

County Waterford Thatched Houses

Report of findings



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1. Introduction

This survey was carried out by John Cronin and Associates on behalf of Waterford County Council. It is, in effect, the first comprehensive survey of thatched houses to be carried out in the county. The basic aims of the report are to identify the surviving historic thatched houses in the county, to describe them, to compile a photographic record thereof and to compile a database of the houses to facilitate their conservation. For privacy reasons, the database and photographs are kept in the council offices and the location of the houses in this summary are not revealed.

Nomenclature

Thatched houses are part of the larger vernacular housing tradition. "Vernacular" houses were generally built without the input of an architect and were built using local materials and labour. As such they made up the vast bulk of the housing stock until recent years. "Thatched houses" by definition are houses that have thatch as their principal roofing material. Today the principal thatching material is reed and this has replaced straw thatch in most parts of the country. "Historic thatched houses" are thatched houses which are not of recent construction. The term "Newly built thatched houses" is self explanatory: Most newly built thatched houses, while having thatched roofs, do not fall into the vernacular tradition as they are built using imported materials and are frequently designed by architects. "Formerly thatched houses" are houses whose thatched roof has been replaced, or in some cases covered, with another roofing material such as corrugated iron or slate.

In general we have avoided using the term "Thatched Cottage" as the term "cottage" has socio-economic connotations in that a cottage is strictly speaking the home of a cottier or landless labour. Many thatched houses, particularly the larger examples, were in fact occupied by strong farmers or, in a few cases, by members of the minor gentry. Five houses (026-003, 029-002, 032-002, 034-007, 034-019) fall into the category of "Cottage Orn  ": These were formally designed cottages, usually associated with an estate, which were intended to reflect an idealized notion of a country dwelling. They grew out of a delight in the rustic which was an element of early nineteenth century romanticism and frequently display features such as rustic porches, tracery windows and, of course, thatched roofs.



A Cottage Orn  

2. Methodology

Desktop Research: Compiling lists of potential thatched houses

The first week of the project was devoted to a desk top study with the aim of compiling a list of known thatched houses in the county and to gather as much background reference material as possible.

The present survey had a number of valuable sources to draw on. A preliminary survey of thatched houses in the county was carried out in 1991 by County Council outdoor staff, and augmented by an input from the ICA (henceforth referred to as 1991 Survey). This survey recorded c.315 houses, c.65 of which were formerly thatched houses. However, the report was limited in some respects. There were no actual descriptions made of the houses nor was a photographic record made. Townland locations for the houses were noted but these were frequently vague or inaccurate. Owners were also noted but in the interim many houses have changed hands or the owners simply were not present to verify that a particular house in a particular area was in fact the house surveyed in 1991. As a result, the 1991 list was of only limited use in the context of the present study- It gave a good idea of the numbers of houses present and a rough indication of their locations but little more.

A second source was the County Council's own Record of Protected Structures (henceforth referred to as RPS) which included 68 thatched houses. Houses included on the list were described and co-ordinates given for their locations. Its main weakness was the fact that it does not represent a full and comprehensive record of all thatched houses in the county.

The third main source was the National Inventory of Architectural Heritage (henceforth referred to as NIAH) which included 105 thatched houses in its list of architecturally significant buildings in County Waterford. This, coupled with the Record of Protected Structures, provided the baseline for the present survey.

In an attempt to augment the lists, local post offices were contacted throughout the county and were invited to identify the locations of additional houses. In addition the County Council used local media to raise awareness of the project and invited the public to contribute to the list. These approaches had only limited success. By far the best source for locating previously unrecorded thatched houses was by word of mouth from other thatched house owners.

Field Surveys

The field surveys were carried out over a period of four weeks in August and September 2006 and were undertaken by three experienced architectural heritage surveyors: Rhoda Cronin, Niamh McCullagh and Ita O'Brien.

From the outset it was decided that NIAH guidelines and standards should be adhered to where possible. The NIAH record sheets were used in the field and the accompanying handbook used to structure the descriptions. In addition to the written record, a photographic record was taken of each house. The locations of previously unrecorded houses were marked on copies of the 6" ordnance survey from which co-ordinates can be worked out at a later date.

Field work was carried out by two teams of surveyors using 6" OS sheets as spatial divisions which avoided overlapping by the teams. Townlands where thatched houses were known to exist were marked on the Discovery Series Maps (Sheets 74, 75, 76, 81 and 82) and these maps were used for

navigation purposes. The surveyors highlighted their respective Discovery Series maps as they completed their review of individual roads – this ensured that all of the road network was inspected.

