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Small-farm settlement landscapes in transition

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Abstract: Settlement landscape heritage is an integral aspect of Ireland's rurality: it contributes to national and international perceptions of Ireland in which images of a land of green fields and rural culture prevail. These images are increasingly valuable in setting Ireland as a place apart within the global economy as evidenced, for example, by Bord Bia's 'Origin Green' initiative. However, contemporary demand for rural housing poses a challenge to the maintenance of these landscapes. The one-off rural house, rather than large scale developments, poses the most significant challenge to traditional landscapes. National policy makers have attempted to engage with this issue with limited success. There is a tacit acceptance of the social, economic and cultural significance of rural housing, particularly farm households that are the primary controllers of land use in rural areas. Within the constraints of the topography of the farm, they have played a key role in the development of both traditional and contemporary farmscapes. This is most evident in areas dominated by smaller farms. Strategies involving allocation or sale of land for residential development are of particular interest given that they simultaneously facilitate continuation of the family farm as a social entity as well as precipitating local change through expansion of non-rural settlement patterns. Insight into the processes of change in small farm structures and communities in recent decades is critical in explaining and understanding the evolution of local settlement patterns up to the present. This paper seeks to elucidate both changes and continuities in three counties in Ireland: Monaghan, Mayo and Meath.

Keywords: *rural settlement, small farm, landscape, housing, one-off house*

Introduction

Tourism and visitor surveys consistently highlight the scenic beauty and unspoilt nature of the Irish landscape. However, there are many contradictions in the attitudes and behaviour of the Irish rural community towards its environment. These have been influenced by constitutional issues around ownership of property which have had

repercussions for planning legislation since the 1960s and have affected landscape and settlement planning in the countryside ever since. One-off rural housing statistics in Ireland in the past decade epitomise the unique pressures on the Irish landscape: between 2005 and 2008, for example, more than 73,000 one-off rural houses were built in Ireland. Almost half the planning permissions in the past few years have been for a rural sprawl of single dispersed houses.¹ The issue of one-off housing was central to the National Spatial Strategy, published in 2002, and is equally significant to the successor to this document which is currently being drafted (DHCLG, 2017).

From the 1970s, many parts of the Irish rural landscape, which for the century after the Great Famine was a scene of demographic decline and settlement abandonment, began to experience renewal of population and housing. The digital mapping of population data has shown the growth of rural population throughout the country particularly during the Celtic Tiger boom, c.2000-2007. Small farms encompass significant swathes of Irish landscape with proportionate impacts on local landscape appearance and quality. For illustrative purposes, if we consider a small farm to be one with less than 10 hectares, there were 25,474 such farms, 18% of the total number, at the time of the 2010 Census of Agriculture (CSO, 2012). While the total numbers of farmers are in decline, with consolidation of holdings proceeding apace, endurance of traditional attachments to family farming has seen the adoption of a variety of strategies to preserve the family farm. These include diversification of the farm enterprise or household resources, for example through afforestation, sale of land for residential development, engagement in off-farm employment and other forms of economic activity. Strategies involving sale of land for residential development are of particular interest given that they simultaneously facilitate continuation of the family farm as a social entity and local change through expansion of non-rural settlement patterns. For these reasons, insight into the processes of change in small farm structures and communities in recent decades is critical to understanding the evolution of local settlement patterns up to the present. This paper seeks to elucidate both changes and continuities in three counties in Ireland: Monaghan, Mayo and Meath, highlighting commonalities and contrasts in the three regions despite a diversity of drivers of change.

Continuities and Changes: Case studies in Monaghan, Mayo and Meath

Aggregate population data and data on changing farm structures for small areas, for example, electoral divisions,² are valuable in illuminating regional trends. However, they tend to obscure the nature of change at local landscape level by generalising the way in which rural housing patterns are shaped or influenced by the structural topography of farm holdings. This paper utilises comparative case studies of small areas in counties Monaghan, Mayo and Meath where, respectively, 23%, 26% and 18% of farms are less than 10 hectares in size; the national average farm size is 32.7 hectares and 18% of all farms are less than 10 hectares in size. Each case study is presented in turn, focusing on

changes in farms, families and housing at townland level. Whilst the specifics of change vary from townland to townland and county to county, the case studies demonstrate that there is substantial continuity in the structure of the landscape notwithstanding the fact that each of these areas has experienced substantial demographic and economic change, which is reflected in changed settlement patterns over the course of the past one hundred years. These issues form the focus of the discussion before a number of the key implications of these developments are considered in the conclusions and avenues for further research are outlined.

Monaghan

W. J. Smyth has referred to the ‘chessboard’ of landscape and the ways in which family and demographic experiences have affected the morphologies of the settlement landscapes of farm holdings.³ Exploring the landscape experience of three small-farm districts in Co. Monaghan at farm and household level elucidates the mechanics of what has happened to farmscapes and landscapes and helps to reflect on the context within which dispersed housing expansion occurs.

