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ROCQUE'S MAP 1760

INTRODUCTION

The location of Skerries seems to be the determining factor in its development as a settlement. It is situated on a promontory with a good natural harbour. References to Skerries as a haven have been numerous. The earliest comes from the Book of Howth and refers to a large force of Gauls, Picts and Britons who had come to do battle with the Irish Princes.[10] Another reference quoted by Dalton mentions a writ by the King in 1496 granting a licence to construct a fortified harbour and walls at Skerre.[4] Along the coast at this point a settlement developed and in Roques[8] Map of 1760 can be seen the village of Skerries with street lines similar to those in existence today (plate 1). It is well to remember that at one stage the Hompatrick end of the town was just as important, perhaps more important than the Northern end. The Monastery at Holmpatrick was responsible for this. However, during the 18th century rapid expansion associated with the fishing industry led the town's population to gravitate towards the harbour. Holmpatrick, in Roque's map, is just a scattered few houses in the vicinity of the Church.

In this thesis, I intend to concentrate mainly on the buildings in the vernacular tradition as these are still common and are the most vulnerable to modern improvements. Invariably they are to be found in the town area as deliniated by Roque in 1760. This part of the town possesses a fine heritage of old residential buildings ranging from single storey thatched houses and two storey houses with traditional shop fronts to Georgian type structures. Because of its location, "off the beaten track" seven miles from the Dublin Road, it has suffered little from modern improvements and has retained much of its original character. However, because of urban redevelopment in the town centre, this character is now in great danger of being destroyed. A few shops recently renovated now have huge plastic signs and three new buildings in Strand Street have been built without any reference to the type of buildings already there. These are - Hogan's Supermarket, the Northern Bank and the E.S.B. showrooms.

Plate 2[a]



Plate 2 b



Since I am teaching in the local school, I intend to focus students, attention on this particular area, hoping that increased knowledge of the buildings and of the character of the town might lead to more symphathetic improvements in the future.

The first good description of the area is contained in a letter written by a British visitor who came here in 1776.[13] He mentions the many fishing boats sailing about in the harbour. He stayed for one night and describes the town."The houses are low, some of them are extremely low which latter in Ireland are denominated cabins. They are situated with respect to each other very irregularly. The town consists of upward of a hundred houses".

Fishing seems to have been the main employment of the menfolk, though some were employed in crafts directly related to fishing, for example - sail making and rope making. The Rope Walk is the old name for one of the lanes in the town. The Bark Yard was so named because fishing nets were immersed in a solution of the boiled bark of trees so that they would better withstand the elements. In a building in this yard apprentices could learn the craft of sailmaking. Another craft established by Robert Cochrane at the beginning of the 19th century was embroidery. In fact a tambour factory existed in the town for many years and the tradition of embroidery continued well into this century. Many old people remember their mothers embroidering stockings while sitting beside the window for light. There were also individual craftsmen living locally. One of these was Harry Maloney whose daughter, now a very old lady, still lives in New Street.



Plate 3

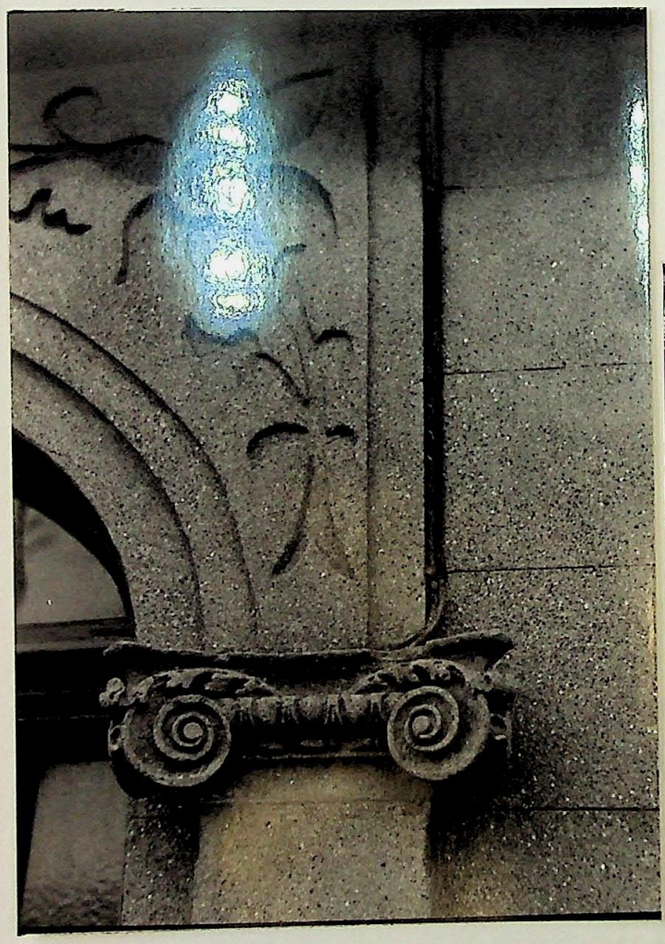


Plate 4



Plate 5 -

Harry was a plasterworker who obviously took great pride in his skill, plates, 3,4 & 5. The beautiful work of the carpenters and carvers can still be seen in the many surviving shopfronts. Though no trace now remains of Manning's forge the names lives on and the tiny street is now called Manning's Opening.

So the majority of the people of Skerries were of humble stock and the buildings in the town reflect this simplicity. A visitor in 1858 wrote in his Topographical Sketches of Unpopular Parts of Ireland: "No visitor can fail to observe the regularity with which the little whitewashed cottages of Skerries are built and the smooth wide and unsullied surface which its main thoroughfare presents on a fine Autumnal day and then only look at the width of the footpaths on either side . We cannot well understand why the Main street is not grass grown more or less. Look down the long thoroughfare and you scarcely see man, woman, child or animal. Its deserted aspect during the day may doubtlessly be accounted for by the fact that the men are nearly all at sea, the boys at school and apprenticed to boat owners and the women and girls at muslin embroidery." 13 "
This description of Strand Street is borne out very well in a photograph from the Lawrence Collection taken some fifty years later.
Plate 6



This picture contains two of the main house types which I wish to discuss. The thatched cottages of the fishermen on the right hand side of the street as you look up and nearer on the left, the shop fronts of Skerries.

CHAPTER I

DWELLINGS:

In Ireland as in Western Europe two different structural systems were used in Vernacular building:- Frame construction and the mass construction. In the first of these the house was supported by a strong framework of stout timber beams and the outer skin of walls and roof was made of lighter material filling the spaces between the framing beams. In the second, mass construction, solid walls both supported the whole building and formed the outer skin against the elements.

