

Papers, Pots and Past Lives

How different types of evidence can be used to explore the past





This booklet was prepared in 2024 by Ballycastle Museum as a learning resource to outline some of the different types of evidence that might be used to investigate how people lived in years gone by.

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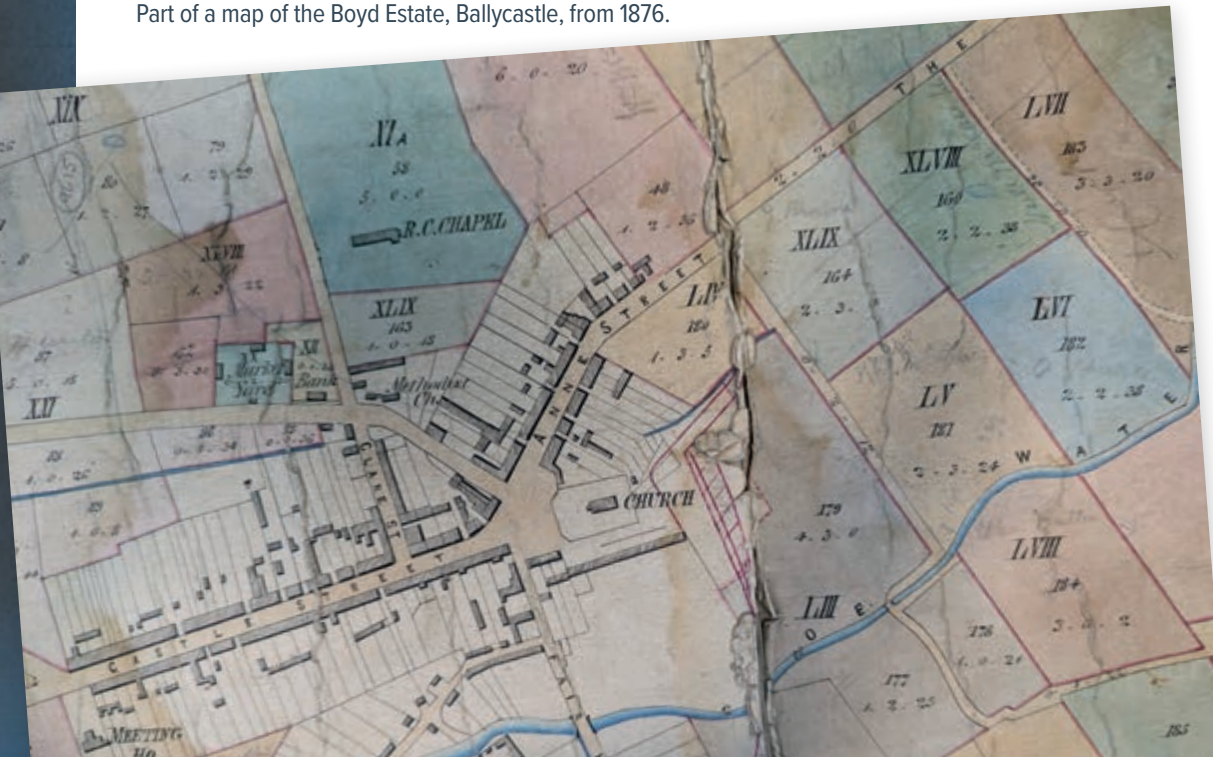
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Exploring the past

Understanding the past is not as simple as reading a history book. The job of an historian is really like being a detective, piecing together different types of evidence to understand the past more clearly.

Our evidence comes in different forms. Sometimes it has been **written** down – things like official records, books, letters, advertisements and newspapers. Other evidence, such as photographs, drawings and paintings, can be more **visual**. **Oral** evidence, the stories we tell and recorded conversations, can tell us different things about the past. **Physical** evidence is all around us, from the objects in museums or on our shelves at home, to the buildings and landscapes we see every day. Each type of evidence has its own strengths and weaknesses, but they are all useful in helping us to build a better picture of how people lived in earlier times.

Part of a map of the Boyd Estate, Ballycastle, from 1876.



Written evidence

Civil and church records

Civil records are formal pieces of information collected about people, places and events. They are usually collected by the government, or by churches (especially before the 1860s), and provide basic information which is usually reliable.

However, civil records do not tell the entire story of a person's life. Instead, an individual's lived experience is reduced down into a small number of key words.

