

Westmeath Field Names Project 2019-20

Project Update



Heritage Week 15-21st August

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An Chomhairle Oidhreachta
The Heritage Council



Introduction

The project began in the summer of 2018 with two community groups, Taghmon Women's Group and Drumraney Heritage Society. Over 700 field names were collected in that first year, some of which have been discussed in our first [booklet](#). Since 2019 we have worked with a further eleven groups, from all over the county: Fore, Collinstown, Kinnegad, Mount Temple, Rochfortbridge, Ballymore, Loughnavalley, Multyfarnham, Tang, Coole, and Rosemount. 20 meetings with community groups were held in 2019 and a further fourteen have taken place to date in 2020. In total, over 100 volunteers have been involved in the project in 2019-20, and 1400 field names have been collected from 70 townlands. Additionally, a further 80 field names have been transcribed from historic estate maps (18th-19th centuries), the Registry of Deeds, local newspapers and other sources. Unfortunately, all group meetings had to cease in March 2020 due to the Coronavirus Outbreak but collection of names from individuals in various parts of the county has resumed, as circumstances allow.

The project is funded by **The Heritage Council**, **Creative Ireland** and **Westmeath County Council**. The County Heritage Officer, Melanie McQuade has provided invaluable guidance, enthusiasm, and practical support which has ensured the project's progress to date. The project co-ordinator is Dr Aengus Finnegan (University of Limerick), assisted by Michelle Dunne (Dublin City University) and Justin Ó Gliaáin (Dublin City University).

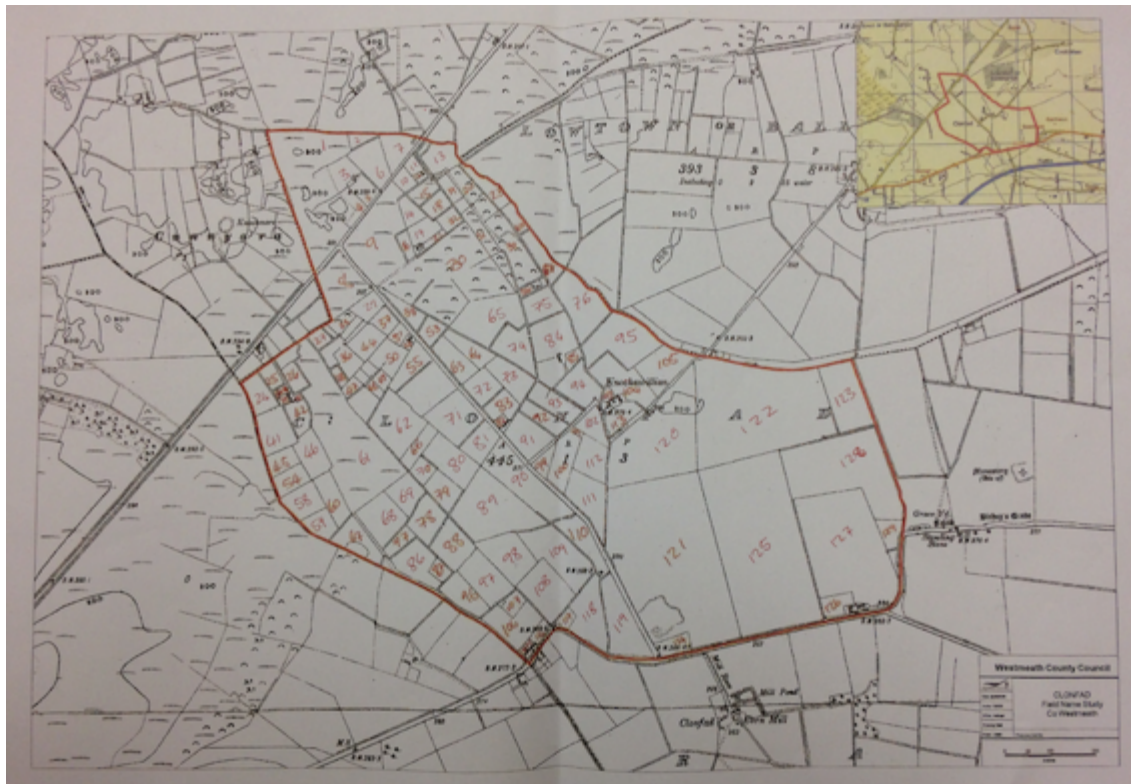
How to collect field names?

