

Where the bodies are buried at johngrenham.com

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The Irish Times

In December 1995, thanks to the legendary Paddy Waldron (pwaldron.info), I did a demo of *Grenham's Irish Recordfinder* for Itronics, *The Irish Times'* fledgling web division. They had just started irish-times.com, and my system looked like a potential money-maker. The sub-site, named 'Irish Ancestors' was eventually launched in May 1998. It was the first Irish e-commerce site and was an immediate success – it turned over a princely IR£600 in the first week.

Because of that initial success, Itronics agreed to invest and expand the partnership. I came in a few days a week to do development and maintenance in return for a royalty on the income. Over the following fourteen years, a whole range of content was added: a surname dictionary, Lewis' *Topographical Dictionary*, parish-by-parish listings of numbers of households in Griffiths, a magazine section and more. In the process, I got a superb opportunity to teach myself database design and web coding.

By 2015, it was clear that the site needed a major overhaul and significant investment. In the end, *The Irish Times* decided it should be spending what little money it had on journalism, not on a niche genealogy service. We parted ways amicably. They sold me back the 50% they'd bought in 1995 for a nominal amount and I agreed to take on the legacy obligations to former users of the site.

My son Eoin began working with me on the site in 2019 and in 2021 we became equal partners. We now share all the coding, development, maintenance and customer service. Thank God.

Content Now

The main difference with the old Irish Times site is the visual presentation of information. Inspired by Edward Neafsey's *Surnames of Ireland* (2002), which comprises 200 surname distribution maps based on 1992 Irish telephone directory listings, I realised that my parish-by-parish Griffiths household numbers could be used to create heat sink maps on the fly, showing detailed distributions of surnames across Ireland 1847-1864. After much banging of my head off the monitor, I figured out how to do it using Javascript and Google Geocharts.



Figure 1: McMahon in Griffiths

With a visual representation, all sorts of insights begin to leap off the screen: the two origins of the McMahon surname, one in Dál gCais in Clare, the other in Monaghan; the surname Buggy confined exclusively to Kilkenny; above all just how rich and peculiar and local is the ecosystem of minor Irish surnames – Minnock, Scahill, Lavin, Parlon, Tarleton, Mattimo, Shreehane, Huggard, Kissane, McWha, Crumlish ...

Having done it with one data-set, I really wanted to do it again. Luckily, by 2014 the 1864-1913 birth indexes were freely available on IrishGenealogy.ie. So I mapped the six million or so births against their Superintendent Registrar's Districts. Then a wonderful fellow-obsessive called Dermot Balson contacted me about collaborating on the 1901 and 1911 censuses. He had downloaded the entire National Archives online transcripts and very generously shared them with me. So I mapped the surnames of the heads of household against the District Electoral Divisions they appear in.

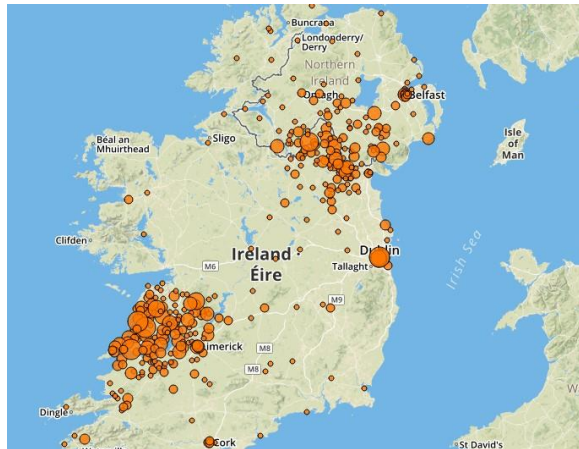


Figure 2: McMahon in 1901

Caveat: There are some peculiarities all the maps share.

