

# Guide to the National Museum of Ireland

## Country Life

**museum**

National Museum of Ireland  
Ard-Mhúsaem na hÉireann

Country Life



Guide to the National Museum of Ireland  
*Country Life*



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A floor plan is included in the back of this guide book.

The National Museum's exhibitions of traditional Irish country life (between 1850 and 1950) are housed in four floors of galleries



Interior of Exhibition galleries



## Introduction

The National Museum of Ireland – Country Life is home to the National Museum's Irish Folklife Collection and houses the national collection of objects representing Irish traditional life. The Museum opened at Turlough Park, Co. Mayo in September 2001, a result of a co-operation involving the National Museum of Ireland, the Department of Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht and the Islands, the Office of Public Works and Mayo County Council. At the museum, visitors and researchers have the opportunity to explore traditional Irish life through objects, images and an extensive related archive collected for almost a century.

The Museum's exhibition galleries are housed in a purpose-built stone-clad building designed by the Architectural Services of the Office of Public Works. The exhibitions, on four floors, focus on customs and festivals, farming and fishing, trades and crafts, life in the home (including furniture and fittings) as well as the clothes made and worn by country people during the period 1850-1950. Rare video footage and photography are used to recreate the original settings in which the objects were made and used. While the exhibitions are the most visible manifestation of the museum's work, the museum also has a scholarly and educational role to study, collect, conserve and make better known, objects of Irish ethnological interest.

The museum complex includes exhibition galleries, storage facilities for the reserve collection, education rooms and a conservation laboratory. Public facilities, including a restaurant, bookshop and library as well as staff offices are located in the Victorian Turlough Park House – formerly the home of the Fitzgerald family. The original drawing room and library of the 'Big House' are open to the public and furnished as they may have looked in 1900.

## Turlough Park House and Gardens

Turlough Park was the home of the Fitzgerald family to whom the estate was granted under the Cromwellian land settlements of the mid-seventeenth century. The name of the village and estate derives from the Irish *turlach*, signifying a lake that dries up in the summer period.

Visible from the museum grounds is a striking and distinctive round tower, one of five surviving in Co. Mayo, usually dated to the eleventh or twelfth centuries and associated with monastic sites. The church at Turlough is reputed to have been founded by St. Patrick.

At its largest, the Turlough estate consisted of almost 8,500 acres requiring many indoor servants and outdoor estate workers to maintain the house and lands. In 1915, the Congested Districts Board – established to initiate economic improvements along the western seaboard – purchased and re-distributed the Fitzgerald estate.



Modern free-standing glasshouse built on the original foundations of a Victorian wooden glasshouse

Today the museum site contains many fine mature trees, a legacy from the parkland that was laid out for the original eighteenth-century house (now in ruins) in a manner that was sympathetic to the contours of the land. The ruins of the eighteenth century bow-fronted house are visible on the right hand side of the avenue near the entrance gate to Turlough Park. In the mid-nineteenth century the gardens were re-designed and landscaped to Victorian fashion complementing the 1865 house on the hill. New features were incorporated including grass terraces, picnic islands, formal flowerbeds, a croquet lawn and a tennis court. The turlough was dammed to form a lake. The modern freestanding glasshouse has been re-built on the original foundations of the Fitzgerald's wooden glasshouse, re-using the original hand-fired floor tiles and iron roof cresting. Richard Turner, the Dublin ironmaster who designed the Curvilinear Range at the National Botanic Gardens in Dublin, possibly designed the iron lean-to vinery adjoining the stables. The entrance gates were made in his Dublin iron foundry. Bord Fáilte Éireann and the Great Gardens of Ireland Restoration Programme have supported an extensive recent restoration of the Victorian gardens and the parkland.



Turlough Park House built in 1865 with modern purpose-built exhibitions galleries to the rear

The architect Thomas Newenham Deane designed Turlough Park House. He was also the designer of the Church of Ireland in Westport and, interestingly, the National Museum building at Kildare Street, Dublin. The architectural style of the house has been referred to as 'Victorian Gothic'. The two-storey house rises to a high-pitched roof with dormer windows. It incorporates an open central Gothic porch bearing the house's 1865 date stone.

The house is built of local grey limestone and interest is added to its façade by light grey, pink and black limestone and worked stone. The service area adjoining the house once accommodated the kitchen and stable block. A 1722 date stone is built into the façade of the stable block – this is probably associated with the original eighteenth-century house.

## Romance and Reality: The Irish Folklife Collections

An imposing stained glass window above the porch incorporates the Fitzgerald family crest and bears the motto *Honor Probatque Virtus* (Honour, Probity & Virtue). The window provides light for the double-storey oak panelled entrance hall and cantilevered Portland stone staircase. The Italian carrara marble fireplace in the hall and the Connemara marble fireplace in the dining room are examples of a revived taste for marble in the late nineteenth century.

The drawing room and library on the ground floor of Turlough Park House are open to the public and furnished as they may have looked in 1900. The homes of the landed gentry would have been decorated in a mixture of furnishing styles collected over many years. The drawing room includes a mahogany Lyrachord piano built in the mid-nineteenth century in Cork, a nest of three tables made around 1900 in Killarney, Co. Kerry, and period silver, ceramics and glass-ware. The library, a place of study, was also where the Fitzgerald's' tenants would pay their quarterly rents.



The Irish Folklore Commission and friends visit the first exhibition on folklife at the National Museum, Kildare St in 1937

Left to right: Seán Mac Giollarnáth, Séamus Ó Duilearga (Director of the IFC), An tAth. Eric Mac Fhinn, Adolf Mahr (Director of the National Museum), Osborn Bergin, Hans Hartmann, Peadar Mac Fhionnlaioich, Liam Price, Rev. John G. O'Neill, Leon Ó Broin, Éamonn Ó Donnchadha, Louis Maguidhir, Áke Campbell, Michael Heaney

The material on display in the galleries comes from the Irish Folklife Collection of the National Museum of Ireland dealing with traditional Irish life. The National Museum of Ireland was established under legislation in 1877. The main focus of the museum after this time and for decades after was in natural history, Irish antiquities, decorative arts and history. Folklife material was not acquired to any significant extent.

