



Northern Ireland
Assembly



The Open University



Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series (KESS)

**'HOME AND AWAY:
EXPLOITING THE CORPUS OF NORTHERN IRELAND PLACE-
NAMES FOR CULTURAL TOURISM'**

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INTRODUCTION: THE NORTHERN IRELAND PLACE-NAME PROJECT

The **Northern Ireland Place-Name Project (NIPNP)** is based in Irish & Celtic Studies (in the School of Modern Languages) in Queen's University, Belfast. It was established in 1987 to research the origins of local place-names, a corpus of over 30,000 names of settlements and physical features (some of which date to the first millennium). These names originated in a variety of languages: primarily Irish (e.g. Belfast < *Béal Feirste* 'mouth of the sandbank'), but with increasing numbers of names in English (e.g. Draperstown) and Scots (e.g. Glarryford, 'muddy ford') appearing on record since the Plantation of Ulster in the seventeenth century. In addition, there are instances of names which originated in Norse (e.g. Strangford < *Strangr Fjörðr* 'strong sea inlet') or which indicate contact with, or knowledge of, other languages such as French (e.g. Pomeroy < ?*Pommeraiie* 'apple orchard').

Queen's University also hosts the **Ulster Place-Name Society** (www.ulsterplacenames.org), established in 1952 to promote interest in the study of names throughout the historic province of Ulster and beyond; this functions in many respects as the public arm of NIPNP as its membership is open to the general public.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The Northern Ireland Place-Name Project was initially established with funding from government as a centre of expertise which would supply and disseminate information on the linguistic origin, meaning and history of local places to government departments, community groups and the broader public. It seeks to preserve and promote the place-name heritage of Northern Ireland through:

- the elucidation of the significance of local place-names in shedding light on the complexity of Northern Ireland's linguistic and cultural diversity, and of their relevance in the promotion of education for mutual understanding.
- collaboration with colleagues in the Irish Republic for the benefit of those worldwide who wish to trace their ancestry and family origins in Ireland.
- the enhancement and completion, using the latest in mapping and other technology, of our online database (www.placenamesni.org) for the benefit of the local community.
- the dissemination online and in print of our research findings (in collaboration with other interested parties, where appropriate).

Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series (KESS)

- the provision of information to governmental agencies, local councils, learned societies, local community groups and individual members of the public in relation to all aspects of naming (e.g. origins and historical development of names, identification of place-names of historical and archaeological significance, creation of new urban names etc.).
- the provision of talks, lectures and exhibitions throughout Northern Ireland (and, more broadly, across Ireland and Britain, and internationally), where these can be facilitated by local historical societies, cultural groups and governmental organisations.
- the promotion of all aspects of the place-name heritage of Northern Ireland both in the print and broadcast media.

COMPILING THE CORPUS: COLLABORATION AND SUPPORT

NIPNP has obtained funding at different times from various government departments and non-governmental bodies during its existence, initially the Department of the Environment and the Community Relations Unit (now in OFMDFM). The UK Arts and Humanities Research Board funded the trawling of historical sources and the gathering of evidence for all of Northern Ireland from 1999-2004; this yielded a corpus of over 130,000 historical references to local places (stretching over two millenia, and abstracted from thousands of sources) together with relevant geographical data.

The link with government took a new direction in 2004 in the form of a five-year collaboration with the Ordnance Survey of Northern Ireland (OSNI); the purpose of this new phase of the Project was to enhance and publish the electronic database (www.placenamesni.org) which contains the corpus, including the detailed and technologically-advanced mapping provided by OSNI. When responsibility for OSNI was transferred from the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure to the Department of Finance and Personnel in 2009 (and on completion of this phase of funding) the Minister for Finance and Personnel directed Land & Property Services (LPS) to continue to maintain and host the database; it was officially launched at the Northern Ireland Assembly in Stormont on 21 January 2013 by Minister Sammy Wilson MLA, and the chair of the DFP Committee, Daithí McKay MLA. The event received tremendous publicity in the media and the strength of interest in the website is attested by the fact that it has been receiving 30,000 hits per month in the period since the launch.

Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series (KESS)

CURRENT STATE OF THE RESOURCE

The NIPNP online database contains all names which appear on the OS 1:50,000 map series and on the older OS six-inch series. This provides complete coverage of important settlements and historical administrative names (in descending order: counties, baronies, civil parishes, townlands), and extensive coverage of other names. A unique feature of the NIPNP database as opposed to others held elsewhere (e.g. Dublin, Glasgow, Nottingham) is the elucidation and provision of an explanatory paragraph for each name (which outlines its historical development and elaborates on its meaning). Approximately 5,000 names have received this fuller treatment to date; the others will be completed on the attainment of further funding (an application to the Heritage Lottery Fund is at the planning stage but will require some support from others, including government).

