

Houses with Decorative Roof Linings at Dunabrattin and Ballynakill, Co. Waterford

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In 1971 the writer published an account of a remarkable straw roof lining in a thatched house in the village of Stradbally, Co. Waterford.¹ A reference to this publication in *Ulster Folklife*² caught the attention of Mr. John H. Mulholland, then living in England, who, in 1972, wrote to Dr. Desmond McCourt of the New University of Ulster, enclosing colour photographs of two other examples of roof linings in thatched houses in the townlands of Dunabrattin and Ballynakill, Co. Waterford, which he had come to know while on visits to Mr. G. P. Warner, owner of the Dunabrattin house. Dr. McCourt passed on the letter and photographs to the writer who was then in the National Museum of Ireland, and as a result of ensuing correspondence with Messrs. Mulholland and Warner an examination of both houses was arranged for May 23, 1973, Mr. Warner kindly offering to act as guide to the Ballynakill house and to introduce the writer to its occupants. The Dunabrattin house has a number of features very similar to ones in the Stradbally house previously mentioned, while its roof lining resembled that recorded in 1940 in a thatched house in the Lough Gur neighbourhood of Co. Limerick,³ although it was of straw and not of reed as in the Limerick house. In the Ballynakill house, the roof lining, which was of a very elaborate character, was confined to the kitchen. In view of the rapid disappearance of Irish traditional house types in all parts of the country in recent decades, it has been considered desirable to place on record all the information noted about the buildings themselves and their furnishings, in addition to that relating specifically to the roof linings.

House at Dunabrattin

The first house examined had been acquired by Mr. Warner some years previously. It is situated in Dunabrattin townland in the civil parish of Kilbarrymeaden, Co. Waterford. Its position will be found on O.S. six inch sheet number 25 of Co. Waterford at a point 126 mm. from the south margin and 378 mm. from the west margin. It appears on the 1842 edition of the map as a single rectangular structure without any outbuildings. It lay with its long axis approximately east-west and immediately in front of it, on the south side, a lane ran to the west at right angles to the lane, about half-a-mile long, by which the house is approached from the coast road. The former lane has now disappeared but Mr. Warner was aware of its previous existence and said that he enjoyed right of way along its track. In front of the house and backing on to the lane there was, when Mr. Warner acquired the property, a range of outbuildings which must have been erected after 1842. As these had fallen into disrepair, Mr. Warner had them demolished. At the west end of

¹ *Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society*, 76 (1971), 81-3.

² *Ulster Folklife*, 14 (1968), 20-21.

³ *Essays and Studies Presented to Professor Eoin MacNeill*. Edited by Rev. John Ryan, S.J., Dublin 1940, p. 230 and Fig. 6.



Fig. 1. Dunabrattin. View of front of house.

the house and separated from it by a narrow passage is a short range of small sheds, forming a single structure at right angles to the long axis of the house. This is, obviously, a comparatively recent erection.

The original dwelling house is a long, single storey thatched building with a gable at the west end and a hip at the east end (Fig. 1). It has a single chimney at about one third of its length from the west end. A slated porch in front and some rooms at the back are later

