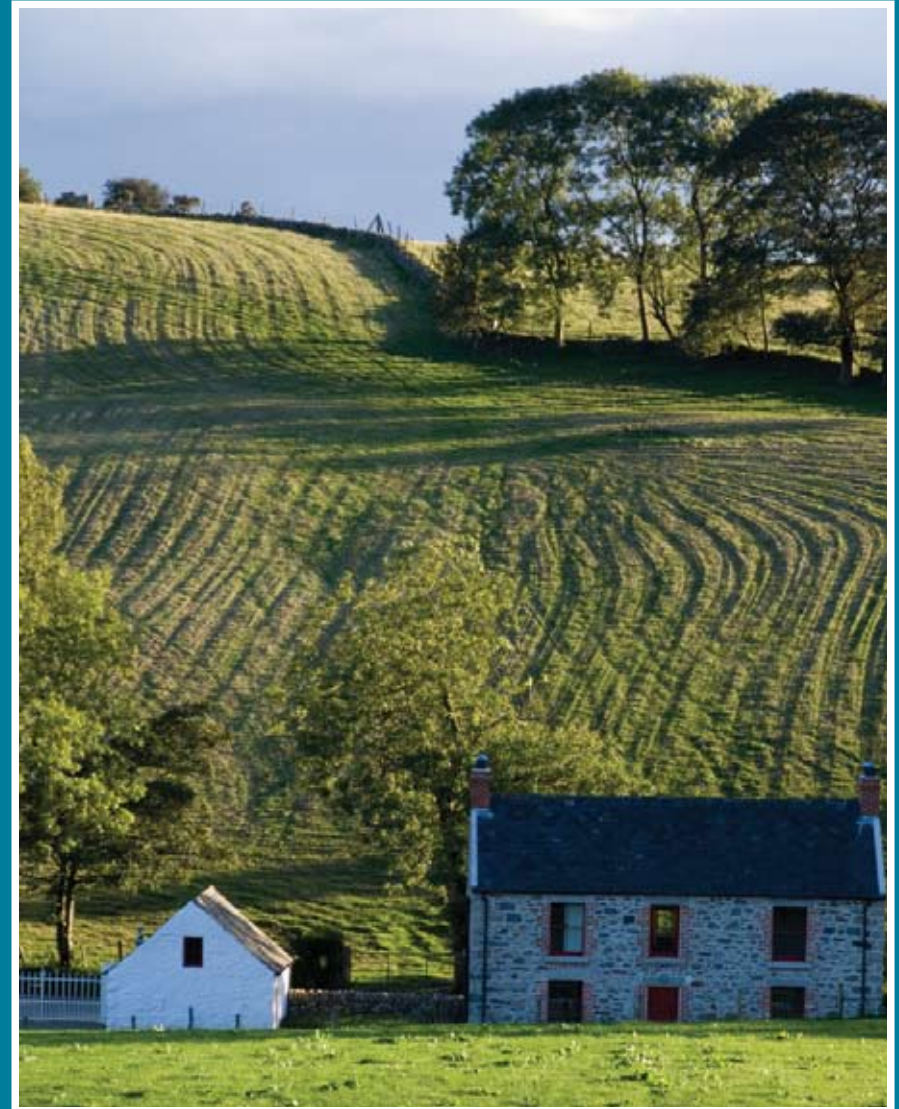


HOMES & HERITAGE

THE MOURNE HOMESTEADS EXPERIENCE



MOURNE HERITAGE TRUST

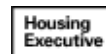


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HOMES & HERITAGE



Foreword

It was not long after its foundation that the Mourne Heritage Trust began to recognise the role of traditional and vernacular buildings in the formation of the character of the Mourne landscape. Clearly these buildings were being lost at an alarming rate, so what could be done? It had also been recognised that many young folk were moving away from the region and one reason for this seems to be the ever rising cost of property. There were already many measures in place to deal with tourist accommodation but none to tackle the issue of permanent homes for local families. In addition the skills necessary for preservation of our traditional buildings were being lost.

The first steps were taken in May 2000 with the appointment of a Built Heritage Officer. A working party was formed and a feasibility study set in motion. A key strand to the study was to advertise locally in order to discover what level of support there might be for work in this field. The results were extremely encouraging with 178 owners contacting the Trust to say they had buildings that would meet the criteria set out and that they would be interested in a scheme that would bring those buildings back into use.

From these initial returns the Trust selected 25 for investigation in some depth. Issues that were taken into consideration included general condition, structural stability, access for people and vehicles, services, viable curtilage and whether the improvement brief could be accommodated. After a detailed assessment process these properties were whittled down to a final nine that not only scored most highly against the above criteria but also represented a variety of building styles and types and provided a geographic spread across the Mourne and Slieve Croob AONB. While two properties were subsequently withdrawn from the scheme by their owners, seven saw it through to completion.