Archaeological research and records show that buildings in frame construction were once numerous in Ireland. An illustration in The Houses of Ireland [7] shows buildings of this type in 18th century Drogheda. However buildings framed in heavy wooden beams have almost entirely disappeared in Ireland and Skerries is no exception to this.

In Ireland the most usual material used in mass construction was stone, bedded and pointed with mortar, usually lime and sand mortar. However tempered clay was another popular and excellent mass material. This material though was adversely affected by an over damp climate and so was not as popular in the north and west of Ireland.

The foundation of an Irish mud walled house according to Duffy [8] involved the placing of four stones on the corners of the site and on top of these four round smaller stones.1,The rank soil was first cleared away from the surface of the street both front and rere. 2, The channel clay was dug to a depth of about 18" and pulverised into pulp. 3, The Clay was made into a thick mortar by wetting it and mixing it with cut rushes or coarse sprat hay. Then the whole mass was left to mature, during which time it was turned with graips and re-turned to toughen before the first course would be set on the stone work and raised to the level of the surface from the foundation.

In Skerries this tempered clay seems to have been a popular means of construction and many houses still standing have walls of this material. Charlie Fanning, the local thatcher, describes how these walls were made in Skerries. The clay was put in a pit and wet straw was mixed through it as reinforcement. This mixture was then trampled by young lads who walked back and forth over it to mix it. The mix was then used to make the walls. They could be between two and four feet thick. One wall of Charlies own house is made of clay. Campbell [1] uses the term Falla Feidin to describe

mud walls which endure as long as the roof is kept properly thatched. Thick coats of lime wash renewed annually gave protection from the weather and it was essential that the thatch should overhang the eaves.

The roof of the house is the part most exposed to the weather and its function is not only to protect the occupants but also the fabric of the house itself. Therefore, the builder's aim must be to obtain the greatest possible degree of shelter and durability. The roof took the form of a framework of wooden beams covered by weatherproof layers. In Ireland good building timber became very difficult to find in the 18th and 19th centuries, so roofs were framed in smaller timbers with shorter spans. Slate and suitable stone for roofing were found in only a few localities. The Irish climate is mild but moist with little snow so the function of the roof was to run the rain off. The characteristic roof shape is narrow, steeply sloped and thatched,[5].

Ake Campbell says that in nearly all cases the Irish method of roof building is to build a framework of the roof on couples and to support the thatch on sods laid on laths of split bog Fir,[1]. In Skerries sods were not used, probably because there are no bogs in the locality and the soil is generally very good. Instead they used bundles of straw as a support for the thatch. Close observation in Skerries and other local towns will bear out E. Estyn Evans "The most intimate relationship exists between building materials and techniques and types of thatch", [9]. While the walls in local houses were being built the rafters - couples they were called - were put into the inside of the walls. The walls were then topped off with clay so that the first layers of thatch could be pegged down at that point - plate 1. This was to prevent the wind getting under the roof and lifting it up. The couples crossed each other at the top and were fastened by a forged nail six inches or more in length. These were thick at the head but tapered to a sharp point. The metal corroded in the wood and they were then firmly stuck together.

Plate 7 a

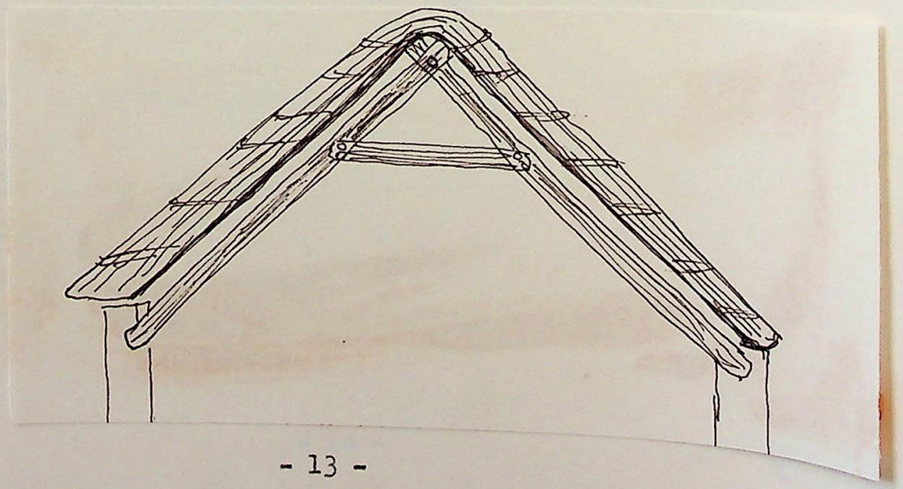
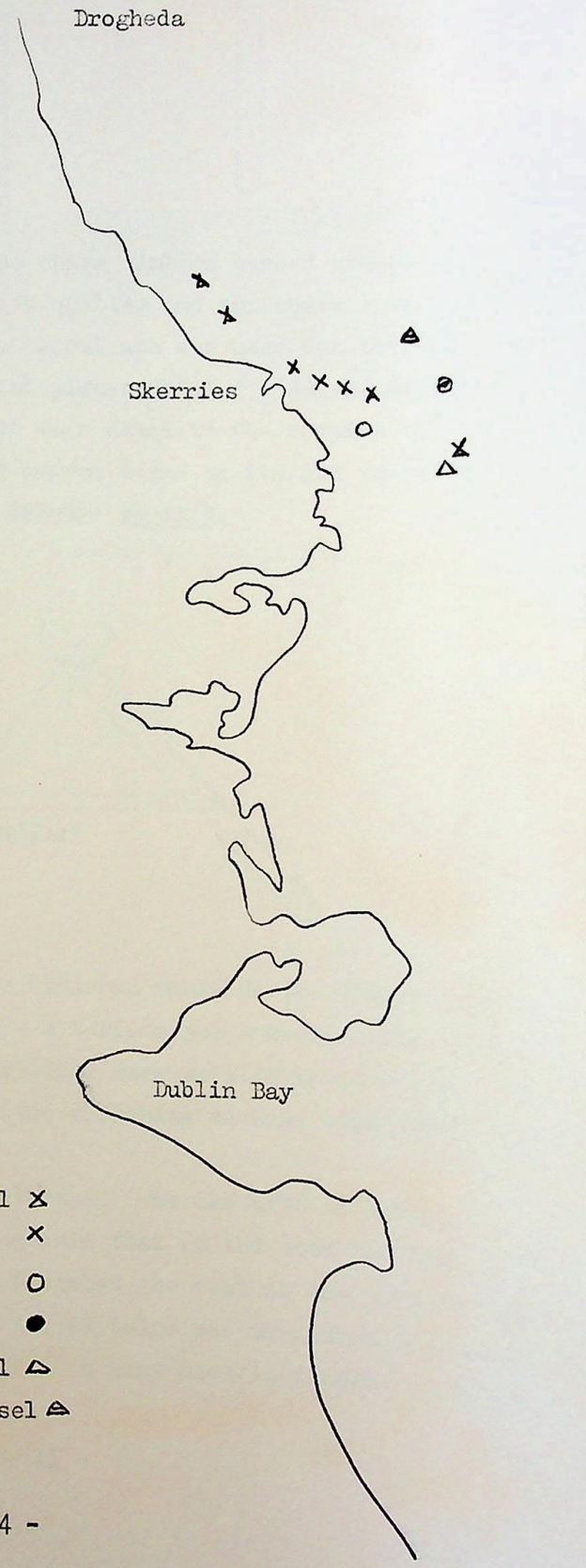


