Gateways to Strangford & Lecale

Strangford Lough & Lecale Partnership
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After applications were received we began to focus on clusters of townlands spread throughout the AONB and gateway locations were selected within these based on their historic and agricultural features and their accessibility. Construction began in 2014 with some sites requiring the construction of a new gateway, where others were to conserve the existing gateway for the future. To celebrate this work and to engage the local communities, ‘gatherings’ were organised.

These ‘gatherings’ were informal get togethers mirroring the way in which rural communities in the past would socialise with their neighbours. These SLLP organised events were hosted by some of our gateway participants, and gave local people the opportunity to catch up with and in some cases meet other people in their community over a cup of tea.

The stories, information and photographs shared at the ‘gatherings’ give a flavour of how past rural communities lived and worked and greatly contributed to this publication.
Today, rural communities have changed significantly and influences are as much global as local. Identification with the townland is being lost and the knowledge of the traditions of the landscape such as field names and folklore are being forgotten. This booklet aims to rekindle interest between people and the traditions and histories of their landscape by highlighting several townlands around Strangford & Lecale.

Hopefully we will not completely lose this rich connection as the poet John Montague laments “the whole of the Irish landscape is a manuscript which we have lost the skill to read”.

The idea of identity and belonging is both physical and psychological; it comes from the place we live and the people around us.

In the past, before mass media and large scale mechanisation our countryside was a very different place and the townland was at the core of rural identity.

It was how people saw themselves, how they identified with their landscape, their traditions and history. Townlands inspired music and poetry, myth and legend and left an indelible mark on the lives of the people that inhabit them.

“It is this feeling, assenting, equable marriage between the geographical country and the country of the mind, whether that country of the mind takes its tone unconsciously from a shared oral inherited culture, or from a consciously savoured literary culture, or from both. It is this marriage that constitutes the sense of place in its richest possible manifestation”. (Heaney 1990:132)
A townland is the term used in Ireland for a small and ancient land division; their formations show the influence of farming, past settlements and topographical features. The townland system is of Gaelic origin and predates the county divisions which were only created in the 17th century. Townland names are noted in 12th century church documents, were recorded by Elizabethan administrators in the 15th century and were mapped by Josias Bodley in 1609 to facilitate the plantation of Ulster. They continued in use because they were tied into the way farming and land was managed and owned. It made sense to English bureaucrats to adopt these systems for taxation and the transfer of land ownership although there was an attempt to make later established townlands more uniform. Later, land valuation, ordnance surveys and the census used the townland as the method of geographical division. It was at the centre of government administration for centuries.
Most townlands are Gaelic in origin and are usually descriptive of the land or features within the land. They often include reference to wildlife or manmade features such as stone ditches and archaeological monuments.

Their boundaries usually follow permanent landscape features such as streams, rivers, bogs and ancient hedgerows. Although stone ditches are also mentioned where no appropriate natural features existed.

However, some townland names and boundaries come from Norman manors, plantation divisions, or have been invented by the Ordnance Survey.

Plantation townland names very often are named after the Planter family.

Townlands differ in size as the boundaries were often formed by the amount of agricultural produce that the named area yielded and not by their acreage as the Gaelic taxation system dictated. Indeed it is true in general that townlands in good land are smaller than those in hilly and mountainous upland regions.

The influence of the original Gaelic lordship divisions would also have an influence over the sizes of the townlands.

For the purposes of this booklet we have focused on four areas in Strangford and Lecale. Each area is different and the people have their own traditions, stories and cultural influences but what unites them all are their farming roots, their resilient nature and their sense of belonging to their townland.
The hill rises abruptly from nearly sea level to 588 feet at the summit and provides one of the most famous vantage points in the county.

While this topography is picturesque, it has also presented problems for the local inhabitants as ploughs had to be driven up incredibly steep ground which was back-breaking work.

David Gilliland of Scrabo recalls that one farm worker decided to take a pay cut from £2.50 to £2 per week to go to work in the Silent Valley as even with the longer cycle to work in the morning it was still easier than ploughing uphill at Scrabo.

Mr Gilliland also remembers that the only way to get water up from the shore to his family’s farm house was by using a pump. It was a noisy and temperamental device that wasted three gallon of water for every one gallon pumped uphill.

The dramatic landscape of Scrabo has been attractive to people for thousands of years, for its setting, its stone and for its fertile ground. In a relatively small area the landscape at Scrabo changes significantly from the shoreline of Strangford Lough to the rocky heights of the iconic Scrabo tower.

