

# ‘Investigating Irish place-names online: Methods and resources’

The Northern Ireland Place-Name Project

# The Northern Ireland Place- Name Project



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the history behind our place-names


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## Discover the origin of our local place-names

At placenamesni.org we've collected information on the origins and meanings of over 30,000 place-names from all over Northern Ireland.

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### The Northern Ireland Place-Name Project

@placenamesni

Project @QUBelfast working on linguistic origins of townland and other historical names in collaboration with LPS @dptfinance. Inquiries to townlands@qub.ac.uk

📍 Belfast, Northern Ireland [placenamesni.org](#) 📅 Joined February 2015

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The main aim of the project is to research the **origins and meanings of local place-names**, based on a corpus of over 30,000 names of settlements and physical features which also contains over 130,000 historical references to these names derived from sources stretching over two millennia, from Ptolemy's Geography, c.150AD, to the first Ordnance Survey conducted in Ireland (1824-1846). The most detailed data in the corpus relates to the historical administrative system as these are the names which are the most ancient on the whole and for which there is the greatest amount of **historical evidence**.



# The place-names of Ireland

Irish names originated in a variety of languages: primarily **Irish** historically but with increasing numbers of names in **English** and **Scots** appearing on record since the Plantation of Ulster in the seventeenth century.

Scots is part of the same language family as English and German. Scots came to Ulster with Scottish settlers in the early 17th century. Scots place-names are found throughout Ulster, but mostly in Antrim and Donegal.





# The place-names of Ireland

There are also names which have originated in other languages such as Old Norse (see **Strangford, Carlingford**). Most of the Norse placenames in Ireland are on the east or south coasts. This is because the Vikings established ports and towns along these coasts.



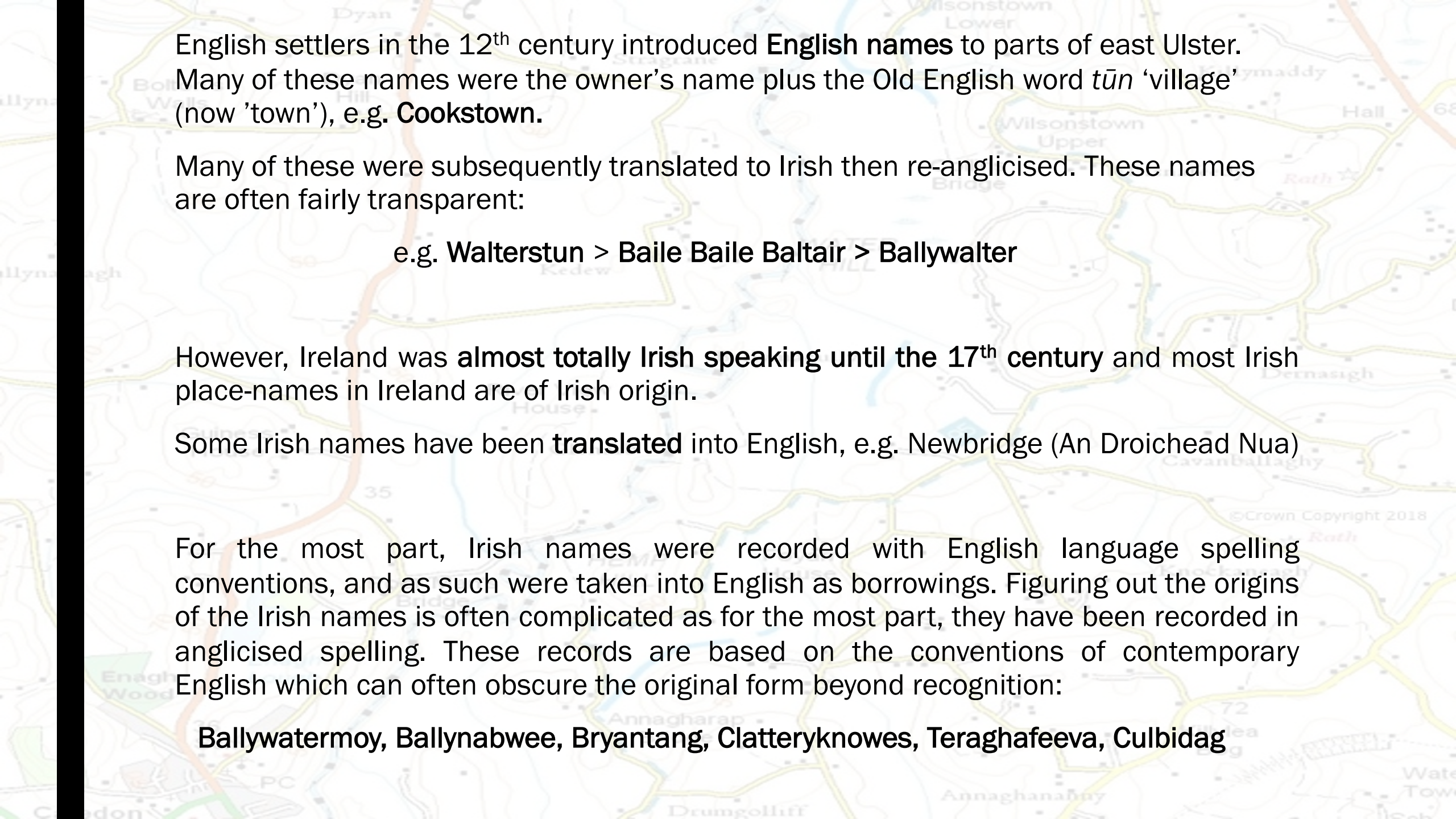
**Strangford** (*Strangr Fjörðr* 'strong sea-inlet')