By the late 1920s however, the recently established Irish State was supporting efforts to record and collect the folklore of Ireland. These efforts were very much related to the movement for the revival of the Irish language and they culminated in the establishment of the state-supported Irish Folklore Commission in 1935. Many of the field collectors of this Commission were active in obtaining traditional objects, which were passed on to the National Museum. In 1937 the first exhibition on folklife at the National Museum was opened under Adolf Mahr, the Austrian-born Director of the Museum.

public. It was not until the 1990s that a solution emerged in the form of an innovative partnership between the National Museum and Mayo County Council, which had recently acquired Turlough Park House. With government support and monies from the European Union Structural Fund, the way was clear for the opening of a new branch of the National Museum devoted exclusively to the folklife collection.

Today the Irish Folklife Collection numbers around 50,000 items and is composed of material mostly made according to the oral folk tradition or items that were at the heart of rural life. It includes objects relating to farming and fishing, transport, the home, costume, toys, religion, the traditional calendar and many crafts and trades. As the oral folk tradition fades away, items that reflect popular life generally are being collected.

The Museum also holds paper archives, recordings, films and videos as well as thousands of images of Irish rural life. The archive, along with the Museum's collections, provides an understanding of the reality of Irish life – harsh for many, but relatively good for others. In contrast, many artists romanticised the people of the countryside and the islands as heroic, innocent, and timeless, portraying the way of life as pure and appealing. Into our own time, tourist postcards and posters have promoted an idealised image of the peaceful and pleasant life lived on the small farms of Ireland. Popular films such as *Man of Aran* and *The Quiet Man* helped perpetuate the idea of an idyllic rural life in Ireland.

### Folklife and Folklore

*Folklife* deals with the popular traditional way of life, the objects made in the informal oral tradition and their associated skills. These objects and skills are part of an oral folk tradition.

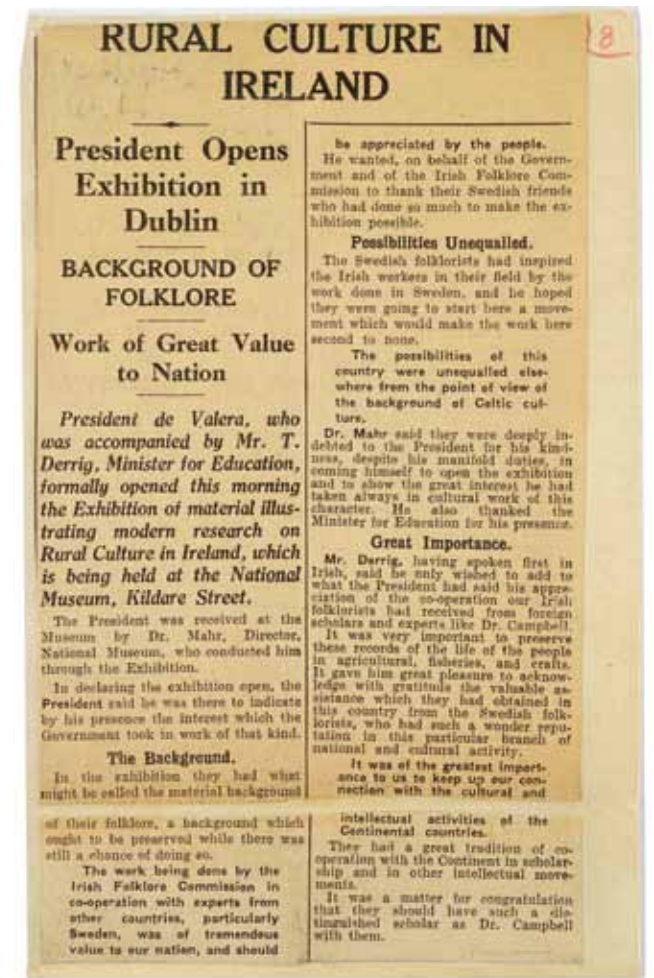
*Folklore* deals with the intangible aspects of life: stories, myths, traditional beliefs and practices, often outside the realm of formal religion. Today folklife and folklore are increasingly studied as part of *ethnology*, which treats of life in the present as well as the past.



James Loughran (on the left), of Ravensdale, Co. Louth, shows the packsaddle he made from hay-ropes to Michael J. Murphy of the Irish Folklore Commission, 1961

The collection of folklife material by the National Museum did not begin in earnest until the appointment in 1949 of A.T. Lucas to the Irish Antiquities Division, with the specific brief of collecting folklife material. A period of intensive collecting was from then undertaken for several decades. More staff were appointed to folklife work in the 1960s and 1970s and the Irish Folklife Division was formally established in 1974.

While the folklife collection grew rapidly, the absence of a permanent and suitable venue in which to display the acquisitions meant that the collection remained in storage for decades, largely unseen by the



Newspaper report of the opening of the first exhibition of Irish folklife material at the National Museum, Kildare Street, Dublin in 1937 by Éamon de Valera

*Evening Herald*, 1937

## The Times

Between 1850 and 1950 the people who lived in the countryside struggled with the devastation brought by the Great Famine and its aftermath. They also participated in great political movements including the struggle for independence and especially for land ownership.

The following summary provides a context for the many social and political changes of the period.

