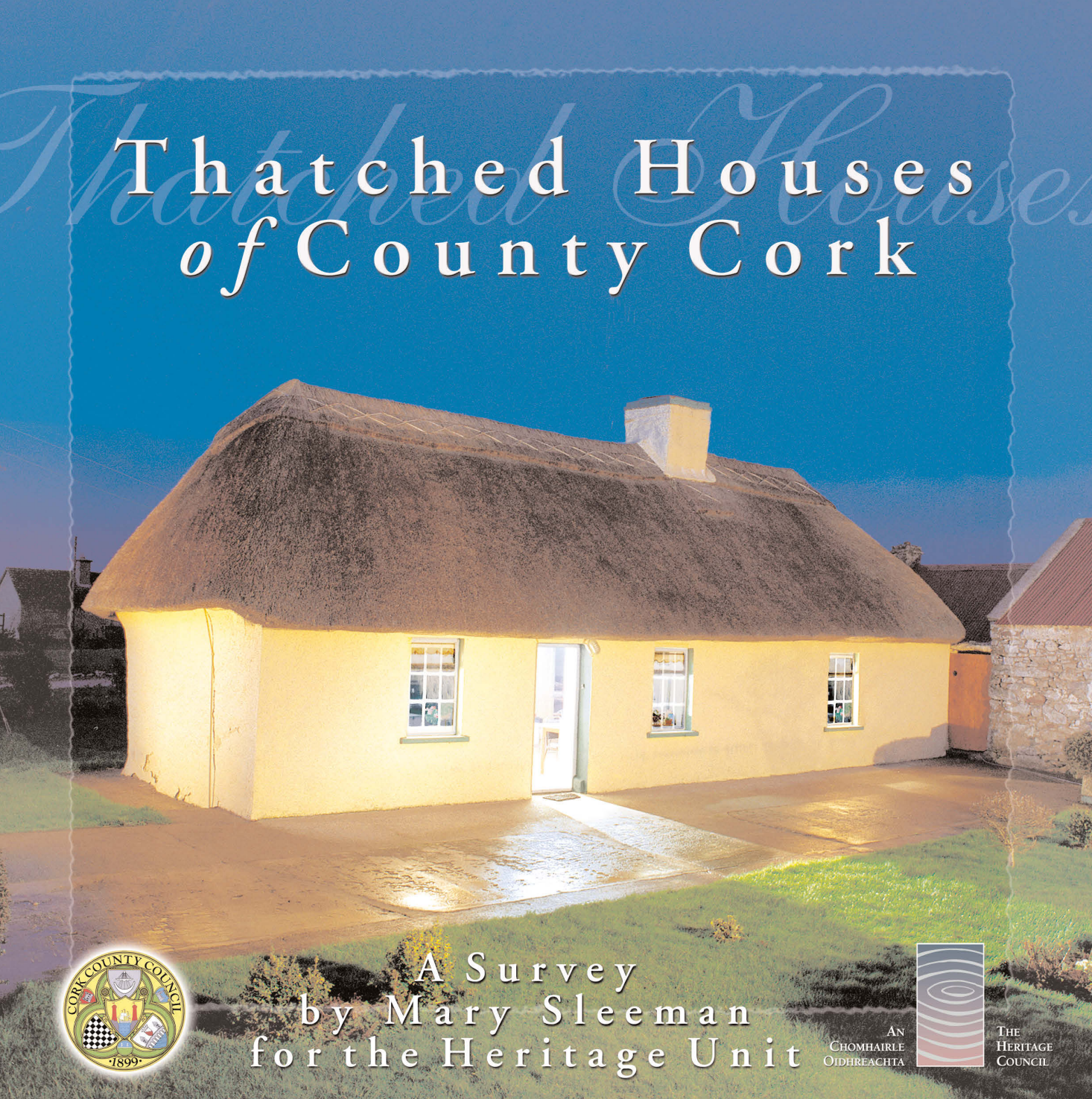
Thatched Houses *of* County Cork



A Survey
by Mary Sleeman
for the Heritage Unit

Cork County Council 1899

An Chomhairle Oidhreachta
The Heritage Council

Foreword

In the 1980s Cork Archaeological Survey recorded thatched and formerly thatched houses in County Cork. From these a sample of 187 thatched houses was included in the Record of Monuments and Places for County Cork in 1988. Subsequently, short descriptions of these houses were published in the four volumes of the Archaeological Inventory of County Cork. Since that time the legislation for the protection of the architectural heritage has been strengthened. The Heritage Council have also been involved in raising awareness of the thatched heritage with physical restoration projects and the publication of the Heritage Council's Irish Thatched Roofs Policy Document.

In 2001 Cork County Council commissioned the author, to carry out a follow-up survey of these 187 houses. The objective of the survey was to study the surviving thatched housing stock, assess its condition and identify its distribution and typology with a view to informing policy on future protection and conservation.

The 2001 Cork County Council Thatched House survey and gazetteer are available at the Cork County Library as well as a copy of the individual survey record sheets for those wishing to pursue further study in the area.

Contents

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Introduction

The thatched house was once a common sight in Ireland, not just in the countryside but also in towns and villages. These modest yet aesthetically pleasing buildings, sitting snugly in their surroundings, gave character and identity to their locality. The thatched house is an important part of our vernacular heritage and as such represents the end of a long building tradition that goes back to ancient times.

County Cork is virtually absent from the published corpus on the traditional thatched dwelling, apart from the occasional passing reference to an individual house (e.g. ffolliott 1972, figs 3, 4 & 5). However, in the mid-1980's the Cork Archaeological Survey (CAS) made a brief but extensive record of thatched houses in County Cork. This survey was based in University College Cork and was part of a nation-wide survey that was conducted by the Archaeological Survey of Ireland. The brief of CAS was to record all known archaeological sites in the county and throughout the mid-1980s it undertook an extensive fieldwork programme. Its field workers were instructed to note any thatched structures encountered during this programme and in this way the first catalogue of such buildings for the county was amassed.

