

Hunters' Huts at Mount Sandel, Co. Derry (7,000 BC)

- Excavated in 1970s by Peter Woodman of the Ulster Museum in advance of a housing development.
- Site on elevated ground overlooking the River Bann.
- Most of the archaeological deposits had been destroyed by ploughing except for an area in a hollow.
- Here a series of stake holes and hearths showed evidence for a camp used by Mesolithic hunters around 7,000 BC.
- A large amount of flint artefacts found.
- Evidence of circular huts. These were built again and again in the same spot- presumably these people came back to the same spot season after season and built a new camp each time.
- The huts were built by thrusting pointed saplings into the ground in a circle and then bending them over so that they formed a dome or tepee.
- This was then covered by some material. There was no evidence of what this was: animal skins, leaves, sod?
- The huts had an average diameter of 6m.
- It is estimated that one of these huts could accommodate 6-9 people.

Farmers' Houses (4,000 - 2,500 BC)

- When farming arrived in Ireland circa 4,000 BC, people began to settle permanently over much of the country. The number of substantial houses that have been discovered date to this period.
- Houses in the Neolithic period are more sophisticated than Mesolithic huts.
 - Use more substantial building materials.
 - Rectangular houses circa 7-15m long by circa 5-6m wide.
 - Foundation trenches.
 - Internal divisions – special areas (sleeping, cooking, etc).
 - Central hearth.
- None of these houses have left any impression above ground as they were built entirely of wood and have long since decayed into the ground. They are mostly discovered during archaeological monitoring in advance of developments like pipelines, roadways or housing estates. These can be recognised by archaeologists because slot-trenches, post holes and hearths have a distinctive darker appearance against the background of the brighter sub-soil.

Tankardstown Co. Limerick

- One of these houses was discovered at Tankardstown, Co. Limerick, during the construction of a gas pipeline in 1986.
- This is a typical Neolithic house, rectangular in plan, 7.4m x 6.4m.
- What survived was a foundation trench, 0.6m wide and 0.65m deep.

- Careful examination of the fill of this trench showed that it was built to contain timber planks set upright into it.
- There was also evidence that the house had been burnt.
- Eight post holes were found, showing where the posts which held up the roof were located.
- Six of these were set into the foundation trench, one at each corner and two along each long side.
- A gap in the trench showed that the door was near the SW corner and was about 1m wide.
- The soil at the centre of the house was reddened due to intense burning, thus showing the location of the hearth.
- Sherds of pottery from typical Neolithic round-bottomed bowls were found.
- A lozenge-shaped flint arrowhead was also found.
- An important find was a lump of charred grain- this had caught fire when being dried near a fire and then thrown away. The grain was later analysed and found to be emmer wheat.
- Charred fragments of hazel shells and an apple core were also identified from the fill of the trench. It was a wild apple- *malus sylvestris*.
- Some fragments of animal bone were recovered from the trench fill. These were of cattle, sheep/goat and pig (it is not possible to distinguish between the bones of sheep and goat from this period).
- The roof was presumably of straw thatch (these are farmers who grew cereal crops) though no actual evidence of this survived.
- Houses like these were being constructed from the earliest part of the Neolithic period, 4,000 – 3,500 BC, and have been found throughout the country.
- In some cases up to three houses have been found in close proximity.
- These houses show that during the Neolithic period much of the native woodland had been cleared and farming communities were living in permanent settlements.
- In the case of the Céide Fields in north Mayo we can see that these settlements were part of a landscape of enclosed fields, indicating a long-term well-organised social system.

Round Houses of the Bronze Age (2,000- 500 BC)

The discovery of metal was a major breakthrough in the technological development of tools and weapons. Copper and tin were alloyed to make bronze. Knowledge of this technology had arrived in Ireland by 2,000 BC.

The typical house built in Ireland during this time changed from one with a rectangular plan to one with a circular plan.

The Bronze age houses survive as post holes or slot trenches cut into the underlying subsoil.

- The houses are usually circular in plan, with an average diameter of 5 to 9 meters.
- The usual plan is either a circular slot trench or a circular arrangement of post holes.
- The wood used was oak and elm for the bigger structural timbers and young ash, hazel and willow for the walls and partitions.
- The roof was supported by just a few large central posts.
- The walls were not load-bearing. In some cases the walls were constructed of wattle and daub, in others just a make-up of sods or turfs.

