



Local History: 1

THE TOWNLAND



Ireland and its counties are sub-divided in a unique way, counties into baronies, baronies into parishes, and parishes into townlands. The townland is a unique feature of the Irish landscape and certainly existed long before the parishes and counties. An ancient division dating back to pre-Norman times, it is the common term or English translation for a variety of small local land units that varied in name and meaning throughout the island of Ireland. In the north there had been a large division called a 'ballybetagh,' generally divided into around 12 'ballyboes', but into around 16 'tates' in the area of Fermanagh and Monaghan. The 'ballyboe' was notionally of 120 acres and the 'tate', 60 acres, but these measurements clearly referred to useable land in an area that might also include marsh and mountain waste. The 'ballyboe' might be further divided into three 'sessiagh' while the term 'carrow' (Irish 'ceathramh', a 'quarter') may refer to either a quarter of a 'ballybetagh' or a quarter of a 'ballyboe'. The 'ballybetagh' disappeared after the Plantation and the subdivisions became the modern townlands, the average size of which, in most of Northern Ireland, is now c.350 acres but c.180 acres in Fermanagh. The spelling of townland names is subject to considerable variation due largely to the difficulties of representing the pronunciation of Irish language names in English spelling.

The original Irish names of townlands were eventually written down in anglicised form as they sounded to English court scribes. A good example of names being written down in this fashion can be found in the Raven maps (**T510/1**). It is possible to trace how they became increasingly anglicised in the *General Alphabetical Index to the Townlands and Towns, Parishes and Baronies of Ireland* and in the Ordnance Survey maps.

In naming townlands frequent use was made of natural or man-made features of the landscape as well as names of families. The townland name may originally have referred to an easily identifiable feature of the landscape such as **Carraig** (meaning rock) or **Tullagh** (meaning a hill) or a botanical feature such as **Annagh** (meaning marsh). The social customs or history of the people who have lived in a particular place can also be reflected in the name of the townland. Often these names are the only records which survive of the families who held the land in pre-plantation times.

Bally or **Baile** (both meaning settlement) are usually compounded with personal or family names and examples can be found all over Ireland including such names as Ballywalter, Ballyrussel and Ballysavage. Many townlands throughout Ireland took their names from early habitation sites, both ecclesiastical and secular, and these include **Rath** (meaning fortification) or **Dun** (meaning fort) or **Chill** (meaning church).

There are approximately 62,000 townlands in Ireland and great variations are evident in their size and shape. They may be as small as an acre or as large as 7,000 acres. In Northern Ireland there are over 9,000 townlands ranging from Acre McCricket in County Down with 4 acres to Slievedoo in County Tyrone with 4,551 acres. It is not known exactly why there should be such discrepancies in size - it may be due to local topography or perhaps farming practices. Anything from five to thirty townlands may be grouped together to form a civil parish.

Up until the early 19th century townland boundaries altered considerably, following subdivisions. While townlands are almost all compact units it is possible to find parts of a townland in different civil parishes.

Townlands were used as the basis for plantation grants in the 16th and 17th centuries so you will find that land was let by landlords on a townland basis. Information in rentals, for example, will be arranged by townland and estates were mapped by townland. Townland names were recorded in a variety of documentation concerning land throughout the 19th century. The Tithe Applotment Books used the townland as its smallest division and it was adopted by government as the administrative unit for the decennial census and for valuation purposes. The boundaries of townlands are marked on the Ordnance Survey maps.

An alphabetical list of all the townlands in Ireland can be found in the *Alphabetical Index to the Townlands and Towns, Parishes and Baronies of Ireland* published at various dates. The indexes were compiled during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries after each census and will indicate in which county, barony, parish, poor law union and district electoral division each townland is situated. They are available in the Public Search Room. Once you have located your particular townland you should consult the Geographical Index (also available in the Public Search Room) which is arranged by townland and describes what archives exist for that townland as well as the PRONI reference numbers.

Opening Hours

Mon-Wed and Fri 9:00am-4:45pm
Thurs 10:00am-8:45pm
(Please check in advance for
late evening opening)

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