

‘A beautiful burden’: towards a sustainable future for thatch in Ireland

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Abstract

Thatch in Ireland has been under persistent pressure for decades, principally due to its short lifespan, being vulnerable to decay in the island’s moist Atlantic climate, and the associated high maintenance costs. The unpredictable availability of thatchers and materials is also problematic, as are acute difficulties with insurance. Supposedly iconic of Ireland, the thatched house has been adversely affected by a surprisingly enduring fetishization of modernity.

The number of thatched roofs now stands at about 2,500. This figure includes about 500 recent non-vernacular buildings. The number of historic roofs extant in the Northern Ireland counties is critically low, at less than 200. Audits of thatched buildings in the Republic indicate losses of up to 40% in the last twenty years, the vast majority of them historic structures. Despite having inherent architectural, archaeological and other significance, their future role as part of the island’s living cultural landscapes is, therefore, not guaranteed. A larger number (perhaps 5,000) of further, historic, examples survive under a later covering, usually corrugated metal (‘tin’).

A viable thatching sector that serves historic and modern thatched buildings is important for the health of all thatch, as it helps to ensure a roof over the head of owners and a livelihood for the thatchers that maintain them. The severity of the challenge has necessitated an interventionist approach on the part of the state. The Government of Ireland (2021) recently published *A Living Tradition: a strategy to enhance the understanding, minding and handing on of our built vernacular heritage*. This is the first time that Ireland has engaged in a concerted campaign to nurture and promote the built vernacular heritage. Action 6 of this strategy, relating to thatch, is intended to help ensure a sustainable future for this most ancient of building materials and is the principal focus of this paper.

Keywords: Ireland, Vernacular Architecture, Thatch, Policy, Sustainability

1. Introduction

The first significant published treatment of thatch was by Mogey (1940), who described the various thatching methods, materials and pointed out the positives ('warm in winter, cool in summer') and negatives ('it is perishable and...it is highly inflammable'). In 1945, Caoimhín Ó Danachair published the results of a questionnaire survey on roofs and thatching, issued by the Irish Folklore Commission, involving a large number of informants in all parts of the island of Ireland, and also making use of the large-scale 'Schools Collection' folklore survey of 1938-9. He reported on roof shape, thatching materials, methods, terms and tools, and included distribution maps for roof shape and thatching methods.



Figure 1: Roped thatch house, Aran Islands, County Galway
Source: National Inventory of Architectural Heritage



Figure 2: Thatched house with thrust thatch roof, Mayglass, County Wexford
Source: Barry O'Reilly

The mid-1950s to mid-1960s saw a flurry of contributions: Ó Danachair⁷ published chapters on thatch in his popular works; Evans wrote a detailed account in his superlative Irish Folkways (1957); and, in the same year, Buchanan (1957a) wrote about thatching in northeastern Ireland, and on stapple thatch, a variant of the thrust thatch method (Buchanan 1957b), his work focusing on the territory of Northern Ireland. Jack Fitzsimons (1981) published a lengthy and very informative chapter in the seventh edition of his pattern book, Bungalow Blitz.⁸ Robinson's study (1985) of the transition from thatch to slate saw this process as beginning with the Plantation of Ulster in the early 1600s, with the introduction of fired-clay tiles, shingles and slate. However, throughout Ireland, tiles and shingles have disappeared from use.

Concerns about the survival of thatch were signalled as early as 1962 by Mac Aodha who wrote:

‘Is dócha nach bhfuil aon athrú eile dá bhfuil tagtha le glún nó dhó ar chultúr ábharga na tuaithe in Éirinn chomh sofheicthe leis an athrú atá tagtha ar dhíonta na dtithe... Inniu níl tuí ach ar líon an-bheag de thithe na tuaithe agus níl ach corrshampla le fáil sna sráidbhailte nó sna bailte.’ [There is possibly no greater change in the material culture of the Irish countryside in a generation or two as visible as the change that has come upon the roofs of the houses... Today thatch is only to be found on a very small number of the rural houses and only the occasional example in the villages or towns.]