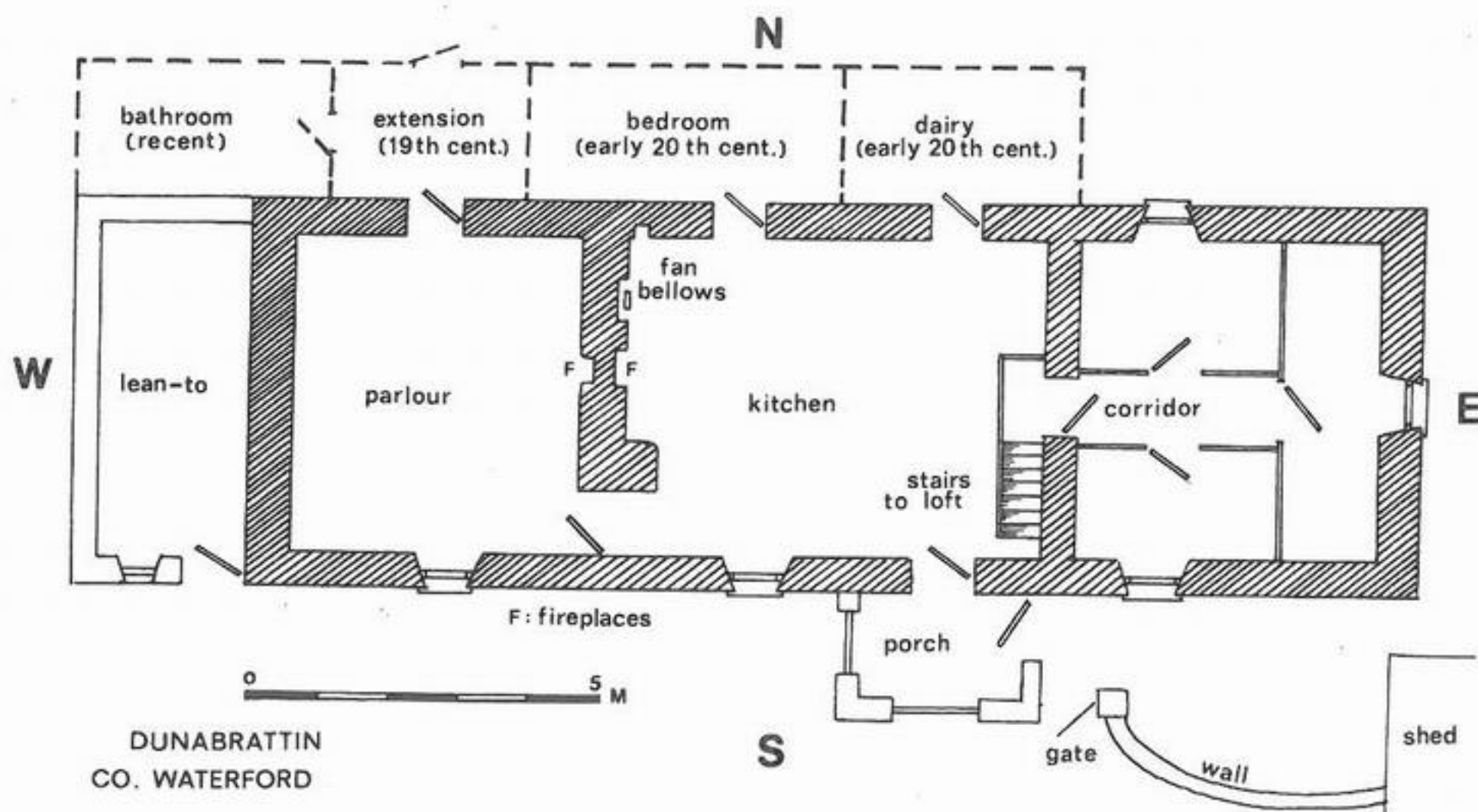


Fig. 2. Dunabrattin. Plan showing original house and later additions.

additions but a small lean-to built against the west gable is, apparently, older than these. Its door adjoins the gable wall and there is a small square window immediately above it. There was a second and larger window at a lower level to the west of the door but this has been closed up at the back to form a niche opening to the outside. The house, lean-to and sheds are all stone-built.

Internally, the house is divided into three main apartments, the middle and largest being the kitchen (Fig. 2). The west cross-wall incorporates the kitchen fireplace and its chimney. The fireplace extends across the greater part of the width of the kitchen and a doorway between it and the front wall of the house gives access to the apartment occupying the west end of the house. This was originally used as a bedroom and it has a small fireplace backing on that in the kitchen and sharing the same smoke-stack. This room is lit by a small window in the south wall and there was, probably, a second window of the same dimensions opposite it in the north wall where there is now a doorway leading to a small recent extension built on to the back of the house, apparently in the nineteenth century. The second cross-wall is situated a little to the east of the kitchen doorway and extends the full height of the building. At ground level it has in the middle a doorway which, in all likelihood, originally gave access to a single apartment, occupying the east end of the house and lit by two windows, one opposite the other in the north and south walls. At some later stage, this room was subdivided into three small units by erecting two parallel wooden partitions, running from each side of the doorway down its centre for about two-thirds of its length, thus forming a short corridor which was entered by the doorway in the cross-wall. Each of the compartments to the north and south of this corridor was closed off by a partition at the east end, was lit by one of the pre-existing windows and was entered through a doorway in the corridor partition. The space so partitioned off at the east end formed the third compartment. It extended the full width of the house, was entered through a doorway at the end of the corridor and was lit by a window in the middle of the end wall. This window, which is larger than any of the others



Fig. 3. Dunabrattin. View of hip end with loft window above and later inserted window below.

in the house, was, apparently, inserted in order to light the end compartment at the time when the original single room was subdivided in three (Fig. 3). All three of these small rooms share a common ceiling which forms the floor of a loft in the roof space above them.

Whatever the date and sequence of the alterations in the ground floor lay-out of the east end of the house, there can be no doubt that the loft retains its original features. It is an undivided space extending from the cross-wall to the end wall and is lit by a window 76 cm. high and 56 cm. wide in the centre of the latter. Externally, the thatch on the hip slopes upwards from each side to clear the top of the window (Fig. 3). Were the thatch on

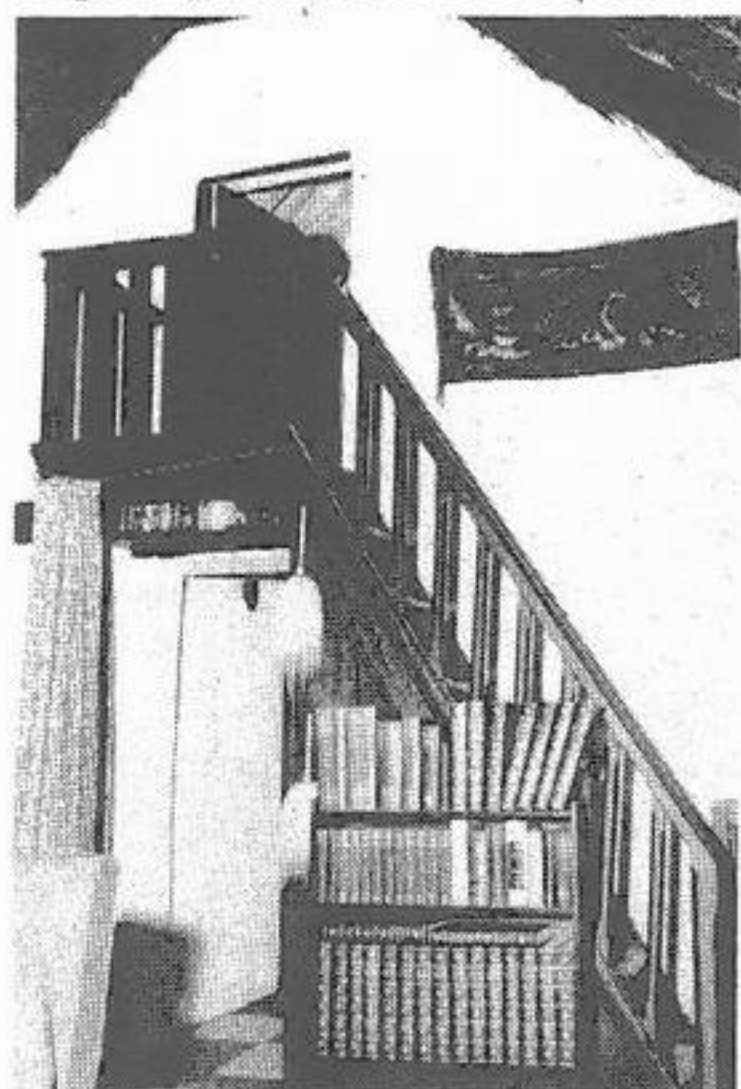


Fig. 4. Dunabrattin. Stairs from kitchen to loft.

