

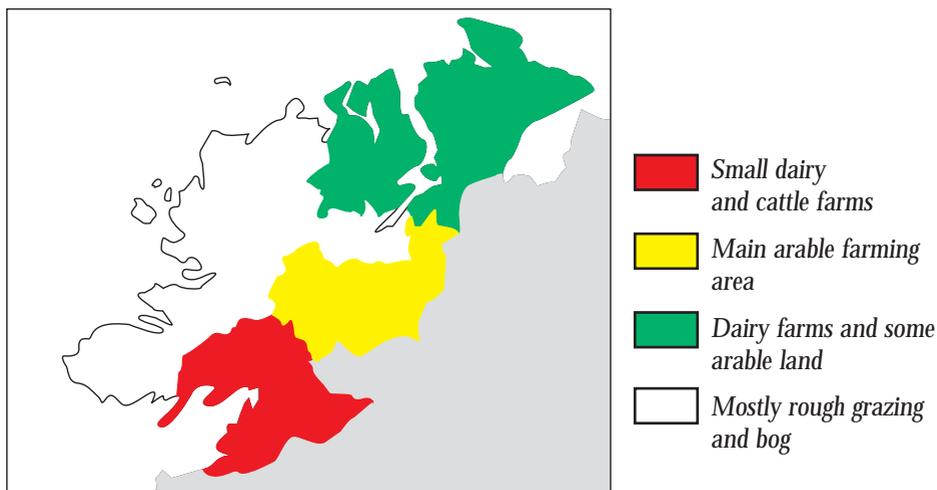
DONEGAL'S FARMING HERITAGE



by
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DONEGAL HERITAGE SERIES 1

DONEGAL'S MAIN FARMING AREAS



Acknowledgements

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Cover photographs (clockwise from top):

A straw horse collar made by Mick and John McHugh of Hornhead in 1981.

Miss Jane Clark of Raphoe, aged 95 years in September 1927, using a scythe (Photo from Bigger & McDonald collection courtesy of Derry Central Library).

Children of Joseph Cunningham of Carrick holding a Donegal spade and a racán in 1957 (Photo courtesy of National Museum of Ireland).

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Overview

Donegal's farming heritage is a microcosm of Ireland's farming heritage as a whole. Donegal has large, wealthy farms but also tiny holdings whose main function was to provide a subsistence living for one farming family. Since the eighteenth century, big farms in the east of the county relied a lot on horse-operated equipment and tractor-powered machinery. This technology developed through an international exchange of ideas and systems.

Small farms were most common in areas of hilly, marginal land in the north and west of the county. The 'common'

systems of farming practised on these smallholdings relied a lot on manual labour, and it is here that we find a wide range of hand tools and some locally-made, horse-drawn implements.

Most surviving farm machinery was used in crop production but, since the Great Famine of the 1840s, livestock farming has been growing in importance in agricultural production within Donegal and the rest of Ireland.



Children of Joseph Cunningham of An Charraig / Carrick holding a Donegal spade and a racán in 1957
(Photo courtesy of National Museum of Ireland)

Heritage Objects

Hand Implements

In Donegal, as elsewhere in Ireland, local ingenuity was most obvious at the level of small-scale farming.

The implements used on these small holdings were small, often produced by local craftsmen, with local variations in design. Many surviving hand implements are very simple in construction and it is only by examining how they were used that we can begin to understand the ingenuity behind their construction. Fieldwork interviews with older people who remember these farming techniques are one of the best ways that we can find out about this skill and refinement.¹



Gerry Mallon of Kilmacrennan making ridges with a loy in 2008



Spadework on Toraigh / Tory Island in the 1950s
(Photo courtesy of Jim Hunter)

¹ These interviews have been recorded over a number of years. More than 30 taped interviews made between 1978 and 2005 are held in the archives of the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum. During this recent audit, several interviews were organised in the Gaeltacht, with the help of Donnchadh Ó Baoill of Údarás na Gaeltachta.

Donegal has a complex history of **spade** technology, but very few local types of spade seem to survive within the county. One-sided spades, known as **loys** (*láighanna*), are mentioned in early nineteenth-century texts, but have not been used in later times. However, in the recent revival of digging with loys in Ireland, the national championship has been won by Gerry Mallon from Kilmcrennan in 2007 and 2010, and the All-Ireland Ladies Loy Digging Championship has been won by Marion Boyce from Letterkenny in 2008, 2009 and 2010.