### **1850 – 1869**

In the immediate aftermath of the Great Famine (1845-1850) families and communities were decimated and dispersed by death and emigration. In 1841 the population was almost 8.2 million. By 1871 it was 5.4 million. This period also saw the emergence of the Irish Republican (or Fenian) Brotherhood, a secret society whose aim was the achievement, by force, of an Irish republic.

### **1870 – 1882**

Many farmers joined the Irish National Land League, founded by Michael Davitt in 1879, with Charles Stewart Parnell as its president, to lobby for lower rents and ownership of the land. The Land War (1879-1882) consisted of mass demonstrations and outbreaks of civil unrest and focussed on the conditions of tenancy and ownership of land organised by the Land League. The Land Law (Ireland) Act (1881) provided for fixity of tenure for tenants so long as the rent was paid, free sale of the tenant's interest in their holding and fair rent fixed by an independent land court. The Act was significant in acknowledging both the tenant and the landlord interest in the Land. From 1882 the political campaign for Home Rule led by Parnell began, seeking an Irish Parliament based in Dublin.

### **1883 – 1891**

Political unrest died down but social and economic change continued to affect the lives of rural people. This was a period of relative prosperity. The 1883 Labourers' Act provided houses for labourers at low rents. The rate of emigration decreased. The Gaelic League (Conradh na Gaeilge) was established in 1893 to promote the Irish language and in 1884 the Gaelic Athletic Association was founded to promote Irish games.

A series of Land Acts revolutionised the landholding system in Ireland from one of territorial landlord estates to that of owner occupiers. The Landlord and Tenant Act of 1870 was followed by further land acts in 1881 (Gladstone's Second Act), 1885 (Ashbourne Act), 1891 (Balfour Act), 1903 (Wyndham's Act) and finally the Birrell Act of 1909.

### **1892 – 1915**

During this period substantial numbers of tenant farmers were able to purchase their own land. The Congested Districts' Board established in 1891, supported cottage industries in order to provide farm families with additional sources of income. The establishment of co-operative creameries in this period regularised milk prices. In 1909 the Old Age Pension was introduced. As a result of the activities of the Gaelic League instruction in the Irish language were introduced in some primary schools. Within Ireland there were divisions at the prospect of Home Rule. The Irish National Volunteers was set up in 1913 to defend Home Rule and the smaller Ulster Volunteer Force was founded in the same year, to oppose it. At the outbreak of the Great War in 1914 many Irishmen joined the British Army and fought in the trenches.

### **1916 – 1923**

Although the 1916 Easter Rebellion was largely confined to Dublin, the subsequent War of Independence (1919-1921) was fought in many places throughout the country. The Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 established twenty-six of the thirty-two counties as a self-governing dominion to be called the Irish Free State Saorstát Éireann within the British Commonwealth. The subsequent Civil War (1922-1923) was fought between the State and those who opposed some of the terms of the Treaty. It divided communities and families and ended when those opposed to the treaty called a ceasefire.

### **1924 – 1950**

Following Independence people learned to deal with the official institutions of the new state including an expanded civil service administration. In the 1930s, farmers suffered because of a trade war between Ireland and Britain but prices rebounded during World War Two when neutral Ireland supplied food to Britain. In 1948 the Republic of Ireland Act was passed.



## The Natural Environment

In the Ireland of 1850, most people lived off the land. A small number of wealthy landowners owned the land; they in turn leased it to their tenants. The question of land ownership dominated Irish political life from 1870 until the early twentieth century when the majority of tenant farmers became the owners of their small farms.

The fertility of the land affected the quality of life of the vast majority of the population. In Ireland some areas contain desirable resources such as rich, well-drained land with easy access to a bog for turf used for fuel. Others are characterised by rocks and poor soils. Mixtures of good and poor land exist in most regions, though most of the good farming land is in the east and southeast; the land is predominantly poorer west of the Shannon river and large areas of bog dominate the centre of the country.



Thatched house on seaward side of the road near Kinnadoohy, Louisburgh, Co. Mayo, 1966



Patrick Gately, raft maker and James G. Delaney, Irish Folklore Commission beside a rush raft made for fishing and fowling on the River Suck in Co. Roscommon, 1962

Farmers relied on local supplies of stone, sod or clay to build their houses. Walls were often covered or rendered with a layer of whitewash made from lime or seashells.

The primary factor affecting the quality and appearance of thatched roofs was the choice of material. Both wheat and rye straw had long life spans; wheat was the first choice for its cleanliness, uniform length, and ease of preparation. If wheat or rye straw were not available, oat straw, barley straw, reeds, rushes, flax or marram grass were used.

People took advantage of local natural materials to make everyday items. As a result, in different parts of the country similar objects were made of different materials. Straw was a cheap, readily available material that people used to make a wide range of everyday objects. Irish Folklife straw objects such as mattresses, baskets, stools, horse collars and hen's nests demonstrate the material's versatility. Each maker used the straw's combination of lightness, flexibility, and strength to serve a specific function. For instance, the craft worker who made the stool used the strength of pieces of straw bound together, while the maker of the hen's nest took advantage of the insulating quality of the straw fibres. On the flood lands of the River Suck in Co. Roscommon, bulrushes, lashed and woven around a wooden frame were employed to make a raft used for fishing and fowling. Such a raft can be seen on exhibition and demonstrates how well people adapted natural materials to hand to serve local needs. It is the only example of its type surviving in northern Europe.



Richard Wadding of Killinick, Co Wexford demonstrating the skill of the cooper in making watertight stave built vessels, 1968

## Trades

Before the advent of mass-production, most of the objects that people needed for their daily lives were made by hand using locally available raw materials. Resourceful householders, adept in a range of crafts, provided for the needs of daily life by making objects such as wicker baskets, wooden furniture and clay vessels.

