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The Black Barn

This last known example of an original heather thatched roof in England had suffered severe and prolonged exposure to the elements.

Most of the South-West slope of the roof had either been torn off by winds or degenerated into peaty compost. This also contributed to decay and loss of timber in the cruck frame, most of the oak rafters in that slope were ready to collapse. On the North-East, sheltered side much of the base coat of original heather thatching had survived along with some of the original rafters.

The Barn site is archaeologically sensitive and Listed Grade II* for its extreme rarity with original heather thatch, and on the English Heritage 'Heritage at Risk Register' with its condition noted as 'Very Bad'.

English Heritage have been very keen to encourage a revival of interest in historic building skills and the unexpected opportunity to study this unique 300 year old thatch gave many exciting clues to lost details of the craft. The project was also substantially grant-aided by English Heritage and supported by Northumberland County Council including provision for Heritage Skills Training ran by the North of England Civic Trust.

Following the erection of scaffolding and a temporary roof (so all repairs could be completed under cover), masonry consolidation and timber repairs were carried out using axe and augur for shaping & pegging rafters over the purlins. The only metal introduced was the use of new steel bolts were installed into the original timber to strengthen joints between the cruck blades and collars.

Opening up the feet of the cruck blades hidden in the walls revealed extensive rot. This was carefully cut out in-situ and extensions were built up in epoxy resin, reinforced with stainless steel rods.

At the time, the geology of much of Northumberland provided easy access to sandstone for building and limestone for burning with coal. One can see a self-sufficient rural economy behind the original construction of the barn in its construction materials.

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Materials for the thatching are also locally sourced. Working all these natural materials requires little more than human strength, and skill to shape, place & fix by hand. So the embodied energy was very low indeed and the carbon footprint nil, except for short transport runs, from moor to site.

The barn is now fully restored (left).

KEY PROJECT INFO

Client: PRIVATE CLIENT

Skills:
- Enclosed Scaffolding
- Structural Propping
- Masonry Rebuilding & Repointing
- Core Timber Repair
- Heather Thatching

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