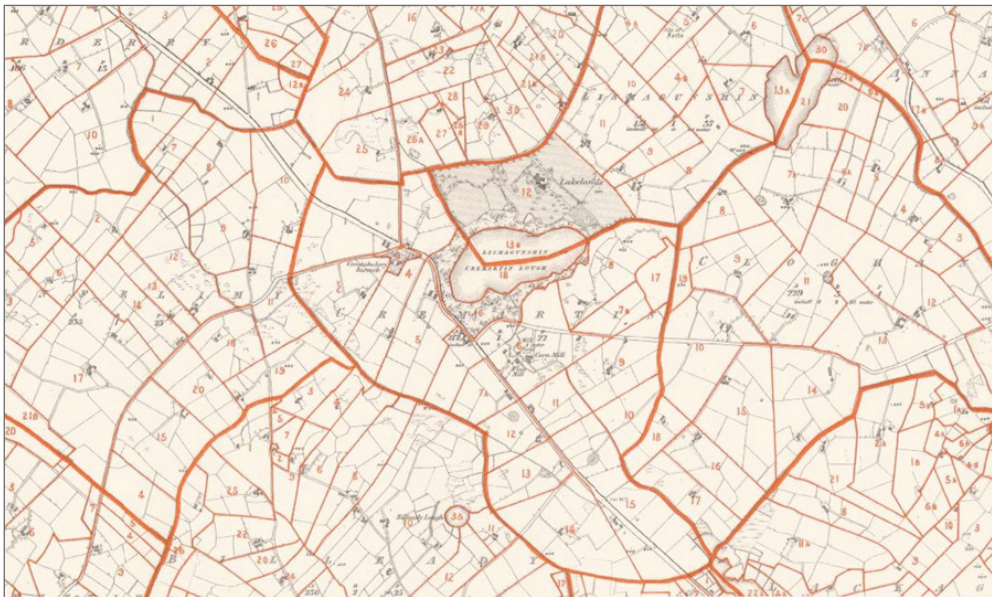


Figure 1 Farm holdings in mid-Monaghan

Up to the 1970s, Annyalla parish was predominantly a small-farm district with most farms less than 20 acres (9 ha.). Figure 1 shows the distribution of holdings in Griffiths Valuation, which is the template of farm holdings that continues up to the present. Until the abolition of domestic and land rates, in 1977 and 1984 respectively, it was possible, with a reasonable degree of accuracy, to track the changing ownership and consolidation of holdings in cancellation books in the valuation office. In spite of the reduction in farm numbers during the twentieth century, the broad parameters of the small-farm structure

have remained much the same up to the present. This is because of the initial small size of most holdings and the diffuse nature of local changes in holdings.

In the 1911 census, there were 564, predominantly farm households in the parish. In a follow-up survey in the early 1970s, this number had fallen to 312. In spite of this decline, there was not a corresponding increase in farm size. On the extinction of some households, holdings remained unoccupied, were held by relatives living abroad or in towns or cities outside the parish, or were taken over by residents elsewhere in the parish or neighbouring parishes – but the overall small-farm structure continued to a great extent.⁴ These patterns of consolidation and farm continuity have persisted into the present, facilitated by an increasing number of part-time farm families over the past generation.

At the time of the 1911 census, the small farm network supported large nuclear families, accounting for almost two-thirds of the total number of families. Very strong kinship networks were evidenced in household composition and household histories – many, for example, were three-generation households or extended families with additional kin. Emigration to America, and especially to Scotland and England, was a central feature of these large families. Passenger lists to America in the early twentieth century contain clusters of young people from the same parishes, heading to relatives in cities of the New World. Many of the incomplete/‘denuded’ households, resulting from earlier emigration, commonly brought in children of their emigrant brothers and sisters – a social process that is reflected in the numbers of nephews and nieces born abroad, in the 1911 census. This is the classic situation, which was well established throughout small farm Ireland and was highlighted, for instance, in the researches of Arensberg and Kimball more than seventy years ago.⁵

By the 1970s, the district displayed an attenuated household demography resting on an enduring template of small farms. Average household size was 3.3 in 1973 compared with 5.5 in 1911. Emigration and depopulation of family members, especially through the 1930s, '40s and '50s, had resulted in almost half the households being incomplete. There were, for example, 68 bachelors living alone on smallholdings. Three quarters of households had extensive arrays of migrant contacts. Migration had been undertaken, in many cases, to save the farm, not the family. By the 1950s, it also pointed to growing alienation from farming in poorer, small-farm regions.

In the townland of Lisdrumgormly in 1973, there were nine farms as follows: No.1 with 25 acres; No.2 – 9 acres; No.3 – 9 acres; No.4 – c9 acres; No.5 – c8 acres; No.6 – 25 acres; No.7 – 19 acres; No.8 – 12 acres; No.9 – 24 acres. While only c130 households in the parish looked likely to survive, it was noted in 1976 that ‘increased participation in off-farm employment may improve the household demography, and maintain landholding structures as they are at present ... [There is] evidence of this trend getting underway at present in many parts of rural Monaghan... reflected in a rash of new houses being built in many areas... [with] a noticeable filtering home of emigrants – many with young families – returning to formerly deserted farms. The considerable number of farms in many areas, which are held by persons living in England, affords some incentive to return, even if they are only used effectively as house sites.’⁶