**Carlingford** (*Kerlingfjörðr* 'narrow sea-inlet of the hag') originally referred to the sea-inlet before it was applied to the town in Co. Louth on its south-western shore. It is thought to derive from Old Norse *kerling* 'hag' and *fjörthr* (later *fjord*) 'narrow inlet of the sea between cliffs or steep slopes' (Longman Dict. sv. *fiord*).

Flanagan suggests that, by extension, *kerling* came to mean 'rock shaped like a hag' and that it may have referred to 'the three mountain tops, locally called The Three Nuns, frequently used as pilot points on entering the lough.'

Some other names indicate contact with, or knowledge of, other languages such as French (e.g. **Pomeroy**).



English settlers in the 12<sup>th</sup> century introduced **English names** to parts of east Ulster. Many of these names were the owner's name plus the Old English word *tūn* 'village' (now 'town'), e.g. **Cookstown**.

Many of these were subsequently translated to Irish then re-anglicised. These names are often fairly transparent:

e.g. **Walterstun > Baile Baile Baltair > Ballywalter**

However, Ireland was **almost totally Irish speaking until the 17<sup>th</sup> century** and most Irish place-names in Ireland are of Irish origin.

Some Irish names have been **translated** into English, e.g. Newbridge (An Droichead Nua)

For the most part, Irish names were recorded with English language spelling conventions, and as such were taken into English as borrowings. Figuring out the origins of the Irish names is often complicated as for the most part, they have been recorded in anglicised spelling. These records are based on the conventions of contemporary English which can often obscure the original form beyond recognition:

**Ballywatermoy, Ballynabwee, Bryantang, Clatteryknowes, Teraghafeeva, Culbidag**

# Ordnance Survey and Standardisation of place-names

- A large amount of evidence on place-names comes from the work of the Ordnance Survey.
- The Ordnance Survey began their first survey in 1824, Their main aim was to estimate the value of land, and for place-names the main aim was to decide on standard English spelling got place-names to put on the 6" maps.
- John O'Donovan (the first Celtic Professor in QUB), was appointed to suggest the standard forms, and to carry out the field work.
- Local Irish forms were collected (where possible) but JOD also made his own suggestions when there was no Irish form available.



# Methodology

## Step 1: Common place-name elements

### Natural landscape elements:

***cnoc*** 'hill' anglicised 'knock/crock' (Ballyknock, Knockbracken, Knock, Crockada, Crockadreen)

***carraig*** 'rock' (Carrickfergus, Ballycarrickmaddy, Carrickmore)

***gleann*** 'valley' (Glenariff, Glenarb, Glenarm) \*Not Glengormley!!

***inis*** 'island' (Inishkeen, Inishroosk, Enniskillen)

***droim*** 'ridge' (Dromore, Dromara, Drumbeg)

***abhainn*** 'river' (Owenbeg, Owenbreedin)

# Methodology

## Step 1: Common place-name elements

Man-made features:

*teampall* 'church' (Templepatrick, Templemoyle)

*lios, dún, ráth* 'fort' (Lisnagarvey, Dungiven, Rathmore)

*caiseal* 'castle' (Cashelbane, Cashelnadrea)

