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## Appeal Decision

Hearing held on 15 January and 13 February 2015

Site visit made on 13 February 2015

**by Anne Napier-Derere BA(Hons) MRTPI AIEMA**

**an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government**

**Decision date: 21 April 2015**

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**Appeal Ref: APP/Y3940/E/13/2207654**

**Park Cottage, Milton, East Knoyle, Salisbury SP3 6BG**

- The appeal is made under section 20 of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 against a refusal to grant listed building consent.
  - The appeal is made by Mrs Noreen Cleal against the decision of Wiltshire Council.
  - The application Ref S/2013/0255, dated 20 February 2013, was refused by notice dated 23 April 2013.
  - The works proposed are described as 'strip back top coat of combed wheat reed thatch and replace with water reed'.
  - This decision supersedes that issued on 20 March 2014. That decision on the appeal was quashed by order of the High Court.
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### Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

### Preliminary Matter

2. Following the close of the Hearing, the Council confirmed that it had adopted the *Wiltshire Core Strategy Development Plan Document 2015 (CS)*, which replaces the *South Wiltshire Core Strategy 2012* and the *Salisbury District Local Plan 2003 Policy CN3*, referred to in its decision on the application for listed building consent.
3. Both the main parties have been provided with an opportunity to comment on this matter as part of the appeal process and I am satisfied that, in having regard to the recently adopted CS in this appeal, the parties will not be prejudiced.

### Main Issue

4. Park Cottage is a grade II listed building, which is located within the East Knoyle and Milton Conservation Area and in relatively close proximity to a number of other listed buildings. These are designated heritage assets and I am mindful of my statutory duties in these respects.
5. The main issue in this appeal is whether or not the proposal would: preserve the listed building, any features of special architectural or historic interest that it possesses, or its setting; and preserve or enhance the character or appearance of the Conservation Area, including in respect of the setting of other listed buildings nearby.

## Reasons

### *Significance*

6. The appeal dwelling is situated within the hamlet of Milton, which contains a relatively small number of predominantly residential buildings, detached from the main part of East Knoyle. These dwellings are informally and loosely grouped around the local road network, with some properties set back some distance from the highway. They comprise a variety of designs and ages, with a number of smaller cottages, as well as larger properties set within their own grounds. Together with the steep changes in levels and the large number of trees within the area, this results in the built form complementing the predominantly rural appearance and sylvan character of the locality. The high proportion of thatched properties contributes positively towards this and is particularly important to the significance of the Conservation Area.
7. From the evidence before me, including the listing description, I consider that the significance of the appeal building is largely derived from its age, evolved form, use and historic fabric. It is in an elevated and visually prominent position, set back from the road, at the heart of the settlement. This setting and the positive contribution that the building makes to the setting and significance of other buildings nearby, and to the character and appearance of the Conservation Area, also contribute to the significance of the appeal dwelling.

### *Contribution of thatched roof*

8. It is the appellant's contention that the current thatched roof of the dwelling does not contribute materially to the historic character and significance of the building. In part, it is argued that detailed features of the design of the roof and its structure indicate that it may previously have been tiled. The oversailing course on the chimney and capped gables have some practical limitations and, in respect of the latter, are known areas of weakness for thatched roofs. However, I understand that these are relatively common features within the local area and I saw a number of other examples of thatched roofs with similar detailing within the locality. It has not been suggested, nor do I consider it probable on the evidence before me, that all these roofs would have been tiled in the past. As such, I do not find these design details to be conclusively indicative of previous tiling.
9. Furthermore, although I understand that there is an absence of lower layers of smoke blackened thatch within the appeal roof, the evidence provided does not clearly indicate previous tiling, such as by marks from closely spaced batten fixings on the rafters. The submitted details demonstrate that the appeal dwelling and its previous occupiers had a strong association with Clouds House and the Arts and Crafts movement. Nonetheless, whilst I have no reason to doubt this link, it provides no substantive evidence that the thatched roof is a more recent alteration to the dwelling. Accordingly, on the balance of the evidence before me, I do not find the argument that the roof was previously tiled to be compelling.
10. In any event, even if the roof had been originally tiled and was replaced with thatch, a photograph of the property from around 1910 indicates that it was thatched at that time. There is nothing before me to suggest that the building has not remained thatched since that date, including at the time it was listed in

1987. Therefore, the thatched roof has formed an intrinsic part of the property for some considerable time. There are many thatched roof properties within the country, including a concentrated cluster within Milton, and not all of these buildings are listed. Nonetheless, in this case, the thatched roof makes a significant and positive contribution to the appearance of the appeal dwelling and, having regard to the vernacular design of the building, its location and its relationship with other properties nearby, I consider the roof is one of its most striking features of special interest.

