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Caring For Our Vernacular Heritage



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Introduction

Our vernacular heritage is a key part of our rural and urban landscapes. It comprises houses, buildings, structures and features that were built by 'ordinary' people, along with their neighbours, using ideas and methods passed down within families and communities. These traditions are also part of a shared culture of building that is found throughout the world. Thus, our vernacular heritage reflects the creativity of our forebears, provides a link with the past and is worthy of our admiration and respect. Our vernacular heritage is crucial for local distinctiveness and gives our familiar landscapes their character. Many urban dwellers are only a couple of generations removed from vernacular houses, so everyone has an interest in their survival.



Well-maintained house at Coolnahane, Banteer, Co. Cork (NIAH)

There are many unoccupied houses and disused outbuildings, mainly in rural areas. Social attitudes, rural depopulation, urban dereliction, and modern methods of construction have, regrettably, led to the side-lining and disuse of much of our vernacular heritage. However, we have come to realize that we urgently need to reduce our 'carbon footprint'. We can look on vernacular buildings as a 'carbon sink' – the greenest buildings are those that already exist!

It makes sense to rehabilitate buildings that are actually standing and bring disused ones back into use, where this can be done in a way that respects the buildings and the communities that created them. This means that we must move away from the approach of 'one size fits all' and look to healthier and more people-friendly ways of building. This change can include rediscovering our vernacular heritage and what it can offer all of us. In these buildings, the materials used, which are mainly of natural origin, tend to be sustainable and healthy for their occupants and users.

Rehabilitating vernacular buildings means more than keeping the outer walls. Historic layout is very important. The emphasis should be on using the building as it is, retaining its structure and features to the maximum and keeping changes to a minimum. This implies that openings should generally be retained in their existing locations and sizes. Major changes to interiors fundamentally alter the character of historic buildings. Removing or altering an old kitchen hearth should be avoided.



Farmhouse in need of gentle rehabilitation at Glendun, Cushendall, Co. Antrim (DfC HED)

This booklet helps explains what vernacular buildings are, and provides some basic advice on their care.

Before You Start Works

It is always wise to get good advice before starting work on any vernacular building, so that features of interest are recognized and the building's character respected. An approach with gentle rehabilitation at its heart will always be the most successful. Talking to other owners of vernacular buildings can be a good place to start. This can be helpful for avoiding pitfalls, getting tips and building up contacts with various trades and crafts people, local authority staff and others.

The majority of vernacular buildings are not listed by local authorities or government bodies for protection or conservation. This does not mean that they lack interest or importance. In the case of buildings that are legally protected, works need to be referred to your local authority as a matter of course.

Grants and Assistance

Your local authority or, in Northern Ireland, the Department for Communities Historic Environment Division, should be able to assist with advice on:

- the best ways to approach repair and rehabilitation
- finding experienced people in the various trades and crafts
- sourcing materials
- grant schemes



Typical farm building, Drumnahinch, Co.Armagh, at the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum (BarryO'Reilly)

'Gentle Rehabilitation'

Working on a vernacular building involves, crucially, understanding its nature, structure and materials, and how to work with it. Buildings (rather like people) will have settled into a way of working and we need to be flexible and work with them in a gentle, considerate way. It is worth realizing at the outset that there is a limit to the amount of 'intervention' that a building can take!

Comfort is important! Heat, light and space are the things that are most often stated as lacking in vernacular houses and it is entirely reasonable to want to upgrade them and to deal with such perceived shortcomings. Nobody wants, or should be expected, to live in a house that is cramped, damp or comfortless. There are good examples of vacant vernacular houses that have been revived to provide spacious, comfortable homes. However, just as there are horses for courses, there may be vernacular houses that suit some people and not others.

If an extension is required it should not overwhelm the existing house and its scale, form and details should be in keeping. A rear doorway or window could be used to link old and new. Traditionally, extensions were added in line, to one or both ends of the house; later extensions made an 'L' or 'T' plan. Sometimes, incorporating an adjacent outbuilding can be considered, while retaining the character of the setting.