the hip carried across horizontally at the level of the front and back eaves of the house, it would cut off approximately half the window. The loft was entered by a doorway in the cross-wall, directly above the one at ground level. Access to it was gained by a steep wooden stairs built against the cross-wall with its foot near the kitchen door (Fig. 4). The stairs had seven steps, each 50 cm. wide and at the top a small landing the same width as the steps, which projected into the kitchen at a height of 210 cm. above the kitchen floor.

In addition to the nineteenth century extension entered from the parlour, two other rooms, one a bedroom, the other a dairy, had been built on to the north side of the house, each being entered from the kitchen by its own doorway. These, Mr. Warner believed, dated to the early decades of the present century. The most recent addition was a bathroom built by the present occupier on the west side of the nineteenth century extension.

Externally, the house was 16.55 m. long and 5.5 m. wide. The walls were 53 cm. thick and 220 cm. high. The original kitchen doorway, *i.e.* the one now inside the porch, was 95 cm. wide. The kitchen fireplace and chimney were built against the western cross-wall, the chimney being stepped up in three stages (Fig. 5). The front wall of the lowest stage was borne on a large horizontal wooden beam, measuring 27 cm. and 20 cm. on its vertical and horizontal surfaces respectively, and curving upwards slightly from both ends towards the centre. The fireplace so formed was a spacious recess 260 cm. wide, 160 cm. high and 120 cm. from front to back. The hearth was situated in the centre of this recess but the wall behind it had been altered in recent times, having been stepped back at a height of 41 cm. to form a shelf 18 cm. from front to back. In the back wall of the recess and next the adjacent house wall was a niche 74 cm. high, 56 cm. wide and 16 cm. deep which housed a metal fan bellows. Still within the fireplace recess and in the north wall of the house was a 'keeping hole' 19 cm. wide, 27 cm. high and 20 cm. deep, its floor being at about the same level as the top of the niche housing the fan bellows.

The roof rafters were of squared timber, about 9 cm. by 10 cm. in section, and they were about 85 cm. apart. In all three apartments the underside of the thatch between the rafters had been lined with a layer of straw, carefully drawn to leave the individual stalks lying side by side and arranged to run uniformly up and down the slope of the roof (Fig. 6). This layer was held in place by strands of iron wire running horizontally between the