He remembers as a boy dreading being sent down to fix the pump which often jammed, as the climb back uphill was arduous.
Scrabo

Scrabo quarry was operational for hundreds of years, in fact there were five quarrying sites dotted along the promontory. Locals remember the buggies or ‘boogies’ as they are pronounced by Scrabo folk running sandstone blocks up and down the hill, the weight of the full buggy as it left the top of the hill would lift the empty buggy at the bottom in a pulley system.

The stone was then loaded onto the train at the bottom of the hill where it was used to construct many of the finest buildings in the county. Today, you can still see the large spoil heaps left from its quarrying past.

In Scrabo, barley and vegetables are grown, sheep are reared on the rocky upland and in times gone by cattle were grazed on the shore.

The Pattén farm on the shore at Scrabo in the commons townland kept cattle until the early half of the last century as they were able to graze on the shore when the tide was out. Today the shore is managed for wildlife as well as agriculture and grazing is restricted.

By far the most famous and important produce of this area is the potato. The Comber spud is celebrated annually with the Comber Potato Festival.

These potatoes are known for their high quality but also because they are the first potato crop of the year and they have been granted special status under European law much like champagne or Parma ham (Protected Geographical Indication).

Its unique qualities are because of the topography of the area and the Lough. The red sandstone and gravel mean that the soil drains quickly and heats faster than in any other part of Northern Ireland which reduces the risk of frost in the winter months.

Many of the houses in the area were traditional stone farm houses but one stands out. There is a large house at the Scrabo crossroads close to where the blacksmith’s forge was. This house was built by a ship breaker called McCausland from Portaferry. The house was constructed from salvaged material; the decking of wrecked ships was used to panel the walls and canons used as hardcore.

McCausland later sold the house and moved back to Portaferry where he was buried but the house serves as a reminder of the maritime connections in Scrabo.
Like in Scrabo the influence of the land and the Lough is very much present on its people and on how they made their lives and their living.

Wha saw the Greba lasses,
Wha saw them gan awa,
Wha saw the Greba lasses,
Ganin doon tha Hard Breid Raa.
(Ulster Scots poem)

At Greyabbey the shore brought with it a source of food, like in Scrabo and other areas around the Lough, cattle were grazed on the shore and locals remember chickens being fed on the harvested seaweed.

Greyabbey is an idyllic area with a long ecclesiastic connection evidenced in the construction of the Cistercian abbey by the Norman invader John De Courcy’s wife Affreca in the 12th century. Cistercian monks were pioneers in agriculture in the medieval period, and left written records of their practices which led to improvements in animal breeding and in higher crop yields.

The shore was also used to grow kelp and for fishing. Some early ecclesiastic fish traps have been found at Chapel Island (1/4 mile off the Greyabbey coast) and are now protected as scheduled monuments. Since the 17th century plantation, Greyabbey and its surrounding townlands have been a home to a thriving Ulster Scots community which have developed a rich tradition of poetry and music.

It was so popular as an animal food and a fertilizer that the water bailiff for the Montgomery Estate was tasked with monitoring the removal of seaweed to ensure that only those permitted were allowed to harvest and then only on the assigned days of Tuesdays and Thursdays.

Sand was also removed for use in lime mortars for building but again the amounts were limited.

Greyabbey

Ballyuranellán – (Baile Iur an Oilean)
Meaning townland of the yew of the island.

Tullykevin – (Tulaigh Chaolimhin) ‘Kevin’s hillock’

Greyabbey – (Mainistir Liath)
Named after a Cistercian abbey founded in 1193 by Affreca, wife of John de Courcy.

Ballybryan – (Baile Bhriain) ‘Brians town’
Greyabbey

Some families living in the area made a living in part, from their proximity to the shore. Before water birds were protected, they were shot on the shore to be eaten or sold at market. The McKeags and McAvoys of Mid Island grew potatoes and kept animals but supplemented their income wildfowling. The McAvoys, the last family to wildfowl on Mid Island were adept at hunting brent geese from boats and were even known to catch seals. Both species are now protected and Will McAvoy became a keen conservationist in later years.

East Down was a thriving grain growing region in the 18th and early 19th centuries because of its topography and climate. As a consequence the region saw the construction of windmills, kilns and grain stores.

The drumlin landscape of Greyabbey is perfect for windmills of which there are many dotted around the landscape. In addition to grain most farmers grew vegetables, kept animals and produced a variety of other products for sale. Ivan McFerran of Glastry remembers that his grandmother would have taken produce from the farm into the markets in Belfast.