Remember that records are only as good as the people who write them down and the spelling of personal names and placenames can often vary, especially in older documents.

Some commonly used civil records include:

- Census records
- Birth, Death and Marriage records
- Burial records
- Ordnance Survey (OS) Maps
- Ordnance Survey Memoirs (OSM)
- Griffith's Valuation



Census records

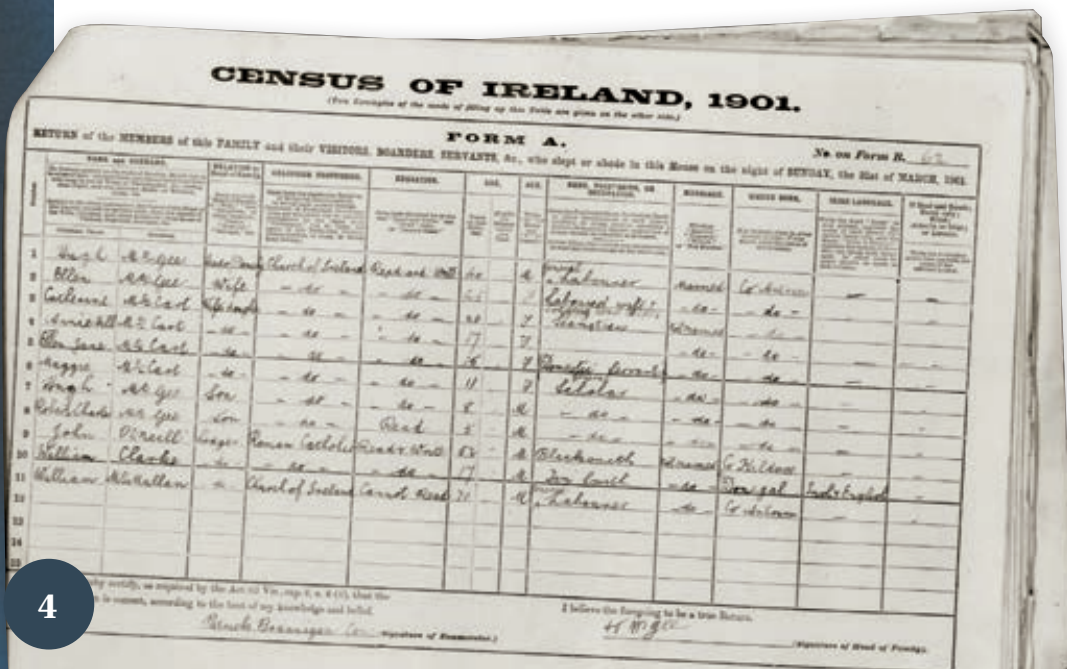
A census is an official record of a population. It provides a snapshot of life on a specific date and may contain information about people’s families, ages, occupations, education, religion and place of birth.

Despite being official documents, mistakes were made and errors do occur in the census records. For example, in the ten years between 1901 and 1911, the records show that Jane Verdon, a spirit merchant living on Castle Street, Ballycastle, aged from 62 to 76, while her daughter, Mary Jane, aged from 31 to 40.

The first full census of Ireland was carried out in 1821. Censuses were carried out every 10 years across the island until Partition in 1921. Many early records were damaged in a large fire in Dublin in 1922. Census taking continued in 1926, after the Irish War of Independence.

For all Ireland, only the 1901 and 1911 censuses are fully preserved. These can be accessed online at <https://www.census.nationalarchives.ie/search>. Census information is kept private for 100 years. The 1926 census of Northern Ireland will be made available to the public in January 2027.

An example page of the 1901 Census showing the occupants of house 62, Castle Street, Ballycastle. © An Chartlann Náisiúnta National Archives.



