

...Coolkeeragh¹...Ardnagrohery²...Ringaskiddy³...

Irish placenames can seem like poetry, a puzzle...or a joke! Learning a little bit of Irish can help you unlock the meaning of the placenames around you.

Irish placenames are mostly natural, describing the landscape or geographical features. In learning about Irish placenames, it's a good idea to start with the obvious features you can see:

Natural Features

mountain, hill, beach, river, field, lake, rock.

Mountain in Irish is Sliabh. In English, this is often Slieve, like in Slieve Donard (Domhangart's mountain).

Hill in Irish is Cnoc. In English, this is often Knock, like in Knockmore (big hill).

Beach in Irish is Trá. In English, this is often Tra, like in Tramore (big beach).

River in Irish is Abhainn. In English, this is often Aw or Owen, like in Owenbeg (little river).

Field in Irish is Achadh (although there are many names for different types of field). In English this is often Agha, like in Aghabog (soft field).

Lake in Irish is Loch. In English, this is often Lough, like in Lough Eske (Fish Lake).

¹ Coolkeeragh – Cúil Chaorach – Nook of the Sheep

² Ardnagrohery – Ard na gCrochaire – the Height of the Hangman

³ Ringaskiddy – Rinn an Scídigh – Scídoch's headland

Rock in Irish is Carraig (although there are many names for different types of rock). In English, this is usually carrick or carrig, like in Carrickbeg (little rock).

Made in Ireland

The built environment is important in Irish placenames too: town, church, fort, road.

Town in Irish is Baile (although it also means townland or homestead). In English this is often Bally or Balli, like in Ballycastle (Town of the Castle).

Church in Irish is Cill. In English, this is often Kill or Kil-, like in Kilcormac (Church of Cormac)

Fort in Irish is Dún. In English, this is often Dun, like in Dunbeg (Small Fort).

Road in Irish is Bóthar. In English, this is often Boher, like in Boherboy (Yellow Road).

Add some Adjectives!

It's useful to learn some basic adjectives, for example:

big	mór	more
small	beag	beg
long	fada	fad or fadda
black	dubh	duff
green	glas	glass
white	bán	bane

Remember that adjectives in Irish are usually placed after the noun they are describing, so instead of Big Hill you have Knockmore – Cnoc Mhor – literally Hill Big.

Result

If you can crack these, suddenly Irish placenames open up to you.

And there's more...

Later you can start learning about how myths, animals, trees, plants and people all left their mark in the placenames of Ireland. Check out the table below, which covers the most common elements in Irish placenames.

Common Elements in Irish Placenames

Feature	English form	Irish original	English placename	Irish name	Translation
field	Agha	achadh	Aghaboe	Achadh Bhó	Field of the Cows
high	Ard	ard	Ardara	Ard an Rátha	Height of the Fort
ford	Ath	áth	Athlone	Áth Luain	Luan's Ford
town (or mouth of a river)	Bally	baile	Ballybought	Baile Bocht	Poor Homestead
mouth of a river	Bel	béal	Belfast	Béal Feirste	Mouth of the Sandbank
small	beg	beag	Magherabeg	Machaire Beag	Small Plain
peak or point	Ban-/Ben-/Bin	beann	Bengore	Beann Gabhar	Peak of the Goats

bottom (or mouth of a river)	Bun	bun	Bunnacurry	Bun an Churraigh	Bottom of the Swamp
mouth of a river (or bottom)	Bun	bun	Bundoran	Bun Dobhráin	Mouth of the Little Water
plot of land or tillage	Capp	ceapach	Capparoe	Ceapach Rua	Red Plot of Land
rock	Carry/Carrick/Carrig	carraig	Carrickmore	Carraig Mhór	Big Rock
meadow	Clon	cluain	Clontibret	Cluain Tiobrad	Meadow of the Well
hollow	Coom	com/cúm	Coomnagoppul	Com na gCapall	Hollow of the Horses
small round hill	Cor	corr	Cornafulla	Corr na Fola	Hill of the Blood
back (of the head – usually a small hill)	Cul-/Cool	cúl	Coolboy	Cúl Buí	Yellow Hill
corner or nook	Cul-/Cool	cuil	Coolgreany	Cúil Ghréine	Nook of the Sun
Oak grove	Derry	doire	Derry	Doire	Oak grove
church	Dona	domhnach (from the Latin, dominicum – church)	Donaghpatrick	Domhnach Phádraig	Patrick's Church
bridge	Drohed	droichead	Drogheda	Droichead	Bridge of the

ridge or hillock	Drom-/Drum-/drum	droim	Dundrum	Átha Dún Droma	ford Fort of the Ridge
fort	Dun	dún	Dungannon	Dún Geanainn	Geanann's Fort
island, strand or water meadow	Ennis or Inish	Inis	Enniskillen	Inis Ceithleann	Ceithle's Island
gravel ridge	Esk-/Eish	eiscir	Esker	Eiscir	Gravel Ridge
clear or white stream	Fin Glas	fionn glas	Finglas Glasnevin	Fionnghlas Glas Naíon	White Stream Stream of the Child
valley	Glen	gleann	Glendalough	Gleann dá Locha	Valley of the Two Loughs
church (or wood)	Kill-/Kil	cill	Kildare	Cill Dara	Church of the Oak Tree
wood (or church)	Kil-/Kill	coill	Kilglass	Coill Ghlas	Green Wood
hill	Knock	cnoc	Knockanore	Cnoc an Óir	Hill of Gold
hillside	Letter	leitir	Letterbrick	Leitir Bruic	Hillside of Badgers
ring fort	Lis	lios	Lisnagarvey	Lios na gCearrbhach	Fort of the Gamblers
lake	Lough	loch	Loughrea	Loch Ria	Grey Lake
mountain pass	Maum	mám	Maumturk	Mám Tuirc	Mountain Pass

					of the Boar
plain	Magha-/Maga	machaire or maigh	Magheraboy	Machaire Buí	Yellow Plain
plain	May-/Moy	má	Mayo	Maigh Eo	Plain of the Yews
summit	Mulla-/Mala	mullach	Mullaghmore	Mullach Mór	Big Summit
mill	Mullin	muileann	Mullingar	Muileann Cearr	Crooked Mill
big or large	-more mor	mór/mhór	Tullamore	Tullach Mhór	Big Hill
hole or pool	Poll-/Poul	poll	Poulaphouca	Poll an Phúca	Pool of the Sprite
stronghold/fort or landing place	Port	port	Portnoo	Port Nua	New Port
fort	Rath-/Rah	ráth	Raheny	Ráth Eanaigh	Fort of the Marsh
red	-roe, rua(dh)	ruadh	Slieveroe	Sliabh Rua	Red Mountain
wood/grove (or promontory)	Ros-/Ross	ros	Roslea	Ros Liath	Grey Grove
promontory (or wood/grove)	Ros-/Ross	ros	Rosmuck	Ros Muc	Pig Promontory
old	Shan	sean	Shankill	Seanchill	Old Church
marsh, bog or quagmire	Sheskin	Seiscenn	Seskinore	Seisceann Mhór	Big Swamp

mountain	Slieve	sliabh	Slieve Gamph	Sliabh Gamh	Mountain of Storms
church lands or place of sanctuary/refuge	Termon	termon	Termonfeckin	Tearmann Feichín	Refuge of St Feichín
beach or strand	Tra	trá, tráigh	Tramore	Trá Mhór	Big Beach
burial mound or mound	Tuam	tuaim	Toomard	Tuaim Ard	High Mound