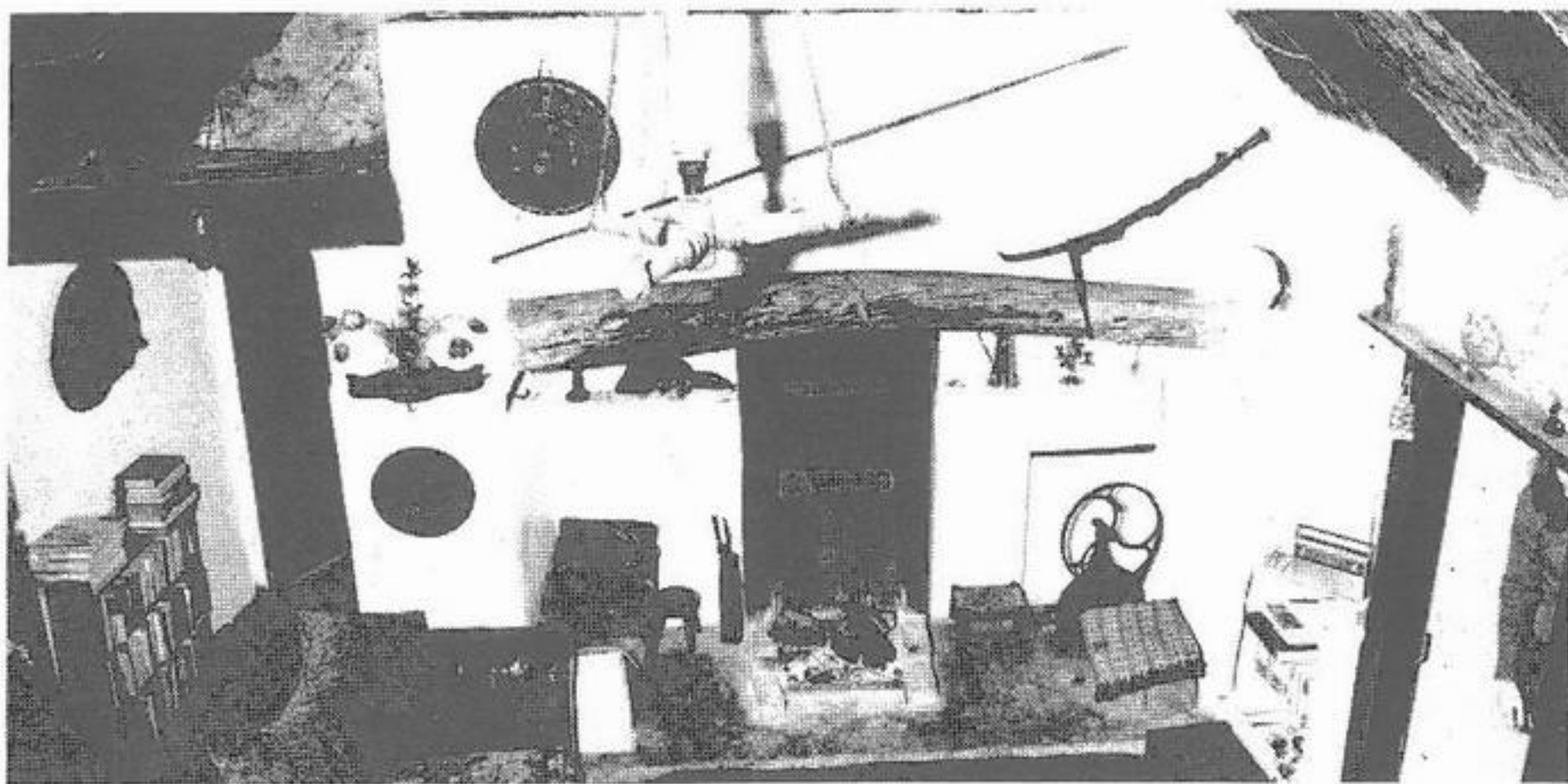


Fig. 5. Dunabrattin. Kitchen fireplace.

rafters at intervals of approximately 30 cm. apart. These wire strands were fastened to the roof by what appeared to be wire staples pushed into the thatch at regular intervals. This lining survived intact in the kitchen. In the loft it had at one time been papered over but at the time of examination much of the paper had come away leaving a considerable area of the straw lining exposed.

If the later alterations and additions are omitted, it will be apparent that this house bears a close resemblance to the Stradbally one described many years previously. Particularly striking is the near identity of the two stairs giving access from the kitchens to the lofts above the bedrooms. A point of difference between the two houses is the position of the front door which, in the Stradbally house, was situated alongside the cross-wall incorporating the fireplace and in the Dunabrattin house beside the cross-wall opposite the fireplace. As it is highly unusual to find a hip at one end of a house and a gable at the

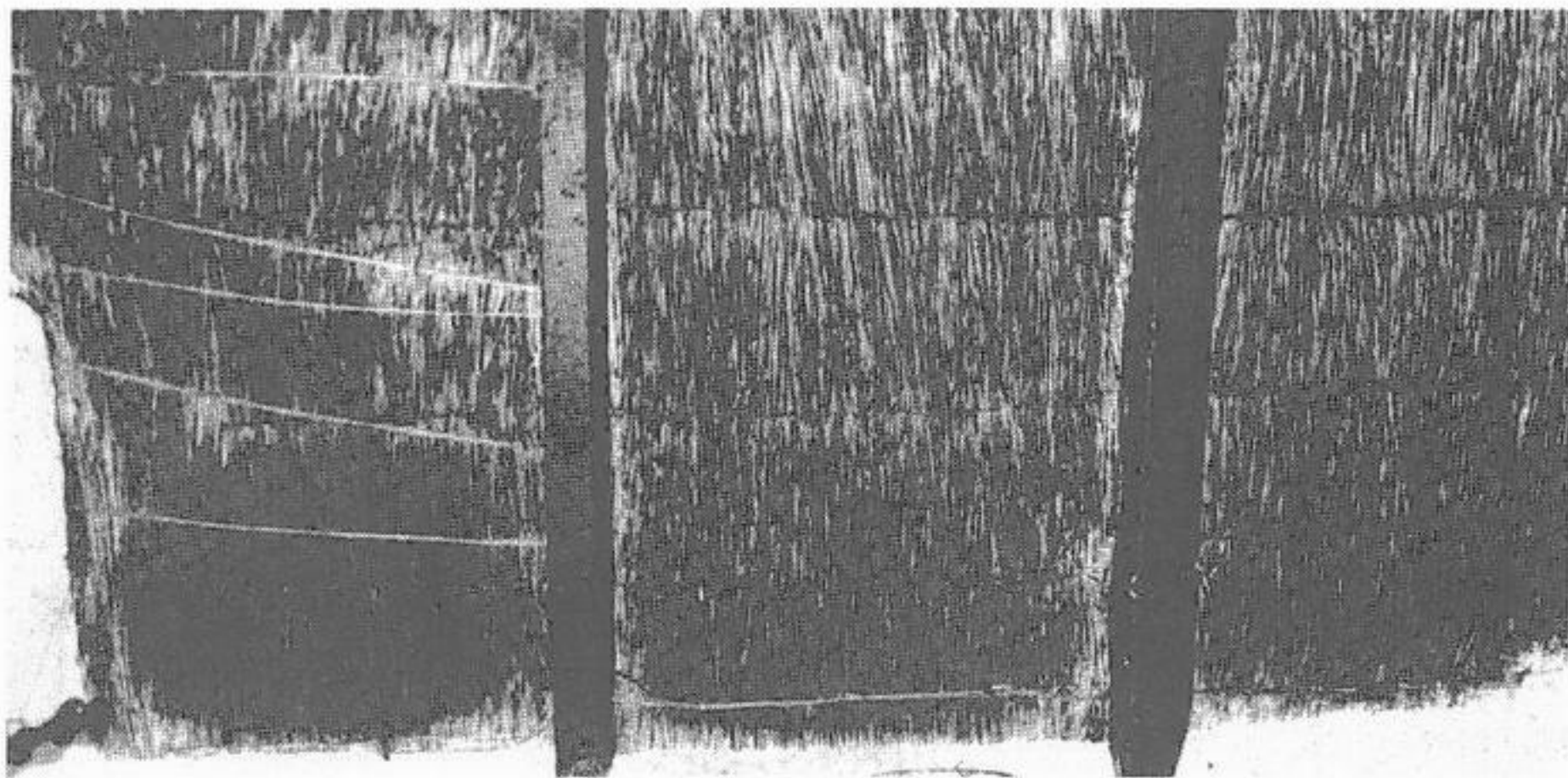


Fig. 6. Dunabrattin. Underside of kitchen roof showing straw lining.

other, it is reasonable to assume that the two ends were originally alike and that one has been subsequently altered. It seems very probable that the house had originally a hip at each end but that the western end was at some later juncture built up to form a gable when the lean-to outhouse was erected against that wall.

