

UNDERSTANDING THE BUILDINGS OF CROMARTY

As you walk around Cromarty you will be able to see buildings which date from the mid 17th century to the present day. Most of the houses, however, were built between 1770 and 1840 when the town was at its most prosperous. A little knowledge of Scottish architecture will help you to appreciate the variety and style of the buildings.

Roofs

Stepped gables (crowsteps).

Many roofs in Cromarty were originally thatched, using straw from the rich farm land around the town. It was important to have easy access to the roofs in order to repair and replace the thatch. Stepped gables may have developed in order to make this possible, since they literally provided a set of steps beside the roof. Or they may have evolved from the natural shape of rough stones at the top of the gable. They are sometimes called crowsteps.

Thack stanes.

A second reminder of the days of thatched roofs are the "thack stanes" (thatch stones) which project from the base of the chimney stacks. These prevented leaks on the vulnerable joints between the thatch and the chimney. Thack stanes were still important with early slated roofs, which were sometimes of poor quality. Slates were used in Cromarty from the mid-18th century, but did not become common until the opening of the Caledonian Canal in the early 19th century, after which slates could be brought easily from the west coast.

Skewputs.

The stone at the bottom of the gable is called the skewput. It is an important stone and is often decorated or finely shaped. It is worth looking out for different kinds of skewput.

Houses with crowsteps and thack stanes will usually be 18th century. You will sometimes see later buildings in Scotland with crowsteps. This was the result of a growing interest in Scotland's past during the 19th century, which led to a deliberately old fashioned style of building.

Some houses from the late 17th and early 18th century have very steeply sloping roofs. This was because there was a period of very heavy winters and the steep slope was needed to throw snow off the roof. Without this the roof might have collapsed under the weight.

Chimneys

The chimney cope (the top part of the chimney stack) is often a good indication of the age of a building. (17th/early 18th century - deep copes with rolled edges; mid - late 18th century - cornice at base; 19th century - panelled stacks with square copes.)