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Feature article

The Hearth

and its significance in Irish homes

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THE HEARTH

and its significance in Irish Homes

"Níl aon tinteáin mar do thinteán féin" is probably the most famous of all Irish proverbs and translates as "there's no hearth like your own hearth".

The significance of the hearth in Irish homes is enormous, having been the centre point for both domestic and social activity for generations. In fact, the Greek translation of hearth is *kardia* meaning *heart*.

The hearth is identified as the base of the fireplace consisting of a large flag stone. The construction of the hearth and fireplace varied in many parts but in Co. Mayo a stone seat was usually constructed on each side of the hearth. A 'keeping-hole' containing paraphernalia e.g. tobacco, pipes, snuff box and knitting, was fashioned into the wall on each side of the hearth wall. Roof spaces above the hearth wall stored horse collars and tackle and perhaps fishing nets, floats and lobster pots. An over mantel positioned on the hearth wall, originally installed as a hood to catch the smoke, facilitated the hanging of laundry and the display of religious and other ornaments. A settle-bed, usually for grandparents, was situated to the side of the hearth.

The hearth evolved from a fire that was located in the centre of the house which later migrated to a solid cross-wall. The hearth gave direction and orientation to the whole house. For instance, the room directly behind the hearth wall was known as the 'room above', while any room behind the opposite wall to the hearth was known as the 'room below'.

There were few domestic activities in which the hearth did not play a part. The hearth could accommodate up to three fires at once – the main fire was used for cooking meals in a pot hanging on a crane. A smaller fire was used for baking bread and another pile of coals was used to keep a kettle on the boil. A variety of cooking implements stored beside the hearth e.g. shovels, pokers, tongs, bread sticks, griddles, waffle irons and kettles of all sizes, implied the type of cooking that could be undertaken.

The fire in the hearth was multifunctional to provide heat, light and a means of cooking. It was around the hearth that meals were eaten, news was discussed, stories were told and children were cradled. Many generations lived in front of the same hearth. The poet, Seamus Heaney, acknowledges the significance of the hearth in many of his writings and uses *hearth language* or dialect.

Many traditions have been associated with the hearth and fire. When a family emigrated, a neighbour or relative brought a tongs with a lit sod from the emigrating neighbour's house, to their own fire. Its significance was important because even though the emigrant's fire was now quenched, the fire never really went out. When the emigrant returned home again the tongs would be given back and a lit sod would be returned to relight a new fire. This tradition is alluded to in the Lahardane Titanic Park, where the 'Addergoole Hearth' there consists of stones from each of the houses from which the Addergoole Fourteen departed.

Superstitions relating to the hearth were plentiful. It was believed that certain items placed on the hearth brought good fortune, for instance, a flint stone symbolised light and sight, sticks represented heat, a coin symbolised wealth, corn signified food and a horse shoe represented good luck.

Other superstitious beliefs proclaimed that if a cat sat on the hearth, there would be rain. To avoid sweeping out good luck, the floor was swept from the door to the hearth. A boy would not marry a girl unless she could make a lovely fire on the hearth. A cure for chilblains was to rub hot ashes on them and rub against the hearth.



On the morning of St. Bridget's Day (Feb 1st) the ashes in the hearth were examined for signs that St. Bridget had been.

Over time, the purpose of hearth has changed from one of necessity to one of visual interest. Nowadays, hearths are usually less central to most people's daily life because of modern cooking and heating methods.

Nevertheless, a hearth stone can still be seen under modern stoves or fireplaces as a nod to an old tradition and many still believe in the old proverb "*Níl aon tinteáin mar do thinteán féin*".

Sources:

- The Hearth and Stool and All* by Kevin Danaher
- 19 Acres* by John Healy 1978
- Hearth and Chimney in the Irish House*, O Danachair
- The Celtic Hearth, the Heart of the Household* by Brian Walsh
- The Mayo News*, the 10 Apr 2012
- Duchas.ie*

A brief history of the townland GLEBE

Located in the west of the parish of Keelogue. Occupied by the Rev. George V. Hart, and let to Patrick Ruane at £6 yearly.

It is all under grazing. Co. Cess* 4 shillings per acre. Tithe 1 shilling per £. The ruins of Kildacommoge old church and burial ground are here.

* *The County Cess was a form of local taxation. It is derived from the word 'assessment'.*

A brief history of the surname HART

While a minority of Hart families in Ireland may be descended from English settlers of the name like the Hart(e)s of Lullingstone in Kent who established themselves in Co. Limerick in the 16th century, the great majority descended from the Irish sept Ó hAirt, one of the so-called Four Tribes of Tara, whose territory was in Co. Meath but who re-established themselves in Co. Sligo. The Connacht counties of Sligo, Leitrim and Roscommon, remained the principal homeland of the Hart(e)s and the O Harts. The surname was rarely found with the prefix 'O' until the present century.¹

(O) Hart, Ó hAirt: Hart is a common English name brought in by the Plantation of Ulster. Ó hAirt, originally of Meath, this sept was pushed westwards by Anglo-Norman pressure and attained prominence in its new territory.²

Hart, Harte, O Harte, O Hart, O Hairt, Ó hAirt, 'descendants of Art' (bear, stone, noble); the name of a Meath family originally seated in the neighbourhood of Tara, but dispossessed soon after the Anglo-Norman invasion when they settled in the barony of Carbury, in Co. Sligo. The name is still very common in Connacht.³

Of the 122 Hart births in Ireland in 1890 – including variants – 27 occurred in Leinster, 16 occurred in Munster, 28 occurred in Ulster, and 51 occurred in Connacht. The surname was principally found in Counties Sligo, Leitrim and Roscommon, Antrim, Dublin and Cork.

¹ From "*Irish Family Names*" by Brian de Breffny

² From "*The Surnames of Ireland*" by Edward MacLysaght

³ From "*Irish Names and Surnames*" by Rev. Patrick Woulfe 1993 edition

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