IRISH VERNACULAR FURNITURE

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Given the turbulent and often tragic history of Ireland, it would not be surprising that no strongly recognisable tradition of vernacular furniture exists prior to the nineteenth century. In common with other parts of Britain, Irish history contains few written descriptions which tell of the lives and possessions of the poor during the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries. However, more substantial records do exist which show that Irish Castles, Manors, and Tower Houses did contain tapestries and grand furniture during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, although much of this was lost during the Cromwellian campaigns, waged in Ireland during the second quarter of the seventeenth century. Although a resuscitation of the decorative arts occurred in Ireland during the Carolian restoration in the third quarter of the seventeenth century, much furniture and other furnishings was, again, burnt or looted in the wars inaugurated by William of Orange between 1688, and 1690. The devastation of furniture was so complete during this period, that only one piece of furniture, an ornate refectory table, is known to have survived this period of Irish history.[1]

With the advent of more settled times in the eighteenth century, furniture making developed again, particularly in Dublin, but very little documented furniture designed for particular houses exists to confirm individual commissions. However, Irish furniture makers of the eighteenth century did develop an unmistakable style, and characteristically Irish pieces of eighteenth century furniture made for the prosperous professional and landed classes do exist in Ireland, although much left the country during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as possessions were sold, a practice which continues until the present day.

Conversely, virtually no furniture made for working people in Ireland exists before the late eighteenth century, and few pieces of vernacular furniture can, with confidence, be ascribed a date before the early years of the nineteenth century. The lack of material objects prior to this is undoubtedly linked to the abject poverty of the greater part of the population. The contributory factors which lead to the impoverishment of many included an explosion in Ireland's population, which increased from two million in 1740 to over eight million in 1845,[2] and this dramatic increase in population resulted in widespread under-employment on a scale unknown elsewhere in Europe. Great wealth was rare, too, amongst the largest class of employers, the farmers, since ownership of land was substantially in the hands of members of the English or Anglo-Irish community who, as landlords, were often absent from the country. Their farm tenants were often effectively barred from achieving other than a modest living by the existence of tithes which they were required to pay to the Church, and rent which went to the land-owners.

The beginning of the nineteenth century coincides with the first recognisable tradition of vernacular furniture making in Ireland, when the high cattle and corn prices achieved during the Napoleonic war created a time of relative prosperity. However, when the war ended in 1815, farm produce prices fell, and farmers, hard pressed with the burden of rents and tithes, sought ways of reducing their costs in order to survive, including shedding

labour. The ensuing widespread unemployment which this caused brought further disruption and poverty to the country. Indeed, a sense of the penury which existed in one farming community, West Tullaghobegly, County Donegal, is given in a graphic account of the village by the teacher at the National School, P. M'Kye, who took a census of the village in 1837. Within a population of four thousand, he records that the only furniture was 243 stools, 93 chairs, 2 feather beds, and 8 chaff beds. The majority of the inhabitants were housed in one room hovels without windows or chimneys. Totally without comfort, the majority slept on straw, rushes, or heather spread on the floor in front of the fire, and 'all in the bare-buff'.[3]

The continuing conflict which occurred between landowners, farmers, farmworkers, and the unemployed, remained a prevalent part of life in the countryside, alleviated to some extent in 1838 by a re-appraisal of the tithe laws which allowed farmers to keep more of their income. However, within a few years of this event, a major disaster in Ireland's history occurred, when potato blight decimated the main staple diet crop over three successive seasons between 1845 and 1848. This catastrophe resulted in the death by starvation and disease of over a million people, and the exodus to America and Canada of a million more. Even after the potato blight was over, the population of Ireland continued to fall in the second half of the nineteenth century.

For those who remained behind after the period of famine, conditions gradually improved in many parts, and for a period of some thirty years from 1850 onwards, there was relative prosperity. Ultimately demands by tenant farmers for fair rents and security of tenure changed to demands to buy their holdings, and eventually laws were passed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which enabled Irish tenant farmers to become landowners in their own right.

A review of Ireland's history during the nineteenth century, however brief, is important to an understanding of the existence and chronology of vernacular furniture in that country since it is probable that two major periods occurred in which furniture was generally made: that is, before and after the potato famine of the 1840s. So devastating was the effect of this event that normal economic and social life in Ireland was totally disrupted, and perhaps a decade passed before organised life returned. Given the widespread poverty and social decline which occurred during this period, it is perhaps surprising that any furniture from the first half of the nineteenth century survived at all. However, that which does, presents a different view of Irish culture from that indicated by an economic history of the time, since the furniture shows an exuberance of style and innovation with different forms of panelling, carving, fretting, and reeding motifs, as well as often multicoloured painting schemes. The design of Irish vernacular furniture seems to make only fleeting references to furniture made elsewhere in Britain, and provides evidence of true spontaneity in the development of a widespread nationally-based code of design within which some significant local forms developed.

The furniture made in the second period of production, after 1850, also shows great variation in style and decoration and includes some furniture types not found in the first period, including, for example, the use of kitchen tables and settle beds which had no direct counterpart in the first half of the century.

The craftsmen who made Irish vernacular furniture were the same carpenters and joiners who undertook all the other necessary woodwork tasks within a community, including, for

example, the making of farm carts, coffins, as well as house carpentry and shop front making. This tradition was true for many rural communities throughout the British Isles. Indeed, there can be few more graphic illustrations of the role of general carpenters and joiners who also produced furniture than by the examination of the decoration used in many nineteenth-century shop fronts and houses. Shop fronts often remain untouched, and some date from the late eighteenth century or early nineteenth century.[4] Some towns contain such considerable numbers of shop fronts which have direct parallels in their design motifs with those used in furniture, that it seems likely that the origin of specific regional furniture traditions in Ireland may be directly traceable from such sources. An example of a town which exhibits many interesting shop fronts displaying devices used in furniture is Thomastown, a small, prosperous town in County Kilkenny. Figure 4 shows an example with shutters which has the shell or fan motif in the corners of the panels (see Figs 15 and 17 for furniture examples using this motif). An elaborate glazed fanlight above the doorway is typical of the many designs used in glazed top cupboards, and again reflects the influence of eighteenth-century architects' work.

In common with house and shop carpentry, nearly all vernacular furniture was made in pine. Although some pieces dating from the first part of the nineteenth century indicate that they were painted by the makers with scumble and decorated with graining combs, or painted in black, yellow, red, or blue lead-based paints and varnished over. Other pieces, particularly but not exclusively those made in the second half of the nineteenth century, appear to have been supplied unpainted, and were then painted *in situ* by the householders. This is evidenced by many items of Irish furniture which show signs of having been painted around the shape of stairways or chimney breasts. Other pieces of furniture's sides typically remain unpainted where they stood against a wall. This practice of providing unpainted furniture was probably an option which the makers offered to the purchasers, and in later furniture clearly coincided with a period, in the second half of the nineteenth century, when house paints were more generally available. However, no attempt was made to create grains or decoration in paint, the item was simply painted all over or, most commonly, had panels or other features highlighted in another colour.

No particular colour conventions exist for householders' paint work, except that bright blues, yellows, reds, and greens were commonly used, in any combination, and, in keeping with the embellished woodwork devices, were clearly intended to bring colour and decoration to the home. Many pieces of furniture had several layers of paint, and in part, this may relate to the convention of village householders taking it in turns to host the Mass. Such occasions demanded redecoration and house cleaning, and often all the woodwork in the home, doors, windows, and furniture, would receive new coats of paint.

