls tend to be of undressed stone, usually using whatever stone was available locally. In some cases, on the mainland, walls have been lime-washed. Unlike the thatched building types of Na h-Eileanan Siar, the buildings here have stone gable-ends with masonry skews and chimneys.

The roofs are traditionally thatched with oat straw, with a turf underlay. The thatch material was traditionally secured with an intricate sub-stratum pattern of ropes, historically made of heather spaced very close together called 'simmens'. In Shetland and Orkney the traditional thatched roof was given the name 'needled roofs' on account of the close spacing of the simmens which varied from four to six inches.¹³ The straw ropes were locally referred to as 'ovi'.¹⁴ The last known example of this type of roof was removed in the 1960s.¹⁵ Many ropes were replaced with net or chicken-wire during the 1930s.

The low, curved form of the roof seen at Burnmouth Hostel, Hoy on Orkney (LB46375) allows the wind to travel over the roof easily. This reduces the noise inside the building as well as potential damage to the roof structure. This feature can also be seen in the northwest Highlands and Na h-Eileanan Siar.

An abundance of available sandstone flagstones have been used, in Orkney especially, as a lapped and seamed sub-stratum for thatch, or as a means to secure it.¹⁶ In many examples across the region a flagstone is tied to the net or ropes across the roof and neatly weights the thatch at the eaves. This can be seen at Shetland Crofthouse Museum (LB5413). Examples of this vary from large slabs to thin strips. The thatching material never overhangs the eaves, as high winds and exposure risk removing it from the roof.¹⁷

¹³ Walker. McGregor. Stark. *TAN 4 Thatch and Thatching Techniques*, pp.21

¹⁴ <http://thatchinginfo.com/thatching-on-the-shetland-islands/> (accessed on 20th May 2017)

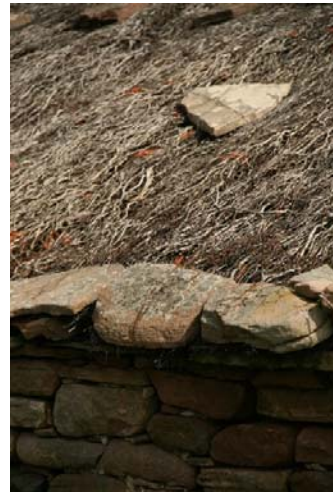
¹⁵ *Ibid*

¹⁶ Walker. McGregor. Stark. *TAN 4*, p.23

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p.54



Burnmouth Hostel, Hoy, Orkney Islands, (LB46375)



Burnmouth Hostel



Laidhay Croft Museum, Dunbeath, Highlands, (LB7951)



Laidhay Croft Museum



Shetland Crofthouse Museum, Dunrossness, Shetland Islands, (LB5413)



Shetland Crofthouse Museum

3.1.2 Mainland Highlands

The style of thatched buildings on mainland Highland share a great deal of similarities with those of Na h-Eileanan Siar, however, they have a higher proportion of buildings with gable ends. The variety of methods used to secure the thatch in this area can still be seen today. There are examples of the raip and scob technique where lines of rope or twine were fixed at regular intervals with a 'scob' (a twig of willow or hazel bent over in the form of a staple)¹⁸ used to fasten down the thatch. There are some examples of hybrid thatches where a combination of ropes and secret fixings have been used for extra security against the weather.

The traditional thatching material in this region was locally available heather or oat straw. It was common for the ridges of roof structures to be secured with turf. Turf was also used as the underlay for the thatch. The thatch regularly overhangs the eaves. The use of heather gives the roof a 'bushy' appearance such as at Old Leanach Farmhouse, Culloden Battlefield (LB1712).

The presence of external fixings to hold the thatch in place is rare. Compared to Na h-Eileanan Siar the weather conditions here are more favourable, as a result the need for heavy ropes and weights to secure the thatch is rarely necessary. There are often masonry or stone chimneys, usually at the gable ends. Unlike other thatched and gabled dwellings, the buildings here tend to be thatched over the skews.



Old Leanach Farmhouse, Culloden Moor, Highlands, (LB1712)



Lonbain cottage, Highlands, (LB427)

¹⁸ Walker. McGregor. Stark. *TAN 4 Thatch and Thatching Techniques*, p. 58

3.1.3 Skye

The thatched buildings of Skye share many features in common with the northwest Highlands and Na h-Eileanan Siar.

The typical plan is usually two rooms with a door at the centre, the kitchen is located on one side and a room on the other big enough to accommodate a bed. A fireplace is often situated at either end of the dwelling.¹⁹ The location of the hearth at the end of the building is one of the first differences between the Skye-type and the traditional blackhouse as seen on Lewis. In the blackhouse the hearth was located centrally, the smoke dissipating through the thatch material. In Skye the use of masonry chimneys or timber lums built into the roof structure as at 2 Luib, Isle of Skye (LB13996) are common.

