



Not so long ago, well within living memory, the corn harvest was a different scene.

In the 1950s, there were no combine harvesters to swallow up acres per hour nor round straw bales to strew the landscape (before being piled up in the face of the straw burning ban which came in the '90s).

The harvest technology was smaller and simpler, for nearly a hundred years centred on the binder which, in its steadily evolving forms, was essentially just a mechanical manifestation of the age-old corn harvest process: cut the corn and tie it into manageable bundles. From the time, in 1868, when an Englishman called John Appleby living in America perfected the knot tying mechanism, the binder, drawn by horses and later by tractor, had led the way.

And its advent had reduced the labour requirement (or destroyed jobs, as some would have said at the time). No longer were lines of scythe men needed to cut the corn while their wives followed on to tie the sheaves, although the sheaves still needed to be stood up to dry - or stooked (or shocked, if one was in East Anglia) - and then they had to be carted to the farm yard and stacked. And then, through the following months, as the grain was required, they needed to be threshed.

Combine harvesters changed all that, cutting and threshing in one and simply offloading the grain on the move into trailers for transport to grain silos. The straw, dumped behind, was thenceforth either baled for cattle litter (or these days for a widening range of uses including bio-fuel) or merely shredded by the combine and later ploughed in.

But that seismic shift did not cater for the equally age-old process of thatching straw production. There are a lot of straw thatches around the country, not least in Suffolk, and they each need renewing every 25-40 years. A decent sized cottage needs perhaps five tonnes of long, unbroken straw and that which comes from a combine is anything but.

Thus has survived a sub-market, a niche in the agricultural sector where a few farms around the country grow wheat varieties with the required long stems - and then cut them with binders and shock the sheaves and stack them and then thresh them the old way.

One such is Red Barn Farm at Badingham near Framlingham where Robert and John Foster grow about 40 acres of thatching wheat straw among other arable crops. They use mostly older varieties like Huntsman and Aquila from seed which they grow themselves every two years as a separate project because such varieties are not so readily available these days. They yield less grain than many modern day strains but then the grain is a secondary consideration and is sold for animal feed.



And yet the production of thatching straw is not a complete anachronism because science has moved with the times whatever may or may not have happened to the straw harvesting technology. Farmers of 50 years ago might not recognise some of the fertilisers and pesticides deployed today to ensure straw quality, nor the bare earth which the herbicides leave between the stems to keep the straw weed-free.

The cycle starts in September with fertilising, ploughing, harrowing and seeding and a further three fertiliser applications follow during the growing period, all of them carefully monitored for full take-up because nitrogen residues would eventually make the straw break down and cause the thatch to rot on the roof. There are then the herbicides and fungicides.



But to those of us of a certain age, the sight of the binder working the field and, later, the threshing drum working in the farm yard, still brings nostalgia, not to mention a hint of Heath Robinson. The Fosters' machine, a Lance Oil Bath Binder, Power Driven, was made in Germany in the late 1940s, one of two acquired initially by another Suffolk farmer for harvesting seed grass. The Fosters bought both and use one for spares. In motion, its flimsy and apparently flailing arms lay the wheat stems over the cutting knife from where wide canvass belts carry it quickly up into the tying mechanism which ejects the tied shocks on the other side.

This is a two crew job - someone to drive the tractor and someone to operate the binder, sitting on the back, watching out for jams and tangles and making sure that the knife is set as low as conditions and field stones allow in order to maximise straw length.

The headlands around the wheat are planted with winter barley which ripens earlier and can be harvested by combine, leaving the binder room to turn without its tractor flattening part of the crop when it starts work.

The wheat itself needs to be cut two weeks or so before it would be by combine because it then matures in a different way and becomes much stronger and more flexible - more rope-like - which makes it more usable for thatching. But then the sheaves are left on the ground for a few days to dry a little more before shocking (or stooking) to complete the drying process. Good drying conditions can make the shocks lose half their weight though they can stand in the field from five days to five weeks, depending on the weather.

Carted back to the yard, the sheaves are stacked and then threshed, a stack at a time, according to demand through the autumn, winter and following spring. And back in the '50s, the threshing was a time of murderous fun for country kids, patrolling the edge of the stack with sticks and pulverising rats and mice that leapt in ever increasing numbers from under each successive sheaf. But again, sanitising science has been at work there with modern day pest control now minimising ancillary livestock, leaving scarcely enough work for one Jack Russell.

The threshing drum, belt driven by a 1948 single cylinder 40hp Field Marshall tractor (the machine which most superseded steam traction engines as the power source for this job), vaguely resembles a double scale flat roofed gypsy caravan, though in place of windows, there are openings for belt pulleys and glimpses of inner workings. It is jacked and blocked and then stabilised by adjustable chains to keep it level and, in action, it rocks gently with the motion of the gears within and issues dust in prodigious amounts.



The sheaves are pitch forked off the stack to a man on the top of the drum who cuts the strings and allows the wheat stems to drop through a small hatch. The process separates the wheat, which is elevated into a trailer at the front, from the chaff which issues from another orifice. Chaff makes good feed for heavy horses but again there aren't many of those left in the face of advancing mechanisation

and so a lot gets burnt. The all important straw is collected by a trussing mechanism at the back and loaded straight onto trailers for delivery.

And, anachronistic or not, this whole process now looks set to survive, bound in to its own time warp for the foreseeable future, maintained there by the most irresistible of influences, market forces. With thatches - reed as well as straw - long enshrined in most people's perceptions of bucolic charm and, indeed, preserved in some cases by town planning regulation, demand for the raw material can only be sustained. So farmers like the Fosters' will always have someone to supply and will do so as long as their ancient binders, threshing drums and Field Marshalls hold together. What happens when those bits of history finally expire is no doubt exercising a few minds but if the demand for spares or complete machines is strong enough, the market will no doubt provide.



Meanwhile, the market has provided one other change to the final leg of the operation which farmers of the '50s would not only not recognise but would probably find hard even to imagine. The Fosters have been delivering loads of straw to thatchers by tractor and trailer since 1984, sometimes to sites up to 40 miles away. 'Even since 1984, the traffic has got a lot worse' says Robert. Which only goes to show that while thatching straw production might continue in its own comfortable time warp, there is no longer any escaping the bind of modern day reality outside the farm gate.