Plate 8

Chart showing the wrecks and casualties on the Coast of Ireland from July 1877 - July 1882.



Total loss of fishing vessel ⊠
Partial " " " " ×
Total loss by stranding ○
Partial " " " ●
Partial loss of steam vessel △
Partial loss of sailing vessel ⛵

Plate 7b

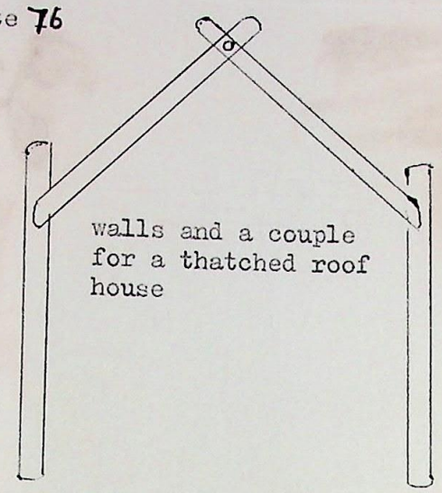
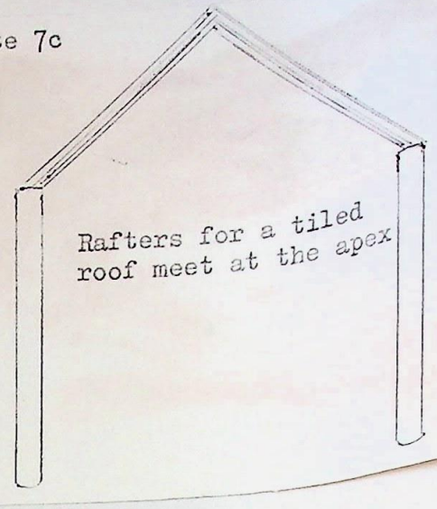
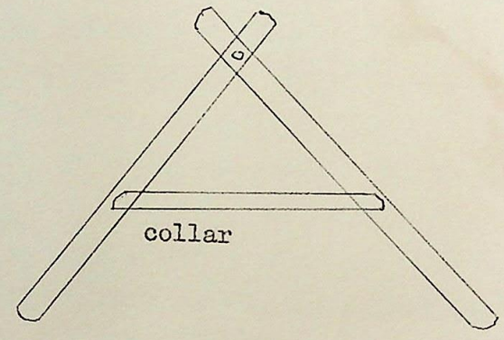


Plate 7c



In Skerries the wood used was ships timbers washed ashore from wrecks, plate 8. It was varied in its quality and thickness - there were roofs with pitch pine and oak etc. Local ash was used for the less important rafters and for the horizontal pieces joining adjacent rafters. These were about 5" to 6" thick and were fixed to the couples with forged nails and tarred twine. Sometimes tarred twine on its own was used. Collars of ships timbers kept the roof steady- plate 9.



There were no ceilings in the finished house so the timbers and thatch linings would be whitewashed - a tedious job - because the materials were very absorbent. The thatch linings were usually wheat straw. This had to be flailed - not threshed as the threshing machine would break the straw.

There are many methods of thatching. The one used in Skerries is as follows - the lining straw was laid flat on the wood and tied down with tarred twine. When this was finished the rest of the straw was laid down flat in 2ft wide areas. The tarred twine was then threaded through the 6" layer of straw with a wangle - a home made instrument - and pulled tight to compress the layer to 3".

Plate 10



The above mud walled cottage is on the Lusk/Skerries road. The wall is 20" thick and the height is roughly 6'. The width of the room is 9' inside. The window, not shown in this photograph, is slightly wider on the inside. The window height is 29". The rooms were dark in Irish cottages. Most of the light came from the open doorway and thus the phrase referring to the unwanted visitor as one who darkens the door, [9].

In this house can be seen a wattle and daub partition dividing the two rooms. This house is typical of the style most popular in the eastern half of the country and the wall with a window, inside the front door, can be clearly seen. The fireplace is directly behind this wall and so anybody sitting at the fire could see at a glance who is at the front door. Ake Campbell considers this to be an imported English fashion as he says its distribution more or less coincides with the distribution of the two-eared English spade while the native house coincides with the single eared Irish spade. The adjacence of fire and door with intervening partition is well known in England. Such houses usually have a porch built at the entrance door and the arrangements of the rooms are not at all primitive. This photograph also clearly illustrates how the couples were attached to the wall as Charlie Fanning described. This method varied from place to place.



Traditional Irish houses in all regions of the country shared many features of the North West European type called EHNHAUS,[5], e.g. rectangular plan tending to extension in length - each room occupying the full width of the house and each room opening into the next without any central hallway or passage. Thick walls were solidly built of mineral stone or clay and the roof was borne on or by the side and cross walls, not be internal pillars or posts. The open hearth was at floor level situated on the long axis of the house, its chimney protruding through the roof ridge. The windows and doors were on the side and not end walls. The roof was of steep pitch covered with thatch of vegetable material. Except for small loft openings set high in gable walls, no openings were left in the ends of the house.

However, there are some basic differences between the houses in the east of Ireland and those of Ulster and Connaught and parts of Munster. Common in the eastern half of Ireland is a type of house in which the entrance leads in directly to the hearth which is situated about the middle of the house,[2]. Behind the hearth is another wall which divides the house, and projecting from this wall is a shorter wall which shelters the hearth from the doorway.

