LAND RECORDS

Landholding in Ireland
Many of our Irish ancestors were tenant farmers who leased or rented their land, either directly from a landowner or indirectly from a "middleman." Only a small percentage of people in Ireland owned their land outright (technically referred to as holding land "in fee."). There could be several layers of subleasing between the actual landowner and your ancestor. Changes over time in the nature of arrangements with their landlords were vitally important features of the lives of Irish tenant farmers. Land holding arrangements affected economic prosperity, the nature of their farming, inheritance and emigration patterns. One common type of lease with great potential for genealogical information was the "lease for lives," a common type of lease in Ireland in the 1700s and 1800s. A "lease for lives" is in effect as long as the person(s) named in the lease are still living. As soon as all of the "lives" named in the lease have died, the lease lapses. A lease could alternatively be granted for a set number of years, or a tenant could rent from year to year without holding a lease of any kind.

Registry of Deeds
Beginning in 1708 land transactions in Ireland were registered with the Registry of Deeds in Dublin. Because registration was not mandatory, not every land transaction was registered. In the Registry of Deeds you can find deeds of sale, lease agreements, marriage settlements and wills. When a deed was registered in the Registry of Deeds it was not filed there; rather, it was returned to the party who delivered it for registration. What was filed in the Registry of Deeds was a "memorial" which is a synopsis of the deed.

Surname Index: One of the indexes is a personal name index to the sellers (grantors) of land (the Surname Index).

Lands Index: The other index, called the Lands Index or County Index, is arranged geographically. This index is divided by county or city and time period and groups townland names by first letter.

The huge collection of records of the Registry of Deeds from 1708-1929, and the corresponding Surname Index and Lands (or County) Index, are available on microfilm from the Family History Library (FHL). The Registry of Deeds on Henrietta Street in Dublin has books of memorials dating 1708 to present and microfilm copies dating 1930 to present.

Pre-1708 Deeds
The National Archives of Ireland (NAI) has acquired manuscript copies of a number of pre-1708 Irish deeds from private collections. These are deeds from before the time of the Registry of Deeds. The NAI also has a card index to the deposited pre-1708 deeds arranged alphabetically by surname, and another index that is arranged geographically.

Land Commission
If you want to find out how the family property in Ireland came into the ownership of a family member, you may need to consult records of the Land Commission. The Land Commission was responsible for making loans from public funds to tenants so they could buy their farms from their landlords. The commission operated according to the various Land Purchase Acts, 1881 to 1923. If you see "LAP" in the Griffith’s Valuation revision lists for your townland, this is referring to the transfer of ownership to the tenant by "Land Purchase Act."
The Land Commission is now located in the same building as the NAI on Bishop Street, Dublin. It has the records for the counties that are now in the Republic of Ireland. The Land Commission records for the Northern Ireland counties were sent from the Land Commission to the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI) after the political division of Ireland. You can access Land Commission records for an estate at the PRONI in the “Land Registry Archive.”

**Land Registry (Republic of Ireland)**

The Land Registry was established in 1892 to provide a system of compulsory registration of land titles. When a title is registered in the Land Registry, the deeds are filed in the Registry and all relevant particulars concerning the property and its ownership are entered on registers called folios maintained in the Land Registry. Once under the jurisdiction of the Land Registry, records of a plot of land are no longer found in the Registry of Deeds. The Land Registry is split into several offices, each covering certain counties. The Land Registry Internet Site is: [http://www.irlgov.ie/landreg/land_registry_services.htm](http://www.irlgov.ie/landreg/land_registry_services.htm).

**ESTATE RECORDS**

Estate records are the private papers of the landlords of Ireland, those who held tracts of land and leased or rented property to the occupiers. The majority of inhabitants prior to the twentieth century leased or rented rather than owned their house and land. Often the landowner of the estate was a member of the nobility, landed gentry or Church of Ireland clergy. Land was also held by the Crown, the Church of Ireland, London guilds and various companies.

Various records were created as a result of the relationship between the occupiers of the land and the landowners, frequently including rent rolls and leases (many never recorded at the Registry of Deeds). Other records potentially found in estate papers collections include estate maps, emigration lists, petitions to the landowner, wills, freeholders and poll lists, mortgages, eviction records, and account lists. In the time period prior to the beginning of church records in a particular parish, estate papers may be among the only sources available for tracing the poorer classes.

**Strategy for Accessing Estate Papers**

1. **Determine the townland or parish where the ancestor lived.**

2. **Identify the landowner’s full name and title, if applicable.** Often there was a middle class of tenants who leased land from a landowner and in turn leased or rented the land to sub-tenants. Even if they did not rent or lease directly from the landowner, records of the sub-tenants may be found in the landowner’s papers.

