

Placenames Database of Ireland Bunachar Logainmneacha na hÉireann

The purpose of this article is to give a brief overview of the online Placenames Database of Ireland (www.logainm.ie). This article will also examine the relevance and importance of this database in relation to research on placenames in Co. Roscommon and will summarize the possible uses of this database outside of the area of onomastic research in Ireland.

BACKGROUND TO THE PROJECT

Earlier this year, The Placenames Branch (*An Brainse Logainmneacha*) of the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs launched their online Placenames database. The database is the culmination of many years of research by officers of the Placenames Branch into identifying the appropriate Irish forms of placenames.

For centuries, the inhabitants of Ireland have had an interest in the names of places. One of the most popular genres of early Irish literature was known as *Dinnshenchas* or 'placename lore' which sought to explain the meaning and origin of placenames through the use of an appropriate story or tale. The majority of placenames in Ireland derive from the Irish language and the remaining placenames are derived from the language of the pre-Celtic inhabitants of Ireland, from Old Norse and Norman French and finally from the English language. Outside of the large corpus of Irish language manuscripts and documents, the majority of Irish placenames are found in an anglicized/Latinate forms. Officers of the Placenames Branch and other academics then record and decipher these various forms in order to provide evidence of forms in use at different historical stages. The Placenames Database of Ireland (*Bunachar Logainmneacha na hÉireann*) will publicly display the research conducted and forms of placenames gathered by members of the Placenames Branch through years of scholarly research. These forms can be used as evidence for the proposal of the authoritative Irish form of a particular placename.

The appropriately titled Placenames Database of Ireland (PDI) seeks, as outlined on its home page; "to make available through the Internet, Irish placenames that have been approved by the Placenames Branch, searchable under both Irish and English versions". The Database is being developed in conjunction with *Fiontar* at Dublin

City University who have developed the very successful online Irish-English dictionary (which can be viewed at www.focal.ie.) Work commenced on the development of the online database in April 2007 and a trial version of the site was launched in April 2008. This trial site is still in operation and feedback from members of the public is welcome. The Placenames Branch has outlined some additional features that will be developed on the database such as a system to enable the simultaneous translation of lists of placenames from Irish-English and English-Irish and the creation of sound recordings of some placenames. The recordings have been included in some of the entries for the placenames of Counties Waterford and Galway. Sound files will be added to other counties on a phased basis and finally, certain notes pertaining to the placenames themselves will be attached to each entry in the future. For example, scanned images of historical records and placename lists created by members of the Branch could be added.

The Placenames Database of Ireland makes use the word 'Database' in its title which might indicate that eventually, all data collected by the Placenames Branch during the course of their work will be made available online. There are many benefits to this, one of which is that the public availability of the historical data will increase the level of transparency in decisions made by the Placenames Branch to support a particular suggested Irish form over another, and secondly that the data is now preserved in an electronic format lest the original maps and documents perish. The creation of this database takes on an entirely new meaning when one considers the amount of perishable documents and maps in the possession of the Branch which contains their research on placenames for more than fifty years. The digitization of their archive will be indispensable for future generations of researchers.

It is hoped that phase one of the project will be completed by the end of 2008 and further work on inputting historical data and sound files will continue after that date. The pilot version of the site will be tested between April and September 2008 and feedback from members of the public will be essential in developing the final version of this site. Suggestions should be sent to logainm@dcu.ie.

Important | *This is a trial version of a website which is still under development.*

Search



Search by county

Welcome

This is a trial version of the Placenames Database of Ireland which is being developed by Fiontar (DCU) and An Brainse Logainmneacha (Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs). [More information...](#)

We invite your opinions about the technical solution, the site layout, and the editorial work, to logainm@dcu.ie.

Placename of the week

▶ **Cluain Fearta**
(Irish)

▶ **Clonfert**
(English)

parish, post office
county: *Galway*



Figure 1: Screen-grab of the Placenames Database of Ireland at www.logainm.ie

THE LEGAL STATUS OF PLACENAMES IN IRELAND

The legal forms (in English) of the placenames of Ireland can be found in the maps of the Ordnance Survey Ireland. The original survey of the country was conducted between 1824 and 1874 and consisted of the mapping and valuation of the entire country. In 1851, the publication of a townlands index provided for the first time a comprehensive list of the townland names of Ireland in their anglicised forms. The forms of placenames found in the 1851 index are deemed to be the legal placenames of the country. The majority of these placenames are simply the anglicised spellings of the original Irish language version of a placename. The Placenames Branch has a responsibility under Article 5 of the Official Languages

Act, 2003, to obtain the correct Irish forms through scholarly research into the etymological development of the placenames from their original form, to the legal form in the English language that is in use today.