At that time a farm would have produced milk, butter, eggs, chicken and vegetables such as potatoes, turnips and carrots. Pigs were butchered at the farmhouse and eaten or sold at market, often referred to as ‘the gentleman that paid the rent’ as they could be reared by eating household scraps. Even rabbits were caught in the fields and sold in the city. Farmers in the difficult pre-war years had to be resourceful and use all their produce and skills to help the family survive.

Like in Scrabo, local materials were used to construct their homes. The slate quarry in Tullykevin was used locally to roof the houses.

The slate was removed from pits, roughly hewn into thick slabs and fixed to the roof with wooden pegs. Today, the quarry is shut and only a few older buildings still have the Tullykevin slate.
Ardkeen

Ardkeen – (Ard Caoin)
‘Fair/pleasant height’

Ballywallon – (Baile Bhaldúin)
Baldon’s or Baldwin’s townland

Ballywadden – (perhaps Irish Baile Bhodáin ‘Wodan’s townland’; possibly earlier English Wodin(s)ton or Bodin(s)ton)
This name may represent a gaelicised Anglo-Norman name such as Wodin(s)ton or Bodin(s)ton

It also has a number of historic settlements at Castle Hill, although human occupation in the area dates back to the prehistoric era as shell middens and Neolithic arrowheads finds attest.

Castle Hill is an interesting site and as we have seen at Scrabo, certain sites are constantly reused throughout history for their setting and resources. Castle Hill, in Ardkeen townland is a known Norman site with a recorded Motte and bailey but was also likely used before this as a rath.

There is also a medieval church and a later medieval towerhouse on the site. It is perhaps unsurprising with this long tradition of human occupation that Castle Hill is known locally to be haunted by the ghosts of past inhabitants.

Ardkeen has some of the rarest natural features that the Lough offers, mud flats, a lagoon, sheltered bays, salt marshes and a marine waterfall. This area has been deemed so extraordinary that the Dorn Nature Reserve was designated by the DOE.

Ardkeen

“Then dinnae cross Ardkeen at night… Thon Castle Hill is haunted groun’;
by elves an’ ghaists it’s guarded;
There spectre Chieftains pace the fiel’s’
(Ballads of Down, Savage-Armstrong 1901)
Ardkeen

While East Down is perfect for windmills, the Ardkeen area was known for watermills. There have been three known watermills in the area. At Ballywallon there was a water driven flax mill, opened in 1834 at the rear of the bishops corn mill with which it shared its water supply, described by contemporary sources as having three stocks. However, this mill ceased operations in 1855, after which it was used as a store.

In the late 1800’s steam flax mills are established at Ardkeen and Glastry but by the turn of the century the growth of flax declined with pre scutched flax being imported from Belgium.

However, the Ardkeen mill was opened temporarily to aid the war effort during WW1. As mentioned Ardkeen also had a grain mill for grinding oats, the last man to work there was called Miller McGrath, he apparently had many callers to the kiln during drying, where yarns were told and cards were played, to while away the hours while turning and raking the grain.

Another feature of the landscape around Strangford and Lecale is the lime kiln. There is a very fine example in Ballywaddan on John Birch’s land. Lime kilns were introduced to Britain by the Romans and continued to be used up to the 18th and 19th centuries, for the production of quicklime for agricultural purposes.

Lime was used to improve acidic soil and grasslands for cattle grazing. In addition, lime was used to make mortars and for white washing rural buildings.

The Ardkeen area was also the scene of many ploughing matches in the past, a tradition viewed with a great deal of pride and competition in farming communities throughout the country.

Frank Savage from the abbacy represented Portaferry young farmers club at the first international ploughing match in Limavady in 1938. Ploughing matches such as this are recorded as far back as 1821 in Greyabbey where a match took place on Robert McKee’s farm at Blackabbey, the winner receiving a prize of £1.

The first recorded ploughing match in Portaferry organised by the Young Farmers Club was in 1932, held in Col. Nugent’s Field at the Dam. The 1933 match was held at the Bishops Mill in Ballywalloon.

This practice is also recorded at St. John’s Point in Lecale where a huge event took place on the lands of Captain Browne of Janeville, in January 1849 between the tenants of Major Beauclerk, Rev. Mr. Hall, and Capt. Browne.
Guided by the will of God, the oxen bore the saint’s body ‘to Dún Lethglasse, where Patrick lies buried’ (Muirchú (Bieler) 120 II 11 (9)).

The land of Lecale is very fertile; grains such as corn and barley were grown in abundance particularly in places like Raholp. Vincent Curran of Raholp recalls a large three storey grain store in Ballintogher townland that operated a pulley system to hoist the bags of grain up to the top. References to the grange at Ballintogher date back to the 17th century.