Bronze Age houses were clustered inside a palisade (fenced) enclosure. Neolithic houses seem to occur without such a defensive protection. By the end of the Bronze Age there is evidence of defensive enclosures being built on hill-tops (hillforts).

In 1986 an important Bronze Age settlement was excavated at Chancellorsland, Co. Tipperary by The Discovery Programme, a government-funded research programme.

Iron Age (500 BC- 400 AD)

Virtually nothing is known about domestic houses in the Irish Iron Age. However, some very large structures have been found at the Royal sites like the '40 foot' structure at Emain Macha. This was a giant circular building, 40m in diameter, with six concentric rings of wooden posts. If roofed this structure would have been up to 12m high. Whatever its function, it is very unlikely that this can be considered a 'house' in the usual sense but was more likely some form of 'temple'.

Early Christian (400 – 800 AD)

The tradition of building round timber houses continues into the Early Christian period. The houses occur in clusters and were enclosed for protective reasons by an earthen bank with an external fosse. These settlements are known as *ringforts*. Along the western seaboard and in areas with a thin subsoil, the enclosures were built using dry-stone walling. These are called *cashels*. The houses within the enclosure were also built of stone. People also lived on small man-made islands in lakes, called *crannógs*.

Vikings

Viking invaders established settlements along the coast. These eventually grew into port towns. These contained houses belonging to various craftsmen and traders. The houses are similar to those found in Sweden and Denmark

- Rectangular.
- Wattle-and-daub walls.
- Door opening at both ends.
- Thatched roof supported by wooden posts.

Dublin Excavations at Fishambles Street

- Foundations of 150 houses uncovered.
- Set in narrow rectangular plots at right angles to the street with post-and-wattle boundary fences.
- House set back off street.
- House occupied the full width of the plot.

The most common type of house at Fishambles Street

- Divided into three aisles.
- Wide central aisle full length of building with door at either end.
- Raised areas on both sides—sleeping area.
- Central stone-lined hearth sunk into floor
- 36m² floor space.
- Walls of single or double wattle-and-daub construction.
- Hipped thatched supported on four upright posts. Layer of sod under the thatch.
- Door solid wooden jambs.
- Floor – covered by woven wattle mats (see *Beneath the Streets*, T2,U3,L2).

Post-Medieval

A massive rebuilding took place in Ireland from the early 18th century through to the early 19th century. Quarried stone became the most popular building material for all variety of buildings including houses, and this continued to be so until it was replaced by concrete in the mid-20th century.

The 18th/19th century witnessed a change in building material and design. Wood was not so readily available as much of the forest had been cut down in the 17th century. Large quantities of stone were now available due to the improved techniques of quarrying and transport. The vast majority of houses were built using mass-material such as stone, clay or brick. Local people built in a vernacular style, using local material to suit local needs. Landlords looked outwards to Europe for inspiration in building houses to display their power and wealth. They employed architects capable of designing houses in the most up-to-date fashionable style.

House Structure

Walls Function:

- keeps the weather out.
- support the roof—load-bearing walls needs to be strong.
- form boundaries—define space.

Material

Load-bearing walls (i.e. supporting the roof)—need to be of a strong material like stone, brick or large timber uprights.

Non-load-bearing walls can be built of lighter materials—e.g. wattle-and-daub. The thickness of a wall will also reflect the material it is made of and whether it is load-bearing or not.

Roof Function:

To keep rain off and insulate the building.

Material:

Thatch—straw, reeds, grass, leaves, slate, wood, shingles, skins.

The two most common roof types are pitched with a gable, and hipped. A critical factor in the Irish climate is the angle of the roof— depending on the material used this has to be sufficient to throw the rain off.

Openings Doors

The position of the door tells us a lot about the use of space within a house and the relationship between the house and its surrounding space. The more doors in a house the more sophisticated it is in terms of the use of space. A feature of doors in medieval times was the use of a drawbar. This was a wooden beam which could be drawn across from a cavity in the wall, to secure the door from the inside. The sockets for these drawbars can be seen in most castles.

Windows

Let light and air into a building and at same time keeps out the weather. A window is often a compromise between the needs of comfort and safety. In most castles sizeable windows are only found above the height a ladder can reach. *(Glass was very expensive until the 19th century when mass production of plate glass was introduced.)*

Fireplace/Hearth

Function:

Place of fire to provide heat and for cooking.

What do fireplaces tell us about a building? Archaeologists use the presence of a fireplace/hearth as one of the key indicative features of a house.