



Sweathouse Conservation Guidelines

for Landowners and Community Groups

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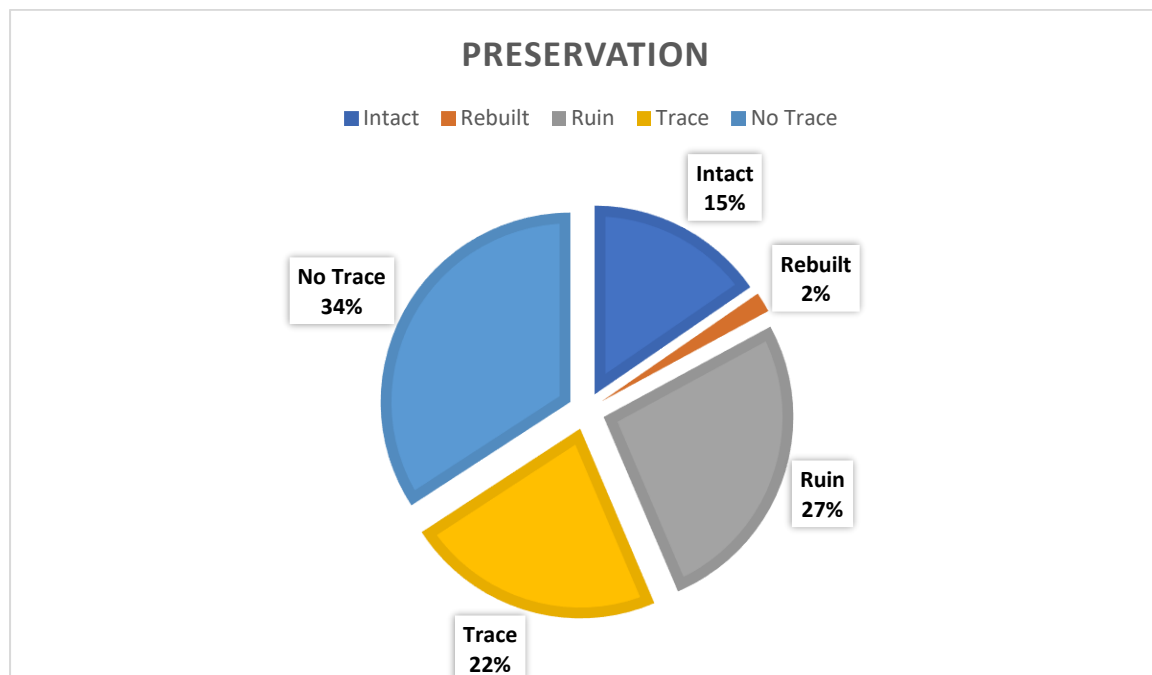
Comhairle Chontae Liatroma
Leitrim County Council

An Chomhairle Oidhreachta
The Heritage Council



Sweathouses are small, stone-built structures that were used as a type of sauna. They generally have a small entrance, are often built into hillsides or banks, near to streams, wells or lakes. They are a distinctive archaeological site of the northwest of Ireland and are a particular feature of the Leitrim landscape.

There are now 117 Sweathouses recorded for Co. Leitrim, however, only 66% of them have any visible remains left. Only 18 examples still have an original roof and can be considered fully intact. The following outlines how these structures, in various states of preservation, might be conserved and protected into the future with the cooperation of landowners and the wider community.



It is hoped that these guidelines will be of use to landowners in making responsible choices for heritage but also potentially increasing the value of the land through government initiatives.

The ways in which we can protect these sites into the future can be divided into two categories: relatively simple protective measures, and more complex conservation measures. The first category is focused on raising awareness and the prevention of harm. The second are preservation measures that take action to prevent them from collapsing or eroding (*i.e.* repairing them). Before anything is done, everyone should be aware that you are not permitted to interfere with a recorded monument – which Sweathouses are – without first having notified the National Monuments Service and receive consent for proposed actions (for more details see page 3).