Flax was grown around Annacloy as linen manufacturing continued in that area into the 20th century. Several mills in Lecale were dual functioning for corn and flax. Potatoes were also produced from farms in Raholp and were sold to Elliots in Strangford.

In Kilclief, sheep and cattle were reared and much of the land here and around Killough and Sheepland was rented by the Mourne Boys who came to the area to grow potatoes.

In Killough the principle export from the quays were corn and potatoes and the town thoroughfare Castle Street comprises of an eclectic mix of stores and homes of all scales.

At the turn of the 20th Century this street contained 11 stables, 6 cow houses, 4 calf houses, 1 dairy, 8 piggeries, and 12 fowl houses. Before 1763 there was no Act of Enclosure and only a few field boundaries were in existence. Open fields prevailed and so livestock were often lost.

The finder of these animals would drive them to the pound in Killough located at the site of Scordin’s well, (later the Coastguards Lifeboat Yard) and notify the owner of their whereabouts. The owner would pay the keeper a fine for the animals grazing however if the animal was not claimed it was sold with the proceeds going to the finder and the keeper.
To transport the stones from the quarry they used their ingenuity and floated them down the Quoile. However the boats kept overturning at a meander near to Inch and so the river was rechanneled; a canal was also built beside Rath Celtair to allow them to be brought as close as possible to the building site.

Lecale much like Strangford has a large percentage of the province's built heritage, one of the most dominant historic buildings in the area is the towerhouse. These were medieval upper class homes, a status symbol but also with defensive characteristics. There is a fine example of this style of house in Kilclief, as with the others it is close to the shore with a view of any approaching sea or land traffic.

The Kilclief Towerhouse is believed to be the earliest of its kind in county Down, built by Bishop John Sely in 1413, although a scandal caused him to lose his post.

Animals could be brought to be sold in Downpatrick on the Belfast and County Down Railway which had a cattle beach adjacent to Fair Green.

The railway ran through the Kennedy family's land at Inch and John Kennedy of Annacloy, recalls the 'sunburst' style iron gates that marked the crossings farmers used to move cattle across the line.

The land on the marshes at Inch tended to be waterlogged although this was more because of heavy rain than the high tides and were only really good for summer grazing. It was the responsibility of the Edgar family who still live at the Quoile Bridge to lower the old floodgates before the high tide.

Like in Scrabo and to a smaller extent at Tullykevin, local stone was also quarried from Cargagh near Annacloy. Downpatrick’s new gaol was built with Cargagh stone between 1824 and 1830 by John Lynn of Downpatrick.

In the area around Downpatrick the farms are predominantly livestock, usually cattle. The centre for animal trading here was the Down County Livestock Mart which was formerly located on Market Street.
Field Names

It is a fundamental instinct for people to name their land and give an identity to it. In the past people were intimately acquainted with the land that they lived on. Every rocky outcrop, stream and bump in the land was given a name, the meaning of many remains unknown to us today. Not only townlands were named but individual fields and areas were given an identity unique to them and their features, many of these names were given at the original time of enclosure.

Here are some examples of the names from Strangford and Lecale. In Scrabo, there are field’s called the Heron’s Meadow and the Bomb Fields, so called after this area was blitzed in WW2. In Greyabbey there is the Hatchet Field, believed to be named because of its shape. The Long Shot, is a curved field named because it was used for shooting wildfowl. Easter Hill and Cuddy’s Hill is where eggs were traditionally rolled at Easter.

Raholp features names like the Spikes, Rooney’s Field, Rough Field, Blacklands and 8 Acre. Tobermoney and Clogher have names like the Dam Park, the Stoney Hollow, the Hanging Back and the Ska Now.

Clearly, the origin of these names in some cases is obvious but with others the meanings have been lost and the correct spellings are unknown as these names were passed on orally.

Local names were accompanied by local pronunciation. A failure to pronounce a name correctly would identify you as an outsider. The Ordnance survey memoir of 1834 remarked that locals disapproved of the new spellings and pronunciations of their townland names. Today, field names are being lost as fields are amalgamated and official documents assign field’s numbers rather than names. As these names are lost we are losing a part of our heritage.

Boundaries

Northern Ireland has the highest density of field boundaries in the UK, generally these are made up of either hedgerows or stone wall or ‘ditches’. Stone ditches have stood for hundreds of years and were generally created by clearing stone from the fields and is therefore more associated with hilly and upland townlands.