In the decades since the 1970s, these small-farm landscapes have shown clear signs of renewal and demographic regeneration reflected in a significant growth in housing and settlement along the roads and byroads of the parish. There is a minority of full-time farms which have consolidated significantly (with one farm of 100 cows, for example,) and some desultory Land Commission (LC) activity in the 1980s redistributing non-productive farms, but a large number of small holdings have continued either as part-time farms or unoccupied holdings held by non-residents/relatives. For the most part, the small farm topography has endured and where consolidation has taken place, the initial small size of holdings has made little difference to the overall picture. Many of the small farms, which have held on, have provided the setting for new housing for family members, in some cases brothers and sisters locating side by side with the parental household. In some townlands, whole families have changed or died out. One is struck by the poignant presence of spanking new houses built by their successors, with lawns and driveways, side-by-side with run-down, dilapidated, out-of-date farmsteads from half a century ago. For example, there were three families living in Mulladuff townland in 1973 and today, there are seven new houses belonging to sons and daughters of the farmers, plus an exceptional estate of fifty houses ('full of strangers' as a local observed – Farm 7 in Figure 2) on one farm sold to a developer ten years ago.

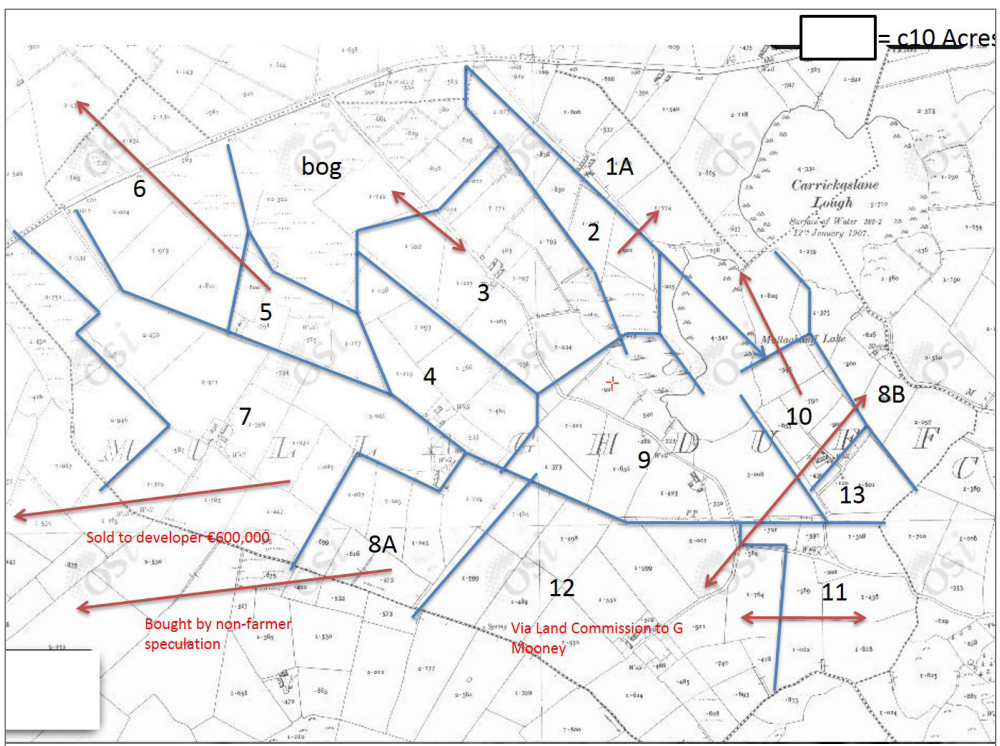


Figure 2 Mulladuff changes in holdings since 1973. Farms remain small and fragmented.

This pattern of new housing by family members is repeated throughout the parish in arrays of new housing replacing derelict farmsteads or set alongside older farmsteads on the network of by-roads and within the template of smallholdings (Figure 3). Continuity of smallholdings has provided a template for a new generation of non-rural houses and families. Most are kin-linked with the residual farm structures, with a sprinkling of urban-generated households from Monaghan, Castleblayney, Dundalk, or cross-border centres.



Figure 3 Ribbon development of new housing mid-Monaghan

Almost half of the 600 houses in Cremartin and Annyalla Electoral Divisions (EDs), which correspond with the parish area, were built since 1991⁷ – and are very evident in the landscape illustrated in Figure 3. Part-time farming on residual small farms has facilitated continuation of older structures. Many of these farms support either drystock or small suckler herds, with landowners engaged in off-farm employment. Drivers, or digger machine operators, for example, were common non-agricultural occupations because of the relative ease for farmers accustomed to open-air work, setting-up in self-employed businesses during the Celtic Tiger boom. Proximity to local small towns afforded work opportunities for farmers or family members in factories, retail or services. In both EDs, 91 (or 13%) of 664 employed were recorded as working in agriculture in the 2011 census, which presumably includes part-time farmers.

Clew Bay districts, west Mayo

Small-farm districts around Clew Bay in west Mayo are composed of much more marginal land where emigration has been an even bigger demographic feature than in Monaghan.

