On the Edge of Improvement: Rathlin Island and the Modern World

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Abstract This paper focuses on the archaeology of an island off the north coast of Ireland as a case study of the processes affecting rural life in the country in the Age of Improvement. The nature of changes to management of the landscape and architectural modes is discussed and an attempt is made to identify the agents of reform. The response and negotiation of the islanders to emergent commercialisation is discerned by changes to traditional houses and the material emerging from recent excavation work.

Keywords Capitalism and improvement · Landscape · Islands · Ireland

Introduction

The notion of "improvement" as it evolved in the discourses of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is inexorably bound up with the emergence of capitalism. While improvement in Ireland was intended to act chiefly as a catalyst for economic transformation, its implications extended to domestic and social spheres. The nature of British governance in Ireland saw the values of capitalism promoted as an avenue of moral redemption for a backward people. The far-reaching consequences of capitalism have been a popular subject of study for historical archaeologists given the multiplicity of its expressions in material culture (e.g., Leone and Potter 1999). These have ranged from architecture to artifacts and landscape organisation (Deetz 1977; Johnson 1996; Orser 1996). Of equal importance have been discourses concerned with the response to evolving conditions under capitalism by various strata of society (e.g. Beaudry et al. 1991; Hall 1992).

The aim of this paper is to attempt to detect the progress and features of improvement as experienced on an Irish island in the eighteenth and nineteenth cen-

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turies. Rathlin Island is located some 9.6 km (6 mi) off the coast of County Antrim at the northeast extremity of Ireland (Fig. 1). The island is also 20.9 km (13 mi) from the southern tip of Kintyre in Scotland and historically has had close cultural links with its northern neighbor (Forsythe and McConkey 2007). It was in the hands of the Scottish McDonnell family since the fifteenth century, and sold to John Gage in 1746. An Anglican clergyman from nearby County Derry, Gage was a member of the established ruling class in Ireland. The island property would remain in his family until the early twentieth century. Gage's acquisition of the island coincided with a period of economic expansion in which Irish landowners were encouraged to view the improvement of their estates as a moral and patriotic imperative.

Antecedents for Capitalism and Improvement in Ireland

In Britain, archaeologists such as Johnson (1996) in England and Dalglish (2003) in Scotland have attempted to trace the genealogies of capitalism and found a long and diverse set of antecedents for changing practises. Johnson (1996, 1997) identified many traits of market capitalism in England in the sixteenth century. As elements manifest in the landscape he noted ongoing agrarian practises such as enclosure from the Late Medieval period. By the sixteenth century, furnishings and objects within English houses were a concern for the first time, and the emergence of new patterns of consumption with increased tableware and segregated eating and living spaces were already in place. The speed of this transformation was set by urban centers, with areas of the countryside unaffected even by the early eighteenth century (Johnson 1996, p. 201). In Scotland, Dalglish (2003) detected changes such as enclosure underway in the landscape of the lowlands in the seventeenth century, but becoming more comprehensive after 1760. After 1740, settlements were increasingly becoming dispersed. Buildings were modernized in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries showing an increased use of stone and lime walling (as opposed to clay walls), tiles and internal subdivision (Dalglish 2003, pp. 141–147).

    In common with Britain, Ireland also has antecedents for eighteenth-century capitalist developments. Like Scotland, these developments are often a late expression of English (and continental European) thinking on both practical improvement measures to advance agriculture and society and wider considerations of commerce and natural order. Yet the nascent capitalism present in sixteenth-century England was also present in both Old English and Gaelic controlled parts of Ireland (e.g., Kilkenny and Galway; Proudfoot 1993, p. 224). The contrast between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries would be one of control, methodology, and origins. The Elizabethan wars had completed the hitherto piecemeal conquest of the country and large-scale confiscations of native lands provided the opportunity for New English thinking on cultivation, science, and commerce to impact the landscape. Seventeenth-century thinkers such as Francis Bacon and John Locke justified the seizure of land from those not only neglecting to improve it, but neglecting to improve it to an English standard. In doing so they not only provided the justification for claiming Irish land but also for English imperialist ambitions in North America (Wood 2002, pp. 110–115; also see Drayton 2000; Orser 2005).
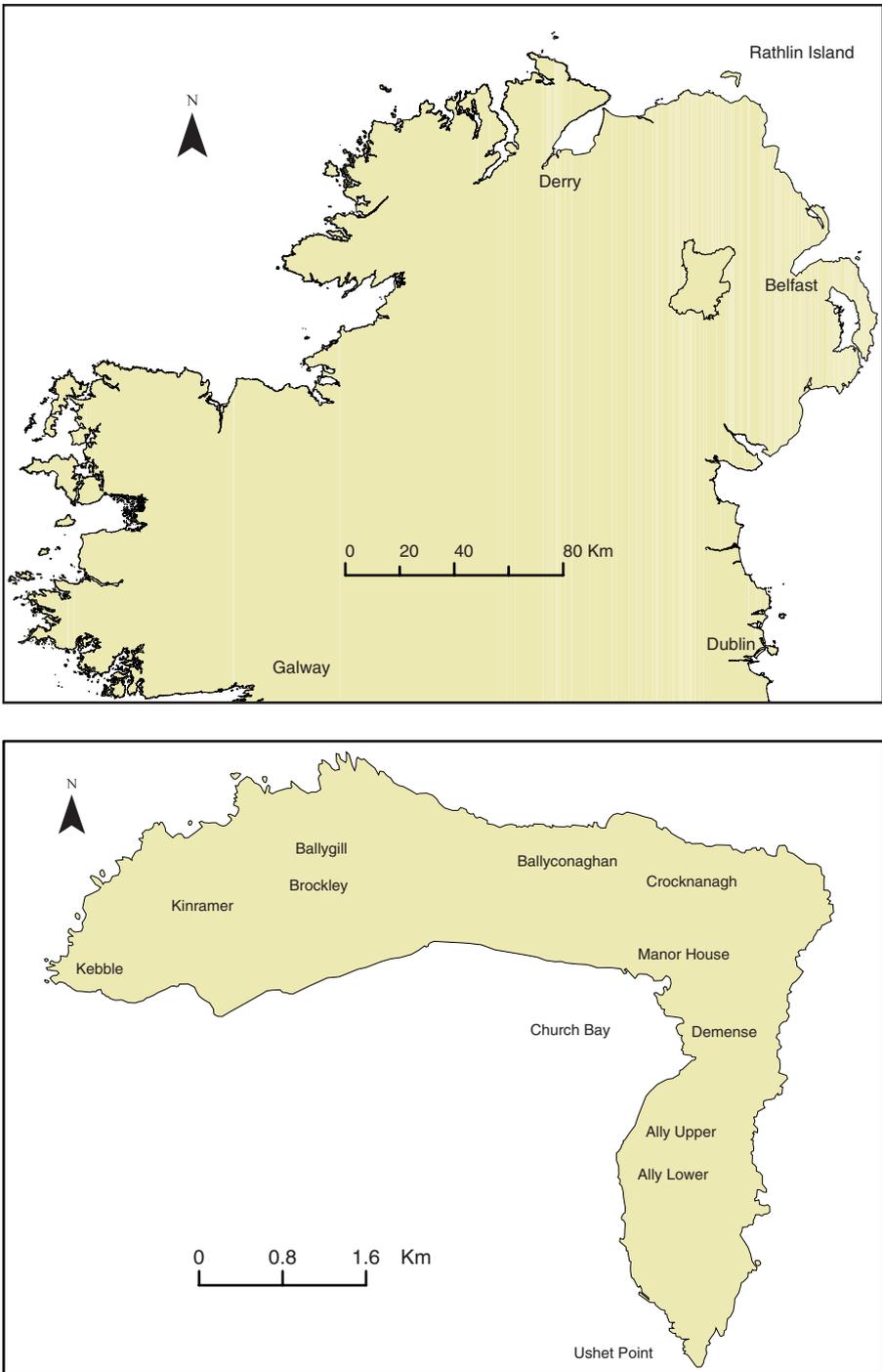
Fig. 1 Ireland and Rathlin Island with places mentioned in the text