Plate 11a (A) Basic type in the east:

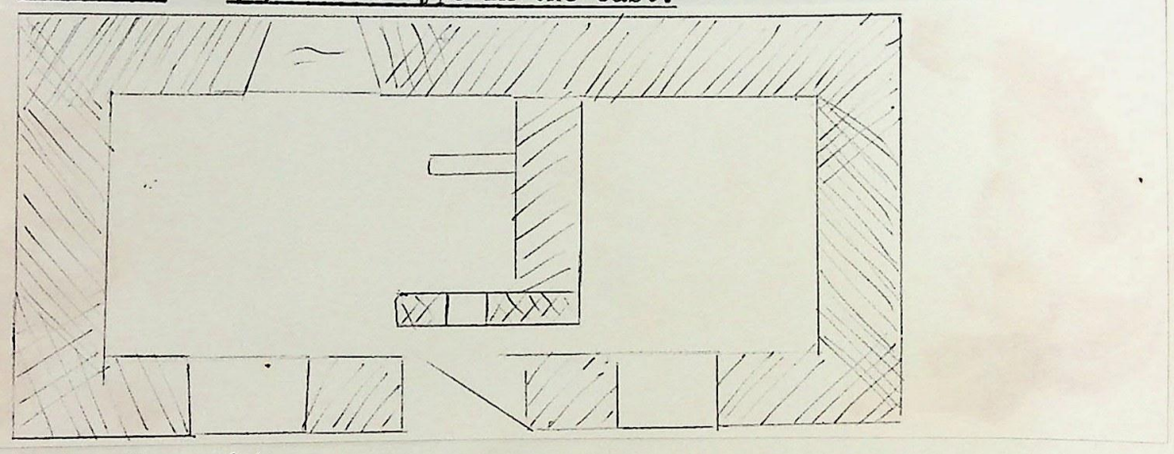
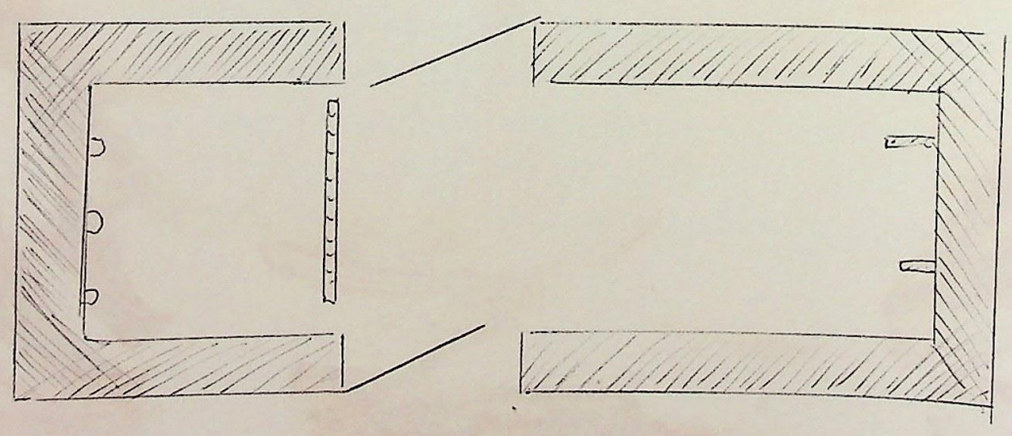


Plate 11b (B) Basic type in Ulster, Connaught & parts of Munster:



This latter house plan was originally used to house animals and humans under the one roof. The rooms were divided by a channel. This channel later became a partition.

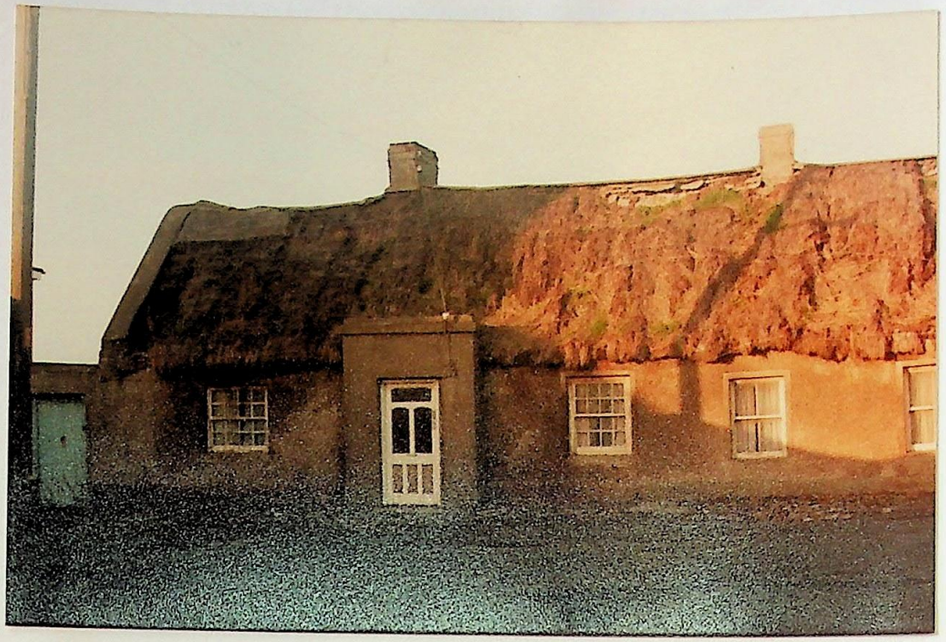
The Eastern half of the country, subject to more outside influences developed in a slightly different way. Animals were housed outside the dwelling. The houses of Skerries are closer in style to type (A). However, there are exceptions and houses with chimneys on the gable wall exist., eg. 16 & 17 Church Street - plate12. No 16 is a delightful house with a tiny dormer window and is greatly enhanced by the retention of its small glazing bars in the windows.

Plate 12



The cottage in Quay Street illustrates the central chimney nearly in line with the front door, plate 13. This house was obviously extended in length and a second chimney added. The porch with parapet like top is similar to many in the town. This device was used because thatched houses do not have gutters and it prevented anybody standing at the front door from being drenched by the water dripping from the thatch.

Plate 13



In front of this house is a lovely cobble stone path made from beach pebbles, plate 14. Though now sadly neglected, it still retains its interesting colours and textures. The pebbles may originally have been used to form a pattern. This was a common and practical use of pebbles and occurs in many parts of the country. In areas where beach pebbles were not available those from local rivers were used.

