

reached marriage age - which for the majority was in the late teens. Four out of five farmers in pre-Famine Mayo held less than five acres. Below the farmer in the social stratification came the 'Spalpeen' (the word comes from the Gaelic words meaning scythe and penny) - the agricultural labourer - who held just a patch of land which contained his one roomed cabin and potato plot. Potatoes and skimmed milk were the sole items of diet for him and his family. His rent was paid through his own labour. Spalpeens who kept just one pig were considered comparatively wealthy.

MARRIAGE, HOUSING AND DIET

A stipend of between one and two Pounds was paid to the priest for the marriage ceremony. This fee represented about three months wages for a labourer. The majority of the peasantry married young as they had no prospect of financial improvement with time. Thomas Campbell Foster in his 'Letter on the Condition of the People of Ireland' commented at the time thus: "If there is any evil more prominent than another in the social condition of Ireland, it is the improvident and early marriages which are contracted... a lad is no sooner sixteen or seventeen years of age, than he marries some girl of fifteen or sixteen... he has a family growing up about him before he is a man". In 1821, 1% of the male population of Mayo were widowers by the age of 18, most of their wives having died in childbirth. Child mortality was high running at about 20%. Early marriages were condoned by the Roman Catholic Church and considered necessary by the peasantry in an era when it was necessary to depend on the support of one's family should illness prevent one from working.

Commenting on marriage and housing Arthur Young stated "In England, where the poor are in many respects in such a superior state, a couple will not marry unless they can get a house. To build [in England]... will cost from twenty-five to sixty pounds; half the life and all the vigour and youth and of a man and woman are passed, before they can save such a sum... But in Ireland the cabin is not an object of a moment's consideration". The houses of the poor of Mayo cost almost nothing to construct. Materials and skilled labour were available at little cost. The usual cabin consisted of one room. The first three feet of the walls were of dry stone construction followed by two feet of turf. Branches of trees were used as rafters. These were then filled in with woven twigs covered with turf thick enough to allow grass to grow to mat the material together. A tiny hole in the roof allowed the smoke from the fire, located in the middle of the floor, to escape. When grass grew on the roofs these 'mud cabins' blended in so well with the countryside that census enumerators missed many of them. Commenting on the housing to the Poor Law Commissioners in 1835, Ballinrobe man Courtney Kenny reported that some tenant farmers of his parish had bedding though "the bedding is generally bad". The Rev. Thomas J. Burgh, Anglican rector of the same parish stated that "bed covering was insufficient and many members of the same family were often in one bed with little under and on the clay floor". Cosy thatched cottages were the preserve of wealthy tenants, middlemen and agents. In pre-Famine Mayo many tenants lived in villages, not on their holdings as different patches of land were rented from year to year. Rev. Burgh put the annual rent of a cabin with one rood of land as high as four Pounds - the equivalent of a year's wages for a labourer. In these cabins families of thirteen and fourteen children surviving to adulthood were common place.

Cooking and dining were done out of doors in dry weather. Turf and timber were the main fuels. Turf cost from 2 to 3 Pounds per ton. Most trees and bushes