RELEVANCE OF THIS DATABASE TO CO. ROSCOMMON

The primary aim of the database as stated earlier, is to provide the Irish and English versions of placenames in accordance with Article Five of the Official Languages Act, 2003 and also to provide additional information such as the townlands location and its various historical forms and finally, to include sound files to assist with pronunciation. This database provides an extremely useful tool for translators, schools, county and city councils, developers, An Post and local historians so they can access the large body of work conducted to date by the Placenames Branch and to view additional historical information on a specific townland or parish.

The PDI is not the first site to deal specifically with townland names. An excellent website dedicated to townland name and genealogical research is the IreAtlas Townland Database (found at <http://www.seanraud.com>), currently maintained by Ed Finn of the Leitrim-Roscommon Genealogy website. The IreAtlas Townland Database is a useful research tool and at present, it surpasses the current trial version of the PDI in its simplicity, user-friendliness and in the good quality of its search results. There were some issues on the PDI site as regards the filtering of results and the display of those results in a user-friendly format (see Figure 2). A more complete version of the PDI will certainly become the standard online tool for research on placenames as regards finding their Irish form (if any), the administrative division in which they stand, the various historical records of a name including its various forms as found in Old, Middle and Modern Irish, Latin and English sources.

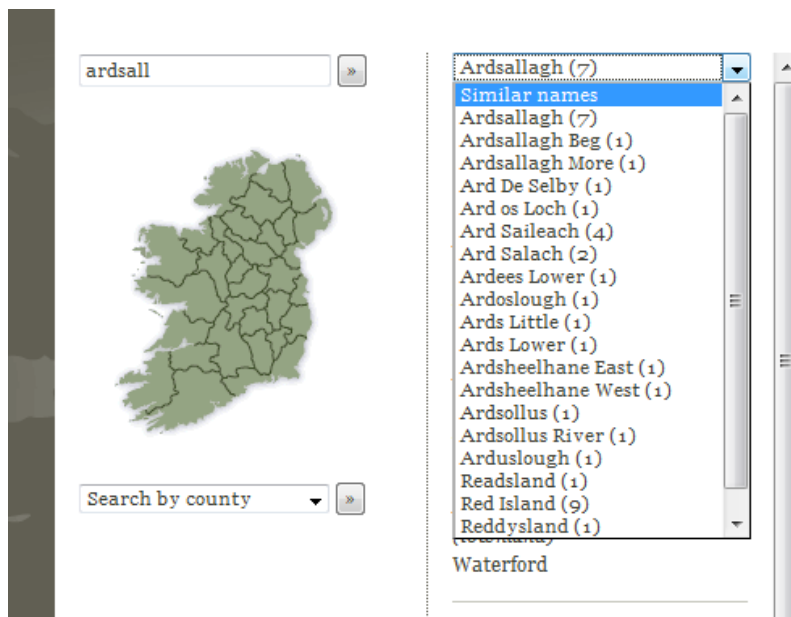


Figure 2: On the initial version of the website, the entry of “Ardsall” would return “no results” but now a list of all names containing a combination of those letters will be returned.

Unfortunately in its present trial form, the PDI does not provide tables of data as the IreAtlas does, but simply provides a translation service for names that have been agreed upon as the authoritative Irish forms. This of course will change as more and more data is added as regards historical forms, sound recordings of the placename in English and Irish, scanned images of notes on a townland name. The most important aspect of the site at present, is the provision of the relevant administrative divisions with each result returned and a map of Ireland with the general location of the requested name on the bottom right of the screen and a relevant grid reference.

