

## MANX TRADITIONAL HOUSES, FURNISHINGS AND HOUSEHOLD GOODS

Margaret Killip

### *Housing Types*

As a consequence of the disastrous wave of building development that has swept over the Isle of Man in the last dozen years, many of the remaining older Manx houses have to a very large extent disappeared. Chiefly affected have been the fishermen's and miners' houses built when these industries were flourishing in the latter half of the last century : they are mostly two-storeyed four-roomed houses with a window in each room, and a landing window at the top of a short staircase going up within a few feet of the front door. The small kind of farm and croft house built on a similar plan have been likewise affected. Such houses, admittedly in need of repair in most cases, have been seized upon by incomers to the Island and have either been demolished or swallowed up in a larger house built round then or have at least acquired new windows, loft extension or similar enlargement, and their traditional character has been effaced. A like fate has befallen some of the small slated two-roomed half-lofted houses, built rather earlier in the nineteenth century or in the latter part of the eighteenth. Thatched cottages of this type, of which discounting those belonging to the Manx Folk Museum at Cregneash, there are less than a dozen in the whole Island, have in the main escaped. Their owners, realizing their unique quality or else persuaded of it by those who did, have retained them in their original state and kept them in repair.

A recent casualty and one much to be deplored was a single-storeyed white washed house at the Cross-Four-Ways in the parish of Malew. This house until the end of its days had the ladder leading to the half-loft in daily use, and the house was of additional interest as it was almost half as long again as is usual in a building of this kind. In this it is believed to have derived from the *thie liauyr* or long house which in the past accommodated domestic animals in the lower end of it. A seventeenth century description of the one-roomed thatched houses of the period speaks of the single room in which "the whole family lyes; and among the meaner sort, they are forced to place their cows in a corner of

houses that the early writers so often spoke of in terms of contempt, and with total disregard of the problems involved in building them. The chief factors determining the kind of house that was built were the availability of building materials, and the means of transport to obtain them. If these were lacking people had to use whatever materials they could find immediately to hand. If timber for doors and roof was unobtainable, as it was until the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century since the Island had almost no woodland, they were compelled to make do with driftwood found on the shore, with branches of sally willow, or with the pieces of bog-oak *darraghs* that their ploughs uncovered in the curragh lands. In such areas, chiefly the northern lowlands where the people lived at some distance from stone quarries, the house walls were built either of puddled clay mixed with chopped straw which when dry, set as hard as cement, or of sods of earth dug from and round about the site where the house was to be erected. A few undertook the laborious task of gathering rounded sea-worn stones from the shore for house-building, but this again required some kind of cart to carry them in — though a few hardy souls are said to have transported them in creels on their backs. Such limiting factors gave rise to considerable variation both in house-types and in construction details, particularly hearth and flue construction, but the ground plan of the house, its dimensions and general layout were in all cases basically similar.

### *Roof Covering*

Stone and slate quarries were fairly numerous in the Island, and houses in their neighbourhood were even in the eighteenth century built of stone and roofed with slate. Manx slates, small and rather unevenly cut can still be found on some old roofs, set closely together, each slate hung by a wooden peg over handhewn laths. But thatch was the most common roof covering, and apart from the parishes of the far north where bent was available, straw was the material most generally used. The thatch was laid on by hand: it was only in the rare instances when thatching was done with ling, that a tool, a ling hook was necessary. The thatch was secured by means of a network of vertical and horizontal ropes made of straw, *suggane*, that were looped over each other at their intersections and tied to stone pegs in the walls below the eaves and at either gable. Some of the early descriptions of Manx houses

speak of roofs covered with sods or turf,<sup>8</sup> and as in the building of the walls people used whatever material was to hand, it is possible that the long mats of dried turf known as *scraas* that were laid on the roof grass-side uppermost from ridge to eaves as a lining under the straw thatch, may once have been the sole roof covering. In a bad harvest straw must often have been in short supply and other materials for thatching were substituted, such as reeds and rushes and other broad-leaved plants. Rush thatch was considered to be of inferior quality, and latterly was mainly used in stack thatching, though occasionally for outbuildings. Ling had a restricted use near to the hills, and ling rope, *gadd*, was sometimes used instead of *suggane*. It was strong and durable.