Any available stone was used and it is not uncommon to see slabs of stone that were undoubtedly taken from nearby archaeological monuments to build a stone ditch.

80% of the hedgerows in Co. Down are hawthorn and these hedgerows contain over 60% of NI’s broadleaved trees, the common hedgerow trees are ash and alder.

The removal of hedgerows has removed some of the visible indications of the ancient townland boundary as well as having an effect on the wildlife that use them as shelter.

Much like the gateways, changes in farming practice associated with the use of large scale mechanisation of farming have involved the removal of these hedgerows. Fortunately, more recently, there has been a move towards protecting existing hedgerow and replanting.
Traditional gateways are becoming a rare architectural feature in our landscape. These gates are often hundreds of years old but many remain in good condition scattered throughout the countryside. The stone pillars are large and can be round, square or solid granite slabs dependant on the region. The tradition of constructing pillars like this is believed to be an ancient practice but most of the pillars visible in our landscape today are more likely to have been built within the last few hundred years.

Traditionally, lime mortars were used and many were whitewashed which made them stand out in a background of green fields. Professor Estyn Evans records that pillars at the entrance to farms were often described as “man and wife of the house and that one of the pair may have a flat top on which it is said the fairies like to dance”.

In other areas, the pillar tops are conical with a pointed top and it is believed in local folklore that they are made this way to discourage mischievous fairies from entering.

These pillars were accompanied by iron gates to keep stock enclosed in the field, although it is clear when viewing these gates that they are so much more. They were a status symbol to the landowner and a display of skill and craftsmanship by the blacksmith.

As you travel around the countryside it is clear that styles of gates change significantly from region to region. In the past each parish had a couple of blacksmiths who would have been responsible for creating gate styles that would identify him in the area.

In addition to creating scrolling and ornamentation to identify their work they often stamped their gates with a small design or initials.

While restoring an original iron gate in Clogher townland in Downpatrick, the original gate was stamped with the initials J.S and with a flower motif.

The blacksmith restoring the gate also noted how many different pieces of iron were fire welded together to create the gate. This seems to support records that describe the reuse of iron tyres and wheel hoops to make the gates.

Sometimes, large landowners would commission the blacksmith to create gates unique to them to advertise their ownership of land. This can be seen at St. John’s point where Major General Browne had an ornate ‘B’ added to the gates on his land.

Today, many of these original gates are discarded, lying against hedgerows, replaced by larger mass produced hollow bar aluminium gates.

Changes in farming technology have led to larger machinery that requires a much larger entrance. Sometimes, one pillar has been kept when the gateway is widened and the other destroyed.

In some cases for example in Killough, pragmatically, the widened gateway is replaced by two old iron gates (see page 12).
His shop was built against a bank,
A tottering old eyesore;
Once through the roof a bullock fell,
Landing safely on the floor.

Some funny things he would tell,
As he blew the iron hot,
How Edward Bell once asked him
To handle an old chamber pot.

Vincent Curran of Raholp remembers children playing tricks on Pat. At the back of his forge the roof was at ground level and local mischievous children used to get a sack, dip it in the water and cover his chimney and wait for an angry Pat to come running out of his smoke filled forge.

In the past the blacksmith was a very important figure in the community. His forge would have been a hub of activity, as David Gilliland from Scrabo recalls “you went to the blacksmith for everything”.

Anything made of metal from farming tools and equipment to household implements to cartwheels were made by and repaired by the blacksmith. Before the times of motorised vehicles coaches would stop at the forge to water and reshoe the horse.

They would deliver the post to the community and deliver the latest news and gossip from the neighbouring townlands. He was considered the man ‘in the know’ and would have been known by everyone in the community and often held in high esteem.

One such man was Pat Crangle, known locally as ‘the Lord Mayor of Raholp’.

The poem entitled ‘Raholp’ by Joe Fitzsimons and published in the Down Recorder in the 1960’s recalls the position Pat had in the local community.

“Like its village blacksmith,
These trades are almost dead;
Where once the anvil stood,
Is now a road bank instead.
This Pat was more than blacksmith,
He was kind of town Lord Mayor,
Local news was fully debated,
As swiftly as it reached him there.

His shop was built against a bank,
A tottering old eyesore;
Once through the roof a bullock fell,
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He recalls that if the range in the schoolhouse was broken, Pat was called to fix it and all the offending boys would hide their heads for fear of Pats retribution if you were recognised.

