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Ripton thatchers notch another top top

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KING'S Ripton may be one of the smallest villages in Huntingdonshire, but it has the best thatchers in the country.

For the fifth time since the biennial competition started in 1992, Dodson Brothers have won the National Society of Master Thatchers 'Best Thatched House Award' – and this time for a roof within little more than an energetic stone's throw from the village.

Previous wins for the 91-year-old company have been at Fenstanton, the Chequered Skipper at Ashton, Northamptonshire, Stanford-on-Avon, also in Northants, and the golf clubhouse at Stapleford Park, in Leicestershire.

But now it has notched up a fifth victory with a roof just up the road in Woodhurst, thatched by a team led by director Richard Leonard, who has been with the company since leaving school in 1990.

Fellow director Stuart Dodson, grandson of the firm's founder and twin brother of another director, Steven Dodson, said the first prizes were not the company's only successes. It had also notched up several second, third and fourth places and, because multiple entries are allowed, had won first and third places in the same year.

"The way it works is that you send in good-quality photographs of the houses, and the independent judges go out and visit the top six they think look best before deciding on the winners," he said.

The company, whose 16 staff include three four-strong thatching teams, grows its own thatching straw in Warboys, having moved production from Wicken Fen in the 1980s. But most of the reed it uses is imported from places such as Turkey and Poland – "we still get some from Norfolk, but the imported reed is often less expensive," Mr Dodson said.

A complete re-thatch of a three- or four-bedroom house typically takes the team about three weeks. But the award-winning thatched houses are usually much bigger places that are roofed with reed. "They are normally big architect-designed houses that stand out."

A roof thatched with long straw will last 25 to 30 years, but reed has a life of 80 years.

Third-generation thatcher Stuart Dodson said he had worked on one roof that had been done in 1919 to commemorate the end of the First World War the previous November.

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