

Survey of Thatched Structures in Laois, 2007

Laois County Council and The Heritage Council

“An Action of the Laois Heritage Plan 2007-2011”



Report compiled by Architectural Recording and Research

October 2007



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Introduction

In 2007, Laois County Council in partnership with The Heritage Council commissioned the consultancy, Architectural Recording and Research to produce a comprehensive inventory of thatched structures in Laois. As an action of the Laois Heritage Plan 2007-2011, the survey was spearheaded by Laois County Council's Heritage Officer, Ms Catherine Casey. As part of an Ireland-wide policy, the aims of the project included the identification of all remaining thatched structures in the county, and the production of a quality inventory by means of a systematic field survey with a view to providing a complete profile of the county's thatched buildings. Whilst the completed inventory entitled Survey of Thatched Structures in Laois, 2007 appears in a separate volume, the findings of the survey are set out in this document.



Architectural Recording and Research

The Survey of Thatched Structures in Laois, 2007

Identification of Thatched Structures in County Laois

Prior to the commencement of fieldwork, a meeting was held between the consultants, Bronagh Lanigan and Sinead Hughes, Laois County Council's Heritage Officer, Catherine Casey and two members of the Laois Heritage Forum, Dr Jack Carter and Mr Tom Cox. During the meeting, a list of potential survey sites was drawn up. In addition to the eleven sites already included on Laois County Council's Record of Protected Structures (RPS)¹, further thatched structures known by Ms Casey, Dr Carter and Mr Cox were added to the list. By the end of the meeting some 30 or so thatched structures had been recommended for inclusion in the survey.

Once fieldwork was underway, further sites were identified with the help of owners and occupiers of the county's thatched houses. By the end of the survey, an exhaustive list of 55 thatched, previously thatched or ruined structures had been identified and recorded.

Field Survey

During the field survey, Bronagh Lanigan and Sinead Hughes of AR&R visited each of the thatched structures. On making contact with either an owner or occupant, permission was sought to carry out the survey. In addition, each owner or occupant was interviewed to gather relevant information on their property.

Interviewees obliged the recorders by providing information on ownership, occupancy or the history of their thatched structure. They provided detailed information about the thatching of the house, materials used, suppliers of materials, frequency of thatching and the names of any associated thatchers. They also raised issues that they felt were relevant to owning a thatched structure today, such as the difficulty in acquiring grant assistance, home insurance or a competent thatcher.

The Inventory

In addition to the interview, a written description of the thatched structure, ancillary buildings and curtilage features was made. Using a survey form, which followed the standards used in similar surveys carried out in Counties Offaly, Kildare and South Tipperary, each thatched site was recorded in a systematic way.

As well as any information provided by the owner or occupant, core data including the name, address, estimated construction date, condition, twelve-digit national grid reference, RPS² number and cartographic information was recorded. Furthermore, a detailed description of the roof structure, walls, openings and interior (where accessed), outbuildings and site boundary was provided.

To illustrate the written record, a set of high resolution colour photographs was taken at each site. Furthermore, where possible, a sketch plan was made of the structure's floor plan. Finally, the location of each thatched structure was marked on a Discovery Series map.

Presentation of Data

On completion of the fieldwork, a digital survey form for each of the 55 sites was produced and printed in 239-paged inventory.

¹ A list of existing 'Protected Structures' is provided in Appendix One of this report.

² RPS is an abbreviation of Record of Protected Structures. Each 'protected structure' is assigned an individual three-digit identification number by Laois County Council. The RPS is maintained within the County Development Plan.

Findings from the Survey of Thatched Structures in Laois, 2007

A Profile of Site Types in County Laois

During the survey, a comprehensive group of 55 relevant sites were visited and surveyed. To create a clear profile, all thatched structures were recorded as well as a number of tin-roof-covered thatched houses and a small number of ruins. The largest group-type surveyed was the traditional thatched structure which retained some, if not all of the original roof timbers and historic thatch. Illustrated below as 'Historic Thatched Roof', this type of site accounted for 30 of the 55 sites visited.

The second largest group of structures visited and recorded were formerly thatched structures that are now covered with galvanized sheeting, illustrated below as 'Tin-Covered with or without Thatch'. Within this category, a number of the structures retained their original roof timbers and some thatch. In other cases, the roof had been entirely stripped prior to the installation of the metal sheeting. Furthermore, within this group it was found that on two occasions, new thatch had been secured over the tin, in an effort to restore the traditional character of the building.

