

Sharon Slater (SS), Jimmy Guerin (JG). Jimmy describes reed cutting and thatching while on site at a building being thatched.

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SS: Today is the 24th of May 2017 and I am with Jimmy Guerin and he is going to tell me a little bit about the reed, we are going to walk over to some of the reed and he's going to tell me about it. So Jimmy you cut it yourself? The reed.

JG: I did cut the reed myself a number of years ago, down in Cooper Hill, Tervoe, over around Mungret 'Kay, Ce?'. You have to go into the spur, we called it a spur, that's the name where you cut the reed. You cut the reed, there there that's a sheaf, that's what's called a sheaf of reed, right now, that's what you call a double sheaf of reed you cut that with the hook in your hand, and on your right hand the hook, which is something onto am, the hand of it now, t'would be awkward to show you, t'would be a bending that way, right

SS: So like a sickle?

JG: Like this, watch this now, that, picture that shape now, that shape is just round, ok, and you catch your reed, say a foot from the ground, and your swinging your hook, and you cut it, to have it just in your hand so you go on to the next bit, so when your cutting your reeds in there it's the very same as a machine, it's up straight in a big long line up along like that, so you cut away whole sheaves, maybe what, they are not double sheaves now really the most of them now they are not cut to double sheaves, but you come back then and you tie 'em. There is a special know for tying them, you have to put a knot in it like that, ok? and you open the center, this is very narrow now, now you put it around the sheaf the sheaf on your knee, right, around the shape of reed, you put it in here around this way in here and out that way are you watching? there it is. So that's the way you have to continue up along up you put a hundred reed two hundred reed, you could probably cut a thousand reed in a day if you wanted to, if you start early in the morning now

SS How much or what would be a hundred reed

JG: A hundred reed as I say to you if we call that a single sheaf, you'd have to cut a hundred of those, a hundred is a hundred sheaves but it got so dear in the price of the reed, and the fellas that would be cutting the reed would call that and the diameter of that, a double sheaf so you would do fifty of them and you have a hundred reed, to make it easier for yourself, so I'd say that's what that is there there is two sheaves in that now, then you have to gather them up as twenty five and make twenty five in a bundle and twenty five and then you try and make a hundred out of them and that's a hundred reed, then you have to gather them all up in this folder they call it and you get to carry them out of the spur which is not nice because there is mud up to here with the rubber, but t'was grand it was only that high y'know and up

and stack it on the bank, now another way of doing that would be to cut it, put it straight into the boat then you could bring it straight up, throw it up on the bank and let it dry there.03:46, ready for thatching, here it is here look, say it was in front of you same as Tommy's afternoon today this is the shape you see, look, see that? From there to there now as I'm showing you, there is five sheaves in that, believe it or believe it not, as I'm looking at that and there is five more in a that, see there are all fives, that's the way they are now, five sheaves, there. Five by five is twenty five a reed, see, and twenty five and twenty five would be fifty that is half a hundred reed, so if you cut those it's surprising that you cut, you could cut about a thousand reed in a day if you wanted to.

SS: How many is it going to take to cover this roof?

JG: Oh, surely two, two and a half thousand I suppose, two thousand definitely without a doubt, it all depends on how good the sheaves are, some of the sheaves when they are small, I'd reckon about two thousand sheaves roughly like, but its lovely the way it's done, did he explain to you the way it's done?

SS: Yeah, Tommy was telling me about that

JG: Yeah but it's not much, I did it years ago when I cut it, had a man out there he's eighty seven years of age he cut it as well, and he was a great man to cut it, we used to go over in groups and cut it.

SS: And you leave the tops on? The flowery bits on the top

JG: Yeah you leave those on until he comes to the top, when you come to the top now they will be gone, and you finish up with the ridging, and that ridging comes out, out there, out here, out over that, and probably down, it should be a nice up and down finish a zig zag up and down on the top and its beautiful, absolutely beautiful you know?

SS: And how long is it going to take do you reckon to do this?

JG: Three weeks, three weeks I'd say, I'd put it roughly three weeks, maybe a little longer, but he's working as well right? And what's wrong there is he hasn't a pulled eight yet do you

now what I mean now? If he had full time on that he would probably do it in two weeks, so he's only doing it in his spare time really, hes working with me all the time see, but am, there isn't much more to it really I'd just go down get into the spur and cut it about a foot from the ground and cut em at ah as I say double sheaves, you could cut em at triple sheaves there if you want but what would happen there is they would be too heavy to take out, so you just use the double sheaves, make them twenty five bundles, up on the shoulder that stuff is part of it out along, now you could put em in as I say straight into your boat and carry em up the river.

SS: I know you cut them in winter, and where did you store them until summer?

JG: You store em in the back, away into a house somewhere you have to put em into some place, where they will be safe number one because we did cut a bit of reed over in Mungret, actually I wasn't with him now on the same day over in Mungret and they brought it in and they had it ready for here and they went down the following morning and all there was there was at it, you had that to watch as well y'know so it wasn't a nice thing to see, that's only there a couple weeks ago like y'know but am.

