

One of the most characteristic and popular features of the Irish landscape is the traditional rural dwelling. Like its European counterparts, it has been disappearing progressively in the face of increased industrialisation and urban development.

The traditional Irish rural dwelling evolved in the manner denoted by the German scholar, Joseph Schepers, as ernhaus - the small house in the evolution of which the hearth has been the central element. The development of the Irish house thus involved a progression to having a chimney.

It is known that there were two original Irish house types:

- the circular or oval plan house
- the large aisled building (similar to the so-called 'Saxon House' of north west Germany).

These two types disappeared in favour of a rectangular solid wall, stone or clay structure, because of a lack of timber. Irish forests were denuded in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to provide space for English plantations, fuel for English industries and to remove hide-outs for Irish rebels.

The traditional Irish single-storey, rectangular, whitewashed, thatched cottage which became the characteristic rural dwelling had the following features:

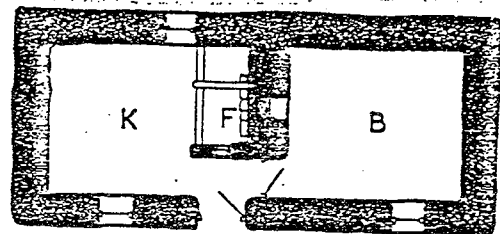
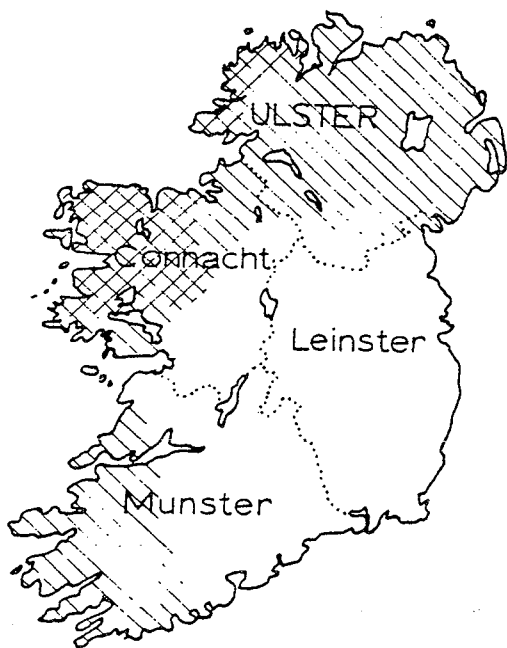
- a rectangular plan tending to extension in length with each room occupying the full width of the house and each room leading one into the other without a central hallway.
- thick walls solidly built of mineral material, stone or clay
- open hearth at floor level, situated on the long axis of the house, its chimney protruding through the roof ridge
- windows and door in the side, not end walls
- roof of steep pitch, covered with thatch of vegetable material.

These features were determined mainly by environmental conditions. They reflect modifications due to availability of materials and to the damp Irish climate.

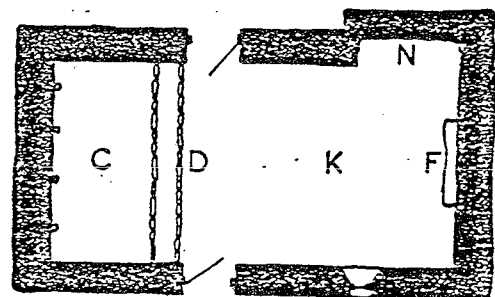
Extensions to traditional Irish houses tended to be in length. Many examples exist where extensions have different roofing materials - thatch, slate, corrugated iron, asbestos tiles. The houses were sub-divided by placing partitions between existing rooms. Wooden partitions were common as were large pieces of furniture (dressers and cupboards) which, with the central hearth, provided a makeshift division.

There were three basic house types, each of which is typical of a particular region:

- Ⓐ the house type characteristic of the east of Ireland has an entrance door which leads directly into the centre of the house to form a simple two-room dwelling
- Ⓑ in north west Connaught and north west Ulster, houses had one single long compartment with the hearth in the middle of one end wall and, about two thirds of the length of the house from the fire, two doors set in the side walls directly opposite each other. An open drain separates the family's living quarters from where the cows were kept
- Ⓒ in east Ulster, the typical house consisted of two compartments divided by a partition wall made from solid material. A single door leads into the larger compartment which served as the kitchen and there is a fireplace and chimney at each of the two gable ends.

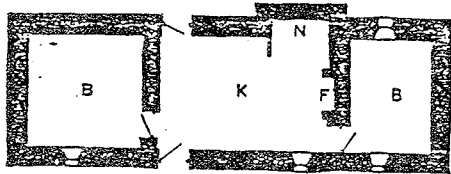
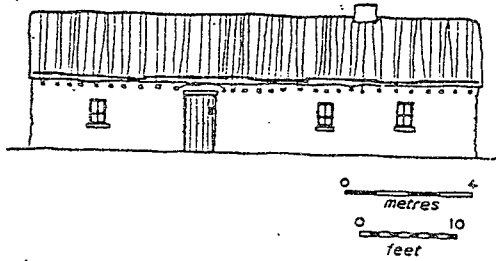


Ⓐ Plan of a small house near Naas, County Kildare. K=kitchen-Living-room; F=hearth; B=bedroom.

