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A note on journey times from Dublin as an indicator of changing regional relationships in Ireland – some long-term and some short-term perspectives

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Abstract. The changing long-term and short-term influence of Dublin is reviewed in relation to journey time information which can be extracted from timetables for early nineteenth-century mail coaches and for later train and bus services. Travel times from Dublin to some sixteen places across Ireland are examined to demonstrate the expanding and intensifying influence of the Dublin city-region. In 2024 journey speeds to these sixteen places were on average between six and seven times faster than in the mail coach era. Such a change represents a very significant time-space convergence which is most obviously reflected in a massive expansion of the Dublin commuting field. At least in relation to public transport, that convergence is particularly evident in some of the fastest travel speeds being related to the larger places within the state. However, the emergence of a radial motorway system has meant that, with the exception of travel to parts of the north-west, contrasts in journey speeds from Dublin remain relatively muted.

Key words: *Regional relationships in Ireland, Dublin city-region, time-space convergence, Irish bus and rail timetables, commuting in Ireland*

An enduring feature of Ireland over several centuries is the growing influence of Dublin across other parts of the island. This is reflected in the size, as measured by population and by employment patterns, of the city and its wider city-region in relation to all other cities and towns in Ireland. Dublin has been growing for well over three centuries. By the mid-nineteenth century, its population, including those living in nearby suburbs, was approaching a quarter of a million – a total that represented about five per cent of the then largely rural population. During the twentieth century, especially after the advent of an independent 26-county state and the appropriation of capital city functions, its growth accelerated. By 2022, the population of 'greater Dublin' (a definition that ignores

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administrative boundaries to focus on the continuous built-up area) was in the region of one and a half million, whilst the numbers living in a wider city-region (roughly definable and taken here as the four counties of Dublin, Wicklow, Kildare and Meath) exceeded two million. Around two-fifths of the total population of the Irish state lived in the Dublin region so defined. In relation to the island as a whole, the proportion living in the Dublin city-region is over one-quarter, around 28%. Within the state, Dublin stands as a 'primate city', being around five to six times the population to be found in the next largest city region, Cork. Across the island, its nearest rival is Belfast, where the city-region population approaches one million; however, the influence of the latter city is largely constrained to Northern Ireland, its primary administrative jurisdiction.

In the following discussion, the changing long-term and short-term influence of Dublin is reviewed in relation to journey time information taken from a range of transport timetables for early nineteenth-century mail coaches and for later train and bus services. Some data are also used to indicate contemporary journey times by motor car. Although not without significant limitations, it is contended that changing travel time from Dublin can offer a valuable perspective on how the influence of Dublin has intensified and extended over a long period. To illustrate this argument, travel times from Dublin to some sixteen places across Ireland are examined in relation to a selection of periods from the early nineteenth century (Figure 1). The sixteen places were chosen for their being large provincial or county centres or because they helped create a geographical spread across the island. As will become evident, changes in travel times between these centres and Dublin have been variable, and have arguably contributed to some unevenness in the changing regional relationships between Dublin and other parts of Ireland.

The data sources used are drawn from early Irish directories and almanacs and from later train and bus timetables. Brief details of the stage-coaches running along the main routes from the city, were given in *Watson's Gentleman's and Citizen's Almanac* published in Dublin from 1729. This almanac was subsequently incorporated into the 'treble almanac', a wide-ranging compendium of information on administrative and commercial topics relating to Ireland and Britain that was produced annually for most of the later eighteenth and early nineteenth century. It included initially a page and later several pages of detail on the growing range of coach and other transport (e.g. canal and goods 'caravans') services from Dublin (Figure 2). The Post Office and Thom's directories succeeded the 'treble almanac' from the 1830s and up to around 1860 published the departure and journey timetables for many of the mail services emanating from Dublin. These directories are the source for the 1840 and 1860 data used here. A later source is *The Red Guide,* published by the Brunswick Press of Dublin, which appeared monthly between the 1920s and the late 1950s. As well as listing the then very extensive locations of fairs and markets, the guide provides an alphabetical list of towns and villages, and how to access them. Most importantly, it offers a consolidated list of the passenger train timetables in use by the various railway companies (e.g. here could be found the timetables of the Great Northern, the Great Southern and many smaller companies). *The Red Guide* for January 1937 is used here (Figure 3), alongside various later timetables, for

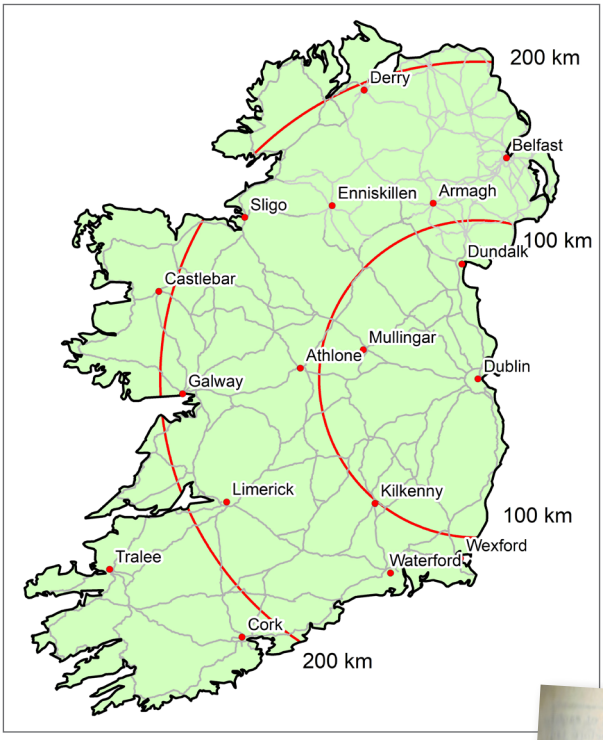
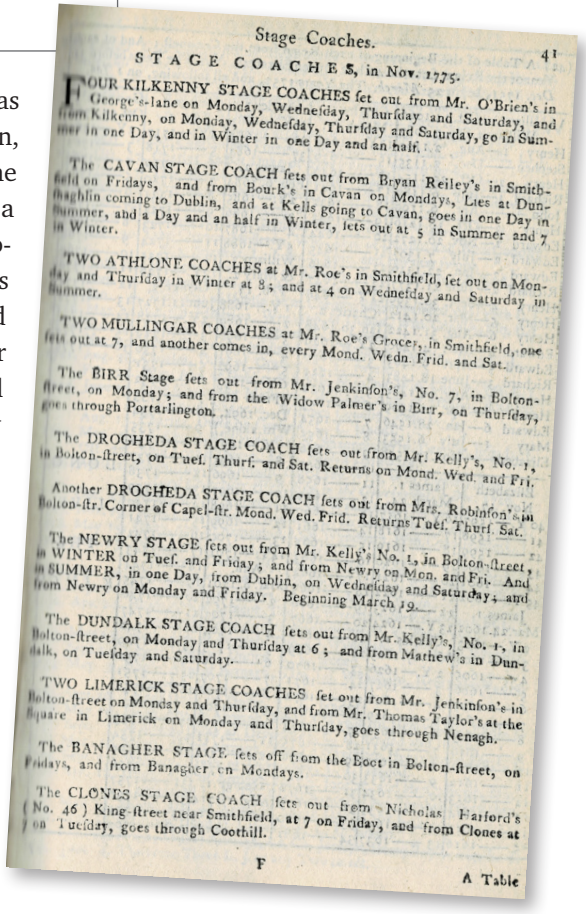


