

The Significance of the Villages and Small Towns in Rural Ireland during the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries

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AS A PREDOMINANTLY RURAL COUNTRY, dependent on an agrarian-based economy, Ireland's history has until recently been viewed as a series of rural events, in which the urban dimension has been neglected. Although eighteenth- and nineteenth-century contemporaries were well aware of the importance and distinctiveness of the urban centres in which they lived, providing as they did foci for local society and economy, a widespread perception has more recently evolved that the smallest towns and villages were relatively unimportant entities in the Irish landscape. In the 1930s, John Betjeman lamented in his poem dedicated to them that 'the small towns of Ireland by bards are neglected, they stand there all lonesome on hill top and plain'.¹ During the 1960s, a publication aimed at encouraging town planning in Ireland carried the uninspiring image of a rural landscape on the front cover that was completely devoid of any urban settlement (see Figure 11.1).² This image belies the integral role played by planned towns and villages in the development of modern Irish life.³

In spite of the considerable progress made by Irish historical geography since the 1970s, relatively little attention has been given to the smallest settlements, which we define here as those inhabited by no more than 1,500 people during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Whilst we know a great deal about the largest centres of population—Dublin, Belfast, Cork, Waterford, Kilkenny and Limerick—comparatively little is known about the multitude of smaller settlements: the villages and small towns, which form the bulk of the present Irish urban network. Such settlements represent one

¹ J. Betjeman, 'The small towns of Ireland', in Earl of Birkenhead, ed., *The Collected Poems of John Betjeman* (London, 1970), pp. 68–73.

² D. Cronin, *Town Planning in Ireland* (Dublin, 1965).

³ L.M. Cullen, *Irish Towns and Villages* (Dublin, 1979); L.M. Cullen, *The Emergence of Modern Ireland, 1600–1900* (Dublin, 1981), pp. 61–82; B.J. Graham and L.J. Proudfoot, *Urban Improvement in Provincial Ireland* (Athlone, 1994).

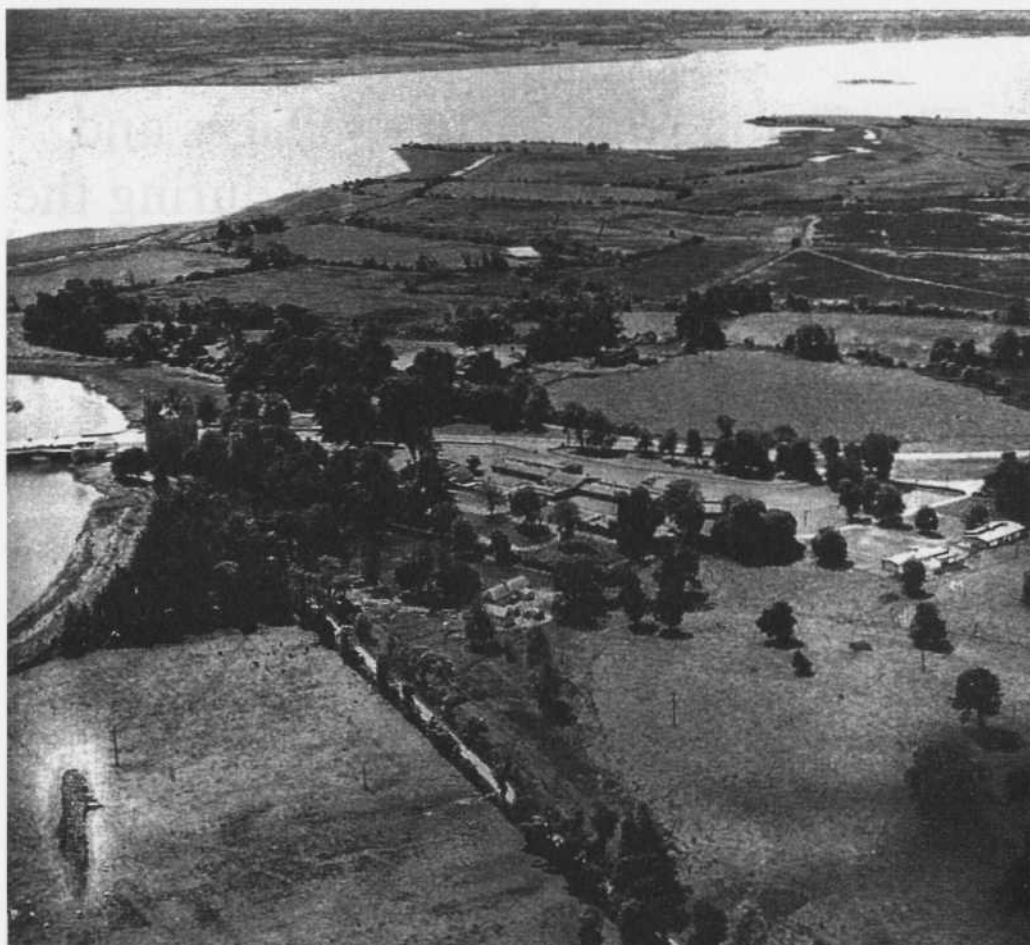


Figure 11.1. A contradictory image: the Irish town (cover illustration from D. Cronin, *Town Planning in Ireland*, Scepter Press, Dublin, 1965).

of the many 'hidden Irelands' that have as yet to be fully recovered.⁴ This chapter will argue that these centres—many of them consisting of no more than a main street, with a few minor side streets and lanes, and punctuated perhaps by just one or two public buildings such as church, market hall, court house or school—played a crucial role in the economic, social and political structure of the Irish countryside during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Although small, the average settlement possessing

⁴ T.C. Barnard, 'Historiographical review: farewell to old Ireland', in *The Historical Journal*, 36 (1993), 909–28; Graham and Proudfoot, *Urban Improvement*, p. 59.

between 150 and 400 households, they formed the arenas where increasing urbanisation and changes in rural life came together, to be clearly seen.⁵

This chapter will examine the village and small-town building that occurred in Ireland during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the period when most centres were extensively remodelled and others created, and explore their role in Irish life. In this regard, it will argue that the direct involvement of Irish landowners in the process of urban development was often more significant than that of their English counterparts, a factor indicated by the complex leasing arrangements contracted between landlords and urban tenants in Ireland. It will argue that whilst the villages and small towns of Ireland formed an integral part of the Irish landscape, and served the agricultural economy as both marketing and service centres for the wider rural community, they were also distinct entities in the Irish landscape. Their distinctive appearance was characterised not only by their building structures, their variety of architectural styles and nucleated form, but also in the mindset of the people who lived in them—the small-town and village tenants. Against a background of agricultural depression, rising prices, falling incomes and social hardship during the 1870s and 1880s, the distinctly urban identity of this social group began to manifest itself in a vocal campaign, orchestrated in the form of local House Leagues. The specific grievances of this social group will demonstrate that, whilst by the end of the nineteenth century many of the places that they represented had, as the poet says, become rather ‘lonesome and bare’, they nevertheless possessed distinctive characteristics, which their inhabitants were determined to preserve.

Context and perceptions

Recent academic scholarship has revisited the small towns of Ireland, providing a contextual framework for exploring their role during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Using the six-inch First Edition Ordnance Survey maps of c.1840, together with evidence from hundreds of collections of estate papers, the research of Proudfoot and Graham has identified over 750 towns and villages which displayed evidence of formal planning intent, and/or ‘infrastructural modernisation’ between 1700 and c.1850. They define ‘formal planning as the creation of regularly structured space in accordance with some preconceived ideal’, while ‘infrastructural modernisation’ refers to recent provision of marketing, industrial or social facilities.⁶ Other more recent studies have continued to redress the neglect of small-town development. The Irish Historic Towns Atlas published by the Royal Irish Academy since 1981 has produced nine fascicles to date, six

⁵ L.M. Cullen, ‘Economic development, 1691–1750’, in T.W. Moody and W.E. Vaughan, eds, *A New History of Ireland, IV: Eighteenth-Century Ireland* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 123–58.

