

Agnew Mysteries ©

Toberagnew

Great emphasis is placed on the geographic feature of Agnew's Hill in Kilwaughter Parish as evidence of long term possession by the Gallwegian Agnews of Lochnaw. The statements appear widely and are seldom challenged.

Why then is the presence of the townland of Toberagnew and its distinctive ancient well totally ignored and essentially forgotten? ¹

Townland of Toberagnew

Townlands, or *ballybetagh* in Gaelic, were ancient Irish land divisions and most sites and names date from deep in the past. As they were already established and attached to identifiable plots, the Normans incorporated them in their system as they began transferring confiscated areas to personal heritable ownership; Nominally the Irish townland was calculated as 480 acres – more or less. In practice some are as small as 1 acre,²

Toberagnew townland and its name clearly predate the plantation period. Its peculiar location bears no evident ties to later 17th century or subsequent political, social or ecclesiastic factors. It is a small detached area, entirely surrounded by the larger neighboring Parish of Templepatrick, and some distance from the Parish of Ballymartin, the civil political jurisdiction to which it has been long appended.

The townland's name has, like most semi-Anglicized Irish name of Gaelic origin, appeared in many variations over the centuries while the two languages struggled for dominance. The Northern Ireland place name project lists and documents the following historical variation examples for Toberagnew:

¹ Today both are known as Toberagnew.

² Interestingly the smallest Irish land measure, 10 acres, was called a Gneeve !.²

Old Forms

- **Bal...rbarnegno** - CPR Jas I, 38b,
- **Ballyturbarnegno** - Inq. Ant. (DK), , 1605
- **Ballyturbarnegno** - CPR Jas I, 38b,
- **Tubbermaccknoe** - Inq. Ult. (Antrim), ,
- **Ballyturbaringno** - Inq. Ult. (Antrim), ,
- **Ballyturbarneguo** - CPR Jas I, 38b,
- **Ballyturbarneyne** - Inq. Ult. (Antrim), ,
- **Teparicknew** - HMR Ant., , 1669
- **Tober Uí Ghníomha "Agnew's well"** - J O'D (OSNB), , 1834c

Source:Placenames of Northern Ireland website <http://www.placenamesni.org/resultsdetail.phtml?entry=18328>

Stephenson comments on the well of Toberagnew in his 1825 History of the Parish of Templepatrick and suggests this is a corruption of Tober Minfio, i.e. “the pleasant well in the woods” but no other authority has suggested this derivation. Local lore in the early 1800’s suggested it was a place where monks travelling the 6 miles from Muckamore Priory to the dependent ancient church at Ballymartin found it a convenient resting place.

Well of Toberagnew

In Gaelic *tober* means “well” so this townland name means “Agnew’s Well” !The spring-fed well itself is 2 feet in diameter and 1 foot deep surrounded and lined with carefully set stone of considerable age. The water is clear and constant. It has been maintained and obviously been prized for centuries. Obviously, the well has been of sufficient note that the townland itself became known by this distinctive feature.

In the 1830’s the well was on the farm of Arthur Greer near Biggams Brae. A Symon Biggam was recorded in a nearby townland in the 1669 Hearth Money Tax roll for the combined Parishes of Ballymartin and Templepatrick. There were also 4 Agnew families on this particular roll.

History of the Area and Hints to Possible Agnew Associations

The entire district around Toberagnew has been the site of human habitation for millennia and recorded events have many links to the history of the Agnews.

The brief notes below for the historic period are reinforced by findings in the Templepatrick / Ballymartin area of English coins of Henry II, Henry III, King John, Edward I, Edward II, encompassing the period from the 12th to the early 14th century and Scottish coins of David I, Alexander III and Edward Bruce for the same period,

Neolithic Period

Within the Townland of Toberagnew the Lyle Hill looms on the horizon and archeological work has been undertaken at that site by government and university staff since 1986. While there is a long range of habitation, recent publications report carbon dating of as much as 4000 years. Indeed a particular type of Neolithic pottery found across County Antrim is known as Lylehill and quantities of flint tools were evidently made there. Charcoal remnants suggest that one of the oldest, if not the oldest house in Northern Ireland, may have been identified at Lyle Hill.

