

Vernacular architecture in Doonbeg, County Clare.

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Introduction

This document was initiated from two days spent photographing houses and features around Doonbeg and Creegh in June 2000. Due to the constraints of time, it was not possible to undertake deeper research, for example, interviewing older inhabitants, particularly local craftsmen, who could shed light on a lot of important, relevant issues.

The Doonbeg area of West Clare is particularly rich in traditional and vernacular architecture. It appears that materials, craftsmanship and traditional building techniques have a higher survival rate here than in most other parts of Ireland with the exception, perhaps, of the coastal islands. This is due, in part, to the fact that the area has not suffered from the intense development pressures experienced in other coastal parts of the County and occurs in spite of the fact that the natural amenities in the Doonbeg area, scenery and beaches etc. are among the finest in Europe.

Other factors, which may have preserved the traditional way of life here, are the distances from major urban centres and a scarcity of major industrial development.

From the archaeological evidence, it appears that the area has been inhabited and probably intensively farmed between three and five millennia. The landscape is dotted with over fifty ringforts which were the farmsteads of local families during the Late Bronze Age, Iron Age, Early Christian and Mediaeval Periods. Numerous other monuments including promontory forts, stone caiseals, and ecclesiastical sites indicate the importance of the area in former times.

During the late mediaeval period, the practice of building tall narrow tower houses became widespread in the County. Between 1450 and 1600 almost two hundred and forty such houses were built, mainly in the rich lands in the east of the County. Two such tower houses, were constructed here, by the MacMahons, Lords of Corca Baiscinn.

Although very similar to other tower houses in the County and built using local flagstone and a high degree of masonry skill, they nevertheless, are today in a very poor state of preservation. This may be due to an eventful history, destruction by the

Cromwellian Commissioners in the 1650s or natural erosion but there is no doubt that their demise was accelerated by the use of sea sand and seashell-lime in the mortar.

After the Jacobite Wars of the late 17th century, the lordship of the MacMahons was replaced by the new ascendancy landlords who built large, formally designed houses, like Cree House and Knocknagore House, while the poorer people continued to live in small, poorly lit, dry-stone cottages. These were often roofed with bog-oak rafters and thatched with reeds or rushes, while the walls were rendered and lime-washed, both inside and out, as protection against the elements. These humble cabins are often described as long-houses, due to the widespread practice of accommodating cows at one end, under the same roof.

After the great famine of 1845 - 1847, during which over one million people died and another million emigrated, the resultant decline in the population and the continuing trend towards emigration led to a rise in living standards throughout the west of Ireland. This allowed people to improve their dwellings by enlarging and glazing windows, building separate sheds for their animals and improving hearths and chimneys. After the mid 19th century, practically all dwelling houses were constructed using local stone and lime mortar. Houses continued to be thatched well into the 20th century.

Of particular interest, in the Doonbeg area, is the fact that the vast majority of vernacular dwellings are of an almost identical layout and design, which evolved over many centuries without the use of formal plans or regulations.

With the advent of the West Clare Railway in the late 19th century, a new type of house appeared in the Doonbeg area. This was the railway cottage. Although based on a design, which was widespread throughout Ireland, the use of lime-wash and local materials aided newcomers to build houses which blended into the landscape and which became a part of the local architecture. Although the beloved railway line was closed in the early 1960s many of these gatekeepers houses are still inhabited and remain very attractive.

During the early 20th century, local authority bodies for example the Congested Districts Board, the Land Commission and Clare County Council undertook many rural building projects. This included the construction of many roadside cottages. Although built to a formal national design, these houses tend to blend unobtrusively into the scenic landscape due to their simplicity and low elevation.

Types of vernacular buildings

The architecture of the Doonbeg area appears to fall into six distinctive categories.

- **Formally designed houses**
- **Two-storey farm houses**

- **Commercial buildings**
- **Traditional architectural details**
- **Traditional cottages**
- **Traditional architectural details**
- **Local authority houses**
- **Modern houses**
- **Uninhabited, derelict and ruined houses**
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Formally designed country houses

These large country houses were constructed by the wealthier classes and were often either designed by architects or copied from other fashionable styles during the 18th and 19th centuries.