⁶ L.J. Proudfoot and B. Graham, ‘The nature and extent of urban and village foundation and improvement in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Ireland’, *Planning Perspectives*, 8 (1993), 259–81.

of which relate to relatively small centres of population, including Carrickfergus, County Antrim, Bandon, County Cork, Kells, County Meath, Maynooth, County Kildare, Downpatrick, County Down and Bray, County Wicklow.⁷ Each contains a wide range of cartographic and other visual sources which help to reconstruct the detailed morphological development of each place, and demonstrate the complex layers of influences at work in their organic growth during successive generations. The progress of studies of provincial urban history may further be measured by the treatment of urban themes in the collaborative county history series, produced under the general editorship of William Nolan. In contrast to the first publication in the series on County Tipperary, which contained only one urban-related essay (Bradley's study of the medieval towns of the county),⁸ the most recent history of Derry and Londonderry carries no less than nine essays on urban themes, although each of these focuses on the city of Derry, rather than smaller centres throughout the county of Londonderry.⁹ Further micro-study of specific places using documentary evidence is needed, to establish the particular diversities and regional distinctions that existed with the world of the small town and village, rather than purely morphogenetically-based accounts.¹⁰

The recent *Guide to Sources* for Irish towns,¹¹ is the first archivally-based guide to examine the sources available in local custody and national repositories for exploring urban history, and devotes some attention to the smallest centres such as New Birmingham, County Tipperary. The diaries and personal correspondence of Vere Hunt, its landlord, reveal the grandiose scale of his plans to transform this modest settlement into a major industrial centre, based on coal mining. Whilst it never realised the size or scale of its English counterpart, the documentary evidence reveals, nevertheless, that it had been carefully planned.¹² Barnard's pioneering article has recently uncovered one hitherto 'hidden' aspect of small-town development, the social and economic life of two ordinary town dwellers, Messrs Egan and Evers, merchants respectively in the midland towns of Birr and Edenderry. Using the inventories of their effects, together with other business records, Barnard reconstructs their business lives, and shows the extent of their influence in the localities in which they operated. He argues that whilst the landlord families associated with each place are remembered, it was merchants such as Egan and Evers who had the most direct impact on the daily lives of local people, in terms of goods supplied and

⁷ The larger centres covered are Kildare town, Athlone and Mullingar, County Westmeath. All are published by the Royal Irish Academy, Dublin.

⁸ J. Bradley, 'The medieval towns of Tipperary', in W. Nolan, ed., *Tipperary: History and Society* (Dublin, 1985), pp. 34–59.

⁹ G. O'Brien, ed., *Derry and Londonderry: History and Society* (Dublin, 1999).

¹⁰ S. Hood, 'The landlord influence in the development of an Irish estate town: Strokestown, County Roscommon', *Irish Geography*, 28/2 (1995), 118–30.

¹¹ W. Nolan and A. Simms, eds, *Irish Towns: A Guide to Sources* (Dublin, 1998).

¹² J. Prunty, 'A planned village: New Birmingham, County Tipperary', in *ibid.*, p. 164.

services rendered.¹³ In architectural and morphological terms too, such tenants contributed to the development of the urban fabric and structure.

Origins and functions

The small towns and villages that survive in the Irish landscape are representative of the process of urban planning and development that transformed the countryside during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This process was closely linked to the wider economic, social and political changes occurring in Irish society during this period, in contrast to the relatively unstable conditions of the seventeenth century, during the civil war of 1641 and subsequent Cromwellian and Williamite settlements, when widespread destruction of the then existing urban network took place. The then-existing urban network of walled towns, enclosed settlements and other fortified focal points had been created by a succession of Viking, monastic, settler and Plantation influences from the Middle Ages onwards.¹⁴ By the early eighteenth century, more favourable conditions prevailed, permitting urban development to take place uninterrupted over a longer period. As one eighteenth-century commentator succinctly observed: 'buildings are now being raised for their beauty as well as their use!'¹⁵

A concurrent theme in the development of these centres was association with a particular landowner. Indeed, the influence of the 5,000 or so members of the landowning élite who owned estates in eighteenth-century Ireland was often crucial in determining the success or failure of urban development on their estates.¹⁶ The period when the majority of villages and small towns were created or extensively remodelled (between the 1740s and the 1790s) coincided with unprecedented economic growth. There was a sustained prosperity during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the twin supports of this economic rise being the cattle trade and linen industry, both of which developed rapidly in response to foreign demand for Irish exports, particularly from Britain. Landlord incomes from rents doubled and even trebled between the 1740s and 1770s. The poorer classes shared in the boom too—smallholders who engaged in weaving or spinning were an example of a cottage industry that supplemented their usual agrarian income. The explosive growth of the Irish population—from just over two and a half million in 1750, to over eight million by the 1840s—was indicative of the prosperity of the lower classes in every region. Local trade increased, and local demand

¹³ T. Barnard, 'The world of goods and county Offaly in the early eighteenth century', in W. Nolan and T.P. O'Neill, eds, *Offaly History and Society* (Dublin, 1998), pp. 471–92.

¹⁴ For useful summaries of the succession of urban building in Ireland, see R. Butlin, ed., *The Development of the Irish Town* (London and New Jersey, 1977); D. Harkness and M. O'Dowd, eds, *The Town in Ireland: Historical Studies XIII* (Belfast, 1979).

¹⁵ W.R. Cheetwood, *A Tour in Ireland*, 1 (Dublin, 1746), p. 98.

¹⁶ Proudfoot and Graham, 'Nature and extent'.

for foodstuffs and other goods helped to consolidate the Irish marketing network, centred on the small towns and villages.¹⁷

Considerable evidence exists in rentals, leases and estate accounts to show that the rent profits of this small landowning élite were translated into local development and improvement during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This development gave rise to what Cullen has termed an 'environmental revolution', which included agricultural innovation, promotion of the linen industry, navigation and road-building projects, as well as urban development.¹⁸ Practical guidance for landowners prepared to undertake such developments was provided by the Dublin Society, founded in 1731 to promote and improve husbandry, manufacture and other useful arts.¹⁹ As early as 1736 one leading exponent of that society advised in a publication widely circulated amongst the landowning group: 'if gentlemen could once be persuaded to build little towns on their lands, they would, in the best manner possible, improve the circumstances of their fortunes'.²⁰

In the 750 or so examples identified by Graham and Proudfoot, landowners in Ireland appear, in some degree, to have heeded such advice. Thus in 1831, the landlord John D'Arcy explained his reasons for founding the village of Clifden, County Galway, which he had planned and laid out over a period of fifteen years, on his remote estate in the wilds of Connemara. 'In the middle of mountainous and wild country inhabited by wild people whose principal occupation was smuggling,' he wrote, 'I undertook the difficult task of improving the lands and civilising the people, for which purpose I commenced building the town of Clifden'. By the 1840s, Clifden had become an important Atlantic seaport, serviced by churches, schools, several shops and commercial outlets, a hotel, a customs depot and police barracks, giving its landlord the satisfaction that he had contributed to the 'national object' of improving the west of Ireland. Indeed he assured officials in Dublin Castle, whom he petitioned for assistance in erecting a market house, building quays and sponsoring trade, that 'the establishing of a trading town in this wild district must necessitate towards improvement'.²¹ Similarly at Clones, County Monaghan, the agent on the Barrett-Lennard estate ensured the enduring protection of his landlord's interests by charging low rents to the estate's urban tenants. He explained: 'I let [the properties] at what I think the tenant can pay without oppression . . . the landlord receives a fair honest rent, the tenant is content . . . and an appearance of English comfort runs through the estates'.²²

¹⁷ L.M. Cullen, *An Economic History of Ireland Since 1660* (London, 1987), pp. 61–77.

¹⁸ Cullen, 'Economic development', pp. 125–30.

¹⁹ J. Meenan and D. Clarke, *The Royal Dublin Society, 1731–1981* (Dublin, 1981).

²⁰ S. Madden, *Reflections and Resolutions Proper for the Gentlemen of Ireland* (Dublin, 1738), p. 43.

²¹ NA, Chief Secretary's Office Registered Papers, CSORP 1831/126, 18 Jan 1831.

²² PRONI, Barrett-Lennard papers, D1232/1/219, letter of William Mayne, agent, 1815, quoted in Graham and Proudfoot, *Urban Improvement*, p. 48.