A self-righteous attitude toward Ireland and the Irish had been a pervasive feature of English views since the medieval period. From Giraldus Cambrensis in the twelfth century to Edmund Spenser in the sixteenth century, Ireland was regarded as an agriculturally underdeveloped island populated by a barbarous and backward people (Leerssen 1995). English intervention would save Ireland's natural resources from the Irish and in doing so make the people contented farmers (Drayton 2000, p. 55). William Petty (1691, p. 29) viewed the process as one of "transmuting one people into the other, and a thorough union of interests upon natural and lasting principles." Petty had a particularly scientific view of the land, its people, and political life. An added justification for the conquest of Ireland in his view was the native lack of scientific expertise, and the application of enlightened measures based on systematic observation and experimentation would be a key feature of improvement over the succeeding centuries (Carroll-Burke 2002). Despite the pretensions to intellectual and administrative superiority, figures like Petty would often clinically regard Ireland as a series of human and natural resources to be exploited in contrast to more sustainable practises in England (e.g., Barnard 1982, p. 30). By the end of the seventeenth century, the notion of improvement was firmly established as rendering land more productive, commonly through enclosure, drainage, and reclamation. The concept became hugely popular through agriculturalists and economists such as Jethro Tull and Adam Smith in the eighteenth century and its influence inevitably spread to Ireland. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the definition of improvement widened to embrace a physical and social transformation of landscape, buildings, infrastructure, and ultimately communities in order that they conform and contribute to the Commercial Age. More than simply improving methods of farming, it entailed eliminating old customs and practices, such as commonage and transhumance (Wood 2002, p. 107). Farms too needed to be organized with both human dwellings and outhouses for animals and produce. The dwelling was to conform to standards of hygiene and propriety—in the latter sense the process of improvement also touched on social, cultural, and moral spheres, as there was a belief that people would only improve their land and situation if they themselves were convinced of the need and benefit of change. This would have particular resonance in Ireland where the process of improvement, while principally undertaken to provide a greater income for the estates, would also be promoted as a moral mission.

Moral and social improvement became increasingly visible in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries through the direct participation of landowning clergy and their involvement in improving societies from the middle of the century (Barnard 1995; Busteed 2001, p. 326). The religious influence extended further through emergent institutions such as schools, libraries, hospitals, and workhouses, which focused on individual discipline and productivity. By such means the individualistic, capitalist ethic was reinforced—moral improvement and economic improvement were becoming indistinguishable (Livesey 2004, p. 635). By the mid-nineteenth century, economic depression stalled progress and the state had an increasing role to play. The main agents of improvement in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Ireland were landlords, government, improving societies, clergy, and the tenants themselves (Forsythe 2006a).

In Rathlin the Gage landowners and the tenants would carry out most of the reforms. The landowners were ultimately responsible for the management of the

physical landscape of their estates, its buildings, amenities, and resources. There has been some discussion among historians of the willingness and relative ability of Irish landlords to invest in their estates (Busteed 2001, p. 319; Ó Gráda 1994, p. 123). Factors restricting landlord activity include the lack of access to large urban markets, and a lack of supplementary wealth from manufacturing (relative to England). Case studies have produced a varied picture of individual landowner's efforts and results and it is likely that such studies will continue to reveal complexity (e.g., Proudfoot 1993). Nevertheless, contemporary observers in general are critical of the apathy of Irish landlords, with a minority of exceptions (Bell and Watson 1986, p. 4). The expanding economy of the late eighteenth century provided an opportunity for Irish landlords, because as rents increased they could re-invest new capital in their estates. Beyond improving their houses and demesnes there was often little effort at practical agricultural or industrial schemes (Ó Gráda 1994, p. 123).

Tenants undertook a number of improvement measures through either necessity (to pay rents) or inserted clauses in their leases (Busteed 2001, p. 319). Crawford and Trainor (1978, pp. 13–17) present an example of the latter from County Tyrone dating to 1783, in which the tenant was expected to erect enclosures, plant an orchard, and maintain all buildings. Tenants were also expected to build and improve houses and farm buildings in Donegal (Devon Commission 1847, p. 131). Dickson (1987, p. 115–116) has noted some modest contributions by tenants in selective breeding of cattle, enclosing, draining, and manuring land especially in lowland areas (see Ó Gráda 1994, p. 31 for large-scale exceptions). Small tenants were no doubt loath to embrace fully the changes that were being made for the landowners' financial benefit whilst their own leases were often a tenuous contract. Despite this, during the economic boom of the eighteenth century they may have sensed the opportunity to improve their own means and social station. Indeed, a new social class between landowner and laborer emerged, fully consolidated as the tenant farmer class by the middle of the century (Cullen 1990, pp. 61–63). For laborers and the poorest cottiers, economic growth and improvement schemes had almost no impact (see for example Dickson 1987, p. 114).