Marion Boyce loy digging in Athy, County Kildare in 2009

One reason for the lack of older types of spade surviving in the west of the county may be that many people from there worked as seasonal migrants in Scotland and learnt techniques used on commercial farms there, which they began to use back home. The use of raised **drills**, rather than **ridges**, for cultivating potatoes might be an example of this transfer of culture. The construction of local spades would be less crucial for making drills than for making the older cultivation ridges. Fortunately, memories of spadework techniques are still widespread.

'**Kibbing**' was a method of planting potatoes that was especially associated with Donegal. It was often done using a spade but a small hand-implement, known as a *cibín*, was also used. The use of a heavy **rake** (*racán*) to cover grain seed sown on narrow cultivation ridges was described in early nineteenth-century accounts.ⁱⁱ



A cibín displayed in St. Connell's Museum, Glenties

ⁱⁱ Hill, Lord George (1971). *Facts from Gweedore* (Belfast: Queen's University).



A sickle blade found in the Seamus O'Donnell's Garden Centre, Baile Chonaill / Ballyconnell, An Fál Carrach / Falcarragh



Drawing of an Irish reaper in 1841
(Source: Dublin Penny Journal,
Vol. 1, February 6, 1841)

Donegal people who went to Scotland for harvest work were famous for their skill in reaping with a sickle (*corrán cíorach*). A prayer recorded recently in Gaith Dobhair / Gweedore asks God to send wind and rain to the harvest fields of Scotland, so that farmers there would have to depend on Donegal reapers to save the crop.

Paidir sa mháigh fá choinne gaith anoir 's fearthainn aniar.

A prayer in the plain for wind from the east and rain from the west ⁱⁱⁱ



Reaping with a sickle
(Photo courtesy of the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum)

ⁱⁱⁱ Seán Ó Gallchoir, *Mín an Iolair*.

Techniques for processing harvested grain on small farms show the same combination of hard work and skill found in reaping. Seed could be **threshed** - removed from the heads of grain - simply by lashing a sheaf against a stone or other hard object. In recent times, however, it was more common to use a **flail** (*súiste*). In Donegal, these were usually made from two sticks tied together at one end. One stick was held and the other swung around to beat the grain out of a sheaf laid on a board on the ground.

After threshing, the hard shells of the seed were removed by **winning**. In Donegal, a **winning tray** (*dallán*) was often used. These trays were constructed in the same way as the southern bodhran, from animal skin stretched over a circular wooden frame.



Using a flail on Toraigh / Tory Island, c. 1930 (Photo courtesy of Thomas Mason)



Winnowing grain in the open air at Ganniamore on Ros Guill / Rosguill, c. 1900 (Photo courtesy of Ulster Museum)

The tray was used in the open air on a breezy day. Seed poured from the tray fell onto a sheet, while the light chaff was blown away. Two very unusual winnowing trays survive on a farm at Feddyglass near Raphoe. These are made of coiled straw rope (*súgán*), a technique of construction which may have been used for several millennia.



A dallán displayed in Fr. McDyer Folk Village Museum, Glenn Cholm Cille / Glencolmcille

The ingenious use of straw is also found in a wide range of locally-made objects, ranging from *súgán* horse collars to harvest knots exchanged by lovers.



A straw horse collar made by Mick and John McHugh of Hornhead in 1981



Winnowing trays made from straw rope (*súgán*), preserved on a farm at Feddyglass



A harvest knot displayed on Graham's farm in Ardagh

Horse-Operated Implements

Some horse-operated implements surviving in County Donegal were made by local blacksmiths and carpenters, but most were industrial products of foundries such as Pierce of Wexford, Ransomes of Ipswich, and Jack of Maybole in Scotland. All of these implements are fairly standardised in construction. By the end of the era of horse work, implements such as wheel ploughs could be made up of parts produced in different foundries and even different countries. This range of farm machinery is particularly associated with commercial farms, most common in the fertile lowlands of the county, especially the Laggan.

Scottish-style **swing (wheel-less) ploughs** became the most widespread type of plough used in Ireland during the early nineteenth century, and a number of these can still be found in Donegal.