*carn* 'heap, pile of stones' (Carnkenny, Carnmavy, Carnanmore)



# Methodology

## Step 2: Common qualifying elements

Names of natural features or man-made structures often also appear alongside qualifying components, such as names (family names, personal names, names of saints or mythological characters):

**Ballymaconnell, Legmacaffry, Tirfergus, Ballypatrick**

Also common are descriptive adjectives or descriptive nouns:

***mór*** 'big/great' / ***beag*** 'small/little' (Ardbeg, Dromore)

***buí*** 'yellow' (Clonboy, Lisboy)

***dubh*** 'black' (Knockdoo, Lisdoo)

***rua*** 'red' (Knockanroe)

***cros*** 'cross/crossroads' (Cross, Ballycross, Crossmore)

# Methodology 3: Historical forms

In some cases, looking solely at the contemporary names doesn't tell us the full extent of the original name:

E.g. Knock, Co. Armagh

## Historical name form

Old Form	Ref. Date	Reference
Knockballebrianboy	1583-	<a href="#">Fiants Eliz. 4327</a>
Ennish Knock = Ba: Bren-buoya	1603	<a href="#">Bartlett Maps (Esch. Co. Maps) 2</a>
Knockb:brianbuy	1609	<a href="#">Esch. Co. Map 5.29</a>
al. Ballyknock	1616	<a href="#">CPR Jas I 314b</a>
tns & Inds of Knockballbrianboy al.	1616	<a href="#">CPR Jas I 314b</a>
1 towne Knocekallybayenboy, Clancan	1621	<a href="#">Inq. Ult. (Armagh) \$7 Jas. I</a>
Knocekallybayenboy	1621	<a href="#">Inq. Ult. (Armagh) \$7 Jas. I</a>
Knockbridge over the river of Ban	1655c	<a href="#">Civ. Surv. x \$77</a>
Knockbridge, a place called	1655c	<a href="#">Civ. Surv. x \$76</a>
td Knockbyllybrianboy	1657	<a href="#">Inq. Arm. (Paterson) 234</a>
Knockballybrianboy	1661	<a href="#">BSD 55</a>
Knock	1664	<a href="#">HMR Arm. (PRONI) 36</a>
Knock	1760	<a href="#">Rocque's Map</a>
Knock	1835	<a href="#">OSNB: gen. sources AE4</a>
Knock	1835	<a href="#">Ret. Tds Armstrong's Sur. (OSNB) AE4</a>
~Cnoc ""a hill""	1835	<a href="#">J O'D (OSNB) AE4</a>
3 Knock bridges	1837	<a href="#">OSM vol. 1 p. 104</a>
~Cnoc Bhaile Bhriain Bhuidhe	1950c	<a href="#">Mooney 1950c 285</a>
~Cnoc, An	1989	<a href="#">GÉ 68</a>
~An Cnoc ""the hill""	1999	<a href="#">Dict. Ulst. PN 91</a>

Analysis of the historical forms such as *Knockballebrianboy* (1583), we can see that the original name was *Cnoc Bhaile Bhriain Bhuí* 'hill of the townland of yellow-haired Brian'!

Historical forms are available via our online database which can be accessed at [www.placenamesni.org](http://www.placenamesni.org).

# Methodology 3: Historical forms

- Gillistown, Co. Antrim looks like a simple English name *Gilly* + *tūn* 'village' like we saw earlier. But look at the historical evidence:

## Gillistown, County Antrim

Show the Map

### Origin

*Ir. Baile an Mhaí* 'townland of the plain'

## Background

The earlier historical forms show that the townland was formerly known by the Irish name *Baile an Mhaí* 'townland of the plain'. The word *magh* (Standard Ir. *má*) 'plain' is feminine in Mod. Ir. but in O. Ir. it was a neuter noun and it later throws up both masc. and fem. forms (DIL *sv. mag*). In this case, the earliest spellings suggest that *magh* is a masculine noun. There is a large, flat area of bogland in the east of the townland, and this appears most likely to be the feature which has given rise to the place-name. The modern English form of the place-name is not documented until c.1711. The first element of this name is obviously the Scottish surname Gillis, a variant-form of 'Gillies', which is derived from Gaelic *Giolla Íosa* 'servant of Jesus' (Black 1946, 306). An individual named Robert Gillis is recorded in the *Hearth Money Rolls* as residing in the Grange of Ballyscullion in 1666 (Carleton 1991, 164). It is quite likely that this Mr Gillis was a recent settler from Scotland, and that it was he who changed the name of the townland to Gillistown. The tradition recorded in 1828 that the townland was named from an individual named Gill who was the ferryman in 1653 is still alive in the area, and it is possible that Gill is a corruption of the surname *Gillis*.

