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The corn stands of Corrandulla

Joe Fenwick

(*Anach Cuain* 2008)

How many people today, even those living in the parish of Annaghdown, can boast to have seen a scythe in use, or recognise a corn stand or have helped to make a haystack? It is now sometimes hard to believe that these traditional farming practices were a part of the everyday experience of most people living in the parish little more than a generation or two ago (Evans 1988). These skills, along with its wealth of centuries-old crafts and folk knowledge, are now largely consigned to the past – lost for good or ill – but it can still be recalled in vivid detail and a degree of nostalgic pride by some of the more elderly citizens the parish. For the rest of us who have not had the privilege of witnessing it at first hand, there is some consolation to be had in visiting the Museum of Country Life in Turlough Park, Co. Mayo. Here, among the exhibits and photographs, the audio recordings and film footage, it is possible to get some sense of the enormous changes that have taken place on this island within living memory and an appreciation of a time and place entirely alien to the Ireland we know today.

But you don't have to travel to Turlough Park to see some wonderful examples of these former times. If you take the time to explore, there are still some hidden treasures of this fast-disappearing inheritance to be found in our very own parish – a handful of thatched vernacular houses, a long-neglected rusting roadside water-pump or an occasional corn stand long-forgotten in some corner of a field. I was surprised to find a series of three such corn stands in a small field along the Cloonboo-Corrandulla road as I had thought most, if not all, had been removed in recent decades – the casualties of progress, land improvement and the modern-day cash-crop of one-off housing.

The construction of corn stands, on which elevated stacks of corn (sheaves of barley, wheat, oats or rye) could be stored over winter, provided a deceptively simple yet effective means of keeping grain safe, dry and out of the reach of common vermin. It is claimed that corn stands were first built in response to the arrival of the brown rat to these shores in the early 18th century which, unlike its cousin the black rat (resident since at least the 12th century), was particularly well suited to the cool damp Irish climate (Conry 2004). This new rat species, *rattus norvegicus*, had the potential to do enormous damage to Irish grain crops. Corn stands,

therefore, became an increasingly common sight throughout many parts of Ireland (and were noticeably abundant in the Corrandulla-Headford-Athenry areas of Co. Galway) in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries. There is some archaeological evidence, however, to suggest that some form of elevated corn stands may have been in use in Ireland long before this, perhaps as early as the Bronze Age, some three to four thousand years ago (Collins & Coyne 2002).

I was fortunate enough to have the opportunity to talk to Mary and Francis Dowd about the three fine corn stands situated on their lands, across the road from their farmhouse in the townland of Tonagarraun. These were apparently built sometime after 1932 and were in use until well into the 1970's. Indeed, their son William is just old enough to recall the corn stacks being made and the excitement in the neighbourhood during the threshing, even though he was only a small boy at the time.

Francis commented that the wheat was harvested by scythe up until the 1960s and this was only replaced by a horse-drawn mower or a tractor-drawn harvester in later years. Not only did the corn have to be cut but it also had to be tied in sheaves which were 'stoked' upright in the field in groups of four or six to allow it to dry over the course of two or three weeks. It was then brought to the haggard by horse-drawn cart. Sowing and harvesting, therefore, was very labour intensive, required not only a good workhorse but also a considerable degree of household teamwork and not a little stamina. Francis remembers spending many long hours ploughing and harrowing the fields in early spring preparatory to sowing the seed, and long hours again spent saving the crops in the autumn.

The majority of the crop was usually threshed in the autumn as soon as it was adequately dry. After the autumn threshing, the grain surplus to household requirements was commonly sold at the weekly market on Eyre Square.

The remainder of the corn was stacked or 'ricked' in the haggard until ready for threshing in the spring, usually in the month of March. The corn stands, therefore, were an essential component of the annual farming cycle. The primary purpose was to safeguard some seed for sowing the following spring, in addition to preserving grain to feed livestock and providing fresh straw for bedding, thatching, etc.

Each of the Tonagarraun corn stands is similar in size and detail. All are constructed of roughly squared, hammer-dressed, limestone uprights, averaging 70cm high and 20cm in

breath and width, on which were perched a series of irregularly shaped flat capstones, averaging 10cm thick and between 55cm and 75cm in diameter: the capstones are now lying in the grass around each stand. The corn stands, in each case, consist of an equi-spaced circular array of five of these 'mushrooms' set around a slightly more substantial pillar and cap set centrally within each circle. The diameters of these circles, aligned side-by-side Southwest-Northeast, measure 3.1m, 2.8m and 3.5m respectively.

