



## 8

# Houses and Hygiene

*After 1170 Dublin took on the appearance of a typical English provincial city and its rulers faced similar problems relating to the regular supply of fresh water and to the safe disposal of human and animal waste.*



Thanks to numerous archaeological excavations, we now know a good deal about how Dublin may have looked to its Anglo-Norman and Irish captors in 1170. At that time most houses appear to have had post-and-wattle walls and turf or thatched roofs. They were windowless and smoke from the central hearth would have escaped through a hole in the roof. Even the residences of the Hiberno-Norse kings may have been built in this style, for we are told that a special wattle ‘palace’ (large hall) was provided for King Henry II and his entourage for their stay in Dublin over the cold winter of 1171–2. Thereafter sturdy, timber-framed houses, some with stone-built ground floors, replaced the older ones and the street-scape probably became more regular. Rocque’s map (1756) shows a fairly uniform pattern of building-plots that may have owed a good deal to medieval precedents. A few of the ancient plots still survive in the historic core of the city, but most modern buildings occupy several former plots that have been amalgamated into a single property unit over time.

## Town Houses

# Town houses

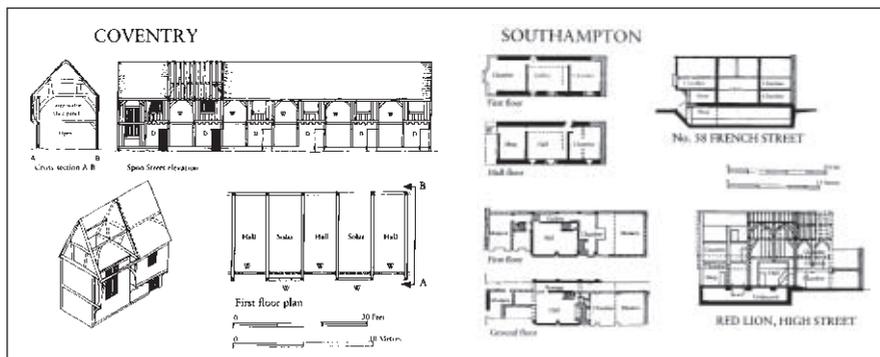
A typical merchant's or craftworker's house occupied a long, narrow burgage plot. 'Burgage' comes from medieval Latin *burgagium*, referring to a particular type of land tenure. For example, the plot of land was normally held for a money rent rather than in return for labour services and the occupier was free to sublet it or to bequeath it to members of his or her family. As Speed's map suggests and the scale-model shows, houses in medieval Dublin usually had their gables (end walls) on the street frontage, though special arrangements had to be made on corner sites. The garden area behind each house was used for many different purposes: for latrines and rubbish pits, for storage, for keeping animals, and for growing vegetables and fruit.



Town houses varied enormously in size and design. City-centre houses would often have had two or even three storeys above the ground floor and their walls were sometimes built of stone. The basic building material, however, was timber. Heavy timbers were used to construct a rigid framework, the panels being filled in with wattle and daub. Extra space was gained by jettying out the upper floors over the narrow streets. At the other extreme, humble cabins with mud walls probably existed on the outer fringes of the city, many of these being occupied by people of Irish descent.

City-centre houses would often have had two or even three storeys above the ground floor and their walls were sometimes built of stone. The basic building material, however, was timber. Heavy timbers were used to construct a rigid framework, the panels being filled in with wattle and daub. Extra space was gained by jettying out the upper floors over the narrow streets. At the other extreme, humble cabins with mud walls probably existed on the outer fringes of the city, many of these being occupied by people of Irish descent.

**Above left:** Grant of a burgage plot to William Russell, 1236, preserved in the White Book. A William Russell was one of the two provosts, or assistants to the mayor, during the mayoral year 1235-6, and they may well have been the same person.



**Left:** Plans and elevations of English late medieval houses. The style of housing in Dublin was probably similar to that in English cities and towns, but no comparable houses have survived from this period in Ireland. A solar is an upper chamber, usually at first-floor level.

**Below:** A thirteenth-century rectangular post-and-wattle hut at Back Lane. This structure was probably not used for habitation as it lacked a hearth, but wood chippings found around the entrance suggest an industrial use. Unusually, a stone surface in the foreground comprised several fragments of a rotary quern stone.