Plate 14



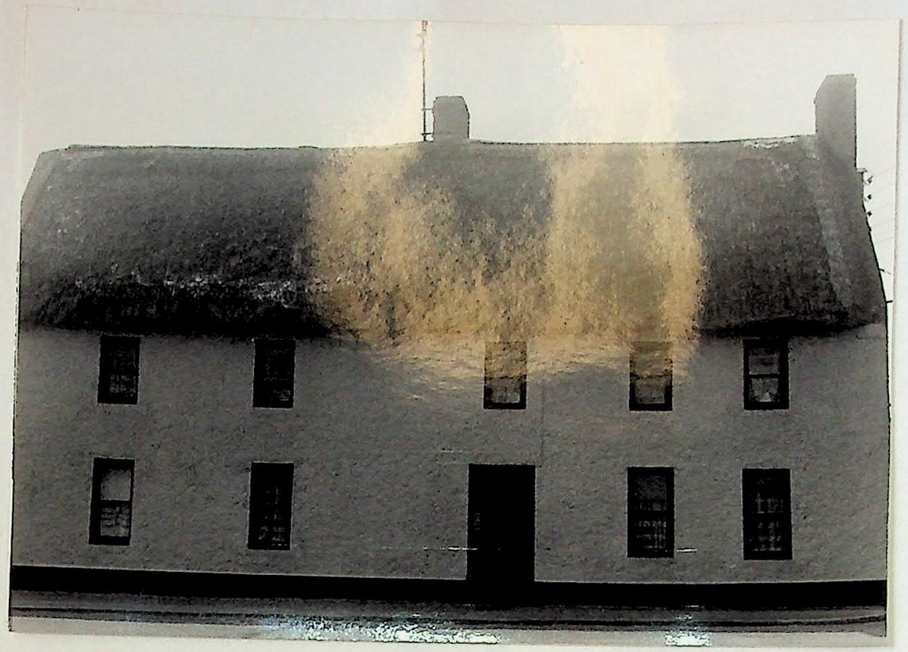
Another feature of the Eastern house is that of a hipped roof, plate 15.



However this roof type is entirely absent from any of the remaining cottages in Skerries. Kevin Danaher believes that hipped roofs were not common in the west of Ireland because they are less durable in a storm. This may be true also for Skerries town as it is a rather bleak exposed area and suffers more than most eastern areas from high winds. Having the chimney in the centre of the house made a hipped gable possible and there are many old houses of this type in the surrounding countryside. There is no doubt that this latter type, which includes not only stone built houses but also those mud-walled ones known as Falla Feidin constructions, stands in close relationship to those small old houses, quadrangular, oval or circular, which have been variously described as the Irish "huts" , "cabins", or "beehive houses",[1].

The vernacular builder had to consider the social status of the family. The house must reflect his standing in the community. A strong farmer might not live in a cabin nor a poor labourer try to build himself a mansion.

Plate 16



Ryans house, Quay Street, is one of a type referred to by Kevin Danaher as a thatched mansion, plate 16. These are two storey thatched houses and were the homes of prosperous landholders and small gentry. Mrs. Ryan believes the house to be two hundred and fifty years old. Her family have lived there for many years and it was the home of her great great grandmother. The walls are of stone and are three feet thick. Together with some of its humbler neighbours it deserved the tribute - "lacking nearly every architectural consciousness and at the same time every kind of imported building material, the Irish peasant house never stands out in bold relief against its background, but melts into it even as a tree or a rock. Built of stone, clay, sods, grass and straw brought from the vicinity, the house harmonises with the landscape to which it belongs. Whenever the old building traditions are faithfully maintained its features are of a fine simplicity", [1].


HPOWER

CHAPTER 2

THE SHOP FRONTS

In Ireland the shops of the small towns and villages were much more modest than those of the cities. These shops served the needs of the fishing and farming communities in the surrounding area, whose needs were a modest combination of poverty and self sufficiency. The typical Irish shop in rural areas sold almost everything. The general idea was that all the needs of a simple community could be satisfied in one general store. The shops were often those of the village craftsmen, carpenter, miller, sail maker etc. The earliest shops used the ground floor of the house and window for display. The two storey shop and house is probably the most common form for the family business and in the next stage in development from the modest single storey house with the front room shop, plate 7.

The architecture of Irish shops developed over the centuries. Though Architects were never involved in the design of small shops their influence through the various movements and styles and particularly through the source books, was felt by the craftsman designer. He used these ideas and adapted them to suit his craft. The earliest name boards on shop fronts were made of wood with a simple hood to throw off rain water. The name board was elaborated in the 18th century, and became in many cases a full entablature with the name on the frieze. The entablature was carried on pilasters or coloums which acted as a method of articulating the large display windows. Consoles and brackets closed the entablatures and further elaboration in wood was used for the great variety of window mullions and spandrils between the arched window heads.

The earliest shop fronts were carved in native oak but after the destruction of the forests and consequent shortages of timber, Baltic Fir and Pine were imported. The imported Fir and Pine was a softer wood and much easier to carve and in 19th century Ireland joiners and carvers combined to produce an amazing variety of wood fronted shops.

The entablature was carefully designed to throw off rain water and so protect the parts of the building below. The entablature with its cornice was an extremely practical finish to the upper parts of a shop front. It finished off the top of the design and protected the shop front from the weather. The frieze was ideal for the name and the proportions of the name panel in relation to the elevation were usually very pleasing, plates, 18, 19 & 20.

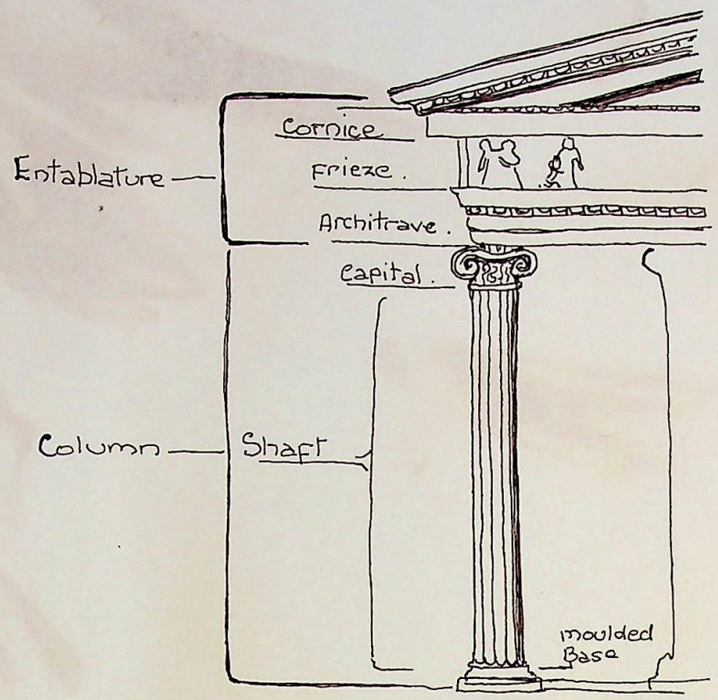


Plate 18

Tonic order.
Erechtheum Athens.

