



## A Survey of Thatched Buildings in Scotland

A project grant funded by



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# The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings Scotland

Thatch Survey of Scotland  
2014-15

A photographic survey of thatched buildings in Scotland, surveyed between May 2014 and August 2015 by Zoe Herbert (SPAB Scotland Officer), on behalf of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings.

The project was grant funded by



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# Contents



Foreword by Historic Environment Scotland	.....
Foreword by the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings	.....
Introduction	.....
Distribution of Thatched Buildings in Scotland	.....
Thatched Buildings by Local Authority Area	.....
Aberdeenshire	.....
Angus	.....
Argyll & Bute	.....
Dumfries & Galloway	.....
Dundee	.....
East Ayrshire	.....
East Lothian	.....
Edinburgh	.....
Fife	.....
Highlands	.....
Midlothian	.....
Moray	.....
North Ayrshire	.....
Orkney Islands	.....
Perth & Kinross	.....
Scottish Borders	.....
Shetland Islands	.....
South Ayrshire	.....
South Lanarkshire	.....
Stirling	.....
West Lothian	.....
Western Isles	.....
Index	.....

# Foreword

*by Historic Environment Scotland*

Scotland has a long tradition of using thatch, and one of the most diverse ranges of thatching materials and techniques found in Europe. In some parts of the country the local traditions of thatching continued until the beginning of the 20th century. However, since then, thatched buildings have largely disappeared from the rural landscape in many parts of Scotland.

Developments in land use, farming practices and a loss of skilled workers have led to changes in the rural economy and the many trades and traditions which it once supported, including thatching. On the Western Isles, where a significant number of thatched buildings do survive, changes in crofting practices have led to a decline in the availability of marram grass traditionally used for thatch. Many areas of wetland that produce reed thatch, traditionally found in Tayside and Fife, are now protected for valid biodiversity reasons, which can mean that harvesting the reed for thatch is not always possible. More serious even than the sourcing of suitable materials is the lack of skills in traditional thatching. There are only a handful of thatchers practising in Scotland; the physical skills and intangible cultural heritage are in many cases not being passed on to the next generation.

Thatch tends to be locally distinctive, with many variations of materials and vernacular traditions found even in relatively small geographical areas. Materials found for thatching roofs in Scotland include oat and barley straw, rye, reed, heather, bracken, broom, marram grass (grown on sand dunes) and eel grass (a type of marine grass). In fact over 20 different types of thatching materials are identified in *Historic Scotland TAN 4, Thatch and Thatching Techniques: a guide to conserving Scottish thatching traditions*. However, this recent survey by the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings indicates that some of these materials are now rarely found.

Traditionally sourced from whatever was found to hand, thatch is also one of the most harmonious roofing materials, blending naturally into the surrounding landscape from which it is taken. Due to its perishable nature, a traditional Scottish thatched roof will rapidly deteriorate unless it is regularly maintained. Since 1998 Historic Environment Scotland has supported owners of thatched buildings through the Thatched Buildings Maintenance Grant Scheme, which has enabled many thatched buildings to be repaired and kept in use.

This survey is the essential first step in identifying the type and quality of thatched buildings which remain, so that skills and resources can be directed most effectively. Historic Environment Scotland will use the data provided in the survey to review grant funding, provide technical advice and training for thatching skills, support local authorities to protect thatched buildings through the heritage management system, and where appropriate, use statutory designation procedures to re-evaluate the importance of the thatched buildings that survive.

*Dr David Mitchell Msc IHBC FSA Scot*  
Director of Conservation  
March 2016

## Foreword

*by the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings*

Thatch provides a protective roof covering for many historic buildings, but in comparison with most traditional building materials it is almost ephemeral. Its relatively short lifespan means that in a generation or two a thatched roof can disappear if not adequately maintained. As such, thatch might be viewed as a good litmus test for the state of vernacular building conservation since problems with its care and repair become evident rapidly.

For this reason the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB) has been delighted to work with Historic Environment Scotland (HES) on a survey of Scottish thatched buildings. Both organisations appreciate that thatch is an immensely important tradition for Scottish building, and that a better understanding of its survival and protection will assist future conservation planning and policy. Fortunately, SPAB Scotland Officer Zoe Herbert, with the support of the SPAB Scotland Committee and HES, was in a position to undertake this research during 2015.

