CORA Cork Open Research Archive
Cartlann Taighde Oscailte Chorcaí

Title	Conducting a study of my local placenames: what do they mean, accessing local lore and history and how has my area changed over time
Authors	Ó Dochartaigh, Caitríona;Mac Cathmhaoil, Nioclás
Publication date	2025
Original Citation	Ó Dochartaigh, C. and Mac Cathmhaoil, N. (2025) 'Conducting a study of my local placenames: what do they mean, accessing local lore and history and how has my area changed over time', Ultonia Project.
Type of publication	Other
Rights	© 2025, the Authors. Produced as part of the Ultonia Project with funds from the Government of Ireland through the North–South Research Programme - Shared Island Fund.
Download date	2026-11-06 22:31:51
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/17678

UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

Ultonia

Conducting a study of my local placenames: what do they mean, accessing local lore and history and how has my area changed over time

UCC
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh
University College Cork, Ireland

Ulster University

CLAR TAIGHDE THUAISCIRT THEAS
NORTH SOUTH RESEARCH PROGRAMME

Conducting a study of my local placenames:

what do they mean, accessing local lore and history and how has my area changed over time

In this unit of work, you are asked to investigate and write a report or give a presentation on the following topics (these topics may be completed separately, or together—consult your teacher):

a) **The meaning of placenames in my area via www.logainm.ie**
b) **Access lore and history regarding my local area via the Schools' Collection and the OSI Letters**
c) **Investigate how my area has changed over time: comparing modern maps against the 6-inch historical maps from the 19th century, the School's Collection, and the OSI Letters.**

Follow the guidance as outlined in each section below to help you complete the task.

a) My local placenames: what they mean.

Irish language placenames are usually incorporated into English by **transliteration**, which means using the closest equivalent sound and letters in one language to write and interpret the sounds of another: e.g. *baile* 'town', is usually rendered as 'bally'. While, the Irish form of a placename can often be discerned from the English equivalent, the transliteration process may, however, conceal the meaning of names for several reasons.

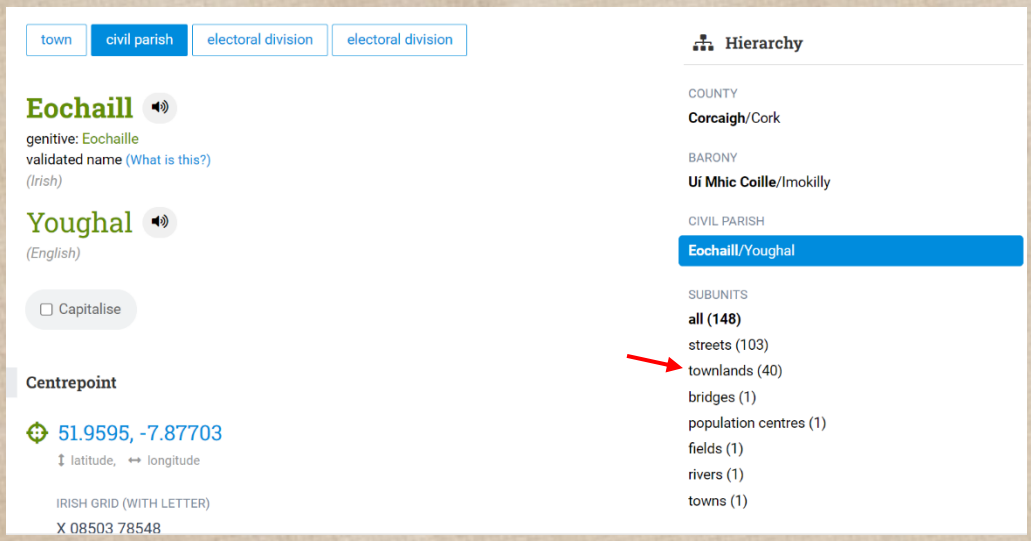
One such consideration is the period in which the name was incorporated into English. As the sounds of both Irish and English have changed over the centuries: e.g. the placename Youghal, nowadays sounds nothing like the Irish form Eochaill, 'yew forest', but when originally transliterated, *-gh-* in English had a guttural sound: meaning 'daughter' sounded more like 'doctor'; 'knight' and 'night' were pronounced like 'nikt' and 'knikt' respectfully. Hence Youghal would have sounded like 'Yocal'. Likewise, the element 'knock', which comes from Irish *cnoc* 'hill', in placenames such as Knocklayd in County Antrim, would have originally been pronounced with a 'k' sound, like the Irish. In a reverse example, where the English retains the more conservative pronunciation, Meath and Louth retain their dental -th- sound in English, which was beginning to fall out of vernacular (every-day spoken) Irish in the 13th century; hence Meath and Louth were reduced to 'Mí' and 'Lú' respectfully, but in earlier forms of the Irish language these were 'Midhe' (Meethe) and 'Lughmhadh (Lugvath).

The *-y* in Bally itself was probably not /i:/, i.e. an *-ee-* sound when originally transliterated into English, but a sound called *schwa* / ə/, i.e. *-uh-*, which is more like the Irish sound. Most of the earlier spelling of Irish placenames in English, which go on to influence later spellings, come from a time when the spelling of English was far more fluid and *-y-* was used to represent a plethora of vocalic / vowel sounds: English, for example could be spelt Englysh. This explains why 'Bally' itself is sometimes confused for '*béal átha'*, which means 'the mouth of the ford / river crossing'.

The first place to start when figuring out the meaning of your local placenames is to search for them on www.logainm.ie.[1] This can be your local parish, town, village, or townland. The more exact you can be the better. If you are unsure of the name of the exact townland in which you live, especially if you live in an urban area, search according to parish initially as this area may be broken up into various townlands which you can use to narrow your search. I have used Youghal in Co. Cork, adjacent, as an example. As shown by the tabs under the map, Youghal appears as an entry under 'town', 'civil parish', and 'electoral division'. The blue-coloured tab indicates which heading entry is loaded on the screen; the 'civil parish' tab is chosen above.