11. It is not a matter of contention between the parties that the materials used for the thatched roof have altered over the years. It was not disputed that the photograph referred to above indicates that, at that time, the roof was thatched in long straw. There is broad agreement between the parties that, at some point towards the latter part of the twentieth century, the roof was re-thatched in combed wheat reed. From the evidence before me, this alteration in material reflects a wider change in thatching practice, allied to alterations in agricultural production, which led to a more general move away from long straw in the area at that time.
12. It is in the nature of thatched roofs that, at least in respect of the top coat, the material has a limited lifespan and is renewed from time to time. In this case, whilst combed wheat reed may not have been the original roofing material, it nonetheless reflects a continuation of the use of wheat straw as a thatching material, which adds to its value and special interest. In addition, the combed wheat reed thatch adds to our understanding of the evolution of the building and, whilst not specifically referred to as such within the listing description, it is not a matter of dispute that this material was in place at the time of listing. Accordingly, for these reasons, I consider that the current thatching material is of considerable importance to the historic character and significance of the listed building.

#### *Impact of proposal*

13. There is no disagreement between the parties concerning the current need for the replacement of the top coat of the thatch. Although some repairs have recently been undertaken, there is evidence of water penetration within the dwelling. Whilst one elevation of the roof slope is in a better condition than the other and could potentially last longer before needing to be renewed, it was accepted that it would be sensible to re-thatch the entire roof with a new spar coat. I see no reason to disagree with this assessment.
14. The proposed works would replace the top layer of the existing combed wheat reed thatch with water reed. It is not disputed that the skill of the thatcher could ensure that the difference in appearance between these two materials would not be significant. There is nothing before me that leads me to a different conclusion in this respect and I find, therefore, that the proposal would not alter the appearance of the building, or materially affect its setting or the setting of other listed buildings nearby, or the appearance of the area.
15. Notwithstanding my finding that the combed wheat reed thatch is an important feature, the previous change from long straw to combed wheat reed was significant. However, this alteration took place before the building was listed and does not provide an adequate reason to make further changes to the building that would affect its historic character. In addition, whilst significant,

the impact of this previous change on the character of the building was mitigated to some extent by the continued use of a wheat straw thatch.

16. Whilst it is not intended to strip the roof completely and the under-straw would be preserved, a replacement of the spar coat with water reed would result in the use of a thatching material that was traditionally used more frequently in other parts of the country. As farming and thatching practices have changed, together with the requirements of owners of thatched buildings, this situation has altered. Nevertheless, notwithstanding some exceptions in Milton, the use of water reed was not historically prevalent in the local area and, from the evidence before me, has not been used previously on this building.
17. For these reasons, I consider that the proposed use of an entirely different thatching material for the top coat of the thatch would not make an appropriate contribution to the evolution of this vernacular building, but would be significantly detrimental to its authenticity. It would materially diminish the historic character of the listed building and would have a harmful impact on its value as a heritage asset. As a result, in detrimentally affecting its importance, the proposal would also diminish the contribution made by the appeal building to the character of the local area and, as such, would cause some harm to the significance of the Conservation Area.
18. Accordingly, I conclude that the replacement of the top coat of the combed wheat reed thatch with water reed would not preserve the building and its features of special interest, or the character of the Conservation Area. As such, the proposal would be contrary to the CS Policy CP58, which seeks to protect the historic environment.