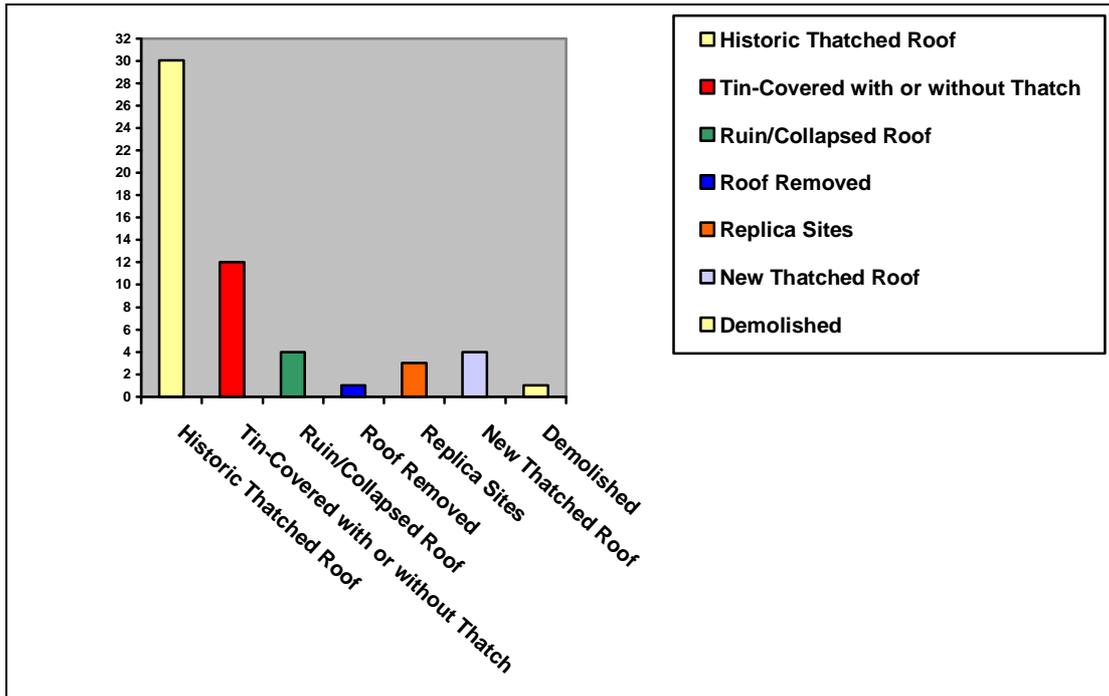
Four of the thatched houses surveyed in 2007 had fallen into ruin and appeared to be beyond rehabilitation. In all cases, the houses had been vacated during the late 20th century, following the construction of a new, modern dwelling or the death of an occupant.

In one case, at Ballylynan, a road-side thatched house recently had its thatched roof and all roof timbers removed. At the time of survey, only the four external walls of the small dwelling remained.

Three of the sites recorded were modern, replica structures. One of the sites, Poet's Cottage in Camross, was built in recent years as a replica of an Irish vernacular house. A further site, near Ballybrittas, was a small replica thatched house, built within the yard of a house in the 1980s. The final site in this category included two thatched structures at a picnic area to the west of Rosenallis.

The penultimate site category illustrated below is the 'New Thatched Roof'. This site type was applied to those thatched houses which, in recent years, had been extensively renovated and re-roofed with thatch.

Finally, the last site category recorded in the 2007 survey was applied to the site of a demolished thatched house. The house at Cloonagh, Mountmellick owned by the Burns Family, collapsed in 1997 and was subsequently cleared to provide a site for a new shed.