Although the loss of vernacular architecture is certainly not unique to Ireland, popular attitudes continue to identify this building mode, and the thatched house in particular, with national trauma, historical memories of poverty and discomfort, callous landlord evictions of impoverished tenants, and the Great Famine of the mid-nineteenth century. More neutral is a certain sentimentality and nostalgia, though generally without any yearning to return to living in the thatched house. This emotional conflict usually resulted in the vernacular losing out. However, older houses, when not demolished, were often reused as outbuildings. Many vernacular houses in Ireland are maintained by families who, while not occupying them *per se*, may use them as somewhere for relations to stay, or simply maintain them for reasons of family pride, notwithstanding the costs of maintaining a thatched roof. More recently, some have expressed an active enthusiasm and passion. This is particularly true of owners who come from other countries and who do not attach negative associations to these buildings, often to the bemusement of local people perplexed by why someone would choose to live in what they might regard as primitive conditions.

⁷ He wrote under the anglicized version of his name for books catering for an anglophone public.

⁸ Fitzsimons' pattern books for 'bungalows' have been, perhaps unfairly, excoriated by some commentators, but he was responding to a clear need on the part of rural-dwellers, notwithstanding the fact that many of these new houses displaced older, vernacular houses.

2. The image of thatch

The perception of thatch among Irish people is well described by Ní Fhloinn (1994):

‘We must acknowledge the fact that successive generations of Irish people have chosen, and are choosing to reject the past as represented by the types of houses in which their parents lived. We must acknowledge that the reasons for this rejection are very often to do with factors such as comfort, practicality and expensive maintenance costs. As such, people are not behaving unreasonably in rejecting the old for the new, and the authorities are, to a large extent, simply reflecting the attitude of the community at large to older houses... This rejection of the old also has importance on deeper levels, touching on our collective psyche and identity, and on the way we regard ourselves.’

Jack Fitzsimons, in his polemical book, *Bungalow Bashing*, a response to critics of his popular pattern books, quotes a retired housing inspector who he credits with saying:

‘It was not long until our over-zealous environmentalists... when on holidays in the west of Ireland... started to bewail the disappearance of our Paul Henry⁹ type thatched cottage. What they want to see is a neat little cottage nestling under the blue mountains, without electricity, water or sewerage disposal. Not to live in themselves, you know, just to see’.

Fitzsimons himself suggested that:

‘the simplicity of the thatched cottage did not result from a conscious choice on the part of the originator. It was dictated by force of circumstances – in plain words by poverty. [With indigenous materials] it simply would not be possible to construct a brash building, neither would insensitive siting be achievable. In essence variation was largely a reflection of indigence in different degrees. This included such basics as size of house, composition of walls...size of windows – if any – and type of roof’.

One could well question the extent to which thatched buildings have resulted from the indigence of their owner-builders as, clearly, tradition is a major force and cannot be so cursorily dismissed. Fitzsimons also observed the higher status of thatch and thatched buildings in England, which he attributes to a sophisticated long-standing tradition as well as to the adoption of the *cottage orné* (architect-designed thatched house) as an important feature of the English country estate. As a result, this saw thatch gaining an added respectability by being ‘identified with progress and therefore very desirable’.

The challenge for thatched (and, indeed, all vernacular) buildings is to adapt them to meet modern needs or to identify less-demanding uses for them. Either way, economics will dictate that they pay their way or they fade away. Disused thatched (and other vernacular) farmhouses are frequently located in working farmyards with very little ground around them. This makes it very difficult to rent or sell the house to a new owner, unless that owner is a

⁹ Paul Henry (1877-1958) was an illustrator who became a painter when he encountered the landscapes of Achill Island, County Mayo in 1910. He went on to copiously paint landscapes in the Atlantic parts of Kerry also and, most prolifically, Connemara, County Galway. In his work he gave such prominence to the thatched house with whitewashed walls as to idealize them and their inhabitants.

relation. On the other hand, thatched houses feature prominently in the property press as very desirable places to live.

3. Problems with thatch

The basic raw materials of thatching have been adversely affected by many of the changes in farming practices, such as intensification, the use of fertilisers (especially nitrogen) which results in a weaker stalk, and reliance on a small number of cereal varieties that give a heavier grain and higher yield, but a shorter straw. Furthermore, combine harvesters cut straw too short for thatching purposes. Ideally, crops of organically-grown straw and appropriately managed reed should be subsidised by the State, at least initially. More traditional harvesting methods are needed to maximize the quality of straw and reed, and keeping reed beds free of nitrates is essential.