For example, the Loughloon area near Croagh Patrick consists of mountainy, poor land which was densely peopled one hundred years ago but like most of west Mayo operated as a sort of emigrant nursery; 15 of the 25 farm families listed in the 1911 census had 74 children: of these, 46 went to America in the following twenty years and 10 to England. Of the 18 or so who stayed and subsequently had families in the village, most of *their* children migrated, mainly to England in the 1940s and '50s.⁸ This was a classic emigration landscape of the West of Ireland. However, as with Monaghan, there was no radical restructuring of residual farm holdings – many continued in the family, often in ownership from abroad.

One hundred years ago, much of the farmland in the townlands of this area was undergoing transition from rundale with many farms formerly held collectively within townlands being broken into separate holdings by the Land Commission. In some cases, as in Knappaghbeg and Loughloon townlands, new farmhouses were re-located out of old farm-clusters within newly laid out smallholdings. In the 1940s and '50s, the Land Commission also moved some farm families out of the area to County Meath, consolidating residual holdings. Ultimately, these changes had limited impact on the overall profile of smallholdings. Although farms and commonages have been redistributed, fragmentation of ownership of fields and holdings frequently continues to reflect the earlier rundale system.

Today, there are only half a dozen farm families in the Loughloon area, and only a couple of these are fulltime farmers. Much of this landscape, in the words of one local, is 'running wild' – reverting to a ferny and gorse wilderness, with some land held by non-residents or relatives in neighbouring districts, or other fragments with obscure or lost title – a situation which has impeded consolidation. Holdings, which have been lying idle for many decades, or are in inaccessible locations, have a limited attraction as properties even for non-rural owners.

In Knappaghbeg townland, there are few fulltime farmers, (one sheep farmer and some with dry stock), the rest are small part-timers with drystock cattle. In the wider ED of Croaghpatrick, only 7% (17) of the population is engaged in farming/fishing; in Kilsallagh ED there are 25 out of 194; and in Louisburgh ED, 33 out of 346. Although farming is a part-time activity for most, landholders continue to maintain the small farm landscape of stone-walls and hedges. A great many people had off-farm work in construction during the boom years.

However, for the most part, west Mayo is not an empty landscape by any means. New patterns of housing have slotted into the small farm network – as house sites have been either taken up by family members employed locally, or have been purchased by incomers looking for rural settings for their homes or in search of alternative rural lifestyles. Much of the coastal landscape around Clew Bay is under pressure from holiday homes and retirement homes engulfing the original farmsteads, often family members building on farm sites (notably from Dublin, England, or the continent). In the favoured coastal locations, there might be as many as several non-rural houses generated on one smallholding.



Figure 4 Murrisk on Clew Bay

In Croagh Patrick ED in the 2011 census, for example, over half of its houses have been built since 1991, over a third since 2001. About one third of all dwellings in Murrisk, and further west around Louisburgh, are holiday homes and one-off private dwellings.⁹ Unoccupied houses along Clew Bay on census night 2011 probably accurately reflect the proportions of holiday or second homes – in Croaghpatrick ED, there were 138 unoccupied houses versus 210 which were occupied (a ratio 1: 1.5); in Kilsallagh ED, 130 vs 205 (1: 1.5); in Louisburgh ED, 358 vs 389 (ratio 1:1). In contrast, in Annyalla and Cremartin EDs in Monaghan, there were 87 unoccupied versus more than 600 occupied (a ratio of 1:7).

South Meath

One hundred years ago, the grasslands of south Meath, consisted largely of big pasture fields and a comparatively empty countryside (as illustrated in the districts around Kilclone in Figure 5). They provide quite a contrast to the other two areas.

Commencing about eighty years ago, the Land Commission embarked on a programme of migration of farm families from overcrowded western counties, including the Mayo districts discussed above, to the relatively underpopulated landscapes of south Meath and north Kildare. Suitable families were selected from Murrisk and districts around Croagh Patrick, for example, as well as other parts of Mayo, Clare, Donegal and Kerry, who were allocated c22 acres (at the outset), later rising to 35 acres (from 9-14 ha.), in Meath.¹⁰ Large cattle farms or ‘estates’ of untenanted land were subdivided among the migrant families so that a skeleton of small farms was laid along the network of by-roads in a swathe across south Meath. New houses and yards, with smaller fields subdividing



Figure 5 Farmholdings in Kilclone district in south Meath

the large grass pastures, were inserted into the landscape. In many cases, access roads were constructed as cul-de-sacs into the empty fieldscapes, all of which represented a landscape as well as a social revolution.

In general, the migrants were settled in small clusters of two or three, and up to ten and twelve houses and farms. In some cases, settlements of fifteen to twenty houses have been identified. Rathkilmore (Figure 6) contained one household from 1911 until the late 1940s. Then, eleven new farmsteads were allocated to incoming migrants from Co. Mayo, sited along a new Land Commission road linking the settlement with the existing road network. The new farms of 20-25 acres (8-10 ha) called for much smaller individual fields.