Such houses are not as numerous in the Doonbeg area as in other parts of the country but fine examples can be seen in Doonmore House (circa 1810), Creegh House (circa 1840) and Knocknagore House (circa 1834). The two former examples are at present derelict while the latter is under repair. In his book "The Houses of Clare", Hugh Weir states that this house had to be re-roofed in 1839 after it was hit by Ireland's most infamous hurricane "An Ghaioth Mór" (The Big Wind).

Two storey farmhouses

The three-bay, two-storey farmhouse, which was popular during the late 19th and early 20th centuries in all parts of Ireland, does not figure significantly in the Doonbeg area. Apart from a few isolated examples, most of these two-storey dwellings are confined to the village settlements of Doonbeg, Creegh and Bealaha.

The reasons for the dearth of this type of house may include various factors, such as, the lack of large dairy or stock farms in the area, which might have produced sufficient income to build and maintain such houses. It is also likely that the people considered the traditional single-storey cottage to be much more suitable for life on this part of the Atlantic coastline. The amount of damage caused by "The Big Wind" in 1839, particularly to the larger, slated houses on the west coast may also have been a factor in the widespread retention of traditional single-storey design.

Commercial buildings

Many of the commercial buildings in the area, including shops, post offices and public houses tend to be two-storey, gable-ended buildings of three, four or five bays. Although many were originally constructed as two-storey buildings during the late 19th or early 20th centuries, it is obvious from the asymmetrical arrangements of the chimneys that many were originally constructed as single storey traditional cottages which were extended upwards at a later time.

Traditional architectural details

- **Roofs**

Though most houses were, no doubt, originally thatched, all are slated today. Most retain the welsh quarry slate roof, indicating that, unlike many of the traditional cottages, they were slated before the 1940s, after which cheaper asbestos slate became available. Invariably the gables are capped with stone / concrete barges or slate extending flush with the verge of the gable.

- **Chimneys**

The chimneys found on the two storey commercial buildings tend to be narrower and less bulky than those on the traditional cottages, indicating that brick was extensively used in their construction, rather than the local flagstone, which, by its nature, requires chimneys to be wider. Although the materials may have differed, the traditional capping details have been retained for the most part, for example, a single or double narrow band of plaster protruding slightly, below the top of the chimney, obviously imitating the narrow flagstone band found in most of the old, vernacular cottages.

- **Plaster**

A tradition of imitating stone quoins or corner-stones, in plaster work, is common in all parts of Ireland and was adopted widely in the Doonbeg area in all styles of houses. Wide, moulded reveals around doorways and windows were also popular, sometimes with plaster bosses at the upper corners, a feature found also in many single-storey, rural cottages. Another popular feature appears to be a difference in decoration used on the upper and lower storeys, e.g. a plain, painted finish on the exterior wall of the ground floor while the upper floor is finished in a brown pebble-dash.

- **Shopfronts**

The shopfronts in Doonbeg and Creegh are very similar to the late 19th century shopfronts found in the smaller urban centres throughout Ireland. They have one major difference occurring, however, which is, that they are invariably made of cement plaster, rather than wood. This indicates that this deviation from the norm must have occurred after the first quarter of the 20th century, when Portland cement replaced lime as the binding constituent in plaster. The probable reason for this change may have been the inability of the original wooden shop fronts to cope with the ravages of the weather on this unprotected area of coastline and the low maintenance required by cement plaster. Never the less, with an appropriate colour scheme and highlighting of details, these shop fronts can be very attractive.

- **Windows**

The original smaller windows appear to have been painted, wooden, vertical sashes with a single pane or light in each sash. These were invariably white. Unfortunately many premises have since changed their style of windows and now include multiple panes in P.V.C or aluminium. None of the original large shop windows

survive in Doonbeg or Creegh. These were probably composed of a number of long vertical lights divided by narrow wooden mullions. Window sills are of local flag / sandstone, split and cut to the required dimensions. They are slightly thinner than those found in limestone areas.

In general, the commercial premises in the area conform to the traditional designs with some innovation e.g. plaster hoods over windows or semi-circular fanlights over hall doors.