Farmhouse at Ballycue, Ballinagar, Co. Offaly, with various extensions (Barry O'Reilly)

The next page presents an example of 'gentle rehabilitation'.

Ideally, rehabilitation works should be hardly noticeable. Vernacular buildings must evolve with their owners and their changing circumstances, as they always have. However, today we also need to embrace sustainability while conserving what is a unique legacy of homegrown architecture. It should be possible to find ways of adapting or extending vernacular houses in ways that do not undermine their traditional character.



Isle of Doagh, Co. Donegal: before (2010) and after (2013) gentle rehabilitation (Duncan MacLaren)



Repairs, Retrofitting and Maintenance

Dampness can be a problem, especially in a building that has been unoccupied for some time. It is important to ensure that there is good ventilation and that roofs and gutters are repaired. Improved external drainage, such as digging a French drain, may be needed. The drying-out process will take time and patience is needed to allow the building to reach its ideal balance.

Repairs to stonework, mud walling, renders, roof timbering and other parts of the buildings may be required, but should be the minimum necessary to solve a problem.

Energy Conservation Retrofitting

If retrofitting for energy conservation is proposed, it must be considered very carefully, so as not to undermine the delicate balance that helps to keep vernacular buildings in 'rude good health'. Using modern off-the-peg materials and approaches that are common in new-build is potentially very harmful to vernacular buildings and their materials. Natural materials such as mud, straw, reed and wicker may suffer dampness and rot, and structural failure could result. It is very important that sound advice is sought before considering such works.

Regular Maintenance

There's no such thing as 'maintenance-free'! As is the case with buildings of all types and ages, regular maintenance will keep a vernacular building in good condition. Poor maintenance only leads to expensive repairs. 'A stitch in time saves nine!' is an well-worn proverb that especially applies to old buildings and should be taken to heart.



House needing repairs Cregg, near Strabane, Co. Tyrone (Barry O'Reilly)

It is a good idea to have a maintenance schedule, in addition to dealing with problems as they arise. Some things need to be done annually, others every five or ten years, and some more often. With increasing rainfall, resulting from climate change, the roof is the most vulnerable part of a building. There may be slipped slates, or problems with gutters and downpipes.

Plants growing in gutters are a sure sign of trouble and can be quickly followed by dampness in the interior of the building. Gutters should be cleaned several times a year. Having a tilt in the gutter will prevent water from running down the face of the building if gutters and downpipes are blocked.

Thatch presents its own challenges, which can be dealt with by an experienced traditional thatcher. The ridge will need to be renewed every few years, as will the areas around chimneys. The whole roof will require a new coat of thatch perhaps every ten years, depending on the material used.



Thatched roof needing attention at Glanycummane Lower, Freemount, Co. Cork (NIAH)

Windows and doors should be kept painted to protect them from the elements. Some timberwork may need to be replaced – a carpenter or joiner will be able to remove and splice in a new piece. It is rarely necessary to replace a whole window or door.

Replacement uPVC, aluminium or other such materials spoil the appearance of a building. Timber sliding sashes and other historic window types facilitate easy ventilation in buildings.



Typical sliding sash window at Tober Hill Street, Westport, Co. Mayo (NI)

Tightly sealing a building will damage its performance and undoing this can be expensive. Sealants of various types are almost certain to prevent the walls or roofs of an historic building from 'breathing', trapping moisture and simply concealing problems rather than solving them.

Fire Prevention

Smoke and fire alarms are vital for giving warning of fire, and should be installed as a matter of course, preferably wired in rather than battery-operated. The roof space in thatched buildings should also have alarms installed. Keeping electrical wiring and appliances in good condition is essential, as is having a ready source of water nearby.

Vernacular Ideas

Vernacular ideas, techniques and materials can help us to find new ways to design, build and even live. They can help to create new houses and other buildings that are rooted within our distinctive traditions. By being proud of, and learning from, our vernacular heritage, we also display confidence in our own communities, culture and society.