The origins of the 750-plus urban products of Ireland's 'environmental revolution' may be divided into two broad types. The first were those extensively remodelled and refurbished on the site of an existing, or decayed, settlement (medieval, Tudor or Plantation) under the influence of a landowner, in conjunction with urban tenants. The second type were those laid out as new foundations, again under landlord influence, and again with a varying degree of input from town and village dwellers, merchants, retailers and other occupants. The major finding of Graham and Proudfoot's Leverhulme-sponsored project was that, in both types of settlement, landlords and urban tenants co-operated in the overall building project of individual places.²³

An example of the extensive remodelling of an existing settlement is provided by Birr, King's County (now Offaly), which was redeveloped from the late seventeenth century by members of the Parsons family, later earls of Rosse. Lawrence Parsons, who held joint office with his brother Sir William Parsons in the Surveyor General's Office, had been granted Birr and several other lands under the terms of the plantation of Ely O'Carroll in 1620. Contemporary documents inform us that the site had been an established landmark and military stronghold from medieval times, known as 'the black castle, fort village and land of Birr, formerly held by Teigh McCallach O'Carroll'. The Parsons family consolidated the existing strategic settlement into a town in the manor of Parsonstown (the name later given to Birr itself), rebuilt the castle and gained a royal patent to hold a weekly market and two annual fairs in the town. In conjunction with the presence of this landowning family, the town began to evolve, its principal elements (a corn mill, triangular green, market area and church) being clustered near the castle, for defensive purposes.²⁴ Protection and defence were important to landlord and urban tenants alike during the seventeenth century, as the town and castle were besieged several times, most notably during the 1640s and during the late 1680s.²⁵ Thus, the Parsons family aimed to provide a secure nucleus at the core of its landed estate. This defensive priority is revealed in the contemporary military map (reproduced in Figure 11.2), which shows the concentration of the essential urban structures close to the protection of the castle.

In somewhat dramatic contrast, the estate map of Birr drawn some 130 years later (reproduced here as Figure 11.3) shows that the defensive priorities so important for consolidating the landlord presence at Birr and protecting its citizens during the seventeenth century had given way to aesthetic interests by the 1820s. In the intervening period since 1690, the town had expanded considerably, being laid out with streets, squares and open spaces. The spaciousness of Cumberland Square, laid out from the 1740s—hence the monument to the Duke of Cumberland (victor at Culloden) that stood there surrounded by water—captures the small-scale and restrained, yet elegant,

²³ Graham and Proudfoot, *Urban Improvement*, pp. 16–17.

²⁴ S. Hood, 'Documentary evidence for the Irish planned town: a case study of Birr', in J. Fenlon, ed., *The Town: Conservation in the Urban Area. Irish Georgian Society Conference Proceedings* (Dublin, 1995), pp. 78–87.

²⁵ Barnard, 'World of goods', p. 373.

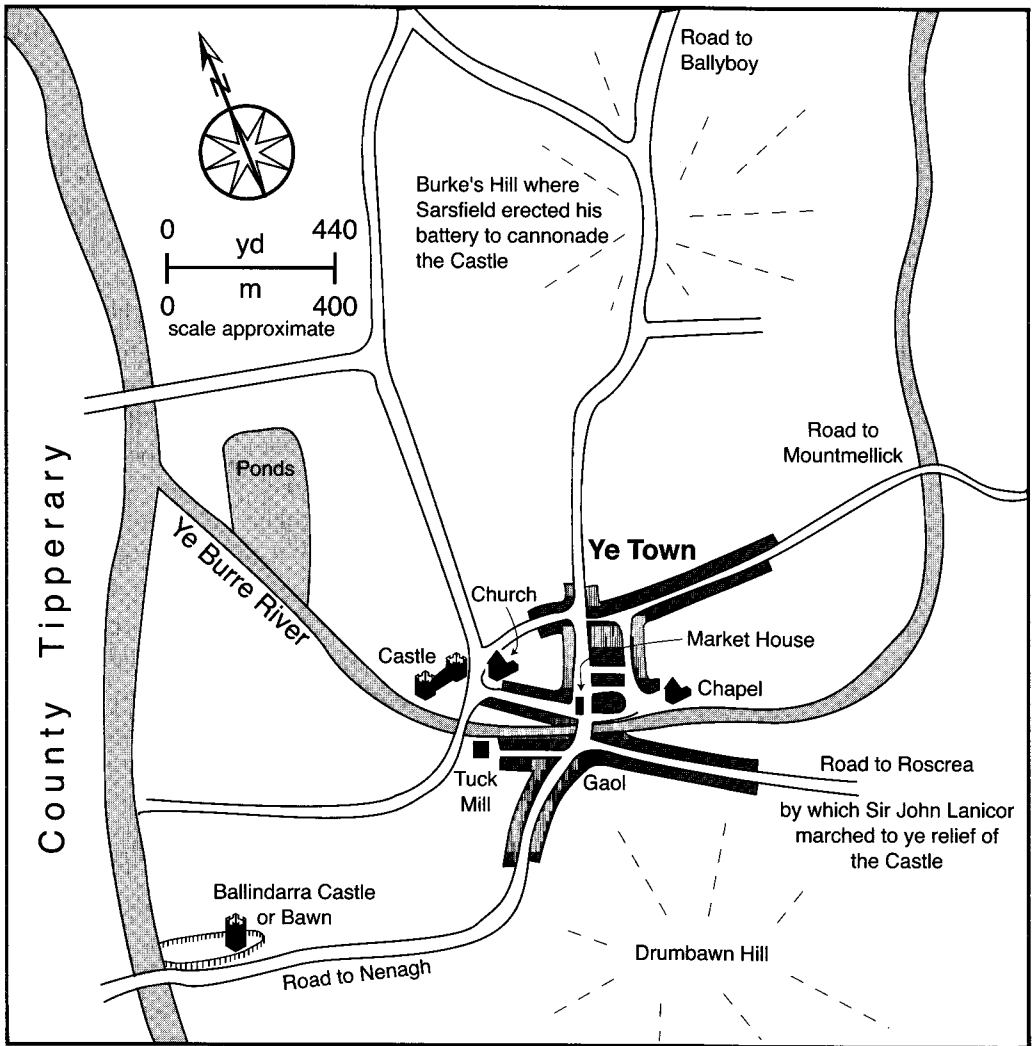


Figure 11.2. Birr, King's County, in 1691 (© Birr Scientific and Heritage Foundation, courtesy of the Earl of Rosse).

display of Enlightenment style. This style was in general characterised by regularly-planned open spaces, uniform frontages, straight axes and vistas framed with public buildings. The square came to be surrounded by fine three-storey stone houses: uniform and spacious, it provided a nucleus for the evolving town. Beyond it urban expansion continued in a northerly direction, where there is evidence of a grid pattern, consisting of three principal blocks alongside Mellisop Lane. In the space between the northern