Such craftsmen were true vernacular craftsmen whose perceptions on issues of the formation of furniture and the use of space reflected the relevance of their own experience of living in close proximity with the people for whom the furniture was intended. That so much furniture was made with a vigour and concentration on detail suggests that in addition to a strong ergonomic sense the makers saw their creations as objects which would enliven the home.

The craftsmen who made Irish vernacular furniture were equally mindful of the uses for which furniture was required, and the considerable constraints which the traditional housing brought to issues of design. Irish vernacular houses from the first part of the

nineteenth century are typically single-storey buildings made from the materials found in each locality, and in different regions, walls were made from clay lump rendered over, stone with mud infill rendered over, dry stone walling, and more rarely, in remote regions, of sods. Roofs were typically thatched with wheat or rye straw, rushes or reeds, and, in times of privation, bracken and even hay was used. Other houses had sods (scraws) covering the rafters, and in yet other regions, clay tiles, slates, and shingles were used.

Irish houses may usefully be classified by at least three basic distinctions. The first is by the mode of entry, which can either be direct entry into the room with the fire in it, or by entry into a small lobby created by a short cross wall. The second distinction relates to the positioning of the fire which could be either a central hearth, or of a gable-built type.

The third broad distinction is between houses which have either hip roofs (Fig. 2) supported on roof trusses which achieve their own system of regional classification, or solid gable end houses (Fig. 4) for example. A feature of houses in many, but not all, regions, was a lean-to or 'bed outshot' which was simply an extension of the house to the rear to accommodate a bed, with either a curtain or matting over this to give privacy.

Within these broad distinctions, homes with one to four units (rooms) were common. Extra rooms were often built on to single or double unit dwellings, with the consequence that the house plan sometimes underwent radical transition from one form of house to another. For example, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, it was unusual to find more than one hearth for each household, but by the second half of the nineteenth century extra fireplaces were being fitted.[5] The house shown in Figure 2 illustrates a traditional thatched roof cottage from County Offaly which underwent changes, with the left hand chimney serving an original two-unit dwelling with a central hearth. The chimney to the right was probably a later addition to create a second, gable hearth. Finally, a room to the right was added, and the house became a three-unit dwelling with two hearths.

More primitive housing also existed and the simplest forms were cabins which may not even have had windows or a smoke hole, and were found widely in the poorest parts of Ireland until the late nineteenth century, particularly in County Galway and the west coast area generally. Other archaic types of housing included those with byre ends in which the family literally shared the home with the livestock who were tethered at one end of the building, and the family had their fire and household furniture in the other, longer part, without a dividing wall. This form of housing was particularly widely built in Donegal in the early nineteenth century, but its spread was limited, and by the mid-nineteenth century, its use had retreated mainly to the west coast, and inland mountainous parts of the west. Removal of the byre end resulted in many one room houses being converted to two room dwellings by the use of furniture items placed across the house, often with a door fitted in-between.

The use of furniture as room dividers was also common when one unit homes were extended to two or three units. Interestingly this usually involved the use of either dressers or press cupboards, and Alan Gailey has pointed out in his excellent article on Irish Kitchen Furniture[6] that box beds in Ireland are not recorded as being used to create room divisions in the way which they were in both Scotland and Wales.

The use of furniture as part of the architecture of the home serves to highlight the extremely integrated qualities which characterise Irish cottage furniture. The craftsmen

who made such furniture employed the relevance of their own experience within the community, and created forms of furniture which would serve the rituals of daily domestic life, whilst carefully observing the complex spatial limitations imposed by single-storey houses. The resulting types and designs of furniture reflect the lack of upstairs bedrooms and the need to condense, on one house level, furniture which in other cultures might be dispersed in other rooms. Thus virtually all Irish furniture is made to exploit the availability of wall space rather than floor space and free-standing tables or storage pieces with a low height to width and depth ratio are uncommon. Consequently, dressers and press cup-boards, which enjoy a favourable height to floor space relationship were common forms of furniture, and, as described above, could also perform the function of living-space dividers. Beds were the most difficult item of furniture to accommodate in single-storey houses, since these took up much floor space and were not needed during the day. Various design solutions were devised, both architecturally and in the design of furniture, to confront the difficulty of lack of space, and also to create some element of privacy. Evidence to confirm where furniture items were positioned in homes is sparse, however a revealing plan drawing made in 1934 (Fig. 4) illustrates the disposition of furniture in a single-storey house in County Kerry. The plan confirms the positioning of furniture around the walls, with the central floor space left free.

Enclosed or box beds were made in which members of the family could sleep with doors or curtains to close off the front. Such beds commonly took up permanent floor space, and sometimes, as Gailey has pointed out, these were accorded additional privacy by having a short jamb wall built across one end, so that they effectively stood in an alcove. A further form of enclosed bed, with a canopy or domed roof was also made (Fig. 19) although these probably stood in outshot extensions of the house. Stump beds of a kind commonly found throughout Britain were also made, and these, too, were fitted into outshots.

A further form of bed was the settle bed in which the base folded down to form a bed compartment on the floor (Fig. 21). This type of bed appears to have been a later innovation, and may only have been made after 1850. Certainly their manufacture was widespread, and although they are believed to have been used for travellers or other visitors, there is some evidence that they formed the only bed in some houses. Another, later form of bed, was made as a 'false' cupboard, which appeared to be a press or wardrobe when not in use, but which contained a bed frame and bedding which could be folded out when required (Fig. 18).

With the exception of free-standing beds, no other furniture filled the central floor space. Tables did not form the focus for seating as they did in many other cultures, and typically the family sat in front of the fire and ate from plates or shallow baskets. Tables with two centre stretchers (Fig. 22) appear to have entered the repertoire of Irish furniture after 1850, bu' they were typically placed against a wall, under a window, for undertaking household tasks in the best lit position.

A further form of table made for Irish homes which was produced infrequently elsewhere in Britain, is the so-called 'falling' table which hinges to the wall, and has a hinged supporting leg. It can be folded down against the wall when not in use. This type was sometimes made to slide on a metal bar, and could be used in a number of positions, including being folded up to act as a shutter against a window.[7] Such tables, again, adopt the principle of using wall space when not in use rather than floor space.

Traditional seating in Ireland was provided by the widespread use of low stools of simple design which were made to seat one or two people. Chairs were common, too, and were divided into three major types; the Sugan ladder or spindle back chairs which have design similarities with chairs made in the Atlantic/Mediterranean cultures. These have thick, matted seats made from a continuous rope of hay, straw or ryegrass (Figs 26 and 27). Windsor chairs of a particular Irish form, with the outer back spindles piercing the arms were made in the nineteenth century, and continued to be made into the twentieth century. Robust wooden seated chairs made entirely of sawn wood were made as simplified versions of more fashionable designs (Figs 32 and 33). Other chairs, made with naturally bent shapes to form legs or seats and back uprights, were made locally on opportunistic basis (Fig. 30). A particularly interesting design of chair formed a regional tradition not made elsewhere in Britain, which has a central flat spine to form the back, and from which the seat and arms radiate. This form of chair, known loosely by its region of origin, as a Tuam or Sligo chair, is shown in Figure 28.

Chairs were typically stood against the wall when not in use, ready to be drawn towards the fire, where the other relatively mobile piece of furniture, the cradle, stood. Cradles of wood and wicker were made, and these too, formed a typical part of Irish homes.