Figure 1. Location of places chosen for assessment in relation to distance from Dublin.

1971, 2001 and 2024, as published by Córas Iompair Éireann, Irish Rail, Bus Éireann, Northern Ireland (NI) Railways and the current NI operator, Translink. For 2024, a further source used is the 'Rome2Rio' website which offers comparative journey times between centres when using bus, train and car. This site provided data for 2024 car journey times. However, it should be noted that the car data appear to relate mainly to motorway travel and may not take full account of the much slower car travel involved in leaving or approaching a congested city centre. All other data used here have a centre-to-centre emphasis as train and bus stations are usually centrally located.



Stage Coaches. 41

STAGE COACHES, in Nov. 1775.

FOUR KILKENNY STAGE COACHES fet out from Mr. O'Brien's in George's-lane on Monday, Wednefday, Thurfday and Saturday, and from Kilkenny, on Monday, Wednefday, Thurfday and Saturday, and come in one Day, and in Winter in one Day and an half.

The CAVAN STAGE COACH fets out from Bryan Reiley's in Smithfield on Fridays, and from Bourke's in Cavan on Mondays, Lies at Dunfhaghlin coming to Dublin, and at Kells going to Cavan, goes in one Day in Summer, and a Day and an half in Winter, fets out at 5 in Summer and 7 in Winter.

TWO ATHLONE COACHES at Mr. Roe's in Smithfield, fet out on Monday and Thurfday in Winter at 8; and at 4 on Wednefday and Saturday in Summer.

TWO MULLINGAR COACHES at Mr. Roe's Grocer, in Smithfield, one fets out at 7, and another comes in, every Mond. Wedn. Frid. and Sat.

The BIRR Stage fets out from Mr. Jenkinfon's, No. 7, in Bolton-ftreet, on Monday; and from the Widow Palmer's in Birr, on Thurfday, goes through Portarlington.

The DROGHEDA STAGE COACH fets out from Mr. Kelly's, No. 1, in Bolton-ftreet, on Tuef. Thurf. and Sat. Returns on Mond. Wed. and Fri.

Another DROGHEDA STAGE COACH fets out from Mrs. Robinfon's, in Bolton-ftr. Corner of Capel-ftr. Mond. Wed. Frid. Returns Tuef. Thurf. Sat.

The NEWRY STAGE fets out from Mr. Kelly's, No. 1, in Bolton-ftreet, in WINTER on Tuef. and Friday; and from Newry on Mon. and Fri. And in SUMMER, in one Day, from Dublin, on Wednefday and Saturday; and from Newry on Monday and Friday. Beginning March 19.

The DUNDALK STAGE COACH fets out from Mr. Kelly's, No. 1, in Bolton-ftreet, on Monday and Thurfday at 6; and from Mathew's in Dundalk, on Tuefday and Saturday.

TWO LIMERICK STAGE COACHES fet out from Mr. Jenkinfon's in Bolton-ftreet on Monday and Thurfday, and from Mr. Thomas Taylor's at the Square in Limerick on Monday and Thurfday, goes through Nenagh.

The BANAGHER STAGE fets off from the Boot in Bolton-ftreet, on Fridays, and from Banagher on Mondays.

The CLONES STAGE COACH fets out from Nicholas Harford's (No. 46) King-ftreet near Smithfield, at 7 on Friday, and from Clones at 7 on Tuefday, goes through Coothill.

F A Table

Figure 2. Details of stagecoaches from Dublin appearing on a single page in the Gentleman's and Citizen's almanac for 1776. (Source: Author's collection).