3. **Determine where the landowner's estate papers are deposited, or if they are retained by the family.** Papers for one landowner may be deposited in several repositories.

4. **Access the estate papers,** looking for records covering the appropriate time period and townland/parish of interest.

**Some Sources for Identifying the Landowner**

1. Registry of Deeds (1708 - )

2. Tithe Composition Applotment Books (1823-1837)

3. Ordnance Survey (John O'Donovan) Place Name Books (1830s)

4. Griffith's Valuation of Ireland (1847- recent)

5. Richard J. Hayes' *Manuscript Sources for the History of Irish Civilisation*

6. Irish county and local histories

**Some of the Available Estate Record Inventories**
1. Richard J. Hayes' *Manuscript Sources for the History of Irish Civilisation* (11 volumes plus 3 volume supplement).


4. Published County Source Lists, such as in James G. Ryan’s *Irish Records*


7. Public Record Office of Northern Ireland’s *Guide to Landed Estate Records*. Also see PRONI web site <http://www.proni.gov.uk/> and PRONI’s “Personal Name Index.” PRONI’s *Register of Irish Archives* is a series of lists and calendars of archives of Irish interest, largely held in private hands.

8. NLI Reports on Records in Private Keeping printed in *Analecta Hibernica* nos. 15, 20, 23, 25 and 32.

**Incumbered Estates Records:** The Incumbered Estates Act of 1849 created a court to sell the estates of insolvent landowners in Ireland. Over 3,000 estates were processed between 1849 and 1857, although the court continued to sell estates through the 1880s. The NAI and the NLI both hold Incumbered Estates rental brochures listing information about tenants. The PRONI has many of the earlier rental brochures with microfilm copies at the FHL. An index of the entire set of Incumbered Estates rental brochures, arranged by county, parish, and townland, is available at the NAI.

**FREEHOLDERS RECORDS**

Voters, Poll, Freemen and Freeholders Records are lists of people entitled to vote, or lists of people actually voting at elections. These records were usually arranged on a county, city or borough basis. Freeholders were substantial landholders who had the right to vote, while freemen or free citizens of cities and boroughs also had votes. In cities, freeholders who qualified through their land and freemen who qualified through their trade both voted in elections, but usually borough elections only involved freemen. Records of freemen, freeholders, and others who voted in Irish municipal and parliamentary elections survive in various repositories and sources, because these records were public.

**Freeholders’ Records**

A freeholder held his property either in fee simple, which means outright ownership, or by a lease for a life or lives (such as the term of his life or the term of three lives named in the lease). A tenant who held land for a definite period such as 31 years or 100 years did not qualify as a freeholder. A person with a freehold of sufficient value, depending on the law at the time, could register to vote. A great deal of the Irish freeholders records were lost in the 1922 Four Courts Fire.

From 1727 to 1793 only Protestants with a forty-shilling freehold (a freehold worth at least 40 shillings per year above the rent) or above qualified to vote. In 1793 Catholics with at least a forty-shilling freehold were given the vote. Forty-shilling freeholders, both Catholic and Protestant, had the vote between 1793 and 1829. In 1829, all 40 shilling freeholders lost the vote, and from that date a £10 freehold was required to qualify to vote. From 1832 through 1884 a series of reform acts extended the franchise somewhat, but it was not until 1918 that all adult males (over age 21) were given the vote. In the 1920s women over age 21 gained the same privilege in both Northern Ireland and the Irish Free State (now the Republic of Ireland).
Poll Books record votes cast at parliamentary elections by qualifying freeholders. They contain the name and address of the voter and often the address of their freehold. Freeholders Registers give similar information to the Poll Books but do not record how people voted at a particular election.

A freeholders register may list some or all of the following information about the freeholders:

1. The name of the freeholder;
2. The abode of the freeholder;
3. The location of the freehold;
4. The value of the freehold;
5. The lives named in the lease or other tenure;
6. The date and place the freeholder registered;
7. The name of landlord;
8. The occupation of tenant.

Some common places to find surviving freeholders lists include landed estate papers and newspapers. Because landowners had an interest in knowing what voting freeholders lived on their estates, copies of freeholders lists are often found among the papers of landed estate owners.

