

## Ulster Folk Museum

The Folk Museum comprises 50 traditional buildings from all parts of rural Ulster, many original but including some replicas, set in the 170 acres of Cultra Manor. Some more urban buildings are grouped into 'Ballycultra' town. We were lucky to have an excellent guide to the rural buildings in Fionnuala Carragher. She told us that country people in Ireland called their homes 'houses', whatever their size or status, the word 'cottage' being associated with disparaging comments by English visitors.

The Ulster linen industry was very important from the eighteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries. We saw a weaver's house with a well-lit workshop and boarded storage loft above the hearth, a water-driven 'scutch' flax mill and also a bleach green tower which sheltered the watchman guarding the rows of newly woven linen laid out to bleach from grazing animals (and theft!). We went on to look at seven farmhouses from different parts of Ulster, reflecting their area by the choice of local stone and also the size and sophistication. All had been built

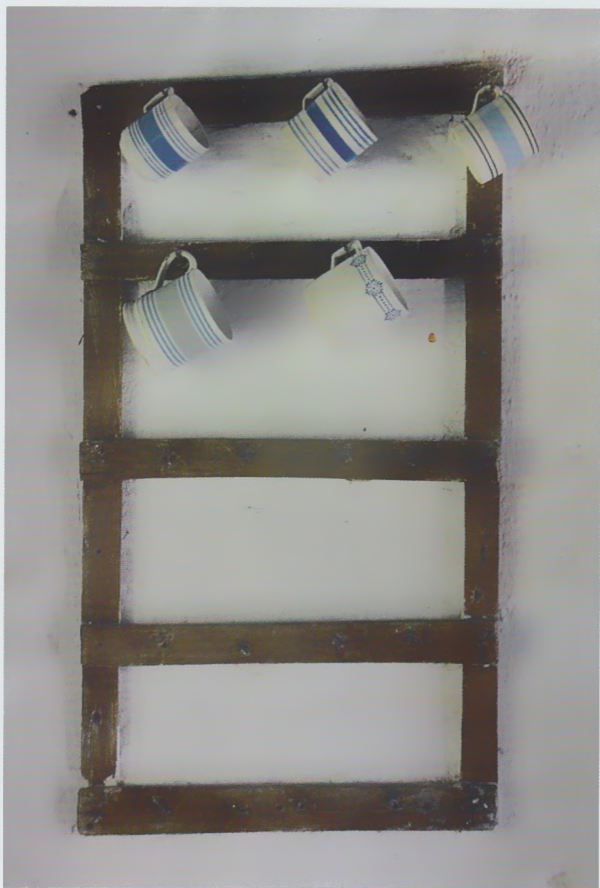


The single-room Magheragallan byre-dwelling which housed people and animals together. From Maghergallan townland in northwest County Donegal. Built in the 1870s on the 'machire', (coastal plain) the building was moved to the Folk Museum in 1974. *Photo Neil MacLennan*

single-storied with a thatched roof and a floor of beaten earth. Extreme poverty was more common in the west, illustrated by the byre dwelling from the shores of Donegal. Its thatched roof was held down to stone pegs. Humans were housed at the gable end with the hearth and animals at the other, separated by a stone drain. Furniture was minimal, without a bed. In the poorest homes, the family would sleep next to the fire ‘in stradogue’, lying together on rushes, heather or straw with a coverlet.

The other farmhouses were all built between 1750 and 1850 with a kitchen and a bedroom. The kitchen hearth was usually central to give some warmth to both rooms. Hearths were equipped with hooks and cranes for suspending pots and kettles above the fire. Sophisticated, wrought-iron ones have survived better than wooden ones, always likely to catch fire. A jamb wall, an internal partition, sometimes served to screen the hearth from draughts from the door. If the house came from a sloping site, for example in the Glens of Antrim, it might have a byre under the bedroom, also providing warmth. Rising prosperity and the Land Purchase Act in the early 1900s led to some of these houses being improved, one by subdivision using partitions and the other two by ‘raising and slating.’ Extra bedrooms, a ‘good room’ and new wooden or tiled floors were created.

Every dwelling contained items from a common repertoire of functional furniture. Fixed items were ranged around the walls, leaving the centre clear.



In poorer homes a ‘hanging dresser’ or cup rack, a light wooden frame of laths with hooks for hanging mugs and jugs, substituted for a full-sized dresser. Ulster Folk Museum. *Photo Neil MacLennan*

Timber was scarce, the native woods and forests having been cut down, mostly to be sent to England. Pine, in the form of deal imported from the Baltic and later North America, was the usual material though, in very poor communities, sticks from hedges and, along the coast, driftwood were also useful. Mahogany would be the hardwood of choice if improving material circumstances allowed. Furniture would be made by carpenters and wheelwrights who would add decorative features such as chamfering. Most furniture would be painted, often by the householders. As well as its decorative value, it was easier to keep clean.

*Sally and Neil Maclellan*