Acquiring suitable thatching material appears to be a perennial problem throughout Ireland. It is best when the thatcher sources the material and, thus, has control over a vital part of the thatching process and can produce an end result with which they can be happy. Reed can be used when it is not possible to get straw, but there is need to be wary about the effect of its regionally inappropriate use on historic structures (in particular) and the likelihood of it undermining the viability of straw thatching. In the case of some straw and most reed, importation from far-flung countries undermines the vernacular nature of these essential materials.

A common problem is the synchronisation, or lack of it, between the availability of the thatcher, the supply of materials and an application to, and clearance from, the State for a thatching grant (The Republic's thatch repair grant was introduced in 1990.); the weather adds a further complicating factor. The shortage of thatchers gives cause for serious concern, and the age of many of them, and the apparent lack of disciples or successors, are problematic.



Figure 3: Typical historic roof of rough boughs, set into wall tops, near Tullamore, County Offaly

Source: Barry O'Reilly



Figure 4: Underside of roof, near Killorglin, County Kerry, showing scraw (turf underthatch), with some straw showing through (in the middle of the image)

Source: Barry O'Reilly

It takes about two to three weeks to thatch a typical oaten straw roof, and about six weeks for wheat. Larger, and two-storey, buildings take longer. Labour and material costs have risen steadily over the years and the thatching grant has lost much of its value, not having increased in nearly twenty years. The grant is available for all occupied houses that are more than ten years old, and can be applied for every seven years, to cater for repairs below the scale of a full rethatch. Extending the interval between grants, while significantly increasing the value of the grant, should lead to better-quality thatching and materials and less anxiety for building owners.

The risk of conflagration in thatched houses has increased substantially in recent years, apparently due to the adoption of solid-fuel stoves by some, often newer, owners. This has caused insurance premiums to be raised very substantially for all owners of thatched buildings and, in fact, in many cases it has become impossible or unaffordable to get insurance. As a general rule, the recent reed-roofed buildings are more likely to be insured, being occupied by young couples with families, as well as commercial buildings, such as public houses. Most houses with elderly owners are not insured at all. There appears to be a lack of understanding of historic buildings, and particularly thatch, on the part of insurers: the main insurance representative body at one stage suggested that homeowners burn coal instead of turf (peat), when the reality is that coal produces much higher flue temperatures

and considerably more sparking. Interestingly, many hearth canopies in Ireland are or were of mud-plastered wattlework, and the author is aware of several blacksmiths' forges that were thatched! Unaltered vernacular chimneys are very wide structures, with large volumes of cool air entering their base, resulting in low temperature emissions at their top.

The bottom line for many prospective owners of thatched properties is the likely annual cost of maintaining and insuring a thatched roof in comparison with other roof coverings. If costs were comparable, through the operation of enhanced grant aid and an assured supply of materials and skilled thatchers, it would be likely that Ireland could retain its thatched roofs as a striking part of the landscape.

It takes a relatively short time for a roof that needs repair to become a roof beyond repair. There are several observable steps between these two stages. Occupied buildings will suffer this fate if re-thatching is long-fingered (and there may be any number of reasons for this) beyond the endurance of the roof. It is, of course, the unoccupied buildings that are likely to become ruinous: if left untended, grooving appears in the middle of the roof, around the base and sides of the chimneys, at verges (where the thatch meets gable ends) and at the ridge. Rain finds its way through, trickling through the thatch and down the walls internally and perhaps externally, showing as tar-like stains. At this stage, constant through-put of rain leads to rotting of the thatch over an increasing amount of the roof surface with a resulting cycle of wetting and partial drying of the roof timbering. The eaves overhang, essential for protecting the walls, will rot away, wall tops lose their integrity and the feet of the roof timbers rot, causing the roof structure to shift from its bearings and eventually collapse. When this happens, interior furniture and fittings will be damaged or destroyed. The outer walls will become exposed to ingress of water and tend to come apart, especially in the case of earth (in Ireland, commonly called 'mud')-walled buildings. The building eventually becomes a shell with a collapsed roof structure and rotting thatch in the interior. The remains of the roof will disappear altogether, if not removed for other purposes. Finally, the only evidence for the building having been thatched will be, apart from local knowledge, family memories and perhaps an old photograph, the setback in gable tops to accommodate the former roof structure.