From the CAS catalogue a sample of 187 thatched houses was included in the Sites and Monuments Record (SMR) for County Cork, issued by the Office of Public Works in 1988. Subsequently, brief descriptions of these houses were published in the four volumes of the Archaeological Inventory of County Cork (Power et al., 1992, 1994, 1997 & 2000).

In 2001 Cork County Council commissioned the author, with the assistance of Sheila Ronan, Alison McQueen and Rhoda Cronin, to carry out a follow-up survey (referred to in the text as the CCC survey) of thatched houses in the county, based on the CAS catalogue. The aim of the CCC survey was to examine the rates of deterioration/destruction that had occurred between the mid-1980s and 2001, to explore the factors that influence this rate, and to highlight the conservation issues relevant to these factors. It was also hoped that the publication of these findings would enhance public awareness of the disappearing thatched roof.

The 187 thatched houses catalogued by CAS were re-visited and recorded by the CCC survey over a six-week period in the summer of 2001. During the course of this work a further forty-seven examples were discovered and recorded, bringing the total of houses recorded by the CCC survey to 234. Whilst it is not claimed that this is a definitive catalogue of surviving thatched houses in the county, it is unlikely that a great number remain to be discovered. The geographic regions are defined for the purpose of this survey is as follows: North Cork - the area north of and including the Blackwater valley, East Cork as the area east of a line from Cork city to Fermoy and West Cork as the area west of a line from Kinsale to Millstreet, (fig. 1.)

The record made of each house was necessarily brief and concise. For logistical reasons the record of each house was based mainly on its exterior

Figure 1. Distribution map of thatch houses in Co. Cork.

appearance. A record sheet was filled out for each building, noting its plan form, roof form, type of thatch, construction materials and condition. Where possible, owners were interviewed and notes made about their attitude to the thatched roof and any traditions associated with it. A photographic record was also made of each building. A full copy of these files is available in Cork County Library.

It must be acknowledged that there are still numerous houses surviving in which the thatch is now covered by corrugated-iron sheets. These are potentially a very important resource and could be the focus of further research, but were not included in the CCC survey as they are far more numerous than those structures where thatch is still the primary roofing material.

This report outlines some of the basic characteristics of Cork's traditional thatched houses and examines some of the issues relevant to their current condition. As the surveys clearly demonstrates this dwindling stock has reached a critical point and it is unlikely that many of the houses that feature in the survey will survive another twenty years without some form of direct assistance.

Figure 3. Corrugated former thatched house, Knockawillin. CCC No 34.

Figure 2. Typical thatched farmhouse, at Ballycrenane, Ballymacoda, East Cork. CCC No 149.

House Types

By and large the buildings that feature in this survey are rural farmhouses: 201 out of a total of 234, (fig. 2). Of the remainder, sixteen have a rural setting but no accompanying farm buildings and sixteen are located in some form of nucleated settlement of which five are public houses, (fig. 27), and there is one fisherman's house, (fig. 4). Whilst it will need a detailed examination of their interiors to determine whether there is a fundamental difference between a traditional thatched house in a rural and an urban setting, it is clear from the survey that all the structures recorded belong to the one vernacular building tradition, with little variation in appearance.

The farmhouses were in the main built by tenant farmers some time between the early eighteenth century and the mid-nineteenth century. In general they are rectangular in plan, one-room deep and one-storey high, though often with a loft at one end. The entrance door is on the front elevation, which is mainly four or five bays (or vertical divisions) wide, with plain rectangular sash windows. The length of the house rarely exceeds 20m, with the majority between 14m and 16m, and the width consistently ranging between 2.2m and 2.75m, (fig. 5). There are a few exceptions to these. There are four examples of two-storey thatched houses, associated with the more prosperous farmers, all occurring in North Cork, (fig. 28). At the other end of the scale there are only a couple of examples of the small one or two roomed houses of the very poor. Both of these types are discussed later in chapter 8 (Rare Examples).

Figure 4. Thatched fisherman's cabin, Crosshaven, South Cork. CCC No 230

Figure 5. Typical thatched house, Dromaneen, Near Mallow, North Cork. CCC No 105.

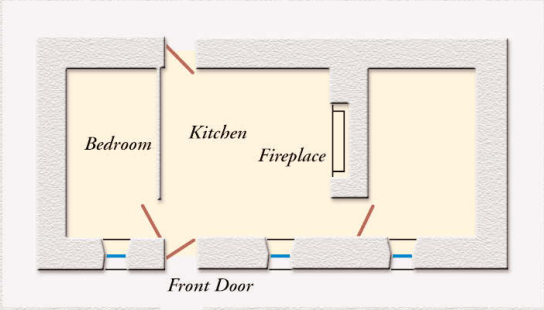


Figure 6. Plan of a direct-entry thatched house.

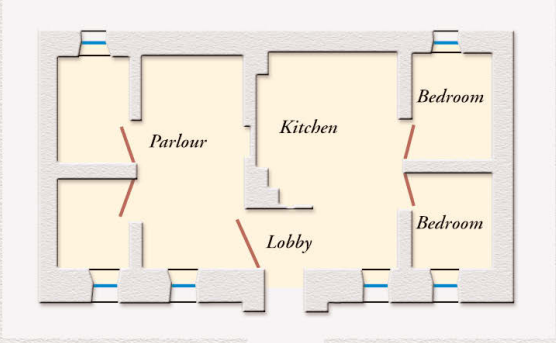


Figure 7. Plan of a lobby-entry thatched house.

In Ireland, traditional farmhouses can be divided into two main groups according to their plan form. These are 'direct-entry' and 'lobby-entry' (Gailey 1984, 140 - 182), (fig. 6 & 7). The basic difference between the two types is the spatial relationship between the entrance door and the kitchen hearth. In the direct-entry house the front door provides direct access into the kitchen, at the opposite end of the room to the hearth, (fig. 8). In a lobby-entry house the front door is in line with the hearth, and the door leads into a lobby that has a screen wall separating it from the kitchen, (fig. 9).