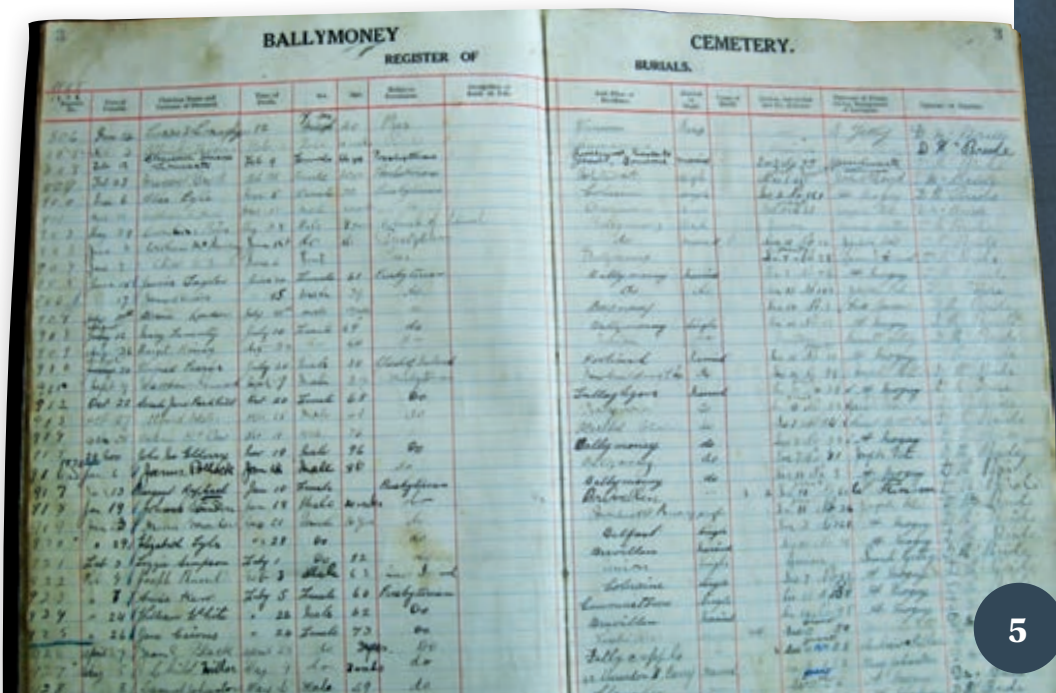
Birth, death and marriage records

Historic records for births, deaths and marriages may be accessed online via the General Register Office of Northern Ireland (GRONI) at <https://geni.nidirect.gov.uk>, and Irish Ministry of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media at <https://www.irishgenealogy.ie>. Baptism/christening and marriage records are also kept by the church where the person was baptised or married.

Burial records

Records of burials – who was buried where, and when – can be patchy. Older records may be held by individual churches, while more recent records are usually held by the local council. Burial records are based on internment – the act of burial. Where they exist, they are generally reliable although in some cases the graves themselves have been disturbed or no longer exist. Other useful records may include death notices, mass cards, and obituaries published in newspapers.

List of burials from the *Book of Internment* for Knock Road Cemetery, Ballymoney 1883-2003, Ballymoney Museum.



Ordnance Survey (OS) Maps

The Ordnance Survey of Ireland was the first ever detailed map survey of an entire country. The 1st Edition maps (1832-1846) showed 1 mile across 6 inches (15cm) and identified features such as standing buildings, historic monuments and townland names. The 1st Edition of the 6 inch maps was followed by a 2nd (1846-1862), 3rd (1900-1907), and 4th Edition (1905-1957).

A more detailed version published between 1952 and 1979 showed 1 mile across 25 inches (62.5cm). The OS maps are usually incredibly accurate and show things as they were at the time. However, they were sometimes updated over time. For example, the 2nd Edition map of Ballycastle available online shows the train station, even though the station was not built until nearly 20 years after the maps were supposed to have been completed.

Ordnance Survey Maps can be accessed online using the PRONI Map Viewer, <https://apps.spatialni.gov.uk/PRONIAApplication>, or at the Historic Environment Division's online map viewer, <https://experience.arcgis.com/experience/8bb16b64f0994385a5c141027ae9d33e>.

Old Ramoan Church across to the Ballycastle Diamond as shown in the 1st Edition Ordnance Survey.



Ordnance Survey Memoirs (OSM)

The *OSM* are a collection of notes and statistics gathered by military officers, government officials and civilian 'hill sketchers' during the creation of the Ordnance Survey. They are an invaluable source for the way people lived 200 years ago.

However, it is important to remember that they were based on observations, not recorded directly by local people. This means that the perspectives of local people were not always reflected; people and placenames were sometimes written down in a standard way which may not have been how they were spelt locally.