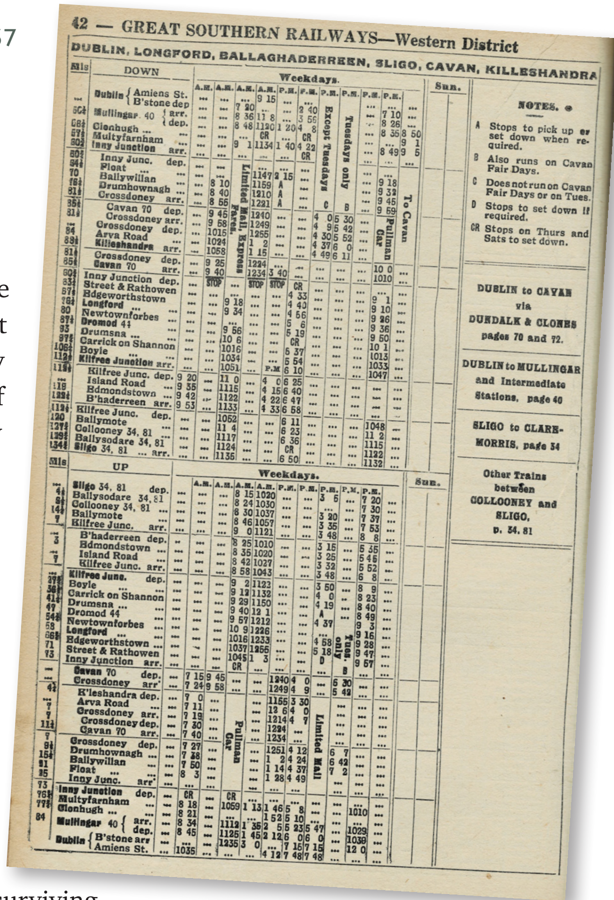


Figure 3. A page from the January 1937 *Red Guide* giving details of passenger trains operating on the Dublin-Sligo route, including details of Mullingar to Cavan and other branch services. (Source: Author's collection).

Data from 1840 represent the mail-coach era at a time when it had become highly efficient. Twenty years later in 1860, the impact of the new railways was increasingly evident, with some travel times now much accelerated. Later data from 1937 denotes a time when the railway system was in maturity and offering a highly-connected and well-developed system reaching to almost all parts of Ireland; car ownership was still low. In contrast, little more than three decades later, in 1971, the railway system was now much subordinate to car and bus use. Cut-backs had been extensive and even on some of the surviving main lines, only skeletal morning and evening services were on offer. The early 1970s represent the nadir of the passenger rail system and contrast with later decades when services on the remaining lines were revived and expanded. During this period too, much greater attention began to be given to the potential of the rail system for long-distance commuting, with new early morning services being initiated. At the same time, bus services have increasingly offered strong competition, especially on routes to the north-west and south-east. The later data for 2001 and 2024 chart the impact of more recent developments.

Calculation of data

The data used in the following tables is essentially indicative of potential connectivity. The analysis for each of the chosen years is presented in terms of the fastest connection, measured in minutes (Table 2). With the exception of the mail coach years 1840 and 1860, the connection is measured for daytime hours, defined here as 7 a.m. to 10 p.m., and is from Dublin to each of the sixteen centres. In many instances just one or two fast services per day were available during this span. Other services were sometimes

noticeably slower. No attempt is made to take account of service frequencies or, beyond the limit to day-time hours, to specify a particular departure time.

To review some of the consequences of changing journey times further, journey times are related to the straight-line, 'crow flies', distance from Dublin. In all instances, travel speeds to each centre are calculated by dividing the straight-line distance by the journey time taken and then expressing the results as kilometres per hour. 'Real-life' road and rail distances are of course invariably greater than the straight-line distance and, in some instances (for example the Wexford route by Rathdrum and Enniscorthy or the somewhat L-shaped rail route to Castlebar), may be significantly longer. However, using the straight-line distance imposes a standardisation and facilitates comparisons. Table 3 shows how travel time from Dublin plays out in terms of standardised speeds, whilst Table 5 indicates how the speeds to reach individual centres deviate from the average speeds for each year.

Forerunners of connectivity from Dublin

From the late twelfth century, Dublin acted as the administrative centre for English (later British) control in Ireland. Communications between the centre of power and other parts of the country were critical for effective administration but really only became finally secured in the early 1600s. A gradual development of regular communications services to and from Dublin can be traced from the establishment of formal postal services in the mid-seventeenth century (Ferguson, 2016). In 1659, post roads from Dublin extended to the larger provincial centres, including Derry, Belfast and Coleraine to the north, Sligo, Galway and Limerick to the west and Kilkenny, Cork and Waterford to the south (Andrews, 1997, pp. 142-4). However, regular passenger services from Dublin appear to have been initiated only in the early eighteenth century. A coach to Kinnegad, some 60km west of the city, was established in 1717 and initially ran two days each week, taking all or most of the day to complete the journey (NLI Report 493, p. 3309). Like most early services, a departure time was given but no arrival time was specified as this depended on the state of the road. Other services developing from the 1730s, ran north and south/ south-west from Dublin. As illustrated by a journey to Belfast (ca. 165 km by road) that took three days in winter and two days in summer (Table 1), travel speeds were also slow on these routes. However, road improvements, most notably the development of the turnpike system (Andrews, 1964), together with more robust coaches and additional roadside inns with livery stables, facilitated gradual reductions in journey times. When a comprehensive mail-coach system was introduced in 1789-90 to ensure an efficient distribution of the mails from Dublin, it was possible to visualise the coaches, who also carried some passengers, achieving journey speeds of seven Irish miles per hour (12 km / hour). With the design and building of an improved post road system in the early nineteenth century (Andrews, 1964), it was possible to extend an effective communications system to all but the most remote parts of Ireland.

Table 1. Specimen journey times from Dublin, by coach mid-18th century compared to c. 1820 and, after the spread of the railway, 1855.

	Mid 18th century	1820	1855/60
Dublin to Belfast	3 days in winter 2 days in summer *(1742)*	14 hours	5 hrs 5 mins
Dublin to Enniskillen	3 days in winter 2 days in summer *(1768)*	18 hrs 20 mins	12 hrs 30 mins *(Mail Coach – no direct rail link*)
Dublin to Mullingar	1 day	8 hours	2 hours
Dublin to Kilkenny	A day and a half (1757, 1760)	c.11 hours	3 hrs 20 mins
Dublin to Cork	2 days (1793)	25 hours via Fermoy	6 hrs 50 mins
Dublin to Limerick	Advt. 1752-57, no detail on travel time: perhaps 3 days	19 hrs 15 mins	5 hrs 10 mins

