

## Muckross Traditional Farms

The final visit of our tour was to Muckross Traditional Farms, exact replicas of original farms furnished not with replicas but with original furnishings. By this time we could recognise nineteenth-century Irish vernacular dressers and how to ‘read’ their contents, including searching for holes in the shelves from which spoons were hung vertically. We understood the various types of settle beds, butter boxes and their uses and decoration. We understood that the fire, not the table, was the centre of social life and that the table was always under the window to make best use of what light was available. Bread was kept and cut on the work surface of the dresser, not the table.

In the working farms we visited, large, medium, small and the labourer’s cottage or cabin, our guide Patricia O’Hare most helpfully placed all the buildings and their furnishings in their political and social context. She explained how the only timber available was dug up from local bogs. Doors and some furnishings were thus often made from straw. Straw, a by-product of the



Alison and David Dewing making *sùgán*, straw rope, in the kitchen of the large farmhouse at Muckross. *Photo Peter Jefferies*

wheat and oat crop, was used for thatch for the roofs and *súgán*, that is straw rope. Under the expert guidance of Pat Broderick, David and Alison Dewing produced a creditable if not expert piece of rope! Pat also demonstrated the use of *súgán* to make chair seats of various designs. Straw was also used to make hats or masks worn by ‘the Biddies’, groups of people going from house to house on St Brigid’s Day, the first of February, the first day of Spring.

Perhaps the most notable fact of all we gained from our Irish visit was the extreme poverty of the Irish rural population. The failure of the potato harvests which brought the Great Famine or the ‘Great Hunger’ of 1845–c. 1850 resulted in the deaths of about one million people from starvation and the forced emigration of another two and a half million. Irish population figures have never recovered and the disaster has had a huge impact on Irish culture, music and language.

But everywhere we went we were met with Irish kindness and hospitality. For myself the highlight was at Carrigeen Farmhouse, when on learning that he had some Scottish visitors Pat Egan unexpectedly called for his melodeon and sitting at his fire, with his wife and daughter providing us with the soda bread we had just seen expertly baked, played as his first tune *Scotland the Brave*.

*Dr Ishbel Barnes*



*A súgán chair seat made by Pat Broderick. Photo Peter Jefferies*