A swing plough (made by Brown's of Letterkenny) in Rutherford's yard, Kilmacrennan



A swing plough displayed at Carrowmenagh on Inishowen

It is relatively rare to find one which has been made in a small local foundry. However, ploughs were made in Brown's foundry in Letterkenny and at least one of these survives in Kilmacrennan.

Wooden drill ploughs, used mostly in preparing land for potato cultivation, were fairly common in the county, and some of these survive, especially in the north and west of Donegal. They were made by local craftsmen and show some local variations in design.



A wooden grubber and drill plough on Toraiigh / Tory Island in the 1950s
(Photo courtesy of Jim Hunter)

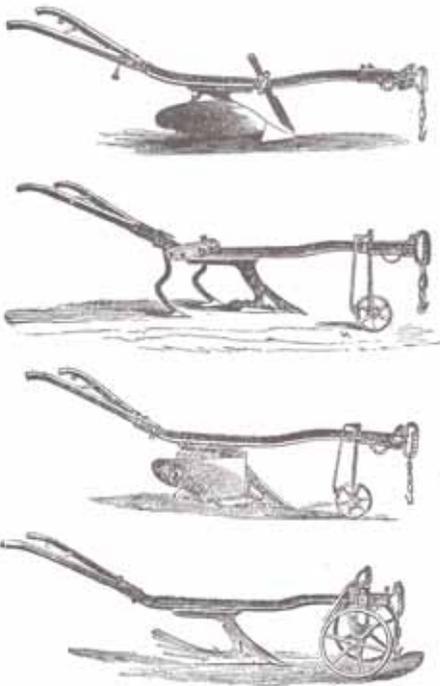


Pat Shane Doherty of the Famine Village, Isle of Doagh, Inishowen with a locally-made drill plough and a grubber from west Donegal

'Universal body' ploughs also survive in the north and west of the county. This type of plough, also known as 'The Combined Glasnevin Implement,' was developed at the Albert Agricultural College in Glasnevin in the late nineteenth century as a plough that could easily be converted to fulfill other functions. These multi-purpose implements may have been distributed

to small farmers in Donegal by bodies such as the Congested Districts Board and/or the Department for Agriculture and Technical Instruction.

After ground has been turned by ploughing, it can be prepared for sowing in a number of ways. **Harrows** are used to break up clods of earth and to mix newly-sown seed with the soil.



The Glasnevin Combined Implement
 (Source: Baldwin, T. Handy Book of Small Farm Management, Dublin, 1870, p. 35)



Harrow displayed outside Teach Mhúiris on the Cnoc Fola / Bloody Foreland



Harrow in use on the Cnoc Fola / Bloody Foreland in the 1980s



A seed fiddle displayed at Graham's farm in Ardagh

Grain crops could be sown by hand from a bag or using a hand-held seed fiddle. On bigger farms, **horse-drawn seed drills** were sometimes used. Harvesting grain was also mechanised on bigger farms. Some **horse-drawn reaping machines** survive in private collections within Donegal. These were generally made in large British or American foundries and represented a considerable investment by individual farmers.

In common with the rest of Ulster, there were considerable amounts of **flax** grown in Donegal during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, especially in the east and north of the county. Processing flax was hard work. The flax had to be pulled by hand and then steeped so that the inner woody core rotted and could be removed from the valuable fibre that was used for making linen thread.

Large stone wheels were used to crush or 'bruise' the flax to make it easier for the core to be beaten out. Several examples of these wheels survive: one in a garden outside Dunfanaghy, another in a yard in Kilmacrennan. Another wheel is said to be sometimes visible at the bottom of Sessaigh Lake near An Craoslach / Creeslough.



Flax bruising wheel at the Glebe, Dunfanaghy



Bruising flax, Donegal, c. 1910 (Photo courtesy of Ulster Folk and Transport Museum)

Horse-powered threshing machines were developed in Holland and Scotland during the eighteenth century. By the mid-nineteenth century, they had become common in Ireland and their construction was fairly standardised.

Machines surviving in Donegal seem to have been manufactured outside the county, in places such as Coleraine in County Derry and Scotland.