Sources: *Contemporary directories, newspapers*

Changing connectivity 1840–1860

The mail coach schedules published in annual directories give an indication of travel speed capability across Ireland in the first half of the nineteenth century. In 1840, a few years before the great famine, mail coaches fanned out from the General Post Office in central Dublin each night at 9.00 p.m. In each direction they travelled at near uniform speed, reaching Belfast in under twelve hours, Derry in eighteen, Galway in under fifteen and Cork via Kilkenny and Clonmel in just over nineteen. A day despatch served Cork via Cashel in twenty hours. It took five and a half hours to reach Mullingar, eight and a half to reach Athlone. Travel to most places was close to the average speed for the sixteen centres analysed – around twelve kilometres of straight-line distance being covered each hour (Table 3). The fastest speed so measured was to Tralee via Limerick, the slowest was to Wexford, where the route was by Rathdrum and Enniscorthy and so was longer by 38 km (33 %) when compared to the 114 km straight-line distance. Considered overall, however, Dublin had a fairly uniform connectivity to most other places In Ireland.

Twenty years later, in 1860, the picture is much more variable. Railways had now become widely developed and were in operation to many, but not all, provincial centres. With rail travel speeds that could be three or four times that of a mail coach, some very marked changes in journey times were now evident. Belfast, Galway, Limerick and Cork could now be reached in under six hours, whilst Mullingar was now little more than two hours from Dublin. Some other places, notably Derry, were connected by a mix of rail and road: the Derry mail reached Castleblayney station by rail in three and a half hours, then made the rest of the journey by road, reaching its destination in eleven hours from Dublin. The Enniskillen mail benefited to a lesser extent, reaching Monaghan by rail in just over five

Table 2. Fastest journey times (in minutes) from Dublin to sixteen places across Ireland, 1840-2024.

	Straight-line distance in km	1840 mail coach	1860 mails by train or coach	1937 rail	1971 rail or bus	2001 rail or bus	2024 rail or bus	2024 car
Dundalk	73	405	157	60	58	55	55	56
Belfast	141	690	320	150	135	116	125	106
Armagh	114	600 (1841)	300*	152	143	160B	115B	89
Derry	196	1080	660	260	265B	255B	250B	186
Enniskillen	143	720	615	209	210B	140B	155B	119
Sligo	178	895	697	255	210	184	191	148
Castlebar	209	1110 (1845)	697	300	218	208	176	164
Galway	187	886	340	220	180	164	138	128
Limerick	176	753	310	195	145	135	119	119
Tralee	295	1225	965 (1850)*	378	240	240	235	188
Cork	220	1155	315	235	170	161	148	152
Waterford	134	720	585	221	135	153	125	102
Wexford	114	720	690	195	154	162R/145B	120B	88
Kilkenny	102	490	375	144	85	102	86	79
Athlone	112	513	200	125	106	90	77	77
Mullingar	75	330	133	76	73	69	73	55
Total distance and total travel time, 16 centres	2469	12292	7359	3175	2527	2379	2188	1754
Ave. Km /hour		12.1	20.2	46.7	58.6	62.3	67.7	84.5
Ave. Miles/hour		7.5	12.6	29.0	36.4	38.7	42.1	52.5

Sources: Post Office annual directory, *1840;* Thom's directory *1860;* The red guide, *January 1937, CIE train and bus timetables 1971; Irish Rail and Bus Éireann timetables, 2000 Irish Rail, Bus Éireann, Translink timetables 2024, also Rome2Rio and checkmybus web-sites accessed, January 2024.*

Notes: (a) B= Bus. (b) Except for 1840 and 1860, where overnight mail journeys were usually faster or as fast, the fastest journey times relate to daytime travel arriving before 10 p.m. In 2024 some overnight journeys were also available and were marginally faster.

Table 3. Travel speeds, kilometres per hour, to sixteen places across Ireland, 1840-2024.

	Straight-line distance in km	1840 mail coach	1860 mails by train or coach	1937 rail	1971 rail or bus	2001 rail or bus	2024 rail or bus	2024 car
Dundalk	73	10.8	27.9	73.2	75.6	79.8	79.8	78.0
Belfast	141	12.2	26.5	56.4	62.6	73.0	67.7	79.8
Armagh	114	11.4	22.8	45.0	47.9	42.8	59.5	75.8
Derry	196	10.9	17.8	45.2	44.2	46.1	47.0	63.2
Enniskillen	143	11.8	14.0	41.0	40.9	61.3	55.4	72.4
Sligo	178	11.9	15.3	41.9	50.9	58.0	55.9	72.8
Castlebar	209	11.3	18.0	41.8	57.5	60.3	71.3	76.4
Galway	187	12.7	33.3	51.0	62.3	68.4	81.3	87.7
Limerick	176	14.1	34.1	54.2	72.8	78.2	88.7	88.7
Tralee	295	14.5	18.4	46.8	73.7	73.7	75.3	94.1
Cork	220	11.4	41.9	56.2	77.6	81.9	89.2	86.8
Waterford	134	11.2	13.7	36.4	59.6	52.6	64.3	78.8
Wexford	114	9.5	9.9	35.1	44.0	47.2	57.5	77.7
Kilkenny	102	12.5	33.6	42.5	72.0	60.0	71.2	77.5
Athlone	112	13.1	33.6	53.8	63.4	74.6	87.3	87.3
Mullingar	75	13.6	20.0	59.2	63.6	65.2	61.6	81.8
Ave. speed to 16 centres, km/hour		12.1	20.2	46.7	58.6	62.3	67.7	84.5

hours before taking a further five hours by road. Only Wexford, which was not reached by rail till 1872, retained a mail coach along the entire route. Dublin to Wexford by mail coach still took eleven and a half hours in 1860.