Subsequently, there was some movement among these Land Commission farms, as numbers of them failed to survive in their new milieu and were incorporated into neighbouring holdings. However, the general pattern of smallholdings continued and set the scene for a second major settlement transformation to take place in south Meath in the 1970s. As the market for commuter housing in the wider Dublin region expanded outwards, and as sites were sought by both farm family members and non-local incomers,

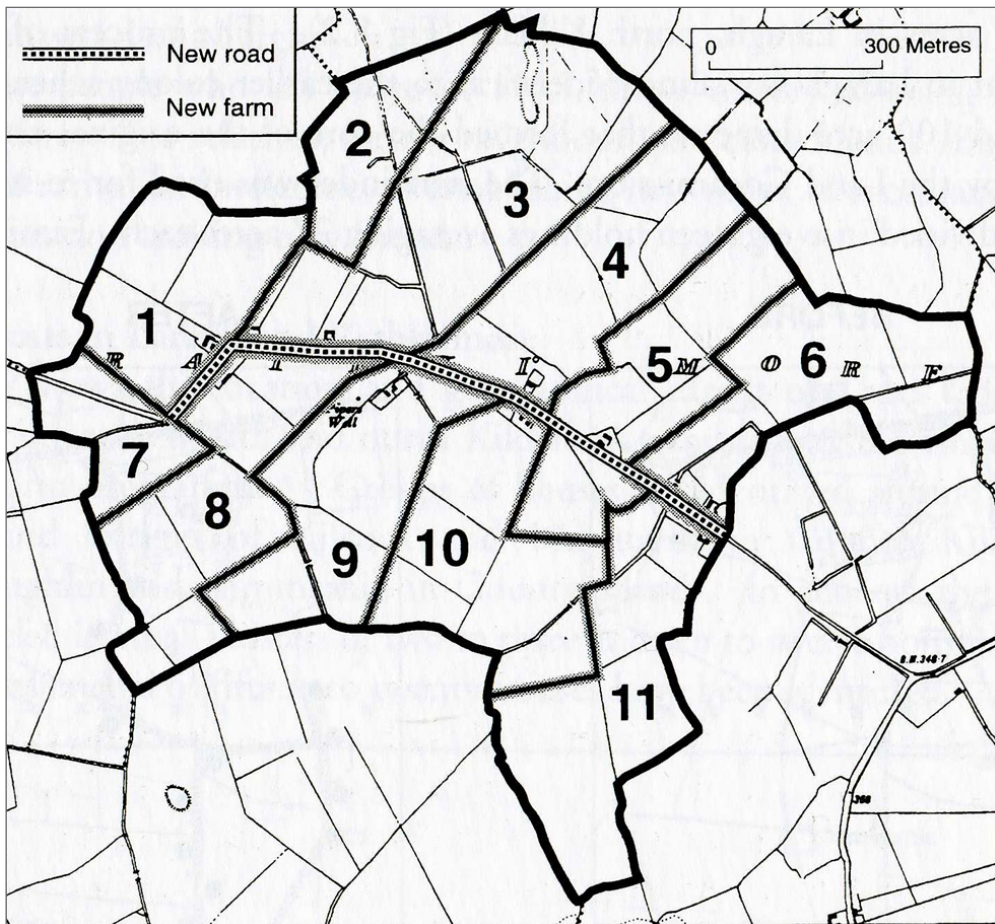


Figure 6 Land Commission farms in Rathkilmore, south Meath (source: Duffy, *To and from Ireland*, p192)

the small Land Commission farms were strategically located to dispose of development sites in ribbon developments, which transformed extensive segments of landscape. In many cases, for instance in the Kilclone area, Land Commission farms generated three-, four- and five-house sites as shown in Figure 7 where the farmsteads are shown engulfed by large numbers of non-farm houses. Significantly, the older, large pasture farms were not involved in this process.¹¹

Census data on housebuilding reflects the intensity of recent rural settlement expansion in south Meath. For example, 33% of houses in Kilmore ED were built between 1971 and 1991 and another third since 1991. In Rodanstown ED (incorporating the Kilclone area), 66% (of 345 houses) were erected since 1971. In Summerhill ED, over 75% of 430 houses were constructed since 1971, and half since 1991.

