

## A Casualty of Progress

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One of the casualties of progress, in terms of the current road works on the Dublin-Naas Dual Carriageway [N7], was a little mud-walled cottage which nestled just below the level of the road a few hundred yards north of the Athgoe junction at Colmanstown, Co Dublin.

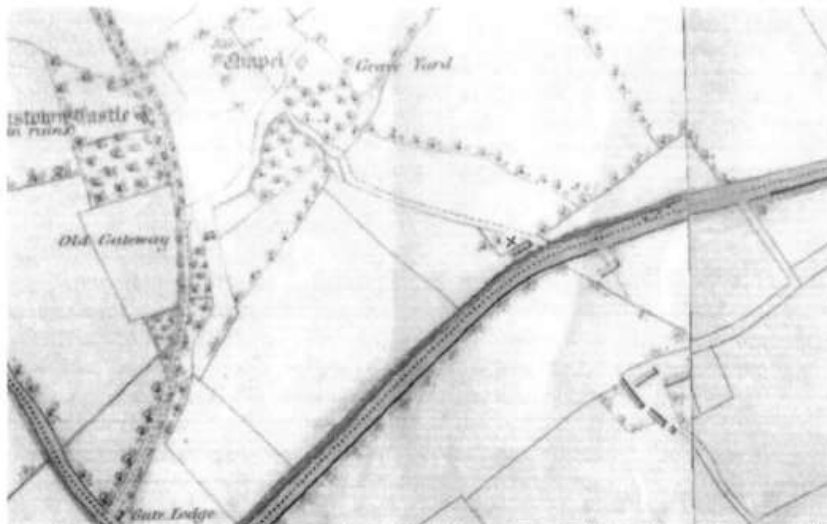
I have already dealt with the history of the old castle and graveyard nearby in volume LVI, No 1 [Spring 2000] of this journal. It was while carrying out the survey of that graveyard that I first became aware of the existence of this interesting little building which had survived - largely un-noticed - alongside the busiest road in Ireland, and less than a dozen miles from the city centre, for so many years.

Initially I thought that the cottage would be left alone as it did not interfere with the planned road works at this point but I was saddened, some weeks ago, to find it levelled, on my way to work.

Amazingly the cottage seems to have been completely missed, or ignored, in the Environmental Impact Statement prepared for the Road 'Improvement' Scheme, although such surveys are supposed to cover buildings of architectural, historic and cultural interest. I feel obliged therefore, to put on the historical record, the passing of this unique piece of vernacular building, so close to the capital city.

There are, as it happens, several early reports of such buildings around this area.

For example, the traveller John Loveday, in his account of a tour in 1732,<sup>1</sup> describes a trip from Dublin to Naas and how, outside of the Metropolis, *are cottages – they call 'em cabins – made of mud and thatched with straw; there was a calf to each cabin.*



*Ordnance survey map on 1st Jan, 1837 and published 20th October 1843.*

A later (1777)<sup>2</sup> traveller recalls passing through Rathcoole, which he refers to as the first village out of Dublin, and describes how it was: *mostly composed of clay huts, which are sometimes, you know, both warm and neat; but these were so awkwardly built, and so irregularly arranged, that even Wales (!) would have been ashamed of them. It hurt me to see them so near the capital, where the landscape was so prettily chequered by abundance of little white villas, spangling the country all round, and rendering it upon the whole very delightful.*

In 1838<sup>3</sup> it was stated that the (then) number of labourers between Rathcoole and Calliaghstown was supposed to be: *about sixty five, of whom thirty five got constant, and thirty occasional, employment, while the average acreable rent here, on the best attainable information, may be set down about £3. The cabins are generally built of mountain greystone, and some entirely of yellow clay, and the average rent for such without land, is about ten pence per week.*

I have also consulted some of the old maps of the area to see if the cottage/cabin concerned can be pin-pointed at an early date.