House at Ballynakill

The second house is situated in the townland of Ballynakill in the civil parish of Kilgobnet, Co. Waterford. It stands on the western foothills of the Monavullagh mountain range and its position will be found on the O.S. six inch sheet number 23 of Co.

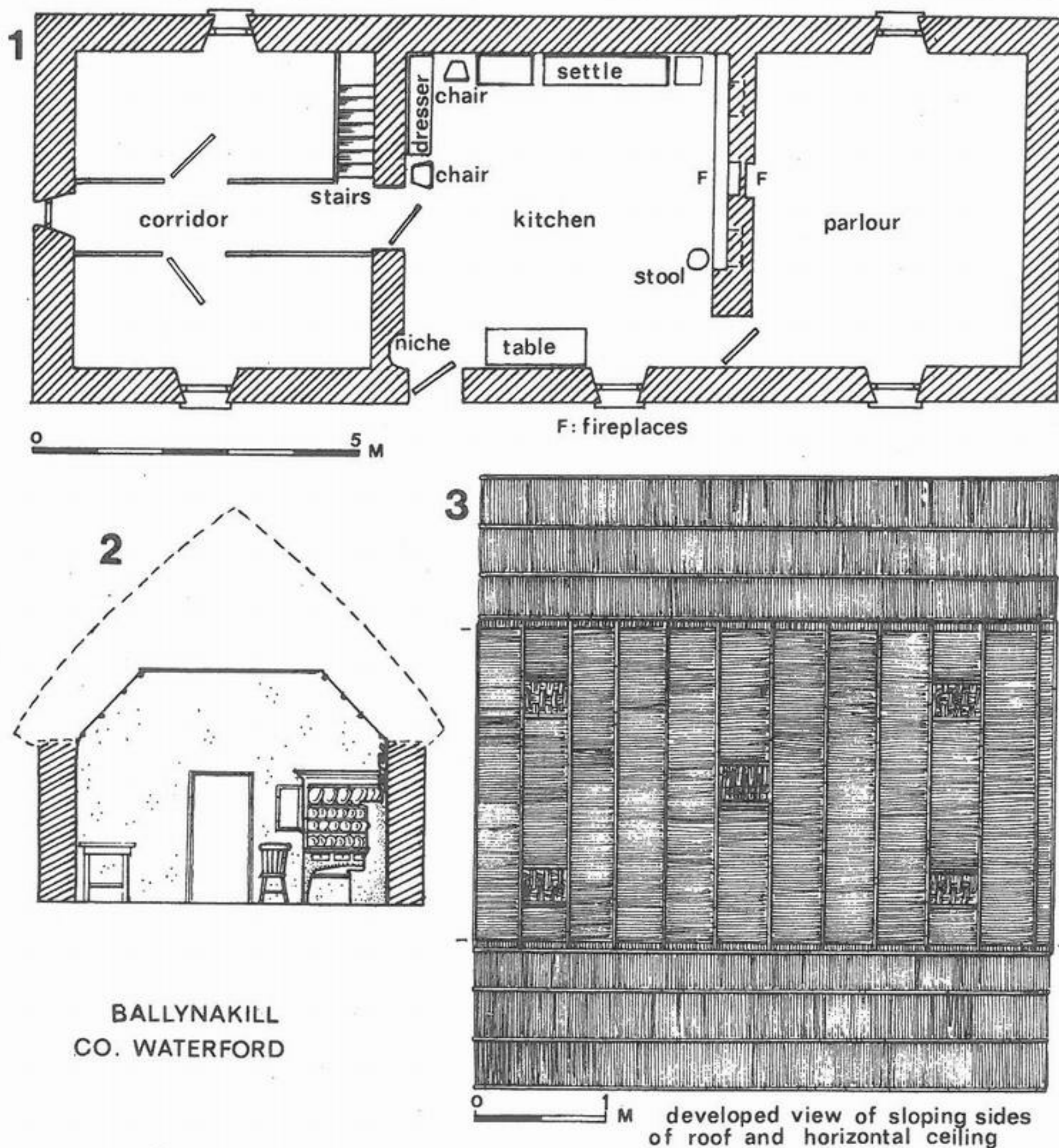


Fig. 7. Ballynakill. (1) Plan, (2) Section of kitchen, (3) Developed view of underside of kitchen roof.



Fig. 8. Ballynakill. View of front of house.

Waterford at a point 15 mm. from the west margin and 96mm. from the north margin. The occupants were Miss Mary Crotty and her nephew and niece, Mr. John Dunford and Miss Brigid Dunford. Miss Crotty, since deceased, was seventy-seven years of age and at least three generations of her family had lived in the house. Her father, Thomas, had died in 1934 aged about seventy-seven years. His father, John, had lived to the age of eighty-eight and had died when Miss Mary Crotty was about ten years old, which would mean that he was born in 1818. John Crotty had told the family that the roof lining was put up before his time. Allowing that he would have remembered it being done if he had been at least eight years old at the time, the implication is that it was carried out prior to 1826.

The house was a stone-built single storey building, 15.6 m. long and 4.9 m. wide, externally, with a hipped roof and a chimney much closer to one end than to the other (Fig. 7). Internally, it was divided into three apartments by two cross-walls, one of which contained the kitchen fireplace (Fig. 8). It had been scrupulously maintained and was in an excellent state of preservation, inside and out. The thatched roof had a fresh decorative trim on the ridge and a three-band panel on the roof slope immediately below the chimney.