**Bottom right:** Fourteenth- or fifteenth-century floor tiles from St Patrick's Cathedral. Line-impressed tiles such as these appear to have made up a tile pavement 1 metre (3 feet) below floor level, which was covered by the collapse of the nave roof in 1544.

## FINDS BOX

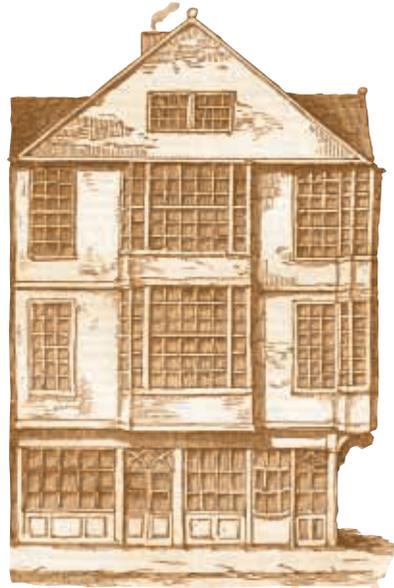
### Building Evidence

Most of the urban buildings in the Middle Ages would have been constructed from a timber frame and insulated with wattle and daub (wicker-work panels covered with clay or dung). Buildings were roofed using either thatch, slate, stone or earthenware roof-tiles. Medieval masons were commissioned by wealthy patrons to construct magnificent buildings for the display of worldly and spiritual power. The few stone buildings in medieval towns were churches, castles, town halls or strong houses (the latter being owned by wealthy merchants and craftworkers). Glass was expensive and generally used to glaze only stone buildings, so most domestic buildings would have had wooden shutters over the windows to prevent the rain from coming in, and hanging textiles to cut out draughts.

The taste for paving the floors of the finest buildings using decorated, lead-glazed, earthenware tiles was introduced into Ireland some time in the mid thirteenth century and continued until the mid sixteenth century. Although the earliest examples were clearly imported (perhaps from south-west England), a local industry was soon established. These tiles come from the religious sites of medieval Dublin, including both Christ Church and St Patrick's Cathedrals, St Mary's Abbey (located on the north side of the Liffey) and the parish church of St Audoen on High Street. Sadly, hardly any Irish paved floors have survived intact and *in situ*, i.e. in their original location. Two exceptions are known from excavations: St Thomas's Abbey, Meath Market, and the Augustinian friary at Cecilia Street in Temple Bar.



The internal layout of the bigger houses was very varied, but a standard pattern would be a shop at the front on the ground floor with a hall and/or chamber and a kitchen behind; other living and working rooms were located on the first floor, and sleeping and servants' quarters on the upper floor or floors, or in the roof space. Servants, both male and female, were probably a common feature of well-to-do households; as in later centuries, young women in particular would have sought opportunities for personal advancement in a large city such as Dublin. Access to the garden or yard was gained either from a back lane or by means of narrow passage-ways leading at intervals from the street and built over at first-floor level and above. The maximum width of a burgage plot in Dublin was 64 feet (approximately 20 metres).



Drawing of the last surviving cage-work house in Dublin, demolished in 1812. This building was probably post-medieval in date, but archaeological evidence suggests that the basic technique of half-timbered construction in Dublin dates back to the thirteenth century.

## *inside a merchant's house*

### Inside a Merchant's House

The reconstruction shows two important features of a typical merchant's house – the kitchen below and the office above. At this social level servants were usually employed and a single household might number ten or twelve individuals altogether. This is why population estimates based on the number of recorded heads of household require a higher multiplier for cities and towns than for villages and hamlets. In the early part of our period merchants were often away from home on voyages at sea, leaving their wives in charge, but they gradually became more sedentary and adapted themselves to office life.



Reconstruction of a merchant's house at Dublinia. The merchant pictured on the first floor of the house is clearly removed from the household duties below. He wears brightly coloured clothing reflecting his high social status and stores other clothes in a large chest.

**Clockwise from top right:**

Large well-preserved iron key, showing details of the fine casting work involved in its manufacture. Found at Christchurch Place, it is clearly a high status object. Such a key might have been used to secure the door of a house, or a chest containing valuables.