Graph illustrating the categories of sites surveyed in 2007

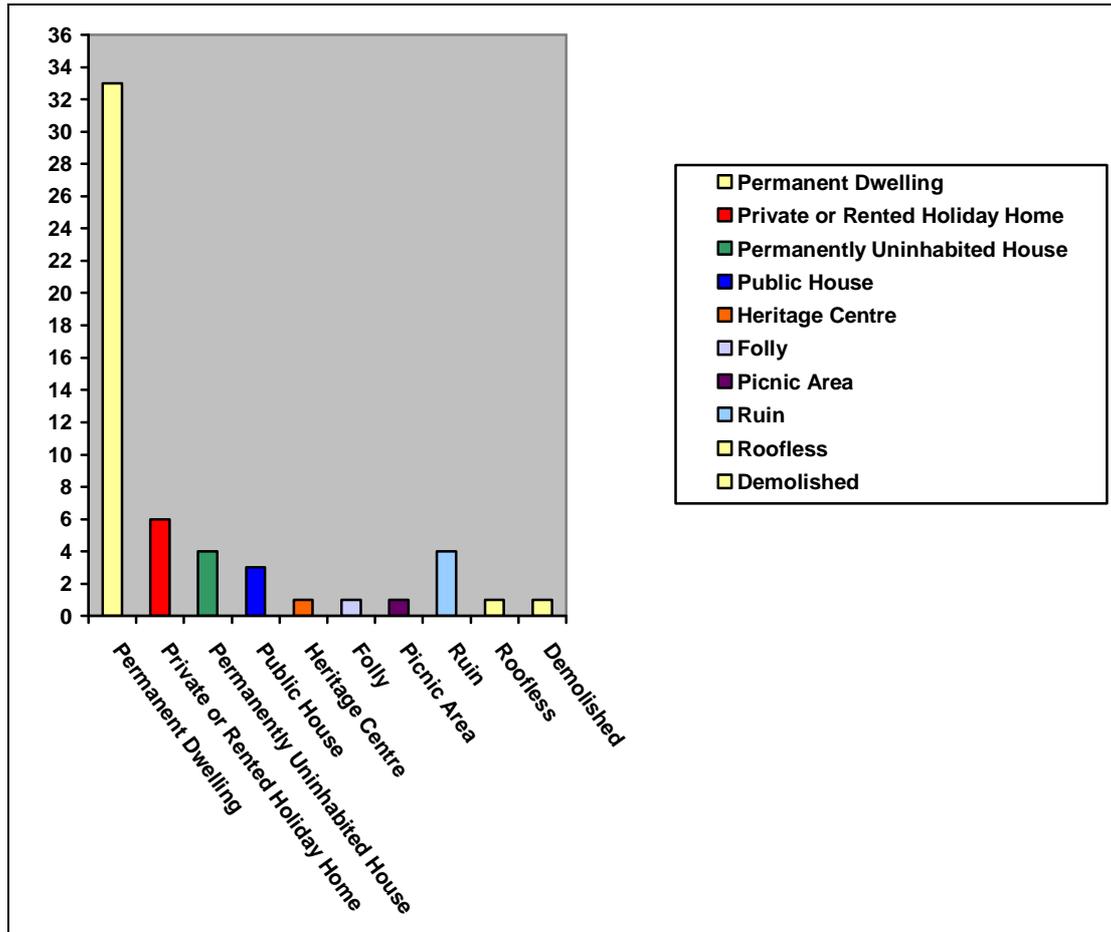
Usage of Surveyed Structures

Of the 55 sites surveyed, a majority of 35 continued to be used as permanent dwellings or were temporarily vacant due to a change in occupant. Six of the houses were no longer in use as a permanent home, but rather as a private or rented holiday home. A further three houses were no longer inhabited and had deteriorated to such a level that it seems unlikely that they will ever be occupied as homes in the future. Two of these houses were tin-covered and were situated within farmyards. Each was abandoned at a time when a new, more commodious house was built on adjacent ground. In each case, the former thatched house was now used as an outbuilding for storage.

Three of the structures included in the survey were thatched public houses. These included Sheran's in Coolrain, The Fishermans Inn at Fisherstown and The Thatch at the Heath near Portlaoise.

Further structures included the heritage centre known as Poet's Cottage at Camross, the thatched picnic bench and replica dwelling to the west of Rosenallis and a replica house near Pound Crossroads at Ballybrittas.

Finally, the remainder of the structures were categorised as ruined houses, which appear to be beyond repair. Within this category, ruined thatched houses were recorded at The Waterfall and Moyanna near Vicarstown, Ballyhuppanane near the Ridge of Capard and a fourth at Fisherstown. A further roofless house was recorded at Ballylynan.



Graph illustrating the usage of sites and structures surveyed in 2007

Distribution of Laois' Thatched Structures

Survey fieldwork revealed that the extant thatched structures in County Laois follow an uneven distribution. Although some areas were well populated, others were entirely depleted of their thatched vernacular buildings. In the north and northeast corner of the county, the greatest number of sites was found. The majority of the structures recorded – a total of 26 - were located in and around Mountmellick, Ballyfin, Emo, Ballybrittas, Fisherstown and Vicarstown. A further eleven were surveyed in the areas of Cullahill, Abbeyliex, Ballacolla and Clogh. The remainder were isolated sites in or near to Stradbally, Ballylynan, Rosenallis, Clonaslee, Rushin and Errill.

Surprisingly, some areas in County Laois had no extant thatched structures. In spite of searching, there was a complete lack of thatched houses in the Borris-on-Ossary area in the southwest of the county and also in the southeast of the county, near the Carlow border.

The Thatched Structures of County Laois

Plan Form of Laois' Thatched Structures

Both direct-entry and lobby entry vernacular houses were constructed in County Laois. Having lost most of its thatched building stock, a true picture of the ratio of direct-entry to lobby-entry houses can never be produced. However, in analysing the remaining thatched structures, it can be suggested that direct-entry and lobby-entry houses were built in equal proportions.

Direct-entry Plan

Direct-entry houses were constructed with the main door opening directly into the kitchen. Within the kitchen, the fire hearth was situated on an internal wall or gable wall, depending on the size of the structure. The central kitchen, at the heart of the home, afforded access to side rooms, which usually included one or more bedrooms and sometimes a parlour. In the 20th century, many houses were enlarged with the addition of further linear extensions or additions to the rear.

Lobby-entry Plan

In the case of lobby-entry houses, the front door opened to a small lobby, which was created by a jamb wall. The jamb wall, which was set perpendicular to the open fire, acted as a wind-break. In a number of cases in County Laois, a small window opening, known as a spy window, within the jamb wall, would allow the fire-side occupant to see whoever was entering the house.

Like direct-entry houses, the central kitchen provided access to additional rooms to each end of the house, or later extensions to the rear.

Construction Materials used in Laois' Thatched Structures

Vernacular houses were constructed using locally available materials. As seen in the Survey of Thatched Structures in Laois, 2007, mud or clay was the predominant material used in the northeast of the county. In the area around The Heath, Ballybrittas, Vicarstown and Mountmellick, most of the houses were constructed from clay with some stone. Mr Martin Delaney of O'More's Forest, Mountmellick described the external walls of his house as having been constructed from boulders, stones and local yellow clay.

In areas where stone was readily available, it was used in the construction of thatched structures. Stone-built houses were commonly recorded in the south and west of the county. In the case of a house in Ballacolla, owned and occupied by Mr Pearse McKiernan, the owner referred to the porous limestone used in his house as 'Weeping Ballacolla Stone'.

Both the mud-walled and stone-built structures were externally rendered to prevent damp penetration. Traditionally, vernacular structures were rendered with a lime-based roughcast render or dash. Combining the binder of lime with an aggregate of sand or small stones, the render was often sealed with layers of lime wash.

In the 20th century, the practice of applying a render of pebbledash was commonly carried out. Many interviewees in the survey remembered the exact year that the new render was applied. Unlike the traditional renders, pebbledash was usually cement-based and impervious to water. While blocking out the driving rain, the dense dash also could trap water within the walls, preventing the structure from 'breathing'.