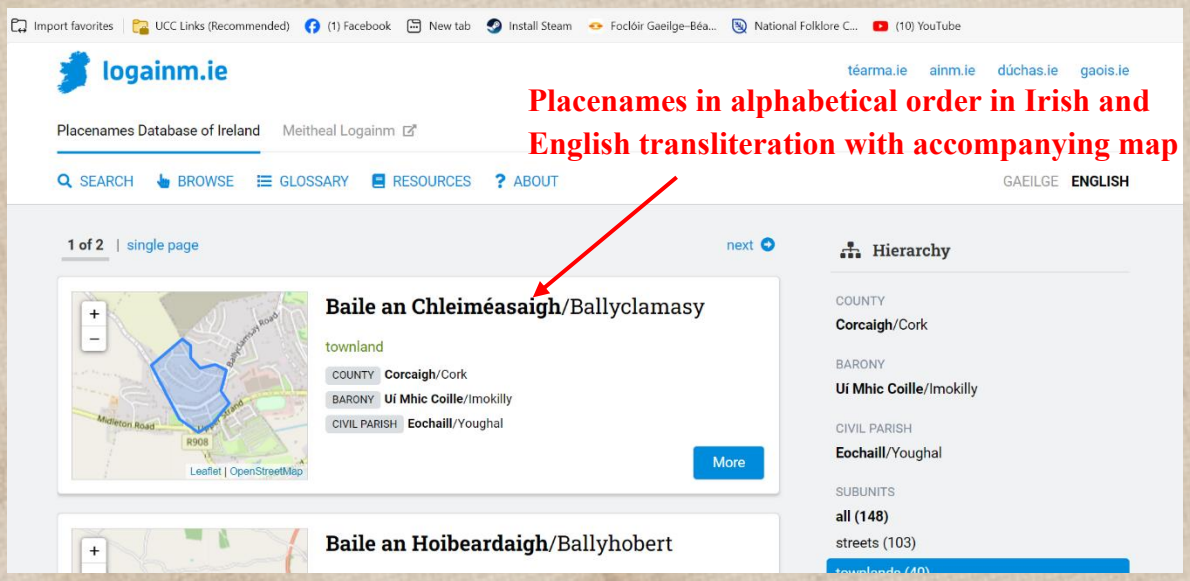


Scroll down and on the righthand side of the screen, you will notice that the parish is broken into various townlands. Click on the 'townlands' option.

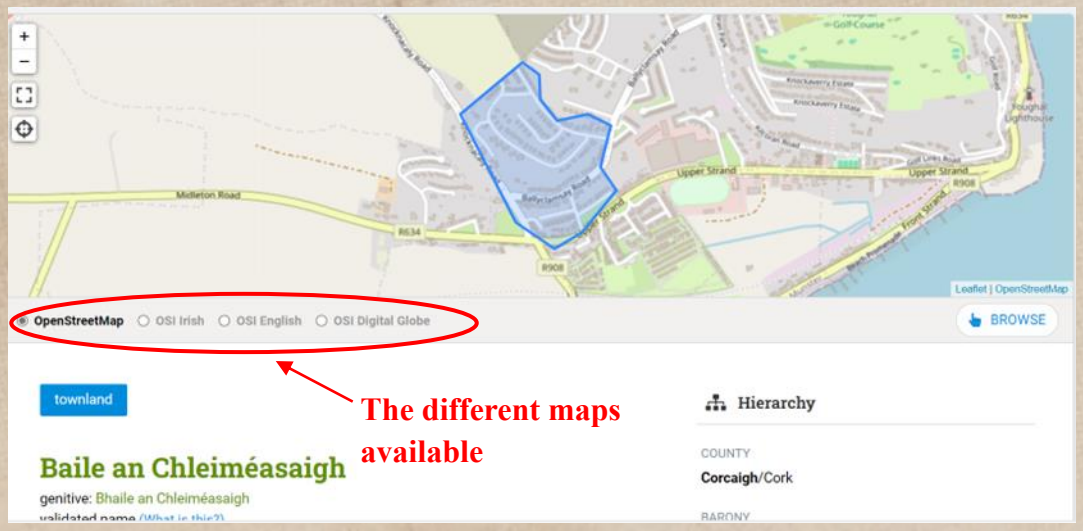


[1] www.logainm.ie have excellent educational resources and a wide array of (early) maps available on their website. Click on 'resources' > 'educational resources' on top of the screen. The educational resources are only accessible in Irish.