Meal or flour bins were important storage pieces in virtually every home in Ireland, as they were in other parts of Britain, but in the making of soda bread, Ireland removed the need for an accompanying dough bin for proving dough, common in England. Blanket chests or coffers, commonly used for the storage of linen in other countries, were rare in Ireland, perhaps because they took up relatively more floor than wall space. Some examples of simple blanket chests have been recorded, however, and an example is shown in Figure 11. Other more elaborate forms of storage chest were made, probably for larger farmhouses, which have chests with a lid forming the upper part, and with drawers below (Figs 12 and 13).

Given the functional nature of domestic furniture in Irish vernacular life, it is not perhaps surprising that scholarly writing related to furniture has usually been included as part of anthologies of essays concered with Irish traditional life, where the use of furniture is usually discussed as part of social, ergonomic or architectural issues. These perspectives are, naturally, crucial in creating a history of furniture where domestic life and architectural relationships are particularly revealing in considering furniture design and use. However important such issues are to a broad understanding of furniture, no rigorous history of Irish furniture can be achieved without an examination of the stylistic qualities. This paper therefore makes its primary aim the illustration of common forms of Irish vernacular furniture, and in so doing has regard for both the decorative and ergonomic qualities of their design. The anthology of types does not seek to be comprehensive in either a national or regional sense. Indeed, all the examples illustrated are taken from sources in Southern Ireland and by presenting a pictorial review, it is hoped that greater awareness of Ireland's rich tradition of vernacular furniture may be created.

furniture is on permanent display at the Irish Agricultural Museum, Johnstown, Co Wexford). Newbridge House, Donabate, Co. Dublin: Figs 9, 27, 29, 30. Victor Mitchell, Esq., Roscrea, Co. Tipperary: Figs 14, 21, 31. The Author wishes to thank particularly the following for giving freely of their time and support whilst undertaking fieldwork in Ireland in 1988: Countess A. Bernsdorff, Dr Anne O'Dowd, Willie Hayes, Matt McNulty, Victor Mitchell, Mr and Mrs C. Nunn, Dr Austin O'Sullivan.

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2. L. M. Cullen, *Six Generations* (1970), p. 45.
3. E. E. Evans, *The Personality of Ireland* (1973), p. 93.
4. A pilaster removed from a shop front in Wexford, now in the collection of the Irish Agricultural Museum, Johnstown, is inscribed on the back: 'This Pallister (sic) was made the last day of the year 1819 by Michael Howlin, Carpenter, for Nattn. (Hore?)'.
5. A. Gailey, *Rural Houses of Northern Ireland* (1973), p. 152.
6. A. Gailey, 'Kitchen Furniture', *Ulster Folklife* (1966), p. 27.
7. A. Gailey, *Rural Houses of Northern Ireland* (1973), p. 216.
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11. R. Noble, op. cit., p. 38.
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NOTES ON THE ILLUSTRATIONS

Measurements are in cm: h, height (or height from seat to top); hh, total height; w, width at widest point; d, depth; l, length.

2. Whitewashed, rendered stonework under a thatched, hip roof. This is an example of a traditional Irish cottage with three 'rooms' within the house. These were typically divided either by jamb walls or by dressers or press cupboards. This house has two (replaced) chimneys, with one chimney serving a hearth originally in the centre of a two-unit lobby-entry house, and another centred on a cross wall

which was added later when an extra room was built to the right. The door is painted in a purple/brown paint, and decorated with wavy comb marks in a closely similar manner to the decoration on the chest on drawers shown in Figure 13, illustrating the close relationship between house carpenters' work, and that of furniture makers.

3. Many of the devices used by carpenters in shop front and general house carpentry can also be found in local furniture designs, suggesting that Irish common furniture was probably made as part of the carpenter's work rather than by specialist cabinet makers. In this shop front, the shutters have corner blocks carved as shell or fan designs, motifs which are also frequently used as decoration in furniture. See Figures 15 and 16 for other examples. The elaborate glazing pattern over the doorway is one of many decorative devices used above house doorways, as well as in glazed cupboard designs.

5. Pine, overpainted in dark brown, with combed wavy line decoration. Surface now oxidised and damaged. Left foot replaced. 217 h, 140 w, 45 d. This form of dresser has an open base, usually with a wooden floor which was used for the storage of domestic items, both of wood and metal. Sometimes this had a curtain covering the front.[13] The shelves were used to store and display domestic pottery as well as decorative items. This example follows the common convention for Irish dressers in having continuous sides to the rack and base, unlike dressers from other parts of Britain which had separate racks. Irish dressers were typically made with a variety of design motifs which produced very lively forms. This example has classically inspired pilasters either side of the rack, terminating in bold capitals. Fretted motifs pierce the frieze, and 'rope twist' carving edges the cornice. This motif is probably a nautical reference, and is commonly found on buildings in coastal towns, as well as being part of many pieces of Irish furniture. For other items of furniture using this decoration, see Figures 12 and 13.

7. Pine, painted over-all in red-brown, with the front of the back boards painted blue/black, and drawer and door panels painted yellow. 205 h, 143 w, 45 d. Dressers with cupboards in the base provided an alternative form to those with open bases and lower shelf (see Fig. 6). The sides of the rack are continuous with the sides of the base, forming a single piece in the manner common to Irish dressers. The doors of the base have corner brackets carved in the form of a shell or fan design. This motif was used commonly by carpenters who made furniture as well as shop-front woodwork (see Figs 17 and 4). The spaces between the upper two shelves of the rack have plain bars across their centres, in the mode of dressers (vaisseliers) from France. These fittings allowed plates to be placed, fronts facing downwards over the bars. A similar removable bar device forms part of a clevy in the collection of the National Museum of Ireland, Dublin, and reinforces the view that clevies may also have been used for plate storage.

8. Pine, painted with red lead. 203 h, 102 w, 45 d. This form of furniture was made nowhere else in Britain and may be unique to the Irish tradition. In common with many other items of Irish furniture, it was made to perform more than one function. This example serves as a kitchen dresser, as well as a pen for containing chickens. The frieze below the cornice has a typical Irish furniture decoration in the form of double zig-zag lines of applied moulding. See the press cupboard in Figure 16 for a further use of this motif. The upper narrow shelf was probably for bowls or small plates. Below this, the deeply fretted sides of the rack may have supported a metal roasting spit, or a wooden strip to hold larger pots or plates. The row of turned spindles below were also to hold plates, and a narrow internal support at the rear has notches to hold the plates firm. The shorter of two sections below has a two-bar slotted entrance which could be raised to allow chickens in or out. The deeper slatted section below may have been used to house chickens or geese.

9. Orginal red lead over-painted in brown. Left lower side damaged, and left foot missing. Two uprights missing betwen the middle shelves. 118 h, 126 w, 22 d. Racks of this type were made nowhere else in the British tradition but were used widely in cottages in Southern Ireland, where they were usually, but not invariably, fixed over the fireplace. In common with many items of Irish furniture, they probably had more than one use. The deep frets each side of the rack have generally been believed to have held metal meat spits. However, this use is open to some dispute, and is unconfirmed by oral history.[15] The top shelf on this example was probably used for crockery, as an alternative, or in

addition to, a full dresser and rack. The gouge carved motifs along the frieze are typical of the forms of decoration used in Irish furniture, and include the chevron motif also used in Figure 13.