4. State intervention

It was only in 1990 that the situation with thatch was recognized as a crisis. That year, O'Reilly published a graph that for the first time quantified the rate of loss of thatched roofs. The figures related to the period 1964 to 1989 for three towns north of the city of Dublin that were famed for their large number of thatched buildings. Two of the towns had lost 90% of their thatched roofs and the third had lost 85%. The town of Skerries lost, on average, one thatched roof every four months in those 25 years. In the wake of the study, a thatch repair grant was introduced by the Irish government and is still in place; the Heritage Council, a consultative body, also operated its own grants in the 1990s-2000s. On vernacular matters generally, two reports, by McClafferty (1989) and O'Reilly (1995), laid the groundwork for what should have been a concerted programme of intervention to assist the vernacular, and thatch in particular. In the late 1990s, an archaeobotanical study of 100 thatched roofs was

funded by the two jurisdictions (Letts 1997).¹⁰ At the turn of the new millennium, the Heritage Council established a discussion forum for stakeholders and issued policy papers on thatch in 1999 and 2002. One outcome of this process was the Report on the Present and Future Protection of Thatched Structures in Ireland (Consarc Conservation Architects & Mullane 2005), which identified policy and other approaches to resolving the various issues inhibiting the survival of thatch. Since then, some of its recommendations have been implemented, although more by accident than by design.

A notable tranche of work on thatch was the series of surveys carried out between 1987 and 1994 by Michael Higginbotham of the Office of Public Works, who located and inventoried the thatched houses (including public houses, but not other building types) of nine counties (eight in the east and one in the west), as well as the Aran Islands. However, the inventory never led to statutory protection. The National Inventory of Architectural Heritage, established in 1999, has increasingly recorded historic thatched buildings for protection by means of ministerial recommendations to local authorities. O'Reilly (2002) carried out the first exhaustive survey of thatch, which also resulted in the first book specifically on thatch in Ireland (O'Reilly 2004). Since then, the thatched buildings of every other county, apart from two and part of a third, has been recorded.

5. A Living Tradition

The Irish government published its first strategy for built vernacular heritage in 2021. Preparation of the document involved wide consultation with relevant stakeholders throughout Ireland, North and South, facilitated by the author's extensive engagement with the subject over many years. Consultees included colleagues (current and retired) in the government heritage departments of the two jurisdictions; the departments responsible for housing, planning, agriculture, tourism and climate change; representative bodies for archaeologists, architects, engineers, planners and surveyors; individual members of these professions; academics (especially in folk tradition); museums; farmer representative bodies; architects and architectural conservators, vernacular furniture conservators; local authority staff dealing with heritage; thatchers and other vernacular practitioners and builders; local fieldworkers; and, not least, building owners. As might be expected, some consultees were more responsive than others, and the best contributions were undoubtedly from vernacular practitioners and building owners. In addition to email and telephone communications, the author had a large number of meetings to discuss in detail the issues and possible solutions. The author's fieldwork at this period had the added benefit of feeding directly into the compilation of the strategy.

The strategy seeks to foster a more positive perception of the vernacular among practitioners and the general public, with implementation focused on the themes of 'understanding', 'minding' and 'handing on', approximately corresponding to the past, present and future. The outcome expected is a significantly enhanced policy environment, better funding for vernacular buildings and a stemming of the haemorrhaging of this key part of the historic built environment. The island's 'North-South dimension' is regarded as particularly important because both jurisdictions share the same distinctive vernacular architecture, providing an

¹⁰ Regrettably, the report was not completed or published; only a short interim report appeared.

opportunity to avoid ‘reinventing the wheel’, where initiatives or practices in one region can assist the other. There are commonalities with other parts of the Atlantic Façade, especially western parts of Britain and France.

Action 6 of the strategy sets out the Republic’s agenda for dealing with thatch, which undoubtedly presents the most difficult issues. In summary, these are: insurance, fire prevention, thatching standards, materials, and recording.

Action 6 Enhance the Protection and Conservation of Historic Thatched Roofs

One of the most persistent issues for built vernacular heritage is ensuring the survival of historic thatched roofs. The many factors involved make this a complex matter. However, the importance of such roofs, in terms of archaeology and architectural history, vernacular crafts and materials, botany and diversity, as well as their landscape values, is such that everything must be done to address the various impediments to their survival. Insurance, in particular, has proved to be a constant problem for many owners and occupants. There is also a need for consistent, authoritative advice for owners and occupants, fire services, insurers and others.