## References

(info. from McKay, P. (1995): Place-Names of Northern Ireland vol. 4 p. 137)

## Historical name form

Old Form	Ref. Date	Reference
Ballinweigh	1605	<a href="#">Inq. Ant. (DK) 51</a>
Ballinweigh	1605	<a href="#">CPR Jas I 77b</a>
Ballinweigh	1608	<a href="#">CPR Jas I 121b</a>
Ballinmoighe	1627	<a href="#">Deed Clotworthy</a>
Ballyneveigh	1639	<a href="#">Lodge RR Chas I ii 337</a>
Ballyneviegh	1654	<a href="#">Marriage Sett. Skeffington</a>
Ballinmoy	1669	<a href="#">HMR Ant. 151</a>
Gillistown	1711c	<a href="#">Rent Roll Mass. Est.</a>
Gillistowne als. Ballynamoy. Gillstown orw. Ballyn	1713	<a href="#">Reg. Deeds 12-120-46602</a>
Gillistown	1733	<a href="#">Duty Bk. Grange</a>
Gillistown orw. Ballynamoy	1738	<a href="#">Reg. Deeds 94-186-65857</a>
Gillistown	1780	<a href="#">Lendrick Map</a>
Gillistown	1785	<a href="#">Duff's Lough Neagh</a>
Ballneveagh orw. Gillistown	1786	<a href="#">Reg. Deeds 378-398-253562</a>
Mosses of Gillestown and...	1820	<a href="#">Reg. Deeds 749-35-509370</a>
Gillistown	1827	<a href="#">Bnd. Sur.</a>
Gillistown	1827	<a href="#">Bnd. Sur. (Reg.)</a>
""Gillistown - Gill was the ferryman in 1653""	1828	<a href="#">J O'D (OSNB) A 39</a>
Gillistown	1828	<a href="#">OSNB A 39</a>

# Methodology 4: Mapping

- Some anglicised forms are ambiguous. For example the component kil- in place-names can come from *coill* 'wood' or *cill* 'church, graveyard'. In these cases (for example in Kilmore) it is useful to consult the historical maps.



Kilmore, parish of Layd, Co. Antrim



Kilmore, parish of Clonfeacle, Co. Armagh

# Mapping online

Interactive historical maps are available online.

<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/services/search-proni-historical-maps-viewer>