Christian Era

The area of County Antrim from Lough Neagh to the North Channel coast was known as Dalriada, the place from which around 500 AD the Irish Dal Riada tribe swept across the Irish sea to conquer southwest Scotland and then spread into the borders and northward up the west coast into the Isles. It was this movement that left close kin in Antrim and Galloway leading to an almost constant interchange for the next 1500 years. It is what first put proto-Agnews in both places.

Muckamore Priory

Half a century later in 550 AD Colman Elo, a missionary monk from St. Columba's monastery on the Isle of Iona, founded the Priory of Muckamore at a place near Lough Neagh and south of what is now Antrim Town. While many other religious houses followed, none rivaled Muckamore in extent of its gifts and holdings. Eventually its lands and livings stretched all the way to Kilwaughter and up into the Glynnns, to Carncastle and beyond. Its last prior and a few monks survived into the reign of Henry VIII and beyond the expropriation of the church. Agnews and O'Gneves appear surprisingly often associated with former farms,

granges and extraparochial holdings of Muckamore lands long after dissolution and far into the 19th century. Whether they had some now unrecognized hereditary lay connection with Muckamore³ or were exceptionally canny as the later Granges and other holdings retained their exemptions from Established Church (Anglican) tithes, there is no evidence in present records.

This priory was very well supported by John deCourcy and at least 6 of his 22 knightly followers can be identified from records of their gifts – although these do not include any Anglo Norman name that could be associated with Agnew or a Lordship of Larne. Other Normans who followed after deCourcy's ouster continued to support Muckamore.

Sometime in the 12th century it is claimed that the Knights Templar, or more likely the Hospitaler Order, built a castle at Templepatrick. In either event, upon suppression of the Templars in the early 13th century⁴, the Knights of St. John of Jerusalem (Hospitalers) came into possession and retained it until the Dissolution. This order, too, received significant support from the waves of Anglo Normans that struggled to actually conquer and secure Ireland. But it was Ulster that continued the most independent of the five provinces with weak and fading Norman influence largely confined to a mere strip from Muckamore and Templepatrick area to the southern Glynnns.

About the same period the powerful O'Neill family of Ulster, who had frequently been High Kings of Ireland, split and the cadet branch of Clanboye O'Neills maintained sway from southern Antrim into Down – i.e. old Dalriada - and with that the ancient name faded from history. Their domain included the areas from Ballymena through the seat of Muckamore Abbey, Templepatrick and far to the east. Two centuries later the O'Neill court would be served by a leading poet and scholar, Fearflatha O'Gnimh (O'Gneevs) and many families of O'Gneevs would be settled along the same area, including Toberagnew and the Templepatrick/Ballymartin Parishes.

³ The Irish Church developed an unusual system of lay supervisors of land and operations – *erenachs* or *muintirs* - whose posts eventually became hereditary.

⁴ Curiously, unlike the extreme persecution Templars experienced elsewhere, in Ireland the claims of heretical behavior were not deemed creditable, they were treated kindly, allowed to retire to other monasteries and supported for the remainder of their lives.

In the later 13th century the first Scots *galloglass* appeared in Ireland - invited by regional Irish chiefs and petty kings who found that their short-term levies of lightly armed farmers and herders were no match for even small groups of mailed and armored Anglo Norman forces set on carving personal feudal estates out of Irish clan territories. The tall, heavily armed Scots professional warriors who fought on foot were the “tanks” of their day and could bring down even mounted knights.

Galloglass⁵ mercenaries came into every part of Ireland They served under contract and were noted for their remarkable loyalty to their patrons, even when they were subsequently recruited by former adversaries. Irish employers valued both their skill and fidelity and rewarded them accordingly so that most hereditary warrior families remained in Ireland making up the first large influx of Scottish settlers before the 16th century.