Local community groups or individuals interested in collecting field names in Westmeath can make contact with the County Heritage Officer or the Project Co-ordinator. Once contact is established a list of local townlands are matched with interested volunteers and numbered maps of each townland are provided. Volunteers then write down the names of the fields on the project record sheet, including the number on the map and the source of the information. In general we are looking for names and pronunciations of names current in the oral tradition which may only be known to the landowner or a handful of individuals, and have not been recorded in written sources. If you are unsure how to spell a name try and spell it as close as possible to how it is pronounced. The project co-ordinator will examine each record sheet at a follow-up meeting and provide guidance or make a sound recording if the names are Irish, or include traditional local pronunciations of surnames, personal names or other words. Volunteers often start with their own farms, or the farms of neighbours and relatives and then broaden out to cover the field names in a whole townland or a couple of neighbouring townlands. Not every field has a name and 100% coverage is not expected – simply record what you can. Some names may have more than one name. In this case both names should be recorded. The names of other small features (streams, hills and hillocks, woods, bogs, rocks, wells, small roads and lanes, ringforts, etc., can also be recorded. Our record sheet can be downloaded [here](#).

Maps

We usually use the 'Last Edition' Ordnance Survey 6-inch maps. These maps appear to have been scaled off the 25-inch series, which were surveyed from 1897-1913. From experience these are the maps which volunteers find easiest to use. The field boundaries are usually fairly

clear, which is important when providing A3 print-outs. Additionally, the boundaries shown are those of about 100 years ago, and in many cases remain substantially unchanged to this day. Sometimes smaller fields shown on the maps are now 'all the one', having been amalgamated with adjoining fields over the years during land reclamation works. If you remember the names of the older fields, you should still write them down. Where substantial numbers of ditches have been removed, or the landscape otherwise altered significantly due to the development of forestry, quarrying, or road-building, we may provide an aerial photograph of each townland to help volunteers orientate themselves when using the numbered maps.



A numbered map of Clonfad prepared for the Kinnegad group

Publication and archiving

All of the names collected are published on Meitheal Logainm.ie. This website provides an open-access online repository for collections of minor placenames, with a searchable mapping tool. It has been developed by Fiontar & Scoil na Gaeilge, Dublin City University. The original numbered maps and completed record sheets are held as a project archive by Westmeath County Council.

Publicity and engagement with the public

Our record sheet, a ten-page booklet outlining the results of phase 1 of the project, some historic maps, and a link to the project page on Meitheal Logainm.ie can be accessed on the [project website](#).

We tweet photographs and snippets from the project regularly, interpreting interesting field names as we go. Follow us on twitter [@NamesField](https://twitter.com/NamesField).



A thread of tweets from February 12th 2020

RTÉ, *The Irish Times*, *Agriland.ie*, *The Westmeath Independent*, *The Westmeath Examiner*, *The Westmeath Topic* and the Country Life programme on Midlands 103 have all profiled the project. The project coordinator will speak about field names and placenames on RTÉ television's *Creedon's Atlas* later this year.

Phase 2 & 3 Results

The following is a by-no-means comprehensive discussion of *some* of the names collected in 2019-20. In general the first or head form of the name is the spelling given by the volunteers who collected the name, and is printed in italics. Specimen words, and orthographical forms in Irish (as recommended by the author) are also given in italics. Phonetic transcriptions are given in square brackets.