Traditional cottages

Traditional houses, most common in this area, are generally three, four, five or six bay, single storey dwellings with three or four large, bulky stone chimneys. This type of house, which is likely derived from the 17th, 18th century long-house, is by far the most dominant feature, in the built environment of the Doonbeg area. The similarity between the numerous examples is so striking that it appears that its design plan was universally accepted as the ideal family dwelling over a long period of time. This type of cottage evolved using local materials, building techniques and skills which have been used in the area for many millennia. This is evident from the remains of stone caiseals, ecclesiastical buildings and tower houses surviving locally.

Traditional architectural details

- **Masonry**

The walls of the cottages and out buildings are invariably constructed of undressed, quarried, sandstone flags, of varied thickness, set in lime mortar and rendered, inside and out, with local lime mortar. They were generally lime-washed annually to protect them from the elements and give the house a well-kept appearance. They were never intended to be devoid of render, in spite of a popular belief that bare stone is more "natural".

- **Roofs**

Undoubtedly, most of these houses were originally thatched as was the common practice in all parts along the sea-board of Western Europe until the mid 20th century. This is evident from photos and film of the area, made in the early 1950s, on display in the old railway station of Moyasta. Reeds, rushes and corn-straw were freely available and an ideal thatching material. Gradually the thatching tradition was replaced by the advent of accessible roofing, quarry-slate mainly from Wales, and later, in the 1940s, 50s and 60s by cheaper asbestos slate.

- **Gables**

Gables are invariably finished in wide concrete barges, resting directly on the slate, without lead or seal. These imitate the old stone barges, which have disappeared from the area.

- **Windows**

From the original windows remaining in ruined or derelict cottages, in the area, it appears that most were wooden, four-light, sash windows with narrow, vertical glazing bars. Green appears to have been the most popular colour for wooden features for example windows, frames and doors. It may also have been cheaper to purchase, possibly because of its popularity. Later the two-light, sash window became popular, but unfortunately many of the later designs and materials used which have made their way into vernacular buildings do not appear to be in keeping with tradition.

- **Window Sills**

Window sills are made of local flag / sandstone and are thinner than those in limestone areas. Because of the nature of the stone, which is almost impossible to cut with hand tools, window sills show a hammer-dressed finish. They are traditionally painted the same colour as the plaster dado or band.

- **Doors**

The traditional door was sheeted vertically in tongued & grooved planks and braced behind horizontally and diagonally. Often a wide fillet was added to the bottom to divert rain. Like windows, the traditional colour for doors seems to have been green. Door furniture comprised: large "T" hinges, a rounded wood or iron door-handle, an iron thumb-latch and an iron dead-lock with key-hole. A rectangular, single or triple-light fanlight is common over the front door and in rare instances an arched fanlight gives a more formal appearance to the house.

- **Chimneys**

Originally, single, off-centre chimney stacks, containing a double flue, were the norm. They served a large open fire-place in the kitchen and often a smaller fireplace, behind this, in the parlour or bedroom. Later in the late 19th century a tradition arose of building "blind" or mock chimneys on each gable. This gave the house an appearance of "balance" and was also something of a status symbol. Blind chimneys can often be identified by a window underneath, in the gable, or the fact that only the central chimney may have chimney pots. The chimney stacks in this area are unusual in being wider and bulkier than those found in other parts of the country. This is due to the use of the local building material, for example, flag / sandstone which, by its horizontal nature, requires more area than limestone or brick. Later houses, though identical in plan and detail, can often be identified by their less massive stacks. Another style of traditional cottage, although not as numerous in this area as in other parts of Ireland, has a pair of evenly spaced central chimneys. This type of house is generally gabled, with concrete barges, although some examples with hipped or mansard roofs are found, in small numbers. Chimney stacks, in the Doonbeg area, are invariably rendered, painted and capped above a narrow string-course of local flagstone. Even later houses appear to have copied this method in plaster. This tradition dates back to at least the 15th century, as can be seen from surviving examples on tower houses. It evolved from a necessity to protect the lime mortar from the rain and frost by the

use of a capstone and the weighting of the capstone to avoid its being lifted in a storm.

- **Plaster / Render**

Rough-cast lime plaster, annually white washed, was the traditional finish for chimneys and exterior walls. Interior walls were given a coat of lime-putty over the roughcast, which provided a smooth finish. This method of plastering had remained unchanged in Ireland from the mediaeval period to the mid 20th century.