Features of the Thatched House

Throughout the building stock of thatched vernacular houses in County Laois, common external and internal features were repeated. Although many houses had been refurbished and modernised, many examples retained early features such as the half-door and multiple-pane timber sash windows.

Internally, some of the most intact houses retained their original open fire with grate, hobs, crane and large chimneybreast. Good examples of the traditional hearth were recorded at Mr Bill Delaney's house at Owenass Bridge, Mountmellick and at Mr Jim Keating's house at The Heath, Portlaoise. Although once a common feature in Irish vernacular houses, the open fire is now rare due to the installation of stoves in the 20th century.

One of the most interesting hearths was found in a house at Clogh. Although now disused, the house had retained an impressive hearth canopy, which was supported by timber uprights.

Roof Types

Both hipped and gable-ended roof types were recorded in County Laois. However, two-thirds of the extant structures surveyed were gable-ended, while one third had hipped roofs. The Irish Folklore Commission's 1945³ study supports this statistic. Of the questionnaires on roof and thatching filled out by inhabitants of Laois, many stated that gable-ended houses were more common than hip-roofed houses. A respondent to the questionnaire also suggested that hip-roofed houses were earlier in date to their gable-roofed counterparts.

Roof Structure

Where possible, the internal roof space of a thatched structure was accessed during the survey in 2007. Traditionally, thatched roofs were constructed on a framework of timbers. The principal members were usually A-frames, referred to as couple trusses, which rested on the front and rear walls of the house, rising to form an apex at the ridge. The trusses comprised a front and rear rafter which was tied by means of a collar. Couple trusses were usually spaced between one and two meters apart. The ends of trusses were embedded directly into the top of the walls, without the use of wall plates. Over the trusses, horizontal timbers or branches were placed.

As seen in many of the county's roofs, trusses and other roof members were formed from roughly sawn, split timbers or worked poles and branches. In some cases, such as at the tin-roofed house in village of Clogh, later strengthening of the roof was carried out by the addition of machine-sawn rafters.

In County Laois a sod layer known as a scraw was commonly placed over the roof timber to provide a bed for the straw. However, a scraw was not recorded at every surveyed roof. Where no sod layer was provided, the base coat of straw was directly sewn to the roof timbers by means of a straw rope, known as a súgán.

Ridge Types

During the survey various ridge types were recorded. Findings show that the principal type used in County Laois is the comb ridge, also referred to as a twisted bobbin ridge. To produce this ridge type, a bundle of straw is pulled and twisted at the centre to produce a knot or bobbin. A series of bobbins are then threaded onto a scollop. The ridge comb is placed over the roof's ridge like a saddle and is secured in place at

³ See appendix two.

either side by one or more rows of horizontal scollops. End knobs are placed to each end of the ridge like a finial.



Details of twisted bobbins and end knobs as produced by Mr Michael Dempsey of Abbeyview Cottage, Jamestown, Ballybrittas. Mr Dempsey finishes a ridge using this method.

A less ornate and less sophisticated ridge type is the lap-over ridge. Less common in County Laois than the twisted bobbin ridge, the lap-over ridge is finished by placing a bundle of thatch over the ridge and securing it to the front and back slopes with scollops. The butt-up ridge type was also recorded in County Laois. This method allows for bundles of thatch to abut each other at the apex, while being supported beneath by a ridge roll of straw.

Elaborate ridges were seen on the roofs of those structures that were re-thatched with water reed. On the reed roofs, raised or decorative block ridges were used, however, these ridge types are not traditional in County Laois.

Thatch

Information provided by the owners, occupiers and thatchers in the county suggests that oaten straw was the predominant thatching material used for most of the 20th century. An inspection of the outermost layers of the thatched houses supports this view. However, the base coat or earlier layers of many of the surveyed thatched structures were shown to be of wheaten straw.

The transition from wheaten straw to oaten straw was widespread in the 20th century due to a change in the cultivation of wheaten straw. The roof of the Fishermans Inn at Fisherstown clearly shows the change in thatching cereals. While the outer layers applied in the 20th century were oaten straw, the earlier layers, including the soot-blackened base coat, were wheaten straw.

Another structure with outer layers of oaten straw over earlier coats of wheaten straw is the home of the thatcher, Mr Jackie Kavanagh. Mr Kavanagh, who lives in the townland of Ballyboodin near Durrow, informed the survey that the last time that the roof was thatched with wheaten straw was in 1956.

While oaten straw was the principal thatching cereal used in County Laois in the 20th century, other materials were used on occasion. Barley straw, for example, was recorded at a few of the structures. Barley straw was seen at the house formerly owned by the late Mr Dan Feeney of The Waterfall, Vicarstown. While the hipped roof was usually thatched with oaten straw, barley straw had been used for intermittent patching.

In recent years there has been an increase in the use of water reed in Ireland. While oaten straw has retained its position as most common thatching material in County Laois, there has been an influx of reed in the past few years. During the survey five roofs with recently thatched reed roofs were recorded.

Although many thatchers and owners of thatched structures believe that reed is more durable and longer lasting than traditional oaten straw, the character of a roof can be greatly changed by its use. Reed, which has a waxy coating, is harder and less flexible than oaten straw. Its colour, when applied to a roof, is greyish brown. This differs greatly to the fresh golden colour of a new oaten straw roof.

To retain the visual character of the county's thatched roofs, a concerted effort should be made on the parts of both thatchers and owners to use oaten straw when re-thatching in County Laois.