Irish names

About 150 Irish-language names, or names which contain an Irish element, were recorded in Phase 2 & 3. This represents c.11.6% of the total number of field names recorded in this period. This figure excludes names containing surnames of Irish origin (*Laffey's Garden* etc.). The word *boreen*, a borrowing into English of Irish *bóithrín* 'little road' accounts for eleven of this number – one example is *Moran's Boreen*, in Dungolman, **Ballymore**. Another example

of a name of this type is *Duff's Kesh* [dʌfs k'eʃ], in Lakill and Moortown, near **Fore**. Duff is a surname, and *ceis* is a fairly common word in placenames and means 'wattled causeway'. In this case it refers to a footstick which crosses a drain between two townlands. The Irish for hedgehog, *gráinneog*, is a commonly used word in Westmeath, at least among the older generation. *The Gráinneog Hill*, Derrynagarragh, **Collinstown**, is a small round hill covered in furze, which, in contrast with the surrounding green pasture, resembles a hedgehog.

A similar type of name are those which include a nickname of Irish-language origin, for example *The Brockan's House* [t̪ə brəkənʒ haus], in Aghalasty and Ankersland, **Fore**. 'The Brockan' (from *brocán* 'little badger') was the nickname of a cranky individual who lived there. A number of Irish-language nicknames were also collected in the **Multyfarnham** area, which were current in the 1960s (some are still in use), which suggests a sufficient traditional knowledge of Irish vocabulary persisted at that time for oblique references to personal traits (by using Irish words), to be understood locally. Irish diminutive or pet forms of personal names also occur, for example *Nansheen's Garden* ['n'ánʃi:ns gardən], in Ballinlig Upper, **Ballymore** (from *Neainsín* 'little Nancy'). Another name featuring a word probably borrowed from Irish is *The Skelps* [t̪ə ʃkelpʃ] in Mullaghcloe 'Called Skelps because it had small drains running across it similar to when they skelped potatoes for sowing'. A *sceilp* is defined in *Foclóir Gaeilge-Béarla* (1977) as a 'cleft, or a fissure (in rock)'.



Volunteers in the Multyfarnham group hard at work on the 16th of January 2020

When field names which include borrowings of Irish words and personal names are excluded about 8.5% of the names collected in 2019-20 are of Irish origin. These names are probably older, and are carry-overs from a time when Irish was a community language in many parts of Westmeath (perhaps until the mid-19th century – although some native speakers survived into the 20th century). An example of this kind of name is *Cluoun a Búi* ['klu:nəbwi:], in

Ballymore (from *Cluanach Buí* ‘place of pastures (yellow)’). The majority of these names are topographical – they tell us something about the physical or natural features of the landscape.

One interesting name of this type is *Mullinagress Hill*, in Derrynagarragh, **Collinstown**, collected by the late Billy Connell. Unfortunately we didn’t manage to get a sound-recording or phonetic transcription of the local pronunciation of this name. It is the name of the highest hill in the townland (509”/155m). The name is also recorded in the Schools’ Folklore Collection of 1937/38 as *Mullanagruss hill* (Vol. 719, 617). It is the site of a mound barrow (Archaeology.ie), and, interestingly, the first part of the name seems to be *mullán* ‘elevated ground, hillock’. The full name may be *Mullán na gCros* ‘hillock of the crosses’.



The Collinstown group – 12th September 2020

Cn- in words like *cnoc* and *cnó* is pronounced like *cr-* in Ulster Irish and to a fair extent in Connacht Irish – this pronunciation must have been common among speakers of Irish in Westmeath as well, as we see it in names such as The Cnoicín ‘the little hill’ [t̪ə 'kriki:n], Carpenterstown, *Cnoc Kelly* [krik'keli:] or [kruk'keli:], perhaps from *Cnoc na Caillí* ‘hill of the *cailleach*’, in Lakill and Moortown, both near **Fore**. We see the same feature in the many examples of *cnoc* ‘hill’ and *cnocán* ‘little hill’, which have been spelt by the volunteers, variously – *Crucán* (Lakill and Moortown, **Fore**), *Crooked William* or *Knockawillian* (Clonfad, near **Kinnegad**, from *Cnoc an Mhuillinn*, ‘hill of the mill’) – though in nearby Lowtown we have *Knock-a-derry* [nokə'deri], from *Cnoc an Doire* ‘hill of the grove (or oakwood)’. Other examples include *The Cruckawn* [t̪ə krukə:n], in Aghalasty and Ankersland, *The Crocán Road* [t̪ə 'krukə:n ro:d], Williamstown, near **Coole**, and, on the other side of the county, *Crockawn*, Ballymacartan (near **Ballymore**), and [t̪ə krukə:n], in Killinure North, near **Glassan**.