House with Roshine Slate roof, taking full advantage of the shelter of the slope, near Dunfanaghy, Co. Donegal (Joe Gallagher/Greg Stevenson)

Because of its intimate connection with tradition, climate and local environment, our vernacular heritage has a distinctive local and regional character. This contributes enormously to a sense of place. So, in caring for this heritage we are also appreciating and maintaining our traditional landscapes.

Vernacular ideas can also feed into eco-building, natural building and other 'alternative', low-carbon approaches to new designs that are also healthy for people.

These approaches empower 'ordinary people' to make their own architecture and, with encouragement, can help make places that work for people, their communities and their environment.

Cherishing our distinctive vernacular landscapes, rural and urban, helps to maintain their quality, enhance local pride and enable us to enjoy an enduring sense of place.

Vernacular Construction

The vernacular way of building is often said to be ‘timeless’, as it retains venerable, older technology and materials. It links us to our ancestors, whose tried and trusted methods are now recognized as helpful for dealing with climate change and other matters. The vernacular can also suggest ways of creating alternative employment, by providing a market for traditional local materials and ways of building. These approaches link care for the fabric of buildings to respect for our ancestors, who understood the connection between people and the natural environment. Such an understanding is one of the keys to living sustainably.

The materials used in vernacular buildings are usually found in the immediate locality and applied using crafts like thatching, basketry, mud-wall and traditional masonry.

Materials include stone and flags from fields and small quarries, mud from the ground, timber from woods, bogs, ditches and shipwrecks, wattles from hedgerows or osieries, lime burned in kilns, scraws from the bog or grassy sward, straw from the harvest, reed from rivers and lakes, and more besides.

Walls

Most standing vernacular buildings have walls of stone or mud, or a combination of these principal materials.

Mud buildings (‘cob’ is not a traditional term in Ireland!) are found in areas with deep boulder (‘yellow’) clay and their irregular appearance helps in recognizing them. The mud was dug out and heaped up onto a stone footing about 30 cm (12 in) high, in courses of 45-50 cm (18 in).



Repairing a mud wall, Poulwitch, Mayglass, Co. Wexford (UCD)

Chopped straw was added, and sometimes light branches were placed across the corners of the building to add strength. Lime plaster or lime wash was applied internally and externally. Mud walls need a deep overhang at the eaves to protect them from drips from the roof. The expression 'a hat and a strong pair of boots' is used to stress the importance of a solid foundation and a wide overhang.

Mud walls have thicknesses of 50-100 cm (20-40 in) and, for added stability, are often wider at the bottom than at the top. Faults in mud-walled buildings will show as cracks at the corners and owners or builders have often added buttresses to help support walls that lean out of plumb.

There are various methods for making mud walls, from using fist-sized clay lumps to blocks up to 50 cm (20 in) long. Several methods may be visible within the same building, or in combination with stone.

Stone-walled buildings typically have walls 45-60 cm (18-24 in) thick, with a more regular appearance than mud walls. In some localities, where stone is of good quality and relatively easily worked, there can be artistic craftsmanship in vernacular buildings, with door and window surrounds, chimneystacks and eaves of cut or dressed stonework that does not need rendering. Elsewhere, walls are usually of stone cleared from the fields, in which case they may be very rough and rounded. In some instances, boulders that were not easily moved were simply incorporated into buildings. Stone from local quarries may be more regular than field stone, but all such 'rubble' walls tend not to have clear coursing and are always rendered with plaster and/or limewash.



Coursed basalt walls, and thatch, Scroggy Road, Crumlin, Co Antrim (DfC HED)

Timber was a very significant building material until the accelerated loss of forest cover in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The frequent political and social instability, and the destruction of many old buildings and whole settlements in conflicts, have also had a role. All this has led to a situation where the island of Ireland has only a tiny number of surviving timber buildings.

'Cruck-framed' buildings are a little less rare – these have long, arching timbers stretching from the foot of the walls to the ridge of the roof, or from part-way up the walls to the ridge.

