

Extract from: "Archaeological Excavations at Pollwitch Farmhouse Mayglass, Co. Wexford" (98E0587). A report by Joanna Wren and Gerry O' Neill.

...The house at Mayglass is a variant of the form, called a 'lobby entry' house which was common in the Eastern half of Ireland. The name refers to the fact that the central hearth has been partly enclosed with walls to the side and rear, dividing the house in two and that the main entrance is into a lobby behind one of the hearth sidewalls. These walls often had a spyhole or window allowing people seated at the hearth to observe who was coming in the door. The earliest standing section of the house is the kitchen Northeast of the hearth. The rooms to the Southwest are a later addition as is the standing wall at the Northeast gable.

Conclusions

If the front and back walls of the kitchen are taken as original it seems as though the house was first made in a simple rectangular form. Its internal measurements would have been 4.20m wide and at least 9m long. It is most usual in lobby entrance houses that the hearth is centrally placed and therefore the house probably originally extended farther Southwest beyond the hearth. This would agree with S. Kirwans suggestions that the nineteenth century section at this end of the house replaced a collapsed earlier section.

The two surviving walls of this original house were constructed of clay on top of stone footings 0.60m high. The Northeast gable wall however (19/23), appears to have made use of wood in its construction. Wood was widely used in the walls of Irish medieval and early post-medieval houses, either as bare wickerwork, weatherboarding or enclosed with clay as wattle and daub. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the depletion of Irish forests meant that wood became a rare commodity. It gradually went out of use surviving mostly in internal walls. By 1705 A.D. the Irish parliament had forbidden its use 'in wattling the walls of houses or cabins or outbuildings, in any kind of gadd or gadds, wyth or wyths of oak ash birch hazel or other tree whatsoever' (Gailey 1984, 40).

This all serves to reinforce the idea that Pollwitch house was originally built at the beginning of the eighteenth century. The layout of the post- holes (20) within the gable wall (19/23) suggest to the writer however, a form of part timber construction which may have continued to be used into the first half of the nineteenth century. The Irish Folklore Commission records a coachman in Meath alive at this time who 'told me that the method of building a mud-wall house was to put down a line of stakes along the line on which the walls were to be built. Then straw ropes were interwoven between these and the puddled mud was spread on the straw and left to dry, when another coat was applied and so, on until the required thickness was achieved'. (O'Danachair 1957, 74). Indeed a farmer in county Leitrim connects the demise of this building tradition with the 'big wind' of 1839 a hurricane which swept Europe causing particular damage in Ireland. Apparently the poles in the side-walls of these houses were attached to the roof timbers and when the roofs were knocked by the storm they took house-walls with them. It is

of course possible that this practice was dying out before this and that this man is recalling poles like this seen in the walls of collapsed houses at that time.

One way or another however, it appears that buildings built from the 1830's-1840's no longer used post like this in their outer walls. Whether or not the clay wall (19/23) actually fell in the 'big wind' this fact still lends credence to a date of c.1831 for the rebuild to the Southwest and from the pottery evidence it would appear that the stone footed wall to the Southeast (9) was built at the same time. This would have meant that the house at this stage was at its largest having an internal measurement of at least 14.44m NE/SW and extending Northeast beyond the current field boundary.

The existence of the glass and pottery below the stone footed wall is interesting as such footings themselves and crushed glass and pottery were often used as ratproof courses in clay walled buildings. The archaeological record also agrees with the surviving building and it appears that the kitchen end of the house was always floored in clay (24/5).

The area to the Northeast gable underwent several other changes. At some time later in the nineteenth century a stone footed wall (10) was built on a line SE/NW. This may have been an internal wall or it may represent a rebuild of the house in line with a different property boundary, perhaps at a time of decline in the fortunes of the householder. The current boundary per-dates the 1840 Ordnance Survey Map.

Repairs and extensions at the gable ends were common in Irish vernacular houses. Such houses were always lengthened as to increase their widthways would have meant finding new roofing timbers with a greater span. The gable end of the house was also a weak spot in clay walled buildings. When the roof became overloaded a process called 'racking' would occur (Keefe 1995, 126). This resulted in cracking at the internal corners and pushing out and collapse of the gable walls.

Finally the Northeast gable was