Cows chewing their cud on *The Cnocán*, Killinure North, Glassan.

Other Irish topographical names recorded in 2019-20 include *The Sceichín* ‘little whitethorn’, *The Currach*, ‘the moor’, *Móitín* ‘little mound’, many examples of *Móinín* ‘little bog’, *The Mullagh* (from *An Mullach* ‘the hilltop’), *Glannarinna* [glan nə rin’ə], probably *Gleann na Rinne*, ‘valley of the promontory’. *The Camóg* [tə ‘kamo:g] ‘the little crooked one’ is the name of a tiny stream, which has just a single bend in its course, near **Coole**. A final example is *Shannonroe Boreen*, a small road which runs northwards down a steep hill from the village of **Coole** towards the townland of Mullagh. The local pronunciation ‘Janə’ro: bo:ri:n or ‘Jan’ro: bo:hi:n, suggests *Seanadh Rua* ‘red hillside/slope’, though the word *seanadh* is not common in placenames outside of Connemara.

Irish names which indicate old settlements or house clusters are also fairly common, for example *Ballinamona Bog* ‘townland of the bogland’, Bliary, **Athlone**. There are numerous fields called *Caltra* from *cealtrach* ‘old burial ground’. Some of these may have been used in the past as burial places for unbaptised children.

Some field names make reference to the farm animals which were kept in them such as *High Ard na mBó* ‘height/hillock of the cows (high)’ and *Little Ard na mBó* height/hillock of the cows (little)’, in Cummerstown (**Collinstown**), though most of these kind of names are English (e.g. *The Bull Paddock*, Derrynagarragh). Others reference local wildlife, such as *Cluain na gCoinín* ‘pasture of the rabbits’ (also in Cummerstown).

Páircín which simply means ‘little field’ is a fairly common name. The word *páirc* ‘field’ occurs as *Páirce* [‘pa:r’k’ə] in the townland of Mayne, **Coole**. Perhaps *páirce* is a genitive form, the remains of a longer name such as *Tobar na Páirce* (there was a well in this field).

A few other interesting Irish names which relate to soils and the use of the land are *Durb Buidhe*, Ballinlig Upper, **Ballymore**, perhaps from *Dáb Buí* ‘yellow daub or subsoil’, *The Bogán* ‘soft ground’ in **Noughaval**, Tang (the soil is peaty), and *Big Pull-in-Ear* and *Little Pull-in-Ear* [puləni:r’] in Snimnagorta, **Ballymore** (perhaps from *Poll an Aoil* ‘hole/pit of the lime’ – lime

for manuring was often produced locally in the past. This name is recorded as *Puillimer* the Schools' Folklore Collection (Vol. 743, 258).

Interesting English names

Four fields called *The Slang* were recorded this year, three in the Ballymore area and one near Multyfarnham. *Slang* is an English dialect word which refers to a long narrow strip of land. *The Haggard* is also a fairly numerous name – a *haggard* is a small field near the farmhouse where ricks of hay or corn were built for winter storage. Haysheds and subsequently silage pits have rendered haggards almost obsolete.