The people of the northern parishes who suffered from a lack of stone for building the walls of their houses, were compensated in having a rich source of thatching material in the marram grass or bent that grew on the sand dunes and cliffs of the northern and northwestern coasts. Bent was the traditional thatching material of the whole of the north of the Island. As the entire plant was required including the root, it had to be pulled by hand not cut, a difficult job, very hard on the hands. After it was pulled it was made into sheaves which were laid flat to dry, then carted or carried home on the back. There were twelve sheaves in a stook of bent, and it took five or six stooks to thatch the small two-roomed half-lofted house. It would remain weather-proof for three or four years, while a straw roof needed repair after only two.

Pegged thatch was little used in the Island, though it was not unknown, but it was probably a rather later introduced technique. In the 17th century, as an inducement to adopt a new mode of thatching that was evidently considered to be an improvement on native methods, it was laid down that men thatching 'after the English manner' were to receive a higher wage. This may have been a reference to pegged thatch. The pegs used were made from briars, cut into short pieces, bent into a V-shape and twisted to give the amount of tension required to make them tighten when they were inserted into the thatch.

### *Sod Houses*

It is believed that sod houses and farm buildings were once



Thatched House at Cranstal, Bride Parish. Photo: H.M. Rogers, 1949.



Basket work flue at West Berk, Kirk Michael. Photo: H.M. Rogers, 1949.

very common throughout the Island, and traces of them are to be found in areas where good building stone was also available. At the Garey Mooar, an upland farm in the parish of Arbory a derelict stone-built house was until fairly recently spoken of by older people as 'the new house', the former buildings on this land having been built of sods. The Garey Mooar is one of the oldest Intacks or enclosures in the Island, dating from the beginning of the sixteenth century and possibly earlier, and it is not unlikely that its owners housed their workers there in sod-built houses on the newly enclosed land to bring it into cultivation.

Collectors of the Manx Museum Folk Life Survey working in the 1940s and 50s frequently heard elderly people speak of farms where there were as many as 30 sod-built houses of which there is now no trace. In his tour through the Island in 1792–3 John Feltham describing houses in the parish of Jurby provides some confirmation of this "Thick as the cottages are they do not strike the eye: the walls of the huts are seldom above seven feet high composed generally of sods of earth and the roof thatched with straw which soon becomes a murky hue".<sup>10</sup> All trace of these sod houses has long since been obliterated. A house made of sods of earth could very easily be dug away and scattered over a field and ploughed under, and this was the fate of many when after 1860 the people lost their grazing and other rights on the mountain Commonlands, and as a result the age-old way of life of the cottager and crofter became impossible, and the farms increased their acreage and gradually took over the crofting lands, and the numerous little sod houses that stood on them disappeared under the plough.

It is significant that only recently a sod house, or at least the three feet or so that was left of its walls was discovered high up in a little *ghyll* above Ballaquayle in the parish of Patrick. It was a house that had been inhabited within the memory of at least one person living in the parish. Its survival can be accounted for by the fact that it was built on rough land that couldn't be ploughed: if it had been built on good land it would have been gone long since. The walls were no doubt worn away by exposure to the weather, but it seems to have been a sizable house about fifteen by thirty feet. Such houses were quickly and cheaply built, and the destitute could always rely on the help of neighbours to get the work done, when as sometimes happened through sudden

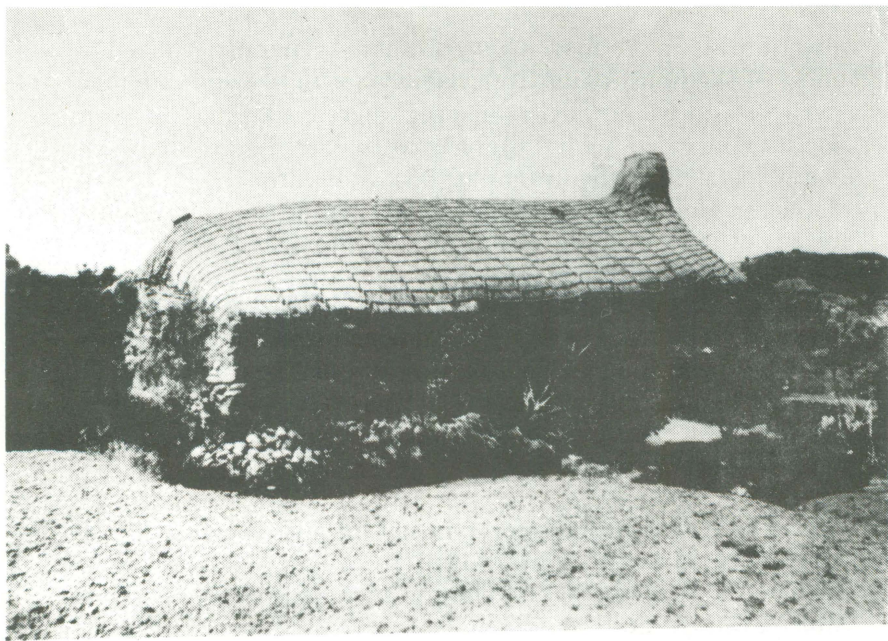
notice to quit their house, they had to find somewhere else to live.