Expressions of Improvement in Rathlin

In the later eighteenth century, John Gage and his son Robert set about reforming Rathlin in order that it conform to modern ideas of productivity. To facilitate the expected economic activity, the island's limited road system was upgraded and parliament petitioned to construct a new harbor PRONI (Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI) 1758). Gage had reason to be optimistic. The late eighteenth century was a period of economic expansion, with agricultural goods finding a ready market. Emergent industries, such as linen production, would also provide an outlet for Rathlin's kelp as a bleaching agent. So lucrative was the kelp industry that by the end of the eighteenth century it paid the entire rent of the island (Hamilton 1839; also see Forsythe 2006b). It has been claimed that the mere presence of an Irish landlord on his estate was an important contribution to improvement given the notorious rate of absenteeism in Ireland (Busteed 2001, p. 19). As a small property, Rathlin was fortunate to benefit from the involvement of

the landowner without the tiers of middlemen that so impeded progress in other islands (Forsythe 2006a). The island property was the Gage family's main source of income and as such they appreciated the importance of developing and maintaining a successful economy. In doing so they provided some opportunity for islanders to prosper by improving infrastructure and building facilities such as mills, kelp stores and quays.

Landscape reform involved the reorganization of both administrative boundaries and the establishment of permanent fields. Townlands represent the oldest secular land unit on the island. Of medieval origin, they often formed the basis for taxation and leases and continued to do so into recent centuries. An inquisition held at Carrickfergus in 1604 listed seven townlands on Rathlin and William Petty's Down survey (c. 1657) is the first cartographic evidence of the position of these townlands (Crone 1906, p. 167; PRONI 1655–1656; Russell and Prendergast 1872). Examination of the townland boundaries show the original borders made close use of natural topographical features including the base of hills, streams, and the ridges and gulleys produced by geological faults (Fig. 2). Between c. 1720 and 1769 these townlands were subdivided. Instigated by the landlord (probably post-1746) for the purpose of rent and tax collection, they reflect the distribution of settlement and indicate a rising population. The eighteenth-century reformation of the townlands lacks the utilization of and sympathy with the local topography. The revised townland boundaries follow the borders of new fields and the roadways, largely disregarding the natural demarcations and topography mentioned above (see Fig. 2). The straight lines drawn up by the landlord with his map lack an intimacy with the landscape and are indicative
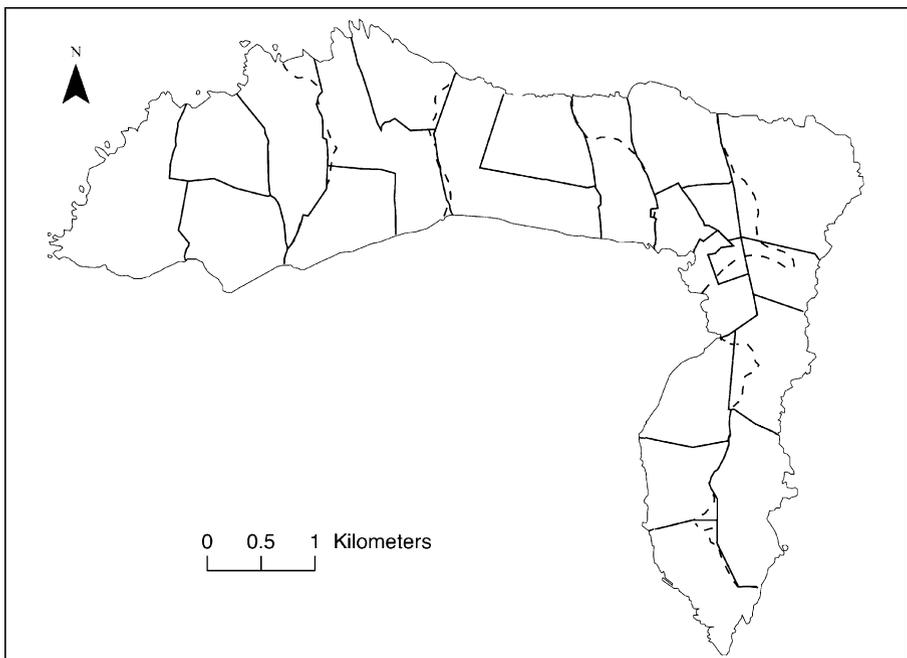

Fig. 2 Rathlin's townlands, the original boundaries (dashed line) and the eighteenth century reforms (solid line)

of a more scientific approach to estate management. A similar situation in field boundary reform has been noted by Symonds (1999, p. 113) on the Hebridean island of South Uist; there regarded as a "physical manifestation of an ideological transformation." The ideological transformation was the imposition of a rational, even symmetrical plan on the landscape. This ignored past considerations of topography and natural features such as rivers as organic boundaries in the landscape.

On a smaller scale, agricultural improvement involved land reclamation, reorganization of field boundaries, and the introduction of new crops. By 1746 out of a total of 1,416 ha (3,500 ac), cultivated land comprised 82 ha (203 ac) of oats, 22 ha (54 ac) of barley and 21 ha (53 ac) of potatoes (Gage 1995, pp. 68–70). The early nineteenth-century references (Hamilton 1839; Lewis 1837) estimate that 25% of the island's surface was arable (i.e., 202 ha [499 ac]—77 ha [189 ac] more than 1746). Corn, barley, oats, potatoes, and occasionally some wheat and flax were grown, with barley being the most common crop (Marshall 1836, p. 8; see also Day et al. 1994, pp. 127–129). Although crops such as flax reflect a contribution to the burgeoning textile industry, other markers of agricultural improvement such as new grasses and crops were not adopted (Feehan 2003).

The new ideas on enclosure and field systems that emerged in the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries were incompatible with the traditional practice of rundale (runrig in Scotland) in the northern and western districts of Ireland. The term rundale, it has been proposed, is derived from *roinn*—division and *dáil*—assembly (Buchanan 1973, pp. 584–586). Its system of partnership farming may have been well-suited ecologically to a subsistence economy, but it could not cope with the twin pressures of commercial farming and rising populations in the nineteenth century (Buchanan 1973, p. 617; MacLoingsigh 1948, p. 116; MacSuibhne 1995, p. 547). Central to the rundale system was the regular re-assignment of land, both arable and pasture, by lots to the farmers holding it jointly (McCourt 1954, p. 373). This practice assured the holders access to a range of land types and periodically the best land, as concern for equity of holding, both in extent and quality, was paramount.