The distinctive external features of a traditional thatched building in this region is the piended roof. The traditional thatching material in this area is moor or deer grass, but sometimes rushes and straw are used.²⁰

The thatching material is traditionally fixed using a lattice of ropes, often made out of straw or heather, being replaced with coir rope imported during the early 1900s. Gradually ropes began to be replaced by nets or chicken-wire in the 20th century. On buildings where a chimney or timber-lum is present the rope or net is brought around the opening to secure the thatch. The rope or net is secured using weights, usually stones which hang below the eaves. The major difference between this and the blackhouse type on Lewis for example is the lack of exposed wallhead, and that the thatch is allowed to overhang the eaves with the weights hanging just on, or below the top of the wallhead.

The appearance of the Skye-type on North and South Uist and Mull is likely to date back to the 19th century where crofting communities would move between islands in search of land. They would have brought with them their own local traditions which may have been taken up by existing crofting communities.

¹⁹ Sinclair. *Thatched Houses of the Old Highlands*, pp.33

²⁰ *Ibid*, p.36



2 Luib, Isle of Skye, Highlands, (LB13996)



2 Luib



Boreray Cottage, Isle of North Uist, Na h-Eileanan Siar



Boreray Cottage



Colbost Croft Museum, Skye, (LB496)



Colbost Croft Museum,
Skye

3.1.4 *Na h-Eileanan Siar and Argyll and Bute*

The typical plan of a Hebridean thatched house, or 'blackhouse' as they are commonly known, is a long, narrow-bodied oblong structure usually divided into three compartments. These compartments consist of a byre at one end, the main house compartment at the centre and a bedroom at the other side. Over time a step or slope was installed between the living areas and the byre to prevent the transfer of waste from the livestock. They were usually a double-skinned rubble structure with an infill of earth or sand.

A prominent external feature in this region are the thick grassed wallheads, traditionally used not only as added insulation from the elements, but also to make access to the roof for thatching easier. This feature can be seen at the blackhouse, 42 Arnol, Isle of Lewis (SM90022). The top of the wallheads would at one stage have been sealed with blue-clay and turf, however most existing examples, especially those on Tiree, have been topped with concrete in the last century.²¹

In this region buildings are often subjected to gale and even hurricane force winds and as a result the buildings usually sit low to the ground. As a general rule sharp angles are avoided at the roof ridges. The exposed wallheads also have the added effect of acting as wind spoilers which deflect the wind and prevent it from lifting up the thatch at the eaves.

One of the most prominent features of the thatched building type here is the methods by which the thatch is fixed. Like many other exposed regions of Scotland a complex pattern of ropes, or more recently nets or chicken-wire, are used to secure the thatch. A series of stones are suspended just above the eaves, either tied into the ropes or hung from the netting using wire. The weights are sourced from whatever is washed up around the coastline or freely available from the land such as the bricks now used at Pierview Cottage, Tiree (LB17844).²² Many roofs in this area were thatched over crook and caber roof structures. To ensure the thatch was secured at the edge of the roof, the central caber would project through the thatch at the apex. This thatching stick, or crow-stick as it later became known, was used to loop rope around in order to secure the thatch.

The traditional roof in this region is typically thatched in oat straw. Over time a wider variety of materials has been used for thatch, such as marram grass which is common on Tiree, and more recently reeds and rushes. The thatch is usually randomly applied in the laid-on style, particularly on the older examples seen on Lewis. The underlay is usually turf divots taken from the surrounding land.

²¹ Sinclair. *Thatched Houses of the Old Highlands*, p.19

²² Walker. McGregor. Stark, *TAN 4*, p. 20



The Blackhouse, 42 Arnol, Isle of Lewis, Na h-Eileanan Siar, (SM90022)



The Blackhouse



3 Kilmolaig, Isle of Tiree, Argyll and Bute, (LB17857)



3 Kilmolaig



Pierview Cottage, Isle of Tiree, Argyll and Bute, (LB17844)



Pierview Cottage

3.2 Central, Southern and Eastern Scotland

This region of Scotland also has a history of diverse local thatching techniques. The industrial and agricultural revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries transformed areas of this region in a very short period of time and as a result relatively few thatch buildings survive. Almost none are known to survive in large towns or cities.

The central, southern and eastern region of Scotland is also the location of the majority of buildings where thatch was used for decorative purposes as part of the Romanticism movement in the late 18th century and the Arts and Crafts movement from the late 19th century.

With the significant shift of people to towns and cities and improvements in transport and communication this region experienced a variety of thatching techniques and traditions. For example, the Brough family, a well-known thatching family operating out of Fife tendered much of their work in this region. They are most well-known for the re-thatching of Swanston village on the outskirts of Edinburgh in the late 1950s.

This region of Scotland is fairly well protected from the extreme weather prevailing in the Highlands and Islands. Consequently thatched roofs did not require heavy duty fixings to keep the thatch in place. Most thatches were pegged into position but the use of raip and scob was not uncommon, especially in Fife. Pegging involved bunches of straw being placed onto the roof in courses. One or two split wood pegs would be pushed through the holding band to secure the thatch in place. This method was usually carried out over a turfed underlay. The use of chicken-wire to keep the thatch in place became common after the 1930s as extra security against bad weather.