The sod house in the parish of Jurby in which Mrs Mary Gilrea lived, was photographed in 1897. Its walls sprouting a luxuriant growth of grass seem to be built entirely of sods, though a neighbour recalled that the fireplace was of stone and there would possibly be some courses of stone in the lower parts of the outer walls to protect them from wandering cattle. It had no door, but a *scaa* — a bundle of gorse blocked the door-space and a windshield of gorse tied with *suggane* stood to one side of it. "It was a little house dug right out of the ground, you had to go down into it . . . there was only one window, in the bedroom . . . the partition (between bedroom and kitchen) was of *suggane* made like a net and plastered with soil and hung from the rafter with *suggane* . . . there was a big oblong table in the kitchen. . . . I have seen a house with a pig in one corner, a calf in another, and a hole in the floor with water in it and ducks in the water . . . and at night hens roosting in the house . . . . they were living in queer places even in my time."<sup>11</sup> This account of a sod house interior was given by a man of over ninety years of age in 1953.

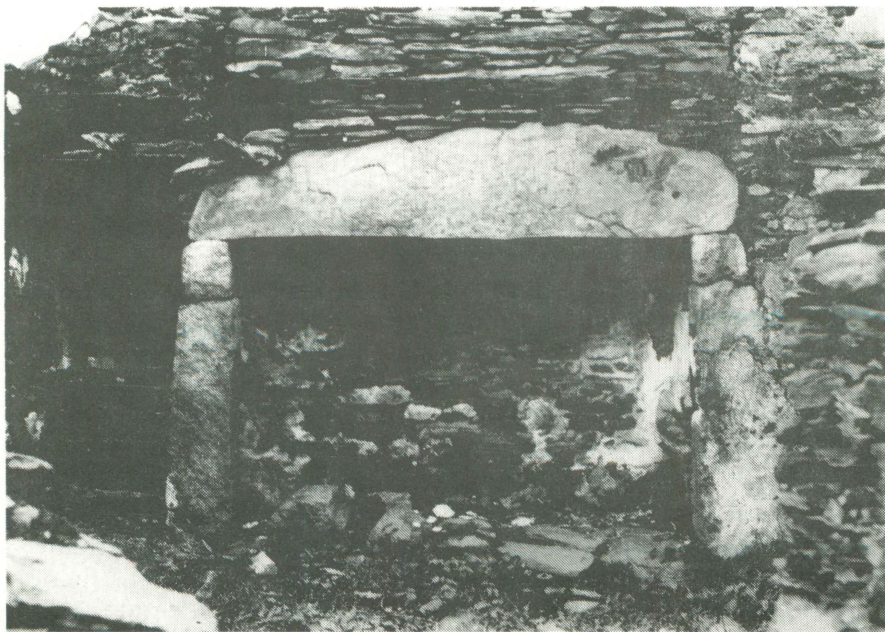
### *Fireplaces and Flues*

One of the main variations in the construction of the traditional Manx house was in the technique adopted for building the chimney breast and flue. This was determined as was that used in building the walls by the availability of suitable materials. Most of the stone-built houses on the larger quarterland farms have a massively constructed chimney breast of stone-work over the open hearth. It is this structure that Manx people have in mind when they speak of a house with a *chiollagh* though the word simply means a hearth. A *chiollagh* is a wide open hearth with turf fire on the floor, and the masonry of the chimney breast above it supported on a stone or wooden lintel nine or ten feet long. Between it and the house walls are recesses where the week's supply of turf was stacked, and in the interior gable wall at the back of the fire, one or two smaller recesses for the storage of such commodities as salt and tobacco, and an 'ash-hole' — a small cavity at ground level into which the ash from the fire could be swept. When one of these open hearths is discovered during house renovation it causes great wonder in those who have never seen the like before,





Sod House. Parish of Jurby. Photo: Rev. F.W. Stubbs, 1897.