10. Residues of original yellow paint or varnish. 96 h, 65 w, 46 d. Bins of this type, made of simple nailed board construction, were an important part of household furniture throughout Ireland. This example was made to hold one form of flour or meal only. More usually, meal bins were divided into two internally, with one side for wholemeal or imported maize flour (yellow meal), and the other for white flour. Often, as in the case of this example, a narrow shelf was fixed inside to hold measures or tins. In other examples, the top of the front hinged to allow easier access to the bottom of the bin.

11. Pine painted red-brown with cream 'drawer' edges. 82 h, 125 w, 61 d. Blanket or general linen chests appear not to have been common in the Irish tradition, with press cupboards being more usual for the storage of linen and clothing. More elaborate examples of storage chests with drawers below were made, probably for larger farmsteads (see Figs 12 and 13). This example is made with a till inside to hold small items, and a rod which can be pivoted to hold the lid up. The simulated drawer fronts seem placed inappropriately high on the front, since real drawers in chests of this general type are typically placed at the base of the chest.

12. Pine, painted yellow, porcelain knob missing on upper left drawer. 107 h, 126 w, 61 d. Blanket chests or coffers appear to have been uncommon in the Irish tradition. This probably reflects the lack of floor space in single-storey dwellings, and the general need to store household items in a cupboard which utilises wall space rather than the floor. However, a particular form of storage chest was made with a removable upper chest, which fitted onto a base of two short and one long drawer, and which had either a flat or domed lid. This example has a domed lid and 'rope' carved borders around the edge of the lid and the base, displaying a form of decoration which was used extensively by masons and carpenters in buildings in coastal towns, as well as in furniture items (see Figs 5 and 13). The reeded pilasters each side of the base are common decorative devices in Irish furniture too, and other examples can be seen in Figures 5 and 17. The half-round columns on the corners of the upper chest illustrate a further special relationship which Irish furniture makers had with classical architectural forms. This piece, although apparently made in a conventional cabinet form is without cabinet joints, and is entirely made of nailed plank construction. The borders are nailed around the edges of the base panel sides to simulate rebated panels, and all other parts are nailed to the frame.

13. Pine, painted in brown scumble and decoratively combed. White porcelain knobs missing from drawers. 107 h, 122 w, 61 d. This storage chest has its original painted decoration in the form of simulated reeded borders to the upper chest and drawer fronts. Elsewhere, the surface has wavy decorative lines, and two simple, stylised plants painted in the centre of the front 'panels'. The edges of the flat lid and the base has an applied, carved 'rope' motif which was used extensively by Irish furniture makers (see Figs 5 and 12). The chevron carving between the drawers was also a common device (see Fig. 9).

14. Pine, painted black. 126 h, 74 w, 49 d. This unusual item of furniture is made as one piece, although it gives the appearance of having a separate top section. The upper chest has a sloping lid, which, like meal bins, (Fig. 10) has the function of preventing it being used as a shelf. It may also have been used as a writing surface. This part is lockable and was probably used for document and linen storage. The lower section has two lockable drawers with white porcelain knobs (one now missing). The highly decorative qualities of this piece are emphasised by the exaggerated form of the feet, and the incised 'hob nail' decoration. This motif was also used on some Waterford glass designs. The base has side panels which are rebated into the stiles, whereas the top chest is made of solid boards with edging strips nailed on to create the illusion of conventional panel and frame construction. This piece reflects a common constructional code of Irish furniture, since it is made shallow front to back, to minimise the floor space it used. In contrast, the storage compartment and drawers are relatively deep, and utilise the wall space rather than the floor.

15. Pine, originally painted in red lead with a later coat of green paint. Handles on lower drawers missing. 171 h, 65 w, 43 d. This unusually narrow and elegant piece has many features in common with conventional bureaux with glazed bookcases above, made in England, including the use of

graduated drawers, and a moderate slope to the bureau fall. Unusually in Irish furniture generally, this example is made in two sections rather than as one piece, and the moulding on the top of the bureau to locate the glazed bookcase, has 'rope twist' carving, commonly found in many pieces of Irish furniture (see Figs 5 and 12). The use of fan or shell carvings, applied in the corners of the lower drawers, as well as those at the base of the upper cupboard, exhibit a strong preference for this motif by Irish furniture makers. See the shop front in Figure 4, and the cupboard in Figure 17. The glazing form in the bookcase shows an usual configuration, in having nineteen small panes of glass, which contrasts with the more conventional thirteen panes typically used elsewhere in Britain, in glazed cupboards or bookcase doors. The interior has exaggerated shaped dividers between the four small drawers, with pigeon-holes above, and an arched door is fitted in the centre.

16. Pine, painted with red lead. Drawer knobs missing. Lower right foot and section of reeded decoration replaced. 220 hh, 130 w, 52 d. The press cupboard was used for general linen storage, and as a store for kitchen utensils as well as dry and preserved foods. Some presses of this type are significantly taller than other forms of household furniture, and often had the architectural role of being a room divider in two or three room houses. Usually a door was placed between it and another piece of furniture or a partition wall. This example has ornate turnery devices applied as split mouldings to the outer uprights and between the drawers. The small reeded panels below the cornice, and the reeding on the lower outer stiles is a common decorative device in Irish furniture from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (see Figs 5 and 9). The applied arches to the doors are of a particular shape adopted in Irish Gothic architecture.

17. Pine, painted with red lead. Handles missing from drawers. 159 h, 126 w, 52 d. The press cupboard was the main all-purpose storage space in many traditional Irish homes. Tall cupboards (see Fig. 18) were used for both storage and as room dividers where a jamb or cross wall dividing the house was absent. This example of a low press or food cupboard has two doors enclosing three internal shelves (the bottom one is missing), with an arched decorative frieze board at the top embellished with shell or fan carvings. Two short and one long drawer are fitted below the cupboard. This is an extremely decorative cupboard with reeding to the outer stiles, creating an illusion of pilasters. The lower stiles have short, horizontal reeding, and the cornice also has a reeded border. Mouldings are applied along the frieze above the doors in a zig-zag pattern. The doors are each made with two vertical and one horizontal panel, and brackets carved in a shell or fan motif are applied in the corner of each panel. The corners of the lower drawers are carved in a similar way to the doors, and the lower drawer has double line carving as a border. The extensive use of the fan corner motifs in this piece illustrate a strong preference for this decorative feature which was used by carpenters who also made shop fronts as well as furniture (see Fig. 4).

18. Pine. 211 h, 127 w, 65 d. Bottom of feet on right side replaced. The exterior is painted brown with simple combed wavy graining on the door framing and front feet, and the door panels and drawer fronts are decorated with simulated heartwood graining. With the doors closed, this press bed appears to be a simple cupboard or wardrobe, whilst in practice it offered an alternative form of concealed bed to the settle bed (Fig. 21). This design allowed a double bed frame and mattress to be stored away when not in use, and linen could be stored in the upper drawer. Tall pieces of furniture of this type were inappropriate to the low interiors of traditional single-storey cottages, and would only have been able to stand in a central position to form part of a dividing wall. This late nineteenth-century example which has none of the design exuberance of the earlier nineteenth-century forms, and is framed and panelled in a conventional cabinet-making manner, is more likely to have been made for a brick and slate dwelling in the late nineteenth century. The bed frame pivots on two bolts which pass through the press frame. When the bed was in use, two stump legs, joined to an upper rotating cross bar, folded down and supported the bottom of the bed.