Jim Porter of Tobermoney recalls Samuel Seed, the last blacksmith in his townland. Again he was a character who was renowned for his longevity. Mr Porter tells of how once it got round that Samuel had died, so two local men called down to the house to attend the wake and pay their respects and as they walked in the door got the shock of their lives as they saw Samuel sitting bolt upright on his chair smoking his pipe. Samuel in fact, lived well into his 90’s and as he had no children the forge closed when he died, sometime around the First World War.
Types of agriculture change over time reflecting the changes in market needs. Flax was once grown in huge quantities to support the linen industry which also supplied the ship building industry in Belfast. However, as other materials became cheaper and there was less demand from a declining ship building industry, this crop was no longer grown in many regions. However, there was a small resurgence in flax growing during the Second World War, Willie John Fitzsimons of Raholp recalls that the government offered grants for farms to grow flax.

People would join together to gather the flax where it would then have been put into water in the bogs or a flax dam. Vincent Curran remembers cartloads of stone were brought in to put on top of the flax to weigh it down. After that, it would be taken out, ‘loosed’ and spread over the fields to dry, then gathered in stacks and brought to the scutch mill in Annsborough. After the war time need for flax diminished once again it disappeared from the fields to be replaced by corn and barley.

Farms in East Down benefitted from the rich fertile soil and grew corn, barley and wheat, reared cattle and sheep and grew vegetables. While carrots, turnips and cabbage were grown, the potato was probably the most abundant crop. Potato was often grown in rotation with barley.

Field boundaries have been removed to merge fields and old gateways are blocked off or removed. Entrances have been widened to accommodate large machines that are now an integral part of modern farming.

The new tractors and machinery have altered the appearance of the landscape. The farming industry has changed considerably over the years. In the past there would have been small farms and each would have farmed a small number of fields. Now, farm numbers are falling, and the surviving farms are larger.

The farming industry has been deeply woven into the fabric of the townlands. The official leases and ownerships of farmland were identified using this land unit and we still see this in modern farms and in settlement patterns. It is the people who live and work on the land who make up the backbone of the rural townland. It is the people who live and work on the land who make up the backbone of the rural townland.

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Threshing Day

Regardless of the area, one occasion that everyone recalls is threshing day. This activity brought the whole community together in a reciprocal relationship to help separate the grain from the chaff and straw.

Cereals were cut either by hand with a scythe or a reaper or binder. The cut grain was then stoked in the field to dry. When dry, it was stored in the yard for the mill to come.

A story from Ardkeen recalls the purchasing of a threshing mill and steam traction engine by John Dorrian in 1902. It was delivered by boat to the Belfast docks and then driven the 29 miles to Ardkeen which involved filling the 8 tonne engine with 200 gallons of water carried in buckets from horse troughs in the city.

William Dorrian walked 100 yards in front of the engine carrying a red flag to warn approaching traffic. He then hired out the machine to farms at threshing season up the peninsula. The Dorrians steam engine was eventually replaced by a Fordson tractor in 1942 but in 1955 the mill was abandoned completely.

The mill man would come early in the morning to light the fire to get the steam engine started followed by the neighbours, often taking their breakfast with the host family before starting a long, hard day of work. ‘Neighbouring’ as it was called bonded the people of the townlands together in a common goal with the only pay the return of the favour when the machine went to their farm.

It would take at least a dozen people to complete the threshing after which the seed was collected and the chaff was used as cattle bedding, although in earlier times it was used to stuff mattresses.

It was an exciting time for children and adults alike as the normally quiet farm was buzzing with people, activity and the noise from the mill’s engine. Neighbours would sit and eat every meal of the day together, exchanging stories and news.

Stew and fresh soda bread topped with homemade butter was a popular choice to feed the hungry workers. In Ireland, this gathering would also have been a time of matchmaking between the young men and women of the community.

The following day, the farmers would once again assemble, with their teams of horses and hayracks, at a different farm for another threshing. This continued until everyone in the ring had threshed all of their grain. Just as the thresher had replaced the earlier hand flails, the threshing mill was replaced in more recent years by the combine harvester.
This hard working and resilient attitude was not uncommon in the townlands. Ivan McFerran of Glastry recalls being told the story of his aunt’s births. Sadie, the eldest, was born when his mother was returning home from market in Belfast.

As her labour pains increased, she realised she wouldn’t make it back home in time so she called in on a relative in Newtownards and had the eldest girl there. While pregnant with her youngest daughter, Ivan’s grandmother again felt the pains of labour while out working in the fields and could not make it back to the farmhouse to give birth.

While it is true to say in the past there was a great deal of community unity where people knew their neighbours well and worked together regularly, it was a harsh life at times. All members of the family were working out in the field from a young age. Without modern safety features, machinery (much of which was horse driven) could be very dangerous.