The front elevation showed a door and three windows. The door opened into the kitchen beside the cross-wall farther from the fireplace. In the cross-wall, immediately inside the door, was a curved niche, 58 cm. wide and 30 cm. in maximum depth from front to back. Family tradition had it that this was to accommodate the 'meat barrel', in which salted meat was stored. The kitchen measured 460 cm. long and 470 cm. wide internally. It had a wide open fireplace with the hearth in the middle and an iron crane with an unusually long arm mounted on the spectator's left of the hearth. Although the open fire was still used, cooking facilities were supplemented by a modern stove fuelled with liquified petroleum gas. Along the back wall was a settle with a high panelled back and two presses below the seat (Fig. 9). It was 186 cm. long and 165 cm. high, the seat being 54 cm. high and 43 cm. from front to back. Above the settle and reaching from the top of its back to the top of wall was an exceptionally fine and massive 'cleddy' or wooden rack for holding roasting spits when they were not in use. This consisted of four brackets, each having two slots, one above the other, for holding the spits and it was 138 cm. long and 70 cm. high (Fig. 11). Opposite the settle and placed along the front wall between the door and the window was a large deal table. Opposite the fireplace and against the cross-



Fig. 9. Ballynakill. Settle with cleevy above.

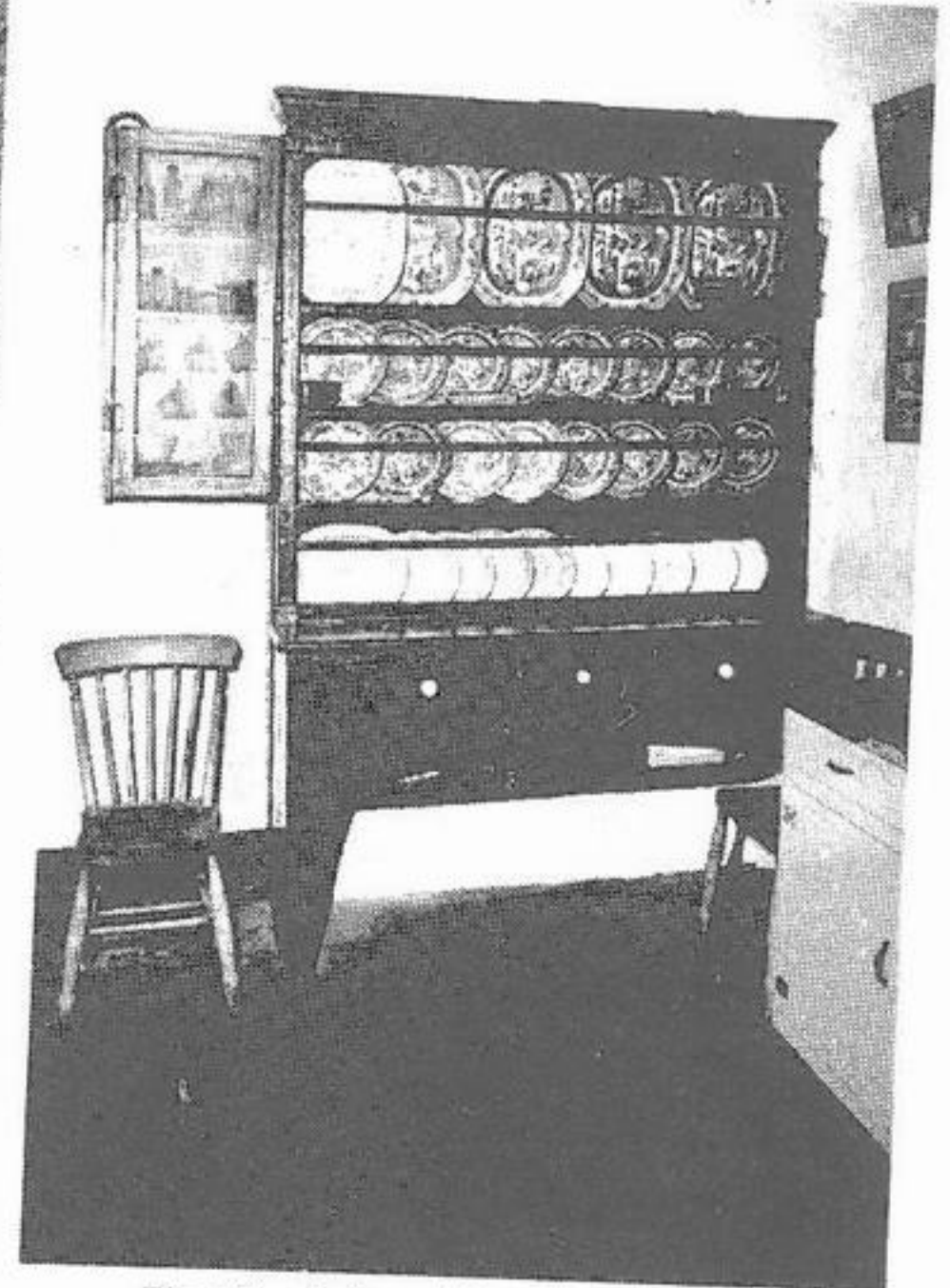


Fig. 10. Ballynakill. Kitchen dresser.