19. Pine, painted on the front only, in blue. The back is a later replacement, now covered in wallpaper. 203 h, 182 w, 119 d. Internally, the mattress rested on slats running from front to back. The ends of the bed are panelled at the mattress level, then thin boards continue over the top of the bed. The curved canopy frieze is decorated in a key pattern with two rows of gouge carving below. The stiles of the canopy are also gouge carved to create simple pilasters. This decorative form of bed,

commonly known as a 'car' bed, is probably a form unique to Ireland. Typically, such beds were placed in an 'outshot' or 'lean-to' built out from the main house. Evidence that this example was used in this way is provided by the sides and top which were unseen, and remain unpainted. Such beds had curtains which could be drawn over the front, and the illustration in Figure 20 shows such a bed with its linen and curtains in use.

21. Pine, painted green with yellow back panels. Providing space for permanent beds presented a considerable difficulty in single-storey houses. Folding beds were a common way of storing them away, disguised as other pieces of furniture, during the day (Fig. 18). Other beds were placed in specially built out-shots made for that purpose. A further solution to the problem was the settle bed which typically had a panelled back and a base which folded down to form a 'box' bed on the floor, in which bedding could be placed. The folding part of the box had end sections which fitted inside the base, with the closed box secured in place with two catches. This example folds down to form a double bed with the result that, when folded up, the 'box' is higher than is convenient as a seat, suggesting that storage of the bed was the higher priority. Such beds probably formed the only bed in many single room dwellings.

22. Pine, scrubbed top with the base painted black. 1861. 71 h, 81 w. This simple form of table was common in many parts of Ireland in the second half of the nineteenth century, and is characterised in having two long centre stretchers joined by two short stretchers, and which mortice into the end cross stretchers. The double stretchers could be used as a shelf for domestic utensils, particularly when the table was placed against a wall. Tables came late into the repertoire of Irish vernacular furniture in cottage homes, since the hearth formed the centre for family life, and meals were eaten in front of the fire rather than at a table.[14]

23. Finished with brown scumble, and decorated with a combed wavy line pattern. Table top: 175 l, 93 ½ w. Settle: 156 h, 154 w, 50 d. Many Irish furniture makers confronted the difficulties of shortage of space in single-storey houses by either creating pieces which were tall and utilised wall space more than floor space, for example press cupboards and dressers, or by creating dual purpose items which were designed to save space by providing more than one function, for example, settle beds (Fig. 21). In this case, the settle table, and its counterpart, the table chair, served as seats, and also had hinged backs which could be folded down for use as a table when required. The base has a drawer at the left end. These dual purpose items followed in a constructional tradition which was known in England during the seventeenth century, but which had declined as a common form there by the late eighteenth century. Only in Ireland, and less commonly in Wales, did this type of furniture continue to be made during the nineteenth century.

24. 67 hh, 33 h, 61 w, 44 d. This chair, made by a Mr Farrell (1816–1909) of Ardagh. Co. Longford is of a type common to that region. This type of Windsor is an alternative design to that shown in Figure 25. Its manufacture utilises hedgerow woods, and basic hand tools including hand axe, saw, draw knife, and hammer, which were available to many rural workers. The legs were typically made from branches which were hand-shaped. Shaped, cleft sections of wood were used to form spindles for the back supports. The arms and back rail are also made from cleft sections of wood. The seat was made from 'pit' sawn planks of timber, and this example is made with a two-part seat. The principles used in making chairs of this type were essentially similar to those used in many coppice and carpentry tasks in subsistence communities, including making gates, hurdles, animal-feeding devices, baskets, and pack animal carriers. These and other items, adopted the techniques of using cleft woods which were shaped and adapted to the particular function.

25. Ash with elm seat 63 hh, 30 h, 56 w, 33 d. This chair adopts a naturally bent branch to form the arm bow and hand shaped back spindles, the through mortice legs are wedged to secure them. Chairs of this type were made in Wales, Scotland, and Ireland, and with echoes of design similarity in some chairs from the south-west of England. See R. Noble[11] for a Scottish three-legged example of this basic design, and T. A. Davies[12] for Welsh examples. This chair is essentially a development of the stool, with a back support added. Such seating represented a substantial advance in providing comfort, and

was within the technology and skills of many rural dwellers who used hand tools and coppice materials in their daily working lives.

26. Ash. 84 hh, 40 h, 43 w, 38 d. This simple design of chair was common in many parts of Ireland, and has similarities in its construction to Atlantic/Mediterranean chairs. The legs and ladders are made from sawn and planed sections of ash, and the leg connecting stretchers are hand-shaped and roughly rounded. The round tenons pass through the legs and are wedged across to tighten them in the joint, reflecting a constructional feature found particularly in chairs from the Iberian Peninsula. The seat of this example is made from a continuous woven rope of hay or 'sugan', from which the chair derives its name. Alternatively, straw or rye-grass could be used to form a rope from which the thick, matted seat was made. The front and back seat rails pass through the legs at a lower point than the side seat rails, thus allowing the woven ropes to form a dished shape to the seat. A stylistic feature of the sugan chairs which is also found in woven-seated chairs from the Mediterranean/Atlantic chair traditions is the prominent front posts which extend above the level of the seat in side chairs.

27. Ash, with residues of red lead paint. 77 hh, 43 h, 50 w, 13½ d. This example illustrates a similar form of chair to that in Figure 26, with the exception that the spindles and connecting stretchers are lathe-turned rather than hand-shaped. The use of turned spindles in the back appears to be a relatively uncommon variant, with ladder back varieties being more prevalent.

28. Scots pine, with red lead paint. 85 hh, 46 h, 54 w, 33½ d. The terms Sligo and Tuam refer to towns some fifty miles apart in the north-west of Ireland, where this design of chair is believed to originate. This style, which was made as either arm or side chairs, has the unusual design component of a broad splat which extends the whole length of the back, and acts as a spine from which the arms and the three-seat sections radiate. A rectangular hand grip is carved into the back of the back 'spine'. The 'throne'-like appearance of this design may owe its origins in ancient forms of Irish seating which had high ritual significance. However, turned triangular-shaped chairs from the seventeenth century and before, also adopted the design principle of a single central turned column at the rear, from which a triangular seat was connected to two turned front posts. These chairs formed an important part of the chair making tradition in England, Wales, and other parts of northern Europe. A rare example of this chair type, made in England in the late seventeenth century, has been recorded, which combines a flat spine and square front posts and offers a close parallel to the later Irish form.[10]

29. Residues of red lead paint. 83 hh, 55 h, 60 w, 40 d. This common form of Windsor chair is reported to have been made particularly in Cavan and Monahan,[8] and is characterised by arms which are pierced by the outer long back spindles and by a curved comb rail joining the back spindles. The back spindles and legs are hand-shaped rather than lathe-turned, and were through morticed and wedged to secure them. The under surface of the seat and parts of the legs show circular saw-blade marks.

30. Pine, originally painted with brown scumble, over-painted in yellow paint, now largely worn away. 109 hh, 69 h, 72 w, 57 d. This chair utilises naturally-shaped sections of pine to form the seat and back uprights, which are united by thin panels of pine. The cross stretchers mortice through the legs and back uprights. In Ireland, cleft, naturally-bent parts to form outer seat rails and back uprights were used to make chairs on an opportunistic basis, using suitable shapes as they occurred, rather than as part of a continuous tradition. See Figure 31 for an example where the front legs and arms were formed in this way. This mode of making chairs has parallels in Scotland, where two distinct regional chair-making traditions from Caithness and Sutherland have been identified as using naturally bent shapes to form the seat and back uprights.[9]

31. Residues of red lead paint. The chair shows the use of naturally-bent branches, cleft or sawn to form symmetrical continuous arms and front legs. A further branch was cleft to form the back legs. The back is framed with simple cross splats, and thin pine planks are nailed to a frame to form the seat. Raised seat border strips are nailed to the legs, probably to hold a cushion.