Thatch in Scotland is not confined to one material or method, but is a tradition that embraces a rich diversity of local types and techniques. Straw and water reed are now dominant, but when John Smith considered thatch in his 1798 General View of the Agriculture of Argyll, it was to compare the relative merits of heather and ferns. These are thatching materials that are rarely, if ever, found today in Scotland, but diversity does still exist. Materials such as marram grass remain in some Scottish coastal areas and all vernacular thatch survivals – plus the craft techniques needed for their care – deserve to be protected and celebrated as part of local character.

Overall, the survey has produced some striking results. Scottish thatch is under threat and there has been decline since a national listing survey was last undertaken. But there are grounds for optimism. The survey has occurred at a point where not all is lost and positive action is still possible. Through information about the state of the nation's thatched roofs, and the impact of loss, we are better placed to value what we have and to care for it more effectively. With HES, the SPAB hopes that future action might embrace improved understanding of thatch traditions, thatching skills training, and grant aid for maintenance.

Beyond the direct benefits for thatched buildings in Scotland, the SPAB also hopes that this survey will act as a catalyst for further conservation studies and initiatives within Scotland and beyond.

*Matthew Slocombe MA FSA IHBC*  
SPAB Director  
March 2016

## Introduction

Thatched buildings are a traditional and valued aspect of the historic environment in Scotland. The low, thatched crofter's cottage is the archetype, and was once a familiar sight in rural areas. Thatched buildings are a particularly ephemeral type of vernacular building; traditionally roofed using locally sourced material, and requiring regular maintenance, they deteriorate rapidly once abandoned, and their numbers have diminished dramatically since the mid-19th century, when other more durable materials became available. The decline in skills and materials following two world wars, and changes to housing standards and lifestyle more recently have increasingly made traditional thatched buildings redundant or difficult to maintain.

The SPAB has a particular interest in vernacular buildings, and the crafts skills that created and sustain them, and is concerned about the potential loss of this vulnerable building type. In 2014 the SPAB approached Historic Environment Scotland with a proposal to survey all surviving thatched buildings in Scotland. Grant funding was awarded which allowed this survey to be undertaken, the intention being to produce a record that could be used to inform the future conservation of thatched buildings in Scotland.

Between May 2014 and August 2015 a total of 331 buildings across 287 sites throughout Scotland were visited. The sites were drawn from an initial list generated from the database of statutorily listed buildings held by Historic Environment Scotland, all of which were recorded as having a thatched roof at the time of listing. From desk-based research, a small number of other sites that are not currently listed, but thought to be thatched, were added to the survey. During the project, other sites were identified and surveyed. Many of these were happened upon by chance, or through information gathered by speaking to local people during site visits.

The buildings were surveyed photographically wherever possible, and information on the thatch was recorded, including the type of thatch present, the type and material of the ridge, and any other significant aspects of the thatched roof. Photographs were taken from sites with the permission of the owner/occupier, or from a location within the public realm wherever possible. General information on the building as a whole was also recorded, for example the location, listing category and whether the building appeared on the Buildings at Risk Register for Scotland. Where access to the building or site was not possible, information was gathered from other sources. Any anecdotal information or assumptions made about the building are stated as such within the text. The survey entries have been organised alphabetically by Local Authority area.