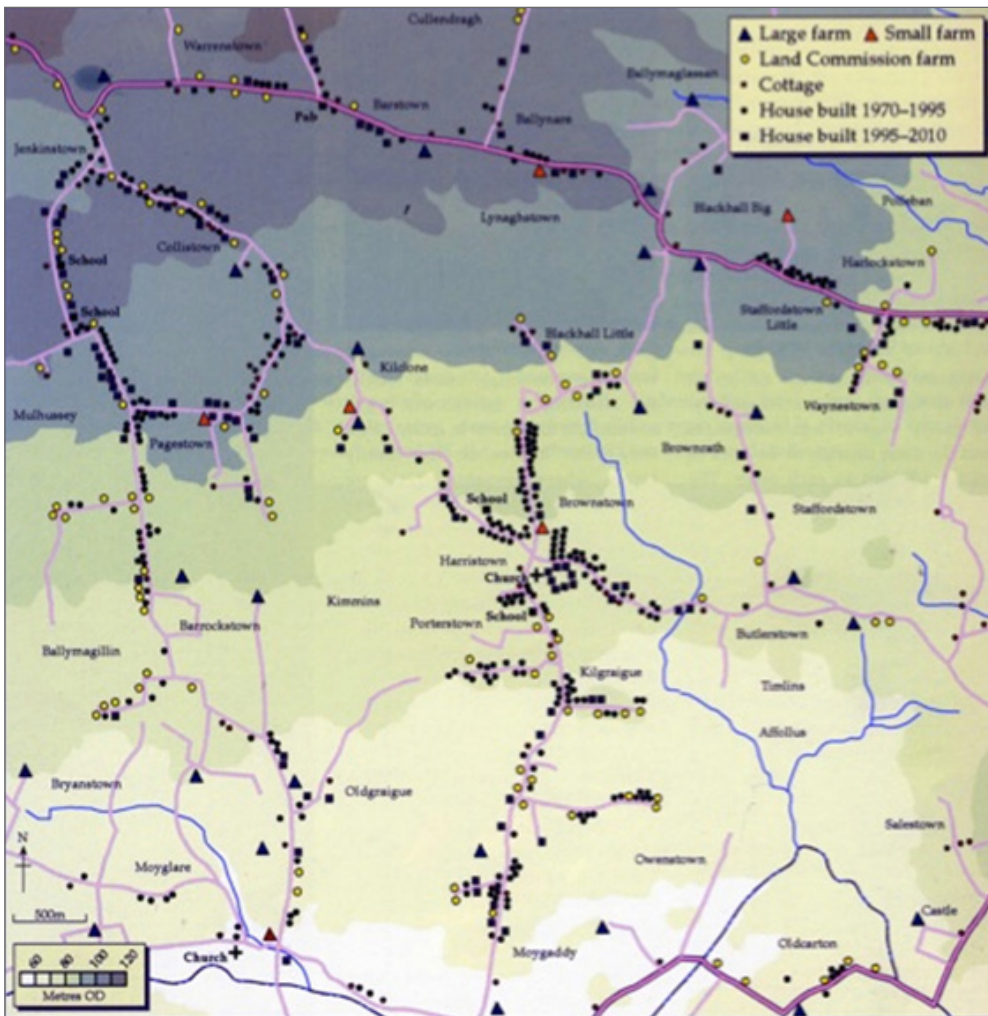


Figure 7 Recent rural settlement expansion in Kilcloone, south Meath

Evolving forms of settlement landscapes

Rural settlement is a product of changes in demography, agriculture and planning policies in the past century. Houses are the central components shaping and re-shaping the rural landscape. The processes constraining or altering housebuilding have important implications for regional or local landscape heritage and sense of place, with repercussions for future rural economies, service provision and tourism, for instance.

Farm-related and *road-oriented* housing comprise the principal types of contemporary Irish rural settlement. Until recent decades, most rural housing development was primarily a product of the dominance of farming in the countryside with farmsteads usually located within farm boundaries. The historic legacy of farm topology is the framework on which much of the pressure for change and development today has been brought to bear. The

size and structure of farms, particularly with reference to the network of rural roads and lanes roads, mediate or influence in large measure the distribution of rural housing.

Because farming was the principal determining factor in the evolution of rural settlement forms until, perhaps, the last half century, territorial structures of townlands, farms, fields and road networks have shaped successive housing patterns. The network of townlands formed the parameters for farming, settlement and farm households for hundreds of years. Farms and accompanying houses all originally grew within the framework of the townland. In some parts of the country, such as Kildare and Meath, farms comprised whole townlands (as in Figure 5), but in most cases, especially in small-farm areas, a number of farms and farmhouses evolved within the boundaries of townlands.

Farms in Ireland are often amalgamations and aggregations, reflecting local histories of landholding for more than a century. Today, many farms are frequently a series of smaller units/ holdings not necessarily contiguous, and not necessarily in the one townland. Therefore, small-farm landscapes are not only relatively small in scale, but also fragmented and diffused across the countryside, resulting in a more fractured farming landscape which means potentially greater settlement pressures going forward. There are more farms per square kilometre in Leitrim, Donegal, Mayo, or Monaghan than in east Leinster, for example. Therefore, they make a proportionately greater impact on landscape than large farm districts in terms of the general trappings of settlement such as fields, hedges, lanes, and buildings.¹² However, in terms of recent housing pressure, depending on local circumstances (such as proximity to urban centres or coastal locations), small farms can generate multiple non-rural house sites. The most dramatic examples of this have occurred in the small-farm districts in Dublin's commuter zone in south Meath, and to a lesser extent in north Kildare.

Fields, which are the ultimate spaces and expressions of landownership, are smaller in the small-farm regions of the west and north-west. Here 'fields' as small as an acre or two contrast with Meath fields, which can be as large as a small Monaghan farm. These large fields, redistributed among Land Commission migrants in south Meath, were subdivided into smaller plots. The 'field' (or section of it) is at the coalface in contemporary rural housing developments. Pre-existing geographies of fields are either constraints or opportunities for individual house sites and groups of houses. Housing estates on the edges of towns and villages usually mirror the boundaries of field properties, which were purchased for development, as is the case in the townland of Mulladuff in Monaghan.

