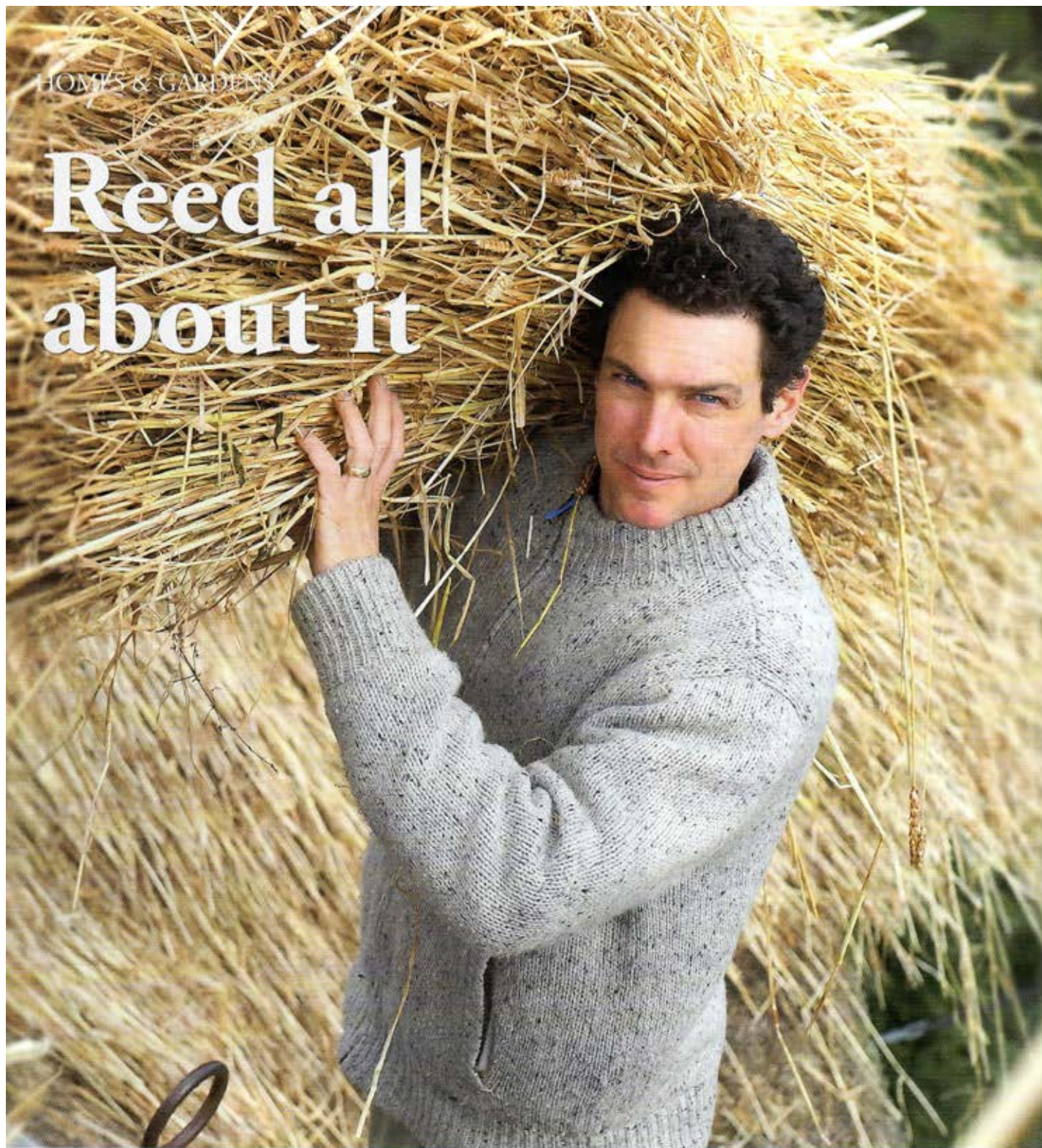


Reed all about it



Julian Claxton meets master thatcher Dominic Meek from Dennington

Photographs by Julian Claxton

The early morning sun bathes the fields in a crisp golden light, farmers are out on the roads and I feel a million miles away from the hustle and bustle of town.