Names are categorised (e.g. townland, town, water feature, hill, antiquity) and all administrative names are accompanied by a grid reference and assigned their place in the hierarchy of townland, civil parish, barony and county. The search facility allows the user to search for names by location (e.g. all names in a parish) or by string (e.g. all names containing *knock-*). There is also a search facility which allows the user to search by name as it occurs in historical sources, another unique feature of this database. A historic rendition of a name encountered in a will or document held by a family of Irish or Scotch-Irish extraction in America, for example, may be identifiable, therefore, with a name which is still current (but which may have changed its form over the centuries) or with a place which has adopted a new name in the interim. The mapping interface allows the user to examine place-names in their geographical context and to explore the landscape of place-names with online versions of the OS 1:50,000 and 1:10,000 map series.

CULTURAL CAPITAL, PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT AND TOURISM

NIPNP was designed to have a range of public impacts since its inception: (i) the enrichment of cultural life by recording, preserving and publishing online the corpus of Northern Ireland place-names and their historical background; (ii) the enhancement of public understanding of aspects of language and history as preserved in these names; (iii) the creation of space in which civil society could encounter linguistic and cultural diversity through the exploration of the depth of connection between place and people (of whatever origin) as witnessed in the corpus of local place-names.

Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series (KESS)

The collaboration between NIPNP and the government agency LPS has produced an extremely valuable cultural resource, the only resource which integrates geographical, historical, linguistic and other information on the place-names of Northern Ireland and which the general public and international community can access easily on a single web site. The link between onomastic researchers and mapping providers is unique (and could be followed as a model elsewhere) in the United Kingdom. The possibilities in terms of the exploitation of this cultural capital are immense, not least in terms of tourism. It may be exploited by local history, archaeology and heritage groups in presenting a composite picture of the history and character of their area; by genealogists in establishing links between families at home and abroad; and by local councils and community groups in forging links between places which are connected through migration (e.g. the many places named Belfast, Derry-Londonderry etc. throughout the world).

The history and origins of our local place-names provide raw material, therefore, for producers of publications and signage for cultural tourism (including sustainable walking and cycling trails) and additional ways of engaging visitors. One example of this is the collaboration between NIPNP and the Lough Neagh Partnership (www.loughneaghheritage.com) which draws representation from local authorities, and statutory and community organisations. It commissioned NIPNP to research place-names which would be encountered by cyclists on the Sustrans Cycle Trail around the lough in order to develop the site for cultural, educational and tourism purposes. By including names of diverse linguistic origin (Irish, English and Scots), this collaboration created the opportunity for the engagement of local people and visitors with cultural diversity in the Lough Neagh region, increased public understanding of local history and heritage, and enriched cultural life. The research was first published in 2007, *Lough Neagh Places*, in a very attractive format which included artistic responses to the information being provided by local school children.

FURTHER EXPLOITATION OF THE NIPNP WEBSITE

NIPNP would wish to see its online resource being developed further, both in terms of the completion of its research and the maximum exploitation of this research by government agencies, community groups and the public (at home and abroad). We are particularly conscious of the extremely valuable contribution our website can make to cultural tourism by providing a portal for the vast numbers of people worldwide who are interested in researching and tracing their roots

Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series (KESS)

and family origins in places located in the island of Ireland (and, hopefully, visiting these places when the opportunity arises). Currently, a member of the Irish and Scotch-Irish diaspora living in America, for example, and unfamiliar with the political geography of Ireland, is likely to look to Dublin in the first instance in seeking to explore their roots in Ireland. The Dublin government sponsors a place-names website (www.logainm.ie) which provides some basic coverage for Northern Ireland; we are currently collaborating with colleagues in the South in creating hyperlinks between our two sites in order to encourage the web surfer to explore Northern Ireland in more detail and to progress from Dublin to our website for more information. This will significantly increase the numbers of visitors to our site and encourage increased visits to Northern Ireland; our proposal (if funding can be found) to provide a photographic gallery to accompany the discussion of places on the website would be an added draw in this respect. A further development we would like to see would be the provision of access to our website in strategic public locations by means of touchscreen and other technology. These would include museums, and interpretive and resource centres, such as the Public Record Office, the Ulster Museum, the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum and a variety of other tourist venues and attractions.