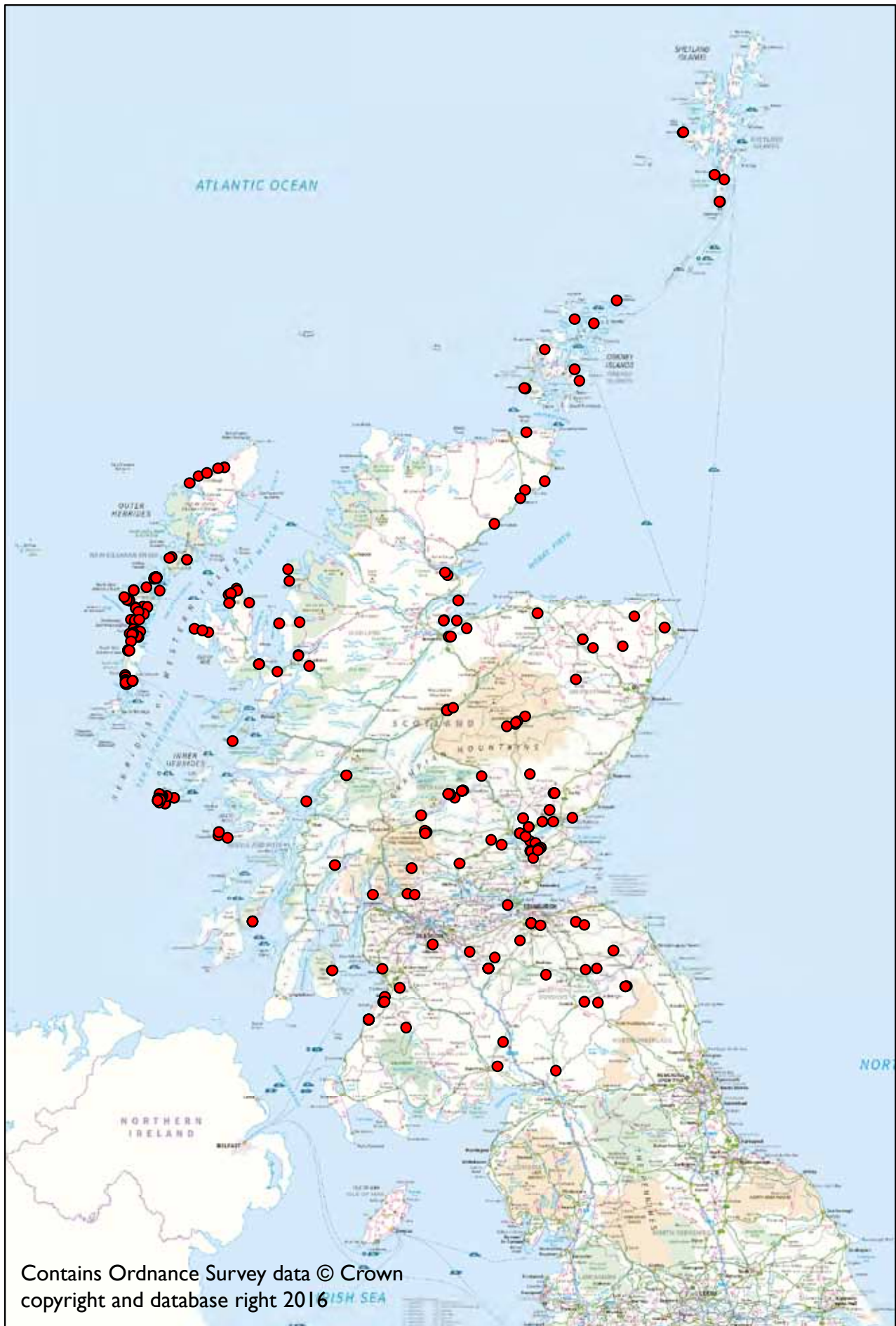
Of the 331 buildings surveyed:	221 were categorised as Thatched
	87 were categorised as Not thatched
	23 were categorised as Unknown

Those that were Unknown were categorised as such either because the site was visited but there was a secondary roof covering in place (e.g. corrugated iron), or because access to the site was not possible meaning the presence of any thatch could not be determined. For these entries further investigation is required to confirm whether thatch survives. In some cases, there were discrepancies in the information that was already held for the buildings on other databases, particularly in terms of the building names and exact location (grid reference). Where such discrepancies arise, a correct grid reference has been given. For consistency, the condition of the thatch and other information for occupancy and use is recorded using the protocol adopted by the Buildings at Risk Register.

It is inevitable that some errors and omissions may have arisen during the course of the survey. Indeed since the field work was completed, information about other thatched buildings which were unknown to us has come to light. It is hoped that the publication of this survey will encourage people to come forward with further information about the buildings featured in the survey, or any that may have been missed, to make the record more complete. The information will be made available digitally as part of the Historic Environment Scotland collections database accessible via Canmore.

*Zoe Herbert*  
SPAB Scotland Officer  
October 2015

# Distribution of Sites Surveyed in Scotland





To receive the full survey please email SPAB Scotland: [scotland@spab.org.uk](mailto:scotland@spab.org.uk)