Wattlework, made from willow ('sally') or hazel rods, is immensely versatile and can survive in fireplace hoods, partitions and the upper parts of interior walls. It may also be found in some roofs as a support for thatch. It was used to make the walls of houses and other structures into the seventeenth century.



Wickerwork chimney, Slievecorragh, Co. Wicklow (Christiaan Corlett)

Brick was never common in vernacular buildings in Ireland, except for a few localities with suitable clay. However, it was increasingly used after about 1850 for chimneystacks and for door and window surrounds.

Some vernacular buildings have walls clad with corrugated iron, or made from mass concrete, reused railway sleepers and other materials.

Roofs

Vernacular roofs tend to have very simple shapes – pitched (or gabled), with the roof sloping from eaves to ridge on the long walls, or hipped, with the roof sloping on all four sides. Some buildings are half-hipped, where the short, end walls of the building continue above eaves level and have hips from that point.

The structures of historic thatched roofs are mainly heavy A-shaped ‘couples’, with the lower ends set into the walls just below the eaves, not on wall plates. The timbers tend to be round woods, or roughly shaped, with ‘collars’ one-third the way up the roof. Some roofs have ‘tie-beams’ spanning from one eave to the other. There are lighter purlins across the backs of the couples and smaller, rougher ‘ribs’ at right angles again across the purlins. In areas with roofs of stone flags or heavy slates the framing is of long, heavy purlins running the length of each room. Sawn timbering started to be common after about 1850, when slate and tile began to replace thatch as a general roof covering. These ‘close couple’ roofs are framed with relatively light, closely spaced A-shaped trusses.

Chimneystacks on vernacular houses are always on the ridge and tend to be quite low. Traditional examples are of stone, but formerly timber boards and even straw were used.



Typical A-frame roof structure at Lisnacon, Kanturk, Co. Cork (Barry O'Reilly)

Historic Thatched Roofs

Thatch, the most identifiably vernacular roof covering, was once found on hundreds of thousands of buildings, in urban as well as rural areas, but today only a few thousand thatched roofs remain. Traditional thatched roofs are simply detailed. There may be a ridge of bobbins (twisted knots of rope) and/or scolloping laid in a crisscross pattern at the eaves and/or just below the ridge. Raised ('block') ridges and 'eyebrow' sweeps are not traditional in Ireland.



Rethatching in progress, Commons West, Swords, Co. Dublin (Barry O'Reilly)

The thatcher works across the roof from right to left (if right-handed), combing away rotten or loose material, assessing the condition of the roof, applying tight bundles of new material, completing one vertical course at a time, from eaves to ridge. Bluestone (copper sulphate) is sprayed to kill grubs in the thatch.

Thatching methods vary from region to region. The most common, covering the western two-thirds of the island and uplands elsewhere, is scolloped thatch, in which the straw or reed is secured to an 'underthatch' of sod, using hairpin-shaped scollops of willow or hazel. This underthatch is rolled onto the roof timbering in strips about 30 cm (12 in) wide and the full height of the roof and a bit more, to overlap the ridge. This layer is tied to the roof timbers with rope.

Thrust thatch is common in drier, less windy eastern counties. A pronged implement is used to push knotted bundles of straw into an underlayer of straw (rather than sod). In Atlantic coastal districts, roped thatch is traditional. Ropes are laid in a crisscross manner to hold down bundles of thatch material, with the rope ends tied to stone, metal or timber fixings set into the eaves and gables.

There are also variants of these main methods and, potentially, methods that remain to be discovered.

Other Roof Coverings

From about 1600, slate became common on high-status buildings and, from about 1800, it appeared on vernacular buildings. It was extracted from local quarries and, from the late nineteenth century, Welsh slate was imported in huge quantities. Later, artificial slates, often of asbestos-cement, were developed. Natural slate is also imported from Spain, for example. Tile is known from the medieval period in large houses and abbeys, but never became common on vernacular buildings.

Stone flags are used as a roof covering in some districts, notably west Clare, where the limestone is easy to split. These are heavy roofs that require strong timbering.