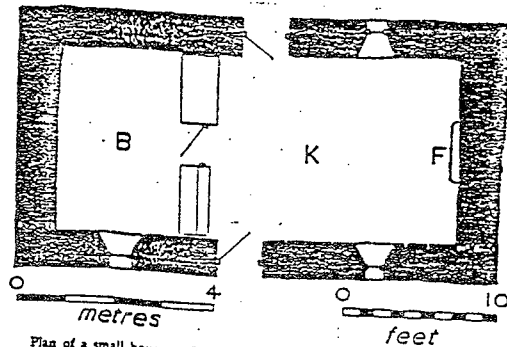


Ⓑ Plan of a small house near Belmullet, County Mayo, still inhabited in 1935. N=bed-salvage; C=space for four milking cows; D=open drain.

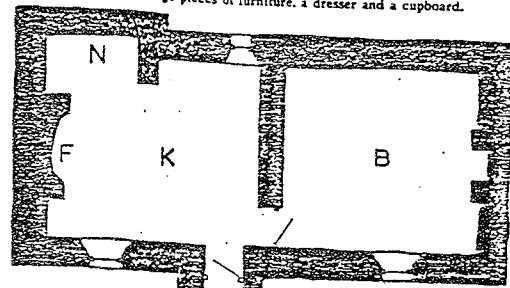
The material of which walls were made depended on local availability. In some bog areas, neither stone nor clay could be found, and sod was most often used for the walls. It was regarded as an inferior material because it was not load-bearing. Tempered clay was used successfully in the south east and was very durable. But the best material was stone and mortar. The stone mason was a widely-respected local craftsman. In areas where lime was scarce, tempered clay was used instead of lime mortar. In areas where both lime and clay were scarce, the old tradition of dry-walling (building in stone without any binding material) was continued.



Plan and elevation of typical farmhouse of south-west County Donegal.



Plan of a small house at Smerwick, County Kerry. Note the partition formed from two large pieces of furniture, a dresser and a cupboard.



© Plan of a small house near Omagh, County Tyrone, with a small fireplace at the end opposite to the main hearth.

The central hearth was dictated by taste and tradition because it became the social and functional centre of the house. The hearth was used to cook fresh food, bake bread daily and keep tea constantly on the boil. The family and guests sat in order of importance with grandparents and visitors having the seats next to the fire.

Except for small loft windows, there were no openings in the gable walls of the house. The window openings and doors were in the long side walls. There were few windows to give added insulation.

The roof was a very important feature. It was usually at a pitch of at least 50° to counteract the rainy climate and the rafters had to overhang the side walls. The hip-roof (all four sides sloped) was used in the south east while the gable roof was typical of the north, north west and west coast. A roof type with a rounded ridge was used in the north west Connaught and north west Ulster as a protection against violent winter winds.

Slate was used in the few areas where it was available. The use of thatch was widespread, however, because it provided a light roof and had qualities of soundproofing and insulation (it kept the house warm in winter and cool in summer). Over the greater part of Ireland (except in the east), a layer of sods was laid on the roof timbers as a support for the thatch and to improve the insulation. The strips of sod were bound to the timbers with cord and the thatch laid on over these. The thatch was usually of corn straw or of reed from rivers and lakes.

Four different methods of thatching were used in Ireland:

- along the north, west and south west coasts, the thatch was laid on the sod without any direct binding, and was secured to the roof by a continuous network of cord or rope which was in turn secured to rows of weights or to the wall tops
- over most of the country the thatch was secured to the sod directly underneath by 'scollops' (staples of cut and twisted twigs or rods)
- in north Leinster and in the south west region, the straw was sewn to the roof with cords at the first thatching and subsequent thatching was done by thrusting handfuls of straw into the roof with a fork
- in parts of east Ulster, a method previously used in Leinster and north Munster has been preserved - small bundles of straw sealed to the roof with clay.

It was common for a wire or nylon netting to be placed on the thatch to prevent birds from nesting on the roof but this system can attract damp leaves. Thatch in proper repair will never be wet more than three centimetres below the surface. It also provides an attractive roof and owners tend to be proud of their investment of time and money. A thatched roof requires more frequent maintenance than a slated roof. Thus in Ireland today, ownership of a thatched roof requires a special commitment to the preservation of the traditional rural dwelling.

There are a number of particular features of the Irish rural dwelling which should be mentioned.