Household objects of similar function show marked regional variations in both material and design. It is not unusual, for example, to find different styles of chairs, butter churns or thatched roofs associated with different parts of the country. These differences resulted from the use of different materials, a variation in the skills of the makers, and because of personal preferences and traditions.

Although the objects made by the country craft workers were often beautiful in form, they were primarily influenced by practical use or function rather than aesthetics. Generally traditional craft workers never used written measurements or patterns, relying instead on skill and accuracy developed through rigorous apprenticeship and experience. Their skills were passed from one generation to the next, often within the same family, resulting in several generations of craft workers who kept traditional patterns and forms in the objects they created. Their tools, which were greatly valued, were usually made by the local blacksmith and wood turner or carpenter, and were also handed down from one generation to the next.

The role of craft workers was eclipsed with the increasing availability of mass-produced goods, distributed nationally and internationally by new transport methods and networks. As the tractor replaced the horse, the work of the local blacksmith and harness maker was reduced. The importance of baskets diminished with the introduction of newly available plastic and cardboard packaged goods. Factory-made furniture, sometimes using new materials such as plywood, replaced vernacular styles.



Seán Ó Curraoin of Ros an Mhíl, Connamara, Co. Galway weaving the bottom of a basket; this was acquired by the National Museum in 1967

Baskets were once commonly used throughout the countryside and they were made in a variety of shapes and sizes for all sorts of uses in the home and on the farm. Wickerwork baskets were generally constructed of willow rods. *Salix Viminalis* was commonly known as sally while better quality varieties such as *Salix Purpurea* were known as osiers. Many farmers grew sally rods to make their own baskets of green or unpeeled willow. Baskets were also made of straw, rushes, heather and briar.



A spurtle (a small fork) from Clones, Co. Monaghan used in thrust thatching to knot small bundles of straw into place

Thatched roofs, once common throughout Ireland were, like baskets, made of natural materials. Different techniques were used to attach straw or flax, marram or rushes, into a series of bound layers to form the thatch. Thatchers only needed a few tools of simple design, usually made by the thatcher himself, or by the local blacksmith.

Thrust thatching was particularly common in the east of the country. In this method small bundles of straw with knotted ears were thrust into the old thatch using a small fork known as a spurtle. It is a method which was not as common nationally as scollop thatching by which the straw was attached to the roof with straight willow or hazel rods which were in turn secured by hairpin-shaped 'scollops' - pointed, slender, pliable twigs.

Wooden furniture such as chairs, dressers, tables and frame beds became commonplace in even the most humble of rural homes from the second half of the nineteenth century as a result of increasing prosperity. Carpenters, joiners and wheelwrights constructed furniture to take advantage of both the available wall space and the relative lack of floor space within the house.

The seat is probably the oldest of all types of furniture and throughout the exhibition many styles of stools and chairs, including *súgán* (rope) and straw armchairs, are on display. Carpenters' chairs are a style which were developed by carpenters at the beginning of the nineteenth century in imitation of the Regency style. They are in striking contrast to the comb-backed 'hedge' chairs of the same period that were made of wood found in the hedgerows.



Thomas Loftus, son of James Loftus, Borrisokane, Co. Tipperary seen using his father's pole lathe.

The specialised woodworker – the wood turner – used a lathe to shape solid pieces of wood into a range of round or cylindrical objects such as bowls and eggcups, handles for spades and tradesmen's tools. In its simplest form the lathe consists of horizontal beams with fastening points upon which the piece of wood being worked is revolved. The pole lathe, a development of the basic type, works on the principal of turning the piece of wood by means of a cord passing around it, with one end of the cord being fastened to the treadle (a lever that is operated with the foot), and the other to an elastic pole above. Unlike the modern woodturning lathe, which has a continuous rotary motion, the pole lathe allowed the craftsman to work on just one side of the wood at any time. This meant that he could leave a projection on the wood that could be subsequently carved to form a handle. James Loftus of Borrisokane, Co. Tipperary, (1851–1933) was one of the last traditional pole lathe turners.

Stave-built vessel with extending handle made by Edward (Ned) Gavin of Ballinagh, County Cavan



The cooper made staved wooden vessels for use in the home and on the farm: they included churns, barrels and buckets as well as vessels used for eating and drinking and storing liquid. The larger of the vessels were known as piggins and the smaller as noggins. The wooden pieces were carefully shaped on four sides to fit tightly together and were held in place by hoops of iron or by lengths of split willow or hazel. The cooper's work was essential to most rural families who needed a variety of containers to process milk, wash clothes and store foodstuffs.

The late Ned Gavin of Ballinagh, Co. Cavan was among the last of the active country coopers until his retirement in the late 1980s. He learnt his trade over an apprenticeship of eight and a half years and supplied butter churns and other dairy containers to customers in the north and west of the country.

As working horses were common in Ireland, harness makers were much in demand. The strength and durability of a set of harness was important because of the farmer's dependence upon the power of horses to perform so many everyday tasks. A harness maker could take up to seven years to learn his trade.



Tinsmith Bernard Mongan photographed in 1965 as he worked at his roadside encampment at Cahermorris, Co. Galway

Working at encampments along the side of the road, the tinsmith, known as a tinker, made tin containers and repaired damaged ware such as saucepans and buckets. His family would sell his goods from door to door, along with other goods that rural households might want, from almanacs to needles or scrubbing brushes to wooden pegs.

The blacksmith was regarded as the chief craftsman and was respected and recognised for his important role in the community. He made and repaired a very large range of objects from gates to domestic cooking ware and agricultural and craftsmen's tools. He was also the farrier, responsible for shoeing horses and donkeys.

The blacksmith would sometimes add a decorative flourish to his work with the addition of ornamental scrollwork.