The rundale farms divided the land into a number of areas by function. The infield was a constantly tilled arable tract, comprising long rectangular strips with plots segregated by low, earthen banks known by a number of terms including mearings, ribs and rowins (McCourt 1954, pp. 372–373). Beyond it was the outfield, a larger enclosed area reserved for pasture and periodic cultivation when required. There was also common meadow, upland grazing (often with peat-bog) and small, enclosed gardens near the settlement (Buchanan 1973, p. 586). Improving landowners suppressed the redistribution of scattered holdings under rundale and assigned fixed ownership to properties by erecting permanent field boundaries.

The permanently enclosed island fields are in general square-rectangular and bounded by loosely built drystone walls (e.g., 276×132 m in Demesne; 55×58 m in Ballyconaghan). Small enclosures for vegetable gardens (e.g. 780 m^2 at Ally Lower; 298 m^2 at Brockley) can often be seen around the buildings of the settlements with larger fields beyond. There are traces of the older infield being divided into plots, for example to the north and south of Ballygill Middle settlement. The Ballygill plots are in the form of strips divided by raised earthen banks. They are set 6–14 m apart and appear to have been formed by digging a shallow ditch on the north side of the division, the earth of which is cast up to form the bank. This has the added advantage

of providing drainage down slope. Cleggan and Kinramer settlements also feature a number of strips in adjacent valleys. The Ordinance Survey (1833, 1904) maps indicate that Rathlin's fields saw little subsequent reclamation and in some cases field systems were not maintained (e.g., Kebble, which was reclaimed for the landlord's sheep). The consolidation of fields must have occurred in the mid-eighteenth to early nineteenth century and more likely prior to the 1770s when townland reorganization in areas such as Ballygill split the infield and rough grazing between three settlements, which then assumed townland status (Ballygill North, Middle and South). By reorganizing townlands in this way, each settlement maintained a land ratio of approximately 30% arable to 70% pasture (Hanna 1961, pp. 28–31).

The settlement form most readily although not exclusively associated with rundale farming is the clachan. The term, which is Scots Gaelic rather than Irish, refers to a cluster of dwellings and outbuildings that have developed without a formal plan (Proudfoot 1959). Unlike a village settlement, they lack amenities such as shops or other infrastructure. Like rundale, the clachan form of settlement was unpopular with estate reformers. In the 1840s, Hill (1971, p. 25) described the houses in clusters as "evil," citing the opportunity for disease to spread and the quarrels that arose from close proximity with neighbors. Of more concern was the desire to see profits rising from consolidated holdings with dwellings nearby so they could be worked more efficiently. This would necessarily involve the break-up of the clachan to dispersed dwellings on family holdings. There is no real evidence that the Gages attempted to reform the Rathlin clachans; indeed, the townlands were reorganised to reflect the established clachan pattern in the eighteenth century. As a result, the clachans persisted as the dominant settlement form into the twentieth century.

The Gage family provided exemplars for some of the reforms they advocated in their own house and grounds. The fields under direct ownership of the family occupied a central position behind the island's main harbor. They were neatly walled and the entrances adorned by rounded stone pillars. The gate pillars were a fashion associated with enclosure on the part of improving landlords in the early nineteenth century (Evans 1972, p. 101). Closer to the house was a walled garden with formal gate pillars and a date stone reading "R.G. 1797" (Brett 1974, p. 13). The 1833 Ordnance Survey map reveals a degree of symmetry in its original layout, being divided in four quadrants. Here Gage could indulge in horticultural experimentation so beloved of improvers and planted a number of species of fruit trees (cherry, peach, and nectarine) hitherto unknown on the island (PRONI 1789–1821).

A more ambitious scheme of improvement was the establishment of weavers' cottages as an attempt to share in the booming linen industry in the north of Ireland (Gill 1964). The two-storey weaver's range was constructed of rendered limestone, with seven bays of windows coupled in three pairs under recessed brick relieving arches (Brett 1974, p. 11). The cottages were eventually deserted as weavers moved out and settled among the island community (Gage 1995, p. 72). This allowed Gage to extend the site, building the Manor House, the main residence of his family for the next 200 years (Fig. 3). The newer section features six bays of tall Georgian windows with three molded chimneys above. The entrance is not central but is a porch to the west end. The door has a Gibbsian surround in red sandstone with an *oeil-de-boeuf* window above dating possibly to c. 1790 (Brett 1996, p. 86) and Gage's residence is described as a "good modern house" in 1838 (Day et al. 1994,

p. 131). Extensive re-modeling by his successor (Rev Robert Gage) took place in 1816, including new rooms, sashes, moldings, and staircase (Brett 1974, p. 11). The form and style of the weavers' cottages and Manor House demonstrate not only the Georgian preferences for order and symmetry in architecture but also represent an idealized model of space, order, and privacy in dwellings for skilled workers and the family itself.

In contrast the traditional architecture of island houses comprised single-storey cabins, with thatched roofs. Rathlin's houses are within the direct entry tradition (common to northern and western districts of Ireland) where the kitchen is directly accessed from outside. The most notable direct entry type of house is the byre-dwelling, so called because animals and humans shared the same building (Ó Danachair 1964). Aalen (1997, p. 148) proposes a series of developments from a one-roomed building in the late eighteenth—early nineteenth century through to an increasingly divided living space, involving the removal of animals. This does seem to be the case in Rathlin and the division of houses, commonly into three rooms, is indeed how most are encountered in the field. Often the inserted partition walls are easy to detect, and sometimes a further apartment for humans or animals has been appended to the end of the original building. In 1847, the practice of adding an apartment rather than building a separate structure saved the price of a gable wall—about 20 shillings (Devon Commission 1847, p. 133). As early as 1836, the presence of a small shed for cattle attached to the house was said to be commonplace on the island (Marshall 1836, p. 17). The central room is always the kitchen with hearth. A second room behind the hearth is often a bedroom, and a third room is formed by inserting a second partition wall at the opposite end, often adjacent to the door.

