

Timber, a common material in western European vernacular styles, has been relatively scarce in Ireland since the 17th and 18th centuries and stone or clay have become the predominant walling material in Irish vernacular buildings.

Stone is in abundant supply in Wicklow and is the most common building material. Rubble stone walls, generally 600 to 700mm thick, are of granite from upland regions, or of lime-stone in lowland areas. The strong stone-cutting tradition of the county is reflected in the vernacular houses of stone cutters and masons, with impressive cut-stone gables and chimneys a common sight in the area around the Ballyknockan quarries.

Mud walling is a particularly sustainable construction method common to cultures all over the world. Favoured for its good insulation qualities and ready availability, clay as a building material is most prevalent in the drier east and south-east of Ireland. In Wicklow clay is more common in the lowland areas, and can often be identified by slightly angled or “battered” walls, often with sturdy buttresses. As clay is susceptible to water, the houses were built on a wider base of field stones with projecting eaves to throw water clear of the walls. Clay walls are extremely long-lasting, yet in the 20th century mud-walled houses became wrongly associated with poverty, although it was the favoured material in the fertile lowlands where it was used for substantial two-storey houses of more prosperous farmers.

Whether built of stone or clay vernacular houses were generally rendered on the outside with lime and sand, and painted with a limewash, commonly white but sometimes tinted with earthen pigments. The white-wash was renewed regularly and acted as a disinfectant as well as keeping a bright smart appearance.

The Folklore Commission Questionnaires provide interesting first-hand information on the use of clay in the county.



Detail of a stone outbuilding with gable of turf sods. Note the thatch surviving under the iron roof

Long ago houses were built with yellow clay and stones but wealthier people had them built with lime and sand. Some of these houses may still be seen in farm houses and in the mountains poor people still inhabit them. To obtain this clay people had to dig a considerable distance into the ground and when they came to the yellow clay they had to get a pick to break the clay. When this clay was mixed with water it became very soft and took about a week to set. (N.F.C.S. 914, p. 339) Eddie Sinnott, Dunlavin



Cut-stone building with distinctive stone “pinnings”



House with battered walls, stone buttress and original lime-washed render



Example of battered mud-wall construction



Small sash window with irregular glass



Cut stone chimney near Ballyknockan



Thick lime-washed walls with splayed window opening