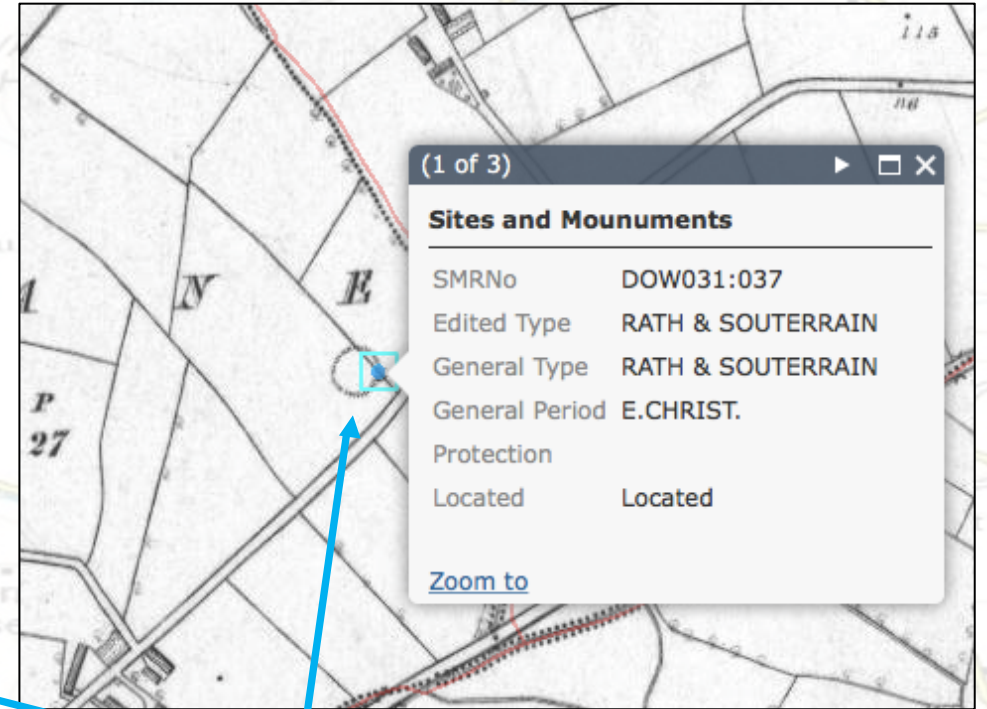
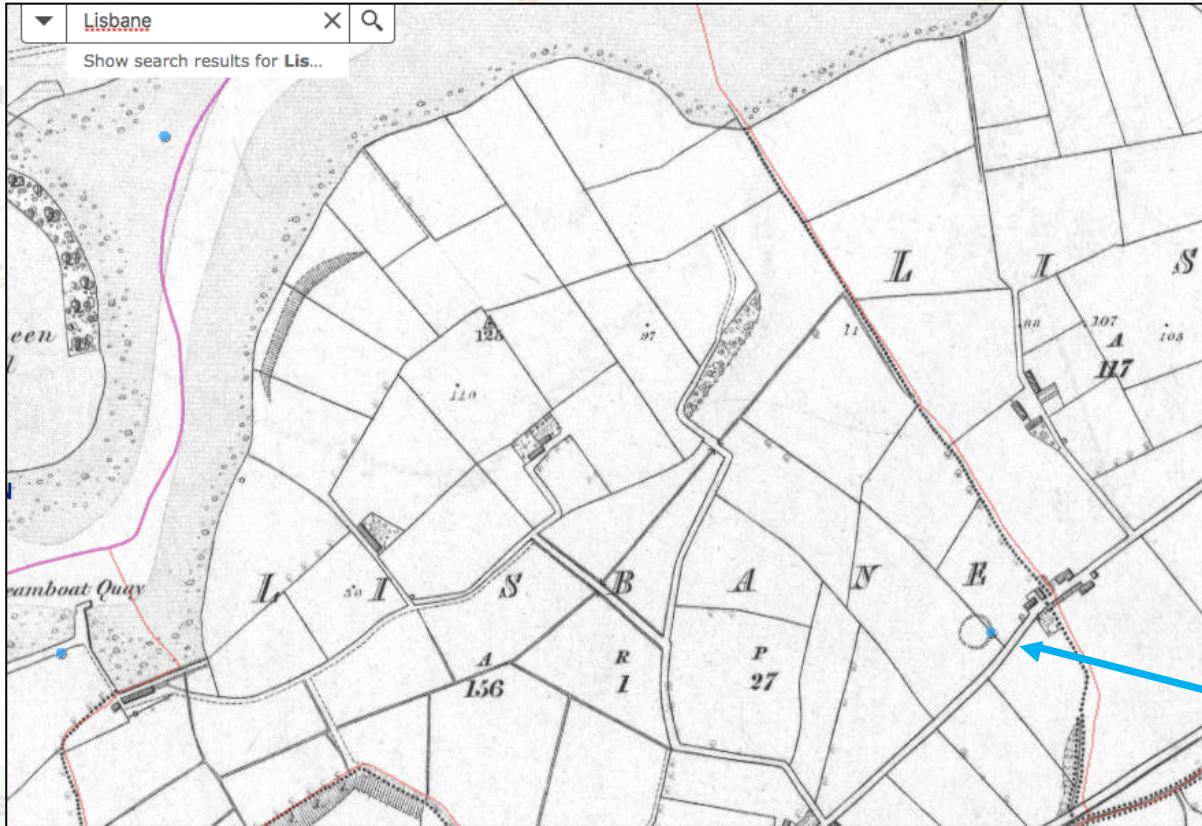
The screenshot displays the PRONI Historical Maps viewer interface. The main map shows a historical map of Crossdall, with a large orange-shaded area representing the townland. A search bar at the top left contains the text "Crossdall". A "Layer List" panel on the right side of the map shows various layers, including "Operational Layers" and "OSNI Historical" editions. A data popup window is open over the orange-shaded area, displaying the following information:

Townlands: CROSSDALL (Tynan)	
OBJECTID_1	5128
OBJECTID	5128
TOWNLAND_I	8255
Townland_P	CROSSDALL (Tynan)
Shape_Length	8093.719851255337
Shape_Area	1960403.7605314776

Below the data popup, there is a "Zoom to" link. The interface also includes a search bar, a search results dropdown, and a search button. The map shows various geographical features, including roads, rivers, and buildings. The background is a topographic map with contour lines and place names like "Bolton's Walls", "Dyan Hill", "Wilsonstown Lower", "Wilsonstown Upper", "Collins", "Lisnafeady", "Rath", "Dernasigh", "Enagh Wood", "36 Sch", "PC", "Annaghanahy", and "Drumgolliff".