In addition, small-farm landscapes generally have dense road and lane networks, reflecting population densities in the past. In the Land Commission districts of south Meath, new roads and lanes were inserted into the large pastures. As a consequence, house sites with road frontage represented an important windfall in small farm regions from the 1960s and '70s, particularly when associated with fairly liberal interpretations of 'local need' in rural development.¹³ A road-oriented housing pattern supporting commuter households is probably one of the most universal and pervasive settlement legacies throughout Ireland today. This 'linearisation' of the landscape is particularly

in evidence in housing developments in some pressured urban regions such as south Meath and in high scenic settings in the west where holiday and retirement homes have mushroomed.



Figure 8 Roadside housing, Lecanvey, Clew Bay area

The prior existence of a road infrastructure reduced the costs of housing provision in the past – during the population boom in the late eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries new roads in west Munster and Connacht were quickly followed by roadside housing, often in unregulated squatting. In many ways, this pattern of settlement has been repeated in the commuter age from the 1970s. Regions and districts with the densest networks of roads, or the greatest mileage of roads and byroads have most opportunities for housing. These are invariably districts with the smallest farm structures and greatest availability of land sites with road frontage. Small farm regions with high accessibility to urban centres or in high amenity areas, such as tourism areas, have even greater potential opportunities for housing development compared with areas dominated by larger farms. As a consequence, the link with the older pattern of farm landscapes continues throughout the country and the matrix of ownership, farm size, and farm enterprise viability is a measure of housing development pressure. Selling sites for housing generates non-agricultural income. This is true in urban-pressured regions, such as south Meath, as well as in Mayo and parts of Monaghan, where derelict holdings lie idle and where agriculture is in decline and part-time farming is increasing. Indeed, some local politicians have called for planning regulations to allow small farmers freedom to ‘produce’ sites for rural housing. Most of this new housing is non-rural, non-local with no economic and limited social or cultural connection with farms and farming.

Maintenance of the rural landscape depends increasingly on a diminishing number of farmers, or on the part-time farmers. The Rural Environmental Protection Scheme

(REPS) and its successors, combined with the single payment scheme, have helped to sustain this landscape of small-farms. In many western regions, demand for scattered rural housing generates substantial pressure on agriculturally poor, but ecologically and environmentally rich, landscapes. The visual impacts of such developments are exacerbated in many areas by the exposed, treeless landscape. As one visitor observed in Donegal, 'houses splattered all over the place have made Bunbeg look less than lovely'. The well-treed landscapes of Meath, and to a lesser extent the drumlin landscapes of Monaghan with their rampant hedgerows are better able to absorb new settlements. Tim Robinson, who is intimately familiar with the settlement landscape of Connemara, takes a more nuanced view of these housing developments which he sees as part of a disorderly communal vitality: 'higgledy piggledy, assembled as if by successive throws of dice rather than according to a plan ... [they are] only as contradictory and untidy as life'.¹⁴

While qualitatively there is little enough visible difference between the new settlement landscapes of Monaghan, Mayo and Meath, socially there are considerable contrasts where new households have no connection with land or farming, and no embedded local communal memory. South Meath, for instance, consists predominantly of commuters from/to Dublin, many professionals and urban service sector employees, with limited local connections. Ironically, some of these new populations find themselves occasionally in conflict with, or unsympathetic to, the local farming activities. In Monaghan, most of the non-farm households are still grounded in the indigenous community, connected by kin and local friendship ties. And in west Mayo, while there are more family members in the new houses, there are also a significant number of outsiders, either retirement (generally Irish or British) households, or transient temporary occupants of holiday homes.



Figure 9 Farmsteads engulfed in swathes of suburban-style houses in south Meath

Today, in Monaghan, Mayo and Meath, the template of smallholdings has supported extensive ranges of suburban-style housing. These are displayed in frequently extravagant designs, with double garages, manicured lawn and garden layouts, perhaps, frequently with exotic 'urban'-style trees and shrubs (such as flowering cherries, or Japanese maple) which contrast greatly with the older traditional landscape character. Some of the uniformity of design and topography of the new properties results from planning regulations about plot size, road frontage and boundary fencing. The ecological footprint of today's rural dwellers is many times greater than the impact of the earlier predominantly farming generation, especially in the case of two-car commuting households. At local level, there have been serious implications for groundwater protection in areas such as west Mayo and south Meath where there is intensive use of septic tanks, which are often contiguous to wells supplying drinking water. In the 2011 census, septic tanks accounted for well over 80% of the sewerage systems in the Monaghan, Mayo and Meath areas.

One of the unanticipated consequences of the past thirty years of growth in rural housing is that latent development pressure has built up for the future, generated by the growing non-rural population as well as the farm population. The younger generation, which has grown up and been socialised in dispersed, often idyllic rural locations, will have expectations to live in similar circumstances in their time. This is particularly the case with farm family members, many of whom will want to gravitate towards their rural townlands where friendship and kin networks exist – so that perhaps a dozen houses granted permission in some localities in the 1970s, will lead to a sort of exponential pressure for further rural housing in these same areas that will become very difficult to control in a political or planning sense. This raises the thorny question of what constitutes 'local need'.

