

THE OLDEST TOWN?

Ballyshannon

The **HISTORY OF BALLYSHANNON** reveals an ancient town which lays claim to be the first place where our ancestors settled in Ireland.

The island of Inis Saimer where these early settlers resided sits proudly in the River Erne as it flows through the town. Archaeological remains of megalithic tombs, ring forts, promontory forts, souterrains and cashels reveal that the area was a popular place of residence for our early ancestors. The town and port of Ballyshannon had strong commercial links to Continental Europe and Scandinavia for many centuries which sustained the local population. It has been a Seat of Power for the O'Donnell Clan and the English forces and also a point of departure for many thousands of emigrants. This exhibition looks at the evidence to support the claim that Ballyshannon is indeed Ireland's Oldest Town.



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Excavations

The town of Ballyshannon and its hinterland is dotted with **ANCIENT RINGFORTS, BURIAL GROUNDS AND MONUMENTS**. The most investigated of these sites is in the townland of Ballymacaward.

Partholon settles on Inis Saimer	C.2700BC
Bronze Age Cist & Cairn at Ballymacaward	C.2200BC
Ballyshannon Sword Hilt lost overboard	C.100BC
Roman Denarius minted which was later found in the Abbey Graveyard	C.878BC
'Lady of the Sands' laid to rest	C.450AD
Ballyshannon Castle built	C.1423AD
Red Hugh O'Donnell escapes Dublin Castle and returns to Ballyshannon	C.1592AD
Ballyshannon Town Charter	C.1613AD
English Military Barracks Built in Ballyshannon	C.1700AD
William Allingham Born	C.1824AD
Building of Hydro-Electric Station Begins	C.1946AD



Ballymacaward burial excavations

Archaeologists found physical evidence of the following periods during their excavations:

Bronze Age Activity (2400BC – 700BC)

The earliest monument found was a low, platform-type burial cairn. Within the cairn were two small stone rectangular cists or stone coffins, one of which was covered by a stone slab.

Middle Iron Age Activity (370BC – 100AD)

Within the periphery of the mound's centre were two small bowl shaped pits one of which contained the cremated remains of an adult female.

Late Iron Age Activity (100AD – 400AD)

This consisted of cremated bone. Radiocarbon dating indicated that this burial took place around the 2nd/3rd century AD, two hundred years before the arrival of Christianity in Ireland.

Early Medieval First Phase of Activity (411AD – 537AD)

Four long cist graves were found all with an east-west alignment consistent with Christian burial practice. One of these graves contained the remains possibly of a young adult male, the rest were identified as female.

Early Medieval Second Phase of Activity (599AD – 635AD)

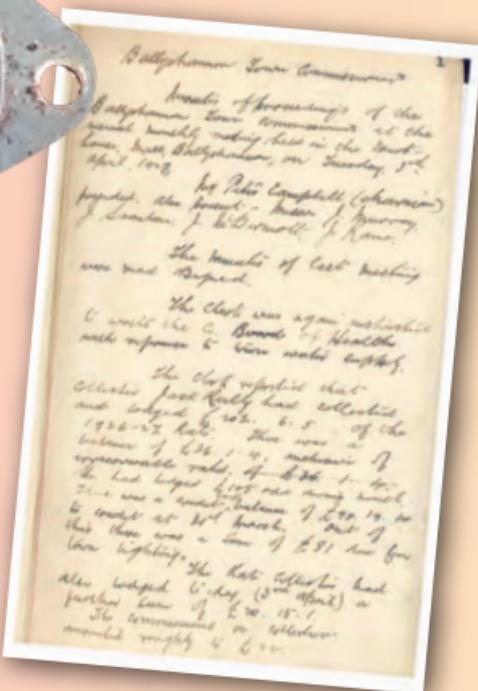
The final phase of activity revealed a minimum of nine extended inhumations all apparently female in unprotected dug graves. One of these burials became the subject of a BBC documentary series called "Meet the Ancestors". The episode was entitled "The Lady of the Sands". Unlike the other burials the skeleton that came to be known as the Lady of the Sands had just one stone slab which had been placed over her chest area. Her arms lay by her sides. Like the others she had been placed with her head pointing west. Together with the lack of grave goods this indicated that she too had been given a Christian burial. The position of her feet within the grave also showed that she had originally been buried in a shroud, another indicator of Christian burial.