“Meal and potatoes form their principal food. A little bacon is consumed and tea is become an almost indispensable article, particularly with the women. Turf is their principal fuel. All classes dress very well and comfortably. They are in general long lived and marry rather early, though there are not any remarkable instances on either of these heads. From 5 to 6 is the usual number in a family.

Their principal amusement is dancing, of which they are very fond and frequently indulge in ...”

The habits of the people of Ballycastle as recorded in the *Ordnance Survey Memoirs*, July 1831.

Griffith's Valuation

Griffith's Valuation was a survey of all taxable land in Ireland, initially recorded between the years 1847 and 1864. It names landlords and lease holders and determined the income that each property might produce.

The valuation is a reliable way of checking names against properties but does not show any relationship between named individuals. For example, there is no way to know if the Hugh Boyd leasing one piece of land is the same Hugh Boyd listed against other properties.

Griffith's Valuation can be found online at <https://www.askaboutireland.ie/griffith-valuation>.



Ballycastle Barracks Attack.

MAN GETS THREE YEARS' PENAL SERVITUDE.
FIFTEEN STROKES OF "CAT" ORDERED.

At the County Antrim Assizes on Wednesday, before Mr. Justice Moore and a jury, Patrick J. Boyle, alias McCaye, was indicted for having had in his possession or control, on 20th May last, twelve Mills's hand grenades, one loaded bomb, and a bottle containing petrol. The prisoner, who was not professionally represented, refused to recognise the Court.

A Special Constable described an attempt to blow up the Ballycastle police barracks, which began at 2 a.m. on the morning of the 20th May and continued for four hours. A live bomb was found near the barrack beside an improvised rope ladder. The attack on the barrack came from various directions, and consisted of rifle and revolver fire and bomb-throwing. The garrison defended the barrack from the outside, and replied to the firing of the raiders, which went on intermittently until 6 a.m. After that hour a search of the locality was instituted by the police. Witness found in a lane off Market Street two boxes of fully-detonated grenades, six in each box. In a stable off the entry witness saw the prisoner, who was concealed and pretending to be asleep. After being accosted he said he had been drunk the night before, and took refuge in the stable, but he had none of the symptoms of a man who had had a bad night. Sergeant Jackson was wounded during the attack in the arm and leg.

A sergeant said on the night of the attack on the barracks there were simultaneous attacks on property all over the county. At 2 o'clock he tried to get Ballymoney on the 'phone. Soon after the district-inspector and a party of police arrived from that station in a Crosley car to see if the Ballycastle barracks was all right. They could not return, as the road was blocked, and they were at Ballycastle when the attempt was made to blow up the barracks. Armed outposts sustained the attack from the Chapel Road and the fields above the Convent. In the course of the subsequent search witness found a basket containing seven bottles of petrol and three two-gallon tins of petrol, with the corks out. The prisoner said he drank two glasses of whisky, and went into the stable for a sleep. When asked where he got the drink he mentioned a particular licensed holder, who denied that the prisoner had got any drink in his house. Prisoner also gave the wrong name and a false address. It transpired that his correct name was Boyle, and that he lived on the coast road near Cushendall.

His Lordship said this terrific attack, which was obviously premeditated and carefully prepared, was only successfully resisted by the great courage of the little garrison at Ballycastle. It would be for the jury to say, first, if there was an attack on the barracks, and, secondly, if the prisoner was a member of the attacking party.

The jury found that there had been an attack on the barracks, and that the prisoner was a member of the attacking party.

This was recorded, by direction of the judge, as a verdict of guilty.

His Lordship, in passing sentence, characterised the attack as a most cowardly one. The accused was concerned in that attack. He was found in the stable near where the grenades and petrol were discovered, and his explanation to the police was an obvious lie. The raid was only repulsed by the great courage of the defenders, and with only one casualty. Had any of the police been killed, the sentence would have been far different from the one he was about to impose. Conduct like that perpetrated on this night in any town would not be tolerated. He directed the prisoner to receive within ten days and not later than six months fifteen strokes of "the cat." In addition, he would be sentenced to penal servitude for three years.

Newspapers (and other Press)

Newspapers and other press material is written and produced to inform its audience. However, newspaper articles are also written to sell newspapers and therefore the stories told are usually written or selected to appeal to the readers.

Look at different newspapers during any political election. The same government statements will be justified or attacked by different newspapers depending on the politics of the newspaper and its readership. The same applies to news in other media (radio, television, online).