Test Excavations on Rathlin

Two clachans at Ally in the south of the island were recently the focus of test excavations aimed at tracing the nature and progress of improvement measures in island houses. Ally is mentioned as one of the main settlements in the island in 1784, and both Ally Upper and Ally Lower clachans were depicted in the first Ordnance

Survey maps of 1833 (Hamilton 1839). The Ally Upper settlement comprises six buildings surrounded by small, garden enclosures. Of the six structures, three may be considered dwelling houses (Fig. 4). The Ally Lower settlement comprises five buildings of which three are likely to represent dwellings (Fig. 5). Again they are
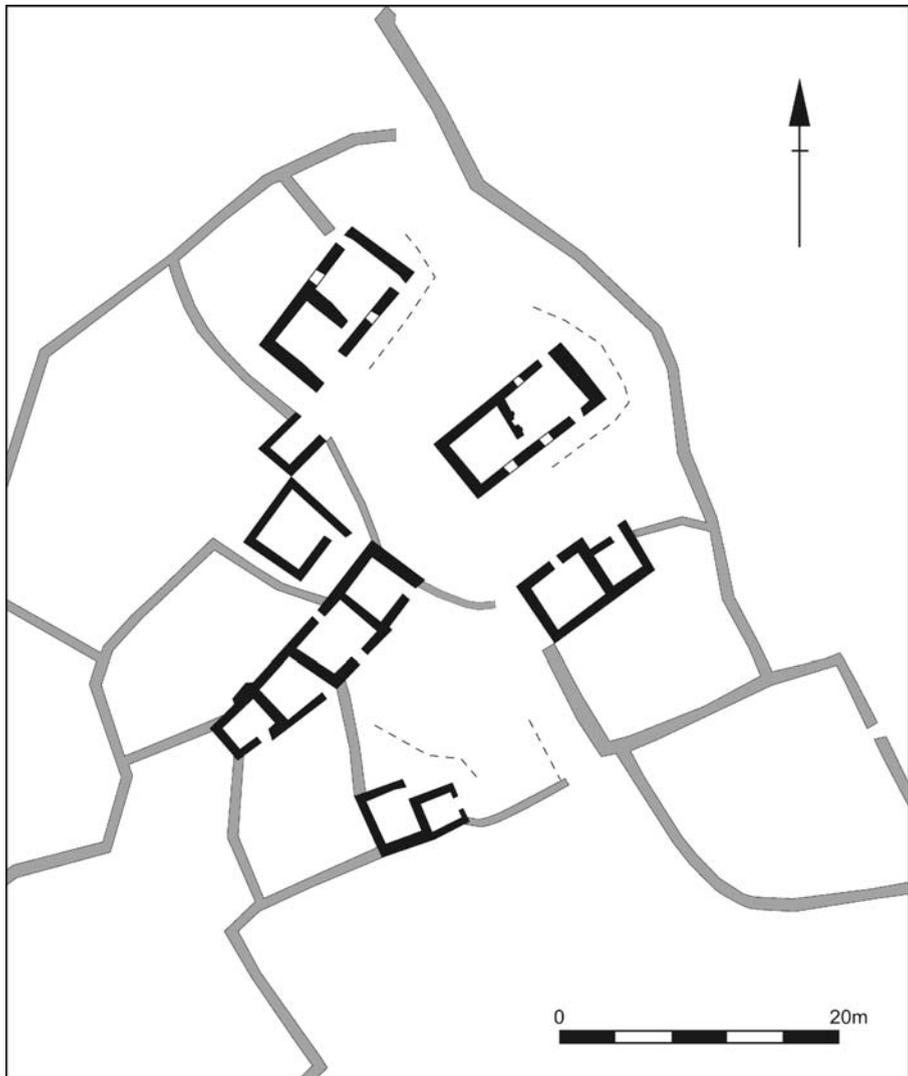
Key

◼️ Surviving Wall   - - - - - - Stone Kerb

▨ Field Boundary

Fig. 4 Ally Upper clachan (survey by Centre for Archaeological Fieldwork at Queens University Belfast)
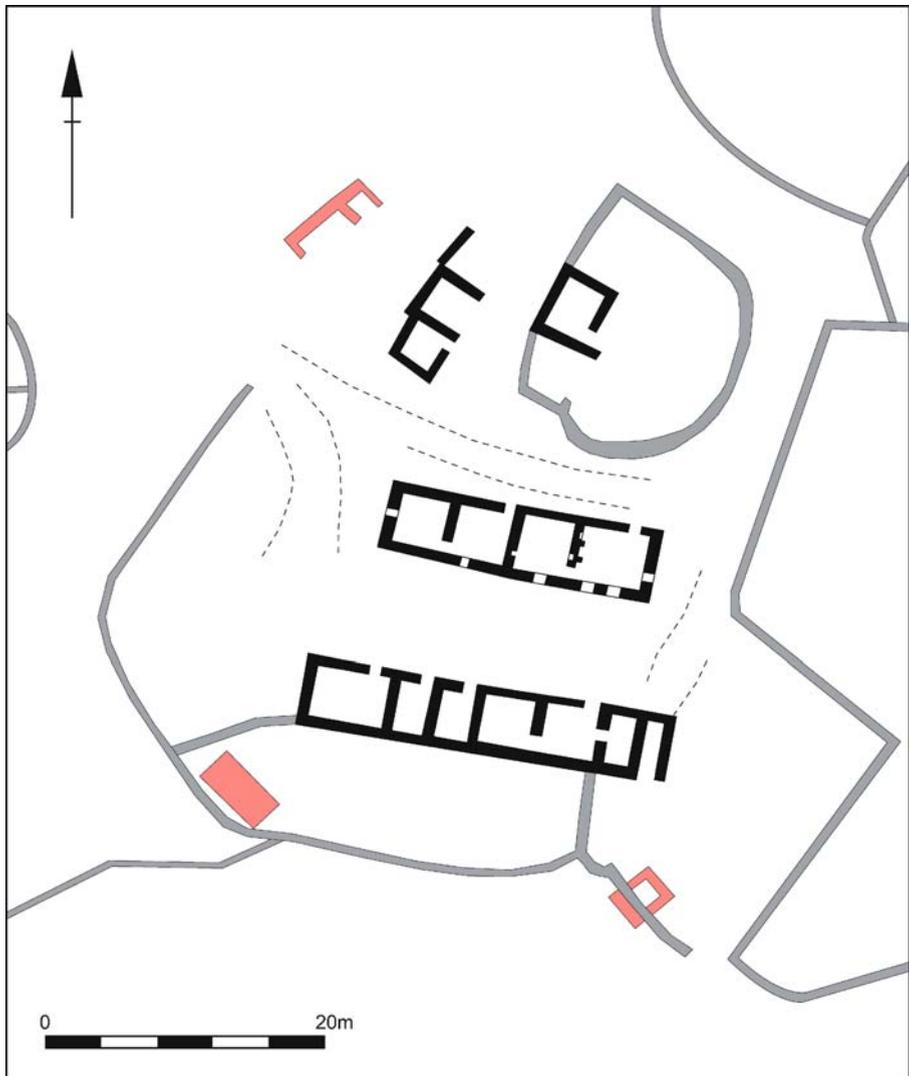
Fig. 5 Ally Lower clachan (survey by Centre for Archaeological Fieldwork at Queens University Belfast)