A new Ireland was thus emerging in these post-famine years, with access from and to Dublin changing in the capacity and frequency of services, and also in the time needed to make a journey to Dublin from other parts of Ireland. The years around 1860 were truly a period of rapid 'time-space convergence' (Janelle, 1969, 1995; sometimes also represented as a much more widely encompassing 'time-space compression', Harvey, 1990; Warf, 2008) when spatial reorganisation developed as new opportunities developed in the relationship between Dublin and the rest of Ireland. It was now possible to travel from Dublin to almost everywhere else in Ireland inside a day; indeed, in many instances it was also possible to make the return journey within a day. Potentially at least, such developments must have had implications for the organisation of economic activity, allowing for new levels of specialisation and for a greater level of centralisation. Hitherto largely independent regional centres such as Cork and Limerick, each with some degree of economic autarky, were now subject to much greater competition from Dublin, and, indeed, from overseas (Cullen, 1972, pp. 142-144). By the 1890s, the capability existed to run a train, the 'limited mail' which also carried passengers, from Cork to Dublin in three hours and fifty minutes, a level of performance that set a standard for most of the next half century.

Connectivity in 1937

1937 is chosen as a year to indicate how Dublin related to the rest of Ireland at a time when, compared to 1860, railway technology was mature, with much stronger and faster engines being widely deployed. It is also representative of a period when the route network was still close to its greatest extent and was a major form of communications across the country. Although a north-south administrative partition was fifteen years old, an integrated cross-border rail system remained in use. At the same time, the year largely precedes the main phase of a growing substitution of trains by buses, and the rise of private car ownership. 1937 is therefore seen here as representative of how Dublin linked to a wider hinterland in the first half of the twentieth century.

Travel speeds were now greatly improved on those possible in 1860. The average speed to the 16 places under review has almost trebled, and for ten of those places journey times, especially those of the early morning mail trains, were under 50% of the time needed in 1860 (Table 3). Even for places already well connected in the earlier year, such as Cork, Limerick and Galway, journey times were usually at least 25% less in 1937. It was by then possible to reach Belfast in two and a half hours, whilst Galway, Cork, Waterford and Derry were accessible in four hours or slightly less. Wexford, eleven and a half hours distant in 1860, was just three-and-a-quarter hours from Dublin in 1937. Mullingar, then on the main lines to both Galway and Sligo, was an hour and a quarter away – not that much different to what it is in the 2020s.

The journey times of 1937 made it possible for some return journeys from Dublin to be completed on the same day: such a possibility existed for travel to Belfast, for example. However, the potential for day return on many routes was relatively restricted on account of the limited frequency of services, and in some instances a return at a realistic hour was virtually impossible, for example only twenty minutes could be spent at Tralee unless a return arrival in Dublin at 3.50 a.m. was acceptable. Rail travel was consequently of rather limited attraction for business. Likewise, considering movement towards the city, the opportunities for commuting to work in Dublin were limited. Of the twenty-six trains that arrived in the city before 9.30 a.m. most of these were on the local lines between Bray and Howth. No train arrived in Dublin before 9.30 that originated more than 50 km from the city centre (Table 4).

Table 4. An indication of commuting intensity – number of passenger trains arriving in central Dublin before 9.30 a.m., 1937-2024.

	1937	1971	2001	2024
Trains originating under 50 km distance	27	20	43	56
Originating 50-99 km	—	2	6	12
Originating over 100 km	—	—	6	17
Total trains arriving before 9.30 a.m.	27	22	55	85

Source: *Timetables for the specified years.*

1971

The period between the 1940s and the early 1970s was marked by significant contraction in the railway system across Ireland. As well as reductions in service frequency, closures were extensive, especially in border areas. Other changes included the closure of two Dublin termini and the dieselisation of traction. Concomitantly, many main roads were improved and private car ownership increased very significantly. The fastest public transport journeys to the cross-border locations of Derry, Armagh and Enniskillen were now by bus. In these instances, journey times changed very little between 1937 and 1971. On most of the remaining main-line rail routes, however, some reductions in journey time were achieved, thereby making day return travel more realistic. Longer-distance commuting possibilities were nonetheless still very restricted. The number of trains arriving in Dublin before 9.30 a.m., i.e. in time for a working day, remained similar to 1937 with only two services (both from Dundalk) originating from a location more than 50km from the city centre.

2001

Across Europe, especially in some of the larger-sized states, the later decades of the 20th century were marked by significant investment in public transport. Selected routes, notably those between a small number of major cities, were the focus for the development of high-speed trains and for some grand-scale infrastructure projects, among them great tunnel projects such as those that bored through the Alps and the Channel Tunnel connecting France and England. The Oresund bridge between Denmark and Sweden was another project in this genre. The collective effect of these developments was to make significant, but spatially-uneven, improvements to connectivity between many of the major city-regions of mainland Europe. A changing, 'shrinking', map of Europe could now be visualised with some attention also being given to the implications for regional development of what the EU (European Union) termed the Trans-European Networks (Spiekermann and Wegener, 1994; Vickerman et al., 1999). Within some individual states, too, an outcome of these decades of significant transport investment was a marked reduction of travel time along some routes as a result of greatly increased journey speeds (Horner, 2000).

As a relatively small island, however, Ireland benefited only indirectly from these developments and public transport investment toward the end of the 20th century remained quite limited and mostly focused on structural issues. On the railways, initiatives included the reorganisation of routes, a programme of track investment, increased service frequencies and the electrification of the main local line in the Dublin area. Other changes involved an (initially rather limited) extension of commuter services, including the introduction of new services from Kildare and Maynooth. At the same time, long-distance bus transport was liberalised and intensified to provide a much-improved inter-urban dimension as a result of the Bus Éireann Expressway service and the initiatives of private operators. The cumulative effect of these developments was to produce a much wider range of opportunities for long-distance travel by public transport. As well as increased frequencies being on offer, some, mostly quite limited, reductions in fastest journey times were also achieved. On some rail routes (for example those to Kilkenny/Waterford and Mullingar), however, capacity constraints linked to single track working and greater frequency still imposed significant limitations on faster journey times.