Ears of wheat from base coat at Fishermans Inn



Oaten straw roof at The Waterfall, Vicarstown

Thatching Methods

Both scollop thatching and thrust thatching continue to be carried out in County Laois today. As shown in an appendix of this report, the 1945 Survey also revealed that during the mid-20th century both methods were commonly practiced.

Scollop thatching is a method which employs the use of hazel or sally scollops to secure the new thatch to the roof. Once any decayed thatch has been removed and a sound bed for new thatch reached, bundles of straw are applied in streaks or columns to a roof. Each bundle is held in place by a horizontal scollop which is pinned down by a hammered-in scollop staple.

The second most common method of thatching is thrust thatching. Using this method, the thatcher, by means of a thatching fork, forces a tied bundle of straw into the existing thatch. The new thatch is held in place by tension.

Although both methods remain in use today, scollop thatching appears to be more commonly practiced.



A detail of a twisted bobbin ridge and thatching tools used by Mr Michael Dempsey

Thatchers

The survey fieldwork revealed that a number of owners of thatched houses in the county carry out regular patching or re-thatching on their own roofs. Owners include Marty Delaney of Graigue, Mountmellick, Martin Delaney of O'More's Forest, Mountmellick, Michael Dempsey of Jamestown, Ballybrittas, Ned Ging of The Heath, Jackie Kavanagh of Ballyboodin, Durrow and Seamus Conroy of Clonaslee. A further owner, Mr Bill Delaney, who passed away in 2007, used to thatch his own roof at Owenass Bridge, Mountmellick.

Either self-taught or having learned the skill from fathers or grandfathers, each owner is self reliant. The ability of an owner to thatch and repair damage has undoubtedly saved many properties from deterioration or demise.

In addition to thatching their own properties, two of the thatchers, Seamus Conroy and Jackie Kavanagh, work as professional thatchers in County Laois. In two other cases, when interviewed, owners of thatched houses expressed interest in learning the skill themselves. One owner, Jimmy Dowling of Moret, Emo, is in the process of training to be a thatcher.

Other thatchers who have worked in recent years on thatched structures in County Laois include Sean Brennan, who passed away recently and Andy Phelan of Kyle, Durrow.



Mr Michael Dempsey of Ballybrittas



Mr Andy Phelan of Kyle, Durrow and his son

Issue Raised by Owners and Occupiers

Insurance Cover

During the survey of each site, the owner or occupier was given an opportunity to voice their concerns about owning or living in a thatched house. While most owners had a great affection for their home, having inherited it from earlier generations, many were disillusioned about the future of their properties.

One common concern shared by numerous owners was the inability to acquire insurance cover for their house. When dealing with insurance companies, they felt that little concession was made for the thatched roof. Seen as a fire hazard, many insurance providers were unwilling to take on the risk.

Numerous interviewees stated that, while they had tried to get insurance in the past, their properties were currently uninsured.

Difficulty in Finding a Thatcher

Many of the owners stated that they find it difficult to find a suitable and available thatcher to repair their roof. Because of this, some had even considered removing the roof thatch altogether and replacing it with tiles or galvanized sheeting.

Grant Assistance

A number of the owners interviewed had availed on occasion of the Thatching Grant awarded by the Department of the Environment. It was commonly believed while the sum awarded could assist with modest repairs, it was not enough to fund large-scale re-thatching.

Although a number of projects have been successfully assisted by grant schemes such as that run by The Heritage Council, some of owners expressed dissatisfaction with having been turned down at application stage.

The Future of Their Thatched House

One worrying trend among the owners of Laos' thatched houses is that many are uncertain about the future of their properties. Some owners commented that they were currently or had in the past considered replacing the roof with a more durable material. They were concerned with the unending need to patch and re-thatch. Some were unsure as to who they could employ to the repair the roof when required, where they would source materials from and where they could find the money to pay for it all. Many felt that the grants are an insufficient incentive to keep the thatch on the roof.

Recommendations Based on Survey Findings

Addition of all Intact Historic Thatched Structures to the Record of Protected Structures

Prior to the commencement of the survey, a total of eleven thatched houses were included in the Record of Protected Structures, as maintained by Laois County Council. It is recommended that all intact historic thatched structures be added to the RPS, so that they can be afforded statutory protection. Within the Survey of Thatched Structures in Laois, 2007, each intact historic thatched structure was awarded a Regional Rating⁴ and assigned three Categories of Special Interest⁵ including Architectural, Social and Technical.

Enforcement of the Legislation Regarding Protected Structures

For legislation to be effective, it must be enforced. Although every assistance and encouragement should be given to an owner or occupier of a thatched structure which is a protected structure, penalties should be put in place for the wilful neglect, unlicensed alteration or demolition.

Dissemination of Information

It became evident during the survey that many owners remain unclear about the financial assistance available to them. It was also revealed that while owners would like to maintain their properties, few understood the importance of good conservation practices and the rarity value of their thatched structure.

It is recommended that a booklet or information leaflet containing relevant information be produced and distributed to owners and occupiers of thatched structures in the county. The publication should make reference to sources of information which relate to owning and maintaining a thatched structure including a list of grant-aiding bodies, other publications, websites and the role of the Heritage Officer.

Prioritise Thatched Structures when Awarding Grant Assistance

As the Survey of Thatched Structures in Laois, 2007 has shown, thatched vernacular buildings in the county are becoming increasingly rare and are under continual threat of deterioration, over-restoration or dereliction.