Clan Donald was a preeminent provider, supplying gallowglass from the Isles and the west coast of Scotland. They were unusual in that they also sent settlers throughout the period, especially where they already had strong ties to Ulster chiefs through frequent marriage and particularly after they acquired the Glynns by marriage with the Anglo Norman Bissett heiress in 1399. The Eoin na Ghoinmha was a noted MacDonald gallowglass and his great grandchildren adopted O’Gnimh as a surname. The O’Gnimh sept of the MacDonnells of Antrim became, not hereditary warriors but, a family of scholars who served as hereditary poets, historians and genealogists to the head of Antrim branch of the MacDonnells by or before the 16th century. From their lands in the Glynns they also later sometimes served the chief of the Clanaboy O’Neills whose seat was in the general area of Templepatrick and Muckamore.

In the early 14th century Edward Bruce was briefly nominal King of Ireland. He ranged widely in Ulster including Antrim. Since he was an O’Neill descendant and was said to have been fostered with them - perhaps even with the Bissetts of the Glynns as well, he may have been familiar with that area of Antrim from Muckamore to the Glynns long before his forces devastated it, On the expedition Bruce was accompanied by many MacDonald forces and was said to have had an

⁵ Note the similarity to Galloway which is not accidental, both referring to “young `foreign Gael’ (Gall-Gaedheal or Norse=Gaelic) warriors.

ancestor of the first Lochnaw Agnew either with him or joining him in Antrim.⁶ Thus, through either the MacDonalds or their own local connections, Agnew and/or O’Gneevs may have been in the Templepatrick area at the time of the Bruce expedition

During the Tudor period, unlike the gallowglass that preceded them for 3 centuries, Scots mercenaries came for the contracted period of service and did not stay but returned to their homes in Scotland. This group of soldiers is properly termed “new Scots”. Meantime, English landlords energetically recruited a third group of Scots specifically to *settle* their estates. They were more “profitable, orderly” tenants, dutifully tilling the land, making improvements, paying rents and renewing leases. In contrast, the Irish - with reason - objected to leasing and paying rent for land they regarded as their own. Moreover, they were not accustomed to farming for more than their own immediate use. Even though the government urged that English settlers were to be preferred, landlords soon found that they too often led to a loss rather than a profit because they frequently required considerable incentives, proved less hardy, discouraged easily and quickly returned home. It was this third group of Scots, together with gallowglass descendants, that were particularly persecuted in the Tudor period and outright outlawed by Phillip and Mary in midcentury. It was feared that they might encourage a Scots invasion to form a second front in their war with England.

When James I revoked the ban and instituted right of denization a number of O’Gneevs and a few Agnews from Down and Antrim applied. At least 2 were residents of Kilwaughter and Larne parishes, i.e. in Muckamore-linked territory.

Too Much Land, Too Limited Funds

At about this point the picture of the Toberagnew area described in the opening comes into full focus. Near the end of the Tudor period during the Nine Year’s War the Earl of Essex gave land in Templepatrick/Ballymartin to one of his soldiers. With the ascension of James I the soldier applied for and received confirmation about 1606. Then almost at once , he turned it over to James Hamilton who, within a year, passed it on to the Lord Deputy, Chichester. There was a surfeit of confiscated and abandoned holdings available but profit from

⁶ Agnew, A, Hereditary Sheriffs of Wigtownshire, 1893.

largely undeveloped land required large amounts of capital, labor and time. Within a few years Robert Norton acquired the estate and in 1611 began construction of a castle, allegedly on the remains of the old Templar stronghold. Norton, however, ended with 11 unmarried daughters but no son and agreed to sell it to Henry Upton some time before 1641. Upton was well liked and apparently took notice of the signs of unrest, putting the stronghold in a state of preparation. When the rising began Castle Upton became a haven for threatened Protestants across a wide area. But during the native raids and settler reprisals Upton also risked his personal safety in attempts to protect his Catholic tenants and servants from equally brutal treatment.

The recently available transcripts of 1641 Depositions collected and adjudicated during the Commonwealth period reveal that both Agnews and O’Gneevs were involved in various incidents and the English scribes sometimes entered variants of both names for the same person. These documents establish that both Agnews and O’Gneevs were resident through the whole area from the River Bann to Carncastle. If it had not already been introduced in earlier times, any of these families could have been the source of the name Agnew applied to the townland and well of Toberagnew.