Conclusion

Settlement landscape heritage is an integral aspect of Ireland's rurality: it contributes to national and international perceptions of Ireland in which images of a land of green fields and rural culture prevail. The rural landscape has been represented in this manner for a long time so that it has iconic significance which must be acknowledged and which needs some protection. Not only is it part of a representation of Ireland for visitors and tourism, but also for more than half the Irish population, which is 'urban' and has no longer any link with the land. Many landscapes in Ireland today are attractive countrysides of whitethorn hedges, intricate networks of laneways and byroads, frequently with small two-storied farmhouses sprinkled through the fields and tucked into the hillsides, their red-roofed haysheds blending with white walls and green fields.

Much of the detail of this landscape was laid down as far back as the middle decades of the nineteenth century. The positive environmental contribution of small farms in the past should be acknowledged: the landscapes we prize today have been developed and nurtured by farming families for more than a hundred years. Their maintenance and continuance rests on the farmholding structure. Policies supporting environment

objectives, e.g. REPS, and the single farm payment (all part of the CAP, which undergoes frequent reforms) have enabled landscape heritage and biodiversity to be maintained. In the absence of protective management policies carried out by farming families, it is possible to envisage that a large proportion of the 380,000km of hedgerows in Ireland will deteriorate in the next twenty years.

The traditional rural settlement pattern is being rapidly transformed by a spattering of non-rural bungalows and large two-storey houses with different colours, designs and textures, which often fit discordantly with the earlier legacy. One commentator in the early 1980s characterised the change that had swept over the Irish countryside as an assault on the traditional landscape: ‘no more blending into the Irish landscape. The bliss of the new bungalow is its ostentation...it sits on the landscape like a beached whale, puffing and blowing to assert its presence’ (O’Toole, 1984).¹⁵ This epitomises what has become an urban-rural clash of perspectives on rural housing and rural landscape in Ireland.

Rural settlement is principally farm settlement in origins and in primary morphology. To what extent can this framework continue to support a modern expanding settlement pattern that has no economic connection with the matrix of farms? As the number of viable farm units in the country continues to decline, how much of a change in composition of rural settlement can be supported in order to maintain the government’s objective of vibrant rural communities? To what extent is the criterion of ‘local need’ for housing compatible with the inherited landscape template which is less and less a farmed landscape? How will such a landscape heritage be maintained and conserved for future generations? The latter question gives rise to questions of whether (rural) housing need today should take precedence over landscape heritage of the past, particularly in light of the impact of the reconfiguration of public services in rural areas. Simply put, are rural hedges more important than rural people?

Endnotes

¹ See Brendan McGrath in *Landscape and society in contemporary Ireland* (Cork University Press, 2013) who has highlighted the reluctance of central and local authorities to implement policies to control and manage landscape in line with other parts of Europe.

² See Irish population change atlas, NCG <http://ncg.nuim.ie/redir.php?action=projects/famine/explore>; Seamus Lafferty *et al.* *Irish agriculture in transition: a census atlas of agriculture in the Republic of Ireland*, Dublin 1999.

³ Heart | Land: The Home Place, RTE documentary, May 2011.

⁴ Patrick J. Duffy, *Population and landholding in Co. Monaghan: a study in change and continuity*, PhD thesis, NUI-UCD, 1976.

⁵ C.M. Arensberg and S.T. Kimball, *Family and community in Ireland*, Harvard University Press, 1940.

⁶ Duffy, *Population and landholding*, p 532

⁷ Census of Population 2011. <http://census.cso.ie/sapmap/>

- ⁸ Based on interviews 1987-8 with John McGreal, a local informant, who was able to reconstruct the demographic experience of local families.
- ⁹ Karen Keaveney, *Contested ruralities: housing in the Irish countryside*, PhD thesis, NUI Maynooth, 2009
- ¹⁰ M. Whelan, W. Nolan, P.J. Duffy, 'State-sponsored migration to the east midlands in the twentieth century' in P.J. Duffy (ed), *To and from Ireland: planned migration schemes c.1600-2000*, Dublin, 2004, 175-196.
- ¹¹ See P.J. Duffy, 'Housing history, Kilclone, Co. Meath', in Aalen, Whelan and Stout (eds) *Atlas of the Irish rural landscape*, Cork 2011, 232-234.
- ¹² A crude calculation of this impact in spatial/ territorial terms would suggest, for example, that a tract of 10 sq. miles (26 sq. km) = 6,400 acres (c2,600 sq. kms) = 320 farms of say 20 acres (c9ha) each in a county like Monaghan, containing perhaps c3,200 fields with a huge mileage of hedging and trees. There is the additional footprint of houses and outbuildings, lanes roadways. This can be contrasted with Meath, for example, where there might be from 30 to 60 farms of perhaps 100-200 acres in a similar size area.
- ¹³ 'Local need' has been variously and ambiguously defined by Local Authorities as demonstrating local or former residency to an area, or even 'bloodline links to the locality', as well as employment in the locality. See *Sustainable rural housing: guidelines for planning authorities*, Government publications, 2005
- ¹⁴ Tim Robinson, *Connemara: A Little Gaelic kingdom*, Dublin 2011, 294, 297, 311
- ¹⁵ O'Toole, Fintan (1984), 'Bright with cosy homesteads', *Sunday Tribune*, 22 April 1984

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