#### *Durability and availability of materials*

19. The lifespan of the existing and previous thatched coating of the appeal dwelling are not in dispute between the parties. The intervals between re-thatching of the appeal dwelling have been notably shorter than for some other properties nearby. However, the evidence provided about the relative longevity of combed wheat reed and water reed is conflicting. The details before me, including the examples of Valley Farm and Clouds Lodge nearby, together with the information provided of the relative performance of different materials elsewhere, support the view that, in many cases, water reed can outlast combed wheat reed.
20. Nonetheless, it is not a matter of contention between the parties that the life of a thatch can be affected by a number of variables, including site specific conditions, such as the climate, rainfall, orientation of the building, design and pitch of the roof slope, as well as the quality of the materials and skill of the thatcher. Taking these matters into account, I find that the balance of the evidence before me does not clearly demonstrate that, in the particular case of the appeal property, there is a reasonable probability that water reed would be more durable than combed wheat reed.
21. Furthermore, having regard to the range of timeframes provided on the longevity of various materials and the existing condition of the thatch on the different roof slopes of the dwelling, I do not regard the lifespan of the existing thatch to have been excessively short. Consequently, even if the longevity of water reed were to be greater, I find that the likely future performance of

combed wheat reed could not reasonably be expected to be so poor as to justify the harmful use of water reed in this particular case.

22. Clear evidence was presented demonstrating that, in the past, there has been a shortage of available good quality combed wheat reed. However, whilst there were also strongly held views on this matter, the evidence about the current and predicted future availability of combed wheat reed was also conflicting. Confirmation was provided by both English Heritage and a local independent thatcher that supplies of combed wheat reed from last year's harvest could still be sourced. The Council also confirmed that it had not received other applications or enquiries to alter thatching materials on buildings elsewhere, in contrast to the time of the shortage in 2008.
23. Taking these matters into account, I consider that it has not been adequately demonstrated that there is a shortage of combed wheat reed sufficient to support the use of water reed in this case. In addition, with regards to the timing of the appeal decision in relation to the harvest and the stocks remaining, the undisputed evidence presented by English Heritage, about the storage methods of the materials and the consequent implications for the quality of the product, lends further support to my view on this matter.

#### *Mitigation*

24. It was suggested that, should any harm be identified to the heritage assets, this could be appropriately mitigated by the use of a condition, which would limit the consent granted to the lifespan of the proposed thatch and restrict the subsequent replacement of the spar coat in water reed without a further consent. However, notwithstanding the example provided, I am not satisfied that the suggested condition would meet the relevant tests in the national Planning Practice Guidance.
25. If consent was granted and the top coat of the thatch replaced with water reed then, all other things being equal, a subsequent replacement of the top coat with water reed would be unlikely to result in a further material alteration to the historic character of the property. As such, whilst the rationale for the condition could be made clear, I am not satisfied on the evidence before me that the suggested condition would be capable of being enforced or, even if it were, given the nature of the proposal, that its application would be reasonable. Accordingly, I am not satisfied that the condition suggested would adequately address the harm identified.

#### *Overall balance on the main issue*

26. The proposal would result in harm to the significance of the heritage assets and I give this considerable weight and importance. However, it would not lead to the loss of the listed building or the removal of the thatched roof. Furthermore, the proposal concerns one dwelling within a much larger Conservation Area, which contains a number of other thatched properties. As such, whilst material, I consider the resulting harm would be less than substantial. Paragraph 134 of the National Planning Policy Framework (the Framework) requires that, in the case of designated heritage assets, the harm should be weighed against the public benefits of the proposal, including securing its optimum viable use.