This attractively decorated example of a bread iron from Carrickacroman, Co. Cavan, made by the blacksmith Matthew Dowd, was used for toasting oatcakes in front of an open hearth

## Life in the Community



St. Brigid's Cross, South Ulster

St. Patrick, the patron saint of Ireland, is honoured on the 17th March, a day on which all Lenten restrictions were temporarily lifted. Children made 'St. Patrick's crosses' – badges of fabric and paper. They wore these crosses to Mass and then to local parades and festivities. Adults wore shamrock during the day as it was believed that St. Patrick used its three leaves to illustrate the Holy Trinity – the existence of three persons in one God. By evening the worn shamrock might be dipped in an alcoholic drink, called 'St. Patrick's Pot', and a toast raised in honour of the saint.

Easter morning marked the end of Lent and of fasting. The build-up of eggs and dairy produce during Lent provided for a welcome breakfast. There were usually enough eggs for children to decorate and use in Easter games.

*Bealtaine*, or May Day, the first day of summer, was a welcoming festival of flowers, dancing and bonfires. People decorated the outside of their houses with May bushes, flowers and furze to promote good luck. They also sprinkled their homes and farms with holy water to promote good luck. They believed in protecting themselves, their home, their herd, the churn and dairy yield from malign influences and mischievous beings from the otherworld. In the twentieth century the month of May was also characterised by religious processions in honour of the Virgin Mary, and flower filled May altars were common.

The 23rd June, the eve of the feast day of St. John the Baptist was often called Midsummer as it was close to the summer solstice, the longest day of the year. Communal bonfires were lit on the hillsides and rival communities vied for the biggest bonfire. Dancing, courting and sometimes fighting were features of the celebrations. Families would light small bonfires on their farm and throw lighted embers from the fire onto their fields in an effort to ensure a favourable harvest. Summer was also a time for outdoor entertainment and sport for all ages. Fishing, road bowling and crossroads dancing were popular summer activities.



St. Patrick's Cross, Co. Kildare

The first day of each season was known as a quarter day. Spring was marked by St. Brigid's Day, 1st February; summer by *Bealtaine*, 1st May; autumn by *Lúnasa*, 1st August, and winter by *Samhain*, 1st November. Many of the ceremonies associated with these quarterly days were celebrated on the eve of the festivals.

Spring began with the feast day of St. Brigid, whose cult had strong associations with that of a pagan goddess of fertility. It was a season of growth on the land and of new life on the farm when people looked forward to better weather and longer days. In order to protect the family, the animals and prospective crops, crosses were made to honour St Brigid and seek her blessing. These were made in a variety of styles using straw, rushes, or other natural materials and were hung in the home and in outhouses. A festive meal of potatoes and butter was also eaten on the eve of St Brigid's Day.



Balls made from plaited horse hair were made by women and given to men as love tokens for May Day hurling matches. This example was acquired by the National Museum in 1975 and is from Lavally, Ballintogher, Co. Sligo

In some of parts of Ireland 'Biddy Boys' (or girls) went from house to house with an effigy of the saint, named 'Biddy', collecting money and food for a party in her honour. Sometimes the 'Biddy Boys' would carry a large straw girdle or belt through which those in the house would step or pass. They did this in the hope of gaining the saint's protection from illness during the coming year.

During Lent – a religious observance for forty days – people fasted from meat, eggs and dairy products. Lent and its associated fasting was in general more strictly observed in the past than today. Fish supplemented porridge, potatoes and dry bread on occasion. On Shrove Tuesday – the eve of Lent – people prepared for the period of deprivation by feasting on all the remaining stock of meat and dairy products. Pancakes were a traditional way to use up surplus eggs, butter and milk. This was also the most favourable day of the year to marry as weddings and festivities were not permitted during Lent. The first Sunday after the beginning of Lent was known as 'Chalk Sunday' and on this day, those not married were often chased by local children who would chalk an 'X' on the backs of their clothes which was visible to all after Mass.



Wooden crosses, carved with symbols of the Passion and the year of pilgrimage, were popular souvenirs for pilgrims to Lough Derg, Co. Donegal



Ghostly masks such as this from An Fál Mór, Co. Mayo were made to frighten neighbours on Halloween



Doll representation of St. Patrick featured in a Mummers Play, Enniskillen, Co. Fermanagh



Harvest Knot, South Ulster

Traditionally a harvest of fruit and nuts was gathered for the festive fare and also featured in family activities on the night. Games foretelling marriages also provided entertainment. People believed that on this night the spirits of the dead might return to the family home. Evil spirits were also thought to be active so people avoided travelling alone at night. They protected their homes from bad luck with holy water and in some areas made Halloween crosses.

The winter festival of Christmas, celebrated on 25th December, is centred on the family and a special meal. In some localities straw-clad drama groups known as Mummers enacted a traditional play in rhyme. The Wren Boys marked St Stephen's feast day (26th December) in some communities. These men and boys in fancy dress went entertaining from house to house 'Hunting the Wren' popularly regarded as the betrayer of the Saint.

The yearly festivals celebrated the passage of time and are intimately associated with the annual routine of work. Elements of the festivals stretch back to antiquity and were closely associated with protecting the family and the farmstead from illness and harm. The festivals also focused upon sustainability of the land, the family and the community.

*Lúnasa* marked the onset of August, autumn and the harvest season. It was celebrated either on the last Sunday in July or the first Sunday in August. In some areas the day was marked by gatherings on mountains or at lakes while in others it was a traditional day for harvest fairs.

The whole family and community helped with reaping the harvest. The cutting of the last sheaf, often known as the *cailleach*, was accompanied by a special ceremony. This sheaf was often decorated and hung above the table at a celebratory harvest meal. In some areas men and women decorated pieces of straw to make 'harvest knots' to be exchanged as tokens of love and courtship at the harvest festival.