Because of time and logistical constraints, the survey focused on the exteriors of the houses. Houses were only entered when the surveyors were invited to do so. If the owner was absent only the front of the house was photographed and, where practical, from the public road.

3. The database

Designing the database

In designing the database we again used the NIAH database as a model. However, given that the scope of the survey was confined to a single building type, a number of fields were considered superfluous, or of limited value, and so were omitted. Strictly defined date brackets, for example, are almost impossible to apply to vernacular houses as they have few dateable features and exhibit an inherent conservatism resulting in little change in building style over several centuries. Conversely, a number of fields were added which highlight important elements of thatched house typology- namely entry type, and roof type- and which allow certain statistical information to be extracted easily.

Overview of the database (See Appendix 1 for sample of database)

The first section of each record provides identification and location information for the house. Each house has an individual Waterford Thatched House Survey Number (WTHS) consisting of six digits, the first three of which indicate the 6"OS sheet number. If the house is included in the NIAH and/or is a recorded protected structure (RPS) these numbers are given. Townlands and other location information are included and, where available, National Grid Co-ordinates are given.

The next section of the record gives some details on the nature and form of the house. The original type is identified as is its present use. We have avoided using strict date brackets for the reasons given above, and instead have indicated a broad period of origin, usually "18th-19th century".

An indication of the condition of the houses is given. It should be noted that the condition of a house was, where possible, assessed quite separately from its level of intactness. The grades and criteria used to classify the condition of the houses are as follows:

Condition	Description
Excellent	Structure, including the roof and fittings, is in excellent state of repair and decoration.
Good	Structure, including roof, is well maintained but may show some signs of deterioration which, as yet, pose no threat to the structural integrity of the house. The roof and walls, may for instance, show some surface moss growth or the paint to walls and fittings may be peeling.
Fair	Structure, including roof and fittings, are beginning to show signs of serious neglect, with render falling from walls and thatch being visibly eroded. Some ingress of moisture may be present.
Poor	Structure, including roof, show serious signs of neglect with structural deterioration obvious. Up to 50% of the roofing material may be absent and water ingress is obvious.
In ruins	Structure is in ruinous condition with the major part of, or all of, the roof collapsed.

The level of intactness of historical fabric of each house was also gauged although it must be stressed that this assessment was usually based on the exterior only. Three levels of intactness were identified as follows:

Level of Intactness	Description
High	Structure retains most of its original, or early, fabric and fittings including walls, windows, doors, as well as most of its original layout and composition. The house will also have only minor later accretions.
Medium	Structure retains some of its original fabric and most of its original form and composition. In most cases windows and doors will have been enlarged and replaced but their placement will be original. Houses will also generally have been extended and added to.

Low	Structure will retain very little of its historic fabric, form or composition. A low level of intactness is generally applied to houses which have either been heavily modernized or which are in a very ruinous condition.
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Example of a house with a high level of intactness.

Note survival of windows and door, wall treatment, boundary wall and gate, and lack of additions.



Example of a house with a medium level of intactness.

Note replacement of windows and door and addition of extension and porch.



Example of a house with a low level of intactness.

Note recent addition of an upper storey and porch, replacement and enlargement of windows, and modern render treatment.

Each record also contains field for detailed description and appraisal of each house. Where a house has been included in the NIAH we have reused the descriptions and appraisals as compiled by the NIAH. Occasional amendments have been added and are identified by square brackets []. Many of these amendments relate to superficial changes which have occurred since the NIAH survey was carried out.

4. Findings

Distribution

(See Appendix 2 for distribution map)

In general thatched houses are widely distributed in Co. Waterford with particularly high concentrations in the southern half of the county. There are significant clusters of houses around the settlements of Dunmore East, Lismore / Tallow, and in the southern part of the county around Dungarvan, Kinsalebeg and Bunmahon. The upland area defined by the Comeraghs, which occupy much of the northern half of the county, display a very low incidence of thatched houses. This area was, and remains, relatively sparsely populated.

Overall the concentration of thatched houses in the county is 0.11 per km². This compares favourably with other counties where similar surveys have been undertaken. Co. Clare for example has 0.02 thatched houses per km² while Co. Cork has a concentration of 0.03 per km².