The traditional thatching material in this area would have been oat straw, as was often the case across Scotland. The planting of the Tay reed beds in the 18th century and the increased availability of reed as a result now means that most buildings in this region are thatched in reed.

The use of turf as a ridging material was common in the Scottish Borders and in some parts of Fife, but in Edinburgh concrete was a common choice as seen at 12 Swanston Village (LB45847). The use of turf to protect the ridge created a soft frame along the ridges and skews. In later examples the use of masonry skews became popular. In some parts of the northeast in the early 18th century the use of pantiles was adopted as an underlay for thatched roofs.²³

In Perth and Kinross timber skews have been used to contain the thatch at the gable ends and concrete to hold the thatch in place at the ridge. This feature can be seen at Glenview Cottage, Rait (LB11631). Concrete

²³ *Ibid*, p.23

ridging is found elsewhere in the Lowlands and Fife but the use of timber skewes is virtually unheard of outside of the central region.

The thatching techniques used in the southwest share many similarities with those used in Ireland, the Isle of Man and Pembrokeshire, rather than those seen elsewhere in Scotland. The ridges of the roofs are usually secured with turf, often with a clay underlay to keep the turf in place. The presence of rolled overhanging skewes in this area are common. In this case the thatching material is wrapped around the eaves of the roof and secured with heavy rope at anchor points on the gable ends. An example of this is the Cruck Cottage in Dumfries and Galloway.



Glenview Cottage, Rait, Perth and Kinross, (LB11631)



Glenview Cottage



Cottown Old Schoolhouse, St Madoes, (LB19809)



Cottown Old Schoolhouse,
St Madoes



165-173 High Street, Newburgh, Fife, (LB38530)



165-173 High Street



The Heckling Shop, North Ayrshire



The Heckling Shop, North Ayrshire



12 Swanston Village, Edinburgh, (LB45847)



12 Swanston Village



The Cruck Cottage, Torthorwald, Dumfries and Galloway, (LB17157)



The Cruck Cottage

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5 GLOSSARY

Arts & Crafts Style of design focusing on craftsmanship, material quality, use of local material, often reviving traditional form. First popularised in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Bargeboard Boards placed at the incline of a gable to hide the ends of the roof timbers, often decoratively treated.

Blackhouse A dwelling comprising byre, barn and living quarters, with walls consisting of inner and outer dry stone facings with an insulating turf core and typically no chimney.

Byre A cow shed.

Coir Rope made from a fibre extracted the husk of a coconut.

Cottage orné An artfully rustic building. A product of the Romanticism movement of the late 18th and early 19th century.

Croft A small farm or holding.

Crook A hook shaped fixing.

Crook and Caber Roof Horizontal poles laid along the surface of the roof to hold down the thatch are held in place with a crook of timber usually made by cutting branches at the fork. One side is cut short the other is left long enough to push through the thatch into the sub-strata where it is wedged tight.

Cruck Pairs of large curved timbers used as the principal framing of a house. They combine the functions of rafters and wall posts. In many parts of Scotland the crucks are made up of smaller timbers jointed and pegged to provide a continuous support, as described above.

Cruck-framed Form of vernacular roof construction in which the roof is carried on pairs of naturally curved timbers or crucks joined at the ridge and combining the functions of upright post and rafter (full crucks) or embedded into the wallhead (upper crucks).

Divot A thin flat turf, generally of an oblong form used for covering cottages and also for fuel.

Driftwood Any form of wood washed in by the tide. On the west coast of Scotland this included whole trees brought over from the Caribbean by the Gulf Stream.

Lums A smoke vent, chimney or flue.

Piended Scottish term for a hipped roof, a roof which has sloping rather than gabled ends.

Raip and Scob thatching Lines of rope or twine fixed at regular intervals with a 'scob' – a twig of willow or hazel bent over in the form of a staple and used to fasten down thatch.

Romanticism Movement of the late 18th and early 19th centuries that turned toward nature and the interior world of feeling, in opposition to the formalism and disciplined scientific inquiry of the Enlightenment era that preceded it. In architecture this movement was often associated with the revival of styles of the past.

Runrig The system of land tenure in Scotland by which an area of arable or pastureland is divided into irregular strips, each of which is then allocated by lot to a tenant on a rotation system.

Sarking Boarding or building felt fixed over the rafters of a roof before the exterior roofing material is added.

Simmons – Simmens A Cope made of heather, grass, rushes or straw used to hold down thatch on houses and stacks by being weighted with stones at the eaves. This is not a normal twisted rope, nor is it a normal plait, but a combination of the two. Fashioned by hand-twisting but using a proportion of the available straw to lock the twisted section resulting in stronger rope.

Skews The edge of a sloping roof at its junction with the gable wall. The Scottish expression for verge.

Stob thatching Stob thatching relies on a combination of weight and friction to keep the thatch in place. Small bottles or twists of straw are thrust into the existing thatch or into the sub strata using a Stob (a specifically made tool with a forked end).

Tacksman A person who holds a lease and sublets land to others. Tacksman were found mostly in the Scottish highlands from the 17th century.

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