surrounded by small fields, some of which display cultivation ridges associated with growing potatoes. The dwellings of Ally Lower show parallels with improved houses on the Mull of Kintyre (Dalglish 2003, p. 105). These range farmsteads date to the last quarter of the eighteenth century/first quarter of the nineteenth century and

comprise a linear range subdivided into compartments with various functions (e.g., dwelling, byre, barn, mill). Communication exists between the dwelling house rooms and sometimes the byre, while other compartments are accessed from outside. A variation is the cottage range where two dwellings occupy the range, with no internal communication between them (Dalglish 2003, pp. 105–107). These types of buildings do have parallels in Ireland (particularly in a line north of Louth to Mayo), where they have been termed extended farmsteads (Ó Danachair 1981, p. 65). Both the range farmstead and cottage range are represented at Ally Lower. Although viewed as an improved form in Scotland (Dalglish 2003) by the mid-nineteenth century they were out of fashion and reformers sought to disperse clachan communities into separate plots. County Donegal agent Charles Kennedy claimed that "double cottages should be studiously avoided ...war is the result...a war of words, of women, of cocks, dogs, pigs, and children; a war of trespass, counter-trespass and petty sessions" (Devon Commission 1847, pp. 132–133).

Excavation in the kitchens of a two-room dwelling at Ally Upper and cottage range at Ally Lower demonstrated a number of improvements to island homes. During much of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, clay or mud floors were the most common form for most the majority of Irish houses (Gailey 1984, p. 125). The use of paving slabs is reported from the early nineteenth century (Gailey 1984, p. 127). On Rathlin, their presence was confirmed by the excavation of the dwelling at Ally Lower (Fig. 6).

A further test trench also revealed paving within a nearby small dwelling or byre. The paving in the range dwelling was set in orange clay and represents the final phase of occupation of the building (contemporary with hearth cobbling, see below). The most recent flooring in Ally Upper was mortar set onto compact pebbles. Below this was 8–20 cm of compacted earthen floor. Upon excavation, impressions of straw represented the former floor covering. Finally, in both the case of Ally Upper and Ally Lower dwellings, drains had been set at the lowest levels (stone lined in the former, stone filled in the latter; see Fig. 6). These were orientated down slope through the living area of the kitchen rather than being open drains associated with animal effluent, as common in western byre-dwellings. In this case, dampness associated with the location seems to have been a problem throughout the houses and it was recalled as the case in Ally Upper by the current owner of the site (S. McMullen, personal communication). Although standards of hygiene in cottages were lamented by improving landlords, they rarely intervened directly. Inserting drains and using straw on the earthen floor seems in this case a purely practical solution by the islanders for basic hygiene and comfort. It does, however, offer some evidence to refute the allegations that tenants lived indifferently to filthy conditions. Given the widespread predilection for increasing rents in response to improvements, "invisible" measures such as the insertion of drains may have been a way of improving living standards without penalty. The stone-lined drains, or French drains, are a noted feature of improved methods of drainage on estates (see e.g., Orser 1997, p. 17). Young noted them in use for field drainage by small farmers in the 1770s (Hutton 1892, p. 138) In this case, the islanders adopted the modern, improved mode inside their houses, albeit without landlord support.

The Ally excavations also shed light on the changing nature of the hearths. Early assessment of Rathlin houses envisaged an evolution from buildings with a hearth
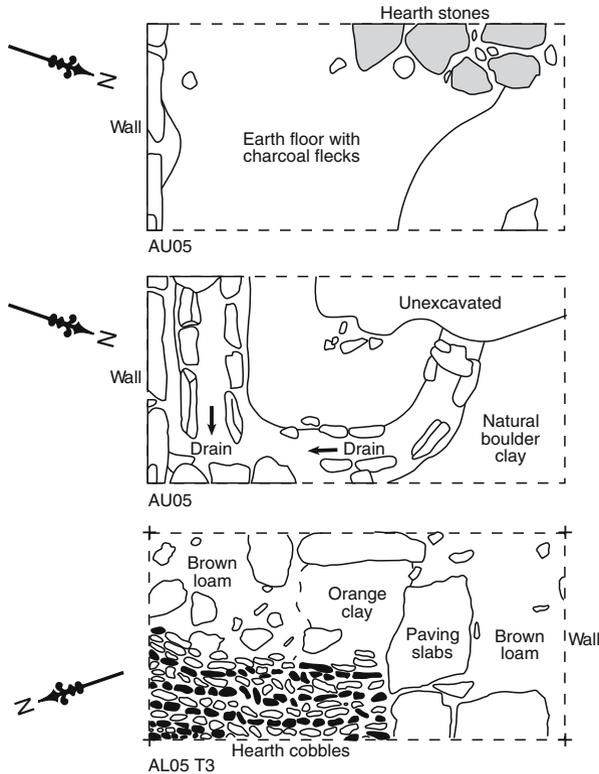
Fig. 6 Plans from the excavations at Ally Upper and Lower. *Top* (Ally Upper), the stones of the central hearth set in an earthen floor; *middle* (Ally Upper), the excavated stone-lined drain in the kitchen floor; *bottom* (Ally Lower) the hearth decoration and paving slabs

set in the gable end to the hearth becoming central by the addition of a new room behind it (Evans 1973). This interpretation was based on a rigid definition of traditional house typology distinguishing houses of the southeast from those in the northwest (e.g., Ó Danachair 1959). The classification of traditional houses by the position of the hearth is not without criticism (Aalen 1966; Ó Danachair 1946). Controversy results from the alternative possibility that an original central hearth was developed to incorporate a formal fireplace and chimney that required a new wall to be inserted. The end result is a similar ground plan regardless of the original position of the hearth. Furthermore, excavated late medieval and post-medieval houses in County Antrim all display a central hearth, including the fifteenth-to-seventeenth-century stone and sod dwelling at Craigs and the seventeenth-to-nineteenth-century stone building at Killylane (Williams and Yates 1984; Williams 1988). In Rathlin, a number of dwellings featured an inserted partition wall and hearth with few indications of any remodeled and extended gables. At Ally Upper, excavation demonstrated that a former central hearth had once existed in the kitchen. The edge of the hearth stones were uncovered set in a former earthen floor with a spread of ash and charcoal in the vicinity (see Fig. 6). Evidently, the hearth had been