It may well be that it is one of two habitations shown at approximately this location on the first sheet of Rocque's 1760 map of Dublin. The slightly later Taylor & Skinner's road maps (1777) certainly records single buildings on both sides of the road at this point – which was, incidentally, about where the 9 mile stone (from Dublin) would have stood.

In any case the cottage clearly appears (I have marked as X) on the first [1837] Ordnance Survey map. Interestingly this map also shows a path alongside leading from the main road to the old graveyard, at that time.

Although the road configuration has changed in the meantime, the old maps show the cottage on a distinct parcel of land which was still reflected, up to recently, in the landscape. In an article in the Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries in 1943 Mr. Liam Ua Broin sets out some notes on the 'Place-names, Topography and Traditions of Rathcoole and its neighbourhood'. In an appendix, Ua Broin lists the maps on which he based his composite map contained in the article and in which this parcel of land is designated as "Crothamore". It is shown as separate from Colmanstown and bisected by the then Naas road. This attribution is based on an 1830 map of part of Count Lock's Estate. Ua Brion speculates that as both Athgoe Hill and Busty Hill are near, it might be that the proximity of these *crota mora* (big humps or hills) was responsible for the name, *which very faintly lingers under the two forms, Crutchymore and the Crutchymores, still remembered by a few as having been heard some years ago from old men who used it in referring to a field which is not now definitely known, but was quite near the cemetery.*

As regards the cottage itself, it was a simple one-roomed construction with a low door and two small



Exterior of cottage.

windows in the eastern facing wall (see photograph 1). There was just one window in the west facing wall and the roof was of galvanised iron. I have spoken to a member of the last family to inhabit the cottage [Mr Seamus Bayle] and he confirmed that, up to the 1950s, it had a thatched roof, as was usual in such cases.

When I examined it there was a simple fireplace, with relatively modern surround, in the north facing gable, which had been breached on the left hand side in more recent years. Inside, the mortar (which had been applied over the original walls) had begun to unravel, thus exposing the original mud walls of the building. Unfortunately I did not take measurements of the interior at the time - little knowing that the building was fated to be demolished within a few years - but photograph 2 (with modern concrete block beside the fireplace) gives some idea of the dimensions.

In addition to the cottage itself there was also a storage shed running alongside and, originally, a vegetable garden out front and a pig-sty at the back of the building when it was occupied.

Frank Mc Donald, the noted environmental journalist, has written<sup>4</sup> that the use of clay in building in Ireland can be traced back to Anglo-Norman times and even earlier to the wattle and daub houses of Viking Ireland. The 1841 Census showed that, at that stage, nearly half of rural Ireland's population were living in clay houses, which it divided into four classes - first, the 'gentleman's residence'; second, the larger farmhouses; third, the smaller farmhouses and, lastly; 'houses built of mud or other perishable material having only one room and window'. The latter category would have included the poorest and most common type of dwelling, the sod-built house. Clay houses were a step up from these and required considerable labour to erect.

Drawing on folk-lore accounts, Mc Donald writes that before building work started the site would be marked out by placing flat stones at the corners, each with a smaller stone on top, to be left there overnight. If the stones were still in place on the following day, construction could begin with some confidence. This unusual tradition had its roots in fairy folklore. Essentially, every housebuilder had to make sure that he was not about to erect his dwelling across a path used by the 'good people' or *slua si* of Irish mythology. In effect, by placing their stones in position, they were applying to the fairies for 'planning permission'.

Making a clay house began by mixing the marly sub-soil excavated for its foundations. Chopped straw was added to the mix as it was turned over and sprinkled with water, then it was left to 'sour' for a few days to absorb the moisture. The labour required to knead the thick, sticky clay was very great. More water was sprinkled on the mix and it was again left to sour for a few more days until it was sufficiently firm to use as a building material; the test was whether it could stand 18 inches wide and a foot deep without bulging. By then the stone foundations, usually nine inches deep and rising another nine inches above ground level, would have been laid, unevenly at the top to provide a 'key' for the clay.