Autumn was also a time for pilgrimage, patterns (communal visits to holy sites) and prayer. In addition to patterns to local holy wells some people went on pilgrimage to famous sites such as Croagh Patrick and Knock in Co. Mayo and to Lough Derg in Co. Donegal.

The festival of *Samhain*, the first day of winter, was marked on the 1st November, the Feast of All Saints. The eve of this day, *Oíche Shamhna* (Halloween), is still celebrated in many parts of Ireland with feasting and games.

## Working on Land and Water

### The Farming Year

Saint Bridget's Day, 1st February, was seen as the start of the new year on the land as days become longer and the first signs of growth are evident. Apart from daily routine tasks, such as milking cows, the main tasks of the traditional farming and fishing family were the following:



Horse and slide car with basketful of turf, Glenshesk, Co. Antrim, c. 1900

### February

- Begin preparing the ground for crops
- Attend fair to buy or sell animals
- Feed animals

### March

- Plant potatoes
- Harvest seaweed
- Assist animals during calving and lambing
- Feed animals

### April

- Plant vegetables and cereals
- Harvest seaweed
- Assist animals during calving and lambing
- Fish for mackerel and herring

### May

- Cut turf
- Put cattle out to pastures, sheep onto hills
- Dock tails and castrate young lambs
- Weed crops
- Attend fair to buy or sell animals
- Net for salmon

### June

- Weed crops
- Shear and dip sheep
- Cut hay
- Catch lobsters
- Dry turf

### July

- Cut hay
- Spray potatoes
- Harvest cabbage
- Fish for mackerel

### August

- Harvest cereals and flax

- Dig potatoes
- Attend fair to buy or sell animals
- Fish for mackerel

### September

- Harvest cereals
- Dig potatoes
- Bring turf home
- Fish for herring, mackerel
- Pick blackberries

### October

- Pick apples
- Dig potatoes
- Pull turnips

### November

- Attend market to sell buy or sell animals
- Plough fields
- Make and repair hedges, ditches and drains
- Bring cattle in from pastures
- Feed animals

### December

- Repair farm equipment
- Lay in seed
- Feed animals

### January

- Repair farm equipment
- Clean ditches and drains
- Feed animals

### Farming the Land

Farming was the main occupation of rural Ireland. Farm work was traditionally done with a small number of hand tools but became easier with the introduction of machinery. Potatoes were the main vegetable crop and they are easily grown even on poor soil. On small farms they were often grown in spade-made cultivation ridges, sometimes called 'lazy beds'. The farmer turned the sod back over the grass, piling on earth and manure to make a raised bed. Apart from potatoes the other main vegetables cultivated were cabbage, onions and carrots.

The small farmer in Ireland often possessed little in the way of farm machinery. The spade and one or two other hand tools were all that existed in the smallest of farms. Nonetheless, spades existed in a large variety of shapes to suit local tastes and traditions. There were two main types: a northern type with two footrests and a traditional type, with one footrest, found in many places. The northern type was generally made in spade mills, while the traditional type was easily made by blacksmiths.

Bogs are common in many parts of Ireland and every May or June people would cut turf to provide fuel for the year ahead. Using a specially shaped *sleán* or slane (a type of spade), hundreds of sods of turf were cut from the local bog. Slanes were of two main types: foot cutting slanes and breast cutting slanes, the latter type cut horizontally into the turf bank. The cut sods were laid out to dry away from the turf bank, before being made into stacks or reeks. Transporting turf away from the soft terrain of the bog meant that certain old types of transport survived relatively late in parts of Ireland. The donkey with side panniers (baskets) was favoured along the western seaboard. The wheel-less slide car and the block-wheel cart survived into the mid-twentieth century in certain hilly parts of the eastern half of the country.

After ploughing which broke the sod, a harrow (a large rake-like device) was dragged along the ground to break up the clods of earth into finer soil. A heavy stone roller might then be pulled over the ground to break it up even more. The seed was then sown. The harrow was used again to mix the seed with the earth and the roller used to help to cover the seed from birds and to press the seed into the earth.



Wooden plough, Kinvara, Co. Galway, 1951



Pulling a stone roller, Muckross House Traditional Farms, Killarney, Co. Kerry, 1980s



Making cultivation ridges at Muckross House Traditional Farms, Killarney, Co. Kerry, 1980s



Cutting turf, Cor na Rón Láir, Indreabhán, Co. Galway, 1967. A.T. Lucas of the National Museum of Ireland to the left.





Mary and Ellen McCaughey, Corleaghan, using a sickle, Co. Tyrone. c. 1910



Threshing with a flail, Carrowhiskey, Westport, 1970s

Before the age of mowing machines, a scythe was used to cut the crop. Normally swung by a man, scythes were used to cut hay – the largest crop and used mainly for animal feed. Scythes came into common use in Ireland from the early nineteenth century. Sickles or billhooks were used before the scythe and these continued to be preferred by some harvesters, particularly women. Such hooks offered a careful cutting method that allowed the harvester to keep the precious seed from being shaken off the stalk and avoid cutting weeds.

Before the introduction of threshing machines, flailing was one of a variety of methods used to shake the grains of cereal free from the husks. Flails were simply made: the handle (generally of hazel) and the beater (of hollyhock) were usually fastened by a loop of leather. This fastening varied in different regions of the country.

Two chief types of flail were found in Ireland: One type with a cap of leather on each stick connected by a thong. It is found in Leinster and north-east Ireland and probably was introduced from Britain. This type of flail is also found in Central Europe. In the second type the sticks were connected by a thong housed in a groove cut around the head of each stick. This type of flail is also found in southern Norway and in a few isolated areas in southern Europe.



