

The Growth and Development of the village of Shanagolden

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The origins of an early and important urban settlement in West Limerick are discussed and its subsequent growth, development and historical significance are outlined and analysed.

Shanagolden can lay claim to be one of the oldest urban settlements in Co. Limerick. The earliest mention of Shanagolden in the historical record is in 968, when Mahon, King of Munster and the increasingly powerful *Dál Cais* defeated the Norse in a major battle at Shanagolden.¹ While the source states that it was the Vikings of Limerick and Waterford who were defeated at *Sengualainn*, this could be interpreted to mean that there was a Viking settlement at Shanagolden. What is certain is that there was a settlement there in the pre-Norman period. In 1165, it is recorded that the armies of Connacht under Rory O'Connor invaded Limerick in an intervention to help the deposed Thomond king, Turlough O'Brien regain his throne. During this incursion Shanagolden village was burnt.² As there is no evidence that the native Irish founded towns in this period, all of the early urban settlements had a Norse foundation,³ this suggests that Shanagolden may have been a Viking settlement. Interestingly, the street running south from the bridge in Shanagolden village towards the Catholic Church is called Dane Street. There is some suggestion from local folklore that the street was named after a Viking settlement, but other information suggests that the street was named after Dean Patrick McNamara, the Catholic parish priest who lived at Elmville House on the street in the early nineteenth century and 'dane' is a corruption of 'dean'.⁴

If the Vikings did settle at Shanagolden, one has to ask why they would have chosen this location. The answer perhaps lies in the good quality farming land on a fertile limestone plain, which is highlighted by the high density of ringforts in the district. The grazing of cattle and the growing of corn were important in Early Christian Ireland and this productive agricultural district at Shanagolden was likely highly prized also by the Vikings, as it provided close access to the river Shannon to transport the produce and less than two day's travel away there was a ready market in the important Norse settlement at Limerick City for the agricultural produce of the region.

In the Black Book of Limerick in 1201, the church of Shanagolden was already established and is recorded as a diocesan church. While there is no evidence for an early Christian monastery it should be considered that these churches may have had a much earlier foundation. The church at Shanagolden was situated a short distance east of the large trivallate ringfort on Knockourha, the headquarters of the *Uí Chonaill Gabhra* tribe.

¹ Thomas Johnson Westropp, 'A Survey of the Ancient Churches in the County of Limerick', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, vol. xxv (1905) p. 396.

² Michael Dolley, *Anglo-Norman Ireland*, (Dublin, 1972), p. 50.

³ Donnchadh Ó Corráin, *Ireland before the Normans*, (Dublin, 1972), p. 72.

⁴ Máire Breathnach Ní Ghormáin, 'The Impact of Man and the Environment on the 'Cultural Landscape' of West County Limerick. Three Case Studies: Shanid, Askeaton and Glin Castles, 1199 A.D. to the present', (unpublished B.A. thesis, University of Limerick, 2008) p. 25; See the plaque on the porch of Shanagolden Catholic Church for details regarding Dean McNamara.

Stout has shown that in many areas of the country there is a relationship between early ecclesiastical sites and high status ringforts.⁵ Shanagolden may also have such a relationship of having an early Christian church founded well before the twelfth century. The early focus of settlement in the village was likely on the hillock where the present main street is situated. It was a well-chosen site, situated on high ground and convenient to the church. Two streams ran nearby guaranteeing a regular water supply.

The support of the Anglo-Norman family the Desmond Fitzgeralds who gained control of the lands of the Manor of Shanid around Shanagolden from 1237 was likely important in sustaining the village during the troubled early Norman period. In the Inquisition of 1298 Shanagolden village is not clearly identified among the lands of the Manor of Shanid, but is perhaps the 'parcels of lands' mentioned as 'Sangenath' valued at 40 shillings a year and the second most valuable land in the manor after the demesne lands.⁶ In 1300, Shanagolden is recorded, in a taxation record, as a village and one of the smaller Anglo-Norman boroughs of County Limerick.⁷