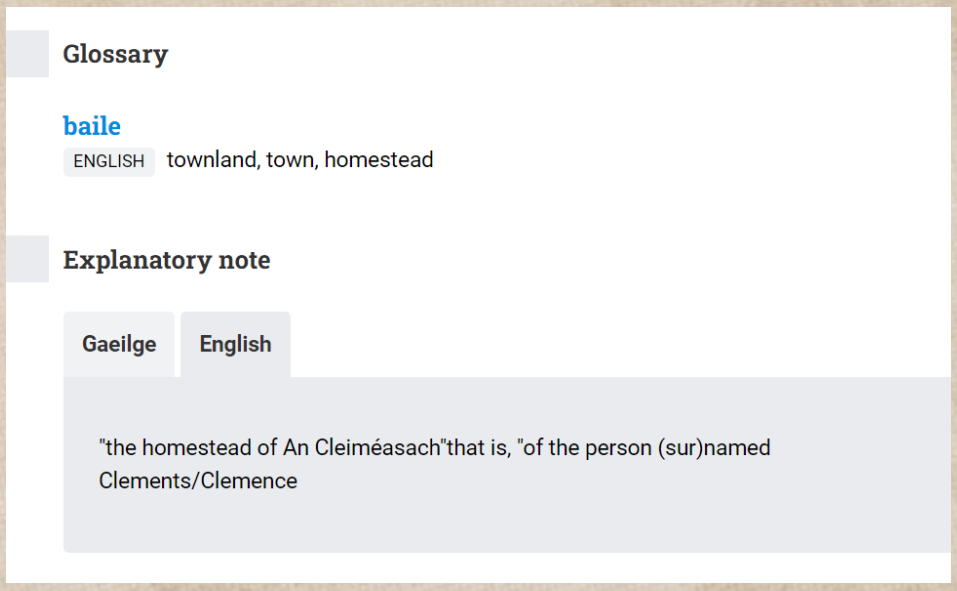
After choosing ‘townlands’, the townlands which fall under the parish will appear in alphabetical order with an accompanying map. Use the map and the landmarks that appear on it to identify the area in which you live. We will choose the first option, Baile an Chleiméasaigh / Ballyclamasy, as an example.



First, it is possible to change the type of map displayed; the options available are as follows: ‘OpenStreetMap’, ‘OSI Irish’, ‘OSI English’ and ‘OSI Digital Globe’. The ‘OpenStreetMap’ is particularly useful for identifying individual houses and local landmarks, like churches, historical sites, golf courses, hospitals, Garda stations and service stations. This is the default map displayed on the www.logainm.ie website and it is the type provided in the pictures below and above. The ‘OSI Irish’ and ‘OSI English’, OSI standing for Ordnance Survey Ireland, help with getting a sense of neighbouring townlands; naturally the ‘OSI Irish’ map is in Irish and the OSI English map is in English. The ‘OSI Digital Globe’ is a 2D aerial photograph, which is more up-to-date than the OSI aerial photograph on Scoilnet (Home | Scoilnet Maps), but Google Earth provides the most recent aerial shots.



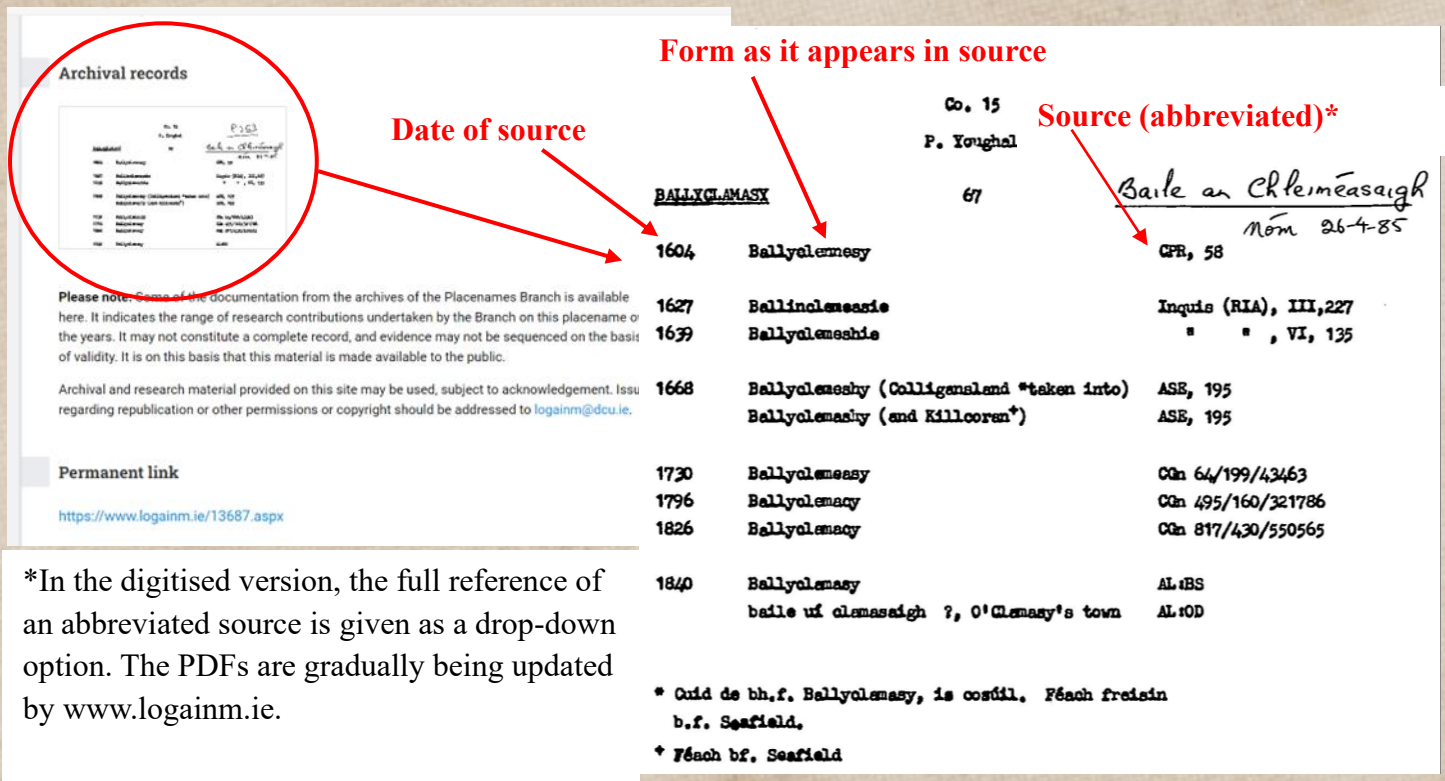
As regards the meaning of the placename in question, if you scroll down, there should be a glossary for the most common Irish placename elements,[2] and sometimes an explanatory note is provided when deemed necessary / completed. Information regarding the placename is updated on an ongoing basis. Regarding the placename in question then, it can be determined that Baile an Chleiméasaigh means 'homestead of Clements / Clemence'.



