

Local Architecture

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Within a short distance of Poyntzpass there is a line of 'grand' houses and mansions — Terryhoogan, Scarva House, Acton House, Lisnabrague, Drumbranagher (demolished) and Dromantine.

However the Dutch Renaissance of Scarva House, the English Georgian of Lisnabrague, or the Italianate classicism of Drumbranagher however, superb in themselves can hardly be described as "local" architecture. So they will not be the subject of this article.

What I intend to look at are the houses of the ordinary people, the little cottages in which the vast majority of local people lived.

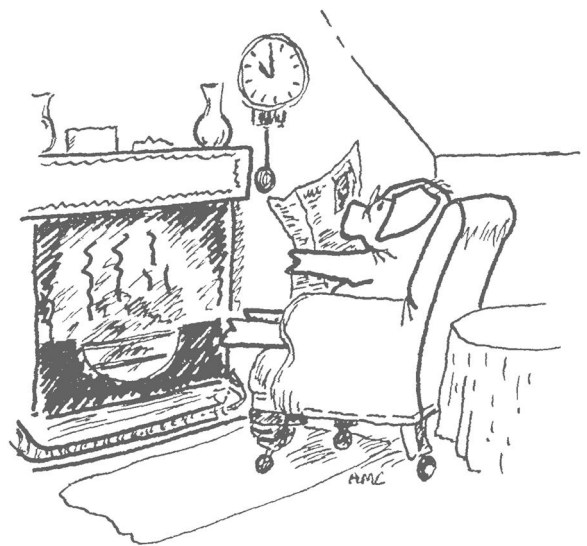
Not architecture you may say! Maybe not, but when we look over the hedge and see something the world has always seen and we dare call it architecture, we know we have come closer to understanding humanity. For that is what architecture is all about. It is these cottages that are our local history, our local architecture, our heritage, not the Actons and Drumbannaghers. So I want you to take a look with me over that hedge and see if we can see something we haven't really looked at before. All are within 3 miles of Poyntzpass.

Before I start I should mention the Folk Museum at Cultra and the American Folk Museum outside Omagh. Visit them, they have done a superb job in salvaging and displaying these old houses and their contents. but we must remind ourselves that they are museums. The curators are charged with collecting and displaying as many of the best examples of as many things as possible within the minimum of space. That is their function and should not be challenged.

Compare those displays with the inventory by Mr. McKye, sent to the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland in 1837. He describes a parish of 4,000 persons, having among them "no more than 7 tables, 92 chairs, 243 stools, 2 feather beds, 8 chaf beds, no clock, 3 watches, 8 brass candle sticks, no looking glass over 3 pence, their bed clothes are either coarse sheets or no sheets man and beast housed together ... some houses having within its walls from 1 cwt (50 kilos) of dung, others having from 10 to 15 tons of dung and only cleaned out once a year." Or that of Mr. and Mrs. S. C. Hall who conducted a social survey:— "..... The furniture

consists of an iron pot to boil potatoes, a wide dresser - sometimes, a couple of three legged stools, a couple of stone seats, a table - but not always, and a kish (wicker basket) into which the potatoes are thrown when dressed." Reading that description, I am reminded of a series of drawings and paintings by Vincent Van Gogh, entitled the 'Potato Eaters.' Poverty and famine did not start and end in Ireland. The indifference with which people are treated during a famine has changed little over the past 150 years. Today all of us are much more secure, but few care. Neither did the back to back terrace slums of English industrial cities or mining communities at that time offer a better alternative lifestyle to that of the tenant farmers who lived in these cottages. Life for the poor was and is universally hard.

However, Life was not always so bad, and later Mr. and Mrs. C. S. Hall go on to describe one of the more "comfortable" Irish cottages "for such are occasionally to be met with." This is their description of a 3 room cottage. "The first object that attracted our attention was a singularly primitive chair, it is roughly made of elm — the pieces being nailed together we next observed what is now rarely seen anywhere, a quern, there was also a primitive grid iron made of a piece of twisted iron, and a candle stick, equally rude, formed out of an iron tube The



"The pig has a separate apartment".