Of the 201 farmhouses recorded it was possible to identify 96 as having a direct-entry plan, whilst 85 had a lobby-entry plan. The remaining twenty were altered to such an extent that it was not possible to say what type of plan they had from their present outside appearance. Of the rural houses without farm buildings that were classifiable, eight were direct-entry and three lobby entry. Of the houses in urban settings that could be classified 7 were of the direct-entry type. This brings the overall total to 111 houses that could be classified as direct-entry and 88 as lobby-entry. It is notable that the numbers of each type become strongly biased towards direct-entry only when the latter two types of houses are taken into consideration.

The type to which direct-entry houses belong is very ancient and evolved from the 'byre dwelling' where animals and humans lived under the same roof, an arrangement that was quite common in the west of Ireland up to the nineteenth century. The lobby-entry layout reflects a more sophisticated arrangement of social space within the house though its remote ancestor may be the later-medieval timber-framed hall-house of the lesser gentry. The strong representation of the two building traditions (lobby and direct entry) in the surviving band of thatched houses in Cork may represent a broad transition zone between East and West.

Figure 9. Example of lobby-entry thatch house, Glenahulla Cross, Mitchelstown, North Cork. CCC No 58.

Note relationship of door and chimney.

Figure 8. Example of a direct-entry thatch house, Tullylease, North Cork. CCC No 40.

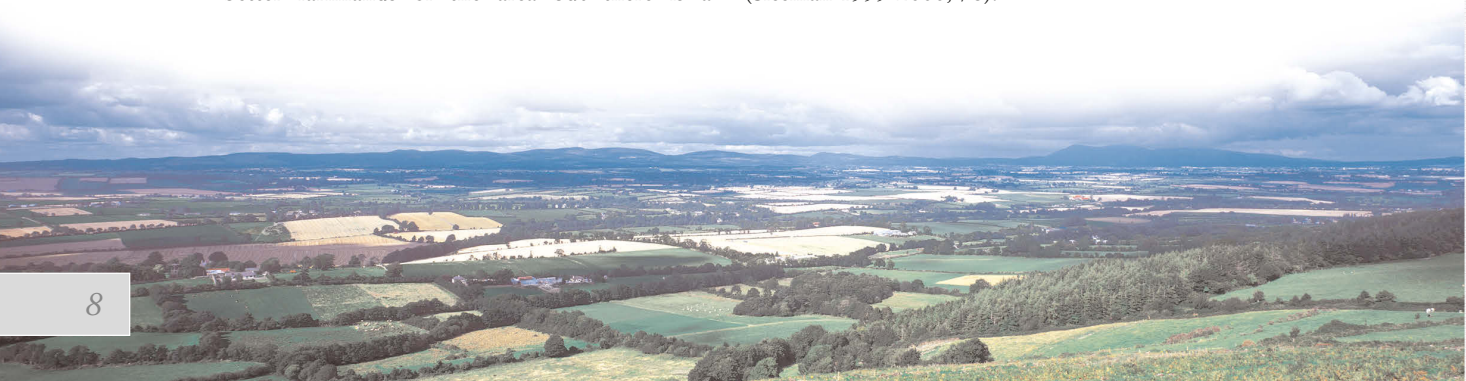
Distribution

Numerous old photographs and oral tradition are testimony to the fact that the thatched house was once a common sight throughout Cork not just in the countryside but also in towns and villages. However, by the late twentieth century the numbers had shrunken dramatically. Today thatch is found to have survived along the eastern and northern flanks of the county with only one surviving example west of a line from Kinsale to Millstreet, (fig. 1). This eastern and northern distribution is part of a wider pattern with similar concentrations in the adjoining areas of West Waterford, South Tipperary and South-East Limerick (see Aalen 1997, fig. 13).

In East Cork thatched houses occur in three notable concentrations. Two are coastal: in the Gyleen/Power Head area and on the Knockadoon peninsula around Ballymacoda. The third is close to the Waterford border, around Mount Uniacke and Inch. In general, the direct-entry house is the predominant type in East Cork. In North Cork the houses are generally more evenly spread over the better farmlands of the area but there is a concentration west of Charleville where lobby-entry houses predominate. However, over most of North Cork lobby-entry and direct-entry houses are intermingled with no discernable pattern.

Whatever the underlying factors that determine this distribution, two practical circumstances certainly enhance the survival of thatch in an area. Firstly, is the survival of the traditional building craft, and secondly, the continuity in ownership from one generation to the next. Both factors may be related to the relative prosperity of North and East Cork in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, reflected initially in the better quality of the buildings themselves and secondly in the ability of the owners to maintain the structure and its roof over time.

In West Cork, there are few remains of the vernacular thatched house in existence. In this area they were systematically rebuilt or replaced by the two-storey gable-ended slated houses in the mid-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, many grant assisted by the Congested District Board (Sleeman 1999-2000, 76).



The Thatched Roof

The thatched roof provided protection for both the house and its occupants. Thatch needs the support of a wooden structure, which usually took the form of a series of A-shaped couples, with each couple consisting of two rafters and a collar tie. On top of this framework purlins were laid horizontally. The traditional length of the rafter was the width of the house, so the usual roof pitch was between 45° to 50°. The bases of the couples were bedded into the wall heads. Both sawn wooden beams and roughly hewn tree branches were used, depending on circumstances. Though roof interiors were not examined in detail by the survey, it would appear that roughly hewn timbers were as numerous as sawn beams.

Figure 10. Detail of a gabled roof, Doneraile, North Cork. CCC No 45.

Figure 11. Detail of a hipped roof, Shandrom, near Charleville, North Cork. CCC No 5.

Two main roof types are characteristic of the thatched house: gabled and hipped, fig. 10 & 11. The gable-ended roof has two pitches that rise to the central ridge (back and front) with each end wall rising to an apex. A hipped roof curves around the end wall and the roof has four sloping sides (back, front and both ends).

