Irish Roots

TRACING YOUR COUNTY LAOIS ANCESTORS

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Tracing Your...

Co. Laois Ancestors

County Laois (once known as Queen's County) and sometimes called Leix, is located in the midands of Ireland, and is one of the smallest counties, with an area of just 660 square miles. It was originally part of the kingdom of Laois, ruled by the O'Moore clan. When the region was finally conquered by the English in the mid 16th century, part of this kingdom was marked out, or 'shired', as Queen's County. It was named in honour of Queen Mary of England who was then briefly married to King Philip of Spain. The neighbouring county of Offaly was named King's county in honour of the latter. On the formation of the Irish Free State in 1921, the name was changed back to Laois, its original Gaelic name. The major Gaelic families of the county are the O'Moores and O'Dunnes and other locally common Gaelic names are Lawlor, Dowling, Devoy/Deevy, Doran, McEvoy, Dempsey, Brophy amd Tynan. After the Norman conquest the area was granted to the FitzPatricks, but they were unable to control the O'Moores and their local allies.

In 1547 the English invaded the county and conquered the local chieftains and later brought in settlers from England. This plantation was only partially successful due to fierce local resistance. The families introduced to the county at this time include Cosby, Hartpole, Barrington, Bowen, Ruish and Ovington. Later arrivals included Pigotts, Parnells, Cootes and Poles. The town of Mountmellick had a considerable Quaker population in the 18th and 19th centuries; while Portarlington was a major centre for the Huguenots from 1696 onwards.

In 1841 there were 154,000 occupants in the county, mainly small-holders, and this reduced by some 28% during the Great Famine (1845-47) and continued to reduce in subsequent decades through emigration to the extent that the population had halved by 1881 and continued to reduce further in later years. The 2016 census shows that the county has 85,000 occupants, and it has been rising significantly in recent decades.

During the 18th and 19th centuries it was an agricultural county which was dominated by large estates on which the bulk of the population lived as tenant farmers. The major towns are Portlaoise, Mountmellick, Mountrath, Abbeyleix and Portarlington.

Laois has a relatively diverse set of records for family research. It has all of the major national records: Civil records of birth, death and marriage start in 1864 and most of these are already available on-line from www.irishgenealogy.ie. It is planned that all of these records (up to at least 1918) will be available in due course.

Griffith's Valuation

Griffith's Valuation (a major listing of land occupiers) was conducted in 1850/1 and is available on many websites including www.askaboutireland.ie; and the 1901 and 1911 census returns which are available on-line at www. nationalarchives.ie. If you are beginning your search and do not know where your family was located within Laois, these are useful starting points. A search in the Griffith Valuation, for instance will show whether the name is associated with a particular local area (e.g. a civil parish). If it is, then you can search the church or other records (see below) from that area to find evidence of your ancestors. Equally, the 1901 census, although compiled long after the major period of emigration, may indicate the local prevalence of a surname. When you have identified a likely area, or a definite ancestor, one or more of the following types of records can extend your search.

Church Records

Catholic baptism and marriage records are relatively good in comparison to many Irish counties. There are 21 Catholic parishes serving the county (some of these parishes are centred in neighbouring counties but also served a part of Laois). Of these, 6 have records starting in the 18th century, the oldest being Rathdowney whose records

The Mysterious World Of Early Handwriting

By
Margaret M. O'Sullivan

Tracing your ancestors can at times be difficult. One of the worst stumbling blocks is finding yourself confronted with a manuscript such as a letter, a map, an estate survey or account, written in English — but not as we know it. This is the case with archives from the 16th and 17th centuries, when literacy was on the increase and communication, personal and business, was more frequent with a greater diversity of people than in the medieval period. So a new publication from the British Association for Local History, Reading Early Handwriting, 1500-1700, aims to get you started, to help you solve common problems, and to give you the skills to do further research.

A glance at the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland's online catalogue reveals quantities of original material, relatively little of which is available in print or digital form. The archives of the Conolly family and of the Earls of Antrim are just two examples. Similarly, The (British) National Archives' Discovery search platform has summary information about estate records relating to Ireland, whether at their headquarters in Kew near London or in other archive services around Britain. Irish record offices and heritage centres also have collections for their specific areas which may include some pre-18th and 19th century material. Early maps, where they survive, can be fascinating and informative sources, but the text on them can be problematic. Most importantly, even if documents have been digitised, you still need to be able to read them, especially if you have to make a transcript.

The following are some tips when you are faced with a manuscript in English later than the medieval period.

- *Read a document with a side-by-side transcript in modern English*. Then you can approach it as though learning a language. Don't guess! Read the whole text before trying to understand it. Copy out words letter by letter if at first they do not seem to make sense.

- *Check letter forms using a guide to contemporary alphabets*. 'Secretary' and 'Italic' are the most common styles of writing at this time.

- *Remember spelling was not standardised*. Capital and lower case letters may differ widely and look completely unfamiliar. Compare them with examples in a guide. Many words will become clearer if you try saying them aloud. 'Jhon' was perfectly acceptable rendering of 'John': they sound the same.

- *There was a more limited pool of first names in everyday use than today, especially for men*. So identifying people can be easier because there are more examples to compare. But variants of the same name occurred then as now — 'Jefferye' on the title of this book is one instance; further down he is 'Jeffery', but the pronunciation is identical. Some short or pet names are different: the abbreviation now for 'Sebastian' is often 'Seb'; in earlier centuries it was 'Bastian'.

- *Women's names have always been more subject to fashion*. Some have disappeared: there is a 'Gilmotha' in a 1629 document, but no modern equivalent. By contrast, 'Elizabeth' was rare until the mid 16th century, and then very popular.

- *Be prepared for abbreviated and contracted words*. Paper and parchment were expensive and so it made sense to shorten words, especially ones in frequent use. First names are often abbreviated. *Hy* for Henry and *Ric* for Richard are easy, but *Xpher* for Christopher is not so obvious. Use a guide for identification and interpretation. Again, don't guess! Some contracted words are very confusing.