An effort should be made by grant-aiding bodies to prioritise thatched structures when selecting conservation projects to assist. The survey has shown that once the condition of a thatched roof declines, the entire building can deteriorate very quickly. In the case of Northeast Laois, where the majority of thatched houses were constructed from clay, once the roof decays and falls, the walls will wash away within a matter of years.

Establishment of a Network of Owners in County Laois

The establishment of a network of owners would increase the survival rate of thatched structures in the county. A network would allow owners and occupiers to seek advice from each other in relation to acquiring a good thatcher, sourcing materials or getting insurance.

⁴ The rating system employed by the National Inventory of Architectural Heritage uses five rating categories: International, National, Regional, Local and Record Only. It is recommended by the NIAH that those sites or structures assigned a rating of International, National or Regional should be included in a county's Record of Protected Structures.

⁵ The Categories of Special Interest are published within Part IV, Planning and Development Act, 2000.

Appendix One

Thatched Structures on Laois County Council's Record of Protected Structures

RPS	Site Name	Address or Location	Owner
RPS 308	Thatched Cottage	South End of Village, Ballylynan	Unknown to Survey
RPS 309	Thatched Cottage	Off Main Street, Ballylynan	Murphy
RPS 454	Fisherman's Inn	Fisherstown, Ballybrittas	Sean Ward
RPS 455	Jamestown Thatched Cottage	Jamestown, Ballybrittas	Mrs Coleman
RPS 456	Abbeyview Cottage	Jamestown, Ballybrittas	Oliver Dempsey
RPS 459	Crannagh Thatched Farmhouse Cottage	Crannagh, Mountrath	N/A
RPS 460	Treacy's Thatched Pub	The Heath, Portlaoise	Tom Treacy
RPS 552	Thatched House	Cloonagh, Mountmellick	Liam McEvoy
RPS 553	Thatched House	Cloonagh, Mountmellick	Mary Connolly
RPS 554	Thatched House	Cloonagh Mountmellick	Henry Burns
RPS 612	Sheran's/The Village Inn	Coolrain, Mountrath	Kevin Hogan

Note on Sites

1. **RPS 459** The Address and National Grid Reference for this site may be incorrect. There is no thatched farmhouse at the location provided. The site may be confused with a thatched mansion in the townland of Crannagh near Stradbally, owned by the Dunne Family. While the thatched mansion is currently not on the RPS, as a substantial and architecturally significant house, it should be awarded protective status.
2. **RPS 554** The thatched house, owned by the Burns Family of Cloonagh, collapsed in 1997. In the following year, the site was completely cleared. A concrete and galvanised animal shed now stands on its site.

Appendix Two

1945 Survey of Irish Thatch

Transcripts of Replies to Questionnaire about Roofs and Thatching

The Irish Folklore Commission - Kevin Danaher

MS 1080 - Irish Folklore Department, University College Dublin

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11 December 1945

**The Irish Folklore Commission
Questionnaire: Roofs and Thatching**

'All over Ireland, thatch is the traditional roofing material. Several different methods of thatching are (or were) used. Below is a series of questions about thatched roofs of the traditional houses of your district. Please fill in the answer in the blank space after each question.'

Name of Writer: Mrs Flosey (Nee Bergin)

Address: Corbally, Abbeyleix, Laoighis

District to which the information refers: District and Townland of Corbally

Co: Laoighis **Barony:** Cullenagh **Parish:** Raheen

1.

In some districts the thatched roofs have hip-roofs, that is, the end walls of the house are at the same height of as the side walls. In other places, the thatched roof slopes only at the front and back, and the gables rise up to the ridge of the roof. Which type is in your district? If both are found, in what proportion (roughly) do they occur?

The gable-end-type of house is very common in this district. The hip-roofs are found on very old houses and they occur once in every twenty.

2.

Is there a layer of some material, such as sods, attached to the roof timbers under the thatch?

Yes, in most thatched houses there is a layer of dry grassy sods known as scraws.

3.

What material is used for thatch? Reed, different kinds of straw, heather, rushers mountain grass or other material?

If possible, oaten straw is used. If not, wheaten straw, or in very rare cases barley straw.

4.

Which is considered the best material?

Oaten straw.

5.

How often is a house thatched?

Approximately 8-10 years.

6.

Is the thatching done by a professional thatcher or by the occupants of the house?

Professional thatcher.

7.

Is all the roof done at one time, or is it thatched in patches at different times?

The whole house is seldom done at one time. Usually the front is done one year and the back the following year.

8.

There are several methods of putting on the thatch and securing it to the roof. Please give a short description of the way in which it is done in your district.

Most of the thatchers in the district use hazel rods about 3' long (known as scollops) to secure the new thatch to the roof, but some thatchers thrust the straw into the roof. This is done with a little flat iron bar with two prongs on the end called a thruster.

To prepare straw for thatch it is first shaken out / over a flat bed and water poured over it until weights are thrown on this bed. It is then allowed to set for a couple of days. It is pulled out in handfuls and put in bundles. Those bundles are tied with straw ropes called sugans. It is ready for the thatcher.

When the thatcher has two swaths of thatch on the roof, he pours buckets of water on it. He then beats it down with his rake to firm it. He then rakes it down and that portion of the roof is finished. When he has the work completed he sprays the new portion of the roof with bluestone dissolved in water. This is supposed to make the thatch wear longer, and it also keeps the thatch bright and looking new for a long time.

