

Section 4 Vernacular Architecture

The most typical and recognisable vernacular dwelling of Donegal is the one storey type building, the famous Donegal Longhouse. As will be discussed throughout the remainder of the guide this simple form of architecture, which was also applied to differing house types of both storey and a half and two storey dwellings, provides important and pertinent lessons on the type and style of development most suitable within Donegal landscapes.

Definition: Vernacular = Native, Indigenous, Traditional

Characteristic Features*

- Not formally designed; designed without the use of a given plan
- Linear, rectangular construction
- Moderate scale
- Narrow floor plan, limited by roof construction to approx 6m
- Thick walls of mass load bearing construction
- Stout, solid chimneys placed at gable ends or incorporated along the axis of the roof ridge as rooms were added
- Front Door opening directly into kitchen
- Hearth positioned at gable
- Window and Door openings to front or rear elevation, seldom evident in gables
- High solid wall to void openings ratio
- Window and Door openings often relatively asymmetrical & of relatively small proportions
- Extensions for new rooms and sheds carried out to the sides of the dwelling, adding length not depth, thereby creating the "long house"
- Steeply pitched roof of between 35-50 degrees
- Occasional addition of small front porch windbreaks or porches
- Internal load bearing walls that extended to roof apex

*Adapted from "The Disappearing Irish Cottage-A Case Study of North Donegal", *Clive Symmons & Seamus Harkin*.



Local & Regional Identity

Distinct regional variations existed within vernacular dwellings such as small porch protrusions, stone benches set against the front wall, paneled painted front and half doors.

One such important feature is the "outshot" or "cailleach", a rectangular protrusion usually located to the rear of dwellings and covered by a continuation of the main roof. Internally this was used to accommodate a bed, usually for more senior members of the household, placed close to the hearth and heat.

Another feature, particularly in north Donegal, is the addition of a byre purposely built into higher banks of ground accessed by an elevated door to the rear and at ground height (enabling the storage of hay to be fed to cattle below). Such byres had slightly higher roofs than the remainder of the linear house and could also be accessed by outside steps to the front that led up to the hayloft.

Other ancillary buildings were occasionally sited in courtyard layouts, at right angles to or running parallel with the dwelling.

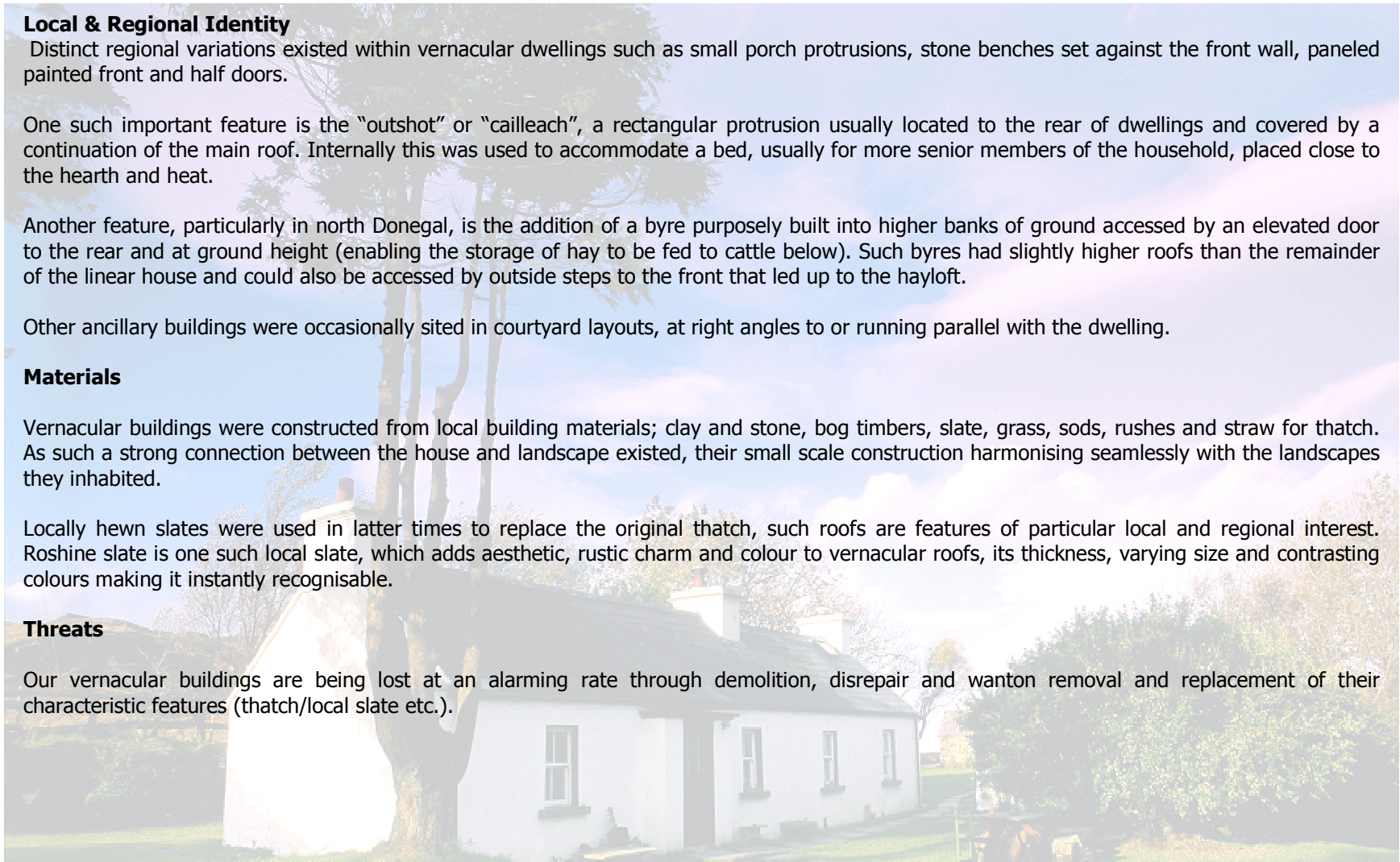
Materials

Vernacular buildings were constructed from local building materials; clay and stone, bog timbers, slate, grass, sods, rushes and straw for thatch. As such a strong connection between the house and landscape existed, their small scale construction harmonising seamlessly with the landscapes they inhabited.

Locally hewn slates were used in latter times to replace the original thatch, such roofs are features of particular local and regional interest. Roshine slate is one such local slate, which adds aesthetic, rustic charm and colour to vernacular roofs, its thickness, varying size and contrasting colours making it instantly recognisable.

Threats

Our vernacular buildings are being lost at an alarming rate through demolition, disrepair and wanton removal and replacement of their characteristic features (thatch/local slate etc.).



The protection and re-use of these buildings is both possible and desirable. It is incumbent on us to ensure they remain an integral part of our living, working, vibrant landscapes, remaining a valued reminder of our past.

Vernacular buildings are a valuable asset, the loss of which will be irredeemable. Our vernacular buildings are uniformly charming, set within and derived from our landscapes, a built expression of our heritage, a tangible link with the past, a cultural inspiration and tourist draw.

It is an objective of the Council to actively preserve, protect, record and encourage the appropriate re-use of such buildings, thereby ensuring the conservation of the County's architectural heritage and regional characteristics.