First, in order to create a point to represent a civil parish (or any other administrative area), we have to designate an exact spot and supply its latitude and longitude in the map-making code. This means that the coloured disks on the map are centred on a townland that may not be at the exact centre of the parish (or other administrative area). Some geographical skewing is inevitable, with the result that the maps can't be taken as absolutely geographically precise. This much said, we've done my best to centre the points, or to pick common-sense locations for the centre points, in the case of GRO records, for example, the market town from which the Superintendent Registrar's District draws its name.

Then in 2017, after FindMyPast and Ancestry had transcribed the National Library Catholic register microfilms, I approached Brian Donovan at FMP about doing similar maps for Catholic baptisms and he very kindly agreed. Those maps went live in early 2018. The following year FMP agreed to share their Catholic marriage records and, together with Eoin, we mapped those. And in 2022, FamilySearch.org agreed to share their transcripts of civil registration death and marriage indexes. You guessed it. We mapped them. We now have visual representations of all four of the universally relevant sources, 1901 and 1911, GRO BMD, Catholic parish registers and Griffith's. Whoopee.

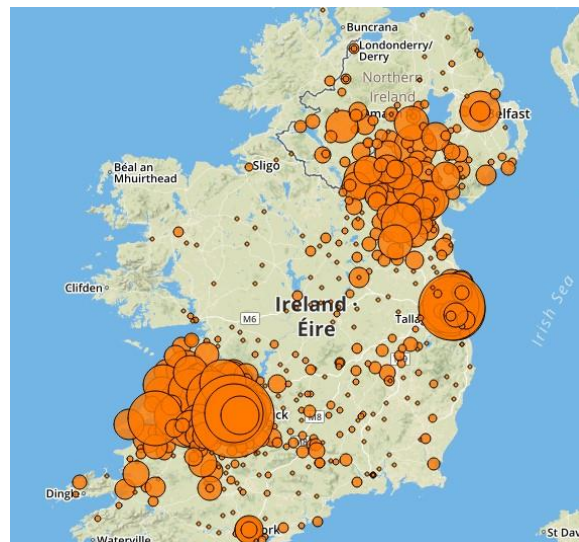


Figure 3: McMahon Catholic baptisms

Second, all of the maps allow some form of click-through to the original data on which they're based, with some variations.

- For Griffith's, you have to drill down to county level to get a clickable list of civil parishes, which then takes you to a list of the parish townlands. Clicking the townland name here takes you to the relevant AskAboutIreland.ie Griffith's page.
- For 1901/1911, clicking directly on the DED on the map or on the accompanying list takes you directly to the National Archives of Ireland results page. You can also get there via the civil parish

townlands listing.

- For the GRO, clicking directly on the SRD on the map or on the accompanying list takes you directly to the IrishGenealogy.ie listing for the surname and District.
- For the Catholic baptisms and marriages, clicking directly on the parish on the map or on the accompanying list takes you directly to the free FindMyPast.ie listing for the surname and parish. It's necessary to register, but not subscribe to see the results. Full disclosure: if you do decide to subscribe, we get an affiliate fee.

Third, all of the maps use the same surname variants system and provide links allowing research to go on to other variants of the initial name. The system has its origins (like a lot of the site) in the Griffith's heads of household listing. It was clear early on that a search that finds "Lonergan" but doesn't connect it to "Londergan" isn't much use to anyone. (I'm looking at you, Ancestry). So in 1996 I began knitting the surnames together. This wasn't as simple a task as it sounds – many variant relationships are not mutual. For example Loughlin is a variant of O'Loughlin and McLoughlin, but O'Loughlin and McLoughlin are not variants of each other.

It was also clear from very early that surname variants are not corrupt deviants of an uncorrupted original (*pace* Irish language purists) and that trying to treat them this way would lead to madness, death and civil war. In the twenty-five years since the original Griffith's variants list, some 26,000 strong, I've added names from every other heritage project I've been involved with, most notably the Dublin City Electoral Lists 1937-1964, which included more than 4.1 million records. My surname variants table got indigestion and I got even blearier-eyed. But collecting these variants has become a bit of an addiction.