# Methodology 4: Mapping

Lisbane (Lios Bán 'white fort') Co. Down

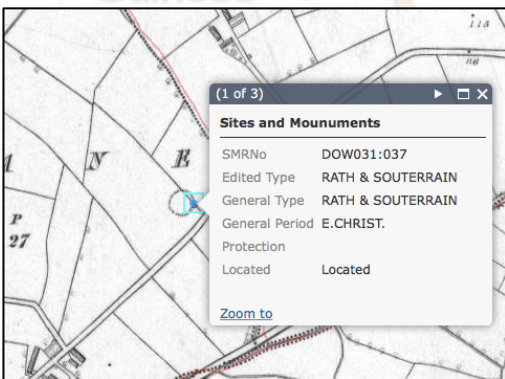


Blue dots on the historical maps are of sites of archaeological significance and will provide an SMRNo (Sites and monuments record)

# Archaeological Evidence: NISMR

<https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/services/sites-and-monuments-record>

Use this SMR No. to locate further information on the site at the website of Northern Ireland Sites & Monuments Record



## RATH & SOUTERRAIN

[Search the NISMR database >> RATH & SOUTERRAIN](#)

On a ploughed field on top of a ridge with good views over Strangford Lough to N. The rath has been ploughed out on the SW side on the field boundary & survives on NE as an uneven narrow raised cresent covered in long grass. There is a claim that a souterrain was excavated c.60 years ago & bones were uncovered. The site was bulldozed by the landowner in 1985, but he claims the souterrain was not disturbed at this time.

## Image Gallery



## Related Documents

[SM7-DOW-031-037.pdf](#)

## SMR Number DOW 031:037

[view on map](#)

**Edited Type:** RATH & SOUTERRAIN  
**Townland:** LISBANE

**Specific Type**    **Specific Period**  
SOUTERRAIN    E.CHRIST.  
RATH            E.CHRIST.

**Council:** NEWRY MOURNE AND DOWN  
**County:** DOW  
**Grid Ref:** J5100047720

**Protection:**  
**Parish:** SAUL  
**Barony:** LECALÉ LOWER  
**Town:**  
**General Type:** RATH & SOUTERRAIN  
**Condition:** TRACES ONLY (No definable features)