Iron knife with a bone handle of thirteenth-century date found at Wood Quay. Bone was ideal for manufacturing small functional objects, especially handles, and was a by-product of the medieval diet.

Thirteenth- or fourteenth-century pewter pricket candlestick from High Street. This rare example has an open-work stem with decorative arches on each side of the base. A candle would have been placed on a spike projecting from the circular plate. The form and function of this object attest to the wealth of its owner.

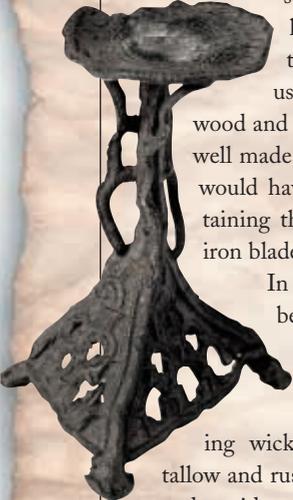
## FINDS BOX

### Household Fittings

Many household fittings were made from iron, such as large door keys, locks and small hinges. One of the most important household tools was the knife, which had many different uses, from preparing food to carving objects of wood and bone. Medieval eating knives were sharp and well made, often with decorative handles. Most houses would have had a rotary sharpening stone for maintaining the sharpness of knives and other tools with iron blades.

In the Middle Ages, candles were made from beeswax, which was an expensive commodity. Consequently, beeswax candles were used mainly in churches or in the homes of the wealthy. Simpler oil lamps containing wicks lighted most ordinary houses, or tallow and rush candles, which gave off poor light and acrid smoke in poorly ventilated rooms. The main light would have come from the open fire, where all the cooking was done and which would have provided the only source of heat in the house.



Literary texts of a certain genre tell us something of the lifestyle and social standing of merchants' wives. The stock image is that of the Good Wife as mistress of the household. She would manage the servants, treating them fairly but firmly, and setting an example by working alongside them in and around the kitchen. The wife would go to the market for pro-

## FINDS BOX

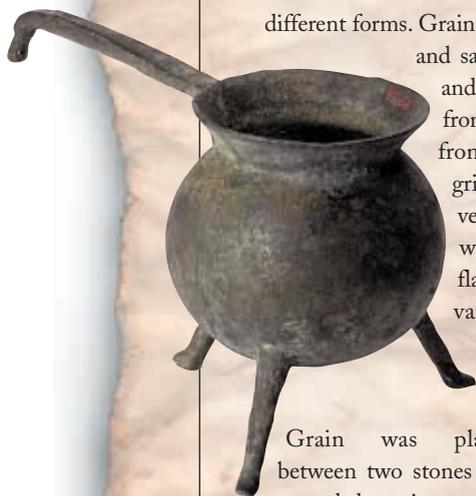
### Food Preparation

Evidence for the production, preparation and cooking of food and drink in the Middle Ages comes in vessels of many different forms. Grain was stored in large jars to keep it dry and safe from vermin, whereas wine, milk and other liquids were kept in jugs made from local pottery. Mortars (bowls made from strong material) were used for grinding and mixing purposes. Cooking vessels are often blackened with soot where they have been exposed to the flames. As well as pottery, vessels of various types could be made from wood, metal and even stone.

For grinding corn, a rotary quern stone would have been used.

Grain was placed between two stones and ground down into coarse flour by the action of the stones as they rubbed together. Grinding corn was the reserved right of private mills, which were driven by rivers within the environs of the medieval city. Payment was required for the use of these mills.

Small rotary quern stones, however, are common finds in the domestic refuse of the medieval city, suggesting that the law on grinding was not strictly followed or upheld.



**Far left:** Cast skillet, or long-handled saucepan, of thirteenth- or fourteenth-century date. The three legs give the stability for use freestanding over an open fire in the kitchen of a wealthy citizen.

**Left:** Reconstruction of a merchant's kitchen at Dublinia. On the table there are various jugs and cooking pots containing herbs for flavouring meat and fish dishes, and game hangs from the ceiling. Large joints of meat would have been roasted on a spit over the fire.

**Below:** Reconstructed wine jug of local manufacture with a green glaze, slashed decoration on the handle and a frilled base. Pottery was being made in Dublin from at least 1190 and probably as early as 1175-80. Potting was a suburban trade located at Crocker's Street, on the line of present-day Oliver Bond Street.