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**The Irish Folklore Commission
Questionnaire: Roofs and Thatching**

'All over Ireland, thatch is the traditional roofing material. Several different methods of thatching are (or were) used. Below is a series of questions about thatched roofs of the traditional houses of your district. Please fill in the answer in the blank space after each question.'

Name of Writer: Áine bean Uí Cíarbaic

Address: Stráidbaile, Laoighis

District to which the information refers: Stráidbaile & Baile Adaim

Co: Laoighis **Barony:** Port Laoighise **Parish:** Stráidbaile & Baile Adaim

1.

In some districts the thatched roofs have hip-roofs, that is, the end walls of the house are at the same height of as the side walls. In other places, the thatched roof slopes only at the front and back, and the gables rise up to the ridge of the roof. Which type is in your district? If both are found, in what proportion (roughly) do they occur?

Both types are found in this district. The majority have the roofs sloping down at the gables.

2.

Is there a layer of some material, such as sods, attached to the roof timbers under the thatch?

There is a layer of scraws or scroughs in places on the wattles or roof timber under the thatch.

3.

What material is used for thatch? Reed, different kinds of straw, heather, rushers mountain grass or other material?

Straw. Principally oaten straw. The roof is sometimes lined inside with reeds or sally rods.

4.

Which is considered the best material?

Wheaten straw is considered best.

5.

How often is a house thatched?

About every ten years if the work has been done well.

6.

Is the thatching done by a professional thatcher or by the occupants of the house?

By a professional thatcher in most cases.

7.

Is all the roof done at one time, or is it thatched in patches at different times?

All done at the same time, except when mending a leakage is necessary.

8.

There are several methods of putting on the thatch and securing it to the roof. Please give a short description of the way in which it is done in your district.

Some days before the thatching begins, a man is employed to pull the straw and put it into bundles. He points the hazel rods and has everything ready for the thatcher. The straw is put on in layers and secured to the roof with hazel rods. The thatcher uses a mallet to tighten the rods. The ends of the straws are cut neatly with a shears when the work is finished.

Some years ago the thatching of a house was a matter of great importance. The professional thatcher was provided with special fare and he got a glass of whiskey each morning before starting on the day's work.

That thatcher was very keen on his work and the best thatcher was the man who knew how to put the proper slope on the house at the top of the house so that no water would sink into the roof.

It wasn't always the [?]-looking cottages that had the best [?] of thatch.

Thatched houses are gradually disappearing from the country as only small farmers are living in them now and the thatching is done by members of the family as a rule. But, there are a few professional thatchers around the district still.

They are paid the usual wages and the old customs and connection with the thatching of the house have died out.

PS. A medal or a cross made of the straw was put on the thatch in the olden days.

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Name of Writer: Seosaim Mac Giolla Fionáin

Address: Baile Fionn, Moin Ráth

District to which the information refers: Ballyfin, Mountrath

Co: Laoighis **Barony:** Tunahinch **Parish:** Ballyfin

1.

In some districts the thatched roofs have hip-roofs, that is, the end walls of the house are at the same height of as the side walls. In other places, the thatched roof slopes only at the front and back, and the gables rise up to the ridge of the roof. Which type is in your district? If both are found, in what proportion (roughly) do they occur?

6 hip roofs to 12 without.

2.

Is there a layer of some material, such as sods, attached to the roof timbers under the thatch?

Yes, a layer of bog sods or "scraws".

3.

What material is used for thatch? Reed, different kinds of straw, heather, rushers mountain grass or other material?

Oaten straw.

4.

Which is considered the best material?

Oaten straw.

5.

How often is a house thatched?

Every 7 years (Information from 9 pupils). Every 4 or 5 years according to 6 or 7 pupils.

6.

Is the thatching done by a professional thatcher or by the occupants of the house?

By a professional thatcher.

7.

Is all the roof done at one time, or is it thatched in patches at different times?

No [?] custom. Thatching is done both ways.

8.

There are several methods of putting on the thatch and securing it to the roof. Please give a short description of the way in which it is done in your district.

A handful of straw or perhaps a bundle. A 'scollop' is inserted into the old thatch at one side of the new straw, bent across and the other end is pushed into the previous thatch at the other side of the new straw. Then another scollop (preferably hazel) is bent into form a staple and inserted into roof to hold 1st. scollop in position, this 'staple' is first hammered at point where it is to be bent by a stone or some other heavy implement.

See rough sketch.

[An ink and pencil sketch of staple holding horizontal scollop and straw bundle in place is included in the questionnaire]

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**The Irish Folklore Commission
Questionnaire: Roofs and Thatching**

'All over Ireland, thatch is the traditional roofing material. Several different methods of thatching are (or were) used. Below is a series of questions about thatched roofs of the traditional houses of your district. Please fill in the answer in the blank space after each question.'

Name of Writer: Áine ní Dúblaig

Address: Scoil Cainnig Naomiga, Acas bó, Bailean Calais

District to which the information refers: Acas bó

Co: Laoigse **Barony:** Clarmallagh **Parish:** Acas bó

1.

In some districts the thatched roofs have hip-roofs, that is, the end walls of the house are at the same height of as the side walls. In other places, the thatched roof slopes only at the front and back, and the gables rise up to the ridge of the roof. Which type is in your district? If both are found, in what proportion (roughly) do they occur?