The hipped roof is the predominant type in Cork. The survey recorded 145 houses with hipped roofs whilst only 44 are gable ended. A significant number, 35 houses, have both a gable and a hipped end, whilst in ten cases the original form of the roof is uncertain. In the national context the gable end is more common in the west and north west of Ireland where the gable provided an anchor to tie the thatch down. A hipped roof is considered to have better waterproof qualities than a gable but less robust against strong winds, fig. (11 & 13). The hipped roof is typical of the southeast of Ireland. However there is a considerable overlap of both types.

Figure 12. Example of a half-gabled thatched roof, at Knockmonalea West, Youghal, East Cork. CCC No 144.

Of the Cork houses with hipped roofs, 67 are lobby-entry whilst 55 are direct-entry. Those with gabled roofs divide between 26 that are direct-entry and 10 that are lobby-entry. And of those with a hip at one end and a gable at the other, 20 are direct-entry, and 9 lobby-entry. The remainder could not be classified.

There seems little doubt that the traditional material used for thatching in County Cork was wheaten straw, though one owner remembered oaten straw being used. The thatched house at Ballinure is the only example where wheaten straw remains the sole roofing material, (fig. 14). However, many houses still have a basal layer of wheaten straw underneath later layers of reed.

Figure 13. Example of a hipped roof, North Cork. CCC No 207.

According to most house owners it was the usual practice of their forbearers to grow their own wheat specifically for thatching their own houses. This was harvested by hand using a scythe, and the straw tied in sheafs and then stored. The grain was removed either by hand threshing or running it through a threshing machine with special care. According to Jim Baker, a retired thatcher from Ballindangan, good traditional wheaten straw would last twenty years, whilst modern straw lasts barely ten years. The use of wheaten straw went into decline with the introduction of the combine harvester in the 1960's. The combine was welcomed by the farmers but not by the thatchers as it left no straw suitable for thatching. From that time on water reed (phragmites australis) became the dominant material used by Cork thatchers.

Today, the vast majority of thatchers still active in Cork use reed, which is referred to in East Cork as 'spire'. Some of this is sourced locally, e.g. from the Bandon estuary near Innishannon or neighboring counties such as the Shannon estuary, in Limerick, the Lismore area of Waterford and as far away as Wexford. However, the increased use of nitrate fertilizers has weakened the indigenously grown reed by reducing its fibrous nature, making it more susceptible to wind damage and rot. So a lot of the reed used is now imported from Turkey. Some Cork thatchers quote a best-case scenario of reed thatch lasting up to 30 years, and longer depending on location and the quality of the reed itself. However, the ridge area is more exposed and needs renewing every 8 to 10 years.

Figure 14. Wheaten straw roof, Balinure, Bartlemy, East Cork. CCC no 209.

The one surviving thatched house in West Cork uses mountain grass, locally called 'ciób'or 'cíb' (the Irish term for mountain grass), which is gathered off the mountain by the owner during the summer months, (fig. 15).

In Cork, the traditional way of thatching is 'scollop thatch'. This is a common method used throughout Ireland where the thatch is secure to the roof by means of scollops. These are large U-shaped pins made by bending a pliable stick of hazel or willow (average length 27 inches) and sharpening it at both ends. The first layers of thatch are tied to the purlins with sugán (straw) rope. Depending on the size of the roof anything between four to ten thousand scollops were required for a single roof. If the thatch is well finished the scollops are invisible, exposed scollops tend to let water seep in. The only section where the scollops are exposed is at the ridge, eaves and gables where the outer layer needs to lie tightly down. On some houses the layer of thatch at the ridge is raised with decorative edges but this is not a strong traditional feature in County Cork. The thatch always finished beyond the wall tops in order to weatherproof the walls. The junction of thatch and wall-top was treated with care so that rain did not seep back into the wall. In some houses a layer of mud provided added protection on the top of the walls, providing a seal between the wall-top and the thatch.

The use of 'scraw' or sod to provide support for the thatch and extra insulation, though a feature in most parts of the country, does not appear to be commonplace in County Cork. Only three examples of its use were noted. Two of these occur in North Cork, at Lisnacon, near Kanturk and Knockawillin, near Tullylease, (fig. 16). The third example is the sole house in West Cork (fig. 15 & 24). This house had two layers of scraw and, according to the owner, it was taken from the mountain in rolls roughly two feet wide and five feet long.

Figure 15. Ciób roof in sole remaining West Cork house, near Glengarriff, Coolieragh. CCC No 185.

During the course of the survey considerable information came to light regarding thatchers still practising in the county. The survey recorded twelve thatchers active in Cork. However, at least half of these are now deceased or retired. Traditionally the craft of thatching is a skill, passed on from generation to generation, usually within a family group. In a few cases it was noted that the owners themselves maintained the roof (e.g. CCC Nos. 185 and 200).

The availability of a thatcher is crucial to the upkeep of a thatched roof. A clear example of this is at Ballylongane (CCC No. 175) near Shanagarry. In 1984, according to the owner, the thatch at his house needed repair and was leaking. But the local thatcher had died ten years previous and the owner could find nobody in the locality capable of repairing the roof. He therefore decided to abandon the thatched house and build a new house nearby. On the other hand the relatively large number of thatched houses that survive in the Newtownshandrum/Charleville area is the result of the availability of a local thatcher, John O'Gorman, himself the son of a thatcher. During the course of the survey we met John, at the age of 81, still thatching in Shandrum, Charleville. Unfortunately, John died soon after, taking with him a great deal of knowledge about the thatching tradition of that area.

Figure 16. Detail of scraw, Lisnacon, near Kanturk, North Cork. CCC No 200.