As of now we list almost 104,000 individual surnames, linked to each other in about 1.1 million variant relationships.

Source references.

Maps are also the starting point for most of the source references. Clickable maps of the entire island for civil parishes, Catholic parishes, counties and Poor Law Unions (aka Superintendent Registrars' Districts) allow users to zero in on the records relevant to particular areas, with the civil parish at the centre of most sources. The references aim to be as complete and useful as possible, showing (for example) all available copies or transcripts of parish registers, along with years covered, and links to any online versions. Like much of the site, such completism evolved out of the need of a professional researcher (me) to know that I wasn't missing any available records. And (*caveat*) such completism is doomed to always fall short, however obsessive it becomes.

The Browse section of the site allows a text-based drill-down to lists of records covering each county, also including a potted history of the county, a list of local surnames and links to county-based historical and genealogical resources.

Browse

This section is also where text guides and how-to's for the various record types can be found. The text now comes from the fifth edition of *Tracing Your Irish Ancestors* (2019), with amendments on the fly where information has gone out of date.

As well as overviews of the records, Browse also includes

- Bibliographies of the Irish abroad and Irish-related passenger lists;
- Contact details of Ireland-based research institutions and organisations;
- A links section;
- An 'Articles' section, including a complete archive of the nine years of the weekly 'Irish Roots' column I wrote for *The Irish Times*, some general articles on surnames and migration and articles from some other publications that may be of interest.

Wizard and Ancestor Search

The site incorporates two attempts to provide an AI-style consultation service. One, the 'Ancestor report', uses a fill-out form to produce a series of links to record sources that may be relevant. This was the heart of the original 'Irish Recordfinder' and the old *Irish Times* site. The logic at its heart has been updated, but it still feels a little old-fashioned. The other, the Wizard, has a more contemporary feel, gathering information step-by-step to produce a discursive report that includes information about the surname and links to relevant source-references.

It goes without saying that both services have limits. One of the joys of genealogy is that every family is unique and every family's research is unique. Automation can only take you so far.

Blog

When the 'Irish Roots' column in *The Irish Times* came to an end in 2016, I began a weekly blog, trying to follow the same publication schedule as the old print format, coming out with a new post every Monday. It worked for almost three years, but by late 2019 my self-discipline was flagging and posts are now less regular, around twice a month. As I get older, my opinions are shrinking and ossifying. With Eoin's help (and nagging) I now also do a short video on YouTube every week, generally on a topic to do with the site, but more often just whatever comes into my head.

Subscribing

The site is our main source of income, and operates a soft pay wall. Most of the content is free (the entire Browse section, for example) and for pages that return specific information about records, places or surnames every user gets five free page-views per day. For more than that, users are asked to subscribe. Daily, monthly and annual subscriptions are available, with a discount annual rate for libraries and societies.

The old *Irish Times* site operated a simple pay wall barrier, which caused misunderstanding. We're not providing access to genealogical records like Ancestry or FindMyPast and the soft pay wall allows users to see exactly what the site does before paying.

Privacy

We set a remember-me cookie if a subscriber logs in, to ensure they're not asked to subscribe unnecessarily and use the IP addresses of users to check for the five page-views. All these IPs are deleted after 24 hours. We don't track logins or the information that users input into the various searches, because that would be rude. The site has one Google Ads per page. We use Google Analytics to track visitor numbers, which means Google has a cookie on our users' devices, which means Google can track our users' behaviour. We also have a Facebook "Like" button on all pages, because it's unfortunately essential. This means Facebook can also track users' behaviour.

Future plans

We update content whenever we come across something new - some weeks every day, some weeks one day only. The most recent major projects were the LDS marriage and death indexes. But people are transcribing the things faster than we can list them.

The one thing I'm sure of is that the site will go on as long as we do. It's too late to stop now.