Usually found beneath the Glossary is an explanatory note and an archive containing the attestations of the placename in Irish and English sources from the earliest of times up until the 1840s, when employees of the Ordnance Survey of Ireland (OSI), primarily John O'Donovan, systematically travelled around the country cataloguing and recording placenames. We will discuss more about John O'Donovan later. Some archives appear as digitised PDFs of cards with references handwritten on them, these may also be typed on paper, or in the more recent updates, they are shown digitally with a clickable drop-down function containing the full title of the abbreviated source. It must be stressed that this archive represents the attestations of the placename **currently known** to the Placename Branch. These archives are updated when other attestations are discovered by the Branch itself, or via other scholarship such as the publication of fascicles of the *Historical Dictionary of Gaelic Placenames* (https://tinyurl.com/46a3bswp)—which is an updated version of the *Onomasticon Goedelicum Onomasticon goedelicum locorum et tribuum Hiberniae et Scotiae: an index, with identifications, to the Gaelic names of places and tribes*, originally published in 1910.[3] These sources can provide a sense of how the form and pronunciation of the name—in both Irish and English—may have changed throughout the centuries.

[2] The www.logainm.ie website has compiled a list of the glossary entries as well as an accompanying map for each entry illustrating the distribution of the glossed name in question. This list may be searched alphabetically or by frequency: Glossary | logainm.ie.

[3] A digitised version of the *Onomasticon* was made available via the Locus Project, University College Cork: DOI: Onomasticon Goedelicum (Home) (ucc.ie); while an updated, but yet preliminary, version was created by



*In the digitised version, the full reference of an abbreviated source is given as a drop-down option. The PDFs are gradually being updated by www.logainm.ie.

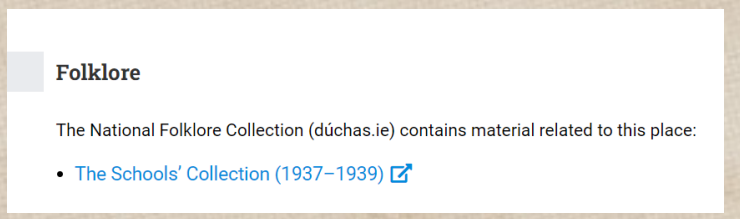
Not all the information provided under each tab—i.e. **'townland'**, **'town'** and **'parish tabs'** as shown above—is the same; so alternate between them in order to collect as much information as possible.

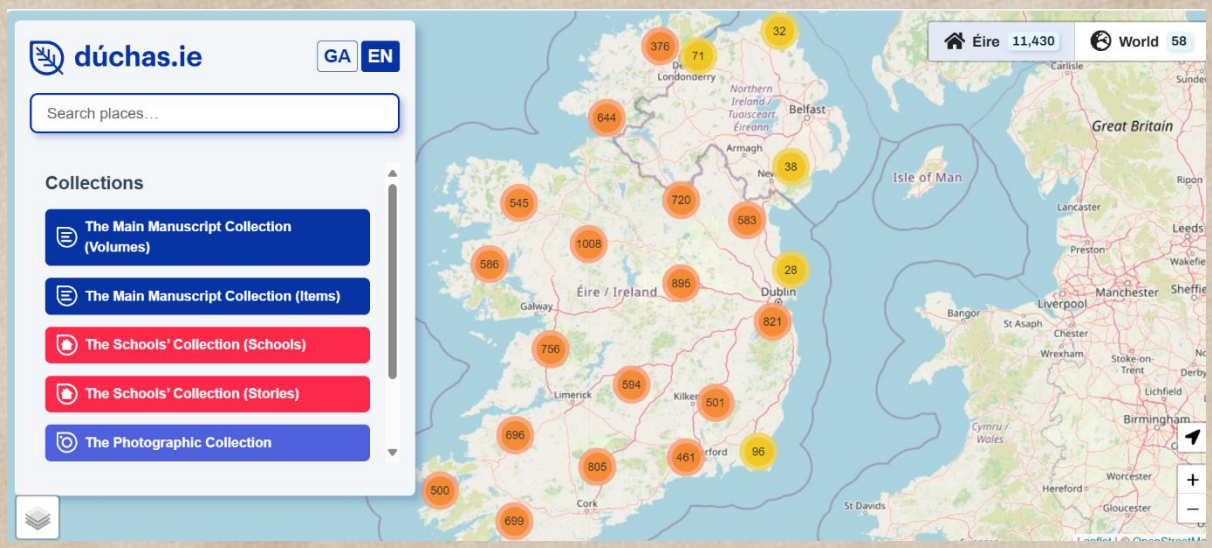
Donnchadh Ó Corráin and made available via the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies website: https://www.dias.ie/celt/celt-publications-2/onomasticon-goedelicum/.