- **Pargetting**

With the advent of cheap Portland cement in the early 20th century lime plaster was replaced by sand/cement. This was found to be more durable and maintenance free and allowed decorative details to be produced in low relief on the façade. Plaster details in low relief, common in the Doonbeg area, include quoins, decorative friezes, moulded reveals, dados, bosses and high plinths. It is common to find all the above in the same façade. In fact the decorative details found on the Doonbeg cottages are so uniform it suggests that they have all been the product of the same individual or group of plasterers.

- **Porches**

It is unlikely that porches featured significantly in the early cottages but since the early 20th century they have become accepted as a traditional feature. They are generally small, windowless and doorless shelters of solid concrete construction, covered with level or slightly sloped flagstone roofs. They were constructed simply to give some protection, from the weather, for visitors knocking at the front door. Because of their relative low elevation and small size they do not impact significantly on the simple, attractive, traditional lines. However, in recent times, a tendency has developed to increase the size and height of porches and to use non-natural materials, which detracts from the appearance of the house.

- **Colour**

Although traditional colours were limited to white lime-wash on its own or with a few additives, for example, yellow ochre, iron oxide or blue tablet, the later practice of choosing from a wide range of colour is now commonplace throughout the area. The unwritten rule appears to be the use of light pastel shades in the wide panels between the windows, and a darker shade of the same colour on the plaster details and chimneys. Bolder colours are used for doors and windows etc. In general, the good taste and natural restraint used in the choice of paint makes for a colourful yet pleasing appearance and tends to add to, rather than detract from the visual environment.

- **Ancillary Buildings**

Most Doonbeg cottages are built close to, and facing the road. They invariably have farm buildings nearby. Some of these are of local stone and thatched with straw but the majority are slated or covered with corrugated asbestos, which over the years has taken on a not unattractive patina. In a maritime environment, this

roofing material appears to be more durable than the corrugated iron used throughout the rest of Ireland for farm buildings. In many cases these farm buildings are whitewashed or painted in light colours. An interesting feature, of one particular outbuilding is the old car-house at the rear of Flynn's in Creegh, where there is a pair of vertical slits in the back wall of the interior, opposite the door. A local resident pointed out that these were "to take the heels (shaft ends) of a horse car, and so allow more room to close the door". The fireplace in the same building was used exclusively to boil food for the domestic animals. Without such local knowledge many interesting facts and details can be overlooked.

- **Layout of farmyards**

As stated above, most traditional Doonbeg houses face the road with a small rectangular "courtyard" between the house and the road. Farm buildings may follow a linear arrangement along the road from the house but in general they are built at right angles to the house with the gable facing the road. If a single farm building is all that is required, it is generally situated to act as a shelter from the prevailing south-westerly wind. In many cases two farm buildings, with gables to the road, flank the house on either side, producing a sheltered and attractive arrangement.

Local authority houses

In the late 19th century the West Clare Railway Company extended its line to Kilkee and Kilrush via Doonbeg. Gatekeepers cottages were built at all road junctions, using local stone with brick features e.g. chimneys and window and door surrounds. Although the line closed in the early 1960s many of the houses are still inhabited and are attractive additions to vernacular architecture.

In the first two decades of the 20th century "The Congested Districts Board of Ireland" built many three-bay, single storey, slated cottages for landless labourers. Each cottage was provided with an acre of ground on which families could grow potatoes and other vegetables. These cottages are wider (two rooms) and shorter than the traditional cottages and do not reflect the "long house" tradition. Never the less when found, as is common, in semi-detached pairs, they tend not to detract from the traditional vernacular patterns.

Many "Land Commission" houses were built in the area, in the 1930s. These were built to a more traditional linear pattern although with central rather than gable chimneys. Since this period the local authority houses which have been built, though using modern materials, have continued to retain the linear, single storey pattern.

Modern houses

With the advent of cheap imported building materials such as galvanised iron, asbestos (in the form of corrugated sheets or slates), brick and Portland cement, a change came about in the vernacular designs of houses throughout Ireland. The three

bay, single storey, hipped-roof house with bay windows became popular in both urban and rural areas during the 1940s and 50s.

The popularity of this design paved the way for new styles of single and two storey houses, which have little in common with local vernacular styles. Traditional and local architecture had evolved over many centuries using a trial and error process and was limited by the exclusive use of local materials. For this reason houses built using traditional and local architecture invariably have less visual impact and often, through their use of natural colour, enhance a landscape.