Below is a screen grab of the result generated from a standard entry of the townland name “Cloontuskert”:

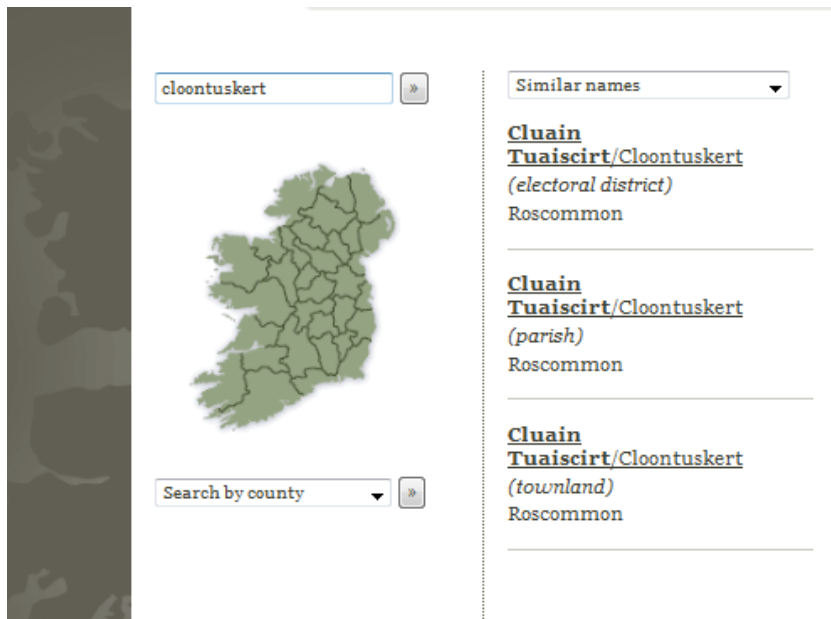


Figure 3: Cloontuskert

Similar names

Cluain Tuaiscirt/Cloontuskert
(electoral district)
Roscommon

Cluain Tuaiscirt/Cloontuskert
(parish)
Roscommon

Cluain Tuaiscirt/Cloontuskert
(townland)
Roscommon

Cluain Tuaiscirt
non-validated name
(Irish)

Cloontuskert
(English)

townland

Hierarchy

county	Ros Comáin Roscommon
barony	Baile an Tobair Theas Ballintober South
parish	Cluain Tuaiscirt Cloontuskert
townland	Cluain Tuaiscirt Cloontuskert

Coordinates

M 99840 72633




Figure 4: Cloontuskert townland

As we can see from Figure 4, we are provided with the county, barony, (civil) parish and the townland names along with coordinates for the Irish Grid and a map of Ireland displaying the general area in which the townland lies. The information at present is not very extensive for this entry but at a later date, when more research has been conducted on the name, an edited version of this entry could be produced possibly under the heading "Historical References". The following is some of the possible information that could be attached to a query on the townland/parish of Cloontuskert in the barony of Ballintober South, Co. Roscommon:

Cloontuskert¹

1. i Manestir Cluana Tuasceirt	AC ²	1244
2. ocus adhlucad ammainistir Chluana tuaiscert co huassal onorach	ALC ³	1244
3. Clontouskirt Nasina	Fiants ⁴ § 3160	1577
4. Clontouskirte	Fiants § 3160	1577
5. Clontouskirt Nasina	Fiants § 3279	1578
6. Clountouskirt na Sinna	Fiants § 3566	1579
7. Clontoskert	Fiants § 4240	1583
8. Clonetoskert	CBC ⁵ 152	1585
9. Clontownskirtie	Fiants § 5250	1588
10. Clontowskirt	Fiants § 5250	1588
11. Clontowskyrtie I Sinna	Fiants § 5250	1588
12. Cloneskerte	CPR Jas I ⁶ 281b	1615
13. Clontywoyskert	CPR Jas 303b	1617
14. Cluntoskert	Census ⁷	c.1659
15. Clontuskert	BSD ⁸ (74:3)	c.1660
16. Cluntuskert	HD ⁹	c.1685

The forms numbered one and two are in Early Modern Irish and are found in the Annals of Connacht and Loch Cé respectively. The remainder are to be found in various English language sources. What is important to note about this record is the retention of the words *nasina* or *I Sinna* in forms numbered 3, 5, 6 and 11. One can

¹ See Ó hAisibéil (2007).

² Annála Chonnacht: the annals of Connacht. See Freeman (1944).

³ The Annals of Loch Cé. See Hennessey (1871).

⁴ The Irish fiants of the Tudor sovereigns See Nicholls (1994).

⁵ The Compossicion Booke of Conought. See Freeman (1936).

⁶ Irish patent rolls of James I. See Coimisiún Laimhscríbhinní na hÉireann, (1966).

⁷ A 'Census' of Ireland (c.1659). See Pender (1939).

⁸ Books of Survey and Distribution, County of Roscommon. See Simington (1949).