b) **Accessing lore and history regarding my local area**

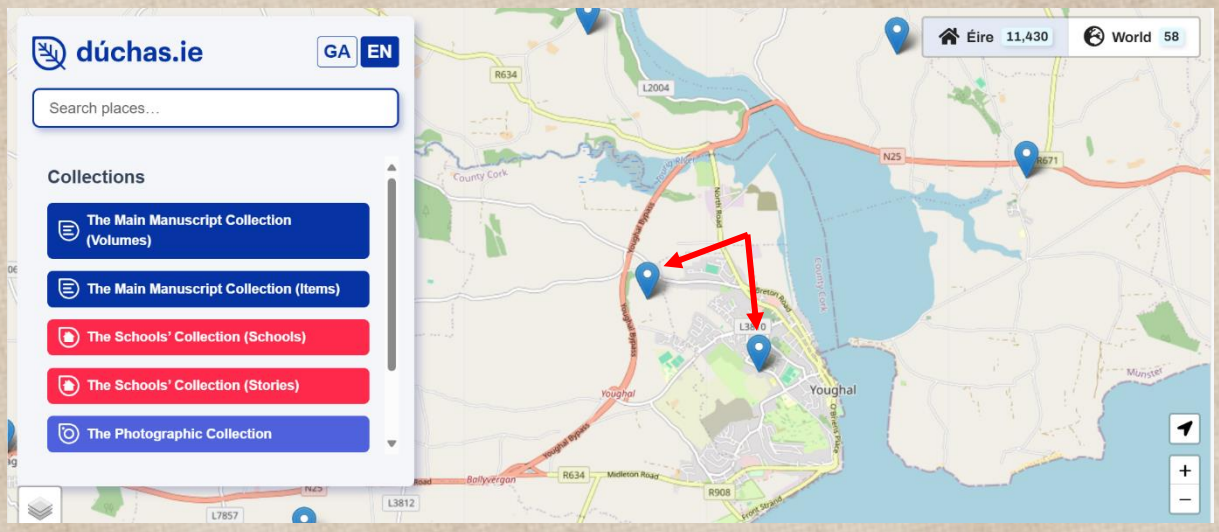
(i) Schools' Collection

If you wish to do a deeper dive into your locality, www.logainm.ie provides a link to the 'Schools' Collection' or 'Bailiúchán na Scol', which is housed on the dúchas website (https://www.duchas.ie/en), if the material to do with your locality has been digitised. If the material exists and has been digitised **the link to the dúchas website is usually only found under the 'town' tab**. This archive consists of stories, lore, placename lore and local history collected by schoolchildren and teachers in the 1930s from elderly members of the community, including material from some of the last native Irish speakers in the area. Not every district was covered in the same depth; the responsibility fell on the individual schools who decided to take part. The collection is gradually being digitised, transcribed, and translated. When you click on the link to the dúchas website, it will bring you to a map, zoom in to find your area. If no material is found for your area, check neighbouring districts as your area may be mentioned in them. It can also be a good idea to check the dúchas site directly and click on the **'Places'** tab which is located on the Home Pages's toolbar.

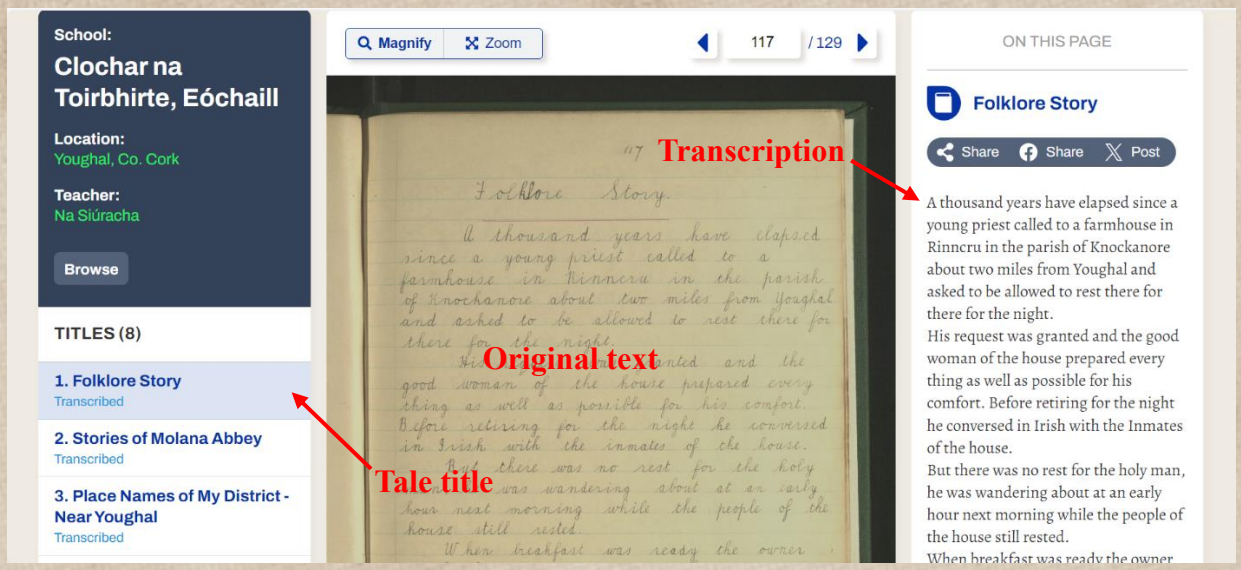




Click on the appropriate marker to access the material in question.



There may be several short booklets; skim through each one for the material you find most appropriate.