Both types are found. Very few have hip-roofs – about five in the district. Byrnes of Shanohoe and Shaws of Goraslean, Rafters of Garrydurr, Handcocks of Boherard, Fitzpatrick of Kildellig.

2.

Is there a layer of some material, such as sods, attached to the roof timbers under the thatch?

There is usually a layer of sods under thatch.

3.

What material is used for thatch? Reed, different kinds of straw, heather, rushers mountain grass or other material?

Oaten straw is chiefly used though sometimes wheaten straw is used.

4.

Which is considered the best material?

Oaten straw.

5.

How often is a house thatched?

Every six or four years.

6.

Is the thatching done by a professional thatcher or by the occupants of the house?

By a professional thatcher in some cases, and often by occupants of house.

7.

Is all the roof done at one time, or is it thatched in patches at different times?

The roof is done swath by swath until it is covered.

8.

There are several methods of putting on the thatch and securing it to the roof. Please give a short description of the way in which it is done in your district.

Hazel scollops are cut and pointed. Oaten straw is pulled in neat bundles. A helper passes bundles of straw and hazel rods to thatcher. He fixes down straw with hazels. The thatcher throws water on each course to flatten it down. He then rakes it. He hammers hazels with mallet and cuts eaves.

Some thatchers do not use scollops, but fasten down thatch with cord using a big pack-needle. The eaves are cut with a hedge-clippers.

Professional thatchers are very scarce now. Some years ago most people could thatch their own dwellings but the art is dying out.

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**The Irish Folklore Commission
Questionnaire: Roofs and Thatching**

'All over Ireland, thatch is the traditional roofing material. Several different methods of thatching are (or were) used. Below is a series of questions about thatched roofs of the traditional houses of your district. Please fill in the answer in the blank space after each question.'

Name of Writer: P.J. Heffernan

Address: Camross, Mount Rath, Leix

District to which the information refers: Camross

Co: Laoighise **Barony:** Upperwoods **Parish:** Camross

1.

In some districts the thatched roofs have hip-roofs, that is, the end walls of the house are at the same height of as the side walls. In other places, the thatched roof slopes only at the front and back, and the gables rise up to the ridge of the roof. Which type is in your district? If both are found, in what proportion (roughly) do they occur?

V. Roof: gables rise up to the ridge of the roof. Thatched roof slopes only at front and back.

2.

Is there a layer of some material, such as sods, attached to the roof timbers under the thatch?

Scraws are put on the roof timber.

3.

What material is used for thatch? Reed, different kinds of straw, heather, rushers mountain grass or other material?

Straw, heather, rushes.

4.

Which is considered the best material?

Oaten straw.

5.

How often is a house thatched?

About five years.

6.

Is the thatching done by a professional thatcher or by the occupants of the house?

Professional thatcher.

7.

Is all the roof done at one time, or is it thatched in patches at different times?

Once every ten or fifteen years.

8.

There are several methods of putting on the thatch and securing it to the roof. Please give a short description of the way in which it is done in your district.

Scraws are cut the same size and tied them to the rafters and then a layer of either heather or rushers. Lastly comes the straw which is held by [?] rods. Oaten straw is considered best for thatch.

Notes

There are 44 thatched houses in this parish. Hazel scollops are used. They throw water on the thatch to level it when thatching. To keep blackbirds and others from pulling the straw, they spray it with sulphate of copper. Bog scraws are used to cover the timbers. A wire is put up on the eaves from gable to gable to keep the storm from blowing it up. The straw was scalloped to the straws or soun [sewn] with a wooden needle and cord. They put three rows of scollops on each side of top of roof. They cut the inside shorter than the outside of eave. Wheaten straw (not too dry) was considered best long ago.

PJH

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**The Irish Folklore Commission
Questionnaire: Roofs and Thatching**

'All over Ireland, thatch is the traditional roofing material. Several different methods of thatching are (or were) used. Below is a series of questions about thatched roofs of the traditional houses of your district. Please fill in the answer in the blank space after each question.'

Name of Writer: Páidraig O'Lochlainn

Address: Rush Hall, Mount Rath, Leix

District to which the information refers: Rush Hall

Co: Leix **Barony:** Upperwoods **Parish:** Castletown

1.

In some districts the thatched roofs have hip-roofs, that is, the end walls of the house are at the same height of as the side walls. In other places, the thatched roof slopes only at the front and back, and the gables rise up to the ridge of the roof. Which type is in your district? If both are found, in what proportion (roughly) do they occur?

There is only one house of the first type in the district.

2.

Is there a layer of some material, such as sods, attached to the roof timbers under the thatch?

As a rule, there is some material, sods or "scraw" between the timber and the thatch.

3.

What material is used for thatch? Reed, different kinds of straw, heather, rushers mountain grass or other material?

Oaten, barley or wheaten straw.

4.

Which is considered the best material?

Black oaten straw.

5.

How often is a house thatched?

When needed: well done 15 to 20 years.

6.

Is the thatching done by a professional thatcher or by the occupants of the house?

By a professional thatcher.

7.

Is all the roof done at one time, or is it thatched in patches at different times?

When a part becomes faulty, it's thatched apart from the rest of the house.

8.

There are several methods of putting on the thatch and securing it to the roof. Please give a short description of the way in which it is done in your district.

- (a) scollops on top keep on the thatch.
- (b) Delving – a bar with a fork at the top shoves in the fangle – the straw roled into a ball at one end – under the above portion.