Methods	Investigate and work to resolve the urgent issue of affordability of insurance for thatched buildings; examine other relevant issues, including thatching standards, fire prevention guidance and availability of appropriate thatching materials; accelerate recording and protection; establish centralized database.
Partner	Heritage Council (in relation to insurance matters).
Involve	Building owners, insurance industry, local authorities (including fire officers), craftspeople and practitioners, grants bodies
Outcome	A resolution of the ongoing problems of insurance for buildings with historic thatched roofs, guidelines for preventing and dealing with conflagrations, and generally enhanced protection for such buildings
Follow-up	Monitoring of the various factors involved in protecting and conserving historic thatched roofs
Timescale	Year 1-2

Figure 5: Action 6 of the strategy for built vernacular heritage

Source: Government of Ireland (2021), 12

Various other actions deal with other relevant areas, such as increasing the cohort of thatchers and enhancing the knowledge of thatch and vernacular among the general public, especially building owners and the diffuse cohort of small-scale builders who carry out most of the work on vernacular buildings, much of it ‘under the radar’. Local government staff and building conservators all need upskilling to know how to deal with thatched buildings. It is important that all those involved in decision-making for thatch, especially in the awarding of grants and the inspection of buildings for this purpose, have the relevant knowledge.

It is particularly important to retain the diversity of thatching techniques, as they reflect the regional and local nature of thatching as a craft. The range of materials in historic roofs is a reminder of farming practices from earlier generations, which used cereal varieties that have now been largely displaced. These roofs may contain several (sometimes many) layers and examining them is an archaeological exercise. Roof structures may contain forms and elements that are important for the history and development of roofs and carpentry. It should be noted that many of the most intact historic thatched roofs survive under corrugated iron or other coverings. For these reasons, historic roofs in particular, whether on houses or outbuildings, deserve to be recorded and protected.

8. Implementation of the strategy in relation to thatch

Dealing with the first item, insurance, has been time-consuming and rather frustrating. As insurers are commercial companies and insurance policies are contracts between them and their customers, the state is closely circumscribed in what it can do to alleviate the problem for owners. The state's approach has been to try to establish the nature of the problem in the first instance. An extensive consultation with all known thatched building owners has, not surprisingly, shown a high degree of dissatisfaction with the level of access to insurance, and its cost. Insurers have been guarded in the release of information, generally only providing a rough idea of the numbers of thatch-owners on their books, and stating that the relatively high incidence of conflagration in thatched houses is the reason for high premiums or a failure to even quote a premium. An important aspect of this issue is that owners cannot acquire a mortgage to transfer property unless the property is insured; this is more an accepted practice than something enshrined in law (as it is with road vehicles, for example). Local authority fire authorities were all canvassed for their views, and the results clearly show a markedly higher incidence of fire relative to other roof coverings; in fact, this incidence is a multiple of that in our nearest neighbour, the UK. The state's approach has been to engage with insurers to press the case for reviewing their approach, and also to issue guidance for thatch owners, in an attempt to achieve a significant decrease in the incidence of fire, with an expected quid pro quo of lower insurance premiums and greater access to the insurance market. For the present, financial assistance in the form of grants has increased significantly for vernacular structures and especially thatch. It is expected that the existing thatch repair grant will be substantially increased and broadened out. There is a range of other grant schemes in operation for vernacular buildings, and the amount spent in 2022 was three times that for the previous year. Such incentives help create a better financial environment for thatch.



Figure 6: Thatchers (father and son) at work, Swords, County Dublin

Source: Barry O'Reilly

The area of thatcher training is also being looked at currently. The aim is to increase the number of well-trained thatchers, who can work on historic roofs and appreciate their significance, or on new roofs, or both. In practice, some thatchers will gravitate towards straw and others towards reed. Many historic roofs are reed, but a far higher proportion are straw, and all new roofs (except for replicas of historic ones) are reed. Various approaches to training are being explored: certified courses of 2-3 years duration, the most common to date, with 'block release' to work or study elsewhere (such as the UK or continental Europe) for blocks of time; 'shoulder-to-shoulder', which would see the trainee working full-time with an established thatcher, perhaps also with 'block release' (an approach favoured by the author); and 'thatch taster' events, of one-day or longer duration with the general public, especially schoolchildren, in mind, sowing the seed for a future career or change of career. It is important that the process not become mired in complexity, in the case of a building craft whose essence is tradition and relative simplicity.