In addition to reporting the news, newspapers often covered local council matters, the business and commercial life of the area, as well as reports from the local courts. They often included sections listing local births, deaths and marriages, local sporting fixtures, job advertisements and classifieds (sales).



Account from an unknown newspaper dated 8 July 1922 recounting the attack on Ballycastle RIC Barracks in 1922.

Personal or family archives

As well as publicly available records, personal or family archives can be very useful in making sense of the past. While potentially an informative resource, it is wise to remember that someone has decided what records to keep and what to discard.

Photos and home video footage

Photographs and videos are a fantastic window into the past. They can put faces to names and show past fashions or places which may or may not have changed over the years. However, remember that they never show the full picture.

Up until the 1940s not many people owned a camera; photos were expensive to take and develop and were usually taken for a specific reason. While cameras became much more common after the 1960s, home video footage was still much rarer until the 21st century.

Both types of evidence can easily give a misleading or biased view of the subject matter whether this is intentional or not.

Members of the Belfast Naturalist Field Club on Rathlin Island, Sam Henry collection, Coleraine Museum.





Oral histories

Oral histories are recorded accounts of people’s personal experiences.

They are particularly useful as records of things that aren’t included in other forms of evidence such as day-to-day life, local folklore, eyewitness accounts and people’s memories of their lives, their families, and family stories.

However, different people may remember the same things very differently. Oral histories are always personal and may contain intentional or unintentional factual errors. They are better at showing how events have impacted on people than as accounts of the events themselves.

Many oral histories have been recorded by Causeway Coast and Glens Museum Services over the years. Some of these can be found on the Northern Ireland Community Heritage Archive, www.niarchive.org.

Some of the interviewees from the Faces of Ballycastle project (2009), archived on the Northern Ireland Community Heritage Archive.

Letters, diaries, and personal records

Handwritten documents that people collect and leave behind such as letters, diaries, and personal memoirs are often a reliable source of the author’s thoughts, feelings and beliefs but are likely to give only one perspective of any event.

Leases and contracts

Copies of leases and contracts can show ownership or occupation of properties at different times.

Formal records

Other more formal records such as year books, school and work records and migration records can also be found in personal archives and provide another perspective through which to understand someone’s life.

Many records from public and private archives that are considered to be in the public interest are housed in the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI). An online catalogue, digitised records and other resources are available at <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/campaigns/public-record-office-northern-ireland-proni>.



A letter addressed to Hugh Boyd from his cousin and agent, Charles Boyd, dated 1 March 1745.