This is a summary of the general issues and steps that need to be followed and consultation with your Heritage Officer and the National Monuments Service is always an essential part of the conservation process.

In what ways are Sweathouses vulnerable?

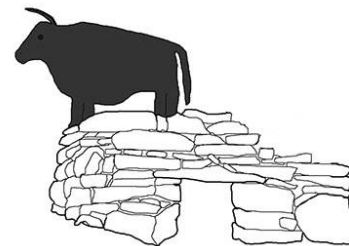
Vegetation

The soil at a Sweathouse is relatively well drained due to the stones underneath it. They are also out-of-the-way places, at corners of fields or on riverbanks *etc.* Therefore, trees and bushes tend to take and grow on or near the Sweathouse. This can provide protection in a way, but larger trees can cause serious problems. The roots themselves may work through the stones of the walls and roof of the structure. Furthermore, with increasing numbers of summer storms, the wind effect on the trees causes them to rock back and forth – as do the roots – and this destabilises the structure. This has been seen at 11 of the surveyed sites in 2022.



Livestock

For the most part, there is no issue with livestock, particularly sheep and lighter animals. However, where cattle are in place they can put enormous pressure on the surrounding earthen mound, and on a hillside, can even stand on the roof of the structure. This caused collapse over time (and potential injury to cattle also). There are 9 instances in Co. Leitrim alone where cattle have inadvertently caused the collapse of Sweathouses.



People



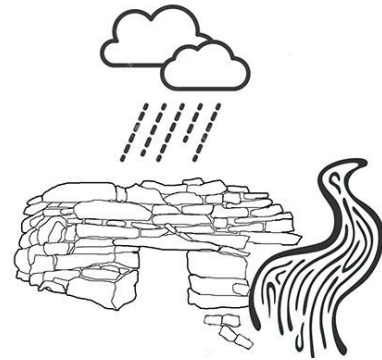
The biggest threat to Sweathouses is a lack of awareness, not just of where they were located but mainly how significant they are. They are only common in counties Leitrim, Roscommon, Sligo, Cavan and Fermanagh – and so they are important part of regional cultural identity.

Many Sweathouses have been removed from the landscape by people over recent decades. This has been mainly to clear land or to reuse the stone elsewhere, and sometimes because the structure seemed unsafe or unstable. This has rarely been done maliciously but instead from lack of knowledge.

Natural Erosion

Sweathouses originally all had a covering of earth or sod placed over them. This acted as insulation, but it also weighed down the stones used to build the roof. As this soil has been washed away in most cases, the roof and upper walls become less stable (therefore some vegetation is a good thing).

The setting of most Sweathouses is on hillsides or riverbanks. There has been a significant increase in rainfall over recent decades especially during winter¹, leading to increased flows in drains and streams - so the erosional power of relatively small streams has increased. Perched on the edge, some Sweathouses have been undermined or will likely be so in the near future.



View of typical ruined Sweathouse near Kinlough

Legal Protection

Official protection for Sweathouse sites, no matter what condition they are in, is provided for under the National Monuments Acts 1930-2004. The authority responsible for maintaining the register of sites and giving permissions is the National Monuments Service. The register of all archaeological sites, including Sweathouses, can be found at www.archaeology.ie. Any registered monument requires that the National Monuments Service is notified 8 weeks in advance of any works in the vicinity.

So far only one Sweathouse in Co. Leitrim is registered on the National Inventory of Architectural Heritage. This is at Gubnaveagh (Ref. 30921001) and is considered of regional importance. It too has protections under the Architectural Heritage and Historic Monuments Act, 1999.

These legal protections apply regardless of the state of preservation of the Sweathouse (or any other monument) and include works that might indirectly impact a site, such as ground disturbance or tree-felling.