In the old days when the thatcher came to thatch a house, all members of the family were expected to assist - handing thatch and scollops to the thatcher and generally keeping him happy. Jack Maum, owner of a thatched house (CCC No. 27) near Kildorrery, recalled the day very clearly. The thatcher arrived with his own tools but expecting the owner of the house to provide the straw, the scollops, and a sturdy ladder. Before he started, according to Jack, he needed a drop of whiskey to steady his nerves! Then he stood back and took a good look at the house checking its proportion and size, something that he frequently repeated during the course of his work. The thatcher was right handed and worked from right to left, working three 'streakes' at a time, roughly eighteen inches wide, starting at the eaves and working up to the ridge. The thatch, once completed, was sprayed with a bluestone (copper sulphate) mix, which extended its life span.

The thatcher's tools were very important. Jim Baker, the Ballindangan thatcher, described his bag of tools to Paul Cotter (1998). It contained a 'bittle' or rectangular timber bat, (fig. 17). This has a smooth side for tapping the reed into place, and a side studded with nails which was used as a comb to tidy the thatch. A scollop container was essential, traditionally the container was made of sugán known as 'pukasheen' (though Jim used a Wellington boot to hold his scallops!). The thatching knives were always at the ready, and a glove was vital to protect the palm of the hand from the constant pushing in of the scollops. In general it is estimated that it took approximately five weeks to thatch a roof if the going was good, but delays due to the weather and other factors could prolong this period.

Figure 17. The thatcher Liam Broderick, pinning down the thatch with a scallop.

Building Materials

Traditional thatched houses were built using materials that were available locally. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, timber was scarce in Ireland following the decimation of native woodlands in the seventeenth century to supply charcoal for iron working. As stated earlier, many roof timbers were as likely to be roughly hewn branches as sawn timbers. What good wood there was tended therefore to be reserved for window and door frames as well as internal furnishings. It is impossible to tell on current evidence the extent to which wooden floors and wooden panelled ceilings and partitions were original features of houses in Cork but it is surmised that most are later additions.

In County Cork, stone was the favoured material for building walls, wherever it was readily available from the numerous limestone quarries. The render on the walls, barring the prudent use of a hammer, made it difficult to determine the construction of the wall beneath. However, in the case of 113 houses it was possible to establish that they were built of uncoursed random-rubble stonework. This was bonded by a variety of mortars, mainly lime, but also by clay and a mixture of clay and lime. The construction technique was double walling with an internal and external face of uncoursed random-

Figure 18. The use of roughly dressed stone, Ballysheehan, near Mallow, North Cork. CCC No 77.

rubble masonry. The thickness of the walls in the houses was quite consistent ranging from 0.52m - 0.7m. The wall height of the vast majority of houses was also quite constant ranging from 2m to 2.75m. Occasionally the stone was roughly dressed but this was confined to strategic structural points such as the corners of the house and above large openings, (fig. 18).

The external wall face was protected by a thick coating of lime render and finished with a lime wash. According to most house owners the wash was renewed annually.

Figure 19. Exposed Clay in a ruinous thatched house, Milltown, near Charleville, North Cork. CCC No 21.

Clay was an important building material in some parts of County Cork. Eighteen houses were certainly built of clay. This is probably an under-representation as it is difficult to tell apart a house with stone walls from one with clay walls, when both are covered by a thick coat of render. Clay had a number of advantages over stone as a building material. It was cheaper than quarry stone and is reasonably easy to use. It also has excellent insulating properties, keeping the house warm in winter and cool in summer. A recent experiment at Castleisland, in County Kerry (O'Hare 1995) provides an excellent description of how a clay house was built. The clay was mixed with straw or rushes in a pit close to the site of the house. This was then left for a few days to 'rest'. The clay mix was then piled onto a stone foundation that was up to 2ft high. This was left to dry before the next layer was laid. The walls were trimmed into shape with a spade. A good coat of lime render protected the clay walls from erosion. If maintained well, a clay house was just as sturdy and sound as a stone one. Today clay is making a modest revival as a sustainable building material in eco houses. However, clay will decay very rapidly once the render deteriorates. This is typified by the house at Milltown (CCC No. 21), (fig. 19). In 1984 the Cork Archaeological Survey recorded this house as recently abandoned and in poor repair. The owner had moved to a modern bungalow. He said his old thatched house had walls of clay which 'kept me warm in winter and cool in summer'. By 2001 the house had completely eroded back into the ground.

All but one of the 18 clay-built houses identified occur in the Charleville area. They reflect both the conditions in this area that are conducive to the survival of clay houses, and a particularly strong tradition in its use by local builders. Houses constructed with a mixture of both stone and clay were also identified. There are 13 examples of houses using this combination. The stonework was used for wall footings, and for framing large openings and the corners of the house, with the remainder of the wall infilled with clay.

The Interior

The position of the hearth or fireplace was central to the original layout of these houses. The room containing the fireplace is generally termed the kitchen, though it's meaning was far wider than the modern usage of that term. Prior to the introduction of the parlour, the kitchen was the most spacious room in the house with the ceiling rising to roof level. The large open fireplace was the central focus of the house; it was here that all the meals were cooked and where the family and neighbours gathered. The fireplace had a wooden lintel with an open flue behind. There are still some fireplaces retaining the once-common iron crane, an upright pivoted frame with an extended arm from which cooking utensils could be hung. The nineteenth century saw the introduction of the cast iron bellows to fan the fire, (fig. 20). These survive in a lot of the houses, particularly in East Cork, and many bear the name 'Pierce', the Wexford iron foundry. The heat from the fire was not only important to keep the house and its occupants dry and warm, but it is an important element in keeping the thatched roof dry. Kitchens traditionally were open to the roof, however nearly all the houses in Cork now have a wood-panelled or modern ceiling. According to most owners this panelling had been inserted in the early twentieth century.

At Ballysheehan (CCC No.77), the 'thatched mansion', the side wall of the fireplace contained a brick lined bread-oven. This feature was introduced into Ireland in the early seventeenth century and survived into the early eighteenth century.

Figure 20. Cast-iron bellows, Ballymacoda. CCC No 161.