Beating, another English dialect word, is found in the name *The Baten Field* [t̪ə'be:tən], Knockacurra, near **Horseleap**. *Beating* refers to the practice of paring off the *scraw* or top surface of the land and burning it to enrich the soil before tilling – this was a common, if frowned-upon, practice in the days before the availability of artificial manures. This word was also borrowed into Irish as *béitín*, with the same meaning – it is difficult to say if it is the English or Irish form which occurs in this name.

Spa River Field, is the name of a field and also a stream in Keenoge, **Ballymore**, pronounced [spa:] or *spaw*. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *spa* as 'A medicinal or mineral spring or well' (2a.). The word originates from the name of a famous spring in the province of Liège, Belgium.

The Bleach [t̪ə 'ble:tʃ], is a field in Templepatrick, **Ballymore** – a *bleach* or *bleach green* was a dry sunny field used to bleach linen (produced from locally grown flax) in the sun. The same word occurs in *The Bleachyard*, in nearby **Harrystown** (in both cases the *ea* in *bleach* is pronounced like the *ea* in *pear* or *bear*). In Milltown, also in the Ballymore area, there is a steep-sided pit called *The Flax Hole*. Retting involved the steeping of flax in such places for a period of time to separate the fibres through decomposition. *The Flax Field* was recorded in Rathcam or Lemonfield, near **Rochfortbridge**. A *slough* is an area of churned up ground or a swamp – just one example has been recorded so far, *The Black Slough* [slau], in Knockacurra. *The Beech Quick*, Ballymacallen is 'A raised ditch with a stony surface and flanked by beech trees'. *Quicks* are young trees/plants for setting a hedge – again this is a word which is less used than heretofore.

Furze (*Ulex*) whose striking yellow flowers can often be seen on steep hillslopes is found in field names collected all over the county: *The Furze*, *Coleman's Furze*, *Furry Hill* etc. In one case a field has two names, *Whins Field/The Furze*. *Whin* is a common name of *Ulex* in the northern half of the country, but *furze* is the usual word in Westmeath. A very common name is *The Bottoms*, referring to low-lying land. Two examples of *The Hopyard* were recorded, the flowers of the hop plant are an important agent for flavouring and preserving beer – there must have been a tradition of brewing in the county in the relatively recent past. Other common names relating to local industries are *The Forge Field*, *Sawpit*, *Sandhole* – the second two might not be readily understood as they are traditionally pronounced ['sɑ:pət], [t̪ə sant̪'aul]. Similarly, *Limekiln* is always pronounced ['laimkil] (something like *lime kill*). A field called *Marble Hole* is named after the *marl* or white clay which is found in the area – this was also used as a manuring agent in the past.

The Track of the Iron or The Smoothing Iron is a field in Keenoge, near **Ballymore** – this refers to the shape of the field and seems to be a common field name in many parts of Ireland. There are also numerous examples of *Three Corner* fields and other names relating to the shape of fields such as *The Long Field* in Clogher, **Tang**. A wide range of crops are referenced in names such as *Cabbage Garden*, *Black Oats Field*, *Barley Garden*, *Wheat Field*, *The Beet Field*.



Volunteers from the Ballymore group on the 19th of September 2020

A few examples of *The Hanging Field* were collected – these are usually steeply sloping or over-hanging fields – though later traditions of gallows have often developed. Wild fruit and berries common in field boundary ditches are mentioned in names such as *The Sloe Hill* and *The Crab Tree*. *The Dog's Hollow* is a dip on the road near Ballymore – this place is said to be haunted by the spectre of a black dog. It is also called [t̪ə blak ʃuk], perhaps *The Black Sheuch*. *Sheuch* is a common word in Scottish and Ulster English for a dike or a drain. An unusual field name from the same area is *The Auld Lassie's House* in Dungolman – there are the ruins of a house in this small three-corner field, which was the 'House (ruins) of Owen Cornally's Granny'. *Auld* is the traditional and still fairly common pronunciation of *old*; *lassie* is a less-frequently-used word, these days, for a girl – the seeming incongruence of this pairing (the male equivalent is *auld lad*), somehow captures the informal tenour of traditional English speech in this area.

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