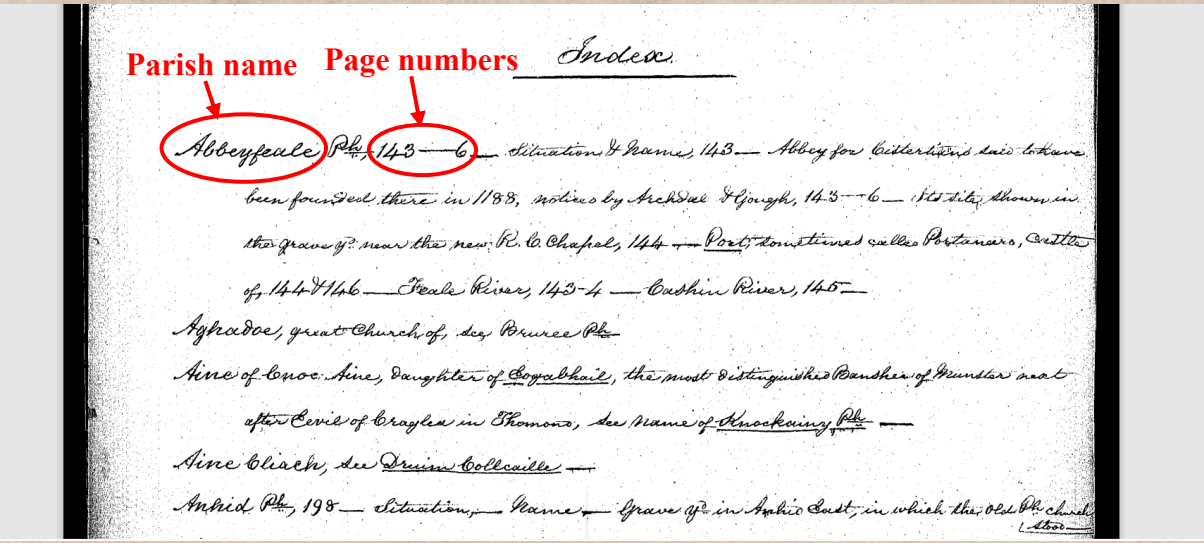
b) Accessing lore and history regarding my local area

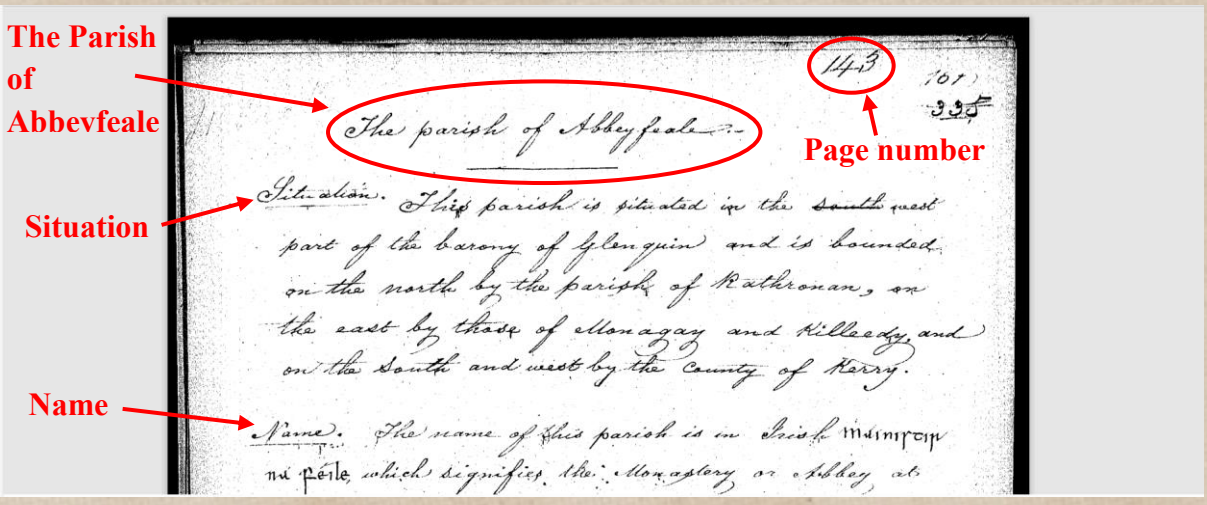
(ii) Ordnance Survey Letters

These letters, written between 1834–1841 and predominantly by John O'Donovan, offer a wealth of information regarding the placenames, topography, and local history (much of it inaccurate) of Ireland. The letters cover all counties to varying degrees of detail—except Cork, Antrim, and Tyrone. While working for the Ordnance Survey, O'Donovan and other contributors systematically travelled around Ireland recording the names of places and history from local informants. **See what O'Donovan and the locals had to say about your area in**

the mid-1800s. Does the information provided in these letters still hold the test of time or has our understanding drastically changed?

These Ordnance Survey letters have been digitised and made available on the website: 'Ask About Ireland' (Ordnance Survey of Ireland: Letters (askaboutireland.ie)). Search the letters according to county. Some counties have more than one volume. An index containing each parish in the county in alphabetical order should be present at the front of the collection (see index entry for Abbeyfeale in County Limerick below). A number should be written next to each placename, this number refers to the page(s) in which the placename in question is discussed, i.e. '143–146'. For larger places, the index usually breaks the information up into thematic sections, i.e. 'Situation (location) and name, 143'; 'abbey … 143–146'. It may be difficult to read the handwriting initially but give it a minute or two for your eyes to adjust.



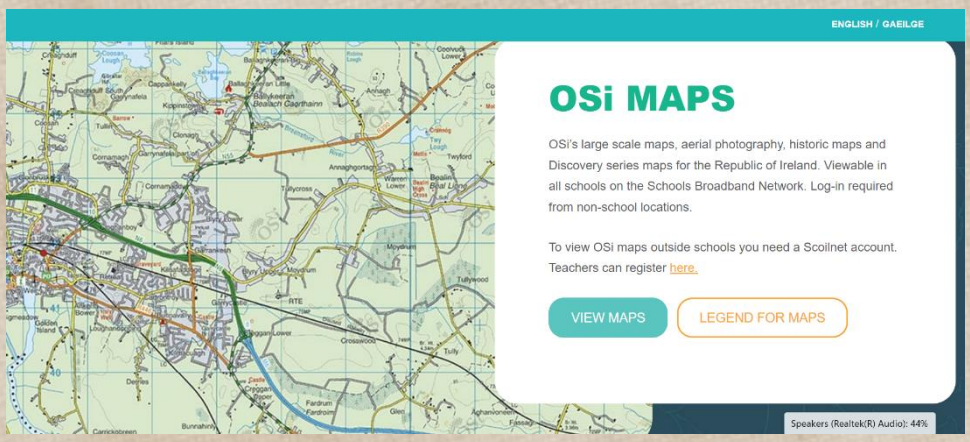


c) How my area has changed over time: comparing modern maps against the 6-inch historical maps from the 19th century