Ballyhanna Excavations

In 2003 test excavations were carried out along the entire length of the N15 Bundoran – Ballyshannon Bypass in advance of its construction. Human remains were discovered at Ballyhanna which led to a full excavation of the site over a period of seven months. By the winter of 2003, 1000 burials were excavated and the foundations of a ruined and long-forgotten small church was discovered. Coins, personal possessions, shroud pins and small pieces of white quartz were found with the remains. It is clear that the burial site was used for hundred of years. The church and burial site however had fallen out of use by the 17th century, as evidenced by the lack of material from that era.



Seal of the Ballyshannon Workhouse, Nineteenth Century, Donegal County Archives



Ballyshannon Town Commissioners Minutes 1928, Donegal County Archives

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Lebor Gabála Éirenn (The Book of Invasions) (c. 900 – 1200 AD)

Lebor Gabála Éirenn (The Book of the Taking of Ireland) is the Middle Irish title of a loose collection of poems and prose narratives recounting the mythical origins and history of the Irish from the creation of the world down to the Middle Ages. An important record of the folkloric history of Ireland, it was compiled and edited by an anonymous scholar in the 11th century, and might be described as a mixture of mythology, legend, history, folklore and Christian historiography. It is usually known in English as The Book of Invasions or The Book of Conquests, and in Modern Irish as Leabhar Gabhála Éireann or Leabhar Gabhála na hÉireann. In this text we hear of the first settlers in Ireland – Partholon and his followers.

Who is Partholon?

In the text Lebor Gabála Éirenn we learn of Partholon who settles in Ireland with his three sons and his people. Partholon established his settlement on Inis Saimer, a small island in the mouth of the River Erne in Ballyshannon. This was seen to be a strong base due to the plentiful supply of fish in the river and the sheltered harbour giving quick access to the sea.

After ten years of peace, war breaks out with the Fomorians, a race of evil seafarers led by Cichol Griacchos. The Partholonians are victorious, but their victory is short-lived. In a single week, they are almost wiped out by a plague — five thousand men and four thousand women.

Annals of the Four Masters

The Annals of the Kingdom of Ireland (Annála Ríoghachta Éireann) or the Annals of the Four Masters (Annála na gCeithre Máistrí) are chronicles of medieval Irish history. The entries span from the Deluge, dated as 2,242 years after Creation, to AD 1616. The Annals are mainly a compilation of earlier annals, although there is some original work. They were compiled between 1632 and 1636 in the Franciscan friary in Donegal Town.

The chief compiler of the annals was Mícheál Ó Cléirigh, who was assisted by, among others, Cú Choigcríche Ó Cléirigh, Fearfeasa Ó Maol Chonaire and Peregrine Ó Duibhgeannain. Although only one of the authors, Mícheál Ó Cléirigh, was a Franciscan friar, they became known as 'The Four Friars' or in the original Irish, Na Ceithre Máistrí. The Anglicized version of this was 'Four Masters', the name that became associated with the annals themselves. The patron of the project was Fearghal Ó Gadhra, a lord in County Sligo. Mícheál Ó Cléirigh and Cú Choigcríche Ó Cléirigh were born in Creevey near Ballyshannon.

Town Charter 1613

On the 23rd March 1613 Ballyshannon was granted a charter by King James I which allowed it to have borough status. Around the same time Lifford and Donegal Town were also created as borough towns. Ballyshannon was to be developed as a town with a strong military garrison to defend the English interests and to control the native Irish. Ballyshannon was granted a corporation with 12 burgesses under a Provost (Portreeve). The first 12 appointed were Bennet Payne (Provost), Henry Follitt, William Rastell, Richard Bennett, Stephen Orme, William Atkinson, John Connor, John Glasson, Hugh Allingham, John Forster, John Stephenson and Francis Edmunds.

BALLYSHANNON-

THE OLDEST TOWN IN IRELAND?

Ballyshannon claims to be the oldest continually settled place in Ireland. Now let's look at all our collected evidence that may support this claim.

Archives

Partholon came to a nomadic Ireland around **2700BC**, travelled around himself but settled on Inis Saimer.

Archaeology

The area surrounding Ballyshannon is **dotted with monuments and structures confirming habitation and burial in the area as far back as the Bronze Age. Only one of these sites has been properly investigated and has proved continuity of usage down through the millennia.**

Artefacts

The Ballyshannon Sun Disc which was discovered in the town dates back to 2400BC. The Roman Denarius coin, Ballyshannon Sword Hilt and English Silver coins **all point not only to continuous settlement, but a development and sophistication of settlement which is linked by international trade.**

Partholon settles on Inis Saimer

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BALLYSHANNON
Ireland's Oldest Town

From the evidence you have seen
WHAT DO YOU THINK?

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Chartered Museum of Ireland