32. Pine, painted with red lead. 86 hh, 42 h, 41 w, 37 d. Simple forms of wooden seated chairs made entirely with sawn parts, formed an alternative mode of seating to the sugan chair (Figs 27 and 26), and Windsor chairs (Figs 24 and 25), which were in common daily use in Ireland during the second

half of the nineteenth century. This example illustrates a basic sawn chair which is influenced by fashionable early nineteenth-century designs and has been made with considerable simplification of the form, to create a utilitarian version. Closely similar chairs were made in both the Welsh, and Scottish traditions, during the second half of the nineteenth century.

33. Pine, brown paint over red lead. This example of a wood-seated chair is influenced by fashionable styles of chairs made during the first half of the nineteenth century, and applies the Regency design of curved front and back legs in a simplified form. The central cross back splat is carved with a foliate motif, and the centre has a common shell or fan motif commonly used in other vernacular forms of Irish furniture (see Figs 7 and 17). Many types of simple wood-seated chairs were made in Ireland during the nineteenth century, with various levels of interpretation of more sophisticated forms.
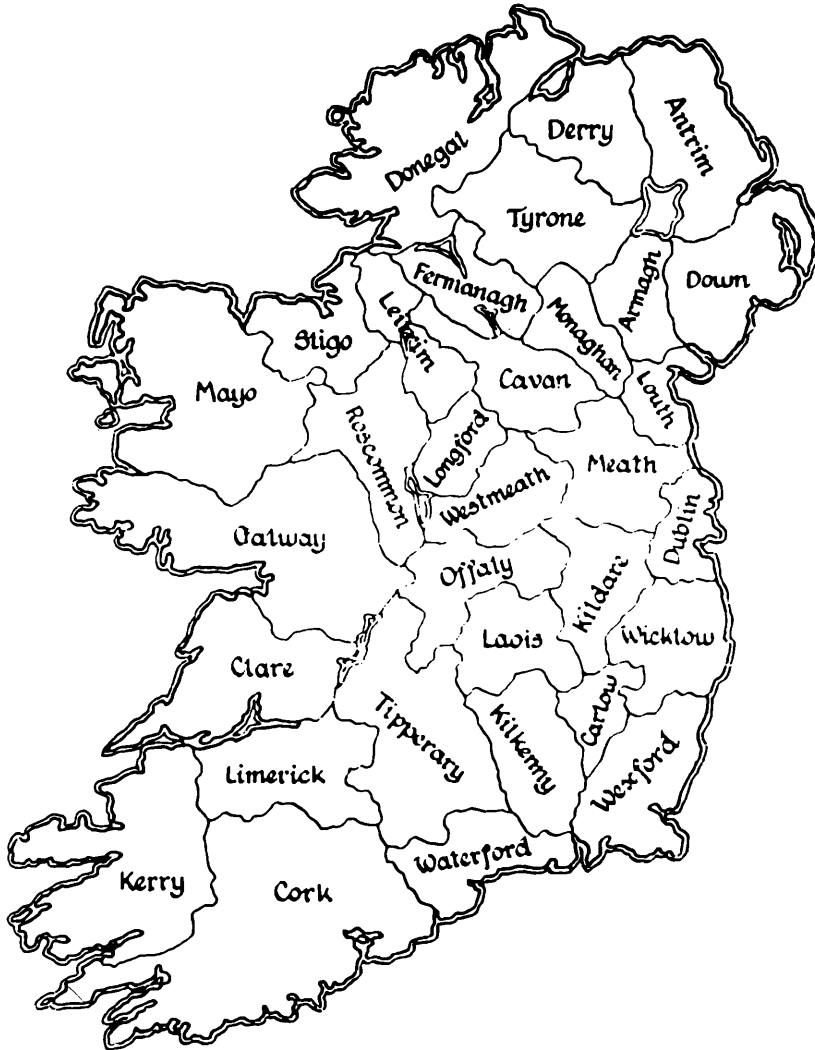
1. Map of Ireland
Courtesy Heraldic Artists, Nassau Street, Dublin

2

2. Single-storey cottage, c.1820. Tullamore, Co. Offaly

3. Shop front of J. O'Reilly, Bootmaker of Thomastown, Co. Kilkenny, c. 1820
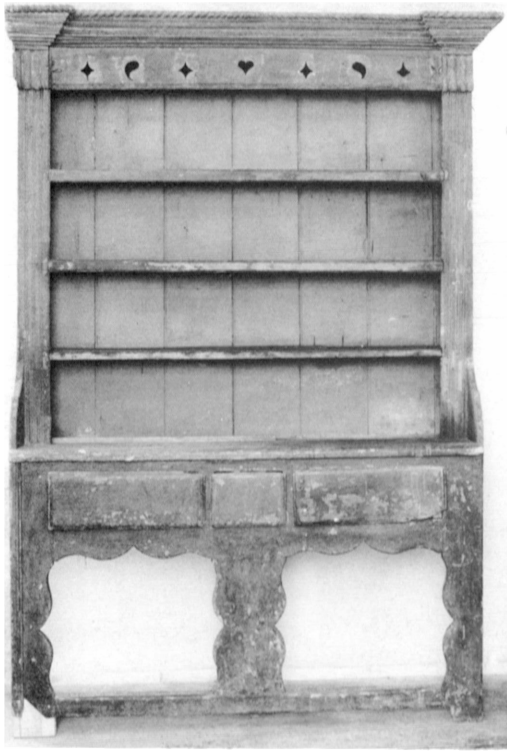
PAIS Ó CONAILL,
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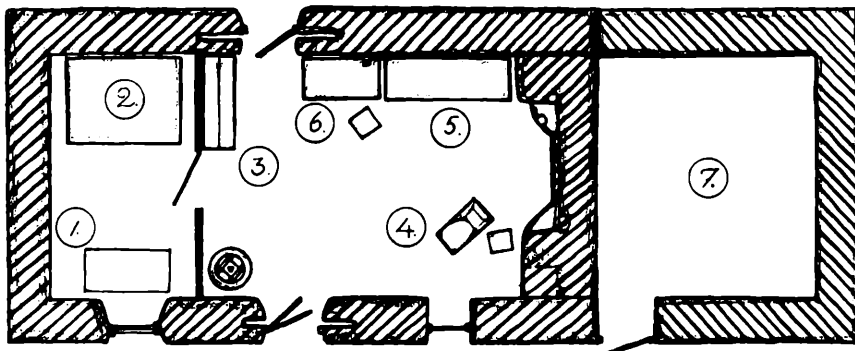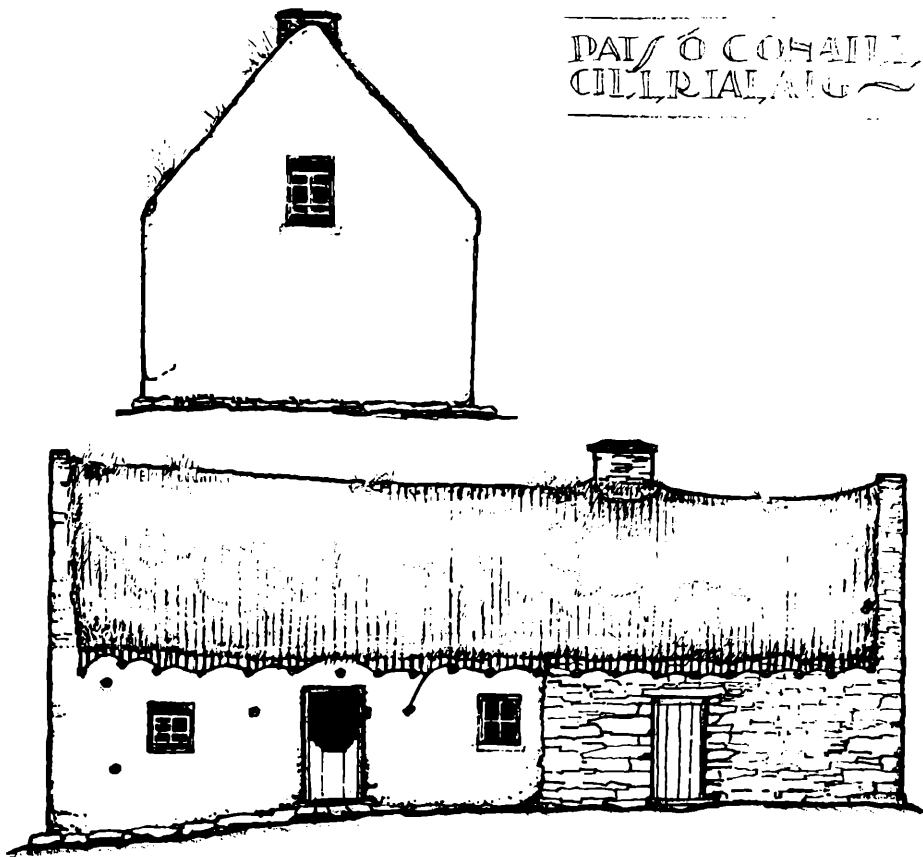
Measured by Seán O'Sullivan.