General characteristics

The database, compiled by the survey, contained 201 individual houses. Since the survey was completed, an extra 8 houses have been located. This may not be a definitive figure for thatched houses in the county, as it is likely that there may be some more extant in isolated areas. Many variations were observed and will be outlined below. In general, however, the houses were almost entirely one storey with three to five bays to the front elevation. The majority were located in a rural setting but some were urban in character with a particularly large concentration occurring in Dunmore East where a number of terraces of thatched houses survive. Many of the rural houses retain outbuildings with a number of typical enclosed farmyards surviving.



Farmyard

Entry type

Vernacular houses tend to fall into two basic plan types, direct entry or lobby entry, based on the relative positions of the main door to the principal fireplace in the kitchen. In the direct entry type, the door allows entry directly into the kitchen space, usually well away from the fireplace. In the lobby entry type, the main door is located adjacent to the fireplace (externally the door is in line with the chimney)

and opens into a small lobby which protects the hearth from draughts. Of the 201 houses in the database, 107 (53.5%) are direct entry while 44 (22%) are lobby entry (The remaining houses were classed as being of indeterminate type either because they were not accessed or they have been altered to such extent that the type could not be determined).

Number of Storeys

The vast majority of the houses surveyed are, or originally were, one storey, or one storey with a loft. The loft, was generally lit by small window in the gable-end of the house and was accessed from the principal room of the house via a timber stairs.



One storey thatched house, with loft window in end wall.



Loft stairs in kitchen

Two-storey thatched houses are a rarity in Ireland (only four were noted in Co. Cork) and are often referred to as “thatched mansions”. Two houses with a dormer storey were noted in Co. Waterford. In both cases the dormer storey is only over a portion of the house and may not be an original feature.



House with dormer storey



House with dormer storey,

One house (WTHS 025-016), in Dunhill, features a fully two-storey portion but this is almost certainly a late 19th or early 20th century addition to what was originally a three-bay, one storey house.



Two-storey addition to house ,Dunhill.

The Roof

Reed is the predominant, if not the only, roofing material being employed by thatchers in Co. Waterford at present. However, older wheaten straw and scraw survives under some of the reed thatch. The overwhelming amount of reed thatch observed, even on roofs, which were not thatched recently, might suggest that reed is, in fact, the traditional roofing material in the county. Today, most of the reed used is imported reed from Turkey, which is said to have a significantly longer lifespan (c.20 years) than indigenous reed (c.12 years). Locally harvested reed is also used, however the demand far outstrips the supply. Scollops of hazel and sally are still being used to fix the thatch to the roof but some thatchers are also using scollops of bent wire.



Traditional wooden scollops

Two main roof types are typical of thatched houses: Gable-ended roofs and hipped roofs (half-hipped roofs also occur but for the purpose of the present study these have been classified with the hipped form). In general it seems that gabled houses are more common in the west and north of the country, areas which are more susceptible to high winds. Hipped roofs, which are said to have better waterproof qualities than the gabled type but are less resistant to wind, predominate in the south east and east. On the basis of the present survey, it can be categorically stated that hipped roofs predominate in Co. Waterford. Of the 201 recorded houses, 132 (66%) have hipped roofs, 37 (18.5%) have gable-ended roofs and 24 (12%) have a combination of both (The remaining houses were either not accessed or are in a ruinous condition). As mentioned above, half hipped roofs are a common variant of the hipped form and often take this form to accommodate a loft window. As regards gable-ended houses, in some cases the thatch is finished with broad band of coping on the gables, while in others it extends over the top of the gable wall.



An example of a hip-roofed house



A house with a gable-ended / hipped roof



An example of a gable-ended house with coping on the gables



An example of a gable-ended house where thatch wraps over gable.

Because only a handful of house interiors were accessed no definitive remarks can be made regarding roof timbers. A small number of semi-ruinous houses still retain some roof timbers *in situ* and in these cases unwrought or semi-hewn timbers were observed.



Underside of a roof .Note roughly hewn rafters and purlins.

Building Materials

Vernacular houses are generally built of easily acquired local materials, usually stone or mud or a combination of both. Most houses today have an outer coating of render which masks the underlying fabric. Frequently, as part of renovation works in the twentieth century, the front wall was actually removed and rebuilt using mass concrete or concrete blocks.

Interiors

Very few house interiors were inspected as part of the present survey with houses only being entered when the surveyors were invited to do so. Fortunately such invitations were usually offered when the owner felt that the interior was especially well preserved and worthy of being recorded. WTH023-001 retains a perfectly preserved 19th –early 20th century interior with original furniture, timber fittings, fire place and rush-lining to the underside of the roof.