Online inventory of freeholders records: <http://ireland.progenealogists.com/freeholdersdata.asp>
PRONI online database (Northern Ireland): <http://www.proni.gov.uk/freeholders/intro.asp>

Freemen Records

The technical meaning of the term “Freeman” was a person who possessed the “freedom” of a city or borough. The freeman had the right to vote in elections as well as exemption from certain fees. A person who held the freedom of a city did not necessarily live in the city. The members of the city and borough trade guilds were freemen.

At least 200 boroughs were created from the 1100s through the 1600s in Ireland. Borough and city corporations were created by charters held of the Crown. The charters of many of these boroughs were later revoked.

An individual could qualify for the freedom of a borough or city in several ways:

1. By birthright for the son of a freeman;
2. By marriage to the daughter of a freeman; or
3. By apprenticeship to a freeman.

Cities and boroughs also named honorary freemen.

A freeman’s register usually stated the freeman’s name, the date of admittance, his occupation (the guild to which he belonged), and the means by which he was admitted (birth, marriage or apprenticeship). Freemen’s lists are often found in the corporation books of boroughs which may still be in local custody or may have been deposited or microfilmed.

Freemen records are particularly important for tracing more prominent Dublin families. The free citizens of Dublin were drawn from members of the Trade Guilds and their descendants. Dublin’s freemen lists date c1234-1918.

Voters Registers

After 1880, Voters Lists are included in the Crown and Peace Records for the individual counties. Many of these records survive and have been deposited at the NAI and PRONI. Prior to 1918, voting rights depended on the value of a person’s property holdings. All men over age 21 and some women over age 30 were given the right to vote in 1918 in the United Kingdom, which at that time included all of Ireland. The series of local genealogy guides compiled by Noel Farrell of Longford, Ireland, includes extracts from twentieth century electoral lists for towns in Ireland <http://www.exploringfamilyorigins.com>. 
**Addresses**

Dublin City Archive: City Assembly House, South William St., Dublin 2, Ireland; Tel: (01) 6775877; Fax: (01) 6775954; Internet: <http://www.dublincity.ie/>

Family History Library: 35 North West Temple, Salt Lake City, UT 84150, USA; British Isles Ref Tel: (801) 240-2367; <http://www.familysearch.org>.

Genealogical Office: 2 Kildare Street, Dublin 2, Ireland; Tel: (01) 6030200; Fax: (01) 6621062.

Irish Genealogical Society International: PO Box 16585, St. Paul, MN 55116, USA; Internet: <http://www.rootsweb.com/~irish/>

The National Archives: Ruskin Avenue, Kew, Richmond, Surrey, TW9 4DU, England; Tel: (0181) 392 5200; Fax: (0181) 878 8905; Internet: <http://www.pro.gov.uk>.

National Archives of Ireland: Bishop Street, Dublin 4, Ireland; Tel: (01) 4783711; Fax: (01) 4783650; Internet: <http://www.nationalarchives.ie>.

National Library of Ireland: Kildare Street, Dublin 2, Ireland; Tel: (01) 6618811; Fax: (01) 6766690; Internet: <http://www.nli.ie>.

Northern Ireland Place-Name Project: Department of Celtic, School of Modern and Medieval Languages, Queen's University of Belfast, 7 University Square, Belfast BT7 1NN, Northern Ireland; Tel: (01232) 273689; Fax: (01232) 324549.

Public Record Office: Ruskin Avenue, Kew, Richmond, Surrey, TW9 4DU, England; Tel: (0181) 392 5200; Fax: (0181) 878 8905; Internet: <http://www.pro.gov.uk>.

Registry of Deeds: Henrietta Street, Dublin 1, Ireland; Tel: (01) 6707500; Fax: (01) 8048408.

Trinity College Dublin: College Street, Dublin 2, Ireland; Tel: (01) 608 1189; Fax: (01) 608 2690; Internet: <http://www2.tcd.ie/Library>; e-mail (Keeper of Manuscripts): mscripts@tcd.ie.

University College Dublin: Archives Department, Belfield, Dublin 4, Ireland; Tel: (01) 7067547; Fax: (01) 7061146; Internet: <http://www.ucd.ie/~archives/>.

Valuation Office of Ireland: Irish Life Centre, Abbey Street Lower, Dublin 1, Ireland; Tel: (01) 8171000; Fax: (01) 8171180; <http://www.valoff.ie>.

**References and Further Reading**


Lyons, Mary Cecilia. *Illustrated Incumbered Estates Ireland, 1850-1905.* Whitegate, County Clare, Ireland: Ballinakella Press.


Smith, Frank. *Smith's Inventory of Genealogical Sources: Ireland.* Salt Lake City, UT: Corporation of the President, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1994.