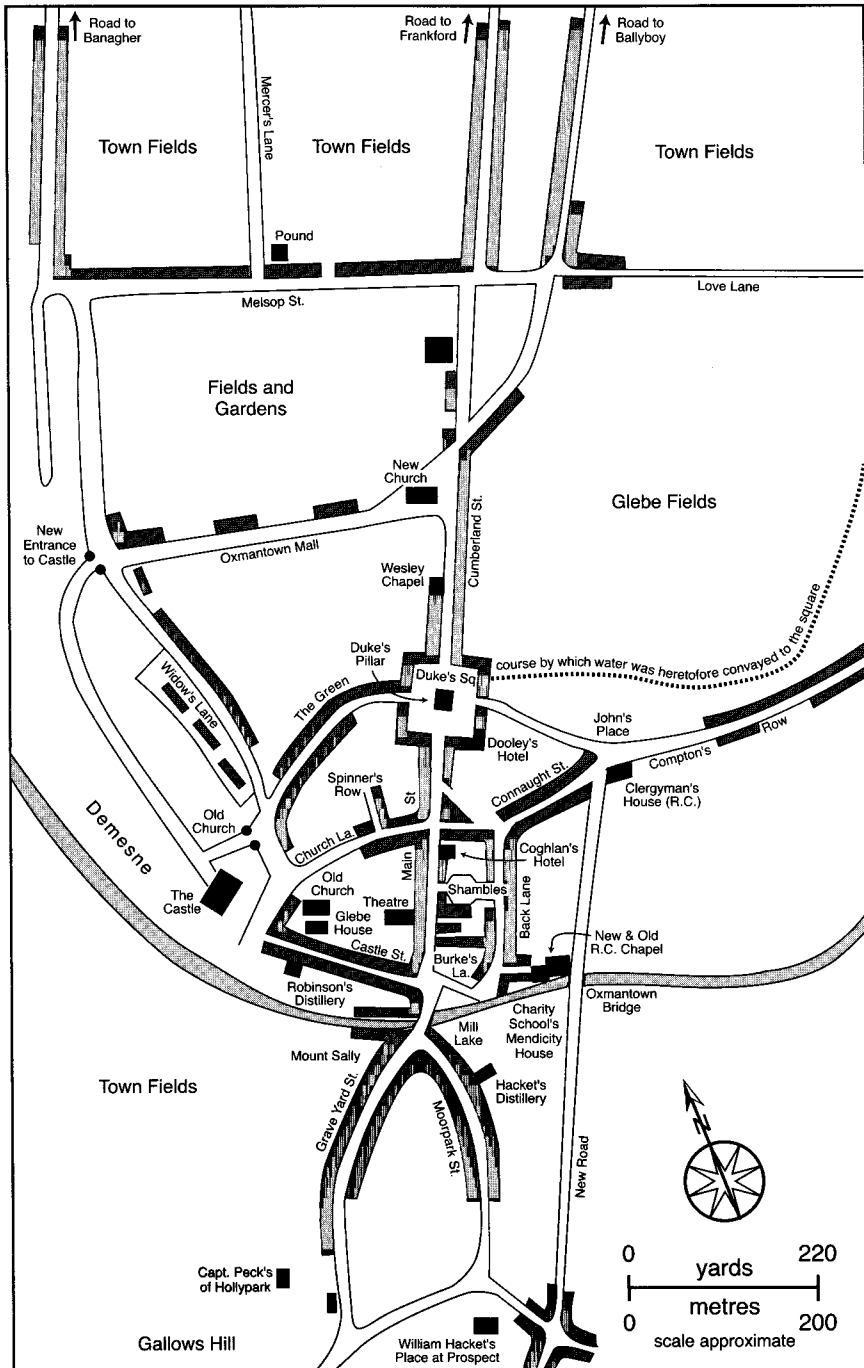


Figure 11.3. Birr, King's County, in 1822 (© Birr Scientific and Heritage Foundation, courtesy of the Earl of Rosse).

periphery and the square, the re-location of the parish church in 1811 from its original site adjacent to the castle walls provided the town with another focal point. Coinciding with the church re-building, new entrance gates to the castle grounds were constructed and a new street laid out, connecting the gates to the church. Known as Oxmantown Place or Mall, to this day the street confirms the Enlightenment ideals of polite Irish provincial society. In the decade after the 1822 map was drawn the mall gradually filled up with large, solid houses along the north side, while a tree-lined mall graced the south side, providing spacious cover for evening promenading. The church and the entrance gates to the castle closed either end of the mall, creating an impressive vista in both directions.²⁶ Again, the choice of the ‘castellated’ gothic style for both features conformed to contemporary fashions. Significantly, Birr has been designated Ireland’s Georgian Heritage town under Bord Fáilte—the Irish Tourist Board—and its Heritage Town Initiative.²⁷

Another town that developed on an existing site was Newtownards, County Down. Originally a plantation settlement, featuring a diamond, it was virtually rebuilt from the 1770s and equipped with a new orthogonal street plan, in which a large open market square and adjoining market house were the central features. Later, the core of the town shifted again with the coming of the railways in the 1840s, to the area around the new Northern Railway station. New markets followed and adjacent streets were widened to accommodate the movement of traffic to and from trains. In spite of the shift of emphasis, townspeople were encouraged by the second marquess of Londonderry to ‘strain every nerve’ to beautify the neo-classical market house, which formed the core of the eighteenth-century development. To this day, the building—with its archways, porticos and pedimented front—remains the centrepiece of the town’s classical architecture.²⁸

Unlike Birr and Newtownards, which developed on existing sites, the midland village of Strokestown, County Roscommon, provides an example of a new settlement. Planned and laid out in association with the development of Strokestown House, a Palladian-style mansion built in the 1740s, the village became the heart of the Mahon (later Pakenham Mahon) estate. It is a fine example of a planned estate centre, exhibiting many morphological features that indicate the presence and influence of a land-owning family in its creation and development over a long period. Strokestown forms an integral element in a planned ensemble of juxtaposed landscape features. Its widened linear main street, measuring no less than 147 feet (44.5 m) across, was deliberately planned to terminate in grand neo-gothic entrance gates to the landlord demesne, beyond which a graceful avenue leads directly to the front door of Strokestown House. At the other end of the village, the main street proceeds uphill towards the highest

²⁶ A.P.W. Malcomson, ‘A variety of perspectives on Lawrence Parsons, second earl of Rosse’, in W. Nolan and T.P. O’Neill, eds, *Offaly History and Society* (Dublin, 1998), pp. 439–83.

²⁷ M. Hogan and J. Shortt, *Birr: Heritage Town* (Birr, 1993).

²⁸ Quoted in B.J. Graham and L.J. Proudfoot, ‘Landlords, planning and urban growth in eighteenth- and early-nineteenth century Ireland’ in *Journal of Urban History*, 18 (1992), 308–29.

ground in the urban settlement, where the octagonal gothic church completes the principal axis. Other infrastructural features indicative of conscious planning include regular building plots along the main thoroughfares, formally aligned streets and public buildings, including two banks in Church Street, situated between the former market house and fair green, once the centrepiece of the town's commerce (see Figure 11.4).²⁹ During the eighteenth century, the widened street (which lease evidence makes clear was in place by the 1760s)³⁰ provided a suitable arena for the village market, with ample space for the movement of cattle and other livestock, as well as traders' stalls and standings on market days and monthly fairs.³¹

Characteristics

Whatever their origins, newly developed or improved towns and villages throughout the island were characterised by a small range of architectural features and street or plan layouts. Influenced by Dutch and French landscaping ideas, the improvement of small towns and villages, like that of the cities, echoed the theatrical style of the polite and genteel landscapes of Georgian England. Here, in a process which accelerated through the eighteenth century, townscape acquired a more ordered, integrated and therefore urban appearance. As Borsay observes, these changes reflected the stress placed by classical architecture on uniformity, spaciousness and order.³² The mindset of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment sought to preserve the world from what it saw as barbarity and ignorance, civilising society through the elegant medium of polite culture. Thus in Ireland, baroque planning ideas—characteristic of the great seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European cities—were replicated in the extreme formalism of many of the smallest towns and villages. The local model for such influences was the spectacular growth of Dublin after 1750s, organised around wide streets and urban squares.³³ Such features were carried into provincial Ireland, where they were articulated in even the smallest villages with a characteristically modest, but nonetheless planned, uniformity. Both the European and local Dublin models explain why so many of the smallest urban centres have similar characteristics.³⁴

²⁹ Hood, 'Landlord influence', 120–1.

³⁰ S. Hood, 'Through the gates: power and profit in an Irish estate town', in F. Eliassen and G.A. Erslund, eds, *Power, Profit and Urban Land: Landownership in medieval and early modern northern European towns* (Aldershot, 1996), pp. 245–69.

³¹ I. Weld, *Statistical Survey of the County Roscommon* (Dublin, 1932), pp. 312–14.

³² P. Borsay, *The English Urban Renaissance: Culture and society in the provincial towns, 1660–1770* (Oxford, 1989).

³³ L.M. Cullen, 'The growth of Dublin, 1600–1900: character and heritage', in F.H.A. Aalen and K. Whelan, eds, *Dublin, City and County: from prehistory to present* (Dublin, 1992), pp. 251–78.

³⁴ B. Graham, 'The processes of urban improvement in provincial Ireland', in Eliassen and Erslund, *Power, Profit and Urban Land*, p. 219.