The Documented Period

Persecutions, religious and political, continued to plague the Presbyterian Congregation of Templepatrick well into the 19th century. But its members persisted their commitments until, by the 1820’s, they were the overwhelming majority there being essentially no Roman Catholics in town and surrounding region and only a handful attending the Established (episcopal) Church. As the attached table shows Scots surnames predominate in both the area and the graveyard, Not only is Agnew among the most common family names of the area but the list also reveals that a remarkable number of collateral families of North American Agnew emigrants were also represented in the Templepatrick region.

Yet the area and most particularly the townland and well of Toberagnew are little known and seem not to figure in discussions of Agnew roots and origin.

10/20/2011A Contemporary Survivor

US 2010 Telephone Yellow Pages and Manta record

Tober & Agnew Construction Inc.

21 Gray Fox Ridge

Newark, Delaware

Founded 1976. Masonry services.

President, Earl Agnew

Vice President, Earl Agnew, Jr.

Customer review sites give strong recommendations. One declared the firm, “The best masons in the area.”

What do *you* think is the origin of this Antrim geographic name?



Table 1

**Parish of Templepatrick PREVAILING
SURNAMEs in ca 1834 Ordnance
Memoirs**

Agnew	Johnston
Allison	Lindsay
Armstrong	McBride
Barron	McIlroy
Bell	McIlwain
Blair	McNeely
Boyd	Millar
Brown	Moore
Carruth	Morton
Carson	Neill
Cochran	Nesbitt
Deboys	Norton
Galt	Parker
Gibson	Price
Gilliland	Rea
Gowdy	Reid
Harper	Rowan
Humphrey	Rusk
Irwin	Saunders
Jamieson	Shannon
	Smythe (Smith)
	Steele
	Williamson

Bibliography

1. 1641 Depositions. Trinity College Dublin Mss 809-841.
<http://www.1641.tcd.ie/index.php>
2. Agnew, Andrew, Bt. *The Hereditary Sheriffs of Wigtonshire*. 2 Vol., David Douglas, Edinburgh.1893,
3. Carleton, S. T., Ed. Heads and hearths: The Hearth Money Rolls and Poll Tax Returns for Co. Antrim 1660-69; Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, Belfast, 1991.
4. Data Base of Irish A Excavation Reports. Antrim 1987 et seq. Lyle's Hill. Toberagnew. neolithic enclosure. www.excavations.ie
5. Day, A. and Mc Williams, P. Parishes of Ballymartin, Ballyrobert, Ballywalter, Carnmoney, Mallusk. Vol Two, Parishes of County Antrim (i) 1838-9. Ordnance Survey Memoirs of Ireland, 1990.
6. Day, A., Mc Williams, P and English, L. Templepatrick and district. Vol Thirty Five, Parishes of County Antrim XIII, 1833, 1835, 1838.. Ordnance Survey Memoirs of Ireland, 1996.
7. Graham, Joe. The Killing Fields of Templepatrick.Rushlight Magazine.n.d.
www.rushlightmagazine.com.
8. Hayes-McCoy, G. A. Scots Mercenary Forces in Ireland (1655-1603). Edmund Burke, Dublin, *Facsimile Reprint of 1937 First Edition*
9. O'Brien, Pat. *Of Gneeves, Townlands, Civil Parishes & Station Districts*. Chapter 25 in Fossa & Aghadoe: Our History and Heritage. Online Book, n.d. Fossa Historical Society, County Kerry, Ireland.
<http://www.fossahistoricalsociety.com>
10. Reeves, William. *Ecclesiastical Antiquities of Down, Connor and Dromore.....* Dublin, 1847.
11. Stephenson, S. M. *Historical Essay in the Parish and Congregation of Templepatrick*. Belfast, 1824.
12. Stewart, Rev. David. *The Scots in Ulster: Their Denization and Naturalization, 1605- 1634*. Reprinted in *Familia. Ulster Genealogical Review, No.11, 1995* .
www.ancestryIreland.com
13. Townland of Toberagnew. Historic Name with Old Forms and references. www.placenamesni.org