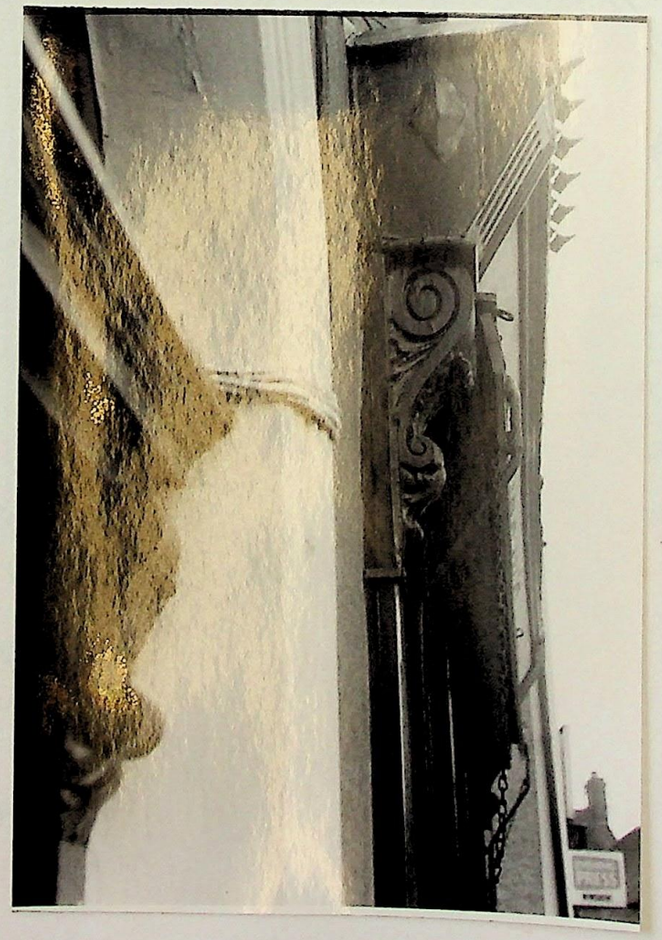
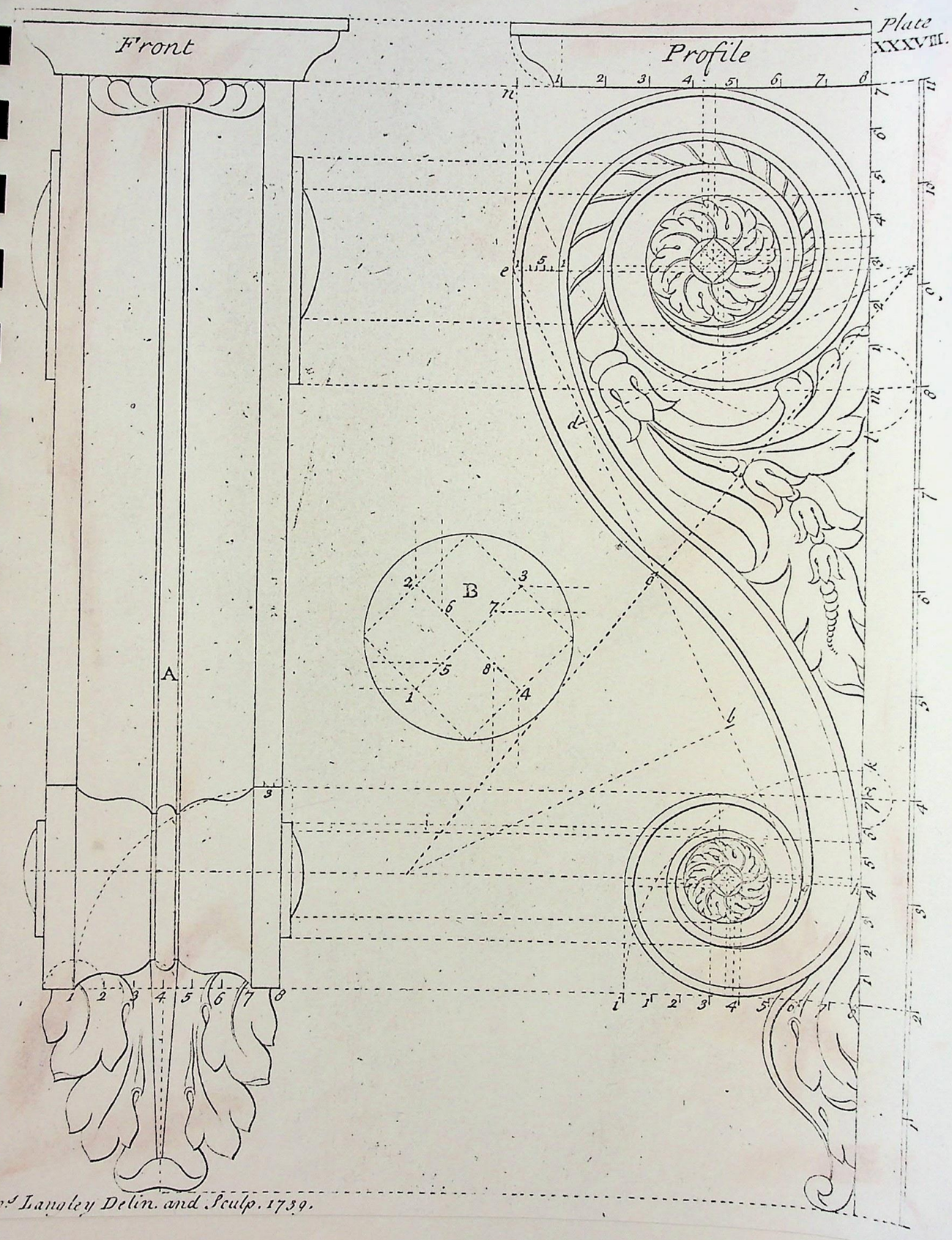


Plate 19



Thos. Langley Delin. and Sculp. 1739.

