

# Finding farming in our placenames

TEAGASC researchers have used Irish placenames to find evidence of past farming activity.

Photo credit: Catriona Boyle

Mapping historic land use can be a challenge where spatially explicit data are limited. Yet we know of significant changes to the Irish agricultural landscape from archaeological and historical records. A useful source for former land use is toponyms (or placenames). Our countryside is replete with specific names that recall physical, cultural, historical, or functional characteristics for a location. Often different characteristics are coded into a single name. Frequently, placenames include a reference to agricultural use. Placenames were standardised by the Ordnance Survey in the 19th century, but many are of far greater antiquity. Frequently, they are simply Irish names spelt phonetically. This has preserved many names and pronunciations, even where the original meaning of a word has been lost. Placenames are an invaluable cultural inheritance, not least because they provide a window to how our ancestors viewed and conceptualised their landscape.

## Mapping farming references in placenames

In a recent Teagasc Map of the Month, an initiative by the Agri-Food Business and Spatial Analysis Department, Jesko Zimmermann and Rob O'Hara used townland placenames to map certain references to arable farming. We have now expanded this map to include a greater number of terms, for specific arable crops, land measures, land use, and references to pasture and livestock farming (**Figure 1**). Our sources for this map were P.W. Joyce's *The Origin and History of Irish Names of Places* (1869), as well as the current online placename database (<http://www.logainm.ie>).

A map of current townlands was obtained from Ordnance Survey

Ireland in a geographic information system- (GIS) ready format, which included a record of the Irish names (not present in all cases). The list of Irish townland names was cross-referenced with our list of agricultural terms. The current agricultural landscape was based on information in the Irish Land Parcel Identification System (LPIS), where dominant land use (grassland, cropland or other, between 2000 and 2016) was identified and proportionally mapped onto a 2.5 km x 2.5 km grid to ensure anonymity. In the accompanying map, points represent previous agricultural use based on the placenames, and the underlying grid shows current agriculture. The points are colour coded by reference type, while the grid colour represents the ratio of cropland to grassland. The transparency of each grid square visualises the total prevalence of agricultural land use reported in the LPIS.

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Burial mount on a tilled field at Newgrange.

### Findings

This, of course, is a very rough proxy for former land use but can still provide insights. The map shows evidence for the mixed farming practices that were more common in previous centuries, with placenames relating to arable farming (blue points) intermingled with pastoral placenames and found far outside the current extent of arable farming. References to types of arable field are quite common, whereas names recording specific crop types are comparatively rare. Pasture and meadows are abundant in the north midlands and Galway-Mayo. Areas of extensive bog or mountain have fewer agricultural names, but they are not completely absent. Summer pasture (booleying) would have been common in these areas. There are several places that are quite specific types in describing livestock (e.g., calves, cows, heifers or bulls), reflecting the deep intrinsic nature of pastoral farming as a status symbol within ancient Irish culture. Both specific and generic terms for farming are found all over the country.

Mapping former land use in this way is an interesting exercise, but it has limits. Agriculture was ubiquitous in the pre-industrial era, so an absence of specific farming-related references does not mean that agriculture was not being practised. Rather, there were other characteristics at a location that were considered more important when naming the place. The densest concentration of agricultural references is in the mid-west region, while in Munster and Leinster there are fewer original placenames relating to farming. References to cropland in the eastern part of the country are uncommon, an area where cropland is now very prevalent.

Original placenames may also not have survived or their meaning has been lost. There are historical reasons why this is the case; a succession of wars in the 17th century left the country depopulated so former placenames may have been forgotten or were renamed by new settlers. There was even an attempt in that century to legislate against “barbarous and uncouth” Irish placenames being used but this, thankfully, was largely ignored. New placenames were adopted over time, reflecting new ownership, or where new agricultural or industrial practices developed.

As such, the information found in placenames, while useful, only represents one part in the complex puzzle that is agricultural history in Ireland.

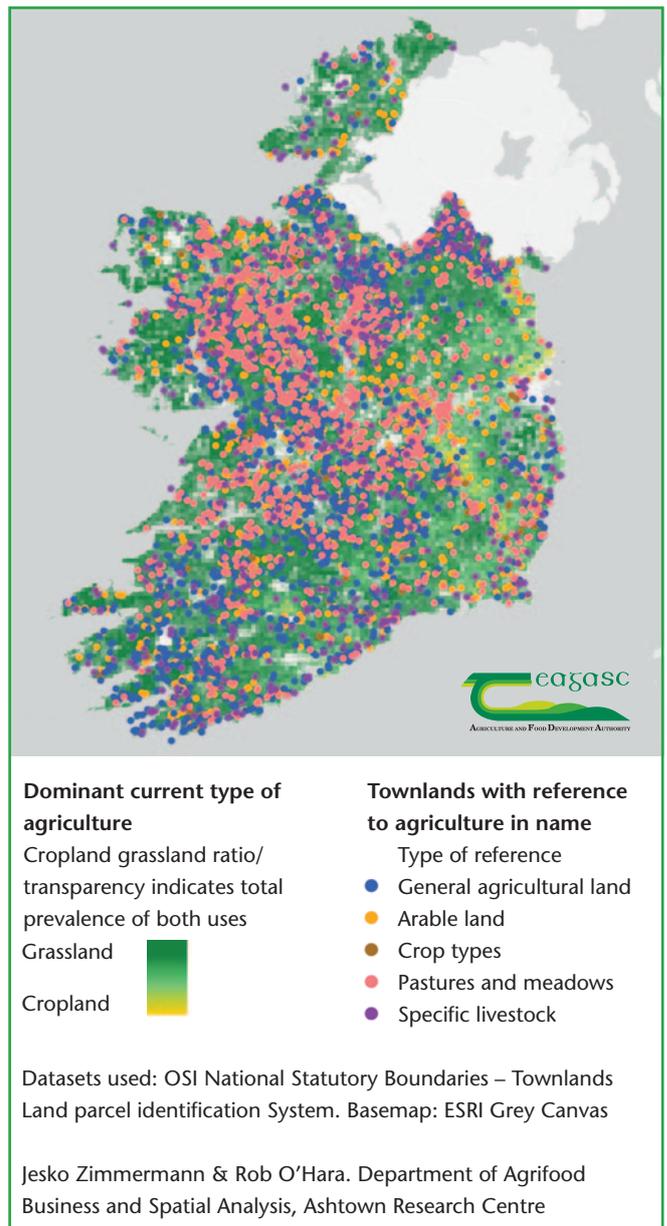


FIGURE 1: Map showing specific arable crops, land measures, land use, and references to pasture and livestock farming in placenames.

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