abandoned for a period while the earthen floor was still in use, as the compacted layer above the stones had straw impressions from successive occupations. The abandonment of the central hearth is likely to coincide with the insertion of the formal fireplace and partition. In 1836, Rathlin's houses were blamed for respiratory illness because many were without chimneys, containing only a "hole made in the roof, by which part only...a small portion of the smoke is carried off" (Marshall 1836, p. 17). Gage (1995, p. 89) reiterated the problem in 1851 noting that asthma was the most common illness on the island. Yet the condition appeared to be on the wane due to improvements being made to cottages —presumably the building of chimneys. Gailey (1984, p. 123) claims that the second half of the nineteenth century was a period of proliferation in chimney building, not only in the kitchen but also the bedroom. Most multi-chimney buildings are therefore late in date. In some cases, the conversion was a necessity. On Rathlin, turf and sod burning in the early nineteenth century was attributed to causing illness. Contemporary reports also note the scarcity of this fuel on the island and state that the population increasingly relied on coal. Burning coal required changes to the fireplace and ventilation. To burn efficiently, greater draught was needed, which could be achieved by raising the fire in a grate. In addition, coal fires produce sparks that are still hot at roof level. Sparks were an obvious threat to thatch, so flues were created and lined with brick. Red brick first appears as a feature in landlord-sponsored schemes, in arched windows and doors, under eaves and rafters and in fireplaces. In island homes they are mainly seen in the fireplaces and chimneys. Often the red brick has been robbed out of abandoned or disused estate buildings. Dating based on standardized brick dimensions (see e.g., Hudson 1972; Shopland 2005), would place bricks from Ally flues firmly post-1803 (22.5×10.5×6.0 cm).

Excavation at Ally Lower revealed another feature associated with the late fireplace/chimney: a pitched surround of black and white beach stones inlaid in stripes in the floor toward the hearth (the rest of the floor was paved, see Fig. 6). This feature was remarked upon by Evans (1973, p. 18) who found another island porch decorated in the same fashion with a lozenge motif. Similar hearth decoration has been recorded from Castletown, County Tyrone, and cottier houses in Islandmagee, County Antrim, and both were estimated to date to the early nineteenth century (Brannon 1983). The Ally Lower example reflects the later horizon of occupation and therefore must also date to no earlier than the nineteenth century. This decoration would appear to compliment the new, formalized fireplace and chimney and reveals a concern with display and ornamentation absent from the simple stones set around a central hearth. The transformation of the hearth led islanders to consider other aspects of décor and items of status. Yet in an era of growing commercialization the elements the islanders have chosen (local, naturally water-rolled stone) also demonstrate that they had not fully embraced the modern, artificial product of the marketplace.

Other manufactured or imported features of improvement include glazed windows and slate roofs. Splayed windows would have increased the extent of light penetrating the rooms and in all cases they are obviously the latest form of windows employed in the houses. Precedents for this form can be seen in the Manor House. As a result, the splayed windows can be considered a facet of improvement to the vernacular houses, albeit one that dates predominantly to the nineteenth century.

Excavation at Ally Upper and Lower recovered window glass from the most recent phase of occupation as may be expected. The recovery of a shard of window glass from the earlier levels of Ally Upper would indicate that the house had good-quality windows for much of the nineteenth century. In 1838, "two small glazed windows" were common in Rathlin houses (Day et al. 1994, p. 132). Slates were undoubtedly a feature of modernized houses, appearing in the Manor House in the eighteenth century. They were not adopted by the islanders until the later nineteenth century, being expensive and requiring modification of the roof structure.

Many of the above changes were gradual, as tenants had limited means, especially by the nineteenth century. On one level, Irish houses had experienced degeneration in quality since 1750 because of the rising population and expressed in the increasing number of sub-standard, one-roomed housing of the poor (Gailey 1987, p. 90). Practical measures, such as building animal byres, could be encouraged by a premium from the landlord, but were commonly undertaken by the tenants themselves (Devon Commission 1847, p. 131; McCourt 1973, p. 17). The premiums that appear in the nineteenth century were also offered for a range of land reclamation and animal breeding schemes. Despite the apparent incentive, they were so often for show and had almost no impact (see e.g., Hill 1971). Ó Danachair (1962, p. 67) has drawn attention to the vicious circle created by the land tenure system, where all improvements to property had to be undertaken at the tenant's expense and inevitably resulted in a rise in rent to reflect the new value of the property (Devon Commission 1847, p. 172). These factors all contributed to insecurity and poverty and provided little or no incentive for improvement on the part of the tenants. However, the situation was slightly different in northeast Ulster where the traditional custom of tenant right provided some security on leases and tenants on leaving a property were recompensed for any improvements they carried out. This may have provided some incentive for Rathlin's inhabitants in contrast with southern districts. Surveys undertaken of housing in the early nineteenth century fail to show extensive housing progress in rural areas (Gailey 1987, p. 100). The reduction in the poorest houses occurred due to the Great Famine of 1846–1849 (through abandonment and emigration) rather than the reforming zeal of landlords. The houses of the poor were often single-room cabins of turf or clay that melt away swiftly upon desertion. As a result the archaeological record is biased in favour of the dwellings of social groups above the level of small tenants.

Responses to Modernity

In contrast to the emerging capitalist ethos, island life in the post-medieval era presents itself as essentially communal. From the rundale system of managing and redistributing land, to harvesting crops and seaweed, boat ownership and fishing, clachans, and the home with its undivided living spaces, the islands were places with strong familial ties and social interdependence. The emerging capitalism required root and branch reform, forcing the islanders to negotiate the new worldview with its attendant impacts on their everyday environment. Broadly speaking, the community's three main responses were: collaboration, acquiescence, and resistance. Although responses of collaboration and resistance are diametrically opposed, in reality

both were employed and sometimes simultaneously in order to maintain successfully island life.

