



North Mayo Heritage Centre Mayo Heritage

Newsletter




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Co. Mayo has over 3,400 **Townlands**

We examine:

- The History of Townlands
- The Origin of Townland names
- Townlands in Co. Mayo
- The difference between a townland and a village



Aerial view of
Crossmolina which
spans across
various townlands

*Image: By Mike Kinsella –
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Are you interested in

TRACING YOUR MAYO ROOTS?

If you are interested in professional help to research your family history
or are curious about your ancestry, why not contact us?



The
North Mayo
Heritage
Centre



Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland



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Townlands: The Smallest Units of Ireland's Landscape

With thousands of these unique geographic units scattered across the country, they offer a fascinating glimpse into Ireland's cultural and historical landscape.

What is a townland?

A townland is the smallest geographical division of land used in Ireland where counties are sub-divided in a unique way; counties into baronies, baronies into parishes, and parishes into townlands.

The English word *town* originally meant a settlement or enclosed space. When English mapmakers and administrators recorded Irish land divisions, they used *townland* as a translation for various indigenous terms referring to agricultural plots, fields, estates - not the meaning of *town* we think of today.

In 1838, the Ordnance Survey officers visited all townlands in Co. Mayo as part of their work in mapping the entire island of Ireland. As a result of this work, Ireland became the first country in the world to be mapped in its entirety to a uniform scale (six inches to one mile). The surveyors made observations about each townland including its name meaning, prevalent surnames names, notable buildings, recorded the presence of lakes, forests, rivers, observed the type of soil and crops, outlined the land ownership, bordering townlands, the number of acres etc. This mapping provided a standard reference for censuses, tax assessment, legal records, civil registrations and land records that remain relevant to this day.

In the 1830s and 1840s, the Ordnance Survey office standardised the anglicised spellings of all townlands. This caused great controversy. Many people continued to use non-standardised spellings, including in official records - this can present a challenge for genealogical researchers. Despite the official standardisation of townland names, many unofficial placenames and sub-divisions within townlands continued to be used by the general population. We see this even to this day, where a single townland can have many name variations. For example, the townland of Breaghwy just outside Ballina had at least four names in the early church records – Ballymunreevy, Slieverue, Breaghwy and Cloonagun.

These four placenames represent sub-denominations or different sectors within the one official townland. When the Ordnance Survey team visited the townland of Breaghwy in the 1830s, they chose one of these place names (Breaghwy) and made it the official townland name.

The Origin of Townland Names

The names of townlands generally refer to permanent, visible and easily identifiable features of the landscape e.g. *cnoc* (a hill), *carraig* (a rock), *aille* (cliff), *adhadh*, (field) and *tullagh* (hill). 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. *Bally* or *Baile* (both meaning settlement) are usually compounded with personal or family names and examples can be found all over Ireland. Many townlands took their names from early habitation sites, both ecclesiastical and secular, and these include *rath* (meaning a fortification) or *dun* (meaning a fort) or *cill* (meaning a church). Rathkelly would be one such sample in Ballinrobe which, in turn, gave the name to the surrounding townland.

Townlands in Co. Mayo

County Mayo alone contains over 3,400 townlands covering the full rural landscape of the county. Townlands vary enormously in size — some are just a few acres, while others stretch for thousands of acres, depending on terrain, soil quality, and historic territorial use.

One of the largest townlands in Co. Mayo is Sheskin (*An Seisceann*) meaning swamp or bog, situated in the parish of Kilcommon. It covers over 7,000 acres (more than 28 km²) and is the second largest townland in Ireland. Its extent (as the translation of the name suggests) is largely due to upland bog and mountainous terrain that made it less suitable for division into smaller plots historically.

Across Co. Mayo, the smallest townlands can be just a few acres. Excluding islands and a few others, the townland of Gorteendarragh (*Goirtín Darach* meaning little oak field) situated in the parish of Oughaval is considered one of the smallest townlands in Mayo, measuring 12 acres, 3 roods and 9 perches (0.018 sq miles).

What is the difference between a townland and a village?

A townland is Ireland's smallest official land division, a historic parcel of land with varied sizes, while a village is a populated settlement, a cluster of houses and buildings smaller than a town, often centered around a community point like a church. The key difference is function: townlands are administrative or survey units, whereas villages are populated places where people live and gather, with villages often being located within one or more townlands.

For anyone doing family research, a townland name is the most important thing. Townlands are indispensable for genealogy and local history because they form the backbone of historic records.

If you're interested in a unique historical insight into the history of any specific townland in County Mayo, including a list of landholders at various time periods, please get in touch.

Prices start at just €35 for the product sent by email to anywhere in the world. Tel. 096 31809 or email: nmhmarketing2017@gmail.com

Sources:

townlands.ie
logainm.ie
askaboutireland.ie

Let's celebrate

MAYO DAY!



May 2nd is Mayo Day. Our Genealogy Banner exhibition will be launched and our researcher will be on hand to discuss any genealogy questions including the 1926 census.