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Exe Press

Newsletter of the Exe Estuary Partnership

EXE



ESTUARY
MANAGEMENT
PARTNERSHIP

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Photo Credit: www.danielsmith-photography.com

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Photo Credit: Richard Starling

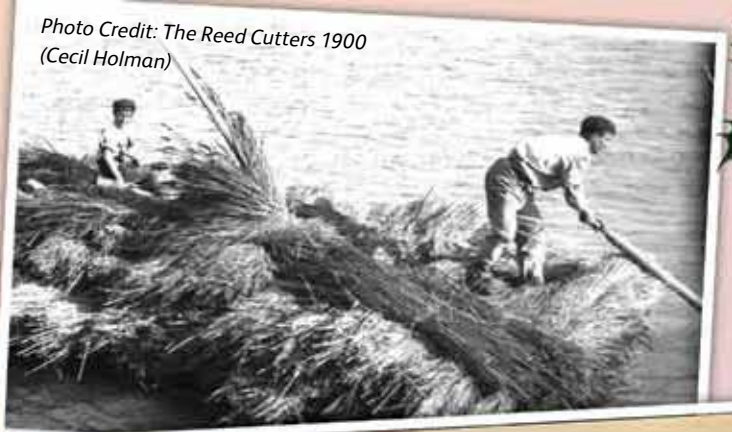


Photo Credit: The Reed Cutters 1900
(Cecil Holman)



Ferry road 1929

Sustainable thatching - 'reed' all about it!

The reed beds along the Exe were once cut by local people to supply quality reed for local thatching, as illustrated by the two wonderful photographs depicting reed cutters and reed at Topsham.

Many people associate Devon with having straw thatched roofs and not reed or 'water reed' as it is often referred to. Whilst straw does dominate, some reed is used for thatching in Devon though nowadays most is imported from countries as distant as Turkey or even China. Locally sourced reed has a far lower 'carbon footprint' than the imported reed, and skilled thatchers are able to use reed to achieve the same style or look of thatching for which Devon is renowned.

There are, however, several challenges for those of us who would like to see the reintroduction of sustainable management of the Exe reed beds, and use of the reed to support a local thatching industry. Several questions need to be answered and doubts dispelled:

Is it possible to have some commercial reed cutting taking place without compromising the important wildlife conservation interests of the sites?

Some reed beds qualify for grant aid because of their importance to conservation. To keep a healthy reed bed, some cutting and removal of the reed from the site has to be undertaken, ideally during the winter months when the reed has finished growing. Winter management also avoids causing disturbance to nesting birds which, in a healthy reed bed can include a variety of rare birds such as bearded tits, bittern, marsh harrier and crane.

In the Broads a balance between commercial reed cutting and wildlife conservation has been achieved thanks to co-operation between the local reed cutters, the Broads Authority and the various conservation bodies. This partnership arrangement has been responsible for a rejuvenation of commercial reed cutting.

Do local people around the Exe Estuary still have the skills to harvest reed, clean it of dead vegetation and tie it into bundles for sale to thatchers?

It is possible that some people who once cut reed on the Exe are still living in the area and could offer valued advice to those who would be interested in taking up reed cutting. Reed bed management does not require anything new. All that is needed is a little research to establish how previous generations solved the same old issues. The solutions are likely to be the same whether the reed beds are in the Norfolk Broads, along the river Tay in Scotland or along the Exe.

.....So?

Although some reed beds attract grant funding because of their biodiversity value, in many cases this does not cover the cost of the management required. In any case, reliance on grant aid in these uncertain economic times would be ill-advised. Better by far to rethink reed bed management, facing up to commercial realities.

There is scope for Exe reed bed owners/managers to jointly purchase and share a small lightweight reed cutting machine. Harvesting of commercial reed could take place in future years as part of a mosaic pattern of reed bed management. With a bit of cooperation and determination from a committed few, Topsham could again witness bundles of reed being unloaded from boats. A new generation of local reed cutters could play an important role in helping to manage the area as part of a revived local industry, meeting local demand for a sustainable and very beautiful building material.

Richard Starling

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(Happy to advise!)