One **barn threshing machine** in Baile Chonaill / Ballyconnell was used by a number of local farmers. Large **portable threshing machines** were hired by farmers for one or two days to thresh all the grain harvested on a farm at the one time. In this case, a *meitheal* of up to fourteen neighbours would help on one another's farm. This is an example of mechanisation leading to increased co-operation between neighbours. In most cases, the introduction of labour-saving machinery such as threshing machines was claimed to have made farmers more independent of one another, 'less friendly.'



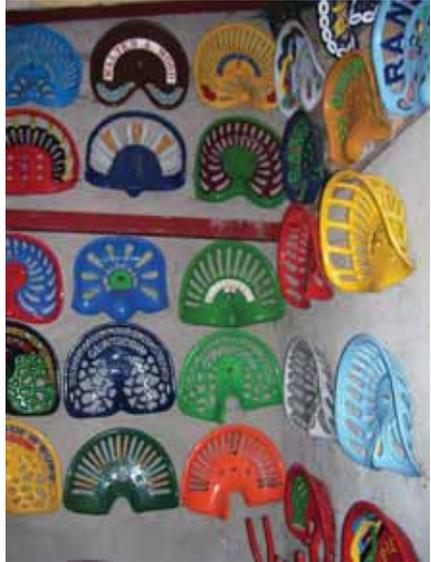
Barn threshing machine at Seamus O'Donnell's Garden Centre, Baile Chonaill / Ballyconnell, An Fál Carrach / Falcarragh



A portable threshing machine (Photo courtesy of Ulster Folk and Transport Museum)

Farm Machinery

The mechanisation of farming in Donegal accelerated from the 1960s onwards. In 1965, there were 57 combine harvesters and 253 milking machines in the county. By 1980, these numbers had risen to 216 combine harvesters and 782 complete milking installations. In 1965, there were 3,322 tractors in the county and 3,014 working horses. By 1980, there were 7,592 tractors and only 324 working horses.^{iv} Today, almost all working horses in Donegal are kept for recreational activities, such as driving events or ploughing matches.



A display of tractor seats on Graham's farm at Ardagh



A Fordson tractor on Wylie's farm, near Letterkenny



A Ferguson tractor on Wylie's farm, near Letterkenny

^{iv} Central Statistics Office, Dublin.

Condition & Conservation

The state of preservation of heritage objects associated with Donegal's farming heritage varies greatly. Vintage tractors and portable threshing machines, for example, are often well cared for. Enthusiasts have restored a number of these and they appear regularly at agricultural events in the county and elsewhere. Some artifacts are carefully preserved and displayed in local heritage centres; for example, St. Connell's Museum in Glenties, Fr. McDyer Folk Village Museum in Gleann Cholm Cille / Glencolmcille, Ionad Cois Locha in Dún Lúiche / Dunlewey and the Famine Village, Isle of Doagh, Inishowen.

A number of private collections also preserve excellent material, notably Matthew and Betty Graham's collection at Ardagh.

Some horse-drawn implements and machines are preserved and displayed as decoration. These might be in gardens or simply set along the roadside. The collection of horse-drawn machinery at Loch an Iúir / Loughanure, for example, makes an impressive public display. However, elsewhere many old implements are lying in heaps, or even discarded completely. All these objects are evidence of the county's farming history and, where possible, they should be rescued and preserved.



A horse-drawn hay rake lying in undergrowth



Horse-drawn farm implements displayed by the roadside in Loch an Iúir / Loughanure