**General Periods:** E.CHRIST.

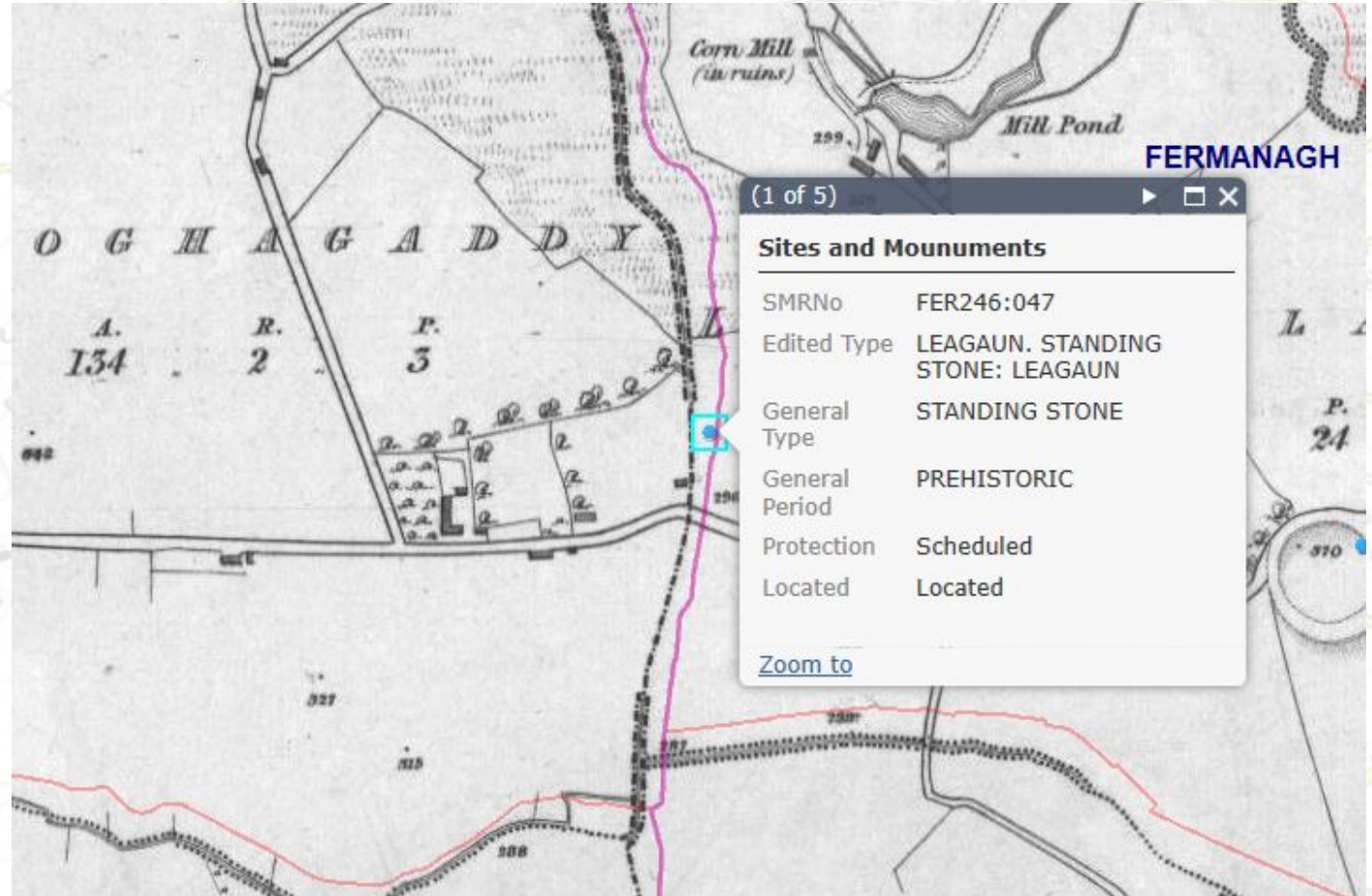
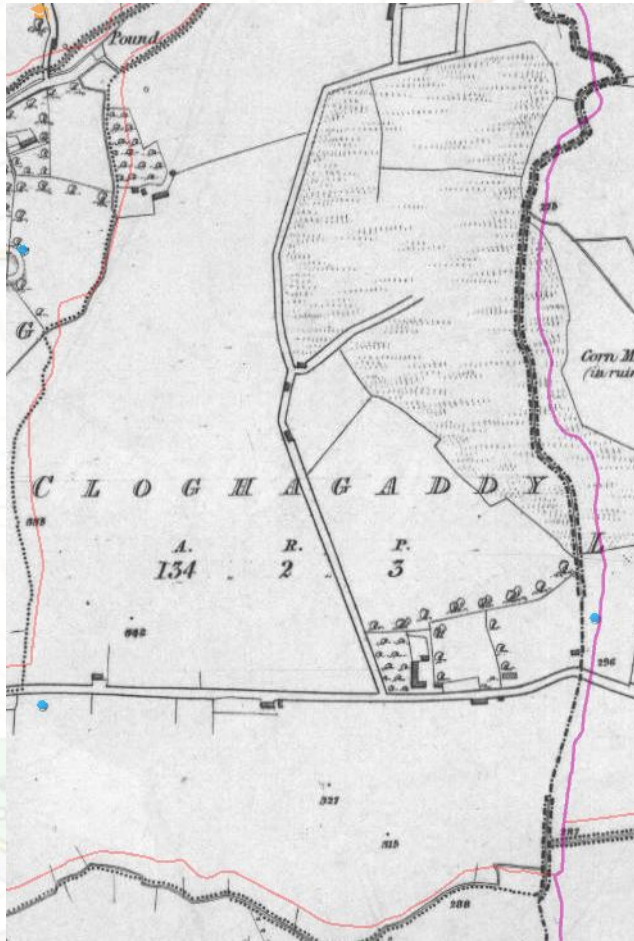


[click here to request additional information](#)

## Bibliography

# Methodology 4: Mapping

Cloghagaddy, County Fermanagh





# Methodology 4: Mapping

## Cloghagaddy (Cloch an Ghadaí 'stone of the thief'), Co. Fermanagh

### LEAGAUN

[Search the NISMR database](#) >> LEAGAUN

In a slight hollow on a gradual NE-facing hill slope, immediately W of a small stream forming the townland boundary. Marked on the 1909 OS 6" map & the current IG map & designated "Leagaun" on both maps. This is a long sandstone orthostat, 2.6m high, 1.9m wide & 0.55m thick, which rises from a roughly rectangular base with the sides tapering gradually to a blunt point. At the base, a hole has been dug revealing the stone to lie to a depth of 0.5m below ground level.