The mud walls were raised using a graip or sprong - a long-handled implement with three or four long, flat metal prongs at the end. This was used to manipulate the clay, patting it down to improve its adhesive properties and subsequently in 'paring' or shaving, the wall. Parings were not wasted, however; they were thrown back into the heap of soured mud and mixed in with it. The



*Interior of cottage.*

walls were built up in layers – sometimes using boards or shutters – until they reached a height of six-and-a-half feet. Windows and door openings were created either by inserting wooden frames in the wall and building up on each side and over the top – often without any strengthening such as a lintel would provide – or by filling the intended opes with turf sods which could be knocked out easily when the building was finished.

Rough, rather than sawn timber was used to form the roof, which was usually hipped or half-hipped, and thatched with straw or reeds or, in the case of poorer dwellings, rushes or heather.

Though built of clay, this type of house in Co Wexford was described by the *Irish Farmers Journal* in 1814 as ‘neat, cleanly and commodious; stone is not to be had here without great expense, but the surprising expertness with which this substitute is handled, and moulded into habitable form, makes a quarry altogether unnecessary. With a compost of moistened clay and straw, without plumb, square or level, but merely with an instrument they call a sprong...every man is capable of erecting a house for himself, compact and perpendicular’ Only the scale varied with the circumstances of the proprietor, whether affluent or poor.

I understand that the cottage at Colmanstown was lived in – probably continuously - up to the early 1960s. Since then it had been unoccupied, with the exception of occasional over-nighting by passing tramps and a more concentrated attempt at squatting some years ago.

Now, alas, it has been wiped from the landscape - courtesy of our local authority.

In concluding I would echo Frank Mc Donald’s view that we, in Ireland, seem to place little or no value on our own vernacular architecture, still less on thatched mud or clay houses. We have, indeed, been turning our back on them for so long that they have become almost invisible. As he points out, State aid for the relatively few that survive is minimal and confined to small grants towards re-thatching; the intrinsic value of the house itself is largely

unrecognised. As we get on with building garish mock-Georgian 'mansions' and bungalows with PVC porticos and landscaped gardens borrowed from suburbia, in the countryside, is it too much to hope that we might attempt to save some of the little that is left of where we came from? At the very least we should insist that the existence, and passing, of these long-standing buildings are noted in the public record.

I would also like to place on record my thanks to the Nolan family of Colmanstown, who pointed out the cottage to me in the first place. The Nolans also drew my attention to the "buried treasure" stone which is still referred in the locality. This may well be the *large grey boulder* referred to by a Mr James Fowler in a 1908 article <sup>5</sup> *beneath which tradition saith there is treasure*. Fowler went on to record the local tradition that to gain the treasure: *one must go at midnight, but going is vain because the spectre of a murdered man, mounted upon a white steed, drives off the treasure seeker. Many years ago two of Mr Locke-O'Carroll's tenants had the hardihood to dig under the stone. They found a secret passage, at the end of which they saw some ancient holy vessels; they feared to touch them*" Mr Fowler was not entirely disparaging of the tradition as he goes on to say "*There seems to be somewhat in this, as the road near the place sounds hollow when a car is driven over it.*"

I would also like to acknowledge the assistance of Mr Kieran Swords of South Dublin County Library for his assistance and for access to the maps referred to.

#### References

- 1 John Loveday's 'Diary of a Tour in 1732' (published by his great grandson John Edward Taylor Loveday, in Edinburgh MDCCCXC)
- 2 Campbell's 'Philosophical Survey of the South of Ireland' (1777)
- 3 Dalton's 'History of County Dublin' (1838)
- 4 'Ireland's Earthen Houses' (Frank Mc Donald, Peigin Doyle) 1997
- 5 Journal of the Society for the Preservation of the Memorials of the Dead (Volume XII), 1908



'Buried Treasure' stone