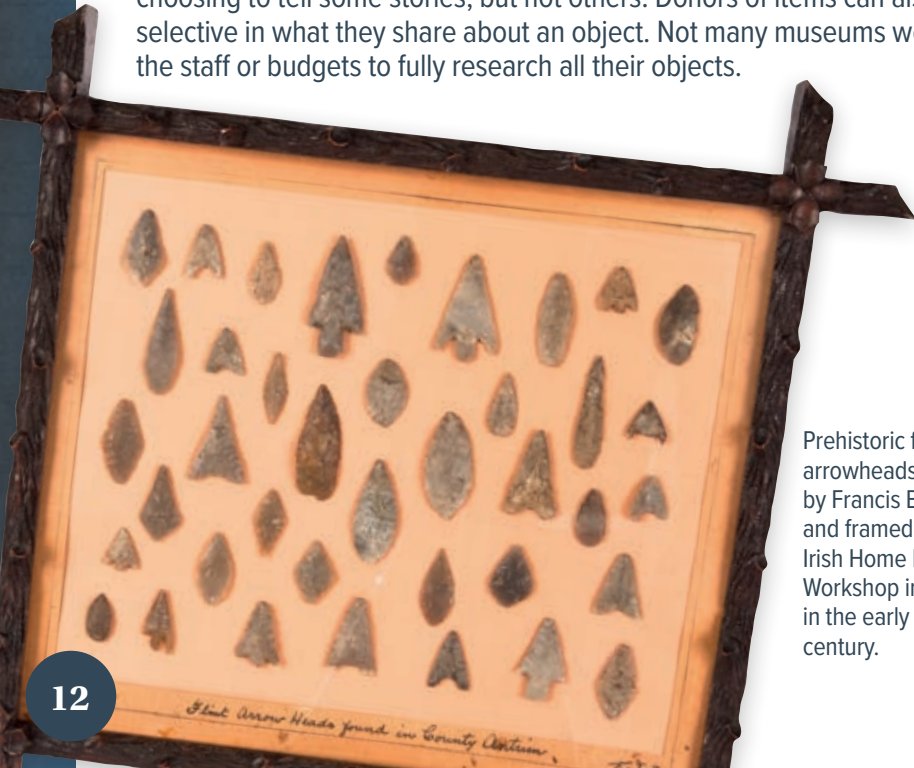
Objects and built heritage

Objects, including artefacts, buildings, and other physical evidence can be much more reliable than written evidence. An object either exists, or it doesn't. Note that questions will still remain over why the object has survived. Has it survived by accident, or has it been preserved? If it has been preserved, who has preserved it, and why?

Museum collections

Museums collect objects and archives to record and show how people used to live. Different museums have different aims and their collections have different strengths. Some focus on local history, others explore cultures around the world, or focus on very specific events. Some museums are funded by the government, others are set up by organisations or local interest groups.

When on public display, objects in museums are usually accompanied by written interpretation which can be used to explain the context of an object. However, museums can be selective about how they use interpretation, choosing to tell some stories, but not others. Donors of items can also be selective in what they share about an object. Not many museums would have the staff or budgets to fully research all their objects.



Prehistoric flint arrowheads collected by Francis Bigger and framed in the Irish Home Industries Workshop in Ballycastle in the early 20th century.

Archaeology, built heritage and the landscape

Archaeology can include everything from broken pottery or glass, up to entire buildings or towns. Buildings and other monuments in the landscape can help us understand how land was used in the past. Some, like the standing remains of castles, might be clear, others, like traces of lazy beds made for growing potatoes might be less obvious. Archaeology provides evidence about how people lived in the past, regardless of whether they were rich or poor, men or women, young or old, literate or illiterate.

Archaeological objects help us make sense of those places and periods where there are few written records. They can help us see the movement of people and ideas over time, and across different geographic areas. Preservation and discovery of archaeology is often by chance, which means it will rarely give a complete picture.

A good summary of known archaeological sites and built heritage can be found on the Historic Environment Division's online map viewer, <https://experience.arcgis.com/experience/8bb16b64f0994385a5c141027ae9d33e>.

Other useful records can be found online at the Sites and Monuments Records database, <https://apps.communities-ni.gov.uk/NISMR-PUBLIC>.



Bronze Age 'food vessel' from Liscolman.

Epigraphy



The grave of Sam 'Mary Ann' McCaw, St James's Church of Ireland, Ballycastle.

Epigraphy is the study of inscriptions including monuments, gravestones and milestones. Epigraphers study the way inscriptions were made and the forms and shapes of the letters, as well as the content, to better understand the inscription's date and context. The creation of inscriptions was expensive, so the information they contain is generally either brief, or carries official messages.

Many graveyards and cemeteries have their gravestones transcribed (recorded) by local historical or genealogical societies. Some become available online, others are kept in society archives, but it is always worth asking around. Many records for graveyards in the Ballymoney area are held in the resource area of Ballymoney Museum.



Numismatics

Numismatics is the study of coins and tokens. Both coins and tokens can be used to explore questions around power, identity and economics. Who produced the coins and why did they choose the images they placed on them?

18th-19th century Ballycastle coal token, courtesy John Rainey.

Placenames

Understanding the meaning of placenames and how they came about can provide all sorts of information about the people who used to live there. Today, most places have a formally recognised name that is used on official documents and maps.

Formal placenames

Placenames often link directly to a location's history. The name Ballycastle comes from the Irish *Baile an Chaistil*, meaning 'the settlement around the castle' and probably refers to the market town which grew up around the McDonnell castle, which was built around 1609, in what is now the Diamond.

In Ballycastle, the influence of the Boyd family can be seen in street names such as Ann Street (named after Col. Hugh Boyd's wife), Mary Street (Col. Hugh Boyd's daughter), and Quay Road (down towards Boyd's harbour, or quay).

Castle Street (leading to the castle in the Diamond), used to be called Main Street and was the main road in the town. Market Street (where the Market Yard was built in 1858) was originally called the New Line, because it was the newest road built leading to the Diamond. Fairhill Street was literally the street running down the hill where the Lammas Fair was centred, while Mill Street led to the mill.