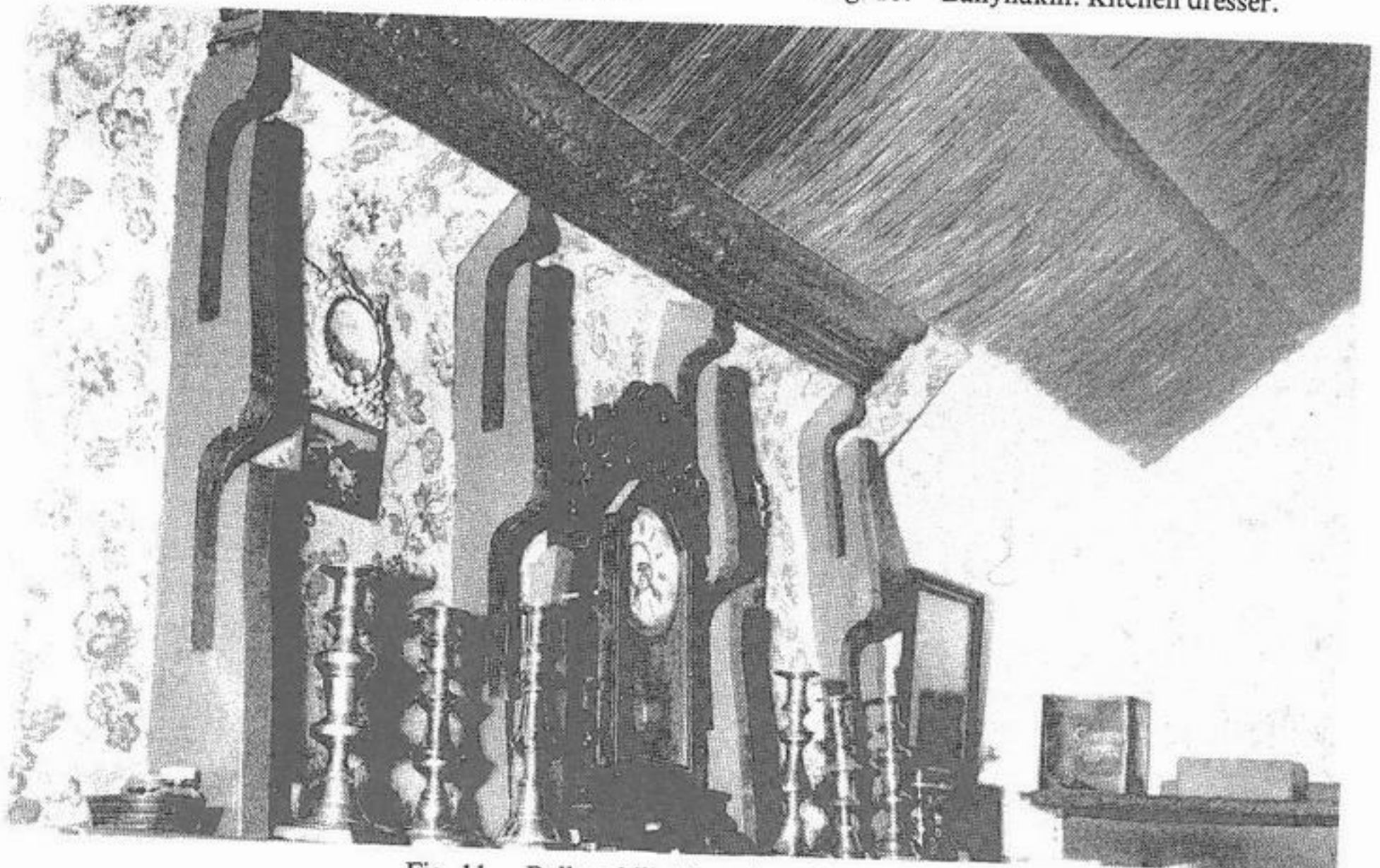


Fig. 11. Ballynakill. Near view of 'cleevy'.

wall at the other end of the kitchen was a dresser with four open shelves closely set with 'willow pattern' plates and dishes, three drawers and a bottom shelf close below them (Fig. 10). It is possible that this bottom shelf was formerly the top of a coop for hens which often formed part of dressers used in the southern counties. The dresser was 154 cm. long and 222 cm. high, the shelves, from the bottom upwards, being 30, 25 and 37 cm. apart.

A doorway between the fireplace wall and the front wall of the house gave access to a room 390 cm. long, now used as a parlour. It had a small fireplace, back to back with the kitchen hearth and was lit by two windows, one opposite the other in the front and back walls. The inside of the roof had, originally, been decorated in the same fashion as that in the kitchen, but it had fallen into disrepair and a flat wooden ceiling had been inserted on the level of the wall tops. There is a step up to this room from the kitchen.

A doorway 100 cm. wide in the centre of the cross-wall opposite the fireplace gave access to the third apartment of the house. This was subdivided into two bedrooms by a corridor formed by two parallel partitions running the full length of the apartment from the entrance door to the end wall. Each bedroom was entered through a doorway in middle of the partition and was lit by a single window in the centre of the outer wall. The ceiling common to the corridor and these two rooms formed the floor of an attic room access to which was by a stairs constructed against the cross-wall, its foot being on the right as one entered from the kitchen. This attic space was lit by a window in the centre of the end wall just below the hip. There was a step down from the kitchen to the floor level of this end of the house, the difference in the floor level of the three main apartments being due to the sloping ground on which the house was built.