Dominic Meek, the thatcher I am here to meet, has given me easy to follow directions: "Get to the church and you

can't miss me, I'm on the roof."

Sure enough, I arrive in Dennington and beside the church is a wonderfully quaint cottage bathed in bright sunshine. Standing on the third rung of the ladder, leaning against the roof carefully raking through the Suffolk long straw that he has recently replaced, is Dominic.

I wander around the 19th century

cottage, stepping over mounds of straw scattered around the lawn and gardens. Thatching is certainly a messy job.

Bundles of long straw, cut from Dominic's own fields, lay stacked against ladders, ready to be carried up to the ridge of the roof.

Bending down looking at the straw, I am jumped on by Dominic's loveable ▶

▶ dog, Diesel, who provides company for the thatcher, who spends long, lonely hours perched on roof tops.

Dominic carries a bundle of Hazelwood brotches – secure fastenings – to the ridge he is working on. The brotches are twisted then bent to secure and fix the straw tightly to the roof – materials and techniques which have been around for centuries. During the mid 19th and early 20th centuries around 90% of countryside properties were thatched.

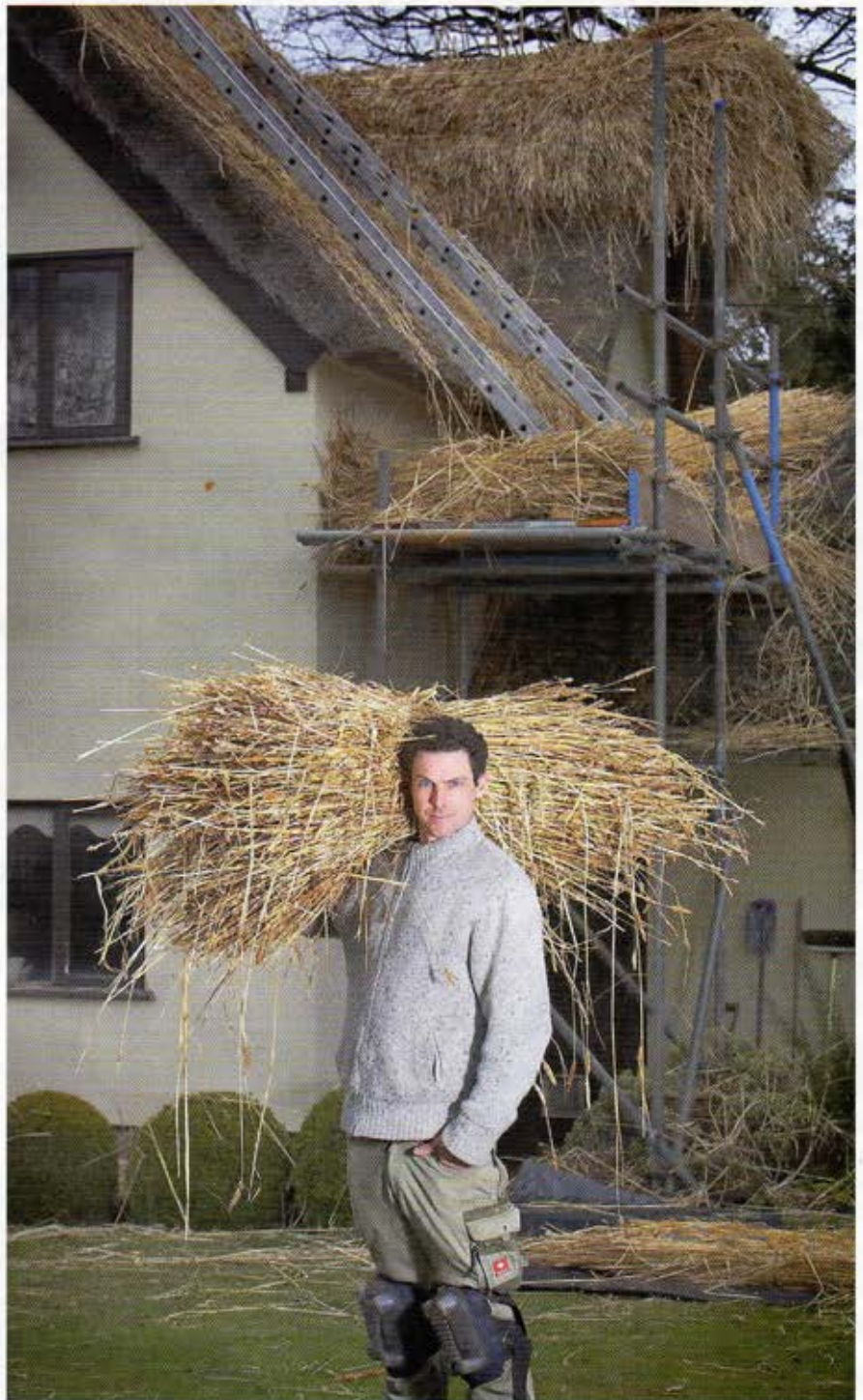
Thatch was affordable and insulating, and the job would often be completed by a local craftsman. “Techniques remain pretty much the same, as do the materials and tools,” says Dominic. “The only difference is that transport has made the whole operation easier.”

