

# 3 ROOFS

The thatch roof is an icon of Irish traditional culture. Historically most houses were roofed with thatch of wheaten or oaten straw, or of reeds, heather or grasses, on roof structures of unrefined timber boughs. An layer called 'scraw' consisting of sod, peat or heather was laid under the thatch into which the straw was fixed using bent hazel, sally or willow twigs called "scallops". In Wicklow "thrust" and "pinned" thatching were the most common methods, though evidence of "roped" thatching was also found. Sometimes estate cottages had consciously romantic or picturesque thatch based on English decorative styles and designed by architects. These would not be classified as vernacular, but modern thatching often follows these fancier styles rather than the simpler more genuine form used for generations in Co. Wicklow. Unfortunately very few authentic thatched roofs survive in the county, many having been replaced with slate or corrugated iron, which have now themselves become distinctive vernacular features. Old thatch is often preserved underneath and this provides very interesting evidence of former methods. In the 1940's and 50's the Irish Folklore Commission carried out a questionnaire survey across Ireland which gives us valuable insight into a thatching tradition in Wicklow which has now all but disappeared.

Wicklow roofs are mainly gable-ended, again an exception in eastern Ireland. A minority of hipped roofs were found in lowland areas conforming to the type more common in the adjoining counties of Wexford and Kildare.



Formerly thatched hip-ended roof

The roof of old houses was supported by couples, made larch poles, fastened together at the top by wooden pegs, the couples were placed on the walls, five or six feet apart, and connected by what was then called ribberies, light poles running from one pair of couples to the other, these ribberies supported the scraws, to which the first coat of thatch was stitched, with straw ropes. The scraws were tough sods, cut in a bog in lengths of 5 or 6 feet, and laid evenly on the ribberies. The scraws kept out the wind, and kept the thatch from showing through the roof. (N.F.C.S. 1309, p. 234) Thomas Donnelly, Knockatomcoyle, Tinahely, 1951.

Next came the heather. The people burned patches in the bog, so as to have "roofing heather" in a year or two. Then when it was about 2 years old, nice and fine and young (so as to "go together"), it was pulled - and a stiff job it was to pull it. It was put on, about 6" depth of it. They began at the wall and thatched up to the point of the roof with it. (If it were kept dry, it would, and did, last 100 years). Over this came the thatch-straw, rushes or "flaggers", which grew on the banks of rivers. (N.F.C.S. 1309, pg. 247) Rose Byrne, Rathcoyle, Kiltegan 1952.



The restored Dwyer-Mc Alistair house with authentic gable-ended thatch roof



Originally half-hipped roof simplified to a gable



Underside of a thatch roof surviving beneath galvanized iron. Note roof structure of roughly-hewn timber, rope fixings and straw underlayer.

The houses built in this locality inside the last two hundred years were roofed with bog deal, and the lofts supported by bog oak beams, which are still as sound as a bell, they were slated with slates from Killcavan quarries. The slates were secured to the laths with one nail, and the bog deal pig over the lath, and the nails are nearly rusted away, but the bog deal pig is still sound. (N.F.C. 1309 pg. 235)



Slate roofs are common in Wicklow