These changes to the public transport environment are part of the setting for what must be recognised as one of the more striking developments of the later twentieth century, namely the emergence of long-distance commuting as a feature of Irish life. A growing number of long-distance commuters are recorded in the population censuses of the 1980s and 1990s (Horner, 1999b). The expansion of the Dublin commuting field to take in most of the adjacent or nearby counties of Wicklow, Kildare, Meath and Louth is especially noticeable. Although most travelled by car, the expansion of public transport opportunities can also be identified (Horner, 1979, 1988, 1999a, b). As well as a growing number of bus services, the number of trains arriving in the city centre before 9.30 more than doubled between 1971 and 2001. Whereas only two trains, both from Dundalk, had originated more than 50 km from the city in the earlier year, twelve were available in

2001, thereby providing clear opportunities for persons from Arklow, Carlow, Portlaoise, and Mullingar/ Longford to travel daily to Dublin and also potentially allowing early access to those travelling from Belfast, Galway, Cork and Limerick. The core of Dublin continued to be its main built-up area, but, as Wright (1967, esp. ii, pp 99-111) had already recognised, a sizeable 'dispersed city' or 'city-region' was now developing and becoming significant alongside the core area.

2024

During the first quarter of the twenty-first century the trends just identified have intensified further. Developments to the rail system have included the creation of a 4-track line on a short section of the main route approaching Dublin from the south/ south-west, a programme to extend electrification near Dublin, and a limited attempt to create greater connectivity within the city by using a tunnel under the Phoenix Park and by introducing a route from the Docklands office area. Some additional capacity has also been created by divesting the rail system of most of its freight traffic. Commuting services have been greatly expanded, most notably from Portlaoise/ Kildare/ Newbridge but also on other routes (Figure 4). As a result, the number of trains arriving before 9.30 now exceeds 80, almost four times what it was fifty years earlier, whilst the number of trains originating over 50km from the city is now over twenty, with seventeen of them originating over 100km away.

Concomitantly, private and public transport by road has been further incentivised by the building of inter-city motorways. The bus system on many main routes is now organised on a 24/7 basis. Overnight services have found a particular sustainability by routing via Dublin Airport, which increasingly serves as the main international travel hub for almost all parts of Ireland (Horner, 2010). Dublin Airport benefits from its motorway connectivity but so also does Dublin city as both are effectively the main hub in a largely radial motorway system. As the 2024 journey times in Table 2 demonstrate, on many routes the motorways have reinforced the advantage that cars have developed over public transport. The fastest rail speeds match car times only on the routes from Dublin to Dundalk, Athlone, Limerick and Cork. Across the sixteen centres reviewed here, the average journey time from Dublin is 84.5 km/hour by car compared to 67.7 km/ hour by public transport.

Discussion

The progressive increase in travel speed that has occurred over almost two centuries means that, for both public and private transport, journeys are now six to eight times faster than the best that could be achieved during the immediate pre-famine era. A consequence of this far-reaching time-space compression is that, although certain continuities are evident in the radial and distance-decay nature of movement patterns in the urban hinterland (Horner, 1979), Dublin's relationship with the rest of Ireland has

Table 5. A section of the Irish Rail September 2024 timetable giving details of week-day trains from Sligo to Dublin. A regular early morning train from Longford was initiated in 1995. Now four trains from Longford, including two from Sligo, arrive in Dublin before 10 a.m, Compare this situation with 1937 (Figure 3), when the first train from these places arrived at 12.35 p.m. (Source: www.irishrail.ie/getmedia/3099bece-c138-4dc7-9359-69192af86239/07-Dublin-Sligo.pdf).

Station		Sligo -Dublin - Monday - Friday (excluding public holidays) – Valid from 16.09.2024 until further notice									
		Monday to Friday									
MACDIARMADA STATION SLIGO	**Dep**	..	..	05:40	06:40	09:05	11:05	13:05	15:05	17:05	19:05
Collooney	**Dep**	..	..	05:49	06:49	09:14	11:14	13:14	15:14	17:14	19:19
Ballymote	**Dep**	..	..	05:59	06:58	09:23	11:23	13:23	15:23	17:23	19:28
Boyle	**Dep**	..	..	06:14	07:13	09:38	11:38	13:38	15:38	17:38	19:43
Carrick-on-Shannon	**Dep**	..	..	06:25	07:26	09:51	11:51	13:51	15:51	17:51	19:55
Dromod	**Dep**	..	..	06:37	07:39	10:04	12:04	14:04	16:04	18:07	20:07
LONGFORD	**Dep**	05:37	06:14	06:51	07:52	10:17	12:17	14:17	16:17	18:23	20:20
Edgeworthstown	**Dep**	05:49	06:25	07:03	08:04	10:39	12:39	14:39	16:39	18:46	20:31
Mullingar	**Dep**	06:09	06:44	07:23	08:24	10:58	12:58	14:58	16:58	19:08	20:52
Enfield	**Dep**	06:37	07:11	07:52	08:48	11:23	13:22	15:23	17:29	19:41	21:17
Kilcock	**Dep**	06:48	07:20	08:02	08:58	11:33	13:32	15:33	17:39	19:51	21:27
Maynooth	**Dep**	06:56	07:27	08:08	09:05	11:40	13:40	15:42	17:46	19:58	21:34
Leixlip Louisa Bridge	**Dep**	07:03	07:32	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..
Broombridge	**Dep**	07:27	07:55	08:34	09:28	11:59	13:59	16:15	18:07	20:19	21:54
Drumcondra	**Dep**	07:32	08:01	08:41	09:34	12:04	14:04	16:21	18:12	20:26	22:00
DUBLIN CONNOLLY	**Arr**	07:38	08:06	08:48	09:43	12:09	14:09	16:28	18:18	20:32	22:07

changed and intensified radically. The many more opportunities for interaction include the possibility of relatively easy day return travel across most of Ireland, including the possibility of commuting to the city from a now very extensive hinterland.