℔1934.

1. Table, 2. bed, 3. dresser, 4. cradle, 5. bench, 6. table, 7. cow house.

4. Plan of single-storey cottage with byre at Cillrialaig, Co. Kerry, 1934, showing
arrangement of the furniture
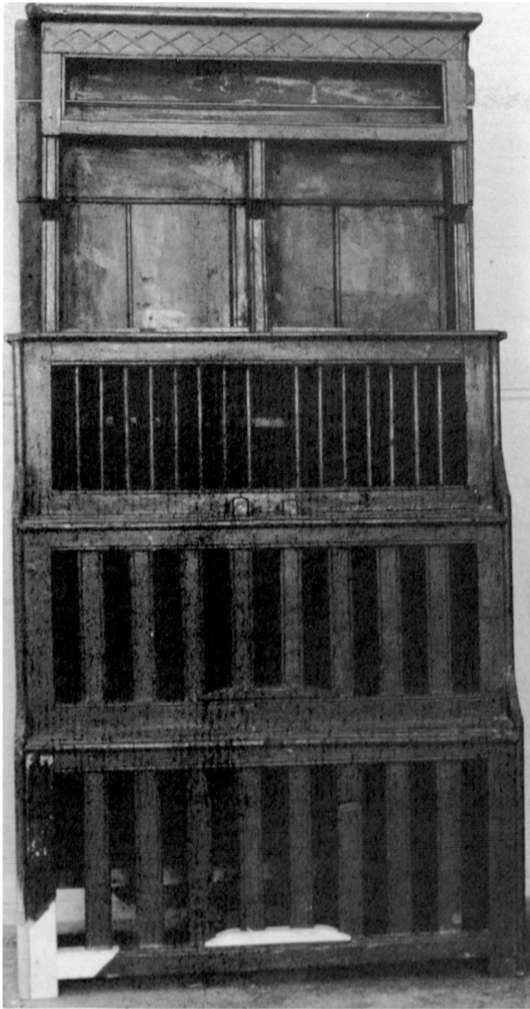*Courtesy National Museum of Ireland*

5. Dresser with plate rack, painted pine, c. 1820, from Pallas Green, Co. Limerick

6. Open front dresser with curtains to cover items on the lower shelf
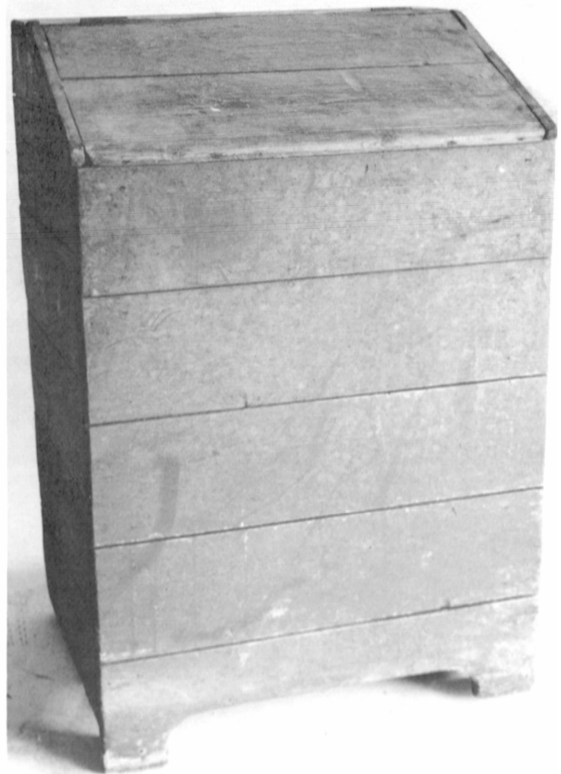*Photograph courtesy The Shannon Free Airport Development Co. Ltd*

7. Dresser with plate rack, painted pine, c. 1820, from Garrycastle (?) Co. Offaly

8. Dresser with chicken coop base, painted pine,
   c. 1780, from Pallas Green, Co. Limerick
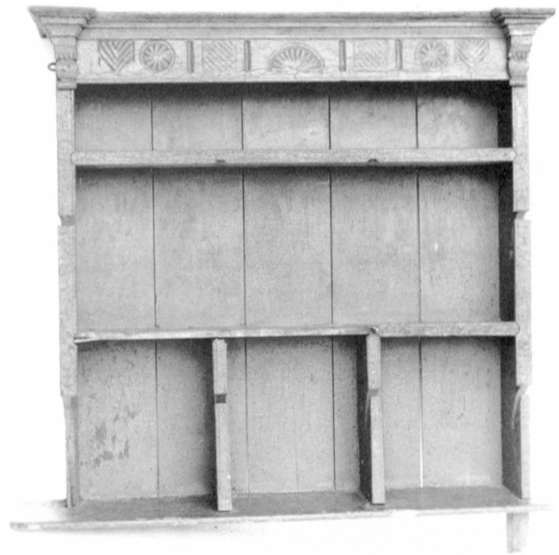
9. Spit or plate rack (clevy), painted pine, c. 1800,
   from Co. Clare