The bed-alcove or bed-outshot was a recessed portion of the rear side wall large enough to contain a bed. From the outside it looks like a small projecting block. Beds were often boxed in or else a curtain concealed them from the area surrounding the hearth. The bed-outshot was typical of north west Connaught and Ulster.

The jamb-wall blocked off the hearth from the door and was most often used in central and eastern Ireland. There was nearly always a small window in the jamb-wall, through which someone seated by the fire could observe a visitor at the door.

Many Irish houses had a half-loft or skeagh above the kitchen area. The warmth of the fire would rise up to heat the sleeping area above. The half-loft was alternatively used as a storage space.

It was quite common to find a number of houses built together in a cluster or clachán. Communities were close-knit and families interdependent so it served a social purpose to build houses in groups.

In Ireland today the traditional rural dwelling is under threat. There are a number of factors which have caused this situation.

The major problem is the lack of government or local authority grants for house repairs and rethatching. Some local authorities are willing to place preservation orders on thatched dwellings but refuse to help the owners to preserve them.

Insurance companies will not insure thatched dwellings due to the supposed increase in fire risk. It has been shown that a properly insulated thatch with a fire-proof shield under it is a safe protection from an interior fire. The thatch is admittedly exposed to potential arson from outside.

Many of Ireland's recently trained thatchers have been lured to the United States of America by the attractive conditions available in heritage parks there. In Ireland there is not enough support to encourage them to stay.

Recent trends in agriculture have diminished the availability of good thatching straw. The new crop strains have lower heights to avoid wind damage and the use of combine harvesters does away with the long straw needed for thatching. Water reed is not used widely in Ireland except in the south east.

There is also a problem of public perception. Whereas in England traditional rural dwellings are an auctioneer's dream, in Ireland they are associated with centuries of poverty and inadequate living standards. The Irish countryside is abundant with modern bungalows while the traditional dwellings are left to fall into decay. At the same time, the thatched, whitewashed cottage is perhaps the most conspicuous image in the publicity which attracts tourists to Ireland. It is sad that, as yet, comprehensive official support has not been forthcoming for the country's important heritage of vernacular architecture.

Some promising signs have emerged recently with the establishment of the Irish Thatchers' Guild, national folk parks and a Heritage Advisory Council. Local authorities are becoming more responsive to public demands. It is to be hoped that these seeds will grow and protect the traditional Irish rural dwelling before it is too late.

Ireland's vernacular architecture is, like its European counterparts, disappearing gradually in the face of increased industrialisation and urban development.

Strenuous efforts are necessary to ensure even a mere touristic function for Ireland's traditional rural dwellings. Ironically, for many years, the traditional Irish single-storey whitewashed and thatched cottage was something of a national symbol. Now it is the symbol of an age gone by.

The Irish rural dwelling has features in common with the general European type known to ethnologists as ernhaus. The distinct Irish features include: a rectangular plan, divided into rooms the full width of the house and one leading off the other (no central hallway); thick strong stone walls; a steep sloped roof weighted on the longer outer walls; an open hearth; a chimney protruding through the roof ridge; usually only one storey in height; and with windows and doors on the side walls not at the gable ends.

These dwellings are most typical of the north and west of the country (most of the province of Ulster, all of Connaught and the south west of Munster) where the climate and landscape are most rugged. Tradition too has been preserved longer in these areas.

With the emergence of an Irish Thatchers' Guild and certain attempts to provide folk-park and tourist facilities, a little hope has appeared. The traditional Irish rural dwelling is, however, worthy of more sustained preservation efforts.

L'architecture vernaculaire d'Irlande est en train de disparaître à cause de l'industrialisation et de l'urbanisation. Il est nécessaire de beaucoup faire afin de garder même une fonction touristique pour les habitations vernaculaire irlandaise. C'est dommage que ça soit le cas parce que pendant le siècle dernier, elles étaient un symbol national. Aujourd'hui, elles sont symbolique du temps jadis.

L'habitation vernaculaire irlandaise a des traits en commun avec le type européen qui est dénoté 'ernhaus'. Les traits particuliers à la forme irlandaise comprennent: un plan rectangulaire, divisé en salles la pleine largeur de l'habitation et sans un couloir central; des murs forts en pierre; un toit avec une pente raide qui pèse sur les murs les plus longs; un foyer ouvert; une cheminée qui dépasse l'arête du toit; normalement d'un seul étage; et avec les fenêtres et les portes aux murs longs et pas aux pignons.

Ces habitations sont plus typique du nord et de l'ouest du pays (c'est-à-dire le province d'Ulster, le province de Connaught et le sud-ouest de Munster) où le climat et le paysage sont les plus sévères. On peut dire aussi que la tradition est importante dans ces régions.

Il est difficile d'être optimiste pour le futur des habitations vernaculaire irlandaise. Il y en a certains développements qui donnent un peu d'espoir. Mais ce trésor de l'héritage architecturale irlandais vaut la peine des efforts plus vigoureux.