Exactly how the changing influence of Dublin has been expressed and has affected other parts of Ireland deserves much further investigation. However, particular attention may be drawn to two developments of the last few decades. Firstly, Dublin Airport (27.8 million passengers in 2022) has consolidated and expanded its dominance as a hub that far overshadows any potential rivals such as Cork (2.2 million in 2022) or even the two Belfast airports (4.8 million at Belfast International and 1.6 million at Belfast George Best) (Horner, 1991, 2010). Secondly, the growth of long-distance commuting, already very clear on a range of innovative maps derived from the 2002 census (Walsh, 2007, pp. 265-284), has been outstanding.

The 2022 census of population was taken at a time when recovery from the 2020-21 pandemic was still in progress and when commuting volumes remained depressed below 2019 levels. Nonetheless, 'Profile 7' of the census report, reviewing employment, occupations and commuting, offers a very wide-ranging perspective on the travel modes and time involved in commuting. A special analysis of sample data was made to show the electoral divisions across Ireland in which the workforce of Dublin city and county were usually resident. From this data, a map can be made to show the intensity of commuting to Dublin from localities across the Republic of Ireland (Figure 5). Inevitably the greatest concentrations of commuters are in the vicinity of Dublin but it is also very evident how, perhaps particularly in relation to places near motorways and along rail routes, Dublin reaches out across a very extensive hinterland. Moreover, except for a very small number of areas, mostly in north Longford and south Kilkenny, some level of commuting can be linked to almost every electoral division in Leinster, as well as to cities and some areas beyond (notably County Monaghan).

The analysis offered in the present article focuses mainly on a long-term perspective related to public transport, a means of travel that is much subordinate to the car, the commuting method of around three-fifths of the population in recent decades. But it is also possible to identify more general issues that lie outside the immediate scope of the census and which deserve further exploration. One such may be the extent and location of the regional differences that may have emerged as connectivity with Dublin has expanded and intensified. In Table 5 and in Figure 3, the speed data of Table 3 are expressed as the extent to which, in each year, the speeds to a particular town deviate from the average for the sixteen towns under review. As might be anticipated, the degree of deviation is quite limited in the era of the mail coach, 1840, and also in the motorway era of 2024 when cars can travel to many parts of Ireland at near uniform speed. Only a slow mail coach journey to Wexford and a slow car drive to Derry represent greater levels of deviation. However, contrasts are greater for public transport, and it may be possible to argue that some unevenness is evident, with travel speeds to parts of the south-east (where rail travel to both Waterford and more especially Wexford is disadvantaged by following rather indirect routes) and to the north-west (Sligo, Enniskillen, and most consistently Derry,

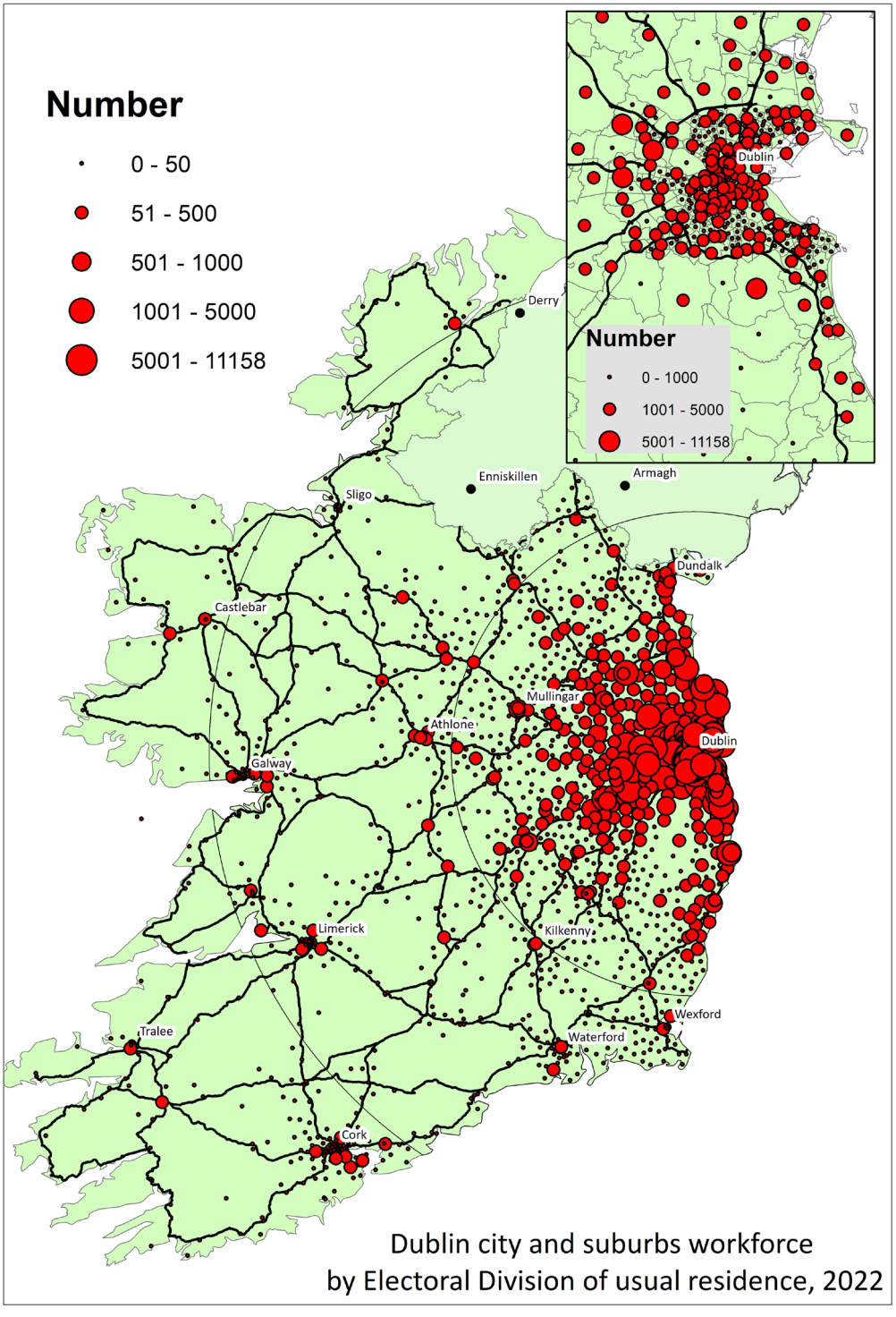


Figure 4. A 2022 indication of the extent of the commuting field of Dublin. Derived from Profile 7 of the 2022 census showing 'Dublin city and suburbs workforce by electoral division of usual residence'. (Source: https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cpp7/census2022profile7-employmentoccupationsandcommuting/commutingtowork/. Accessed 20.1.2024)

all locations that still benefit to only limited extent from new motorways) usually being markedly below the average for the years reviewed. Conversely, public transport travel speeds to Dundalk, Galway, Limerick, Tralee and Cork are consistently above average.