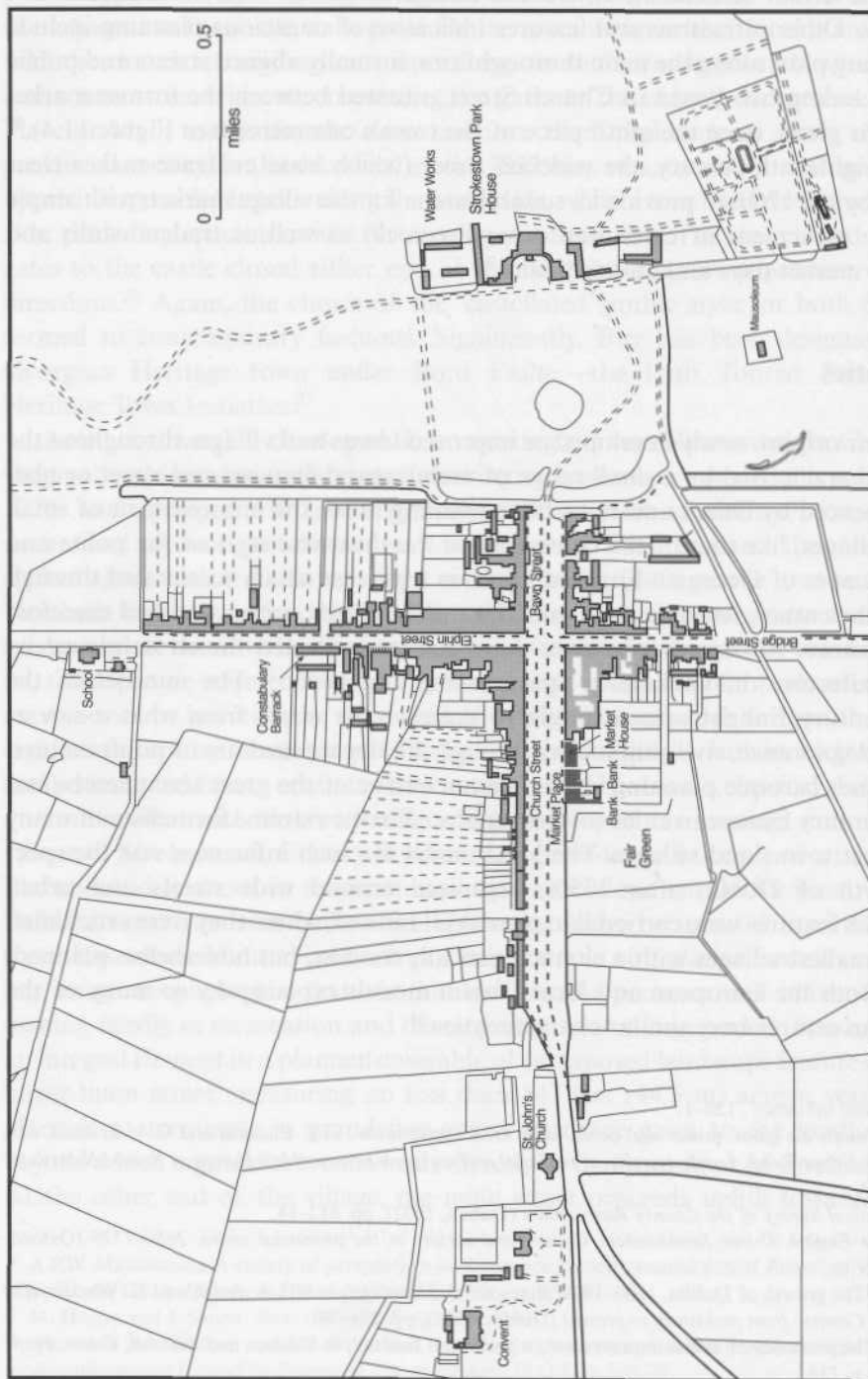


Figure 11.4. Strokestown, Co. Roscommon, in the early nineteenth century (based on 25" to the mile OS map, with acknowledgements to OSI).

Features such as widened linear streets, straight axes and vistas geometrically framed with public buildings (court houses, market houses, churches, the entrance gates to the landlord demesne), with regularly-planned open spaces and uniform frontages, created a remarkable sense of spatial conformity repeated from one place to the next. In most cases, members of the landlord élite were the initial conveyers of these styles and features. As Foster has commented: ‘the Ascendancy desire to build and to plan deserves some attention: it may indicate a landscape only recently won and insecurely held.’³⁵ Thus, the local landscape was used to reinforce social standing and class identity, whereby the perceived higher position of the landed élite was grounded in its creation of places of spaciousness, imprinted with grand and often ostentatious features. As we have seen, landlords had their own set of priorities when moulding the local landscape. The initial defensive priorities began to give way to spacious planning in the latest architectural styles. They also celebrated the economic prosperity of the time by building market halls, typically finely-proportioned, cut-stone buildings with arches and pedimented fronts. These not only guaranteed them a stake in commercial life, but also allowed them to send a powerful message about their perceived status as leaders of local society.

Graphic evidence of how planning styles from abroad were diffused and carried by members of the landed élite into provincial Ireland, is provided by the late eighteenth-century ‘logbook of my travels’ compiled by Lawrence Parsons of Birr. Following his creation as the second earl of Rosse in 1807, he oversaw many of the improvements and developments in Birr during the nineteenth century. As a younger man, the earl had travelled in England and Wales during the 1790s, and in this notebook of observations logged the aspects of English urban planning that impressed him. Of Northampton he wrote: ‘situated on an eminence, gently sloping to the river, streets straight and handsome built, the market place fine and spacious’, while at Wells he found ‘the houses well built, streets clean, adequately wide, and neatly laid’.³⁶ The second earl was apparently interested principally in church architecture, and the book includes numerous sketches of churches. Significantly, when he later inherited the Birr estate and had the opportunity to stamp his own improvements on its urban infrastructure, he became personally involved in the construction of both the Church of Ireland on Oxmantown Mall, in 1811, and a new Catholic church on the banks of the Camcor river, in 1817. He selected the final designs for both churches, and ensured that the spire on one and steeple on the other might complement and contrast with each other, whilst signalling the presence of both churches and the town for miles around. His earlier travels and architectural observations came to influence him during the late 1820s, when he personally designed John’s Schoolhouse in the form of an Ionic temple, in memory of his son, John C. Parsons. He directed the local builder to execute the structure ‘in the best manner

³⁵ R.F. Foster, *Modern Ireland, 1600–1972* (London, 1988), p. 192.

³⁶ Birr Castle, Rosse Papers, A/21.

possible, as to render the whole chaste, harmonious and durable', to set a standard for other new buildings in the area which he anticipated would follow its example. The 'temple' was built on ground lying east of Duke Square, and a broad new street called John's Place was soon laid out around it. This proved to be as attractive as Oxmantown Mall, and contains some of the finest houses in the town, built there during the 1830s.³⁷

In spite of his overriding aesthetic input to the urban project as a whole, the second earl was not the only contributor to the building process at Birr. In fact, most of the houses on Oxmantown Mall and John's Place were constructed by individual tenants, indicated by leases in the Birr Castle muniment room, and underlining the degree of landlord and urban tenant collaboration that existed in such locations.³⁸ Whilst the earl's imagination and experience, influenced perhaps by his travels abroad, had created harmonious symmetry in the streets of the town, other individuals were involved in the process of urban building in practice. Thus, in 1821 we find a Mr Compton informing Lord Rosse that it was his intention to build two more houses to complete a row of ten houses. To execute the plan satisfactorily, however, he urged Lord Rosse to advance him £180, pointing out that he had already done much to promote and assist the 'ornament of his Lordship's town'. The loan appears to have been made, and 'Compton's Row', as it became known, was completed by the mid-1820s.

Tenants also embellished their properties, imitating the styles used by the landed classes, their more modest but nevertheless stylish ambitions reflected by 'polite' Georgian details such as string-courses, quoining, pedimented windows and 'Gibsonian' door cases. As Graham has commented: 'the ubiquity of such detailing throughout Ireland's improved towns and villages suggests that a process of downward imitative cultural diffusion may have been operating, as less well-capitalised tenants sought to emulate the architectural forms adopted by wealthier members of the landowning élite.'³⁹ Such activity, over a long period, explains the prolific and piecemeal development of the typical small Irish town. Some houses are three bays across, while others are two; some two storeys high, while others are three or four. Some are punctuated by the archways and laneways that once led to stables and yards beyond them, whilst others form unbroken rows of terraced housing, but overall there is a planned coherence indicating that landlords and tenants worked with each other in producing the urban fabric.

Landlords, tenants and the urban lease

Landlord facilitation with the support of a co-operative tenantry in the process of urban building was true of the general pattern of development in small towns and

³⁷ Malcomson, 'Lawrence Parsons', p. 490; Hood, 'Documentary evidence', p. 84.

³⁸ Birr Castle, Rosse Papers, Q76 and Q79, boxes of leases for Oxmantown Mall and John's Place. For Compton's Row, see *ibid.*, E47, James Compton to Lord Rosse, 30 Mar 1821.

³⁹ Graham, 'Processes', p. 236.

villages throughout Ireland. As Graham has argued, the morphology of these settlements is normally dependent on plan rather than architectural coherence, suggesting that many players were involved in the overall construction.⁴⁰ They included merchants, traders, retailers, craftsmen, professionals and even clergymen, who also had a stake in the success or failure of an individual settlement. Their contribution can still be seen from the morphological evidence of the urban landscape. There are numerous examples where independent builders leased plots and constructed houses—and other premises such as shops, hotels, breweries, distilleries, tanneries and other manufacturing premises—in small towns throughout Ireland. By means of the lease, many landlords attracted reliable tenants to participate in the improvement of existing or newly established villages and towns, delegating to them the responsibility of building on individual holdings. Horner's study of the re-development of Maynooth on the earl of Kildare's estate has shown that its transformation from an irregular cluster of cabins into a planned village took over sixty years to realise, being overseen by several generations of the landlord family, in co-operation with their tenants.⁴¹ In Strokestown, a visitor to the village noted that several residents 'of independent means' had built five excellent houses and shops contiguous to each other in Elphin Street, in 1829. Later, after the Irish Famine, several merchants were attracted to invest in Strokestown's improvement, by means of favourable leases, which encouraged them to take houses in the same street 'for the purpose of having them improved'.⁴²

Typically then, landlord involvement in urban improvement relied upon leases that offered their tenants plots of land over a long term of years at relatively low rents. In return the tenants bore most, if not all, of the costs of constructing the individual properties.⁴³ The general pattern was typified by the actions of the agent on Lord Weymouth's estate in County Monaghan. In a bid to encourage the development of the town of Carrickmacross, he urged a policy of letting tenements for 'three noted lives or the English building lease—whichever may last the longest'. He further observed that neighbouring towns were increasing in trade and industry precisely because leases were being offered 'in perpetuity'.⁴⁴ Such leasing arrangements were suitable for prospering economic times, but, as we shall see, hindered freedom of both landlord and tenants in less favourable conditions. This leasing policy represented a delegation of authority by landlords to tenants of some of their monopolistic property rights, and also conferred considerable social status to individual tenants.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 219–20.