Rebecca McFerran of Ballyobegan was only 23 when she was involved in an accident on the family farm in 1939.

Rebecca had gone out to help in cutting turnips in the field and while working had gotten her long hair caught in the belt of a machine. Unable to free herself, her scalp was torn from her head. It took Rebecca a year to recover from the accident, but this did not deter her from farm work and she continued to take a full and active role in the running of the farm.

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Rebecca was born there in the turnip field in 1917. She gave birth to fourteen children in all and this story reflects the hardy nature of women at the time.

Children were generally born at home, and so people very often would have been born, lived, worked and died in their townland.

Therefore, it is perhaps unsurprising that people had a deep connection for their landscape.
The war had an effect on the rural townlands and as the following stories show, it was not only in increased agricultural production. Easter Tuesday in 1942, Strangford Lough was accidentally bombed during the blitz. The bombs fell on Scrabo and the whole hillside was ablaze.

One local story tells of a mare and a newborn foal on Heron’s farm (now Donnelly’s). When the bomb fell, it hit the stable that held the horses.

The next day all that was left of the mare was its tail but the foal was left alive with not a mark on it.

The South Island at Greyabbey was used as target practice for the allied airforce to drop anti-tank bombs. Sometimes the pilots missed their target and bombs were known to have fallen on Mid Island and mainland Ballyuranellan. During the war, rationing also lead to a rise in wildfowling as families attempted to bolster their small food portions.

Farming was a family affair and children were very much a part of the work force. They were often excused from school in rural communities to take part in potato gathering in October and, in the weeks leading up to Christmas children would stay at home to help with plucking and preparing the chicken and turkeys for sale.

Many recall that the school had to close for potato gathering as no children would have attended while such an important task was taking place on the farm.

Vincent Curran of Raholp recalls the many chores done by country children, gathering sticks for the fire, collecting eggs and churning the butter.

Vincent remembers churning the butter until his arms ached, then it would be passed to his mother and so on, taking turns until the solid butter formed and his mother would shape it into patties between two paddles.

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Stories of wildcats, ghosts and superstitions are prevalent throughout County Down, as indeed they are throughout the whole of the Island. Mr Porter of Tobermoney remembers the field (named the Hanging back) that the reputed last wild cat was shot in in the 1740’s. Throughout Ulster tales of wild cats roaming the land and attacking people date back hundreds of years.

However, tales of fairies seem to be the most frequent through Strangford & Lecale. Fairy trees are a common feature of the townland landscape; these are generally single hawthorn trees, usually placed in the middle of a field, beside an archaeological monument or a holy well. The fairy folk were mischievous and sometimes malevolent creatures that would mete out punishment to any who offended them.

Many of the rural superstitions, myths and stories were passed on at gatherings where before television, storytelling was the main means of entertainment.

Tobermoney and Clogher townland residents (Downpatrick) recall a famous character called James Rooney, the Tobermoney poet. He was a big man, a born entertainer who wore braces, running his thumb up and down them as he recounted his tales, histories and poems.

His stories made him a much loved local figure and a welcome guest at any social gatherings. In his time he became somewhat famous as in the 1950’s he had a regular spot on BBC radio.

The ‘fairy king’ Macananty is said to have lived at Scrabo. One particular offence to the fairies was to cut down their trees. A BBC news report from 1964 reveals that belief in the fairies was still alive and well in Annacloy at this time. Local residents were in uproar over the removal of a fairy thorn during the construction of the road from Annacloy to Ballynahinch, one lady interviewed claimed that her grandmother had seen a fairy and that the fairies would take their revenge on whoever removed the thorn.

The blacksmith craft has long been tied to superstition. Blacksmiths were believed to have been taught the secret of forging iron by the fairy folk and so have inherited supernatural powers.

Greyabbey locals remember that the quenching water blacksmiths used to cool forged metal was collected as it was believed to be a cure for warts.

It was also believed that blacksmiths had the power to curse people by turning their anvil upside down and repeating the name of their victim three times!

‘Playing where a bewitched blackthorn’s growing
Beside a pile of fairy whinstone rocks
That no man dreams of quarrying—not knowing
What’s hid beneath, who here at midnight walks
(Patrick Kavanagh ‘March is a silversmith’)

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‘Macananty, Macananty,
Un’ernayth the Strangford Sea,
An’ ye mock the mason’s hammer
An’ the quarry divil’s-clamour’
(Ballads of Down, Savage-Armstrong 1901)
Throughout Strangford & Lecale everyone recalls the local dances. In Tobermoney there was a hall near the blacksmiths where the local people would use to play cards and to hold dances.

