

Wicklow Town in the late 1600s

The history of settlement in the area of Wicklow town stretches back to at least a Viking settlement around the ninth and tenth centuries. With the arrival of the Anglo-Normans, Henry II gave the Black Castle and its surrounds to Strongbow in 1173. This would have involved a charter, and burgage plots. These are attested by 1199. But the tumult of history has made drawing any direct lines of ownership impossible. It was only in 1603, when the English colonial government needed new boroughs to support its numbers in the Irish parliament that a new charter was issued.

Sir William Ussher was made the head of the borough, and William Parsons, Murrough McTeige Oge (Byrne), William Dowdall, Patrick Conway, John Wolverston, James Byrne, Richard White, Laughlin Doyle, Murrough McCallowe (Byrne), Donnogh McThomas (Byrne) and John White were made the first burgesses. It was up to them to attract people to live there, and to develop it into a profitable town.

We do not have the minutes from the years 1603 to 1662. There are no town records from the time of the 1641 rebellion. And even though the cover of this volume states that it contains records from 1659, they are not to be found in it. What the Cromwellians got up to in Wicklow is not available to us in borough minutes. It is only after the king, Charles II, was restored to the throne, that we have a window into what was happening in the town.

By that time, much of the land within the borders of the borough had been leased to the leading men of the day. Of great interest to us is the fact that, when parcels of land were being leased, the boundaries of those plots were very well described and measured. On the basis of this information, it should be possible for a cartographer to draw a very precise map of the town in the late 1600s, now that the necessary data is more accessible.

One of the first things that the burgesses did was to purchase a new mace. A ceremonial mace is a symbol of authority. If there had been one before 1650, it would have had a crown on it. For this reason, it would have been disposed of by the Cromwellians. We do not know if they had a mace made for Parliamentary rule. If they did, it would have been removed with the return of the king.

Otherwise, the two most common items of business in the first few years of the Restoration were the leasing of land and petitions for men to be made 'free of the town' or made freemen. Again, we do not know how the Parliamentary burgesses would have dealt with landownership. Were Royalists stripped of their deeds? But what was still very pertinent was gaining the freedom of the town. Without it, one could not trade or sell there. If a petitioner was accepted, there was a charge, called a fine, initially of 13 shillings and 4 pence, for admission, an oath to be taken, and the man's trade was noted. Men higher in society were often not charged for admission, but their status - gentleman, esquire, knight, etc., was noted.

The burgesses also were responsible for levying specific taxes on the people of the town, to be used for repairing the roads and town buildings, or for building or replacing buildings such as the market house, the school house, and the guard house. The building of the bridge to the

Murrough also required public money. They likewise collected rents and tariffs on goods coming into the port.

What was going on in Ireland and England from the 1640s to the 1700s?

In 1641, there had been a rebellion in Ireland against the English colonial government in Dublin. The gradual erosion of Gaelic and Anglo-Norman landownership, political power, and culture, had provoked a lot of anger within the population. In addition, the Gaelic and Anglo-Irish saw the king, Charles I, as being sympathetic to them, whereas the English parliament was hostile to their rights. After the 1641 rebellion, the Irish Confederation had then set up a government in Kilkenny. The English government was unable to dislodge it, in part due to civil wars going on in England during this decade.

When the Parliamentary rebels under Oliver Cromwell won the war and executed the king, they turned their attention to Ireland. The Parliamentarians had borrowed money to arm themselves based on the sale of Irish land. After Cromwell devastated Ireland, resulting in the loss of 60% of the population, the land was taken and sold to raise money to repay those debts or awarded to Cromwellian soldiers.

Both Ireland and England then suffered under the very regressive religiosity of the Parliamentarians for 10 years, from 1650 to 1660. In 1660, Charles II, son of Charles I, was returned to the throne after having lived in France for that time. There was general rejoicing and people were glad to be able to dance and sing again. Charles II set up a Land Settlement commission, to try to return land to the people from whom it had been taken. There wasn't enough land to do this, and by the end of the century, Gaelic Irish owned only about 20% of the island.

Then, in 1685, James II, a Catholic, came to the throne, and started giving Catholics some control in Ireland. See pp. 86r & v for the edict allowing Catholics to become freemen in boroughs. This upset Irish Protestants. James II's Protestant son-in-law, William, the Dutch Duke of Orange, was invited by the English Protestants to drive James out and take the throne. William succeeded in doing this. The oppression of Catholics was then seen as necessary to prevent them from fighting against William to bring James back. See p. 115v for the oath requiring a person to swear that they did not hold Catholic beliefs. Anyone who did not take this oath would be suspected of being a Catholic (apart from Quakers who were known never to take oaths) and an enemy of the Crown. From the late 1690s until 1829, Catholics in Ireland were severely disadvantaged and exploited.