For owners inspired by this project and interested in taking up that challenge we would recommend a further publication that accompanied the scheme "Traditional Buildings in Ireland: A Home Owners Handbook" written by Dawson Stelfox and Richard Oram and drawing on the Mourne Homesteads experience and other examples. It provides practical guidance for those wishing to maintain, repair or restore traditional buildings. Copies of the handbook can be obtained from: Mourne Heritage Trust. Tel. (028) 4372 4059, www.mournelive.com, or email mailto:mht@mourne.co.uk mht@mourne.co.uk

However, as we have outlined the challenge also needs to be taken up by politicians, opinion shapers and policy makers to provide a context that is sympathetic to the retention of these wonderful buildings, which this scheme has clearly demonstrated is not only possible but also hugely rewarding to our society.



Ref:

¹Evans, E.E. (1957) *Irish Folk Ways*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, pp.39-40



As well as the scheme being one of a kind, each building selected is unique; each is sited within the diverse landscapes of Mourne; but all contribute to the character and cultural heritage of both their immediate locality and collectively to that of the wider area. They represent not just bricks and mortar, stone and lime, but also the stories, memories and traditions bound up within their walls, sustaining family and community ties that could have perished with the buildings.

The completed projects demonstrate in their own individual way how a dwelling which might otherwise have been lost, can very successfully be adapted for modern day living. The re-use of existing buildings is inherently sustainable, all the more so here for the active involvement with, and subsequent occupation by, members of the local community. This sustainability was enhanced by working sympathetically with the special character of the buildings and in harmony with the immediate environment.

Numerous challenges had to be overcome in the course of the scheme and many more remain. There are countless vacant traditional buildings dotted around the countryside of Mourne, and further afield. The future of these buildings realistically lies in private hands, but it is imperative that others, particularly government, create a policy environment in which private owners can be encouraged retention of these important aspects of our shared rural heritage.



Planning and grant policies must proactively favour repair and reuse over replacement. Interpretation of existing policies should recognise that traditional buildings are intrinsically important, and not only when they are prominent features in the landscape. The rhetoric of sustainability must finally be translated on a larger scale into action on the ground.

In 1957, the eminent Estyn Evans¹, a man inextricably associated with Mourne, wrote in Irish Folk Ways that “more could be said of the old styles, at their best providing homes of character, comfort and beauty”. The Mourne Homesteads Scheme demonstrates this potential, providing both inspiration and helping to de-

fine a common challenge for the future.



A second part of the feasibility exercise was to carry out an audit of what traditional and vernacular buildings remained in the rural landscape of Mourne. A previous audit had been carried out in 1980 by the Department of Environment and by comparing this with the new data collected it was possible to establish that no less than 1000 such buildings had been lost during the intervening years. From the new study 600 remaining buildings were deemed suitable for restoration.

The third part to the feasibility exercise was the most difficult, to assemble enough funds to move forward and the Trust is most grateful too all of the funders who have contributed.

After funding was secured from the Pilgrim Trust to get the ball rolling with the first dwelling, Rock Cottage, Heritage Lottery Fund came on board as the main project funder and as well as the restoration of the buildings Heritage Lottery Fund were particularly interested in the skills development aspects of the programme. Courses in skills such as thatching, dry stone walling, lime working and traditional masonry among others accompanied the building programme and were conducted on a cross border basis with support from Co-Operation Ireland and Duchas. The Rural Development Council provided funding for the improvement of outbuildings and curtilages, while the Northern Ireland Housing Executive provided a grant for each property in return for the delivery of an exacting specification outlining modern standards of accommodation within. The Esmee Fairburn Foundation also provided substantial funds for the general support of the programme. Finally, the Architectural Heritage Fund provided the necessary loans with Ulster Garden Villages Limited kindly paying the interest. For the property Ronan’s Cottage Ballycoshone, which is a listed building, Environment and Heritage Service provided further grant support.



As can be seen a diverse range of funders facilitated different aspects of this programme, requiring the Trust to set in place a specific and tailored administrative system to support the project. To all our funders must go a sincere thank you.

We would also like to express our thanks to the professional team and contractors involved in the project. The design work of Alistair Coey Architects Ltd has been of a high standard, while the quantity surveying and legal services required to bring the designs to reality were very professionally provided by Hastings and Baird and Johns Elliot respectively. The highly skilled and sensitive building works were carried out by two local Mourne firms, Castledara Developments (Rock Cottage) and Cousins and McKee (All other properties).

Recognition must also be given to the members of the Mourne Heritage Trust's Built Heritage Sub-Group, too numerous to mention in these pages, who evolved the idea of the Mourne Homesteads project and provided knowledgeable guidance throughout. Credit is also due to my fellow Mourne Heritage Trust Board members who had the courage and vision to run with this project.