Farm implements displayed outside Teach Mhúiris on Cnoc Fola / Bloody Foreland



Dairy equipment displayed in St. Connell's Museum, Glenties



Potato sorter preserved on Friel's farm near Letterkenny

Glossary

- **Barn fans (*Cáiteoir*):** A machine for winnowing, removing the shells from grain seed by setting up a light draught of air that blows the shells (chaff) away, but allows the heavier seed to fall straight downwards.
- **Churn (*Cuinneog Bhainne*):** Used for making butter by agitating soured milk. In plunge churns, the milk is agitated by a hand-held dash or plunger which is repeatedly raised and plunged into the milk. Barrel churns are fitted to a stand, and the milk is agitated when a handle at the side of the stand is turned, making the barrel revolve 'end over end.'
- **Drill plough (*Druilchéachta*):** A plough used to push loose earth up into long straight rows, mostly for planting potatoes.
- **Drills (*Druileanna*):** Long, straight, equidistant rows in which seed is sown. The equal spacing of the drills allows growing crops to be tended and harvesting to be mechanised.
- **Fiddler (*Meitheal*):** A work group made up of neighbours who joined together to help with tasks such as threshing, digging or even building a house.
- **Flail (*Súiste*):** Two sticks tied together at one end. The sticks were tied together in different ways. In Donegal, the most common tying was eel skin or flax, which was looped through a hole in the larger stick. This stick was held and the other used to beat seed out of the grain from a sheaf laid on the ground.
- **Graip (*Píce*):** A fork with metal prongs used for a variety of tasks, including digging out potatoes or lifting and spreading dung.
- **Grubber (*Grafán*):** A horse-drawn implement with iron feet that uproots weeds out of the sides of drills.
- **Harrows (*Cliath fhuirste*):** Used to break-up ploughed ground or to mix seed into the soil.
- **Loy (*Láighe*):** A one-sided spade, used mostly in the west of Ireland.
- **Noggin (*Gogán*):** A small, staved, wooden container used as a drinking vessel for milk.
- **Quern stone (*Bró*):** Used for grinding corn by hand. Querns can be made from two flat stones, one of which is turned on top of the other, grinding grain placed between them or may be a 'saddle' quern consisting of a dished stone on which grain is spread before being ground by hand, using a small rounded stone.

- **Racan/Rake (*Racán*):** A rake with metal teeth used to break-up soil and mix soil and seed together.
- **Rope twister (*Corrán súgáin*):** Used for twisting ropes made from straw or hay.
- **Scythe (*Speal*):** A long, smooth-bladed implement used for mowing hay and grain.
- **Seed fiddle (*Fidil síl*):** Used for sowing. Seed falls from a small box onto a disc which is made to rotate by pulling and pushing on a bow. The seed flies out in a wide even arc.
- **Sickle (*Corrán cíorach*):** A reaping hook with a toothed blade used for cutting grain crops, marram grass, or seaweed.
- **Spade mill (*Muileann spád*):** Large numbers of Irish spades were made in special mills established in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. County Donegal had seven spade mills:
 - Imlick Townland, Killea Parish, Raphoe North Barony
 - Kildrum Lower Townland, All Saints Parish, Raphoe North Barony,
 - Carrick Townland, Donaghmore Parish, Raphoe South Barony
 - Carrick Upper Townland, Glencolumbkille Parish, Banagh Barony
 - Mountcharles Townland, Inver Parish, Banagh Barony
- Milltown Townland, Killymard Parish, Banagh Barony
- Belalt South Townland, Templecarn Parish, Tirhugh Barony
- **Straw rope (*Súgán*):** A hand-made rope of twisted straw.
- **Threshing (*Bualadh*):** The separation of grain seeds from the husks and straw.
- **Threshing machine (*Buailteoir / Inneall buailte*):** A machine that beats the seed out of heads of grain in a sheaf.
- **Winnowing (*Cáitheadh*):** Removing the hard shells, or chaff, from seeds using a breeze or mechanically-produced air stream to blow the light chaff away.
- **Winnowing tray (*Dallán*):** A tray used to hold seed. The seed is poured from the tray onto a cloth. The light shells are blown away in the breeze while the heavier seed falls onto the cloth.



Miss Jane Clark of Raphoe, aged 95 years in September 1927, using a scythe (Photo from Bigger & McDonald collection courtesy of Derry Central Library)

Further Information

The County Donegal Heritage Office, Cultural Services Division, Donegal County Council in association with The Heritage Council and the County Donegal Heritage Forum commissioned an audit of heritage objects associated with farming and fishing in County Donegal as part of the County Donegal Heritage Plan in 2007. The audit was undertaken by Jonathan Bell & Mervyn Watson and this booklet is based on the outcome of that audit.

If you know of any farming implements that would be worth recording or preserving, please contact or send information to:

Donegal County Museum
High Road,
Letterkenny,
County Donegal.
Telephone: (074) 912 4613
E-mail: museum@donegalcoco.ie

A copy of the audit of heritage objects associated with farming and fishing in County Donegal is available free-of-charge from the County Donegal Heritage Office, Donegal County Council on (074) 917 2576 or by e-mail at heritage@donegalcoco.ie