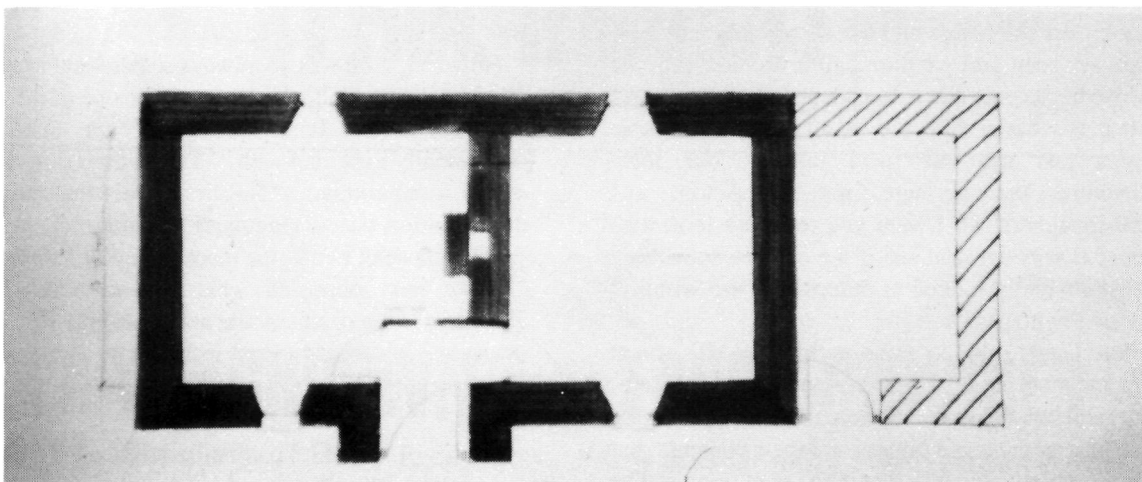
dresser was well garnished with plates, there were 3 or 4 three legged stools and at either side of the chimney was a stone seat; in the chimney, there were two holes, one very small to place the tobacco pipe when relinquished, another larger, for the "screeching hot tumbler of old times." They go on to describe other artifacts — "The roof was sound, the windows were whole and opened and closed, the stagnant pool was at a respectable distance, the pig had his separate apartment" Doesn't that sound grand? The pig had his separate apartment!

So much for the artifacts — what about the houses themselves? In 1841 a housing survey was done of the whole of Ireland, on a parish by parish basis, and houses were classified from Class 1 (the best) to Class 4 (the worst). 75% of houses fell into classes 3 and 4. A class 3 house had 2 to 4 rooms, windows, and a hearth and chimney. Class 4 houses had neither window nor chimney and consisted of one room only.

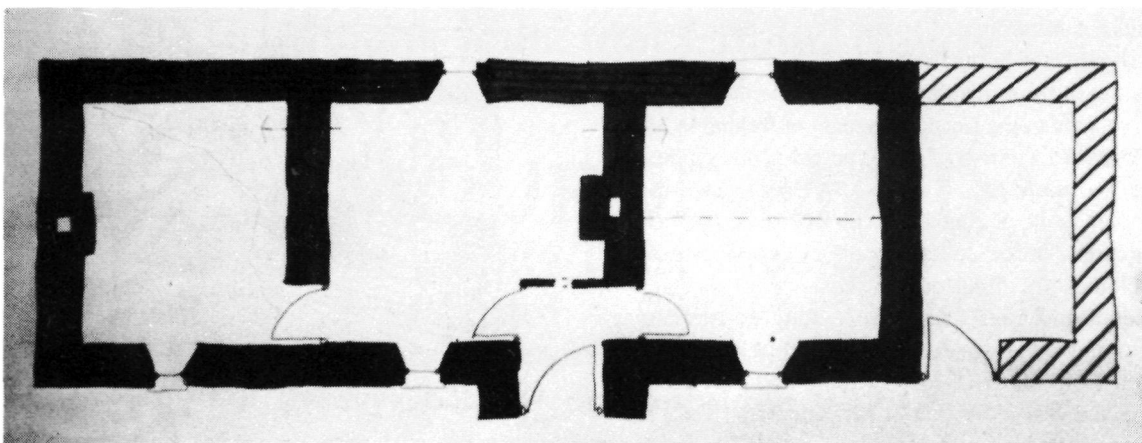
Class 2 houses with 5-10 rooms were generally merchants' or professional persons' houses, often situated in the towns. Class 1 houses, and there were few of them, were those I referred to by name earlier, and built in an European style. Class 4 houses are difficult to identify, being no different in construction or detail to a byre. However Class 3 houses are abundant, they are everywhere!