Many place names are based on old Irish words while others come from different languages including Scots, English, and Old Norse.

Some common words used in placenames are shown below.

| PLACE NAME | MEANING | ORIGIN |
|------------|---------------|----------------------|
| Bally | Settlement | Irish (Baile) |
| Ban | White | Irish (Bán) |
| Beg | Small | Irish (Beag) |
| Brae | Hill or slope | Scots (Brae) |
| Ford | Small lough | Norse (Fjorðr) |
| Knock | Hill | Irish (Cnoc or Croc) |
| More | Big | Irish (Mór) |
| Rath | Ring fort | Irish (Rátha) |

Informal placenames

Even where formal names for places exist, you might find people using other informal names for places in their local area that have been passed down from person to person, sometimes over many generations. Informal placenames will only survive if they are remembered and continue to be used. In remembering informal placenames, the local history of the area is preserved.

On the opposite page are some examples of informal placenames in Ballycastle. The information comes from members of the Friends of Ballycastle Museum and shows how memories can be passed down through the generations.

Houses of the Milltown, in the early 20th century, courtesy Impact Printing.



Milltown

Milltown, or The Milltown, is still sometimes used to describe the area of Fairhill Street and Mill Street (where the mill was located), from the Diamond down to the Tow River. Milltown included the original Roman Catholic chapel, the Ballycastle National School, gasworks, and the sheep market.

Rats Terrace

Rats Terrace, or Rats Row was the nickname for the row of houses that used to stand along the edge of the Bleach Green, on the northside of Station Street. The name is believed to be linked to the poor sanitation in the area in the past and the number of rats drawn to the bleach works and river.

Rattlin' Brae

The hill on Whitepark Road, between Kinbane and Ballycastle, was known as the Rattlin' Brae. It led from the Ballycastle Workhouse to the Famine graveyard at Crockatinney. The informal name came from the rattling sound of the horse-drawn wagon carrying the deceased from the workhouse for burial in the mid-nineteenth century.



How reliable is your evidence?

Regardless of what source you are using, you should always ask yourself, is it reliable? It is important to remember that just because something has been published or is widely believed, it doesn't mean it is factually accurate. All types of evidence have the potential to be biased.

For each piece of evidence, ask the key questions:

- Who wrote, said, or made it?
- Why did they write, say, or make it?
- When did they write, say, or make it?
- Who was the intended audience?
- Why has it been preserved?
- Is there any other evidence to support it?

Asking these questions will tell you more about the people and events of the time than just the information presented by your evidence.

Remember that there is no single, perfect source. All sources of information have limitations, and it is only by combining evidence that we can start to build a complete picture.

Date stone reading WRKGS 1625, thought to be from the McDonnell castle (in the Diamond area of Ballycastle), but which had been reused in a later building on Castle Street.



Glossary

Archaeology: The study of the past based on man-made objects, covering everything from stone tools and broken bottles to monuments, castles or whole towns.

Archive: A collection of historical documents which can include written documents, photos, films or audio recordings.

Bias: Personal opinions that impact on how somebody thinks, talks or writes about an event or topic.

Context: The setting of an event, statement, object or idea, which can help us to fully understand it.

Evidence: Material, objects or stories that can be used to decide if something is true or not.

Historic: Something that happened, was made, or written about in the past.

Lazy beds: A way of growing potatoes in small plots of land consisting of long raised strips separated by furrows.

Memoirs: Sets of detailed notes based on personal observations.

Ordnance Survey: Detailed map sets covering the entire Island of Ireland. The 1st Edition was drawn up between 1832 and 1846 and were accompanied by memoirs.

Partition: The division of the island of Ireland into Northern Ireland and the Irish Free State (later the Republic of Ireland) in 1921.

Prehistoric: Objects made in the time before writing (in Ireland, that means before AD 400, or about 1,600 years ago).

Reliable: Something that can be trusted to be of good quality, accurate or truthful.