Stone flag-roofed outbuilding, Ballycastle, Co. Mayo (Sarah Jane Halpin)

Corrugated iron, an imported, industrially produced material appeared about 1860. It has essentially been adopted into vernacular construction. Ironically, by being used to cover over thatched roofs, it has helped to preserve historic roof structures, techniques and materials. Also, because it has so often replaced thatch, its presence is usually an indication that a building was formerly thatched.



Corrugated iron-roofed house, Scraghy Road, Castleterg, Co. Tyrone with bed outshot projection, typical of the region, at left (DfC HED)

Roofing materials developed in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries include corrugated asbestos and, more recently, cellulose-bitumen (Onduline). Tared felt is found mainly in western counties, being first used to cover traditional fishing boats, and has often provided roofing for boathouses in maritime districts. It can also be found on some workers' houses.

Doors and Windows

Door and window openings are usually simple and unadorned. Many houses have a shallow, often later, windbreak at the front door, which also acts to support this wall at its biggest gap. This is especially helpful for the stability of mud walls. Windbreaks have gabled, lean-to or flat roofs, sometimes with 'fancy' bargeboards or other decoration. Where a porch has been added, this was done relatively recently.

Most doors are of ledged, braced and sheeted timber ('matchboard'), but where an owner was more prosperous, there were panelled doors. Half-doors, for keeping children in and hens out, were formerly very common.

Timber sliding sash windows are the most common type on intact buildings; others are fixed, casements or pivoted. Internally, windows may be beaded, with timber linings. Louvered windows can be found on farm buildings, mills and other structures. Earlier buildings had openings with shutters of wood or straw mats.



Interior of a house from Lisnacloskey, Co. Antrim, at the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum (Jean Farrelly)

Replacing old windows and doors with uPVC, metal or timber should be avoided, as this greatly diminishes the character and visual appeal of a building, as well as often needlessly wasting sound timber. Reversing the effects can be very costly.



Windbreak and board door, Ros Muc, Co. Galway (NIAH)

Interiors

There are two principal traditional layouts of vernacular houses – lobby entry and direct entry (illustrated on this and the next page). In the first, there is a small lobby formed by a partition wall between the front door and the hearth beyond. In the second, there is usually no lobby and the hearth is at the opposite end of the kitchen to the front door.

In vernacular houses floors tend to be of concrete or timber, the latter especially found in the ‘good room’ and first floor or loft rooms. Formerly, beaten clay, with some stone flagging or cobbling at the hearth or inside the entrance, was common. In some houses the kitchen floor is or was flagged.

Traditionally, rooms in the vernacular house were open to the roof. Over time, bedrooms and dairies were given ceilings made from the sides of tea chests, or flour sacks, and whitewashed. ‘Good rooms’ had ceilings reflecting their status, with tongue-and-grooved boards. The kitchen is usually the last room to be given a ceiling, but many remain open. An interesting feature in some districts is a decoratively laid straw or wicker lining.

Interior walls tend to be rendered in lime plaster, but some only have limewash. White is usual, to maximize the light, but wallpaper is also found, but more usually in bedrooms and parlours.



Fireplace, Portally, Co. Waterford (Barry O'Reilly)

Stairs in two-storey or lofted buildings can be quite steep and roughly made, or access can be by way of a ladder. Any alteration to these features should always be carefully considered.

The Old Kitchen and Its Hearth

A modest or plain exterior can often mask a very interesting or intact interior. Usually, only the outside of a vernacular house can be appreciated by the public, but close neighbours will be familiar with the old kitchen as a place for tea and a chat. This room is of key importance for understanding and appreciating the traditional significance and value of a vernacular house.

The hearth was the focus of all household life traditionally. The fire was important for heating, drying, cooking, boiling, smoking fish or meat, and other essential activities. It was served by a variety of interesting iron utensils and equipment, including the crane, or hook and chain, made by the local blacksmith. Mass-produced bought items include griddles, tongs, kettles, pots, clothes irons and bellows or fire fans.