¹ Data from the EPA shows an increase in average annual rainfall of 5% in the period 1981-2010, compared to the period 1961-1990, see <https://www.epa.ie/environment-and-you/climate-change/what-impact-will-climate-change-have-for-ireland/>

Protective Measures

There are a number of actions that landowners and the local community can undertake to provide protection to these monuments. Most of these actions are straight-forward but address the threats identified as effecting Sweathouses in Co. Leitrim. They can be separated into three main headings; Awareness, Maintenance and Fencing.

Awareness

Just knowing where a Sweathouse is located means that it can be respected as a vulnerable part of our heritage. It must not be used as a dumping ground and stones should not be removed for use elsewhere. The fact that there are only about 300 or so on the island of Ireland must be emphasised, and these are part of the character of the region.

Sweathouse sites which have collapsed or seemingly removed already, are even more susceptible to further damage. This is mainly because they don't appear to most of us structures, but instead as a pile of stones or a slight hollow. To an archaeologist they can be a wealth of information, either through detailed survey or excavation. Also, what lies between the surface could be key to answering even more questions about the Sweathouse if it were to be investigated in the future.

Some Sweathouses that are in a relatively good condition have had fires set within them recently. This is not recommended as even the best structures have likely not been tested by such heat in over a century and the outcomes are unpredictable. Furthermore, modern ashes and embers contaminate the site, so that if it were excavated in the future radiocarbon dates would be unreliable.

Finally, by knowing where a Sweathouse is, and what state of preservation it is in, we can measure if it is deteriorating, and how quickly, and remedy this through more robust preservation measures (see page 6).

Maintenance

Nobody should interfere with a Sweathouse, even to 'save' it, without an approved management plan and permission from the Minister through the National Monuments Service. However, there are simple measures that we can apply.

Vegetation growing in or on a Sweathouse can for a while help preserve it. However, as trees grow the roots open the joints between the stones. This can consolidate the structure but also can dislodge stones. The main problem is that in high winds, the leaves of the trees catch, swaying the tree and rocking the root system. This push-pull action is evidently causing Sweathouses to collapse. If the tree is removed using biocide, then the roots will shrink and stability will be lost without immediate further intervention. Therefore, trim small trees, bushes and briars instead of killing them off. See that this is done in line with good ecological practice and at an appropriate time of year.

Do not remove lichens as these give an age the stone, adding character but also their absence can indicate 'fresh' breaks or rebuilds in the Sweathouse.

Lastly, keeping the immediate area drained of standing water will help prevent livestock poaching the ground, and ultimately slow the slippage of the Sweathouse mound. Make sure any new drains are not too close to the Sweathouse and divert any existing channels if they are too close (this will only be possible in occasional cases).



Sweathouse with collapsed roof caused by tree roots (near Rossinver)

Fencing

The purpose of a fencing off the area around a Sweathouse is mainly to keep heavy livestock out. Sheep and lighter animals do relatively little damage. The fence itself also serves as a reminder to people that they should not infer unnecessarily with a given Sweathouse. Fencing need not be elaborate or even surround the whole Sweathouse. However, it should be as far out from the structure as can be accommodated. This relies largely on common-sense and what is practical at each Sweathouse. The presence of a fence further demonstrates that the landowner has interest in the structure and has made efforts to protect the site.

Conservation & Preservation Measures (Repair & Reconstruction)

The following measures require more thought, as every Sweathouse has a unique set of circumstances surrounding it, and the consequences of poor repair work can be serious in the long-term. There are a number of stages to consider prior to progressing with any preservation work and it is highly recommended that landowners and members of the community contact the Heritage Officer (County Council) or the National Monuments Service for initial advice.

Record There must be an accurate and factual archaeological record of the Sweathouse prior to any repair work being undertaken. This will allow appropriate conservation to be planned (i.e. management plan) and means scaled drawings, photographs and descriptions of the structure. One of the main principals of conservation is that rebuilding should stop at the point where conjecture begins – so simply, never rebuild what was not there before.

Retain the original structure must be kept – insofar as this is possible – stones of the Sweathouse should be kept in place; no stone should be removed if at all possible. This is true also for fallen stones, these should be kept nearby (for potential repairs, but also to show what type of stone was used originally).