Useful Sources

Civil records available online

- General Register Office of Northern Ireland (GRONI)
<https://geni.nidirect.gov.uk>
- Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI)
<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/campaigns/public-record-office-northern-ireland-proni>
- Irish National Archives – An Chartlann Náisiúnta
<https://www.nationalarchives.ie>
- Irish Ministry of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media.
<https://www.irishgenealogy.ie>
- Northern Ireland Community Heritage Archive
www.niarchive.org
- Griffith's Valuation
<https://www.askaboutireland.ie/griffith-valuation>
- Irish Census (1901 and 1911)
<https://www.census.nationalarchives.ie/search>

Historic maps and archaeology available online

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<https://apps.spatialni.gov.uk/PRONIAApplication>
- Historic Environment Division's online map viewer
<https://experience.arcgis.com/experience/8bb16b64f0994385a5c141027ae9d33e>
- Sites and Monuments Records database online
<https://apps.communities-ni.gov.uk/NISMR-PUBLIC>
- Northern Ireland Placename Project
<https://placenamesni.org>
- Placenames Database of Ireland
<https://logainm.ie/>

Causeway Coast and Glens Museum Services

[\(museums@causewaycoastandglens.gov.uk\)](mailto:museums@causewaycoastandglens.gov.uk)

- **Ballycastle Museum**
59 Castle Street, Ballycastle BT54 6AS
- **Ballymoney Museum**
1 Townhead Street, Ballymoney BT53 6BE **Ballymoney Museum houses a local history research area with numerous local records and hard to find books on local history.**
- **Coleraine Museum at Coleraine Town Hall**
The Diamond, Coleraine BT52 1DE
- **Green Lane Museum**
41 Dogleap Road, Limavady BT49 9NN
- **Limavady Museum at Roe Valley Arts & Cultural Centre – Ionad Ealaíon agus Cultúir Ghleann na Ró**
24 Main Street, Limavady BT49 0FJ
- **NI Community Heritage Archive**
www.niarchive.org

Other local museums and heritage centres

- **Cuil Rathain Historical & Cultural Centre**
3a Union St, Coleraine BT52 1QB
- **Garvagh Museum**
142 Main Street, Garvagh BT51 5AB
- **Limavady Orange Heritage Centre**
Catherine Street, Limavady BT49 9DA
- **Rathlin Boat House**
Church Bay, Rathlin Island BT54 6RT

The Ballycastle Museum Project is made possible with The National Lottery Heritage Fund. Thanks to National Lottery players, we have been able to work with local schools to create this heritage resource to support Key Stage 3 learning and beyond as part of a wider project to restore and refurbish Ballycastle Museum.



CENSUS OF IRELAND, 1901.

(See Examples of the mode of filling up this Table are given on the other side.)

No. on Form B. 62

FORM A.

NAME AND SEX OF EACH MEMBER OF THIS FAMILY AND THEIR VISITORS, BOARDERS, SERVANTS, &c., WHO SLEPT OR ABODE IN THIS HOUSE ON THE NIGHT OF SUNDAY, THE 31st OF MARCH, 1901.

| NAME AND SEX OF EACH MEMBER OF THIS FAMILY AND THEIR VISITORS, BOARDERS, SERVANTS, &c., WHO SLEPT OR ABODE IN THIS HOUSE ON THE NIGHT OF SUNDAY, THE 31st OF MARCH, 1901. | RELATION TO HEAD OF FAMILY. | BELONGER PROFESSION. | EDUCATION. | AGE. | SEX. | BORN, EMPLOYED, OR OCCUPATION. | MARRIAGE. | WHERE BORN. | IRISH LANGUAGE. | IF DEAF AND DUMB, STATE IN WHAT SENSE, AND IN WHAT DEGREE. |
|---|-----------------------------|----------------------|----------------|------|------|--------------------------------|-----------|-------------|-----------------|--|
| Michael | Head | Church of Ireland | Read and Write | 40 | M | Widow | Married | Co. Donegal | | |
| Ellen | Wife | | | 35 | F | Widow | do | do | | |
| Caroline | Daughter | | | 17 | F | Domestic | do | do | | |
| Maria | Daughter | | | 15 | F | Domestic | do | do | | |
| Ellen | Daughter | | | 11 | F | School | do | do | | |
| Maggie | Daughter | | | 8 | F | | do | do | | |
| Thomas | Son | | | 5 | M | | do | do | | |
| Robert | Son | Roman Catholic | Read and Write | 52 | M | Blacksmith | Married | Co. Wick | | |
| John | Son | | | 17 | M | Domestic | do | do | | |
| William | Son | Church of Scotland | Read and Write | 20 | M | Domestic | do | do | do | do |