Sean Rothery' [16], believes that the consoles on brackets probably originated from the decorated ends of projecting beams. The standard form of a console is an S shaped double volute with the large spiral at the top and the small spiral at the bottom. This was a very convenient way of closing off the ends of the entablature and nameboards and so defining the shop from its immediate neighbours. The earliest shops did not use a console to close the design but allowed the cornice to project.

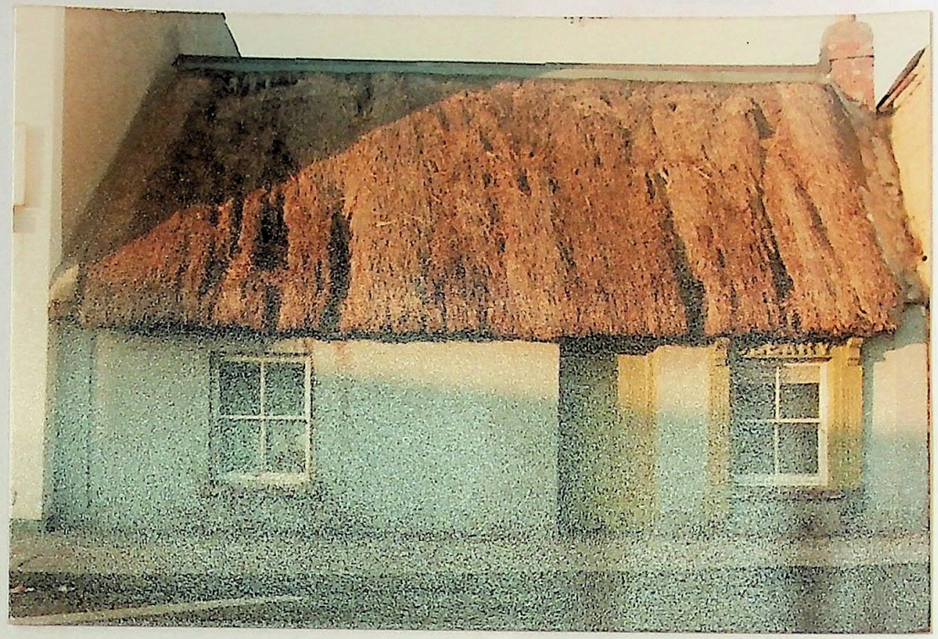
The earliest pillars and columns consisted of a flat pilaster with a cap to keep out the rain. Theyframed the front and supported the name board.

In Skerries there is a remarkable number of traditional shopfronts still surviving. Many are no longer used as shops but have been with a few exceptions, well maintained by their owners.
Plate 21



O'Leary's, now sadly in very bad repair, is one of the more interesting as it is typical of the earliest Irish shops which used the ground floor as the shop and its windows for display. However, in this case the decoration is well developed and suggests a date about mid 19th century. The name is unusual in that the letters are carved in relief.

Plate 22



The Post Office in Skerries is interesting and appears in one of the Lawrence collection of photographs, plate 7. The Shop front now looks rather top heavy. This is caused mainly by the addition of the awning on top of the pediment. This awning was not in position when the earlier picture was taken. This shop also has carved wooden surrounds on its upstairs windows which are unique in Skerries. It dates from the last quarter of the 19th century.

Plate 23





Plate 23

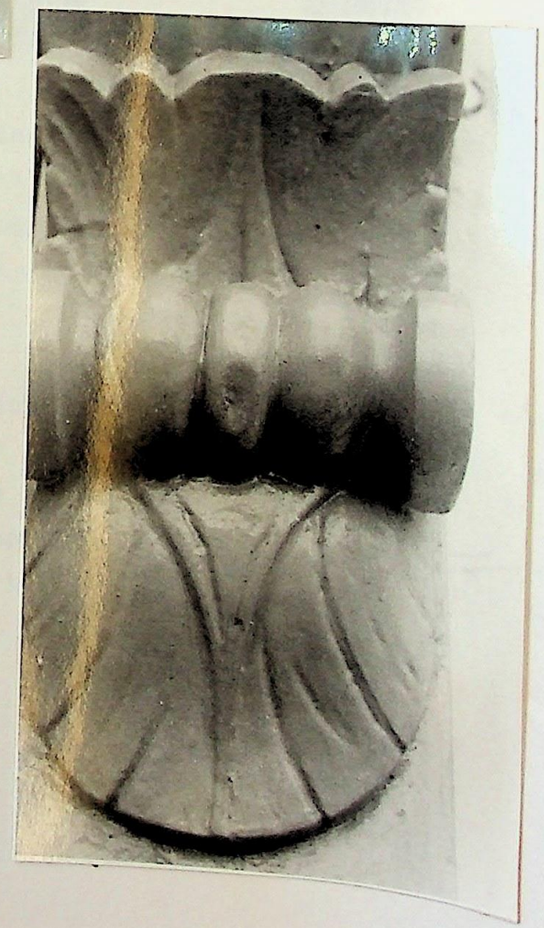


Plate 23

Murray's Drapery , plate 24, is a well planned, carefully designed shop and house front and has most of the traditional features including a cast iron finial. The front door of the dwelling is carefully designed to harmonise with the shop front. Notice how cleverly the awning is incorporated into the overall design. The beautiful carving of the console can still clearly be seen, though now coated with layers of paint. Unfortunately the double doors were recently changed and a standard size door slotted in. The window glass too was probably changed as it was usual to have vertical strips of glass.



The former shop in the Square, plate 25, still retains these features. Vertical strips of glass were most commonly used during the 19th century. J. Young's book of designs mentions that the glass panes average length was four feet,[16]. This size remained fairly constant up to the end of the 19th century in Ireland.

The reasons for the small size were obviously economy, ease of transport and fitting but Sean Rothery says that aesthetic considerations cannot be ruled out as many commentators of the time disliked the sight of masonry which appeared to sit uncomfortably on large sheets of glass. The use of glass in these strips and the double door gave a strong vertical emphasis to the shop fronts.