The introduction of electricity had a profound impact on the traditional house. In many cases the 'kitchen' was moved into a flat-roofed extension at the rear of the house in order to accommodate the washing machine, fridge and electric cookers, as well as a sink with running water. Also included in many of these extensions was a toilet/bathroom. With these changes in how the house functioned the large open fireplace was no longer the central hub of the house and many were reduced in size and a modern fireplace inserted.

As we have already seen the simplest layout of a vernacular house contained a central kitchen, entered either through a lobby or directly via the front door, with bedrooms occupying the ends of the house. Many of the surviving thatched houses in Cork had a more elaborate internal arrangement than this. The parlour is an extra room located on the opposite side of chimney to the kitchen. It was used as 'the good room', for special occasions and often featured the only decorative furnishings in the house. According to Ó Danachair (1975, 49) *'in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century it became fashionable, in imitation of the gentry, to set aside in the larger houses a room, designated the "parlour". Usually overfurnished and crowded with ornaments and knickknacks this was reserved for important guests.'* In some instances the fireplace has a cast iron surround and there is a wooden-panelled ceiling. Parlours are a common feature of surviving thatched houses in Cork, especially lobby-entry houses.

Bedrooms usually occurred at either end of the house. In general, two small rectangular bedrooms lie directly off the kitchen, accessed directly by two doors in the wall opposite the fireplace. There is usually another bedroom off the parlour at the other end of the house. In quite a number of Cork houses extra sleeping space was provided with a loft at one end of the house. The lofts were accessed either by a simple ladder or by a steep narrow wooden stairs, (fig. 21). Light for the loft is usually provided by a small square window in the end-wall.

In Cork, the original floors have all been covered over with timber planking or modern concrete. However, there are a number of references by house owners to their original earthen floors. Ó Danachair's (1946, 25) description of flooring in County Limerick could as easily be applied in Cork: 'floors were usually of clay. In laying the floors the earth inside the house was dug away to a depth of nine inches or a foot, and the space filled with tempered clay, which was packed hard, smoothed off and left to dry. The area in front of the stone heath was often floored with stone flags or cobbled.'

Even more susceptible to change and modernization is the house furniture. In the main, the furniture in the Cork houses is modern. However, it is surprising just how much does remain - wooden dressers with their original paint, settles, dressers, tables, chairs etc. Claudia Kinmonth (1993) in her book on Irish Country Furniture covers the wonderfully rich and wide range of furniture within traditional houses and many of her examples come from traditional houses in Cork county.

Figure 21. Narrow stairs, Rathnacarton, near Castletownroche, North Cork. CCC No 82.

Farm Buildings

As most of the buildings featured in the survey are farmhouses, it is worth remembering that these were part of a complex, which included a range of other buildings. The main type of farming practiced by the owner of these houses was mixed dairying and tillage. This required a variety of farm buildings, and these were usually grouped around the dwelling. The buildings varied in size and layout according to the prosperity of the farmer.

The layout arrangement of the complex is varied. In nearly half of the examples noted the yard was laid out in what Aalen (1997, 166) terms the 'half-courtyard manner', with the house and one farm building forming two sides of a yard. Quite a number of the rest had no structured plan with the farm buildings apparently randomly placed in the vicinity of the house.

The vast majority of surviving farm buildings are built of random rubble stone and roofed with slate or galvanize, though many were originally thatched. They had a wide variety of uses, including hay and grain stores, cow byres, stables, pigsties, and hen houses. Small by present standards these buildings do not lend themselves easily to modern farm practice and consequently most are either derelict or heavily altered.

Figure 21A. Farm buildings forming a rectangler courtyard in front of farmhouse at Ballydeloughy, North Cork. CCC No 56.

Rare Examples

Figure 22. Thatched house in the streetline, Boherbue, North Cork. CCC No 190.

Figure 23. Thatched house at the edge of a village, Gyleen, East Cork. CCC No 224.

Figure 24. A rare example: the only recorded thatched house in West Cork, Coolieragh. CCC No 185.

Thatched houses were once a common feature of towns and villages, both as part of the street line and scattered at the edge of the settlement. In North Cork two thatched houses still survive in a street line, in the villages of Boherbue (fig. 22) and Ballindangan. Somewhat more numerous are freestanding houses at the verge of village settlements. There are examples of the latter in the East Cork villages of Gyleen (fig. 23), Ballycotton (CCC No.228 & 229), Killeagh (CCC No. 217), Mountuniacke (CCC No. 218). A substantial number of houses with corrugated steel roofs covering the thatch did survive in most towns and villages in the county into the 1980s but these are now almost as scarce as the thatch.

The single remaining thatch in West Cork (CCC No. 185) is a small rectangular, one-storey gable-ended house with a loft, (fig. 24). It is a type that was once common in the coastal areas of West and South Cork, and similar buildings were noted on the Beara peninsula by Rosemary ffolliott (1972, figs 3, 4 & 5). There is also evidence of them in the Ardfield/Rathbarry district near Clonakilty (Sleeman 1999-2000, 76) as well as in County Kerry (Ó Danachair 1975, 28). The West Cork house can also be compared with a number in East Cork, notably those at Knockadoon (CCC No. 168) and Gyleen (CCC No. 222).

Figure 25. A rare example: a two-roomed thatched house, Ballywalter, near Shanballymore, North Cork. CCC No 79.

The once ubiquitous one- or two-roomed thatched 'cabin' has now almost entirely disappeared from the county. This reinforces the point made above that survival seems to be related to the relative prosperity of the house owner. The smallest of the few that do survive is at Ballywalter in North Cork, (fig. 25).

At the other end of the scale is the two-storey 'thatched mansion'. Four examples were recorded, all in north Cork. The substantial house at Curraheen, (fig.26), near Kanturk, is the only remaining example in good repair. Cloghanughera (CCC No. 14), near Charleville, lost its thatch in 1984, as did Fort William (No 76), near Doneraile (Grove White 1905-25, vol.3, opp. 320) at an earlier stage. The example at Ballysheehan, near Mallow, was intact in the late 1980s but is now a ruin (Sleeman et al. 1998), (fig's 18 & 28).