Before we look at them in detail, a word on materials. Class 1 and 2 houses would have been constructed of dressed stone or brick, the latter often "imported" as ballast on sailing ships, and good timber from the prosperous estates.

The class 3 and 4 houses we are looking at would have been constructed of materials obtained within a wheelbarrow's distance (or less if you had no wheelbarrow!). Hay, mud and hedgerow sticks limit a buildings height and span, influencing the development (or lack of it) of the plan form. This has



Typical plan of a 2 room Class 3 dwelling.



Typical plan of a 3 room Class 3 dwelling.



Two room dwelling with byre, Lisbane Road, Scarva.

manifested itself in the repetitive linear development characteristic of Irish cottages. Mud was used extensively in this area, about half the Class 3 houses are entirely or substantially of mud construction. The fact that mud houses survive in a rain soaked Irish climate as opposed to a heat baked African one is a credit to the quality of mud used. Believe me, look at them closely, some really are made of superb quality mud! The mud, a still clay type subsoil, with no vegetable matter was often dug from pits. It would be puddled if necessary, i.e. mixed with water into a still dough, and then mixed with coarse grit and sand. Straw was often used as a binder. The still mixture would then be placed on the wall in layers, each layer beaten

down onto the layer below with bats or the back of a spade.

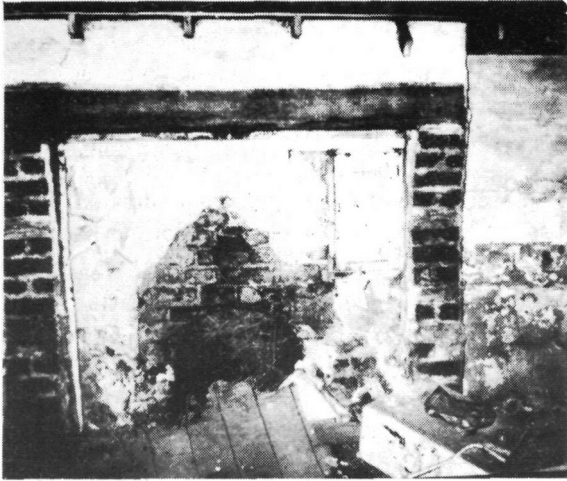
I'm told that the laying of a mud floor, and most were of mud, was often a great social occasion. You simply invited all the neighbours to a hooley, by the end of the evening's dancing and jigging the mud would be packed down so firmly it would dry like concrete!

Turf sods were also used, mainly for internal walls and over openings where infilling without weight of stone was required. Mud or turf sods would be "plastered" externally with lime washes to act as a binder and waterproofer.

The other main walling material was stone. Again, these would be "picked up" from the fields, rather



Three room dwelling with byre and outbuilding between Scarva and Acton.



Fireplace to 3 room dwelling (c. 3).

than quarried. Dressing, even rough dressing, was rarely done. The rounded and irregular shapes led to the walls being squat and thick to maintain stability. The mortar was generally a mixture of lime and grit. It has a lovely rich colour and coarse texture, unlike the smooth grey cement mortar which is too frequently used to repair such walls. We often destroy what is around us in an attempt at saving it, because we haven't seen what we are looking at. Roofs were generally thatch — only the prosperous could afford slates. Most local thatch was done on a framework of hedgerow poles or rough split timbers over which was woven or tied a network of sticks. Turf sods were laid over these, and the thatch then secured through to the sods with willow or hazel pegs.