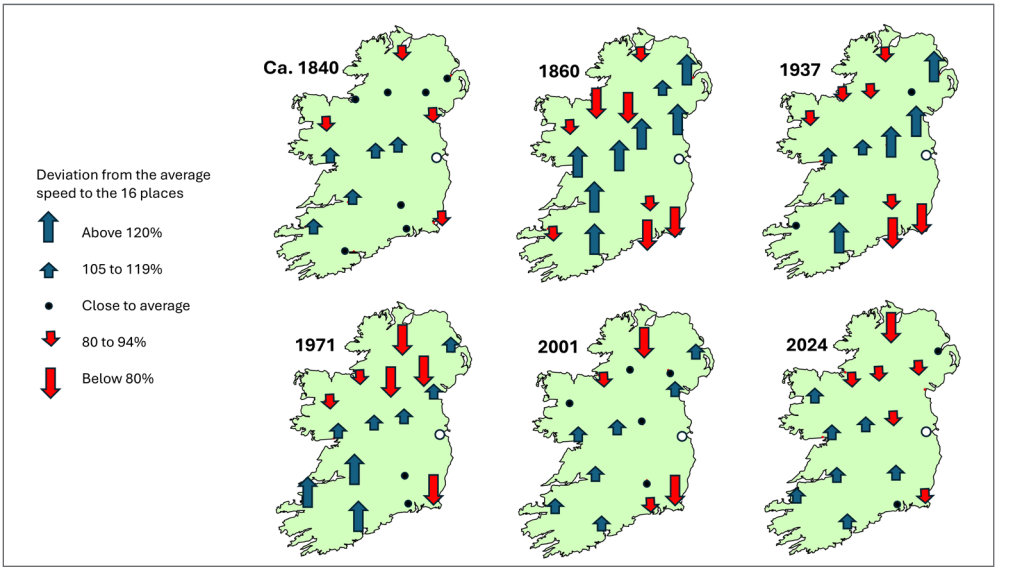


Figure 5. Extent of deviation of public transport speeds to 16 places relative to the average speed to those places, ca. 1840 to 2024.

Notwithstanding the relatively low significance of public transport in the Ireland of recent decades (1970s – date), the discussion presented here may allow some exploration of the contention that, at least to some limited degree, some parts of the country are better connected to Dublin than others. Arguably too, Dublin has followed the time-space convergence model that suggests that convergence is greatest in relation to other large centres (Janelle, 1995). That Derry and to some extent Belfast underperform in this scenario may perhaps be related to frictions arising from being in a separate administrative jurisdiction – frictions that have curtailed the development of major road development, notably the A5 (the 'western transport corridor', Aughnacloy to Derry/ Londonderry,) in Northern Ireland, and which have also frustrated the long-foreshadowed implementation of higher speeds on the rail route from Dublin to Belfast. That said, perhaps an equally striking feature of the data presented here is the generally limited nature of the contrasts. Particularly in the motorway era, relatively consistent levels of connectivity are available along most main routes linking Dublin and most parts of Ireland.

Ultimately, it is perhaps because Dublin is a principal focal point to a communications system across an island where major physical barriers are quite limited that the range of connectivity contrasts remains quite muted. As an island, the land-based transport network of Ireland is independent of the wider European transport system. The scale and operation of long-distance internal transport is therefore curtailed primarily by the

small size of the island. Particularly in the present era, the potential for strikingly uneven patterns of regional development is therefore also quite limited. In relation to land-based public transport, investment is thus driven mainly by considerations internal to Ireland, and, in this instance, size matters.

Table 5. Travel speeds to each place in specified years as a percentage of the average travel speed to the 16 places under review.

	Straight-line distance in km	1840 mail coach	1860 mails by train or coach	1937 rail	1971 rail or bus	2001 rail or bus	2024 rail or bus	2024 car
Dundalk	73	89.6	138.4	156.8	124.0	128.1	117.9	92.3
Belfast	141	101.5	131.3	120.8	106.9	117.1	100.0	94.5
Armagh	114	94.5	113.1	96.5	73.0	68.7	87.6	96.4
Derry	196	90.0	88.4	97.0	78.7	74.1	69.5	74.9
Enniskillen	143	98.0	69.3	87.9	69.7	98.4	81.8	85.4
Sligo	178	98.5	75.9	89.7	86.8	93.2	82.6	85.4
Castlebar	209	93.5	89.3	89.6	93.2	96.8	105.3	90.5
Galway	187	105.0	163.7	109.3	106.3	109.8	120.1	103.4
Limerick	176	116.4	169.0	116.1	124.3	125.6	131.1	105.0
Tralee	295	119.9	91.1	100.3	125.8	118.4	111.3	111.4
Cork	220	94.5	207.7	120.6	132.4	131.6	131.7	102.8
Waterford	134	92.5	68.2	77.9	101.6	84.6	95.0	93.3
Wexford	114	78.6	49.1	75.2	75.7	75.7	84.7	92.0
Kilkenny	102	103.5	81.0	91.0	104.4	96.3	105.1	91.7
Athlone	112	108.5	166.7	115.2	108.2	119.8	129.0	103.3
Mullingar	75	112.0	167.9	126.9	105.1	104.7	91.4	96.8

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