There are about 3,500 thatched properties in Suffolk, and while it’s often perceived as a dying art, thatching is in fact a thriving industry.

Dominic was awarded master thatcher status in 2007 and was elected chairman of the East Anglian Master Thatcher Association. He clearly enjoys his craft. It all began rather poetically for the 41-year-old, when 20 years ago he happened to chat to a local thatcher in a village he was cycling through. The thatcher offered Dominic a chance to have a go. After a long apprenticeship his love affair with thatching began and shaped his life.

“I get to work on wonderful properties, meet lovely people, create something which lasts for years and is part of the fabric of local communities. Nothing beats driving past a property I have thatched.”

Climbing the ladder, I watch with interest as bundles of straw, known as yealms are hauled towards the ridge. Dominic is about half way through a



four-week job and to my untrained eye it looks a chaotic jumble of straw and hazelwood. On closer inspection I get to appreciate the complex nature of the craft.

Yealms of straw are stacked on the scaffolding boards and iron hooks are guided into the reed roof, while the straw is packed tightly in between, creating a thick and even density of thatch.

Split hazel or willow rods create a decorative pattern on ridges and around the edge of roofs. Dominic is working on

a traditional double diamond pattern, apparently a simple design that looks impressive and keeps the straw tight – the “key to any quality thatching job.”

After weeks of labour intensive work, the finishing touches are applied – trimming the straw much like a haircut, says Dominic.

Fine wire netting is then used to protect the roof and stop wildlife taking advantage of its insulating qualities.

Dominic uses both his own locally

I get to work on wonderful properties, meet lovely people and create something which lasts for years



Well-timed initiative

grown long straw and also Norfolk reed, depending on clients' requirements. Using straw is decidedly more untidy and takes longer to work, but it offers a degree of flexibility. Reed on the other hand is brittle, but is easier to work with. A typical thatched property using reed will last around 80 years, while an equivalent thatched straw roof lasts about 50 years.

I'm keen to know if Dominic has discovered anything of interest in the period properties on which he works.

"A few years ago, I was re-thatching a very old property in a nearby village and, low and behold, under the rafters I discovered a Tudor wooden spoon. I normally only find old wasps' nests!" he says. "I placed the spoon back where I found it and left a small box with some modern day snippets of our lives. I guess you could call it a time capsule."

Dominic is one of the fine Suffolk characters in our county. The passion he demonstrates for his work and love for life is evident.

Packing my photographic bag, I notice menacing dark clouds appearing on the horizon and wish Dominic luck with the rest of the job as the energetic Diesel sees me off the premises. **SM**

Clockwise from top; Dominic up on the roof; tools of the trade; techniques of thatching.

■ Dominic Meek works in Suffolk and