

Here today, gone tomorrow

Chris Corlett laments the threatened passing of the vernacular Irish cottage

Many lament the gradual disappearance of the old Irish cottages and farmhouses from our landscape up and down the country. Yet despite the apparently unrelenting pace of development in Ireland during recent years, and the resulting dramatic changes to our landscape, it is worth noting that the vernacular buildings that once dotted the countryside can still be found. And with a little detective work it becomes clear that many more survive than might initially be perceived. Frequently tucked away down an overgrown bohreen, these overgrown and dilapidated buildings remain forgotten and neglected. Of course, many have been spared demolition or decay, and have been lovingly renovated. I use the word 'renovated' because these buildings rarely lend themselves to restoration. Apart from the four stone walls, practically all the materials used to build these houses were entirely organic: the wooden roof structure and thatch; the wicker or wooden canopies over the fireplace; and of course the furniture. Renovations of old farmhouses rarely preserve any of these original features, which frequently have decayed beyond repair.

Elsewhere, and in contrast to the often-quoted received wisdom that more recent generations were ashamed of their old home places and replaced them with modern bungalows, old farmhouses that might have been lived in until recent years



Abandoned thatched cottage near Louisburgh, Co. Mayo.

have been allowed to remain standing. In such cases there has been a certain unwillingness on the part of some owners to do away with the old place. Yet these buildings remain neglected, largely because their owners are at a loss as to what they might do with the houses in which they or their parents were born. So, despite that sincere reluctance to take down the old house, the inevitable result is gradual decay and then ruin.

So what, then, is the future for those houses that have remarkably survived the unrelenting house-building of recent years? Well, while many have been renovated and no doubt will remain with us for many years to come, the fate of the neglected farmhouses is a cause for worry. It is the abandoned and fast-decaying farmhouses that will reveal most for study, with many of their original organic features still intact. All around us are the bare stone walls of houses that have suffered the same fate over the last 50 years or more. These ruins might as well be a thousand years old for how little we know of them.

There is, however, another factor that is likely to have an even greater impact on the old farmhouses than the all-consuming building of recent years. Today in the twenty-first century there is a growing environmental enlightenment, but it is becoming clear that this environmental consciousness may not rest easily with competing concerns for our cultural

landscape. There is a growing realisation that new houses should be energy-efficient, and there is no doubt that the incoming regulations in this area will have a dramatic effect on the types of houses that are built in years to come. But have we given any thought to the impact that this might have on our present houses? Many of our finest buildings have legal protection, so we need not be overly fearful for their future. Elsewhere, many of us might be glad to see the back of the 1960s or 1980s bungalows that have 'blissed' our landscape with a greater blight than that which struck the potato in the 1840s. But what hope is there for the future of the tumbling-down farmhouses that fed a postcard industry for 100 years? Will the new drive for energy-efficient houses be the final nail in their coffin? Will the once most common building on the Irish landscape for over 200 years become more rare and elusive than our medieval castles? And will this happen before we have even realised it, leaving us to study the ruinous, moss-covered walls of these houses as if they were some monument of the dim and distant past? Well, that is precisely what they will become unless we make some attempt to record and document them now. ■