Uninhabited, derelict and ruined houses

All the above examples of vernacular architecture can be found in various states of dereliction. Others which are almost perfect have the appearance of being uninhabited or neglected for some years. Some incentive should be provided by the relevant authorities to encourage the repair of such buildings to accommodate individuals, families or even as holiday homes. Such a scheme might relieve the pressure on development in the area of Doonbeg and at the same time enhance the built environment.

Gatepiers

The traditional gate-pier in this area falls into two main categories.

- Tall, circa 2m. high, single, local flagstones with rounded tops and a single circular hole to take iron gate hangers. This type of pier, which is hammer-dressed rather than cut, is very common in the area and of such conformity in design and material to suggest that they may all have been produced at the same local quarry. They are generally found only at the hanging side of the gate.
- Massive square piers of local flag / sandstone, either dry-built or in lime-mortar. These are not generally rendered although annual lime-washing is common. They may be capped in the same material with a rounded finish or with a single or double, square flagstone. It is also common to weigh the capstones with small round boulders. Although square-based piers are not unusual in Ireland generally, they tend to be more massive in this area due to the nature of the local stone. (see chimneys.)

In recent years there has been a tendency to repair old gate piers with concrete caps. This practice is inappropriate, as traditional materials are still available and relatively inexpensive.

Stone walls

Traditional stone boundary walls, whether dry or mortared, seem to be constructed in a similar fashion and are generally circa 350mm. to circa 500mm. thick. The local flag

/sandstone has a regular, natural cleavage which renders it very suitable for building but unsuitable for fine dressing or carving. For this reason, "imported" limestone features, for example, doorways and windows are often found in flagstone buildings such as Tromra Castle near Quilty. The selected stone is always laid horizontally, with or without coursing and requires little or no packing with "spawls" as is common in lime-stone areas.

New walls often incorporate vertically laid stones, which is not the traditional method as can be seen from examining older buildings in the area, for example, 15th century tower houses.

The traditional method of capping stone walls in the area was invariably to finish the wall with large flags, the full width, thus protecting the mortar from rain and frost, and then weigh down the flags with regular, mortared or dry, stone flags set tightly together in a vertical pattern. Capping traditional style walls with castellated stone or concrete is inappropriate.

Bridges

The stone bridges of Ireland are interesting features which are often overlooked when dealing with vernacular architecture. Those of the Doonbeg area are all the more interesting as it is likely that most are over 200 years old. The bridges at Doonbeg, Creegh and Mountrivers are shown on both the 1st edition Ordnance Survey Map (1842) and Pelham's Grand Jury Map of 1787. It is not possible to say when or by whom they were built without further research as styles of bridge building differed little from the middle ages to the last century. They are all of a similar design, built of local stone and laid in a traditional pattern. The design is invariably of single or multiple semi-circular, stilted arches with cut-waters only on the upstream sides of the piers. The piers are built on slightly wider stone plinths, many of which require remedial repairs, as the action of water has washed away much of the lime mortar.

Doonbeg bridge is of particular interest as it comprises six arches and a blind arch on the North East side. Beside the blind arch is a small vaulted room with a rectangular doorway. It is possible that this bridge replaces an earlier stone or wooden bridge, possibly built by the MacMahons of the adjacent Doonbeg Castle.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that this particular area of West Clare is extremely rich in vernacular architecture not only in its houses and other buildings but also its features such as stone walls, gate-piers, bridges etc. To date it has survived, to a great extent, unspoiled. However the pressures of new developments brought about by an ever improving economy may take their toll on this area in the near future. It is important that care is taken to make sure that whatever development takes place, it is sustainable and attractive.

Incentives must be provided to encourage people to repair old houses rather than replace them with new inappropriate structures, which do little to reflect the traditional styles, which have evolved over many centuries. Courses should be conducted to demonstrate traditional building skills and the proper use of traditional materials particularly when conserving old buildings and built landscape features.

We have a duty to protect our environment for the generations to come. This can only be achieved with the cooperation of local residents, local authorities and state bodies. Resources are necessary to educate people in the benefits of sustainable and attractive development and development which takes place within agreed guidelines.

Ní neart go chur le chéile

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