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Author: Lucas, A. T.

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A Straw Roof Lining at Stradbally Co. Waterford

By A. T. LUCAS

The small village of Stradbally, Co. Waterford, lies about seven miles east of Dungarvan and less than a mile from the sea. In 1962, the late T. Lynch, T.D., of 21 Michael St., Waterford, informed the writer about an old thatched house in the village belonging to Miss Nora Flynn of High Street, in one room of which the interior of the roof was lined with straw in a very unusual manner. He subsequently obtained Miss Flynn's permission to have it examined and recorded by the National Museum and this was done by the writer on August 28 of the same year. Miss Flynn died some years later and the house has been demolished.

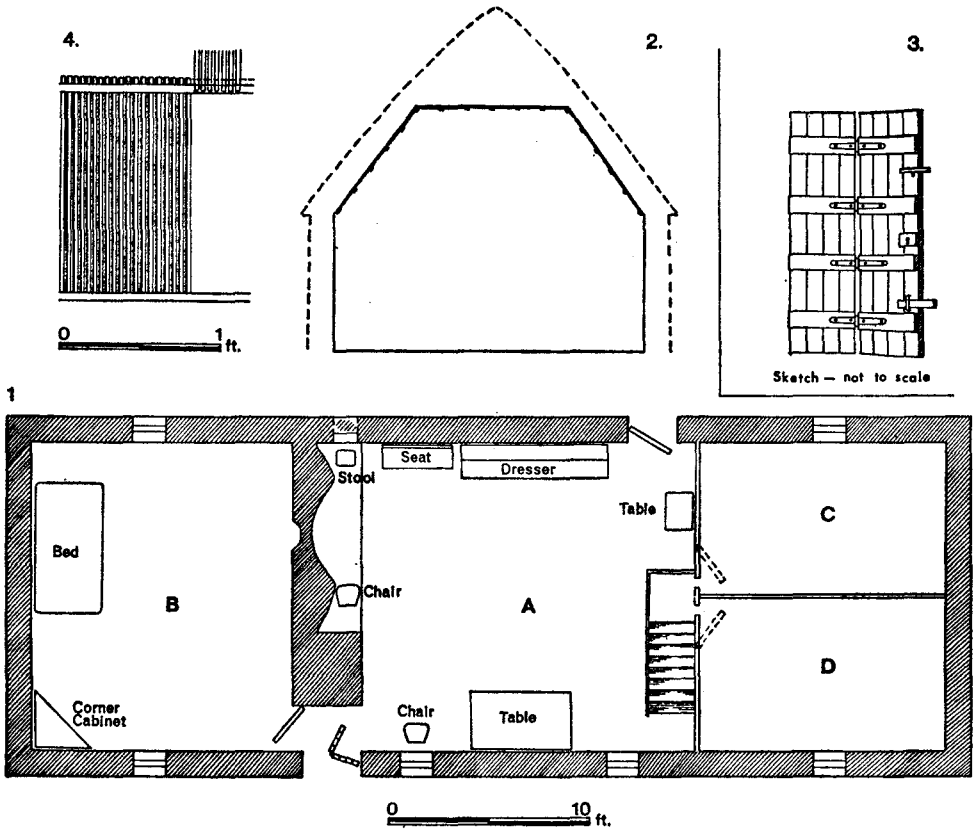

Fig. 1. House, Stradbally, Co. Waterford. 1. Plan of house ; 2. Section of room with straw lining ; 3. Vertically divided kitchen door ; 4 Diagram to show arrangement of straws.

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The house, a single storey gabled structure with mud walls, was 48 feet long and 18 feet wide externally (Pl. VI, *bottom*). It contained three rooms: a large central kitchen with, at one end, a bedroom occupying the full width of the house and, at the other, two smaller bedrooms with a loft room above them (Fig. 1, 1). The first bedroom was divided from the kitchen by a mud wall, on the kitchen side of which was the main fireplace and on the other a small fireplace in the bedroom itself. Access to the bedroom was through an interior doorway beside the street door of the house. The two smaller bedrooms at the other end of the kitchen were equal in size. They were divided from each other by a longitudinal wooden partition and from the kitchen by a transverse wooden partition which ran to the full height of the latter room. Access to these bedrooms was through two doorways, situated side by side in the centre of the transverse partition. Above these two rooms was a loft, entered through a doorway centrally placed above the doorways of the two lower rooms and access to which was gained by a short steep wooden stairs, placed laterally against the transverse partition and having a small landing in front of the upper doorway (Pl. VI, *top*). Kitchen and loft were ceiled with boards nailed to the rafters.

The kitchen fireplace was of the open hearth type, with a large smoke-hood and a clay hob at the back of the fire. To the left of the hob was an iron firecrane and to the right a fan bellows with, above it, three short wooden shelves for holding small household articles (Pl. VI, *middle*). In the back wall of the house under the smoke-hood was a rectangular recess. This had for long been built up but Miss Flynn said that it formerly opened into a bread oven which was built against the back wall of the house on the outside. The oven had been taken down before her time and she never remembered seeing it in use.