Figure 26. A rare example: a thatched mansion, Curraheen (near Kanturk), North Cork. CCC No 35.

Figure 27. Thatch house in use as a public house, Dromina, North Cork. CCC No 187.

Date

Thatched houses are, by their very nature, difficult to date. They are part of a vernacular building tradition using long-established methods handed down through the generations, and therefore changed little over time. By their very nature these house are rarely mentioned in documentary sources and often the present occupant has no idea how old the building is. There are some exceptions. Jack Maume from Kildorrery can precisely date his house (CCC No. 27) to 1825 when his family was relocated by Lord Kingston who moved tenants off his land to make space for the 'new town' in Mitchelstown.

The Ordnance Survey maps can be used to help date houses. Nearly all of the houses identified by the Cork Archaeological Survey are marked on the 1840 six-inch maps, but how much older than that they are is difficult to say. It is very unlikely that any of the surviving thatched houses in Cork are older than the late-seventeenth/early-eighteenth century, and equally unlikely that any post-date the 1840s.

It is possible to roughly date some buildings on a particular feature. The 'thatched mansion' at Ballysheehan (CCC No.22) has a bread oven. These were a feature of the late-seventeenth/early eighteenth century (Sleeman et al 1998, 147).

Sometimes a date is scored into a stone or beam. During the renovating of the house at Gurteenbeha (95), the owners uncovered a date stone of 1709 in its porch. However, date stones can be misleading, as they may also be mementoes of a renovation rather than date the original construction.

Figure 28. Ballysheehan thatched mansion near Mallow, North Cork (1984), before it fell into ruin (fig. 18). CCC No 77.

Rate of Destruction and Deterioration

Each house recorded by CAS and by the 2001 CCC revisit survey, was graded according to its condition on a scale of 1 to 7. The following is a brief definition of each grade.

- Excellent: these houses are well maintained and have had very little modern alterations, and the thatched roof is in good repair.
- Good: these houses are in the same general condition as those above, but show some degree of recent alterations, usually in the form of modern doors and windows.
- Fair: these houses and their thatched roof are in need of some maintenance, though they are generally structurally sound.
- Neglected: these are houses that still have a thatched roof but are urgently in need of maintenance.
- Poor: these houses have thatch that is beginning to collapse, render is peeling off the walls and some structural cracks are beginning to appear.
- Ruinous: these houses are roofless or the roof is collapsed.
- Gone: these are all houses recorded by CAS of which there is now no evident trace left.

Figure 29. Thatched house in ruins, Farranshonikeen. CCC No 22.

However, two further grades were necessary to cover houses that are still occupied and in repair, but on which the thatched roof has either been covered by another material or entirely replaced. In some of these houses the original form of the house is still evident. In other cases the house now has all the appearance of a modern structure so heavily has it been modified.

- Re-roofed: these buildings are basically intact except that the thatched roof has been replaced or covered with another material. Also, in many cases the windows and doors are replaced in uPVC or aluminium.
- Modernised: these have been so heavily altered or modernised that it is difficult to tell what is original and what is new. The fabric of the buildings may remain but it has lost nearly all its traditional features.

The following is the total number of houses classified under each grade by the CCC survey in 2001.

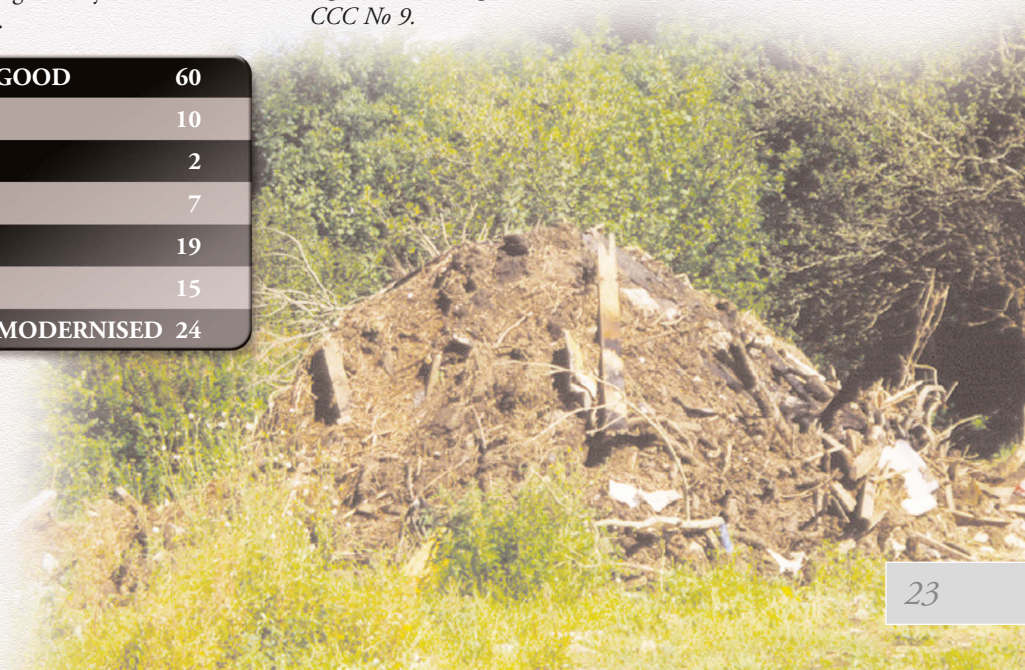
EXCELLENT	15
GOOD	78
FAIR	13
NEGLECTED	7
POOR	9
RUINOUS	33
GONE	32
RE-ROOFED	34
MODERNISED	13

Of the 187 thatched houses recorded in the 1980s, 137 could be classified as being either of Excellent or Good in grade. By 2001 these were reclassified as follows.