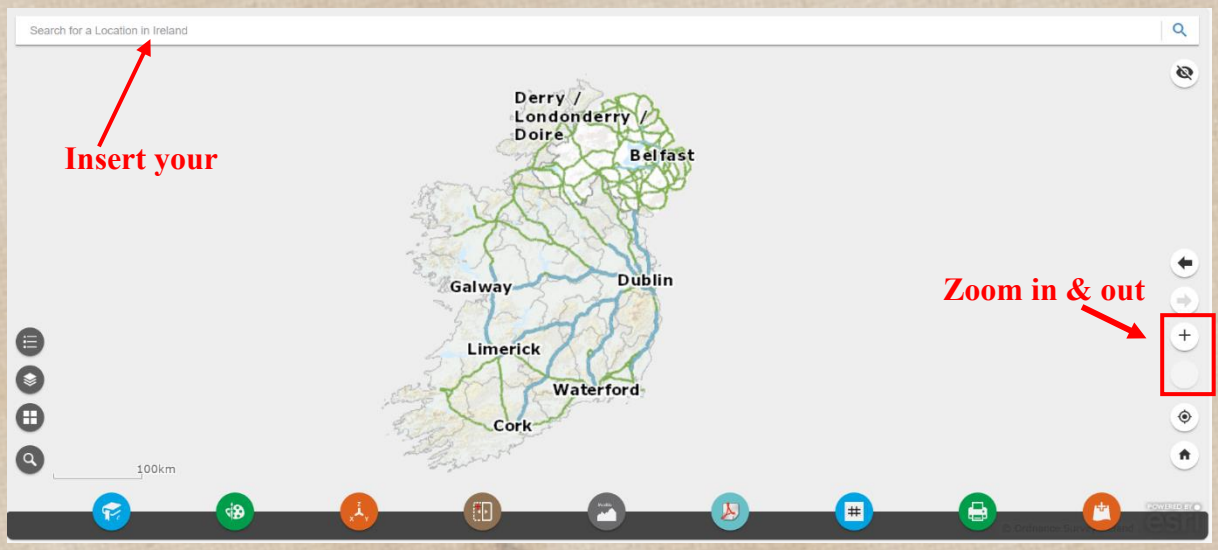
For this exercise, Scoilnet Maps (Home | Scoilnet Maps) and Tailte Éireann (Historical Maps and Data - Tailte Éireann) will be of use. Scoilnet Maps is useful for the variety of maps available; while the format of the historical maps, as displayed on Tailte Éireann, makes it much easier to compare the modern map and the historical maps because they are displayed on the same screen and automatically zoom in and out to the same scale.

(i) Scoilnet Maps (Home | Scoilnet Maps)

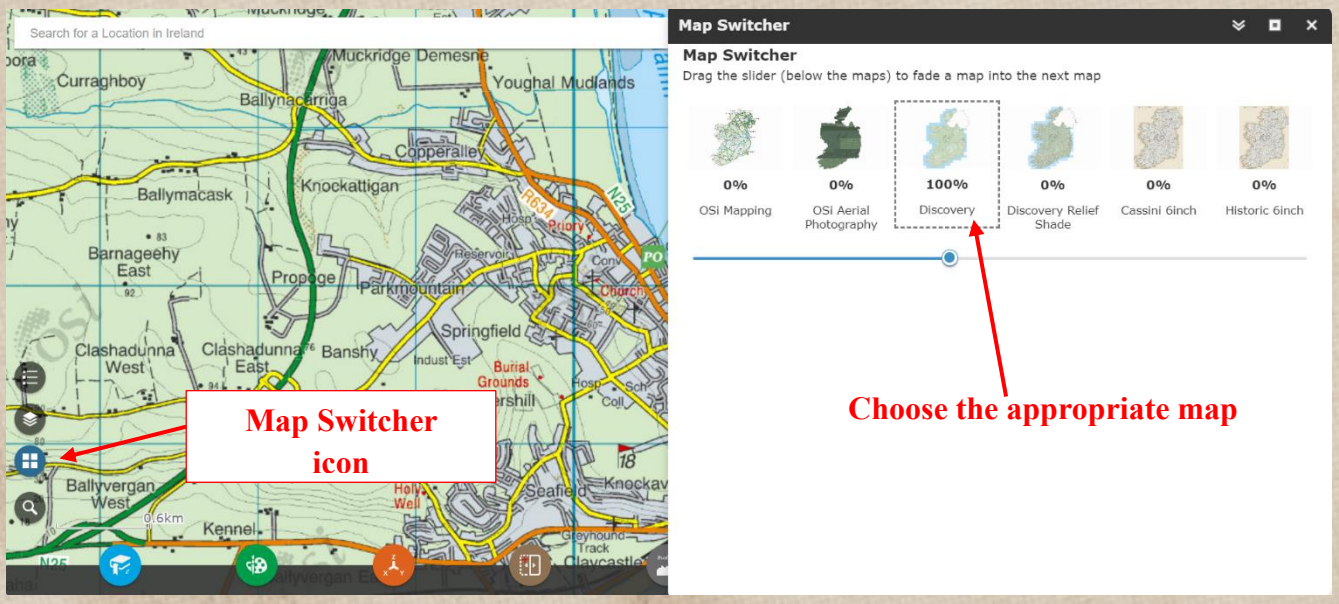
Scroll down until you see the heading 'Osi Maps' and click on the option to 'view maps'.