27. The main public benefits resulting from the scheme would be the contribution made from retaining the use of thatch on the building. As well as the environmental benefits that would result from the replacement of the existing top coat, including an improvement to the appearance of the appeal building and the Conservation Area, it would have some economic and social benefits, in supporting and sustaining the thatching industry, including in the production of materials and the continued development of appropriate methods and techniques. However, similar benefits would also arise from the use of combed wheat reed on the roof. Accordingly, whilst these benefits count in favour of the scheme, I only accord them moderate weight.
28. It has also been suggested that the proposal would provide an opportunity to obtain empirical evidence on the performance of water reed in comparison to combed wheat reed. However, whilst this may be the case, given the evidence presented about the variable factors that may affect the performance of different thatching materials and the relatively limited information about the proposed methodology, I have some doubts as to the potential wider usefulness of such research. Nonetheless, its potential beneficial contribution to increasing the depth of knowledge of this matter leads me to give it moderate weight.
29. The proposal would also make some contribution to supporting the continued residential use of the property, which was agreed to be its optimum use. However, whilst recognising that maintaining a thatched roof property will have financial implications, it has not been suggested, nor do I consider it likely given the location and quality of the building, that its viable use as a dwelling would be at risk should the appeal fail. As such, I give this matter limited weight in support of the proposal. The appellant also indicates that the carbon footprint for cereal straw would be higher than for water reed, even if sourced locally. However, only limited evidence has been provided on this matter and, as such, I accord it only little weight in favour of the scheme.
30. Paragraph 132 of the Framework advises that great weight should be given to the conservation of a heritage asset in considering the impact of a proposal on its significance. As heritage assets are irreplaceable, any harm or loss should require clear and convincing justification. For the above reasons, I consider that such justification has not been demonstrated in this case and, whilst the use of water reed on the heritage asset may be viable, it would not represent its optimum use.
31. Therefore, I conclude overall that the benefits of the proposal, either individually or cumulatively, would not be sufficient to outweigh the harm identified to the significance of the heritage assets. The proposal would not meet the aims of section 12 of the Framework or its paragraph 17, to conserve heritage assets in a manner appropriate to their significance.

#### *Other matters*

32. The proposal would be of significant personal benefit to the appellant, not least as I understand that she has previously purchased the water reed necessary for the work. I am mindful therefore that the dismissal of the appeal would undoubtedly result in inconvenience and additional expense. However, whilst I have considerable sympathy with the appellant's situation in these circumstances, these personal benefits are not sufficient to outweigh the clear harm identified above to the significance of the designated heritage assets.

33. A number of other properties within the local area, which have been thatched with water reed, were drawn to my attention. However, I do not have the full details of all these examples, including whether consent was required or granted for these roofs and, if so, the policy context that was in place at that time. Moreover, the existence of other thatched roofs elsewhere is not an appropriate reason to allow a proposal that would cause harm.
34. Copies of a number of other appeal decisions were also provided. From the limited information available to me, I am not satisfied that, in terms of the location of these sites, the nature of the proposals, or the detailed issues involved, these other examples are directly comparable with the scheme before me. Accordingly, I have considered the appeal proposal on its merits and in light of all representations made.

### **Conclusion**

35. For the above reasons and having regard to all other matters raised, I conclude that the appeal should be dismissed.

*Anne Napier-Derere*

INSPECTOR

## **APPEARANCES**

### FOR THE APPELLANT:

Mrs Noreen Cleal	Appellant
Mr Adam Cleal	Appellant's husband
Mr Sebastian Head	Of Counsel
Mr Nicholas Worlledge BSc, Dip.Arch.Cons, MRTPI, IHBC	Worlledge Associates - Planning and Conservation Consultant
Mr Rod Miller	Thatcher
Ms Majory Sanders MPhil, MSBiol, CBIol, Churchill Fellow	Technical consultant
Mr Andrew Raffle	Thatcher and Secretary of the Society of Master Thatchers
Mr Nigel Turton	Thatcher and Chairman of the Society of Master Thatchers

### FOR THE LOCAL PLANNING AUTHORITY:

Mr Andrew Minting MSc, Dip Bldg Cons (RICS), IHBC	Conservation Officer
Ms Alison Henry BSc(Hons), Dip Arch Cons, PGDip, IHBC	Senior Architectural Conservator, English Heritage
Mr Jack Lewis	Thatcher and Chair of Conservation of Traditional Thatch (COTT) Group
Mr Keith Quantrill	Thatcher and member of COTT Group

### INTERESTED PERSONS:

Mr John Barker	Local resident
Ms Barbara Gibson	Local resident
Mr Christian Eyres	Master Thatcher



## **DOCUMENTS SUBMITTED AT THE HEARING**

1. Appellant's suggested conditions and specification
  2. 'Thatch and thatching: a guidance note', English Heritage, 2000
  3. List of suggested conditions and specification agreed by the appellant and the Council
  4. Copy of listed building consent by West Wiltshire District Council, Ref 08/00688/LBC, dated 29 April 2008
  5. Written copy of appellant's final comments, presented by Mr Head
  6. Written copy of appellant's final comments, presented by Mr Cleal
  7. Written copy of Council's final comments, presented by Ms Henry
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