The building of a corn stack was both an art and a skill that required many years of training and experience to perfect; a tradition handed down from generation to generation. Mary explained that wooden laths or poles were firstly placed on the capstones to form a 'cartwheel', over which additional layers of branches were spread. This formed a stable platform on which the sheaves of corn could be carefully arranged to form a cylindrical or pot-bellied corn stack, crowned with a conical top. In general two-thirds of the sheaves were used in the building of the stack proper and the remaining third used in the construction of the conical roof to facilitate thatching.

Each sheave was carefully placed in a series of interlocking layers, the head of one being packed tightly into the butt of another to prevent slippage. The builder was also mindful to ensure that the centre of the stack was always kept higher than its outer edge as the stack building progressed. The cut ends of the corn stalks, therefore, always sloped downwards towards its sides. In this way even driving rain could not penetrate far into the stack and its core, containing the bulk of the grain, would always remain dry and well aerated. Conry (2004) notes that, unique to parts of the Galway, the stack-builder distributed the first sheaves in a circle around the outside before stacking the centre. He also records an interesting tradition preserved by a Mr Michael Kavanagh, a resident of Corrandulla, who on completing the platform put down four sheaves of oats in the form of a cross, starting where the sun rose as an expression of thanks to God for a successful harvest and to safeguard it over the winter months. After the first ring of sheaves were placed on the platform it was necessary for the stack builder to climb up on the stand and continue the work from a kneeling position. A very long-handled fork was required by an assistant to pass the sheaves, one at a time, to the stack-builder above. Commonly the corn stack took on a pot-bellied appearance, which served two purposes; to increase the volume and capacity of the stack and also ensure that any rain water would drip clear of its base. On reaching the eaves, the stack was gradually drawn in to form a neat 45°-angled cone rising to a pinnacle crowned by four sheaves tied with twine. The

eaves of the stack projected outwards by several centimetres around its perimeter to ensure that rainwater flowing from the thatched crown would be thrown well clear of the stack.

The corn stacks were commonly thatched using oaten straw. Galway was noted for the particularly elaborate corn stack thatching techniques, due largely to the wetter climate and the potential for extreme winds but there was also, no doubt, some degree of competitive craftsmanship among neighbours too. The straw from the previous years threshing had first to be prepared – cleaned, sorted and tied into bundles, which were known as *bunnáns* in some parts of Galway – before thatching could begin. The conical thatch was commonly held in position with a combination of encircling *súgán*, or straw ropes, and carefully placed hazel scallops, which were cut locally or purchased at the market especially for the purpose.

Mobile steam threshing mills were used up until the 1930s but there were gradually replaced by a diesel-powered equivalent in the 1940s which in turn were made obsolete – as were centuries old farming traditions – with the introduction of the combine harvesters, the first of which arrived in Ireland in the 1960s. The mobile threshing mills travelled from farm to farm within a district like a travelling road show. These great machines which separated the grain from the straw, required several people to operate – someone to cut the sheaves and feed the machine, others to hang and remove the line of sacks collecting the grain, and still more helping-hands to heap the straw thrown from the top of the thresher into haystacks nearby. The grain intended for household purposes and seed was often put through a winnowing machine to ensure it was clean and weed free. Mary recalled with fondness the sense of community and the great craic neighbours had during the threshing as everyone in the locality joined together to help one another.

Oats tended to be the principal crop as this could be used to feed work horses, livestock and poultry. Mary pointed out that crushed barley was also used to feed cows and calves. Wheat and oats, however, could also be ground at the local mill for household purposes. Mary and Francis said that they usually brought wheat and oats to the water-powered mill at Cregg (also known as Wade's mill) but Furey's mill (formerly Alcorn's mill), nearer Headford, also served the parish and surrounding area. Oatmeal could be used for a variety of purposes. Pinhead oatmeal, for example, could be mixed with hot milk to make a nutritious and delicious bowl of 'stirabout'. Alternatively, it could be used to make oatmeal bread or

‘bannocks’ of oatmeal. Wheat was ground to produce wholemeal or flour for baking. Wholemeal was used primarily for wholemeal bread or *cáiscín* cakes.

It seems a world away from our experience and perception of the parish today, but as Mary said, smiling broadly at her husband, “It was a hard life but ... they were happy doing it”

Acknowledgements

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Bibliography

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Plate 1 The three corn stands at Tonagarraun set out in a neat row in the Dowd haggard one for oats, one for barley and one for wheat.



Plate 2 One of the corn stands of Tonagarraun consisting of a central upright surrounded by a ring of five equi-spaced uprights which would originally have supported a series of capstones (two of which have been placed in position here, with others hidden in the grass). The corn stands are located conveniently close to the Dowd residence, on the opposite side of the road.



Plate 3 A neatly thatched corn-stack perched on a corn stand of a type similar to those at Tonagarraun (photograph reproduced by kind permission of the Museum of Country Life, National Museum of Ireland, Turlough Park, Castlebar, Co. Mayo).