The kitchen had two doorways. The street doorway was opposite the end of the smoke-hood, the space between which and the front wall formed a diminutive lobby. This had been originally cobbled with beach pebbles but these had been replaced by a cement floor. The door itself was divided vertically into two equal leaves joined together by four strap hinges, so that half the aperture could be closed completely and a variable fraction of the other half left open (Fig. 1, 3). This vertically divided door allowed maximum latitude in the regulation of ventilation and draughts and this flexibility of control was particularly important to the previous owner, Miss Flynn's father, a cooper, who sometimes worked in the lobby adjoining the door. The back door was situated at the other end of the kitchen beside the partition dividing off the bedrooms and the loft. The kitchen was lit by two windows in the front wall, there being none at the back. The bedroom next the fireplace had two windows directly opposite each other, one in the front and one in the back wall. Each of the corresponding pair of windows at the other end of the house gave light to one of the smaller bedrooms.

The main items of kitchen furniture were arranged around the walls. The space between the two windows was occupied by a large table and opposite it, against the back wall, stood a dresser. On one side of the hearth under the smoke-hood was a chair and on the other a small four-legged stool. Another chair was placed under the window between the street door and the table, while a long seat with a back stood along the back wall between the smoke-hood and the dresser. Near the back door and against the wooden partition was a small table which held water buckets and other vessels.

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Pl. VI. *Top :* Stairs Leading to loft
Middle : Kitchen fireplace
Bottom : View of house

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Pl. VII. *Top:* Straw lining on roof slope and ceiling

Bottom: Straw lining on ceiling and forming border on wall

Photographs A. T. Lucas, 28/8/1962

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The straw roof lining[1] was confined to the large bedroom beyond the hearth end of the kitchen. This room was 13 feet long and 15½ feet wide and, like the kitchen, its ceiling was inserted at a considerable height above the side walls so that the part of the room above wall level formed a truncated triangle in section (Fig. 1, 2). The straw lining covered the two sloping sides of the roof and the horizontal ceiling extending between them, completely concealing the boards with which they were sheeted. The walls were covered with paper with a floral trellis design and rope pattern border.

On each of the sloping faces of the roof, the lining was arranged in five horizontal zones running the full length of the room. Each zone consisted of a layer of wheaten straws, the layer being only one straw thick. The straws were laid with almost mathematical precision, lying uniformly side by side and aligned exactly to the slope of the roof. They were held in place by narrow laths, three-quarters of an inch wide and a quarter inch thick, running horizontally along the roof at intervals of 15 inches apart. The lowermost lath was nailed in place along the line where the roof met the top of the wall and the uppermost along the corresponding junction of the roof slope with the ceiling (Pl. VII, *top*). Between these two laths, the roof slope was divided into five equal zones by four other laths running parallel to them. The horizontal ceiling was divided into six equal zones by five laths evenly spaced between the two which ran along the junction of the ceiling with the roof slope on either side. As well as could be estimated, the laths on the ceiling were the same distance apart as those on the roof slopes. So far as could be ascertained without damaging the lining, all the individual straws had been cut to a uniform length of about 16 inches. In the zone immediately above the top of the wall, the lower ends of the straws were completely concealed by the lath which held them in place (Fig. 1,4). Their other ends, however, projected slightly from under the edge of the lath on the upper margin of the zone but these projecting ends were effectively hidden by the lower ends of the straws in the next zone above, which were inserted under the same lath. This successive screening of the projecting upper ends of the straws in one zone by the lower ends of those in the zone above it was continued up the slopes of the roof and, presumably, across the ceiling as well. In one area only did the lining extend to the walls of the room. This was immediately below the ceiling on the wall dividing the room from the kitchen where it formed a horizontal border somewhat narrower than the other zones (Pl. VII, *bottom*).

According to Miss Flynn, this straw lining was put up in the room by a man named Hannigan at the time when her father was married 94 years previously, i.e. about 1869. Despite the passing of almost a century, it was in an astonishingly perfect state of preservation. All the straws were as straight and tubular as if they had just been cut from the living plants and only an occasional one was out of place. They were, moreover, incredibly clean and retained their original golden colour. Nowhere did there seem to be any lapse from almost total regularity in both the laying out of the zones and the arrangement of the individual straws. The work appears to have been commenced at wall level and to have been carried upwards zone by zone but the writer is unable to offer any suggestion about the methods which might have been employed in executing it.

[1] For an analogous feature—a reed lining screening the roof timbers of a kitchen—see 'Old House Types near Lough Gur, Co. Limerick' by Seán P. Ó Ríordáin and M. J. O'Kelly in *Féil-Sgríbhinn Eóin Mhic Néill* edited by Rev. John Ryan, S.J., D.Litt., Dublin, 1940, p. 230 and Fig. 6.

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