*Choillagh* with Supporting Granite slabs. Photo: H.M. Rogers, 1939.

but they are much more common than is generally realized. In most of the houses built 150-200 years ago, of which there are even yet quite a number remaining, there is likely to be an open hearth concealed behind the oven with barred grate that was probably installed in the latter part of last or early this century. Though *chiollagh* construction in most cases was carried out by means of stone-walling, sometimes with quarried stone, but quite often with field stones, certain other methods were used. In the parish of Malew the superstructure of the *chiollagh* was supported on squared blocks of granite obtainable locally, and in Kirk Maughold the front of the flue was covered over with long lintel slabs of diminishing lengths set edgewise one above the other and embedded in the flue side walls which were constructed of smaller building stones.

There was another method used for enclosing the flue and conveying the smoke upward from the open hearth fire, and this involved a quite different technique and resulted in a much more flimsy, though quite serviceable structure. A length of timber, sometimes only a pole or a branch of a tree was stretched across the open hearth and fixed in the wall on either side. On this a light basket or canopy flue was constructed on a framework consisting of four or five upright pieces of wood sloping inwards towards the apex in an inverted funnel shape. This was covered over with branches of willow and briars, or with *suggane*, the materials woven over and under the upright supports in a basket-work, and the whole then plastered over with clay. In some later flues of this type, one or two of them still in existence today though no longer in use, the uprights are boarded over with neatly sawn pieces of wood which are nailed on.

It is probable that very many of the clay and sod-built houses had flues of this kind, but the construction was by no means confined to them; it was quite often used in stone-built houses. It was an easier and cheaper way of building, requiring no cartage of building stone or heavy lintels. One or two examples have been recovered for preservation, but many have rotted away or been destroyed by fire. A stone-built house that formerly had a canopy flue is distinguished by two features: the absence of a stone-built flue wall, and a slight funnel shaped depression in the inner gable wall at the hearth end. This light canopy construction may have been an earlier as well as a simpler way of forming the



smoke channel, but the stone-built flue has been in use for some hundreds of years. Bishop Wilson writing in 1797 about the slate quarries in the Island,<sup>9</sup> mentions a particular kind of blue slate found at Spanish Head in the parish of Rushen "out of which are wrought . . . long beams of tough stone fit for mantle trees, of 12 or 15 feet long and strong enough to bear the weight of the highest stack of chimnies."<sup>12</sup>

### *Food Preparation*

The people of the Island have lived immemorially by farming and fishing, and there was no change in this mode of life until the nineteenth century when the two gradually became industries in their own right and people tended to engage in only one of them. Their final severance came with the disappearance of the crofting way of life. They lived on the produce of their land, barley, oats, pease, a little wheat, and potatoes which after the eighteenth century became their chief food. They had milk and other dairy produce, though this was often in short supply. There was for most people little fresh meat, but as everyone who could kept a pig, they had salt pork and bacon, but relied principally on the herring fishing to provide them with fresh fish in summer and to enable them to lay down a supply of salted herring to last through the winter and into early spring which was often a time of scarcity sometimes of famine.

The cooking of all the food both boiling and baking was done in a large pot hung over the hearth fire from the *slouree*, a long chain attached to a bar set high up in the chimney opening. When not in use the pot, which came in several sizes, stood on three legs on the floor. Many other things beside herring went into the salting barrels and crocks for winter use: the farmers and bigger crofters would slaughter a beast, an ox or a sheep, and the less well-off cottagers and crofters made do with various kinds of poultry. From this salt meat, which was soaked to remove the salt before use, they made soup and broth, and pies on special occasions. The baking of the daily bread, round flat cakes made of barley and oat meal was done in early days on the *losh* or bake-stone, later on a iron griddle set on a tripod or *croe* over the turf fire. An oven for baking *bonnags*, rounded cakes of wheat or other flour, could be improvised by putting a lid on the pot and piling turf around and on top of it. In some houses an oblong or bee-hive shaped stone or brick-built oven was set in the wall

beside the *chiollagh*, and could be fired for baking, but these were probably a later feature introduced in the eighteenth century, and the pot oven was the more usual and no doubt more traditional method of baking. On the farms there was often a small isolated kiln for grain drying, but it was not unknown for the grain to be dried or parched in a pot over the fire to prepare it for grinding and baking. The open *chiollagh* was not only the chief feature architecturally in the Manx house, it was also the centre of domestic life in both work and leisure, and the turf fire on the hearthstone was never allowed to go out.