The kitchen roof was a truncated triangle in cross-section and the straw lining completely concealed the rafters and their cross-ties. It is, therefore, impossible to say if, on the horizontal upper part of the roof, the lining was applied to the original cross-ties or to a second of ties inserted at a lower level. If the lining is coeval with the building of the house, the cross-ties may have been made longer and set lower than usual with a view to the fixing of the lining to them. The lining was applied in zones which ran longitudinally along the two sloping sides of the roof and transversely across the horizontal upper part (Figs. 12 and 13). There were three zones on each of the sloping sides, the lower two being 37 cm. wide, the uppermost slightly narrower. On the horizontal upper part there were eleven full zones and a narrower one next to the cross-wall opposite the fireplace, all running at right angles to the long axis of the roof. The straws in each zone were at right angles to its long axis so that those on the sides of the roof ran up and down the slope while those in the horizontal upper part ran parallel to the long axis of the roof. The straws of the lining lay side by side with great regularity and appeared to form a layer of considerable thickness. The lining straws were held in place by laths about 50 mm. wide and 10 mm. thick with a slight keel along the median line. At intervals about 42 cm., they were fastened in place by iron nails which were, presumably, driven into the rafters on the sloping sides and into the cross-ties on the upper horizontal area. As the lower ends of the straws in each of the upper zones on the slopes of the roof passed under the lath below them and emerged to overlie the upper ends of the straws in the zone below them, it is evident that the work of applying the lining to the roof slopes was carried out zone by zone from the bottom upwards. A distinguishing feature of this roof lining was the presence of five ornamental panels of 'woven' pattern, symmetrically arranged on the horizontal part of the roof (Fig. 13). In the second zone from the cross-wall at each end of the kitchen there were two panels, each near one end of the zone and both at the same



Fig. 12. Ballynakill. Decorative roof lining in kitchen.

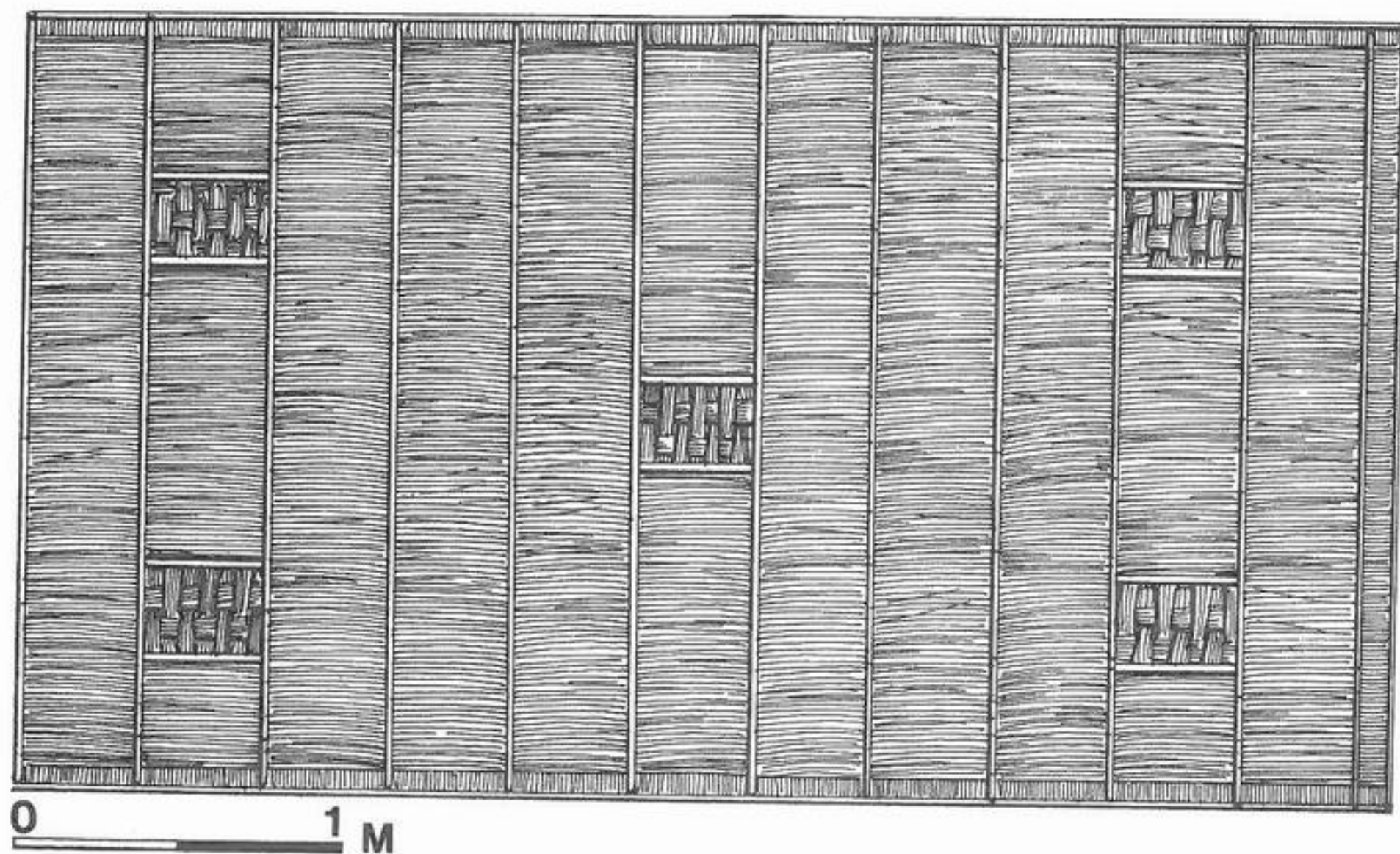


Fig. 13. Ballynakill. Drawing of horizontal part of kitchen ceiling showing panels of 'woven' pattern.

distance from the adjacent end. The fifth panel was in the centre of the middle zone on the ceiling. All five panels were approximately the same size, 37 by 30 cm. Each panel was framed by the two laths margining the zone and two lengths of similar lath about 30 cm. long fixed transversely between them. The 'woven' pattern filling the space so framed consisted of wide flat bands of straw (Fig. 12). Each panel contained three bands, forming what might be called the 'warp', and seven bands which formed the 'weft'. The warp bands ran parallel to the long axis of the roof and the weft bands passed alternately over and under them.

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Specimens of the straw from the roof linings of both houses submitted for examination to the National Botanic Gardens did not, unfortunately, have diagnostic characters clear enough to permit certain identification, but it is probable that both were oat (*Avena*).

Acknowledgements

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