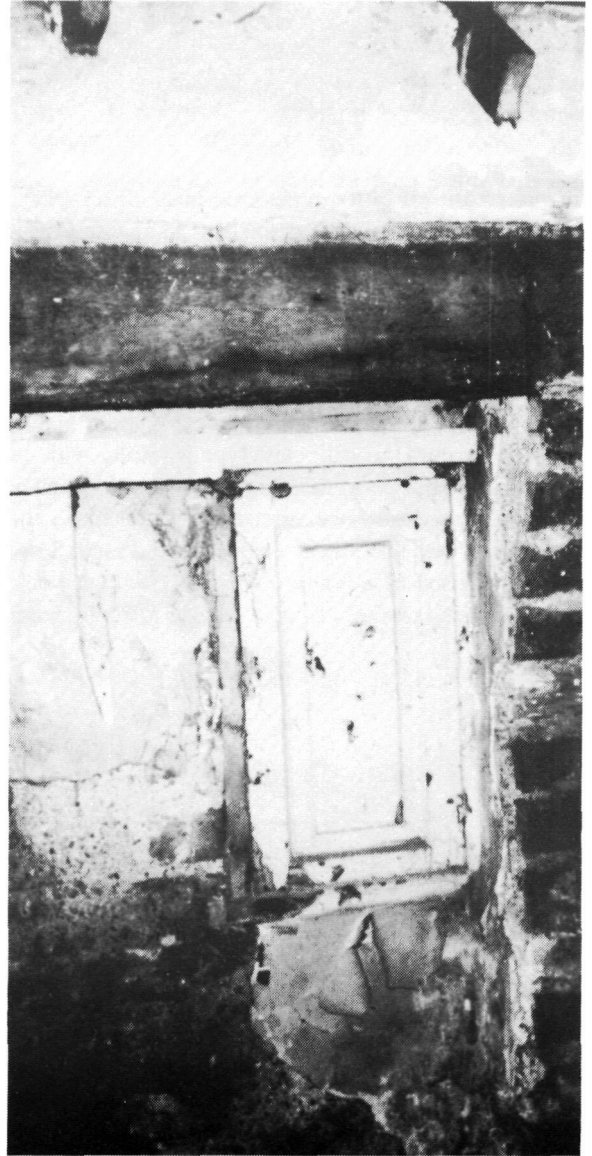
The poor quality of material available for thatching restricted its life. No wheat straw or Norfolk reeds here but rye straw at best, or hay more commonly. Again the frequency of the rethatching cycle occasioned by such short life materials perpetuated the small low simple roof shape. These were "homespun" thatches, not the work of the professional thatcher. Although such men did exist they required payment for their labour, and money was a commodity not common to those living in this class of house.

The plan form of the cottage, although not unique, is nevertheless very particular and worthy of noting. The room width varied from 11 to 14 feet generally. The cottages were one room wide almost without exception, therefore the house from back to front was only 11 to 14 feet. As the cottage extended, either by the addition of more habitable rooms, working rooms (for weaving looms etc.) or accommodation for

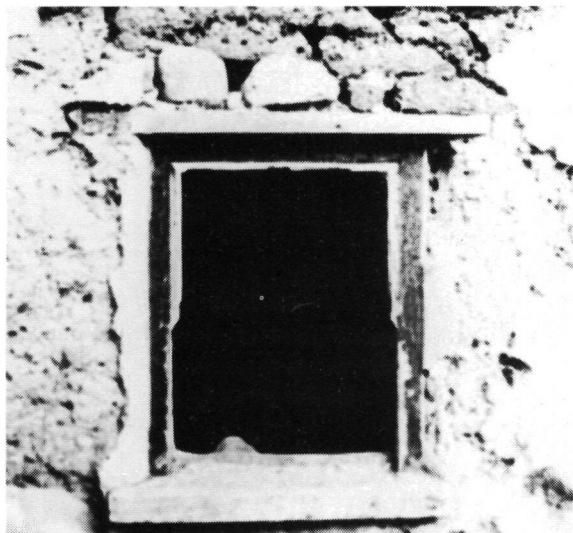
animals, the plan form became longer. In some cases this extended to 100 feet or more! But still only 11 - 14 feet wide, never 25 x 50 feet or 35 feet square. Internal circulation was from room to room, the whole thing was a bit like a railway train. This narrow plan form produced only the minimum of roof space which was nevertheless frequently floored and used as a sleeping loft in some parts of cottage.

Now let us look a little closer at a selection of these local cottages.

The first one is on the Lisbane Road just outside Scarva (behind the old Rectory). A two room cottage (with a 'separate apartment' for the pig!) The entrance



Detail of fireplace showing cupboard for the "hot tumbler".



Turfs used as walling over window head.

is in the centre and to the right is the living room with an enormous fireplace (perhaps for roasting the pig?). To the right of the fireplace, high up in the wall, is a hole through to the other room. A careful look at this other room reveals rows of holes just below the the eaves where joists would have supported the floor to a sleeping loft reached by ladder from the living room via the hole in the wall. On the way out notice the porch wall to the left, it has a generous curve.