The hearth was, importantly, the natural place for neighbourly visits, storytelling and the handing on of folk traditions. The hearth and the hearth fire feature in a considerable body of tradition, mainly relating to the supernatural.

Retaining the old kitchen hearth, together with any surviving features, such as keeping holes for salt or tobacco, and iron or wooden fittings, is most important, and this is respectful to a vernacular house, to its builders and to its former occupants.



Dolly's Cottage, Strandhill, Co. Sligo, with bed outshot at left (Barry O'Reilly)

Traditional Furniture

An often-neglected aspect of vernacular houses is their furniture and smaller items, which reflect the lives of their owners. Many items were made by local furniture-makers and blacksmiths, or by journeyman carpenters and tinkers, and some pieces have 'trademark' details. 'Fancier' items were bought in shops or from pedlars and travelling salesmen.

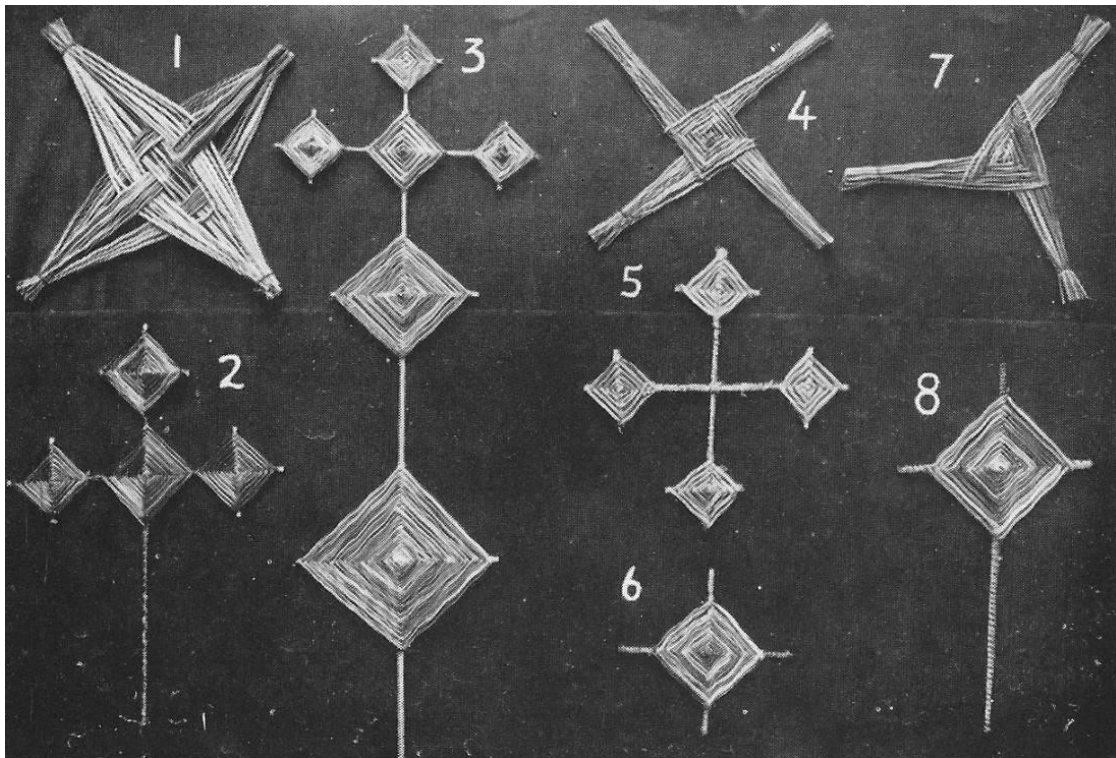


Dresser in a house from Ballyveagh, Co. Down at the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum (Barry O'Reilly)

Typical items in the vernacular kitchen are the dresser, settle bed, food press, table (often under a window) and a variety of wooden chairs with timber or rope seats. Butter churns, meat safes, flour bins and straw seats are rarer survivals today. Cooking vessels and fire utensils, crockery and 'fancy' items were bought in shops.