Repair If it is necessary to repair part of the Sweathouse, then like for like materials from the site should be used. Repairs should be made only to stabilise the stonework and may involve the use of ‘pin-stones’ to tighten the joints of the masonry already there.

Replace It may be the case that a stone is missing, or broken or decayed, causing a weakness in the structure. Such a stone can be replaced by an experienced stone mason. Only look to replace stones if the stone required is not available on site, but it should be sourced locally.

Rebuild If all the proceeding stages are applied and the structure is still unstable, it may be appropriate to rebuild a section of wall and/or roof. This should be considered a last option and only ever following discussion with a stone Masons, Structural engineer, and the statutory authorities. Where it is decided that it is the only option, then it must be carried out by an experienced dry-stone mason and matching the style in materials and construction of the original structure. Concrete and modern materials should be avoided.

Stabilise Sweathouses are peculiar dry-stone structures in that the stonework is often loosely fitted and yet many of them have corbelled ceilings (meaning the stones gradually move inwards towards the top). Sweathouses would also have been covered with a mound of earth, for insulation, but it may also have been a way of stabilising the stones into place (as a counterweight). Over time many of the mounds have eroded away but could be replaced if deemed otherwise structurally secure.

Conservation Schemes

There are a number of funded conservation programmes available. There are two current schemes which are particularly well-suited to Sweathouses. However, Landowners who are farmers should also be aware of the new Agri-Climate Rural Environment Scheme (ACRES) under Ireland's CAP Strategic Plan. In ACRES a payable Tier 3 action includes the protection and maintenance of archaeological monuments- arable/grassland, and therefore, the conservation of a Sweathouse on your farm could be of real benefit.

The Community Monuments Fund

The aim of this fund is to provide grants for the conservation, maintenance, protection and promotion of local monuments and historic sites. The grants cover 100% of eligible costs across three funding streams. Stream 1 is for the conservation and repair of archaeological monuments with a maximum grant of €85,000. Stream 2 is funding for Conservation Management Plans up to €30,000 – a step essential in implementing any application for Stream 1 – while Stream 3 is for providing access and infrastructure.

The Community Monuments Fund was created specifically for conservation works to be carried out on monuments which are deemed to be significant and in need of urgent support, enabling them to withstand the effects of climate change, and making the sites more accessible. In 2022, almost €6 million was awarded across 128 applications. It seems that many Sweathouses in Co. Leitrim would meet such criteria and be suitable candidates for this scheme.

Adopt A Monument

This scheme is administered by the Heritage Council and operated by Abarta Heritage to help communities become actively involved in the conservation and interpretation of their local archaeological heritage sites. Essentially, local groups of volunteers, with the permission of the Landowner, can opt to research a given monument, get approval for conservation measures and then implement those protective measures in an on-going way. Sourcing funding through Local Authorities and businesses (including semi-state organisations such as Coillte and Bord na Móna) has been very successful in this scheme.

As can be seen from the protective measures outlined here for Sweathouses, a collaborative approach from the community would be a welcome means of achieving such conservation.

Further Information

The first point of contact should be the Heritage Office of the County Council (<https://www.leitrimcoco.ie/eng/community-culture/heritage/>). The Heritage Officer (Ms Sarah Malone) will be able to advise on all matters outlined here. There are several important websites with a wide range of information relating to the conservation of archaeological stone structures such as Sweathouses.

For information about where recorded Sweathouses are located and forms to report newly discovered sites, or especially for notification of works, visit the National Monuments Service: www.archaeology.ie

For detailed guidelines on various aspects of conservation of buildings visit the National Inventory of Architectural Heritage: www.buildingsofireland.ie/guidance/

The ACRES scheme is detailed by the Department for Food and the Marine at: <http://www.gov.ie/ACRES/>

For more information on the Adopt a Monument Scheme visit: <https://www.abartaheritage.ie/adopt-a-monument-ireland/>