Trading through the Port of Wicklow

From time immemorial, sea trading ports have been of great value. We can only make informed guesses for the goods traded through Wicklow, incoming and outgoing, before written records were kept. Fortunately, this minute book has two listings of the major portion of what passed through the harbour. In 1664 these are the goods and their customs charges (as transcribed from the minute book, please note contemporary spellings and terms.....):

Order for payment of Customs by foreigners & strangers	Ordered by the Portreeve, Burgesses & Commonality that the Customs here under written (having been anciently paid to the portreeve of the Burrough) be paid to & recorded by the Portreeve of the Burrough & his successors to their own proper use, vizt	
If lying on the Corporation lands for more than one month		ix^d
for every cord of bark brought into the Burrough		ix^d
every ton of timber		vj^d
every 1000 of hoops		vj^d
every 1000 of hoop staves		vj^d
every 1000 of barrel staves		1^s
every 1000 of laths		ijj^d
every 24 poles, one pole		pole
every 12 pieces of draft timber		ijj^d
every cord of wood		ij^d
every 1000 of wattles		ij^d
every 1000 of trundles [small wheels]		vj^d
for every carcase of beef		ijj^d
every single hide		ij^d
every load of butter or cheese		ij^d
every sheep sold in the market		10^d
every veal or hog		1^s
every barrel of corn of all sorts		1^d
every bolt of cloth containing ten yards & so proportionable		1^d
every boat without a topmast for anchorage & porcage		vj^d
every vessel with one topmast		ix^d
two topmasts		$1^s vj^d$
every vessel coming into the harbour laden with corn, coal, salt or other merchandise sold by the barrel		one barrel
if not fully laden proportionable		
every boat load of oysters	100	100
and so of all other merchandise sold by the	100	
every boat of herring, one meace [500-600] of herrings		
for the season of fishing for the same boat		
three casts of herring at every setting of their nets & coming ashore		

$ix^d = 9$ pence; $vj^d = 6$ pence, etc. 12 pence = 1 shilling, 20 shillings = a pound

Oaths

Oaths have been used through the centuries in an attempt to make a person act in a responsible way, to tell the truth, behave according to the law, or conform their beliefs with the policies of the ruling power. It only works, of course, if the thing that the person swears on, e.g., the bible, is something seen by the person as exercising real power over their fate, or if the person wants to be seen as trustworthy or respectable. In the late 1600s, it was generally

true that people took the bible seriously. In small communities, being seen as respectable was important for one's social and financial success.

The text of eleven oaths can be found in this Minute Book. They are:

- two oaths of supremacy (on p. 35v and p. 109v)
- one for the Town clerk, p. 47r
- an oath of fidelity to King William and Queen Mary, p. 109v
- two oaths of a freeman, p. 110r and p. 204
- two oaths of a burgess, p. 110v and p. 205
- two oaths of a portreeve, p. 110v and p. 205
- the oath of a Commons councillor, p. 113v
- an oath against Catholicism, p. 115v
- the oath of Constables, p. 167*

*see A Note on Pagination at beginning of Transcription

Briefly, the oath of supremacy had been required since the late 1500s to restrict government posts to those who asserted that the English monarch was the head of the Church, thereby ruling out Catholics in government offices. After James II was deposed by William and Mary, an oath was instituted to ensure that they would be accepted as the legitimate monarchs and not James II.

The oath of a freeman was instituted so that those so designated could be clear about what was expected of them as supporters of their borough. This included following the rules set down by the portreeve and the burgesses which focused on promoting the good of the borough and protecting it from economic competition. A portreeve was similar to a mayor but was the term used in a port town. The term has the same antecedent as 'sheriff', which was initially the 'shire reeve', gradually changing to a shireeve, thence sheriff.

Upon election to the borough council, a burgess was administered the relevant oath, again focused on promoting the good of the borough over the competition and requiring to the burgess to actually work for the borough when action was required. The portreeve was a burgess who steered the borough and collected the income from rent, tariffs and taxes. Lack of executing the office, and outright corruption made an oath for this office necessary. The constables likewise took an oath so they could be clear as to what their office involved.

The oath against Catholicism required people to specifically declare that they did not believe in the authority of the pope or transubstantiation, among a number of other Catholic dogmas. This was another angle to try to protect the crown from Catholics who often supported James II and his son, James III, as he was known. The pope was thought to be actively plotting against Protestant England.