When you click on 'view maps', you will be presented with the map below. Insert your location into the search function or zoom into your location using the mouse or the + / - tabs on the centre right of the screen.

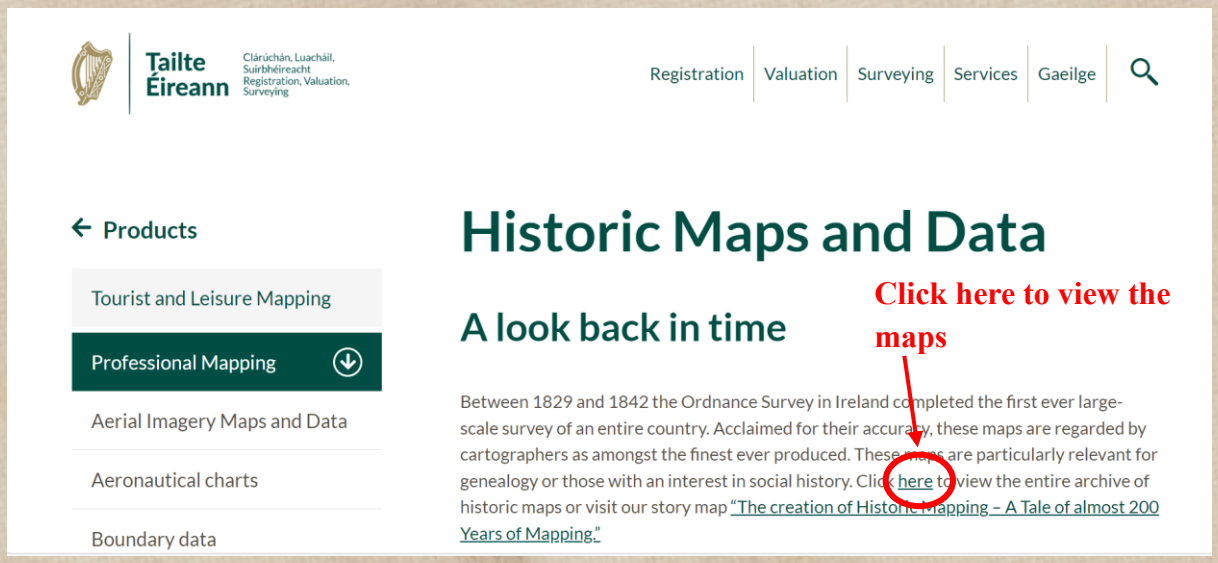


Once you find your location, choose the ‘map switcher’ icon, to alternate between the different maps available. The ‘Discovery Map’ is particularly useful to gain an understanding of the services available and historical sites in the locality. The Historic 6-inch maps, completed between 1829-1842, are also available.

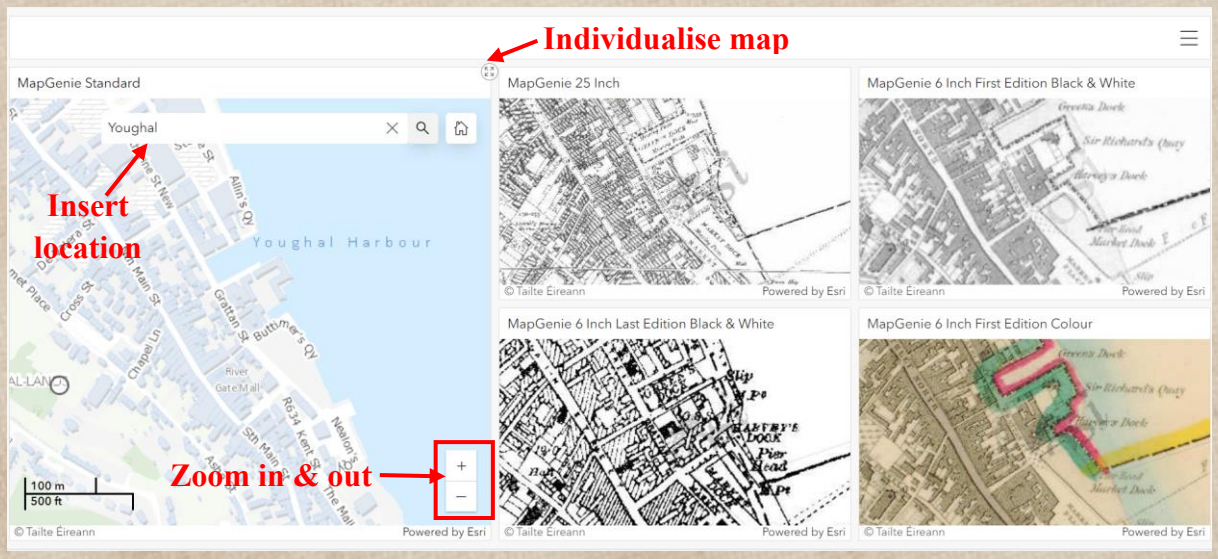


(ii) Tailte Éireann Historical Maps (Historical Maps and Data - Tailte Éireann)

At this point, it may also be beneficial to search the Tailte Éireann website because the modern and historical maps are here displayed side-by-side. Click on the ‘here’ hyperlink to view the maps. If you wish to learn more about the maps, click the hyperlink ‘The Creation of Historic Mapping’.



The maps automatically zoom in and out to the same scale. Zoom in and out using the mouse or the +/- icons. The maps can be viewed individually by hovering over the map you wish to view individually and then clicking on the zoom icon that appears in the right background of the map in question.



Identify the differences between the modern map and the historical maps: ask yourself some key questions:

- How has land-use changed? Is there an increase in urbanisation?
- Are there any historical site no longer visible on the modern map?