Kitchen dresser



Ceiling treatment

Two other structures, WTHS 031-009 and WTHS 036-004 (Seanchaí Bar), retain open fireplaces with built-in, cast-iron ovens.



Fireplace with oven



Fireplace with oven

Date

Thatched houses, and indeed vernacular houses generally, are notoriously difficult to date. The occupiers usually only have a vague idea of their antiquity and they rarely contain features which can be compared with main-stream, and therefore datable, architectural trends. On the contrary, they represent a conservative building tradition which may stretch back to the medieval period with few technological or stylistic innovations. Features such as the Georgian style windows and door case of Cove Cottage, which might suggest a date in the late 18th –early 19th century for this house, are the exception. In addition, it should be noted that windows are easily replaced and enlarged and can be a very unreliable basis on which to date the building itself.

In general it is believed that much of our vernacular housing stock dates to the period from c.1700 to 1840 although some latitude needs to be allowed at each end of this period (Sleeman 2004, 21). Mapping evidence is of limited use in dating. Most of the thatched houses surveyed appear on the 1st

edition OS maps of the 1830s-40s. This provides a date before which they were constructed but does not indicate how long before.

Date stones occasionally occur in thatched houses – a single example is known from Co. Cork, for example, which indicates a date of 1709- but unfortunately none came to light in the course of the Waterford survey. An outhouse associated with Mary Kennedy's Bar bears a date stone of 1882 but this does not date the actual house. An outhouse associated with WTH30-006 bears a date stone dated to 1847 but again this does not apply to the house, which in this case is probably about 50 years earlier. Similarly a wrought iron gate at WTHS 023-001 is inscribed 1874 but again this does not date the house.



Date stone on keystone of arch to outhouse



Dated gate (1874)

Condition

The condition of houses in County Waterford varied greatly but the vast majority were judged to be in *good* (53%) or *excellent* (25%) condition. These houses are currently not considered to be vulnerable to neglect or decay. In contrast, a minority were found to be in *fair* (11.5%) or *poor* (7%) condition. These houses are at risk of being lost to the record. Only 3% of the houses recorded were classed as being *in ruins*. The remaining houses were not accessed.

Level of intactness

The level of intactness is intended to give an idea of the degree to which the historic fabric of a house survives. A significant minority of houses surveyed (c. 27%) were considered to be of high intactness. Such houses are a very valuable part of the vernacular housing stock as they retain a high degree of historic patina and fabric. The majority of houses (61%) were judged to be of medium intactness. These houses generally lacked their original fittings, had their openings modified and /or had visually intrusive additions. A small proportion (9.5%) were considered to be of low intactness. These houses were frequently very highly modernized to the extent that their original vernacular character has been virtually erased. Others within this category are in such a ruinous condition that little of their original fabric and fittings survive.

5. The future

As this is the first comprehensive survey of thatched houses in County Waterford it is difficult to draw statistical conclusions regarding the rate of survival. However, the 1991 County Council Survey offers some basis for comparison. It listed 250 thatched houses which suggests that in the past 15 years nearly 20% have been lost. This is a high level of loss and is borne out to some extent by anecdotal evidence. Interviews conducted during the present survey repeatedly tell of the loss of considerable numbers of houses within living memory.

Yet, on the basis of the present survey it would appear that the *tradition* of thatching is alive and well in County Waterford. The majority of houses surveyed are in excellent or good condition indicating that both the willingness and the technical skills to maintain vernacular thatch is strong. There are also a large number of newly built thatched houses (25-30 observed) which, while not strictly part of the vernacular tradition, are important in sustaining a high level of skill among thatchers - in other words, thatching is not simply a maintenance activity confined to a fixed or diminishing stock of existing houses but is also seen as a viable career for young thatchers. This ensures that the skill set survives into the future and, to some extent, guarantees the survival of the vernacular thatched house.

In contrast to previous decades when the worry was the loss of thatching skills, today the skill set is sustainable and viable. While the stock is diminished it is nonetheless a valuable cultural resource. What is required is a more holistic approach to grant aid. At present the focus is on preserving and maintaining the thatched roof in isolation. Where funding is being provided from central or local government agencies consideration should be given for top-up funding to preserve associated vernacular features such as windows, doors, outhouse complexes etc. This would help overcome the inadvertent, cumulative and progressive loss of historic fabric which at present appears to be biggest threat to the buildings.



A new development of thatched houses at Stradbally.

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Distribution map