Winnowing at Rosapenna, Co. Donegal, c. 1900



Horse harnessed to block wheel cart, Portsalon, Co. Donegal, c. 1900

Winnowing was the process by which the wind was used to remove the lighter chaff, leaving just the grain. Using a winnowing basket, the farmer tossed the grain and chaff mixture, letting the wind carry the lighter chaff away as the heavier grain fell to the ground. Improvements included threshing machines that threshed and winnowed the grain and combine harvesters that also mowed it.

Most Irish farm families owned a few domestic animals each of which had their own unique function. Cows, pigs, sheep and fowl provided valuable food in what was often a very limited diet; horses and donkeys offered far greater power than human muscle and sheep could be shorn for their wool.

Horses were essential for heavy farm work such as ploughing and they could pull heavily loaded carts long distances. The donkey, by contrast, was the 'horse' of the smaller farm and was more common in the west of Ireland. Equipped with a straddle and a pair of pannier baskets, a donkey could carry turf, manure and seaweed.

Sheep and goats were generally raised on land that was not particularly suitable for other grazing animals, while goats provided milk and were also useful in controlling wild vegetation.



Branding sheep, Clare Island, Co. Mayo, 1900



Taking bream on lines, Inis Oírr, Aran Islands, Co. Galway, 1940s



Making line, Inis Oírr, Aran Islands, Co. Galway, 1940s

### Fishing

Before the introduction of commercial trawling much sea fishing was done from small boats. The tarred and canvas currachs, which originated from hide boats, were a distinctive feature of parts of the west coast of Ireland. Most small-scale sea fishing took place in the summer when the fish were more plentiful and when the weather was less dangerous for small boats.

The currach is a type of craft evolved from wicker boats covered with animal hide and it is still in use along the west coast of Ireland. In the last two hundred years most examples made have used tarred canvas on a wood frame and in more recent times many currachs have been made from fibreglass.

Fishing was done by line as well as with a net. In deep water, fishermen could use a spillet line, a weighted line with many hooks. The fishermen would set the spillet line and leave it overnight strung



Trawling for oysters, Clarinbridge, Co. Galway, 1967

across the sea bottom, marked at either end with a buoy. Next morning the catch might include sea bream, cod and ling, as well as flat fish such as plaice, sole and turbot.

In shallow water, the fishermen anchored the vessel. Here they could use shorter lines and so each man could manage several at once. Fishermen often made their lines themselves, twisting pieces of thread into longer lengths using a line twister. Hand lines were also used to catch mackerel, pollack and bass from a boat or even from a cliff.

Drift nets were used to catch salmon and were left out overnight. Another netting technique for herring and mackerel was seine netting, where two boats formed a purse of the net around the fish. A technique called draft netting was used in estuaries, the net played out from the shore by a boat.



Searching for sand eels, Mulroy Bay, Co. Donegal, 1890s

Fishermen used pots to trap lobster and crab, usually for commercial sale, much as they do today. In the past, pots were made from willow rods or even heather. The baited pots were weighed down with a stone and set on the seabed.

Some shellfish could be collected from a boat using a rake or dredge, while others were gathered by hand standing in shallow water or prised off rocks when the tide was out.

Some ancient fishing techniques such as spearing survived in local tradition. Spears of differing types were used to catch eel and salmon. Eel fishing was generally legal but spearing salmon was illegal and often took place at night using a torch.

Traps made of wicker or netting were set in rivers to catch fish. Snares and large hooks called strokehauls were also used to catch salmon or trout by a skilful pull.



Coracle on the Boyne, Oldbridge, Co. Meath, 1930

On certain rivers net and rod fishing for salmon took place under licence. However, poachers used illegal nets that were set in weirs or pulled through the water. A leather coracle, called a currach locally, was used to set salmon nets on the River Boyne into the 1940s. On the floodlands of the River Suck in Co. Roscommon, a raft of bulrushes was used for fishing and fowling.

## Activities in the Home

Women's work consisted primarily of activities based around the hearth and home. Fetching water, cooking, tending the fire, feeding the farm animals and looking after young children were daily tasks. Every week the woman of the house also had to wash the clothes, go to market, clean the house, and make and repair clothing. Women also worked in the fields and were responsible for the fowl and dairy.



Ink drawing by Swedish ethnologist Åke Campbell of a hearth in a traditional house, Cill Rialaig, Co. Kerry, 1935

The traditional Irish house was a single storey thatched building, rectangular in shape and one room in width. The hearth was central to daily life and the traditional house has been classified by the location of the hearth either towards the centre of the house or at an end wall. The fire provided the family with heat and light and was the focus of the home – hence the saying 'home is where the hearth is'. The regular tasks of cooking and washing, as well as social activities such as storytelling and visiting were centred around the hearth.

Furniture such as chairs, dressers, tables, chests and frame beds became commonplace from the second half of the nineteenth century. The furniture was constructed to take advantage of the available wall space and the relative lack of floor space within the small houses. Seats were made in a range of styles using many different materials. The design of the three-legged chairs and stools ideally suited the houses' uneven floor surfaces. Settlebeds doubled as seats by day and opened as beds by night.

Some homes also had a table, a food press, a hen coop and a meal bin for holding grain. A "clevy" might be found, this was a wall mounted unit used to hold large meat platters and roasting spits. Before electricity became available people relied on the fire and lamps for light.

### Feeding the Family

Households tried to be self-reliant in producing their own food, growing grains and potatoes, fruits and vegetables, and collecting wild berries, garlic, and herbs. Most farms kept some livestock such as pigs, cows and goats for meat and milk, and poultry for meat and eggs. The women of the house sold any surplus butter and eggs. Some families also kept beehives to provide a supply of honey and wax. Fish and trapped game added more variety to the general diet.



Like today many people displayed religious objects such as holy water fonts, pictures and statues in their homes in the belief that they offered protection to the household, Aran Islands, Co. Galway, c. 1900

In the nineteenth century the poorer households bought only what they could not grow themselves. Tea, salt, sugar and whiskey, initially bought as infrequent luxury items, later became common purchases, as did baking soda, for making leavened bread.