10. Meal bin, pine with traces of a yellow finish,
    c. 1880, from Coonagh, Co. Limerick

11. Blanket chest, painted pine, c. 1850, inscribed inside lid: 'B. Morris, Killeen' (Co. Cork?)

12. Storage chest, painted pine, c. 1820, from Ballingarry, Co. Kilkenny

13. Storage chest, painted pine, c. 1820, from Doon, Co. Limerick

14. Storage piece, painted pine, c. 1840, from Co. Kerry

15. Bureau bookcase, painted pine, *c.* 1830, possibly from Castleblayney area, Co. Monaghan

16. Press cupboard, painted pine, *c.* 1780, from Pallas Green, Co. Limerick

17. Press or food cupboard, painted pine, *c.* 1780, from Co. Limerick

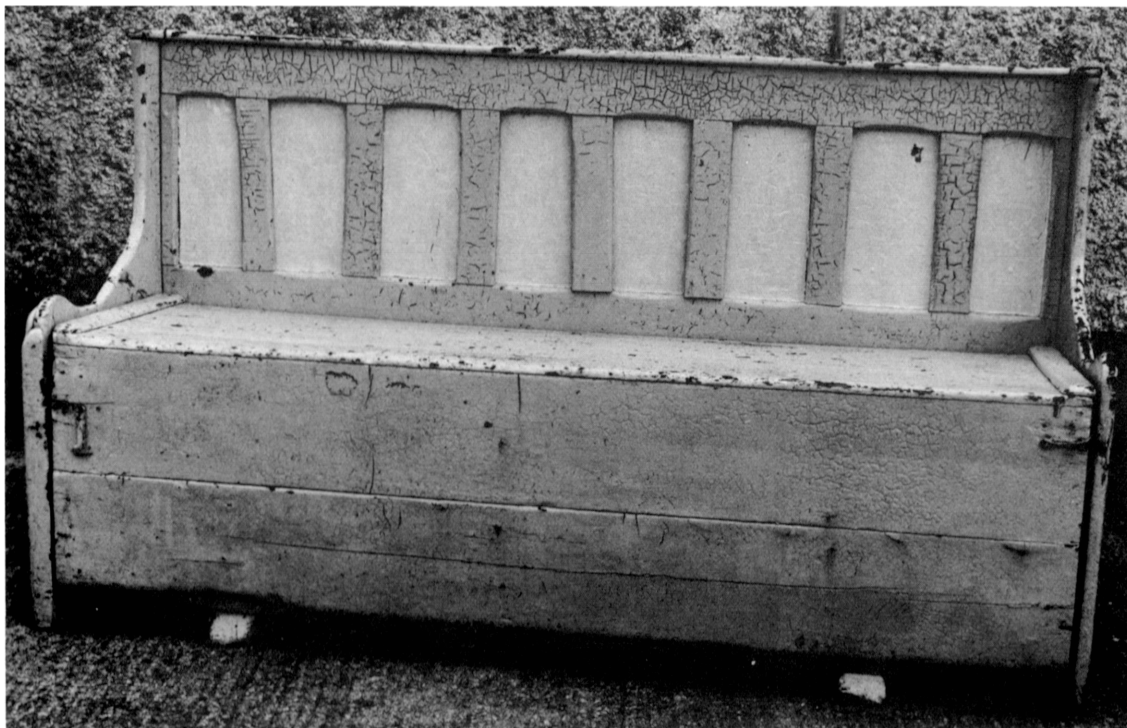18a. Press bed (closed) painted pine, *c.* 1890,
from Kilmihil, Co. Clare

18b. Press bed, with doors open

19. Canopy bed, painted pine, *c.* 1800, from
Co. Waterford

20. Covered car bed *Photograph courtesy The Shannon
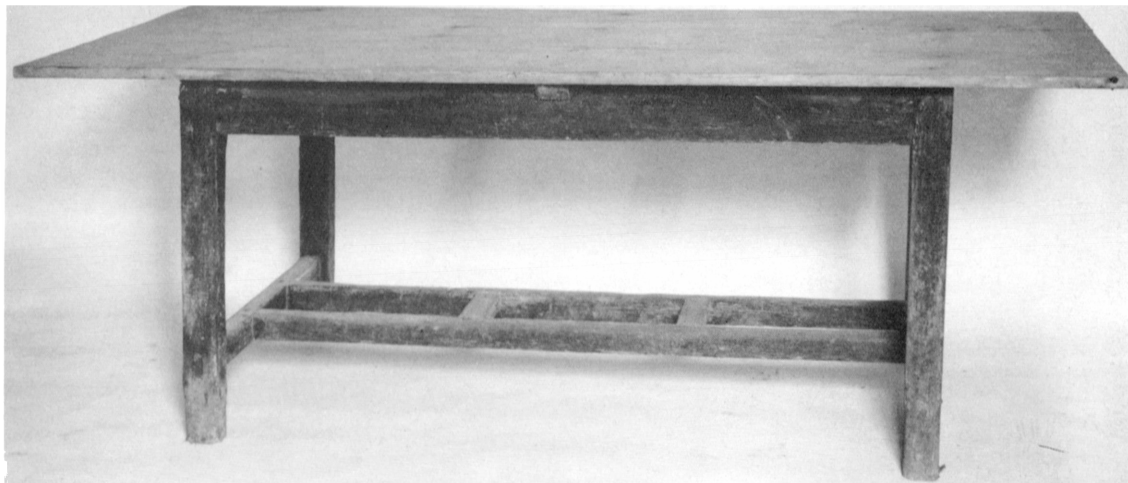Free Airport Development Co. Ltd*

21a. Settle bed (closed) painted pine, *c.* 1870, from Gorteen, Co. Galway

21b. Settle bed in folded down position

22. Kitchen table, pine with painted frame, *c.* 1870, from Pallas Green, Co. Limerick

23. Settle table, birch or willow with elm legs, scumble finish, *c.* 1850, from Mullinavat, Co. Longford

24. Windsor armchair, ash with elm seat, c. 1850, made by Mr Farrell of Ardagh, Co. Longford

25. Windsor armchair, ash with elm seat, c. 1780, from Greatdown, Co. Westmeath

26. Ladder-back 'sugan' chair, ash, c. 1850, from Coonagh, Co. Limerick

27. Spindle-back sugan chair, ash, *c.* 1850, from Southern Ireland

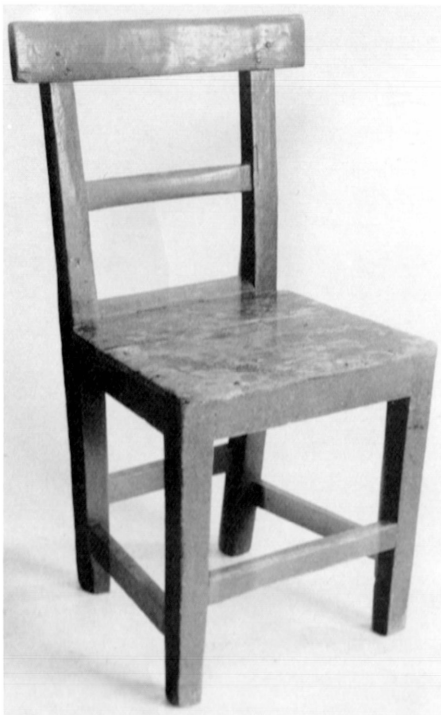28. Tuam or Sligo chair, painted pine, *c.* 1820

29. Comb-back Windsor armchair, ash with sycamore seat, *c.* 1880, from Castle Pollard, Co. Westmeath

30. Panelled armchair, pine, originally painted,
c. 1820, from Dowra, Co. Leitrim/Cavan border

31. Armchair, pine with traces of paint,
c. 1820, from Scarrif, Co. Clare

32. Chair, painted pine, c. 1850, from
Athlone South, Co. Roscommon

33. Chair, painted pine, c. 1860, from
Tullygarvey, Co. Cavan