### Image Gallery

### Related Documents

- [FER246.47 Declaration.pdf](#)
- [FER246.47 Map.pdf](#)
- [SM7-FER-246-047.pdf](#)

### SMR Number [FER 246:047](#)

[view on map](#)

**Edited Type:** STANDING STONE: LEAGAUN  
**Townland:** CLOGHAGADDY

**Specific Type**    **Specific Period**

**Council:** FERMANAGH AND OMAGH

**County:** FER

**Grid Ref:** H4305030220

**Protection:** Scheduled

**Parish:** GALLOON

**Barony:** CLANKELLY

**Town:**

**General Type:** STANDING STONE

**Condition:** WELL                      PRESERVED  
(Complete/substantially complete)

**General Periods:** PREHISTORIC



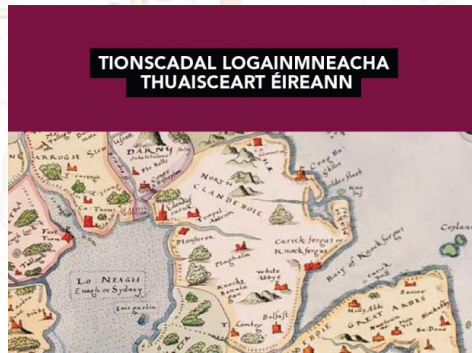
[click here to request additional information](#)

### Bibliography

PSAMNI, 1940, 181



# Projects: Northern Ireland Place-Name Project



• Based at QUB  
[www.placenamesni.org](http://www.placenamesni.org)

- Over 30,000 place-names in database
- Analysis of all townland names in NI to be completed by October 2020



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the history behind our place-names

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Map of Boundaries

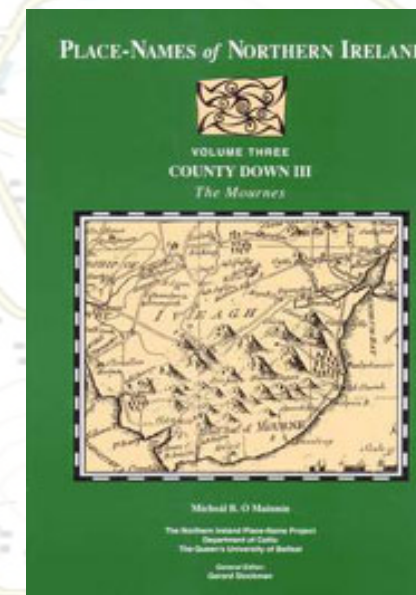
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Enter a place-name to get started

e.g. Strangford

Search



# Projects: The Placenames Database of Ireland



An Roinn Cultúir,  
Oidhreacht agus Gaeltachta  
Department of Culture,  
Heritage and the Gaeltacht

logainm.ie

tárma.ie ainm.ie dúchas.ie gaois.ie

Logainm.ie Meitheal Logainm.ie

Gluais & Léarscáileanna dáileacháin Acmhainní Oideachas Eolas

GAEILGE ENGLISH

Sliqeach

LOGAINM AN LAE

16/11/2018

Eas Liath

Aasleagh

Nóta mínithe

Taifid chartlainne taifid scanáilte (1)

Breis eolais

Fáilte

Fáilte go Bunachar Logainmneacha na hÉireann, arna fhorbairt ag Fiontar & Scoil na Gaeilge (DCU) i bpáirt leis an mBrainse Logainmneacha (An Roinn Cultúir, Oidhreacht agus Gaeltachta).

Tuilleadh eolais

Bí ar an eolas:

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Mearzúmáil

Cuardaigh

Sráidainmneacha san áireamh

- The Placenames Branch was founded in 1956 as part of the Ordnance Survey
- The Placenames Database of Ireland was created by Fiontar & Scoil na Gaeilge in collaboration with The Placenames Branch (Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht).
- Distribution maps for common elements
- Some educational resources (in Irish)  
<https://www.logainm.ie/en/res/>