

McKenna, Rachel. *Traditional Architecture in Offaly: History, Materials and Furniture 1800 to present day* (Offaly County Council 2022), 288pp, ISBN 978-1-9163287-6-1.

It is available online via <https://www.offalyhistory.com/shop/book-store>, price €30.00

The author Rachel McKenna is architect for Offaly County Council and has been researching vernacular buildings since 2018 when it was realised that the number of thatched buildings in the county was declining rapidly. After Claudia Kinmonth⁹ recorded and documented Carrigeen Farmhouse, an amazingly untouched survival of a traditional house and its furnishings, Rachel carried on the research. She made a point of asking home owners about their furniture and fittings and often found good pieces of local furniture which had been relegated to farm buildings and outhouses.

The book has chapters covering the history of Carrigeen Farm, the setting of vernacular buildings in the landscape, farmyards and farm buildings, architecture (including plan types, construction, materials and thatching) and many aspects of social history from food, farming, pigs living in the house, employment and housing improvements (with the eviction of the pigs!) But the chapter of greatest interest to RFS members is *Chapter 5 Interior and Furniture* which fills pages 98–213. In every case the furniture is looked at in the context of the house and family, how it was used and why it was designed the way it was. The kitchen hearth was the focus of family life, for heating and cooking, eating, talking, story-telling and music-making, and much of the furniture in this room is described in relation to the it. The dresser often stood opposite the fireplace, where the leaping flames would light up the *delf* (delft, though most of it was not actually Delftware) on the dresser shelves and make it glow. By the end of the nineteenth century the dresser

when necessary. A large meal chest or ark stored food for the *hungry months* of June and July when last year's potato crop had run out and the next crop was still growing. Like the wall-mounted salt box it often had a sloping lid to prevent things from being put on top.

The book looks in similar detail at the furniture in the parlour and the bedroom of the three-roomed houses, and describes press beds, corner cupboards, parlour chairs and dowry chests. The author suggests that many items of furniture may have been made by the local wheelwright, using his draw knife to create simple chamfers around panels instead of the more complex mouldings produced by a carpenter or joiner. Simpler items were probably made by family members. She also discusses the changes in painting and colour schemes, which were often coordinated with the furniture, the fireplace surround and the front door all being painted the same colour. This is especially true in the later period of gloss paints in bright colours and seems a little startling to those of us used to furniture in varying shades of brown.

The author quotes from many contemporary sources and from Claudia Kinmonth's work, and Carrigeen Farm features prominently throughout the book. It is sumptuously illustrated with numerous superb photographs, from the buildings to the landscape, from iron gates to close-up details of a precious cup stapled together after a breakage. Contemporary line drawings, paintings and maps add to the mix, as well as Rachel's own pen, ink and watercolour sketches and house plans which have a magic of their own. This is a book not so much about architecture and furnishings as about the everyday life of the Irish people as revealed by their homes and their belongings and is a worthy addition to anyone's bookshelves.

Linda Hall

⁹ Author of *Irish Country Furniture 1700–1950* and an unpublished survey of Carrigeen Farmhouse.