EXCELLENT/GOOD	60
FAIR	10
NEGLECTED	2
POOR	7
RUINOUS	19
GONE	15
RE-ROOFED/MODERNISED	24

The first obvious fact that emerges from these figures is that of the structures that were viable as traditional thatched houses in the mid-1980s, almost exactly 50% were still in that condition in 2001. The rest are either ruinous or have lost their thatched roof. The reasons why this is happening are discussed below, but what is clear is that to loose 50% of a building stock over fifteen years represents a serious and rapid decline. Given that the 2001 survey recorded a total of 93 houses in Excellent/Good condition, then it seems that at best there will be considerably less that fifty viable traditional thatched houses in the county by 2015 if nothing is done (fig's 29 & 30).

Figure 30. Disintegrated thatched house, Shandrum. CCC No 9.



Legislation and Protection

In 1997 Ireland ratified the Council of Europe's Convention for the Protection of the Architectural Heritage of Europe (The Granada Convention). This ratification process commits the Government, at both a local and national level, to make every effort to ensure the survival and conservation of our built heritage. As a result a series of legislative, administrative and financial frameworks were put in place in order to realise this objective.

In December 2001, the Department of Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht and the Islands issued a draft policy document entitled Architectural Heritage Protection Guidelines for Planning Authorities. This contains an elaborate framework for the protection of built heritage. Since the abolition of that department in 2002, responsibility has passed to the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government.

The primary legislative tool for protecting heritage buildings is the Local Government (Planning and Development) Act, 2000. The act gives local planning authorities the principal role in the protection of built heritage. Amongst the act's range of provisions the most significant with respect to vernacular buildings is the concept of the **Record of Protected Structures**.

In their recently published policy paper on Irish thatched roofs, The Heritage Council state as one of their recommendations, that 'every planning authority should ensure that all thatched buildings over 50 years old are placed on the **Record of Protected Structures'**. This will enable the owners of these houses to qualify for grant-aid, and also 'ensure effective legislation protection for thatched buildings'. The recently adopted County Development Plan for County Cork includes 117 thatched houses as protected structures (these structures were identified as a result of the CCC survey).

Another legislative tool useful for the protection of vernacular buildings is the National Monuments (Amendment) Act, 1994. County Cork is unique in having thatched houses designated in its **'Record of Monuments and Places'** (RMP) (issued in 1998). Under section 12 (3) of the 1994 Act, the owner or occupier of an item listed in the RMP who wishes to carry out work at the site is required to 'give notice in writing of his proposal to carry out the work to the Minister' and will not 'commence the work for a period of two months after'. (The 'Minister' is the Minister of Environment, Heritage and Local Government.)

As mentioned above an important recent publication by the Heritage Council is the policy paper, *Irish Thatched Roofs and the National Heritage* (May 2002). The overriding principle of the document is that the traditional thatched roof is worthy of preservation as an inherent characteristic of the Irish landscape. It outlines seventeen useful and important recommendations which include:

- Establishing a forum for thatchers and interested groups
- The training of thatchers
- Research into traditional materials
- The provision of new incentives for owners as the present grant system is inadequate

These recommendations need to be acted upon. One of the recommendations is that 'each planning authority should complete an inventory of thatched buildings in its administrative area'. Cork County Council has taken that step with this study.

The Future

Whilst it is difficult to quantify the effect exactly, it is clear that two major factors are at work in the continuing disappearance of the traditional thatched roof. Firstly, is the abandonment of these houses once the owner is deceased. In a large number of cases the current incumbents of the house are elderly and there is a clear trend that once they pass on, the next generation are likely to abandon the house and build a new dwelling on an adjacent site, or completely modernise the structure. Secondly, many thatched houses are falling into decay because there is no longer a thatcher available locally. We have already noted the close relationship between the survival of thatch and the survival of the craft of thatching. Conversely, once the craft dies out locally then the number of houses with thatched roofs in the area will begin to fall off rapidly.

The first problem is symptomatic of changing social values. The thatched house is perceived as old-fashioned and unsuitable for modern standards of living. There is also a deeper problem with the importance society places on traditional buildings. As Fidelma Mullane (2000, 75) has observed 'our attitudes towards the care of our vernacular landscapes range from benign neglect to active hostility'. To combat this problem we need to place greater value on these buildings. At least in the course of the two surveys (CAS & CCC) and subsequent selection of houses as **Protected Structures** for the Development Plan, owners were made aware that there was some degree of outside interest in their houses. This needs to be followed-up in some way that will further enhance the 'value' of these buildings. Whilst there are grants available for thatching, few house owners were conversant with the details of this scheme, which in any case was perceived as a modest contribution. Many of the house owners are elderly and would require assistance with a grant application. Related to the viability of these houses is the perception that the cost of insuring a thatched roof is prohibitive- some owners cited the advice of their insurance company as the reason for replacing the roof.

The second problem may not be as intractable and there are probably still enough thatchers active in the county to keep the craft alive. But what is in danger of being lost is the 'local' tradition. In at least one case a house has been re-thatched in a style that is clearly not typical to Cork (CCC No. 53). In another instance the thatch roof on a West Cork house (fig. 28) has been replaced with corrugated iron as the owner was elderly and could not find any one to do the job (CCC No. 185). There is an urgent need for a training scheme or apprenticeship to be set up where knowledge of the local craft is recorded and drawn upon.

In spite of all these difficulties it is still possible to effectively sustain the traditional thatched house in County Cork. This survey demonstrates that enough houses survive in a viable condition to make the effort worthwhile. The question to be answered is whether, as a society, we have the collective will to do so.

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Abbreviations

SMR: SITES AND MONUMENT RECORD, 1988 Office of Public Works

RMP: RECORD OF MONUMENTS AND PLACES 1998, Dúchas the Heritage Service, National Monuments and Historic Properties

John O'Gorman, Thatcher,
1920 - 2002

CORK COUNTY COUNCIL
1899

An Chomhairle Oidhreachta
The Heritage Council