And of course, none of this would have been possible without the cooperation and forbearance of the owners of the Homesteads themselves, who also made a financial contribution commensurate with the increase in value of their properties. Understandably with such a groundbreaking scheme there have been teething problems along the way and significant delays against the time scales originally estimated. I hope that they can now take much deserved pleasure in the outcomes that have derived for sticking with this initiative and wish them our heartfelt thanks and health to enjoy these fine buildings.

Reflections on Mourne Homesteads

Mourne Homesteads has been a pioneering scheme in many ways. Following a long lament over the loss of traditional buildings, by bringing seven back from the brink of dereliction, as well as encouraging traditional skills, the scheme has arguably been the most successful co-ordinated attempt to reverse their unfortunate decline.

This innovative nature has been recognised in the receipt of a numerous awards and commendations. These include nominations as a UK finalist in the National Lottery Awards in 2005 followed the subsequent year by an RSPB 40th Anniversary Environmental Award in the Planning category. In 2007 the Trust received a 'Mention', given to projects of cultural, social or economic benefit to the community, in the prestigious Civic Trust awards and was a finalist in the Northern Ireland Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors awards. Finally in June 2007 the Trust attended a the Europa Nostra ceremony in Stockholm, Sweden to receive a commendation in the European Union's awards for cultural heritage. Thanks are due to Alistair Coey Ltd who put a great deal of time and effort into entering the scheme for a number of these awards.



Moneyslane Road, Lowtown



This cottage is likely to be the oldest of the structures in the Homesteads scheme. It is a very narrow construction with walls built of field stones set in clay. The roof structure is quite new, being all machine cut timbers, so it is possible the house had at one time been thatched. Yet another indication of its age is the chimney hood in the kitchen which is built of hand made brick but in a manner that suggests that it may have replaced an earlier wattle hood. Also adding to the character, a millstone has been incorporated into the threshold of the entrance door.



The building was originally a two room farmhouse with labourers' lodging, the only remaining evidence of which is the skylight in what was a sleeping loft. As it stood the building could not accommodate all the requirements of the homestead brief and so it was necessary to plan for an extension. Fortunately the site allowed for an additional bay to be built to the gable. Because the construction of the new section is much more regular than the old building, it was decided to make a feature in the external plaster finish, clearly expressing this transition.



The present scheme includes curtilage works to mark out the driveway from the road with a newly planted thorn hedge, a new iron gate in traditional style at the road entrance and the creation of an enclosed cottage garden.

I hope too that as a reader of this booklet you will enjoy learning about the restoration of the individual Mourne Homesteads and perhaps be inspired by them. There have been many challenges and difficulties to face in the implementation of the Mourne Homesteads Project, but on behalf of Mourne Heritage Trust and all involved I take great pride in what has been achieved. The buildings now stand testament to what can be achieved when imagination, determination, sympathetic design, and excellence in construction are applied to traditional buildings. These once almost derelict structures are now comfortable family homes with all the conveniences of 21st century living, together with the character that only time and history can provide.

Dr. Arthur Mitchell, MBE
Chairman
Mourne Heritage Trust.



Rock Cottage, Altnadue, Castlewellan



This was the smallest of the dwellings in the Mourne Homesteads Scheme and the first to be renovated. Occupying a prominent site above the Dublin Road outside Castlewellan, the house is particularly characteristic of Mourne.

The property, as the design team found it, was in a poor condition. Had it not been for the attention of the owners in ensuring the roof remained watertight it would almost certainly have been a ruin.

An extension was needed to meet the accommodation brief laid down by Northern Ireland Housing Executive. Extending upwards and then in length were considered and rejected in favour of a rear extension. This proved successful in allowing the original dwelling to remain the dominant feature of the site.



Among the difficulties encountered was the discovery, after the removal of render and plaster, that the gable wall built against a bank at one end of the house was a single skin of field stone bedded in clay and lime. It was important this fabric was not lost and with advice from a structural engineer it was conserved employing specialist grouting techniques.

Whitehill Road, Castlewellan

This two story farm house was built in its present form in the early years of the last century. There is evidence that it is a remodelling of an earlier building. The single storey byre standing out in front is one clue Another is the way the masonry at the upper end of the house had been built into the bank.



For some reason the building was never finished. The external carcass was completed but the interior never fitted out. According to the family who own the house, it had been built to accommodate a engaged couple after their marriage. Sadly they parted ways without ever reaching the altar. Consequently, until the owner approached the Trust, the house had been used simply for storage. The building proved to be ideal for the Homestead scheme. The structure was sound and it was large enough to accommodate the requirements of the brief with a minimum of intervention and no extension.