### *Furnishings and Household Goods*

Seventeenth and eighteenth century wills, and inventories of the goods of those who died intestate provide reliable evidence of the living standards and material possessions of people of those days. While the merchants and larger landowners had household goods and furnishings that matched their finer houses, the belongings of those in poorer circumstances could often be listed very briefly. But even when the list amounted to no more than some clothing, one or two stools or chairs, a few vessels, barrels or other oddments, they were valued for sale or distribution by specially appointed appraisers.

The items that appear most regularly in inventories, wooden, sometimes pewter household vessels, some earthenware, simple furniture, baking irons and cooking pots, butter and wool and flax working equipment, farm tools and implements and fishing gear, quantities of farm produce, and some livestock, are those essential to a way of life that was pursued over the centuries by small local communities whose members were dependent on the work of their own, and to some extent their neighbours' hands for all its means of support. The appended Inventory dated 1793 is a fairly representative record of the goods of a small crofter. A farmer with more land would have had rather more of the same kind of domestic utensils, a greater variety of working tools, and a larger number of the chief wealth of both farmer and crofter, cattle and sheep.

# THE INVENTORY OF WILLIAM WATTERSON OF BALLAFESSON

	£	s.	d.
To Wooden Vessels	0.	2.	6.
To Pewter and Candlesticks	0.	3.	1½
To Pots, Gridle, Tongs and Smoothing Iron	0.	4.	1½
To a Pot frying pan and Bottles	0.	1	1½
To Wooden Vessels	0.	0.	7.
To Earthen Ware	0.	0.	11.
To Fishing Gears	0.	1.	0.
To Chests	0.	3.	9.
To the Apparel	0.	14.	4.
To Wool	0.	5.	5.
To Towe and Towe-yarn	0.	0.	6½
To Linnen and Wostid yarn	0.	2.	4½
To a piece of Cloth	0.	2.	11.
To a box and a Window	0.	0.	5.
To a Table Furum (Form) frame and Stools	0.	1.	5½
To Bedcloathes and Bedstock	0.	5.	9.
To a piece of Timber and a Basket	0.	1.	4.
To Sacks Sives and Dollans (Skin-covered trays)	0.	0.	10.
To Husbandry Gears	0.	2.	0.
To Netts and Ropes	0.	2.	1½
To Salt	0.	0.	6.
To Hors Geers and Ladder	0.	0.	5.
To Carrs (wheel-lesshorse-drawn cart)	0.	0.	6.
To a Plough Harrows and Traces	0.	1.	3½
To Wheels (Spinning Wheels)	0.	0.	7.
To Sheep	0.	1.	1.
To Cattle	1.	1.	3.
To Horses	0.	13.	9.
To a Pig	0.	3.	0.
To Fuel	0.	5.	8.
To a Piece of Timber	0.	1.	8.
To fourteen Stooks of Oats	0.	8.	2.
@ sevenpence pr. Stook			
To Barley	0.	8.	8.
To Wheat	0.	1.	8.
To Pease	0.	0.	10.
To Hemp and Lint	0.	0.	10.
To a Calve	0.	1.	6.

	£	s.	d.
To Potatoes	0.	2.	9.
	4.	19.	10½
Deduct Expences for reaping and saving of crop	0.	7.	10.
Remains	4.	12.	0½

## Court Fees 2

The Inventory in full of the Effects of Wm. Watterson Pris'd by  
four Sworn-men jury Namely

Richd Higgin	my Mrk . . . X
John Carine	my Mrk . . . X
Richd Kneen	my Mrk . . . X
Henry Watterson	my Mrk . . . X

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## Notes

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2. Talbot. 1924. 50b.
3. Gibson. 1695. 17
4. Quayle. 1812.
5. Gibson. 1695. 17
6. Wilson. 1797. 94
7. Robertson. 1794. 15
8. Waldron. 1731. 2
9. Mills. 1821.
10. Feltham. 179 163
11. Manx Museum Folk Life Survey.
12. Wilson. 1797. 94