⁴¹ A.A. Horner, 'The scope and limitations of the landlord contributions to changing landscape', in V. Hanson, ed., *Collected Papers Presented at the Permanent European Conference for the Study of the Rural Landscape* (Copenhagen, 1981), pp. 71–9.

⁴² Hood, 'Landlord influence', 126–7.

⁴³ Graham and Proudfoot, 'Landlords, planning and urban growth'.

⁴⁴ PRONI, Shirley papers, D3531/A/5.

⁴⁵ Graham and Proudfoot, *Urban Improvement*, pp. 42–50; Hood, 'Landlord influence', 125.

The landlord facilitation of the organic growth of urban settlement, and the tenant participation in the process—contracted together as they were by the urban lease—worked during periods of economic prosperity. In contrast, the widespread economic decline that Ireland experienced from 1815—following the cessation of the Napoleonic wars—constrained urban expansion and thus curtailed ties between urban landlords and tenants, because less leases for urban property were issued. A lasting depression set in as foreign demands for Irish linen and other goods fell away. The economic fortunes of the landowners experienced a downturn. Legislation of the late 1840s and onwards permitted landlords in debt to sell off their encumbered estates, and the brisk petitions to sell—followed by steady sales into the 1850s, facilitated by the Landed Estates Court—indicated a growing trend.⁴⁶ With less money available for investment, local industry declined, and prices for agricultural goods, linen and cattle alike, soared, damaging the commerce formally focused on the small towns.⁴⁷

As early as the 1820s one visitor to Strokestown found that in spite of its many substantial houses, it had outlived its eighteenth-century economic importance as a centre for milling, brewing and linen manufacture. He commented that such activities had been ‘beaten out of the market by cotton and other cheaper goods’, observing that ‘everything at Strokestown does not wear the appearance of progressive improvement’. Whereas the width of the main street had formerly encouraged commerce, and facilitated the movement of livestock and traders in linen yarns and other goods during the eighteenth-century boom, by the 1820s it had become wasted space. ‘Streets disproportionately wide’, he observed, ‘have invariably the effect of reducing the importance of its buildings’.⁴⁸ Later, during the 1860s when the width of the street provided a convenient camping ground for beggars and vagabonds, a surveyor advised the estate office that planting of trees and construction of wider footpaths was required to narrow the street, and to keep undesirables out. Although these plans were never implemented, it demonstrates an early example of what is known today as the concept of ‘defensible space’.⁴⁹ There are similar fascinating accounts of urban decline in places such as Skibbereen, County Cork, in another contemporary publication, Shaw Mason’s *Parochial Survey of Ireland*.⁵⁰ Later, a visitor to Lord Sligo’s ‘pleasant village’ of Westport was also sceptical about its future as a commercial centre by the 1840s. Although impressed by its spaciousness, he felt that the streets were out of proportion in relation to the houses, commenting: ‘nor is this the first nor the hundredth place to be seen in this country, which sanguine builders have erected to accommodate an imaginary commerce’.⁵¹

⁴⁶ M.C. Lyons, *Illustrated Incumbered Estates, Ireland, 1850–1905* (Whitegate, 1993).

⁴⁷ Cullen, *Economic History*, pp. 114–15.

⁴⁸ Weld, *Statistical Survey*, pp. 322–3, 328, 336.

⁴⁹ Hood, ‘Landlord influence’, 126.

⁵⁰ W. Shaw Mason, *Statistical Account or Parochial Survey of Ireland*, 3 vols (Dublin, 1816).

⁵¹ W.M. Thakeray Thomson, *The Irish Sketch Book*, II (London, 1843), p. 92.

The low rents and favourable urban leases that were a feature of urban estate rents from the early eighteenth century continued into the nineteenth. Because so much of the responsibility for building and maintaining individual holdings was delegated to tenants, the landowning elite inadvertently encouraged a strong middleman interest in the small towns of Ireland. By the mid-nineteenth century, low rents and long leases encouraged speculative tenants—who did not always occupy the holdings they leased directly from their ground landlord—to avail of the low rents, and re-lease to undertenants. In Strokestown, for example, the enumerators who surveyed the village for the first valuation of Ireland in 1854 found that while the landlord's rents were low—the greater part being ground rents only—nearly all other rents were high, being let by middlemen. In other towns, a plethora of interests made the position of occupying tenants very precarious. These intervening interests complicated the tenurial structure, creating what O'Connor has termed 'a complex web of tenures' which tended to curtail urban improvement.⁵² With no one taking direct responsibility for overseeing housing conditions, sanitation and water supplies, living standards became very poor indeed.

In some cases, landlords were actually inhibited from making improvements by the very long leases and favourable terms that their ancestors had created for previous generations. For example, in Killarney, developed by the first earl of Kenmare during the eighteenth century, an estate report complained that by 1888, it had become a haven of 'squalor, dilapidation and dirt'. These problems were directly attributed to the leasing practices of the first earl, who from the 1750s onwards, would grant a lease for ever of a plot to anyone prepared to build a slated house in the town. In a bid to attract tenants to his town, 'no restrictions on sub-letting were written into leases, with the result that subsequently much subletting of dwellings and their adjoining yards and gardens had taken place, with cabins being constructed on free ground'. The report continued that as most of these cabins were built on land that was practically freehold, the fourth earl was unable to 'move a finger to repair the evil done by his ancestor's generous mistake'.⁵³

Town tenant protest

It would be wrong to depict the small towns and villages as completely separate from the rural world in which they existed. As we have seen, they played a crucial role in articulating the agricultural economy, their markets, fairs and shops providing valuable outlets for the sale of goods and services to surrounding hinterlands. Nevertheless, despite their functional interdependence, the interests of the small towns, villages and their rural hinterlands were not necessarily synonymous.⁵⁴ In the

⁵² P.J. O'Connor, *Exploring Limerick's Past* (Newcastle West, 1987), p. 95.

⁵³ PRONI, Kenmare Papers, D4151/F/4.

⁵⁴ B.J. Graham and S. Hood, 'Town tenant protest in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Ireland', *Irish Economic and Social History*, 21 (1994), 43.

mindset of the inhabitants who occupied properties in villages and towns throughout the island, they had rights that were quite separate from their rural counterparts. The tenantry argued that its particular needs relating to urban property had been overlooked, in spite of changes to rural tenant rights by the end of the nineteenth century. Their precarious standing had to some extent been hidden during times of economic prosperity in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, but indications that all was not well had emerged during the economic depression of the 1820s and the famine period of the 1840s, and manifested themselves again during the economic crisis of the 1880s. By this latter period, conditions in many small towns became so unsatisfactory that their inhabitants mounted a vocal campaign to draw public attention to their grievances. The establishment of branches of the House League in dozens of towns throughout Ireland reflected a growing consciousness among town tenants that their interests had been neglected. While townspeople had been well represented in the Land League, which successfully gained concessions following the major land acts of the 1880s, neither the 1881 Land Act nor the later Ashbourne Land Act of 1885 applied to urban property, in spite of the unsatisfactory tenurial terms of urban tenants. Thus in January 1886, *The Times* reported that the 'formation of a House League after the pattern of the Land League is the newest development of the agitation against property. This has been commenced in different country towns in the west and south.'⁵⁵

The House Leagues were consciously modelled on branches of the Land League and often shared the same local memberships, but their focus was entirely separate.⁵⁶ Townspeople were just as vulnerable to harsh leases, high rents, absence of compensation for improvements to their properties and eviction, as were their rural counterparts. The political agitation organised by local House League branches focused attention on a complex set of grievances specific to urban tenants, which were due to the unsatisfactory nature of urban tenurial arrangements, and particularly the widespread involvement of middlemen. Thus in Listowel, County Kerry, tenants complained about the actions of middlemen, who not only refused to grant leases to their under-tenants, but actually raised rents if improvements had been made to properties. The establishment of a House League in this town was directly attributable to the need for occupying tenants to protect themselves and protest against these conditions.⁵⁷ In contrast, the rules of the Kanturk House League, County Cork (reproduced as Figure 11.5), emphasise that their main source of grievance was against the high rents charged by landlords. Here the organisation took action to ensure that in the event of a tenant being evicted for non-payment of an unjust rent, no other person should take on the house (see rule

⁵⁵ B.J. Graham and S. Hood, 'Social protest in late nineteenth-century Ireland towns: the House League movement', *Irish Geography*, 29/1 (1996), 1–12.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁵⁷ House of Commons Select Committee, *Report on Town Holdings* (London, 1889), p. 359.