Making Sense of What's Written in this Text

The way in which English was written and spelled in the 1600s and early 1700s was sometimes quite different from how we do it today. This transcription follows as exactly as possible the way in which this minute book was written. If you find something puzzling as you are reading it, you will probably find an explanation of it in this section. Because of this, it would be useful to read this section first, if you want to read the transcription.

Interestingly, the penmanship (i.e., the actual forming of the letters on the page) and spelling deteriorated as the years went on. There was a borough clerk who would probably be the one to write out the final copy of the minutes for the official record, but the quality of his services appears to have varied widely over the decades. In the early 1700s, the spelling reflects the way in which the words were spoken. For this reason, you can hear how English was being spoken in Wicklow at that time.

Any date between 1 January and 24 March is dated for the previous year, and needs to be increased by one to be in line with our current calendar. Lady day, 25 March, is when it became the proper year according to our way of reckoning. For example, if 24 February 1689 appears in the text, it has been transcribed as 24 February 1689 [1690]. Also, the year of the reign of Charles II is calculated from the death of his father in 1649, even though he was not crowned until 1660, due to the 10 years of Cromwellian rule.

Quarter brother – ‘a non-freeman was admitted as a quarter-brother in the guild on payment of a fine called ‘intrusion money’ and remained free of the guild so long as he/she paid the quarterage regularly every quarter day, and conformed to the guild regulations. They were not required to be sworn. This opened the way in which Catholics could be allowed into the life of corporate towns. The status of quarter-brother seems to have been peculiar to Ireland.’ From ‘The Catholics of the Towns and the Quarterage Dispute in Eighteenth-Century Ireland’ by Maureen MacGeehin, *Irish Historical Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 30 (Sep., 1952), p. 94. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30004777>

A ‘Certificate of Protest’ is a notarized statement obtained after a ship enters port after a rough voyage. Its purpose is to protect the ship’s charterer or owner from liability for damage to the cargo, the ship or to other ships in a collision, where this was caused by the perils of the sea (for example, bad weather or pirates).

A cordwainer is a shoemaker who makes new shoes from new leather, whereas cobblers repaired shoes.

‘distress’ is a legal process whereby if a renter could not pay the rent, or an owner a tax or other fine, then the one to whom the money was owed could enter into the property and take away enough goods or animals to make up the amount that was owed.

nemine Contradiscente – a Latin phrase meaning ‘no one contradicting or dissenting; unanimously’.

When the words ‘his mark’ or ‘her mark’ accompany a person’s name, it means that they either are not able to sign their name, but affix a mark recognized as specifically theirs, often some form of an X, or they are able to sign their name, but use a mark as a shorthand form.

Michaelmas or Michlmas, the feast of St Michael the Archangel, is 29 September, a date on which things often commenced, for example, the portreeve’s one year term.

Clarret is a type of red wine, originally French

Sack is a type of light-coloured wine, originally Spanish

Comments on the text

Spelling was optional – not standardized, either for words generally or names; the same word could be spelled differently on the same page

Anything between [] is not in the original text; [?] means that the previous letters/words are unclear

Very little punctuation, no commas for the most part

Roman numeral sometimes used – i = 1, or j (j is the last or only ‘1’), v = 5, x = 10, l = 50, c = 100, d=500, m = 1000; when a lower value letter is placed before a higher value one, it is subtracted from the higher one. For example, **xlj = 41**

£ = pounds, s = shillings, of which 20 make a pound, and d = pence, of which 12 make a shilling; x^s = 10 shillings

perch, rod, or pole – a variable unit of measurement, in England 16½ feet or 5½ yards

stang = .4+ of an Irish acre

A ‘score’ is 20 of whatever is being counted, half a score is 10.

~ at the end of a word means that it’s been slightly abbreviated, but the exact letters aren’t given

‘accompt’ = account

-con is -tion in modern spelling

‘&c’ = etcetera

ff = F

Jo is John, Jos is Joseph

kt = knight

‘margent’ = margin

‘midsomer’ = 21 June, midsummer

s^d = said

‘the like’ = ‘the same’

‘vizt’ = namely

‘y’ in old spelling is often ‘i’ in modern spelling; however, at the beginning of a word, it is a ‘th’, as in ye = the, or yt = that, though sometimes it can be ‘it’.

Note on military references

For those who are interested in the notices detailing the movement of government troops in Ireland in this book from 1670, the earliest such notice in this book, here is a listing of the pages on which these can be found. The latest date is 1705.

Pages:

45r-v

58v

84r

88v

102v

104r & v

105r

106r

107r

108r

112v

115r

119v

120r

122r

sheet after 127v

128v

131v

132r & v

134v

135r

136v

143v

146v

149v

151v

155r

157v