⁹ *Hiberniae Delineatio*. See Petty (1685).

infer from this that Clontuskert Nasina or *Cluain Tuaiscirt na Sionainne* (Northern Meadow by the Shannon) is the one situated in Co. Roscommon, as opposed to another important ecclesiastical site also named *Cluain Tuaiscirt* (anglicized as Clontuskert with one 'o') which is situated close to the border of Roscommon, to the south of Ballinasloe in Co. Galway. It is clear that *na Sionna* was used as a qualifying element to differentiate between this and the one in Co. Galway. It is a very good example of how a very descriptive and appropriate placename has lost its qualifying element through the passage of time. The uses that are immediately apparent, outside of simply translating Clontuskert to *Cluain Tuaiscirt*, are that all of the various spellings of a name in the major onomastic sources from as far back as 600 A.D. to present can be displayed on-screen attached to each entry in the database. This is extremely helpful for an individual conducting onomastic/genealogical research into a specific townland and in their efforts to trace the residents of that particular townland. The user can then see a likely spelling of that placename at a certain period and then search for that as opposed to the modern day version. What is especially useful about the addition of the historical record is that if a placename changes over the course of 300 or 400 years, that change can be documented and shown to the user. For example, the residents of modern day Grange townland in Kiltristan civil parish, barony of Roscommon would possibly be mentioned under 6 separate townlands in earlier sources. Grange itself was previously called/part of Cluain Bolcáin, Cluain Plocáin, Lisheenishell and Ballymulconry between the years 1232 and 1660 A.D. Ballymulconry was a *Baile Biatach* (an ancient name for an estate/division of land) and appears to have been known by each of the different forms.

Grange¹⁰

1.	do gabail <i>Cluana</i> Bolcain in hoc anno	AC	1232
2.	do thecmail i cend baile h.Mailconuire	AC	1470
3.	'Pardon to Oluse O Mulconry of Clonclogan [a misspelling of Clonplogan]'	Fiants § 3941	1582
4.	'Pardon to Gelernuve Keigh of Clonpluckane, rimor, Ferfesse O Mulconry of same, Padine oge O Mulconry, of same, rimor.'	Fiants § 4678	1585
5.	'Clonepluckane, in the grange of Lissenishe, 5qrs belonged to Tomultagh McDermott, abbot of Boyle'	Inq. Jas I ¹¹	1607

¹⁰ See Ó hAisibéil (2007).

¹¹ See Suirbhéireacht Ordanáis na hÉireann (1927).

6.	Clonpluckan in le Grainge	Inq. Jas I	1607
7.	'Grangia near Clonpluckan called Lisseinishell'	Inq. Jas I	1613
8.	Clonpluckan	CPR Jas I 406a	1619
9.	Grange in Ballymulconry	BSD (188:6)	c.1660

CONCLUSION

The Placenames Database of Ireland represents a significant move forward for the Placenames Branch in their creation of an online, user-friendly and comprehensive research tool. It is also a step in the right direction as regards the digitization of our paper archives and also to publicize the current state of research on placenames in Ireland. The second phase of the project is being implemented at present to develop and edit existing material and to continue work on the sound files and historical entries. The project team also state that they are planning to develop some new features such as the use of mapping tools for the site and a method of displaying search results on a map. The provision of explanatory notes on certain placename features is to be investigated as well as an interactive system for the submission of information on placenames by members of the public. There are also plans to develop educational resources for school pupils, something that will be of interest to many national and secondary schools who are engaged in local history projects. It would be of some use to newcomers to the site if a page was created listing the most common placename elements and their meanings and in the future, to include the possible/definite meaning of every placename in the database. The Placenames Database of Ireland is only in its initial stages of development and already there is great potential on the horizon for creating a powerful research tool for various user groups, be they translators, school children or local historians.

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RELEVANT WEBSITES

LOCUS Project, University College Cork - <http://www.ucc.ie/locus/>

Placenames Database of Ireland / *Bunachar Logainmneacha na hÉireann* - <http://www.logainm.ie/>

The IRE Atlas Townland Database - <http://www.seanruad.com>

The Leitrim-Roscommon Genealogy Web Site - www.leitrim-roscommon.com/index.shtml

The Placenames Branch - <http://www.pobail.ie/en/IrishLanguage/ThePlacenamesBranch/>

Ulster Placenames Society - http://www.ulsterplacenames.org/ainm_index_to_contents.htm