RULES

Laid down for the Guidance of the Members of the

KANTURK

HOUSE LEAGUE.

- 1st.--That this League be called the "House League."
- 2nd.--That the Executive consist of a President, Secretary, Treasurer, & Committee.
- 3rd.--That in case of a difference of opinion between the tenants as to what constitutes satisfactory terms, the dispute must be submitted to Committee.
- 4th.--That the Financial resources of the League be employed for the benefit and protection of the Members.
- 5th.--That in the event of being proceeded against for the non-payment of an unjust rent, the cost of defending same be borne by the League.
- 6th.--That the Entrance Fee for Membership be not less than 2s. 6d. for each Shopkeeper; others in proportion.
- 7th.--That whenever there are more Tenants than one subject to the same landlord, they be required to go together when paying rent, and that neither pay until all obtain satisfactory terms: and that whoever violates this Rule will be expelled from the League.
- 8th.--That no person take a house from which another has been evicted for the non-payment of an unjust rent.
- 9th.--That we pledge ourselves not to deal with any Merchant, who supplies with goods the Trader who takes a House from which the previous Tenant has been evicted for non-payment of an unjust rent.

Figure 11.5. Rules of the Kanturk House League, Co. Cork (*National Archives Ireland CSORP, Chief Secretary's Office Registered Papers 1886, file 9900*).

eight). Furthermore, any merchant who supplied a house from which the previous tenant had been evicted would be boycotted (see rule nine).⁵⁸

The House League movement was a well orchestrated campaign, which although short-lived, and, it has to be said, coincided with an agricultural depression, succeeded in drawing attention to the distinctive grievances of urban tenants for the first time. It became closely linked to the nationalist politics of the day in the aftermath of the general election of 1886, when the pro-Home Rule Irish Parliamentary Party held the balance of power for Gladstone's Liberal government. The party carried the campaign from the local villages and towns into the parliamentary arena, and following lively debates in the House of Commons, forced the government to refer the whole question of town tenure 'in the three kingdoms of Britain' to a select committee. This committee met between 1886 and 1889, and during its first year heard evidence from over 100 Irish urban witnesses concerning their tenurial grievances.⁵⁹ Although a wide variety of complaints were presented to the committee, the most significant were directed at the tensions induced by the prevalence of middling interests, particularly in the smaller centres of population. Distinctions were drawn between small towns and villages where the presence of a single landowning family had stimulated a uniform and controlled organic growth, and other settlements in which a number of landlords owned and leased property. In the former instances, the tenants' specific grievances were generally directed against middlemen who, it was feared, would replace the old landowning influence by raising rents and evicting occupying tenants. In the latter, where a multitude of landowning interests were involved, tenants sought to purchase the properties they occupied outright.

The committee agreed that short building leases and the absence of any compensation for improvement were the main disincentives which inhibited occupying urban tenants from investing in their holdings. While the committee found that the majority of the labouring classes held properties on very short tenancies under middlemen 'who are very numerous', and was forced to concede that 'in many cases the bad state of town property in Ireland is owing to the middlemen rather than the landlord', it did not feel, however, that the redress of town tenant grievances required specific legislation.⁶⁰ The government, in turn, was reluctant to implement radical changes in Irish urban tenurial conditions, simply because major land concessions had been granted to rural occupiers by the succession of land acts. Significantly, there was concern that the Irish situation should not act as a precedent for urban tenurial reform in Britain, where the committee had found tenurial relations between landlords and tenants were very different. It was argued that 'in considering . . . the condition of things in Ireland, it should be borne in mind that the decrease of population, and the stagnation of trade

⁵⁸ NA, Chief Secretary's Official Registered Papers, 9900: rules of the Kanturk House League, c.1886.

⁵⁹ House of Commons, *Town Holdings*.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 390.

have in many cases preserved Irish towns from the social evils attending upon the rapid growth of English towns in area, wealth and population. Some at least of the grievances of urban tenants in Ireland are due to the application of antiquated forms of agricultural holding to districts acquiring an urban character'.⁶¹

The agricultural identity attributed to the small towns and villages of Ireland by the Select Committee undoubtedly added to their negative image in the popular mind. But as far as town and village representatives were concerned, they were determined to obtain reform of their grievances. In 1904 the Town Tenants' League was founded 'to secure for the people of the cities, towns and villages of Ireland . . . the same freedoms won for the people of the land'.⁶² Later consolidated into the All-Ireland Town Tenants' League following Irish independence in 1922, the movement continued to campaign on behalf of urban tenants for a further thirty years.⁶³

Conclusion

This chapter has emphasised the significance of the small towns and villages of Ireland, and introduced some of the characteristics that make them distinctive entities in the Irish countryside. It has shown that these centres played an important role in the agricultural-based economy of Ireland during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when most were extensively remodelled or newly laid out, usually under some form of landlord influence. It has also shown that alongside the landlords, an array of participants was involved in the process of urban transformation, giving rise to the prolific and piecemeal appearance of many streetscapes. Although, as the poet says, many of the smallest centres of urban population of Ireland may have stood 'lonesome and bare', recent heritage initiatives are attempting to rescue them from obscurity. The vocal campaign mounted by branches of the House League and the subsequent parliamentary campaign for legislative rights, at the end of the nineteenth century, demonstrate that not only have these places had distinctive characteristics that their inhabitants felt were worth preserving, they have also had a central and colourful history.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

⁶² NA, Department of Justice, File H226/1, minute explaining the origins of the Town Tenants' League, 8 Oct 1924.

⁶³ Graham and Hood, 'Town tenant protest', pp. 56–7.

Irish towns published during this period. Although Irish urban development lagged far behind that of England, there were a number of towns which compared favourably in size with those of England. However, even in these towns the evidence for a strong and self-confident urban culture, which is visible in the histories written of English towns, is much less substantial. Whereas English urban identities were strongly articulated and informed by historical traditions of independence and autonomy, Irish towns, in general, did not subscribe to the same collective myths of freedom or appeal to the rhetoric of freeborn Englishmen. Their historical heritage was often more problematic, involving periods of intense conflict and subordination to neighbouring landlords: the past was something to be contested, rather than providing the basis for a collective identity. Rather than championing local particularity, their culture was portrayed as derivative of Dublin and London. Towards the end of the period, however, there are signs in some towns of efforts to produce a history compatible with 'polite' society. As commercial and manufacturing prosperity began to take off in Belfast in the early nineteenth century, a history of the city's manufacturing and commercial growth could be written, celebrating the dynamism, superiority and unique qualities of the town, in terms which echoed those of the growth cities of eighteenth-century England.

SUSAN HOOD

The Significance of the Villages and Small Towns in Rural Ireland during the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries

The paper examines the instance of village and small-town building in Ireland during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Although the villages and small towns of Ireland make up the bulk of the present Irish urban network, relatively little is known about their complex history. The paper attempts to explore the origins and functions of villages and small towns in Ireland, with particular reference to the role played by Irish landowners in their creation or re-modelling during the period, and the co-operation and mutual interest of urban tenants in the process. The distinctive characteristics of these centres are examined, and particular attention is devoted to the mindset of the people who lived in them — the small-town and village tenants. The last part of the paper examines the specific grievances of this social group during the latter half of the nineteenth century, whose somewhat sensational, yet short-lived, campaign, manifested in the form of a Town Tenants' League, emphasised the social and economic distinctiveness of the settlements they occupied.