The woman of the house was responsible for processing foods for cooking or storage. The grain had to be ground into meal, and meat and fish were preserved to extend their storage life.

Specialised types of cooking equipment were needed to boil, grill, roast or bake food. Everything had to be cooked over the open fire at the hearth. The cook had to be adept at manipulating heavy pots and hearth equipment. As only one item at a time could sit directly over the fire the other foods simmered or baked nearby making the order and timing of preparation critical.

Kettles and various sized cast iron three-legged pots were used for boiling liquids. Gridirons and toasting forks were used for grilling and frying pans were also common.

Bread irons were used for toasting oatcakes and the griddle was used for baking unleavened breads and cakes. Roasting was done on spits with adjustable settings so that the joint could be raised or lowered to distance it from the fire. However, these were replaced by the end of the nineteenth century with the adoption of the versatile pot oven that could be used both to roast meat and to bake bread.



Woman grinding grain using a rotary quernstone on Inismurray Island, Co. Sligo, 1900



Spinning Wheels and clothes drying near the hearth at Weaver's House, Teelin Co. Donegal, c. 1900

### Clothing the Family

While there was no national traditional Irish costume, people in the countryside typically wore clothes made of hard-wearing materials. Most people owned separate outfits for working and for 'Sunday best', the latter eventually relegated to everyday wear. New clothes, whether made or bought, were a rarity.

The man of the house purchased most of his clothes from the local tailor. His wife generally made his shirts and undergarments at home, while headgear was shop-bought.

The woman of the house would have made most of her own clothes, and those of her children. Cloaks were bought from a mantlemaker and some women purchased shawls in large towns.

The two most important raw materials for making clothing were fleece and flax. It was the women who separated the shorn fleeces into different grades of wool, selecting the wool to be spun and woven. Sheep's wool is usually white or cream-coloured (*báinín* in Irish), although some breeds produce black wool. There was a choice of using undyed wool in its original colour, or dyeing the wool with natural or purchased dyes. After the dyeing the wool was carded to prepare the wool fibres for spinning.



Dressed for a race meeting, Connemara, c.1900



Red Aran Cardigan from Inis Meáin, Aran Islands, Co. Galway, 1937

Originally, women spun the wool using nothing more elaborate than a spindle with a weight attached. Later, spinning wheels became more widespread and these simple devices enabled the spinner to twist the fibres into a single continuous thread more efficiently.

Fibres from the flax plant were spun into linen yarn using a spinning wheel known as a low Irish wheel or a Dutch wheel, which originated in Holland. Although flax was grown and spun in all parts of Ireland, the production of linen only became an important industry in the northern counties. Once the wool or flax was spun into yarn, it was wound into hanks and brought to the local weaver who operated a loom in his house to weave the yarn into woollen or linen cloth. An additional treatment called napping involved roughening the surface of the cloth (such as flannel) in order to produce a tufted effect which was weather resistant.

Women were often engaged in needlework by the light of the fire. Clothes were sewn and knitted and those skilled enough decorated them with lacework and embroidery. This decorative work was also used for church linen, while quilting and patchwork were used for making bedclothes.

## Forces of Change

The period from the 1850s to the present has witnessed substantial change. A way of life that had altered slowly over the previous centuries changed in significant ways during this time. Some people born within the period saw the transformation from a virtually medieval way of life to one dominated by electricity, technology and centralised organisation. Aspects of their life changed in one generation from living reality to memory.

In the countryside, the thatched house was replaced by the slated or tiled bungalow. The work of the horse was instead performed by the tractor. Cultivation for the kitchen table became so rare that even farmers would purchase such formerly home-produced items as meat, potatoes, vegetables, bread and milk. Home entertainment would increasingly be dominated by television and radio and the traditional storyteller would become a thing of the past. Increasingly households possessed a car, with cycling and walking becoming unusual (except as leisure pursuits) and the horse-drawn trap a rarity.

The movement from the countryside to towns and cities and emigration to other countries was ongoing. At certain times, however, emigration virtually ceased and in recent years many have returned from abroad.

Town dwellers are increasingly building houses in the country and commute to work, so that new houses spring up everywhere. Farming, though still important, has changed. Many small farmers take up jobs in towns and farm part-time. Large farms have become larger, more mechanised and more specialised. In some coastal communities, fishing has become more commercialised. The small farmer-fisherman has become a figure of folklore.



The coming of electricity to the countryside was ongoing from the late 1920s. Thatched houses at Lusk, Co. Dublin, photographed in 1943

Provision for basic health and education has changed and the range of social services has become more complex. Local bonds of co-operation have increasingly become diluted and many folk traditions have died out and become the preserve of the museum. Yet, not all folk-tradition is being lost. Some festivals such as Christmas, Halloween and St Patrick's Day have become more important (though often under commercial influence). Traditional music has experienced a renaissance.

The countryside has lost much of its quietness though. Increasingly the hum of traffic on busy roads forms the background noise. Yet the countryside has lost some of its loneliness too. Everywhere houses are brightly lit by electricity. The television, radio, music systems and the Internet today bring virtual life to houses.



A modern house and a traditional house at Achill, Co. Mayo, 2004

Cultural life has changed. Speakers of Irish, as a first language, continued to decline in number in the twentieth century. In English too, local forms of speech and dialect have become diluted under the influence of more centralised education, as well as through the influence of radio, television and urban life generally. Religious practice has remained strong for much of the period but the involvement of churches in many spheres, such as education and healthcare, has diminished.

Above all, money has become increasingly available. This has led to greater availability of goods and services. In many ways rural life is now similar to that of the city life. It is largely lived in accordance with a technological way of doing things, rather than one of a long and local tradition.

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