Plate 25 a

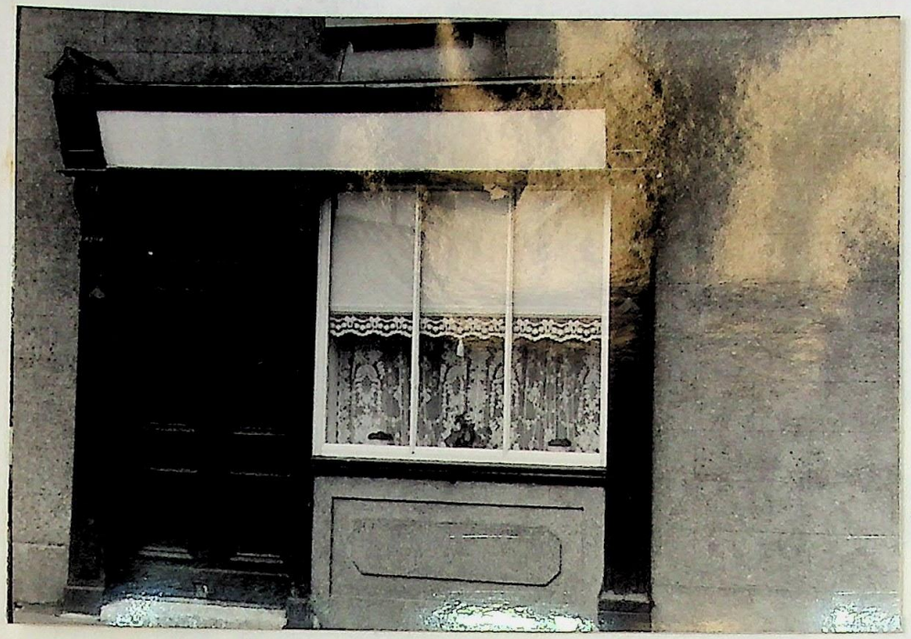
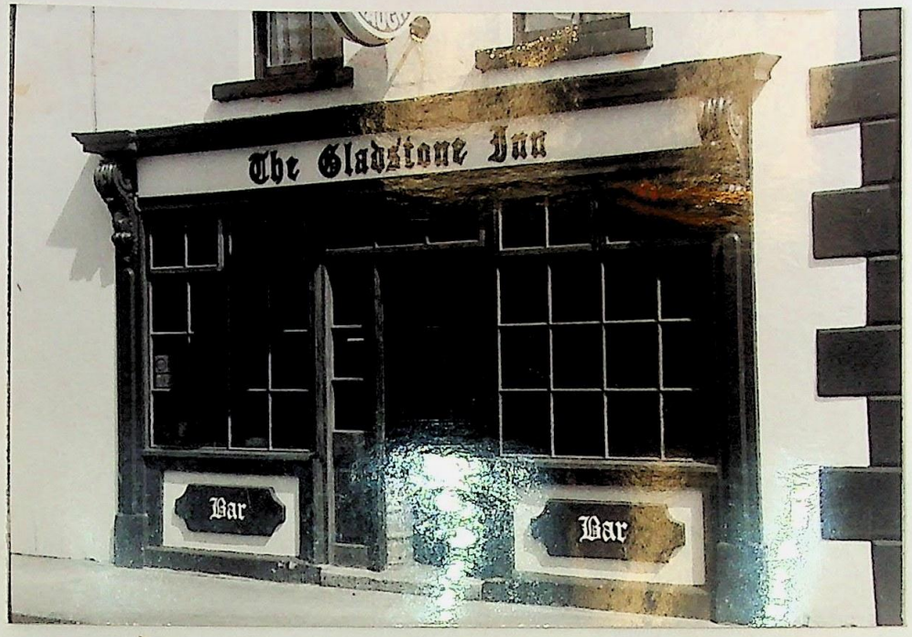


Plate 25 b



The Gladstone Inn, plate 26, retains some of its original features. Notice the black painted quoins. This device was a popular one as it clearly defined one house from its neighbours.
Plate 26



Another characterestic of country shops particularly pubs and turf accountants, is illustrated in Bassies, plate 27. That is the practice of obscuring the lower parts of the window to provide privacy for the customers from prying eyes. Display windows were considered unnecessary.
Plate 27



SUMMARY

The particular charm of Skerries is that its centre still retains much of its original layout. The buildings, though often very modest, were acquired at an early stage in its history, or are similar to earlier buildings. However, it is a fragile charm as it depends on an uncluttered layout and harmonious street line and on the simplicity of its dwellings. This point is clearly illustrated when one compares the Lawrence photograph of C. 1900 with a modern one.

Plate 28



Both photographs are taken from almost the same place. What a difference it would make today if all the electricity and telephone wires were placed underground. The mail box does not need to be so conspicuous and could be incorporated in a wall. The litter bins look rather ugly. It is time for a re-think on the design of litter bins. The street and indeed, the shops themselves would be much improved if all the projecting signs were removed.

Although Skerries is unlikely to be affected by realignment of roads, it is increasingly affected by the replacement of older buildings with unsymphatetic new ones and unsuitable alterations to existing properties, plate 22. These changes are often devastating to the building and its neighbours. Today the life of a shop front or interior can be as little as five years. The search for a quick turnover and profit has been allowed to decide that the shopping environment is standardized to a dreary sameness all over the country. Often impermanent material of a tawdry nature are used. These can have a impact on the street scape which is little short of disastrous. Skerries too has suffered from this type of development.

Most of the best efforts of modern designers are concentrated in the show piece city centres. Unfortunately away from city centres, shop design has been debased to the point where design is now non-existent,[16]. As early as 1855, the need for the involvements of architects in the design of shop fronts was realized. Delassaux & Elliot wrote "It may not at first sight appear a very dignified employment for the heads of the profession, but in reality few classes of subjects afford such scope for inventive genius and none where its efforts would be more appreciated or exercise so favourable an influence on the taste of the multitude",[16]. Today that assertion is still true. The craftsmen designers who formerly were responsible for the appearance of the shopfronts, have been ousted by the availability of mass produced building materials. These materials are worked by specialists with no thought for the overall aesthetic effect on the building. The architect must play a guiding role. In Strand Street three buildings exemplify such a role.

Plate 29



The new dwelling house is almost an exact copy of its next door neighbour. It fits in very nicely of course but would not be everybody's ideal new house. The pair of semi-detached priests' houses, now being built, take into account the street line, the angle of the roofs, the roofing material and the type of window prevalent on the street.

Plate 30



They blend well, though the windows should have been elongated slightly

Skerries is at once a fishing village, a holiday resort and a dormitory town. The increase in car ownership and personal mobility has changed holiday patterns. The town is now more a day trippers' resort than a residental holiday one. The population of the town has more than doubled in the past ten years. This expansion has taken place almost entirely outside the older town core but the task of providing services for fisherman, day trippers and new residents is putting development pressures on the centre. How this challenge is met will determine the future character of an important part of our local environment.

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