Le Corbusier's Ronchamps was no more 'complete' than this! The roof is a replacement, but the stonework is good.

Just down the road a little, on the main road from Tandragee just past Aughlish cottages, on the left hand side is a three room house with additions at both ends. A real textbook of construction. The older centre section is of mud walls, the straw reinforcement still obvious where the lime wash has come away. The lime wash was not always white either, that is a misconception, a whole kaleidoscope of earthy colours, layer upon layer, can be picked out. Notice also above the windows, the wall is constructed of turves. Either side of the centre part of the house the construction is of stone, firstly random stone, then the last extension at the far right partially dressed stone. This is a farm that must have grown and prospered. Inside the house, below the corrugated tin roof lies the original roof of sods and thatch. The sawn-off timbers above the fireplace suggest a loft area existed originally, either for storage or sleeping. And what of the fireplace, that hole for the "screetching hot tumbler" has been provided with a door.

A bit further down the road to Poyntzpass, in the lock keeper's cottage at Acton, those two holes, one for the pipe and one for the tumbler appear again in the fireplace. This is a 1½ storey cottage with a complete floor at the upper level. It is of a high quality construction, probably reflecting the prestige of the Canal, stone throughout with large dressed stone quoins. It would be hoped that if the Canal is restored, this cottage will be reinstated in a similar way to that at Money Penny's Locks. On the road from Loughbrickland to Scarva on the left hand side is a neat group of buildings set round a central yard. Still occupied and as neat as a pin. the simplicity and beauty of the composition, the pattern of wall and window, are an architectural masterpiece, and the use of colour is on a par with the best of Mondrian.



Sods to the underside of a thatched roof.

When people gather from what is around them and build with it, they create a certain harmony. It's not just that the materials used are similar to those still lying in the surrounding countryside, and not only because they are similar to those their neighbours use. What emerges from these materials and their limitations is an architecture which is in harmony with both the place and the people. As one old man put it "It sits at peace with itself". Architecturally these small cottages are something special and they are there, just over the hedge.

So, when next out for a walk, have a look, **you** may see something the world has always seen — but you may never have noticed before.

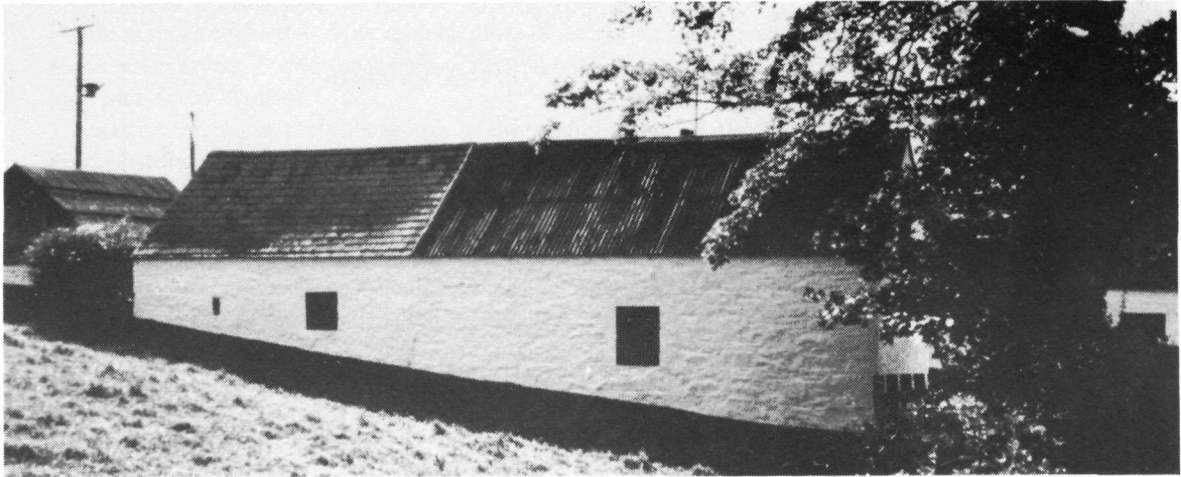


Cottages between Loughbrickland and Scarva.





Lock-keepers cottage—Acton.



Elegant simplicity—outbuilding to cottages.

Footnote:— The original talk was illustrated by slides of a large number of local cottages in the district. The printed version has been restricted to a small selection of those cottages originally illustrated and described.