

Lecture by Dr Claudia Kinmonth MRIA: *Irish country furniture and furnishings 1700–1950: Recycling our past*  
Claudia Kinmonth, Research Curator (Domestic Life) at the Ulster Folk Museum and Visiting Research Fellow at the National University of Ireland, Galway, led the tour for the next two days. In her introductory lecture she examined traditional Irish furniture and houses, focussing on her recent research and work in Cork.

In 1841 a British Government survey showed that 50% of the population of Ireland were living in one-room cabins, in overcrowded poor conditions that were dark, with one window, no chimney, a thatched roof, an earthen floor, and often shared with a pig. Widespread deforestation by the mid-eighteenth century meant there was little available timber so improvisation and recycling was common practice. Turf (called peat in Britain) was widely used for building houses, providing a well-insulated interior.

*Súgán*, a twisted straw or hay rope, was widely used in the west and south-west for making plaited and coiled stools, cushions and mats, sometimes bound with lengths of stripped bramble. As seats wore out, chairs were re-seated but as fishing twine became available it replaced the widespread use of straw. There is evidence of timber obtained from shipwrecks being recycled into furniture such as stools and cradles; ships' timber can be identified by the large holes made by shipworms, or *Toredo*. Stools would have been really common, more than chairs as they used less timber. The bark edge was often retained to maximise sizes of seat wood and there is frequent evidence of renewed chair legs.

Falling tables occur across the country, sometimes associated with a falling bench. These tables were multi-purpose, recorded in one instance as a surface on which to butcher the pig. Settle beds are ubiquitous and can be traced back to 1640 in inventories. In the larger estates they were used for servants to sleep in and, with the bedding enclosed, were folded up for use as a seat or table surface during the day. Dressers, sometimes built into the parlour wall, were open-fronted until the late nineteenth-century and, like the settle bed, were always painted, sometimes in two tones. Dresser shelves held plates, mugs and jugs, and some were pierced to hold cow horn spoons. A dovetailed sledge foot, which was renewable if it broke, is a common feature as it made the high dresser more stable. Some dressers included a hen coop in the lower part while others were open for safe keeping of water jugs, or closed with doors.

Wooden noggins, small vessels with a stave handle, were used to contain liquids such as buttermilk, which was commonly consumed with boiled potatoes dipped in the buttermilk. An upturned basket, pot or churn improvised as a table for eating off, positioned in front of the fire where all cooking was done.

For further information on Claudia's publications, *Irish Country Furniture 1700–1950* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993, reprinted 1995), *Irish Rural Interiors in Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), and articles on spoons and noggins, see [www.claudiakinmonth.ie](http://www.claudiakinmonth.ie)

*Liz Hancock*