Tenants often had little choice in acquiescence or collaboration; islanders were forced by rising rents to engage in commercial pursuits beyond their own subsistence requirements. These include growing flax and burning kelp, activities directly tied to emerging industries and market conditions. Laborers too paid rent through participation in the schemes of improvement, including reclamation and enclosure. The opportunity for tenants to improve their social station and living conditions should not be neglected. By the early nineteenth century, Irish farming was completely commercialized with money in wide circulation, largely having replaced the payments in the form of goods or services. Contact with the markets had introduced desirable new commodities to rural areas with attendant connotations of prestige. In the home, status symbols included the clock, the porch, sheeted ceilings, kitchen floor tiling, and the burning of coal in the hearth, but for most houses these were features of the later nineteenth century (Gailey 1984, p. 224). These changes drew islanders deeper into the new commercial world and tied the welfare of their households to fluctuating commodity prices. There was a willingness to incorporate aspects (or cheap imitations) of elite cultural material. Ceramics including 'polite' tableware (e.g., ceramic plates and teacups) thus appear in the houses of Ally. These were in use while the building had a simple, central hearth—the "polite" and "impolite" existing side by side. In architecture, houses were sub-divided and animals ejected. Windows and chimneys were eventually adopted and earthen floors were replaced with paving, with decorative cobbling hinting at a new expression of interior taste. The most overt triumph of fashion over function in architecture is the superfluous "dummy" chimneys at a dwelling in Crocknanagh providing a visual balance to the façade of the house. These general amendments of course could not imitate the "big house" wholesale. Rather than see the emulation of the elite at work, it is likely that as aspects or versions of new material culture became diffused and commonplace throughout society they became disassociated with notions of superiority and Anglicization.

As well as collaboration and adoption of all or some of the new values, there were also acts of overt and passive resistance. As Gailey (1984, p. 201) states "It was one thing for a landlord to have improving ideas; it was another for a tenantry to agree to be 'improved.' During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there were various episodes of national unrest and protest, the most serious of which culminated in the 1798 United Irishmen's' rebellion, which saw activist Thomas Russell visit Rathlin. The badly planned rebellion had little effect on the island although it made the local elite nervous. Most acts of overt resistance were small-scale and in reaction to local conditions. As social and economic conditions deteriorated in the early nineteenth century, rents were increasingly difficult to meet. Relations became strained and a pound was erected on Rathlin to receive confiscated cattle (Murphy 1987, p. 27). There is also evidence of personal grudges resulting in criminality. In 1797, Robert Gage offered £50 for the persons responsible for breaking into his office houses and also maiming six milk cows (Belfast News-Letter 1797). Similar passive protest can be seen through everyday actions of insolence (e.g., Murphy 1987, p. 24), as well as a tenacious grip (coupled with conservatism) on the older ways of life (e.g., Dickson 1987, p. 111). For example, rundale redistribution of farming land and shore persisted informally despite attempts to eradicate it (McCahan 1988, p. 14).

Hall's (1992) work on slave resistance in America and South Africa demonstrates that artifacts embodying resistance are not restricted to forms falling outside the traditions of the elite. Orser (2005, p. 401) has also noted in Ireland the simultaneous defiance of the system while acquiring English fine ceramics. In coastal communities, a potent form of both embracing the commodities of the new order and subverting the system was smuggling. This activity manipulated the market economy and the regulatory restrictions of the controlling elites to the advantage of individual islanders and the community. In Rathlin, smugglers took advantage of the differing tax regimes in Ireland and Britain to profit from illicit commodities. Documented merchandise included tobacco, fish, tea, wool, linen, salt, sugar, wine, and spirits (PRONI 1739–1816). Indeed, the very monuments of improvement in the form of Gage's quay and storehouse at Ushet port were subverted to play a role in this trade (Fig. 7). During the first decade of the nineteenth century, the island was managed by an agent acting on behalf of Gage (then a minor). The agent orchestrated an extensive smuggling operation using the facilities built by the Gage family. The resident customs officer was persuaded to turn a blind eye in return for a bottle of smuggled brandy (Gage 1995, p. 80). The extent of smuggling eventually resulted in the establishment of a coastguard station at the port and the blocking of the harbor. This point serves to caution a reading of, for example, the adoption of tableware and spirit and wine bottles as simple evidence of the imitation of elites or seduction by market novelty. The possibility lies open that these items were smuggled commodities (or contained smuggled substances), evidencing an altogether more subversive response to the new world economy. In addition, Irish contributions to architecture, furniture, glassware, and ceramics emerge by the end of the eighteenth century, albeit many were in imitation of English styles. As these items became common among the general public, emulation occurred *within* the communities rather than being an impossible attempt to imitate the incredibly wealthy. When neighbours in the clachan obtained tableware and teacups it became vital to possess a similar collection in order to participate in the new social rituals. Adoption of these items may also reflect a new patriotism and pride rather than any insidious "foreign" influences, especially those openly expressing radical allegiances through emblems and logos on tableware and clay pipes. Indeed Powell (2005, p. 70)

Fig. 7 Ushet Port quay and store were both improvement schemes carried out by the landlord, but later used heavily for smuggling

points out that even among the politically radical in Irish society, "luxury" items were adopted, though political awareness was shown through the choices made and through boycotts.

Conclusion

Communities living in byre-dwellings that were part of a clachan and farming land in rundale experienced great changes in how their landscape and society was managed after 1750. Their communal routine extended not only to exploitation of natural resources but also to settlement and the interior of their houses where little privacy existed. Improvement measures saw the application of rational and scientific principles to the landscape. On Rathlin, these ranged from the reformed townland boundaries to the enclosure of fields and horticultural experimentation in the gardens of the landlord. In reforming agriculture, traditional practices such as rundale were suppressed. On the other hand, clachans were tolerated, allowing island communities to continue to live in close proximity. Aspects of improvement did influence the homes within the clachans; the introduction of manufactured materials (e.g., red brick, glass) depended on market contact, although islanders also utilized local, natural materials to complement new features (e.g., hearth cobbles). Changes to the interior, such as the formalized fireplace, entailed the segregation of domestic space allowing familial, gender, and generational distinctions. The appearance of matching sets of tableware also emphasised the individual within the household. The individualistic and value-laden emphasis of emerging capitalism would appear to be at odds with traditional island life. Yet there is considerable evidence that aspects of the new system were adopted and subverted. Despite the sentimentality bestowed on them by the emigrant, the older cabins were often despised by a populace attempting to extricate itself from poverty. The small tenant farmer class that emerged in the eighteenth century was engaged in an ongoing process of attempting to advance its station. Their dwelling houses were not invested with a kind of personal or cultural significance felt worth preserving from all forms of change. Rather, islanders concentrated on maintaining a livelihood through legal and illegal means. Covert practices such as smuggling supplemented their income and rundale redistribution of holdings survived in one form or another into the twentieth century.

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