



Withstanding Fire – and Pilgrims

There were strictures against construction of thatch roofs in London as early as 1212, following a fire that destroyed a large part of the city and killed 1,000 residents before finally petering out after ten days.

The original 1212 document, in Latin, stated, “Whosoever wishes to build, let him take care, as he loveth himself and his goods, that he roof not with reed, nor rush, nor with any manner of litter, but with tile only, or shingle, or boards, or, if it may be, with lead, within the city... Also all houses which till now are covered with reed or rush, which can be plastered, let them be plastered within eight days, and let those which shall not be so plastered within the term be demolished by the aldermen and lawful men of the venue.”⁷¹

Such ordinances were obviously not well enforced. A 1474 promulgation against thatch addressed the issue solely by fining owners of said roofs.

The original Globe was only in use from its construction in 1597 or '98 until June 29, 1613, when a cannon was fired during a performance of *Henry VIII*, catching the thatch roof on fire and burning the building to the ground in less than two hours. The following year, it was rebuilt. In 1642, the Puritan parliament issued an ordinance suppressing all stage plays, and two years later, the owner of the land demolished the structure.

In the wake of the great London fire of 1666, thatched roofs were banned unequivocally in London. But with the combination of a new chemical treatment for thatch and a special sprinkler system, the new Globe was able to secure the necessary approval to use authentic materials in the rebuilding of the theatre in 1996.


— Kristen Ammerman
www.globe-theatre.org



Master Thatcher Phil Campbell (above) at the ridge of the building, alongside the River Thames. Photo by Cavan Pawson, courtesy of The Evening Standard.

1. A Source Book of London History from the Earliest Times to 1800, edited by P. Meadows, London: G. Bell and Sons, Ltd., 1914; pp. 21-22, <http://www.elfinspell.com/PrimarySource1212.html>, accessed on Nov. 10, 2008.

were not round, but polygonal buildings. The Globe excavation determined that it was a 20-sided building with a diameter of 100 feet. It also showed that the roof was made of water reed thatch.

For more tidbits on thatching, see “That(ch)’s Facts,” page 25 of this issue. 

Sources

Bonnie Alter, “New Thatched Roof for the Globe Theatre,” www.treehugger.com/files/2008/10/new-thatched-roof-for-globe.php, accessed on Oct. 29, 2008.
www.globe-theatre.org, accessed on Oct. 29, 2008.
www.shakespeares-globe.org/abouttheglobe/background/rebuildingtheglobe/, accessed on Oct. 29, 2008.



The inside of the theater prior to rethatching, during a free production. Photo by Andy Bradshaw.

Reridging nearing completion. Left-hand side of stage roof newly thatched. Photo © Nathan Harrison.