

# County Kerry vernacular furniture: the hole story

During the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, in Ireland, my research and photography excursions became restricted. Snapshots of objects were still being sent to me, even as my book, *Irish Country Furniture and Furnishings 1700–2000*, for Cork University Press, was being printed. This article includes recently acquired information, along with ‘snapshot’ images of chairs that I could not examine or re-photograph, alongside others from my new book. Focusing on items from central County Kerry, it examines how similarities of decoration can reflect regional characteristics.



Child's *sùgán* chair, riven ash back rests are nailed at each side where each shouldered tenon is inserted. H 620 mm, W 430 mm, D 470 mm, from Inch, County Kerry. Author's photo with canvas by Patrick Scott, courtesy Eric Pearse



One of three similar *Sùgán* armchairs, of painted ash, with drilled hole decoration, riven back rests nailed at each side where the shouldered tenons are inserted, chequered twine seat with traces of pink. H 840 mm, W 550 mm, D 570 mm. Photo courtesy McMullen Museum Collection, Boston College

In Ireland's extreme south west, rural County Kerry suffered historically with the poorest farmland, and an acute shortage of timber for making vernacular furniture. It was an area known especially for *sùgán* chairs (which are discussed in proper detail in my book, rather than here). These required minimal timber, few tools and traditional joints such as through mortice and tenons, with wedges, pegs and sometimes nails. Their seats of woven *sùgán* (Irish for twisted straw or hay rope) were renewed by householders themselves. Most *sùgán* chairs lack arms, and have a ladderback construction. Ample space around the seat allowed the ball of *sùgán* to be passed around the frame when weaving, so stretchers were deliberately low, with prominent front leg posts giving strength and avoiding the fragile short grain.

In 1962 the artist Patrick Scott (1921–2014) bought a *sùgán* chair from its maker, at Inch, County Kerry, as a prop for the film, *The Playboy of the Western World*. This child's chair of ash is distinctive, with its double row of decorative infills, each drilled with three holes, set in mortices between the three horizontal back slats, which form the back rest. Those horizontal back rests have wire-headed nails, that secure the tenons in place. It is straightforward for someone drilling holes for mortices in these chairs to drill more when decorating them, so the holes, like the pierced decoration typical of Irish dresser fascia boards, created decoration by removing material, rather than adding it.

A similarly decorated *sùgán* armchair, without provenance, was displayed in Boston in an exhibition, *Rural Ireland the Inside Story*, that I helped curate at the McMullen Museum of Art. The way its back rest incorporated drilled holes, in a square pattern of five, was a striking feature. The maker had also included double curved armrests, each fixed at the front by having the front legs elongated upwards, and strengthened beneath by a series of vertical rods. Its seat has a chequered weave of thin rope (in pink and buff). This reminded me of a *sùgán* armchair with a chequered seat from the National Museum of Ireland, originating from a dealer in County Limerick, which borders County Kerry (illustrated in *Irish Country Furniture*, 1993 edition, fig. 74).

In September 2020 I was sent a snapshot of another *sùgán* armchair, incorporating the same idiosyncratic 'double armrests', but with a different arrangement of backrest with simple pierced decoration including two drilled holes. Rescued from a skip in Castleisland, County Kerry, Covid restrictions prevented me from travelling to inspect it so it is published here, as found. The way the seat is 'chequered' is also notable, because it echoes the way well-worn bicycle tyres were cleverly woven into a chequered seat on yet another '*sùgán* style' side chair that I found unprovenanced in neighbouring County Cork, painted black.

In late October 2020 I received more snapshots of an armchair, bought at auction, closely similar to the Boston example, with a slightly narrower back, inscribed '1950' on the rear, and with identical square pattern drilled holes. Like the first two chairs illustrated, from Inch and Boston College's collection, it has distinctive 'wire' nails with criss-cross heads, securing





*Súgán armchair, painted, with double armrests, its woven recycled bicycle tyre seat in chequered pattern, from a skip in Castleisland, County Kerry. Photo courtesy Leo Suijkerbuijk*



*Súgán chair, painted black, with woven recycled bicycle tyre seat in chequered pattern, unprovenanced, County Cork. Photo by the author*

the horizontal back rails, wherever they meet the uprights, and at the back of the armrests.

Drilling holes decorates furniture frugally without adding wood. When I noticed twelve holes drilled into each shelf front of a hanging dresser, also from Kerry, the detail resonated with the holes on the various chairs, apparently from the same region. In 1940, the *National Geographic Magazine* published an article about Ireland by photographer Harrison Howell Walker. Walker took the three-mile boat trip out to the Great Blasket Island to meet Peig Sayers, by then a celebrated storyteller and author. Her stories in Irish had already made her famous; the island homes lacked electricity or running water, and tales of folklore, told in Irish by the fireside, were a central part of their traditional culture. Walker's photo, published this year full width in colour for the first time, having been discovered partially colourised, shows Peig posed beside her two dressers. A dresser with its meticulous arrangements, was traditionally displayed as a cultural reflection of the aspirations and status of its owner. This was the aesthetic focal point and status symbol of any Irish kitchen, with plates leaning onto bars to avoid dust while reflecting light, and cups dangling from hooks. The coloured glass fishing floats ranged across the top of the dresser echo arrangements in other coastal homes. They sit in glass jam jars, which are also gleaming in double rows along the 'bed' of the dresser, with a loaf of Peig's brown bastable bread (soda bread baked in an iron pot in front of the fire), equally prominently displayed. Walker's caption draws attention to the electric light bulbs which were collected, displayed and discussed, because the islanders' tiny





Peig Sayers with her dresser and hanging dresser (far right) with pierced holes along shelf fronts, Great Blasket Island, County Kerry. Photo Harrison Howell Walker c. 1940 (colourising courtesy Graham Cooper, thanks to RFS)

homes had no electricity. These are displayed on her smaller, 'hanging dresser' (far right) among egg cups and assorted drinking glasses, behind three shelf mouldings each with drilled hole decoration. If such holes were a feature of furniture from other parts of Ireland, they might have been dismissed as coincidence. But considered together with those found on the Kerry *súgán* chairs, they indicate a pattern of local Kerry tradition, from which observers of such pieces might build upon in future.

The colourising of parts of the photograph of Peig Sayers was paid for by a Regional Furniture Society grant, which also supported some other aspects of photography. All the images illustrated (except the third chair) are from my book, *Irish Country Furniture and Furnishings 1700–2000* (Cork University Press, November 2020).

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