SS: And you'd store them all standing up like this?

JG: You have to store them all standing up, the weather is fine and it's all year around, but if the weather was wet or anything like that, all those would be taken to a water here and we would spin em around, rotate them, y'know, but they won't be there, they will be above there, so you have to keep em safe y'know.

SS: What age do you start cutting reed at?

JG: Eighteen years of age, less maybe, seventeen eighteen years of age and we would often cut two three thousand reed in a day, t'would be like doing a field, if you've ever seen a field of corn the way they would be doing straight up along, straight in through this spur, it was lovely to watch them, the biggest problem is tying them all and bringing them out, that's the biggest problem.

SS: And when you got them you put them on boats?

JG: We put them on two boats we would strap two boats together that's the gang o boat, two boats, and you strap the two boats together and you come on with your sheaf then and you put the sheaf across the boat, both boats, and you cross them, keep crossing them, and put that like that, that way, and then the next one like this like that, that's the way alright,[demonstrates] that's the way you load that to your boat up along, we had that, we had an eleven hundred reed inside in a boat, eleven hundred a reed inside of the boat and a big massive shower came, the water came between the two boats because that's the shape of the boats, so the water made its way in there look [demonstrates], in there and what happened, down go the two boats, and inside the middle of the Shannon, I'm talking about new year's day! 1981 or 82, something like that, and we were pretty lucky to get out of it really, y'know, but we did , and we are still here to prove it, but you have to know what you are doing really you have to know what you are doing when you are down there at the river Shannon,

SS: How did you see, when you had that up in front of you how did you see where you were going?

JG: Amm, the man that was driving the engine then was inside of the locker, we called that the locker then, so he as standing up on the locker, at the height of the reed ii was standing there below the reed and he was standing on the locker, and he used to drive it with his leg, he'd tip the handle with his leg and we'd go that a way, so I said to him Aiden there is a big massive shower coming, and there is one of the boats I said inclined to take water, so she's gonna go down, so he gave the handle a kick like that, and when he did he turned fast, he hit the other one, down it went, it swamped the other boat as well, so down goes the two boats, and down we went as well, we said there is no fear because we had the reed tied to the boat, but what happened the rope that was tying on to one of the knees inside the boat that busted and then all the reeds started hopping away, and we couldn't see the boat and it was getting dark, okay , this is the truth now I'm telling you so we were hopping and trotting jumping from sheaf to sheaf to see, we couldn't see where the boat was, and he was roaring because he couldn't swim, I couldn't swim either, I could maybe do two or three strokes and that's it, so we had to stay there for four and a quarter hours, that's two holes in my shin bones here, and there always will be stopping the boats and turning em over top topside, I'll tell you one thing is you don't let a boat turn over, because if it turns over your definitely gone, y'know so we had to stick it out for five hours which wasn't nice t'was the hypothermia, the things that came into your head you could nearly think you could walk on water, the first hour was terrible, of the coldness I'll never, never forget that. Twas numb and shivering but after that hour, after that hour, you could hit yourself with a hammer in the leg or the hand and you'd feel nothing, because that's what the coldness is after doing, so when that tide went in eventually, we were very lucky, terrible lucky that the boat didn't go out so when the tide started to go out, and it went mad out, next thing was I spotted the bows of the boat and I made a leap for it and I said to Aiden "were safe I have it!" So wind circulations started to come back, oh, I'll never forget that, oh we were staggering and pheww [gestures] the whole world I'll never never forget that, never and we had to walk the whole ways up the bank to get to home, because there's eleven hundred a reed gone, there was paddles gone, the engine was broke, there was parts of the engine we don't know where they went to, and we still made it home, I'd say if you had a camera you'd say oh those guys aren't gonna survive, we did, we are here to prove it, y'know the fellow who was with me only lived up the road there, and he

used to be a roaring and shouting, and I said to him to just try to keep calm, now I'll be frightened myself as well, I'm human too, cos I didn't know if I was going to make it or not either y'know, but all those things, that was the worst thing that had ever happened to me down there, other than that we cut the old reed we supplied the old cottages, out around Killfinnin and those types of places, up by the old a Bunratty all those, we cut the reed for all those as well, and we used to love it!

SS: When did you stop?

JG: Oh I stopped about twenty years of age I suppose, twenty two years of age, because I was working out there at that time then and I was only doing it part time, and then eventually I packed it up altogether, because I got a bit of that there so I went away doing instalments so I wouldn't be doing it anymore but the reed was lovely and I was doing it for all the fine days absolutely fantastic, to be below in the spur cutting reed, nothing only the birds whistling and cutting your bit of reed, but that was all that was in it really. Cut it a foot from the ground cut your hundred a reed all in bundles, gather it up, put it into the boat and go away about your business. Will that do you?

SS: That will do me, thank you very much

JG: Thank you too