The area of thatching standards is likely to be a challenge as, traditionally, thatchers in Ireland are cagey about how they work, and are always reluctant to join together to form an association, although they frequently have something to say about other thatchers. The state has an opportunity to be an honest broker in raising standards, again without interfering in the vernacular nature of the craft. Without direct aid from the state, it is unlikely that there would be a thatching sector in Ireland, and the relatively small number of thatched roofs in comparison with neighbouring countries means that state subvention is critically important.

Grant aid comes with strings attached: taxpayers' money must be accounted for and wisely spent. In turn, this implies that thatching standards must be acceptable.

A major difficulty for thatchers is the inconsistent supply of thatching materials, and concerns about their quality. The key materials are straw, reed, scollops and, to a lesser extent, scraw. There are some specialist growers and harvesters of straw and reed, but not enough, and thatchers can be waiting for long periods for access to these materials. Some thatchers grow or harvest their own supply and harvest and shape their own scollops. This is a good thing, but the quantities are too low for the thatching sector in general, and large amounts of material has to be imported, from as far away as central or eastern Europe, and Turkey. The carbon footprint of this activity undermines the green credentials of the material and the obvious solution is to ensure supply from as locally as possible. Growing materials for thatching purposes can also feed into the biodiversity agenda, and offer agricultural and economic diversity to farmers. Inevitably, the state will have to instigate and subsidize these enterprises, until such time as a reliable supply of good materials is available. In reality, it is likely to need monitoring by the heritage and agricultural authorities to ensure an effective market. Of course, thatch should be available for new work – an aim of the strategy is to show that vernacular materials are good modern (as well as historic) building materials and that they should be considered for use in a society that is otherwise almost completely dominated by industrialized approaches to building.

Recording of thatched buildings in Ireland has been sporadic. Surveys for some counties took place in the late 1980s and have not been resurveyed since, while other counties have been resurveyed several times; in practice, this relates to the interest of the relevant local authority. Surveys also vary in quality over time. The more recent ones have engaged owners for their views on living under thatch. This social aspect is important, as the knowledge that someone is on their side offers, for owners in difficulty, a degree of consolation. It is important that surveys of thatched buildings not be undertaken as data-gathering for its own sake, or to instill regret over the loss of roofs in the previous period. Optimism is a necessary qualification for this endeavour and the information obtained must be put to good use for monitoring the health of the craft of thatching and assisting building owners to keep a roof over their heads.

The state initiated a survey for all parts of the Republic in late 2022. This project was carried out by 46 recorders, selected for their field experience in their own counties. Larger counties, or those with probable large numbers of thatched buildings, were divided into two or more survey units. Recorders were contracted to drive all the public roads in their survey area, noting every thatched structure/building, whether historic or recent, regardless of condition; in addition, they were to note every example of a house with a corrugated metal or asbestos roof, as many of the latter are known to cover over an earlier thatched roof. The results are currently being collated, but the figures suggest 2,500-3,000 thatched buildings and twice that number of corrugated (although some recorders, not unreasonably, found it hard to distinguish between outbuildings and much-altered houses. In contrast, Northern Ireland, which contains one-fifth of the island's land area, has approximately 190 thatched houses, plus an unknown number under metal/asbestos, representing 7% or less of the island's total. In other words, the Northern Ireland counties have only one-third of the number that one

should expect. This indicates that something fundamentally different has been happening to the vernacular housing stock in that jurisdiction. In fact, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive had, over many years, taken a zealous approach to 'unfit' housing, condemning countless numbers to demolition and replacement. The recent surveys will facilitate a thatch management plan which should allow estimation of the amounts of materials and numbers of thatchers needed to repair existing buildings, while being mindful of the desirability of encouraging the use of thatch as a modern building material.

10. Conclusions

The survival and sustainability of thatch in Ireland has been a complex and fraught matter, involving a mixture of emotional attachment (or detachment) on the part of individuals or communities; and, since 1990, of interventionism on the part of the state. While thatch has too-often been, rather lazily, claimed to be 'iconic' of the island, the reality is that it has been an endangered cultural species for decades. Belated, but concerted, actions are now being undertaken to change this situation for the better. The local, national and global imperative to be environmentally, socially and economically sustainable suggests that this is a battle that must be won.

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