Jim Porter recalls that all the local young people would take their bikes or walk down to the hall to dance and have craic and go courting. Boys would give the girls they liked a lift home on the front bar of the bike. In Saul, Sunday night dances were held in the parochial hall.

Willie John Fitzsimons remembers ballroom dancing at the hall by some people in the community influenced by the dance halls of Belfast. Mostly, venues for socialising in local communities were barns where anyone who played music would be invited to play the fiddle or sing.

There are very strong musical traditions in Greyabbey carried on by people like Ivan McFerran, Gibson Young and Rosemary Woods who displayed their talents at some of the gatherings; their music is very influenced by the land and the farming traditions.
Mechanisation & Changing Times

Our rural townlands have seen a great deal of change over the years from plantations, enclosure acts and the effects of changes in industry and technology. We can see from the industrial revolution that the new large scale mechanisation and manufacturing of industry was causing huge changes in our towns and cities.

However, these changes also had a significant impact on the countryside in two ways. New and more effective farming equipment lead to a fall in the need for casual agricultural labour and a drop in wages and the growing industry in the cities lead to many tenant farmers and farm hands leaving the country to work in the new mills and factories of Belfast.

Many farmers interviewed during the course of this project recall that they noticed a stark change in rural communities from the beginning of the Second World War and cite this as the beginning of modernisation in the countryside after which many of the older practices and traditions began to die out.

In the 1920’s and 1930’s motorised transport was very rare and most farm work was carried out by hand with the aid of horses and with the annual hiring of steam threshing equipment at harvest. Farms were small and living conditions in small one storey cottages were not ideal.

The townland system suited this slow paced life where people generally walked or cycled or used a horse and cart. People would have stopped to speak to their neighbours as they travelled as many recall the post being delivered on foot. Jim Porter from Tobermoney recalls the blacksmiths nephew delivered the post as a young man and that he rarely used the roads assigned to him by the post office but used his knowledge of the fields and farms to take shortcuts through the fields.

There were a series of stiles in the area that local people used to take such shortcuts for visiting neighbours and getting about. For the most part this intimate acquaintance with the local landscape is something that motorised transport has removed. In times gone past the townlands were where you were born, where you lived, where you worked and where you were buried. Every part of life was carried out in a few acres of land.

Change is inevitable and not always unwelcome as with this change in lifestyle came an increased prosperity, better health care and more choice for the younger generation but there was a certain price to be paid for this change. Modernisation meant that farms became larger, old gateways abandoned and hedgerows removed to make way for large machines that required less manpower.

Many turned to pastoral farming as this required no harvesting and did not require hiring temporary staff and using expensive machinery. More people moved to the towns and cities for work or commuted there, losing that connection with living and working on the land. Traditions like ‘neighbouring’ and local barn dances slowly faded away, and the stories and knowledge of the townlands were being passed on less and less over the following decades.
The “Townlands Campaign” emerged to protest against the changes. It was comprised of individuals from different religious and political backgrounds that saw the omission of townlands from the postal service as an attack on the heritage of rural communities. They argued that the townland was central to their sense of belonging and a vital connection with the rich cultural heritage of Northern Ireland.

One further mechanism of modernisation was the introduction of the postcodes, effectively eradicating the townland names from all postal correspondence. Before 1972, townlands were the method of addressing post throughout the island.

However, in this year the Royal Mail started to use house numbers, road names, and postcodes in Northern Ireland and the townlands were seen as “superfluous information”. All counties fell under the new system, except for Fermanagh which is currently undergoing its transition from townlands to post codes.

To many people the house numbers and road names were new and unfamiliar and were seen as sometimes nonsensical changes implemented by officials who knew nothing about the importance of place names and townlands. It is perhaps unsurprising that communities, particularly in rural areas were opposed to the erosion of their townland identity with this new system.

The action highlighted that although modern life had changed many of the ways we lived, people still identify with their rural landscape and that the townland was the tangible expression of this sense of belonging. Since then organisations such as the Federation for Ulster Local Studies have focused their work on the importance of townlands and rural life.

In 2001 the assembly passed a motion to assert “that this assembly calls on each Government Department to adopt a policy of using and promoting townland names in all Government correspondence and official documents”.

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Acknowledgements

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www.bbphotographic.co.uk

To find your townland name go to SLLP’ website and download our townland maps of Strangford & Lecale

Facebook: strandfordloughandlecale
Twitter: strangfrdlecale
Website: www.strangfordlough.org

Gateways to Strangford & Lecale