Abbreviations

| | |
|-----------------------|---|
| BL | British Library |
| <i>Cal. S. P. Ire</i> | <i>Calendar of State Papers, Ireland</i> |
| HC | House of Commons |
| JCHAS | <i>Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society</i> |
| JRSAI | <i>Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland</i> |
| KTCM | Records of the Corporation of Kells, 1685–1787: NLI MS 25446, 8 vols |
| LPK | C. McNeill, ed., <i>Liber primus Kilkenniensis</i> (Dublin, 1931) |
| NA | National Archives [Dublin] |
| NHist. | <i>Northern History</i> |
| NLI | National Library Ireland |
| <i>Parl. Gaz.</i> | <i>The Parliamentary Gazetteer of Ireland</i> |
| PP | Parliamentary Papers |
| PRIA | <i>Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy</i> |
| PRO | Public Record Office |
| PRONI | Public Record Office of Northern Ireland |
| RO | Record Office |
| TCD | Trinity College, Dublin |
| UH | <i>Urban History</i> |
| UHY | <i>Urban History Yearbook</i> |
| VCH | <i>Victoria County History</i> |

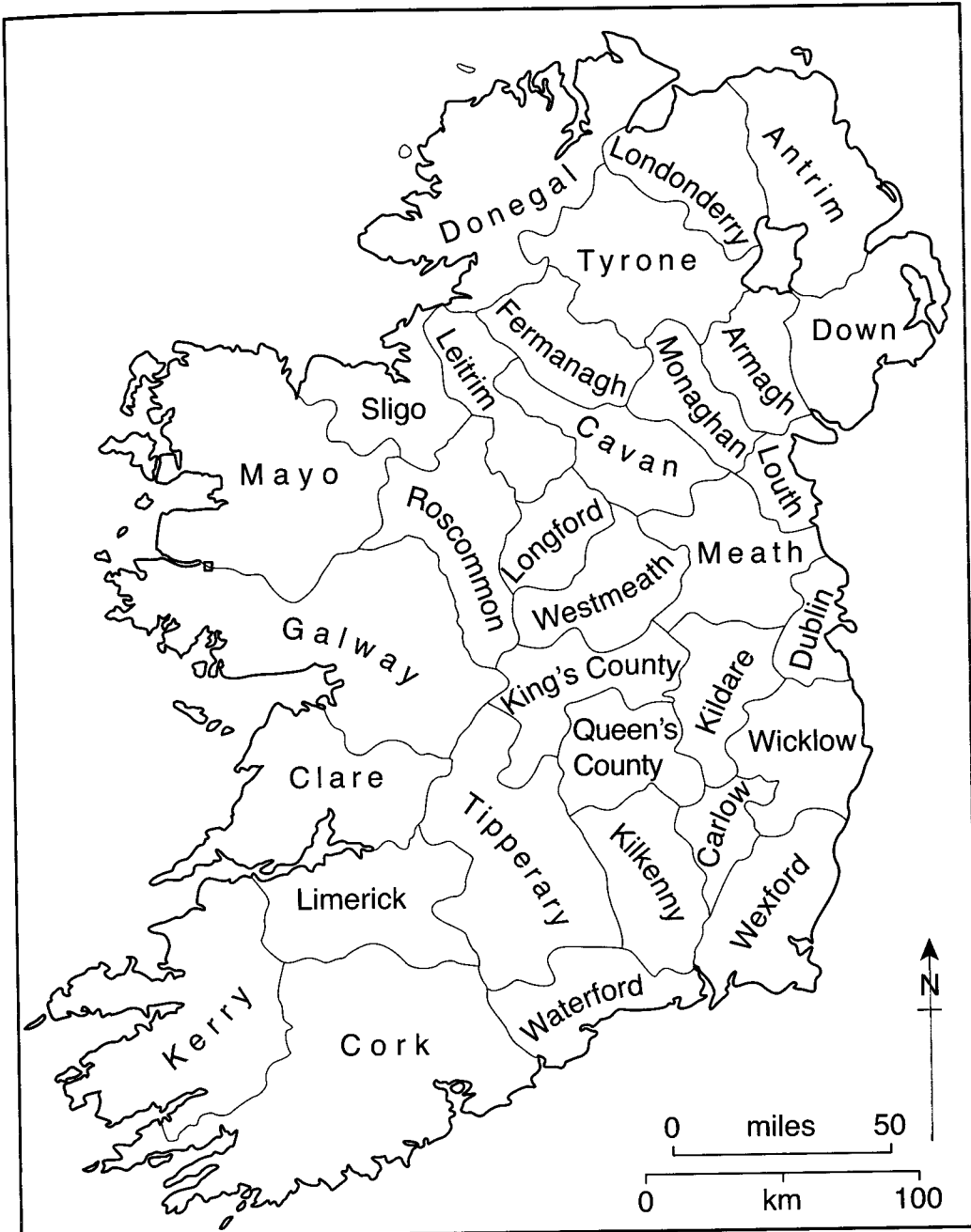


Figure 0.1. Ireland: county map.

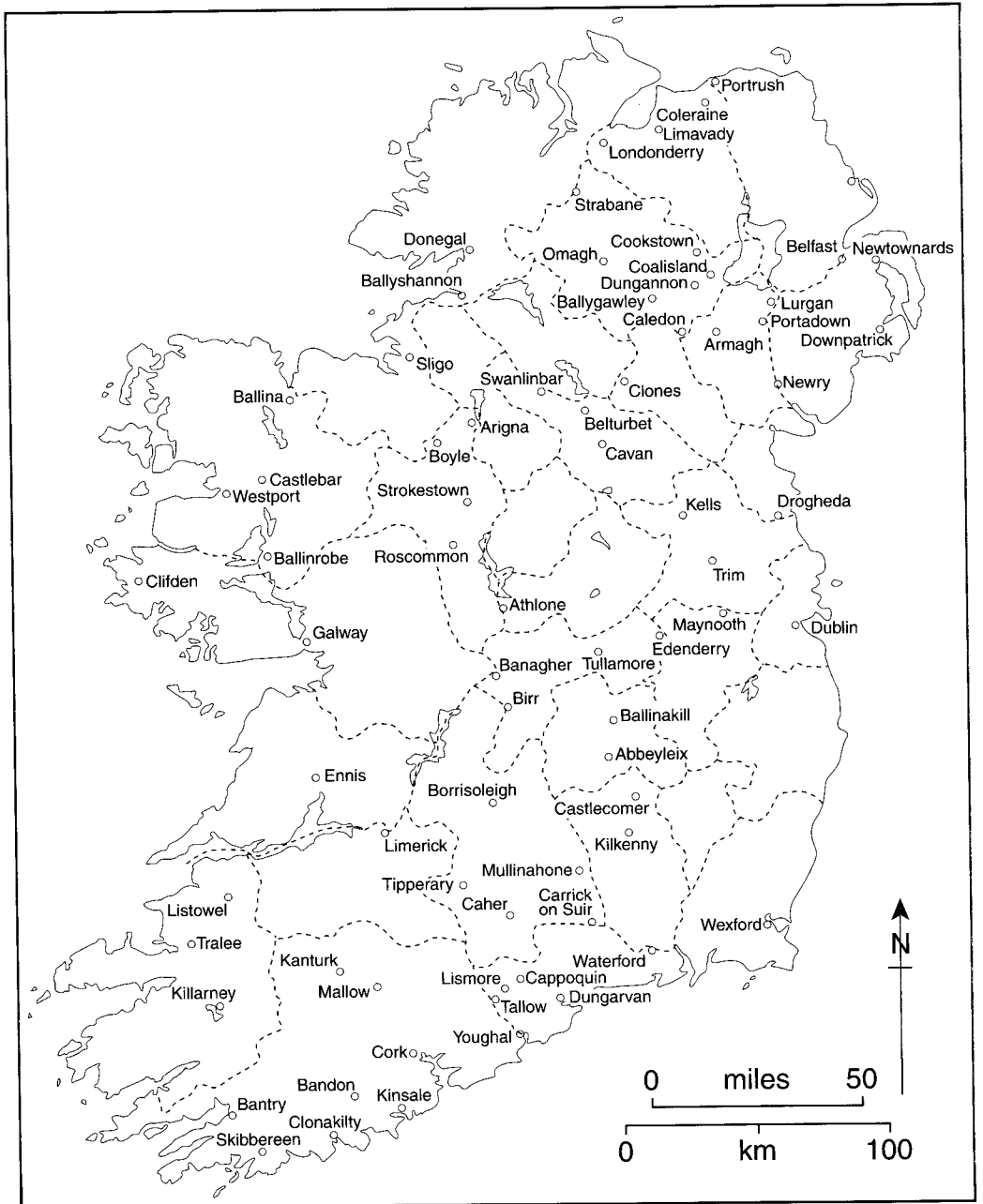


Figure 0.2. Ireland: places mentioned.