

Reading Our Landscape...

The striking landscape of the hills inevitably features in their townland names.

Some describe the physical characteristics, including the very rock that makes the hills, while other reflect mankind's influence on the landscape. The dark basalt of the hills and the contrasting chalk is reflected in the English names Black Mountain and (the much later) Whiterock, and also in the Irish names Divis ~ *Dubhais* 'black ridge' and Ligoniel ~ *Lag an Aoil* 'the hollow of the limestone'.



IRISH	ENGLISH
<i>achadh</i>	field
<i>ais</i>	ridge
<i>alt</i>	steep valley or hill
<i>beann</i>	mountain
<i>carn</i>	cairn
<i>cloch</i>	stone or castle
<i>collann</i>	mountain, hill, slope
<i>currach</i>	bog
<i>droim</i>	ridge
<i>dún</i>	fort
<i>gabhlán</i>	fork
<i>garraí</i>	garden or small field
<i>gleann</i>	glen
<i>lag</i>	hollow
<i>maigh</i>	plain
<i>muine</i>	thicket
<i>mullach</i>	hill (usually rounded)
<i>poll</i>	hole or hollow
<i>sleacht</i>	cairn/commemorative stone
<i>sliabh</i>	mountain, uplands
<i>tor</i>	height or rocky hill
<i>uchtóg</i>	slope

Trees & Woods

The range of trees in the foothills are evident in the townlands names which include references to trees such as *saileán* 'willows or 'sallies', *fearn* 'alder', *doire* 'oak', *coll* 'hazel' and *muine* 'thicket or scrub wood'.

Trees have been important to the Irish from earliest times. In the fifth century, the creators of the first Irish alphabet, called *Ogham*, even named their letters after trees.



<i>Fearn Alder</i>	The alder was associated with war and death. This may be because its white wood turns red when cut. It was traditionally used to make shields. Other uses included the making of containers and charcoal and the use of the bark and catkins to make dye. Cloghfern
<i>Coll Hazel</i>	The hazel is associated with fertility, wisdom, and mystical knowledge. It was noted for its powers to protect against evil. Its nuts were used as a source of food and its wood for making furniture, fencing and wickerwork. Collinward
<i>Doire Oak</i>	The oak is a symbol of strength, fertility, kingship and endurance. It was also associated with magic and the otherworld: a circle drawn with an oak sapling was thought to protect a person from the fairies. Its wood was used for many purposes from the making of ships to barrels while its bark was used for tanning leather and making black dye. Budore
<i>Saileán Willow</i>	The willow was associated with fertility and life, and with celebrations at St. Patrick's Day and Palm Sunday. The Irish harp was traditionally made from willow and its wood was also used for wickerwork and to make household implements. Ballysillan

Folklore & Heritage

The name of the large Iron Age rath of Dunnaney Fort, in Carnmoney, or Nancy's Fort, is probably from the Irish *Dún Áine* meaning 'the fort of Áine'. She was an ancient Irish sun-goddess who was associated with summer, love and fertility. Her name means brightness or radiance. Fire rituals were performed in her honour on hilltops up until the late 19th century. In some parts of Ireland she was thought to have been the Queen of the Fairies.

Some names reflect the Christian heritage of the hills such as Shankill (the old church), two of the five civil parishes which converge on the Belfast hills. It is also likely that Budore 'hut or cell of oak' refers to the site of an early Christian hermitage and that Bolgan Well at Slievenacloy and the townland of Bovolgan ~ *Both Bholgáin* 'the hut of Bolgán' also echo Christian traditions. Some scholars have suggested that the latter are named after St Olcan, a contemporary of St Patrick normally associated with the Dál Riata of north Antrim.



Ben & Ballyaghagan Madigan

Although a 15th century Irish source calls it *Beann Uamha* 'the hill of the cave', its more common name was *Beann Mhadagáin*, and Mac Art's Fort was *Dún Mhadagáin*.

They were both named after Matudán (†857 AD), a king of the *Ulaidh* (Ull-ee), the tribe which gave its name to Ulster.

Ben Madigan has long been associated with The O'Neills of Clandeboy who controlled the area from the 14th century until Elizabethan times. In 1556 the Earl of Sussex was told that in Ben Vadagan ... there 'is a great cave where is the treasure of the country of Clandeboy'. The O'Neills of northern Clandeboy were inaugurated at McArt's Fort which lies in the townland of Ballyaghagan. This townland is named after the Ó hEachaidhín family, who for several hundred

years acted as hereditary bards to the O'Neills. As their patrons disappeared or lost their land, these bards descended into obscurity, and most of them changed their name to Hagan or Hawkins. A few became clergymen, others became highwaymen. The most famous of these was Neece O'Haughian, who haunted the hills of Antrim from the Braid to Colin Mountain until he was caught and hanged at Carrickfergus in 1720. His treasure is said to be buried in the Belfast Hills, five jumps to the east of a spot where you can see five castles, five loughs and five counties.

Belfast Hills Partnership

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Belfast Hills TOWNLANDS



Townlands

The townland is a unique feature of the Irish landscape and is one of the most ancient divisions in the country.

Townlands predate the Norman Invasion of the 12th century. The size of the townland was generally related to the quality of the land, areas of good land having more townland divisions than areas of poor land. There are over 60,000 townlands in Ireland and anything from around five to thirty can be grouped together to form a parish. In the past, the value of land was often measured in terms of how it would support cattle, so people talked about having "a cow's grass", that is being able to feed one cow for a year. Upland areas were used for common pasturage and the movement

of cattle onto higher ground in the summer was known as 'booleying' - from the Irish word *buaille* 'summer pasture'. It was still practised in parts of Ireland until the 1940s. The word 'townland' was coined to translate the Irish term *baile fearainn*. It is a combination of the word *baile*, which originally meant a 'farmstead or settlement' but has now come to mean 'a town or village' and the term *fearainn* which means 'land, territory, quarter'.



Naming Our Hills

The source of many of our placenames lies in our Gaelic past. Divis, Carnmoney, Colin and Slievenacloy have retained versions of their older Gaelic names.

The ridge behind Collin mountain is called Slievenagravery ~ *Sliabh na gCreabhairí* 'the mountain of the woodcocks', birds which thrive in moist woodlands and bogs. Older names for some of the other hills have also survived; Mullaghglass ~ *An Mullach Glas* 'the green hill top' became Boomer's Hill; Altnakey ~ *Alt na Cuaiche* 'the valley/ height of the cuckoo' became Armstrong's Hill. Cuckoos can still be heard amongst its scrub and hedgerows as they scan for meadow pipit nests across the mosses and heather of Divis and Standing Stones Hill.

Wolf Hill gets its name from the tradition that the last wolf in Ireland was killed there in 1692. However, 17th century documentation offers us a number of earlier names such as Sleughtinermore ~ *Sleacht an Fhír Mhóir* 'the cairn of the big man or giant' which got its name from a standing stone or commemorative cairn on its slopes. According to Irish folklore bad luck and misfortune followed those who tampered with these stones.



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