Bedroom furniture includes various types of bed, including examples covered in timber or cloth, wash stands, shrines and chests or presses for clothes and bedding, including patchwork quilts and other craft work. Parlour items tend to be standard and less local in origin.

Smaller items include testimonials, dedications and framed needlework, religious prints, statues, Sacred Heart lamps, crosses and biblical quotes. St Brigid's Crosses are still seen in many houses, often now made by the children at school.



St Brigid's Crosses, Co. Armagh (E. Estyn Evans, Irish Folk Ways (1957)



House leek (*sempervivum tectorum*) in thatch, Fortyacres, Bruree, Co. Limerick (NIAH)

Traditionally, horse (or ass) shoes and particular plants or flowers were used to ward off supernatural forces. The 'house leek' (*sempervivum*) was employed as protection against conflagration and can be seen in the thatch of some houses, or elsewhere in the yard.

Farmyards and Settings

Farmyards are an essential part of the rural scene and their forms and layouts vary from place to place, reflecting the type of farming carried on in the locality, the size of the farm and perhaps also broader, historical traditions. Farmyards in lowland areas tend to be larger, more regular and of courtyard form; those in hilly districts can have linear, parallel or scattered arrangements. The range of types of vernacular farm buildings in Ireland is quite modest – there are simple byres, stables and storage sheds, but they don't differ much in general appearance.

Farm buildings tend to be small, single-storey and made with the same materials and methods as houses. The widths of doorways can be a good indicator of a building's use, and stables often have a hayloft, with a window in the upper gable. There may be interesting interiors, with old stalls and mangers, cobbled floors, waste channels and other features. Often added to over the centuries, the undulating rooflines of vernacular farm buildings can be very attractive.

Farmyards may have old cobblestone yard surfaces, which need care and maintenance too. There are also traditional boundaries of stone or formed by hedges and trees, as well as orchards, gardens and other planting. Walls, ditches and planted boundaries to fields and routeways form a highly significant part of our vernacular landscapes.



Farmyard at Luffany, near Mooncoin, Co. Kilkenny (Barry O'Reilly)

Iron hay barns began to appear across the island of Ireland after 1850 and became extremely popular. Although invented abroad, with imported components, they are a familiar feature of practically every vernacular farmyard.

These buildings with their rust-red paint are an appealing feature of all farmyards, with their half-barrel (or occasionally, pitched) roofs, sometimes with their sides filled with iron sheeting or concrete. There are also some vernacular hay barns with timber uprights and generally pitched roofs. In the Beara peninsula there are hipped-roof examples with concrete supports.



Pump and churns, Ahenny, Co. Tipperary (Barry O'Reilly)

Wrought-iron gates were forged in local smithies, along with the whole gamut of metal objects used in vernacular settings, on the farm, or by fishermen and others. A visually pleasing feature of farmyards and roadsides, they often have decorative 'trademark' features. They are supported on square or round-plan piers, the work of local masons. Foundry-made cast-iron gates are not common in vernacular settings.



Forged iron gate, close to New Buildings, Co. Derry (Barry O'Reilly)

Summary

- Our vernacular heritage reflects the people who created it and who have used it
- Minding this heritage carefully is to respect the work and creativity of our forebears
- The best approach to working on vernacular buildings is 'gentle rehabilitation'
- Get good advice before starting works that might have an impact on vernacular buildings
- Your local authority may be able to assist with advice and grants
- Respect the authentic character, layout and features of vernacular buildings
- Avoid current 'fads' or fashions
- Be very careful if carrying out energy retrofitting
- Successful repairs or adaptations should be hardly noticeable
- Check your buildings regularly for repairs that might be needed
- 'Mind, mend, gently rehabilitate'
- Keep up the good work if you are already the custodian of a vernacular building!



Hay barn of vernacular character, with timber pole supports and pitched roof, Maddyboy, Barringtonsbridge, Co. Limerick (Barry O'Reilly)

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Back cover image: Row of vernacular urban houses, Hillhall Road, Lisburn, Co. Antrim (DfC HED)

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