The elevations are built of rubble stone with brick dressings. This makes for a most attractive finishing, and therefore it was decided to point rather than render. The variety of stone and brick types used in the original work is very curious. There must have been good reasons at the time of construction. If the whole history of this building was to come to light, there is no doubt it would add to the fascinating story.

Other interesting features with this building are the original gate complete with the stamp of the local maker 'M O'Rorke'. As part of the scheme the old byre was converted to act as a utility room and with its lime wash it acts as a striking contrast to the cut or semi-dressed stone of the main house. A dry stone wall was also rebuilt.

Ronan's Cottage, Ballycoshone, Hilltown



At one time in history this dwelling had been a very substantial farmstead. However, by the time it was offered to the Trust it had stood empty for a number of years. When the buildings making up this homestead were first constructed is difficult to determine because there have been many alterations and upgradings during their long history - but it seems likely that they date from the second half of the 18th century. Unfortunately, in the period between the buildings being offered to the Trust and the time when work could commence, vandals descended on the site and as a result of their attentions a number of historic features were lost. However one significant remaining feature is a fine traditional kitchen hearth.



In its original form the house part seems to have been quite small, not more than two rooms with a sleeping loft above. However, it has been added to and adjusted over the years like so many of the older buildings in Mourne. The Trust however still had to find additional space to meet the accommodation requirements of the Homesteads brief. Fortunately, there was an old dairy against the West gable. It was agreed to break a door through and to incorporate this additional space into the dwelling so that no new build extension was required.



The complex also includes a range of substantial farm offices arranged in parallel to the dwelling and facing it across a private street. These farm buildings were also repaired as part of the current scheme with the street's original cobbles being maintained as a striking feature. Other historic features conserved include a fine set of traditional iron gates.



Dunaval Road, Ballyardle, Kilkeel

Unlike many of the dwellings in the Mourne Homesteads scheme, this house sits at a prominent crossroads location on the Mourne plain between the town of Kilkeel and the coast. The building began life as a two storey dwelling, with a direct entry plan of a fashionable half formal design, so that from the front it appears symmetrical. Built about 1830, it was converted in 1852 to serve as the local Post Office. Indeed a post box can still be seen nearby. The room to the right of the entrance was given up to this purpose so that a lean-to had to be added to augment the living accommodation. This resulted in a very awkward and inconvenient plan.



The construction of the original building is solid brickwork. This made it unusual but not unique in the district at that time. It is most likely the bricks were made on site from the fine local alluvial clay, burnt in temporary clamps. The lean-to was a very inferior construction of rubble stone.

The Mourne Heritage Trust scheme has reclaimed the post room for domestic use to create a two bedroom house with two living rooms, a kitchen and a bathroom. This has been achieved by replacing the staircase where it would originally have been and replanning the lean-to.

Head Road, Silent Valley

This building is located in a prominent site above the Head Road, near the Silent Valley, and enjoys stunning views out to sea matched only by the spectacular mountain backdrop featuring Slieve Binnian. Built on the stream line, there is an issue of clear fresh mountain water close to the North wall. The building had never been altered in its previous history. It is a two storey, two bay, direct entry vernacular farm house of about 1830 and is approached from the Head Road up a track of a little over ¼ mile. There were the remnants of a group of out buildings and a single ash tree remained of the original shelter planting.

The original construction is the highest quality of any of the buildings encountered during the Mourne Homesteads project and consists of partly dressed granite blocks, with the joints packed out with small stones known as snecks and gallets and bedded in high quality lime mortar.



In preparing the improvement scheme, devising effective land drainage was a paramount importance because of the quick reaction of the local terrain to rainfall. Getting services to the building also presented problems. Mourne Heritage Trust has now provided a lean-to extension to house a bathroom and utility room. The only structural intervention is a new



doorway to link old with new. The boundary walls of the plot have been rebuilt, the out-house replastered and the shelter planting has been augmented with three young trees.

Valley Road, Ballymartin

This, the largest of the Homesteads, was a two storey, vernacular, direct entry farm house of the early 19th century. It began as a single bay, two storey house of one room up and one room down with a byre and feed loft adjoining. Over the course of the 19th century this grew and was finally re-roofed in the early 20th century with one unified and conforming pitch. When Mourne Heritage Trust surveyed the building it consisted of a two bay dwelling, a lean-to single storey lodging against the West gable, a two bay byre and loft approached by steps at the East gable, two pig houses and a ruined cart shed.

The quality of the rubble stone masonry varied considerably from one building period to another. The public road had been realigned in front of the house in recent times, leaving a deep verge which the Trust has cleared levelled and planted with grass.

The Homesteads scheme has combined the old lodging and byre with the living accommodation to provide three bedrooms, a living room, a dining room, kitchen, bathroom and separate shower room. The interventions were limited to three new internal doorways and three new windows in the North wall of what had been the byre. An original well has been kept and the front boundary wall rebuilt.