Following the failed Desmond rebellions in the late sixteenth century most of the lands around Shanagolden were granted in 1587, as part of the Plantation of Munster, to the English planter William Trenchard. While the Trenchards were based at the castle at Corrig, Foynes, it was Shanagolden village that was the centre of commercial activity of the estate. In 1612, William Trenchard's son, Francis, was granted a patent to hold a Friday market and one annual fair at Shanagolden. This suggests that the village had survived the upheaval of the Desmond rebellions in good shape.⁸

Centres having a mill and a castle/manor in the mid-seventeenth century, such as Shanagolden and the nearby centres of Robertstown and Dunmoylan can be taken as being village settlements. The distribution of corn mills in the district reflects the importance of cereals in the Anglo-Norman economy. The medieval villages of Robertstown and Dunmoylan each had two mills while there was one mill at Shanagolden.⁹ These five corn mills were within an area of thirteen square kilometers. This is the highest density of corn mills in west Limerick and is an indication of a strong commitment to tillage and suggests that the land in the district was highly productive.

The exceptional growth of new markets and fairs in this part of west Limerick between 1610 and 1619 at Askeaton, Ardagh, Dunmoylan and Shanagolden is a pointer to increased commercialization following the plantation of new English settlers and highlights that the rearing of livestock was the most important agricultural activity.¹⁰ These were small urban centres serving English needs and tastes, but the number of these small centres does imply that many of the Irish in the countryside participated in this new commercial system. First of all, with the new English settlers being few in number, how else would shopkeepers and traders at these centres have survived, and secondly and of

⁵ John Fleming, 'The formation of the medieval church in Limerick', in Liam Irwin, Gearóid Ó Tuathaigh and Matthew Potter (eds), *Limerick, History and Society, Interdisciplinary essays on the history of an Irish County*, (Dublin, 2009), p.13; Matthew Stout, 'The distribution of early medieval ecclesiastical sites in Ireland', in Patrick J. Duffy and William Nolan (eds), *At the Anvil, Essays in Honour of William J. Smyth*, (Dublin, 2012), p. 71.

⁶ Anthony M. McCormack, *The Earldom of Desmond 1463-1583, The Decline and Crisis of a Feudal Lordship*, (Dublin, 2005), p. 28; John Begley, *The Diocese of Limerick, Ancient and Medieval*, (Dublin, 1906), pp 157-161.

⁷ Patrick J. O'Connor, *Exploring Limerick's Past, An historical Geography of Urban Development in County and City*, (Newcastle West, 1987), pp 16-7.

⁸ O'Connor, *Exploring Limerick's Past*, pp 29-31.

⁹ Robert C. Simington, *The Civil Survey A.D. 1654-6 County of Limerick, Vol. IV with a section of Clanmaurice Barony, Co. Kerry*, (Dublin, 1938), pp 322-3.

¹⁰ O'Connor, *Exploring Limerick's Past*, p. 29.

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more importance, the much more numerous Irish farmers had to sell their corn and cattle at these centres to earn the cash to pay the yearly rent to their new English lords.

In the mid-seventeenth century the Mount Trenchard Estate were held by William Trenchard who was living in England. The estate by this time may have been sublet to middlemen and divided into two separate divisions, for in the Census of 1659, Francis Paluis and Symon Gibbins, both described as gentlemen are recorded as living at Robertstown and Shanagolden respectively. This census also gives an indication as to the number of houses in Shanagolden village at this time. The later townlands of Shanagolden containing the houses on the eastern side of the main street in Shangolden village and Shanagolden Demesne situated north of the creamery were then part of the mid-seventeenth century division of Shanagolden. In 1659 this division had nineteen households, five of English origin and fourteen described as Irish, while the division of Ballycormick that contained the western side of the main street of the village and the lands up the Kerry Hill Road had seventeen households, five English and twelve Irish.¹¹ As this census is seen as recording houses that could pay the 1660-61 poll tax, this suggests that there were at least thirty-six houses in and around Shanagolden village c.1660 that were liable to pay this tax and there were probably a number of other houses in the village of the poorer classes of society.

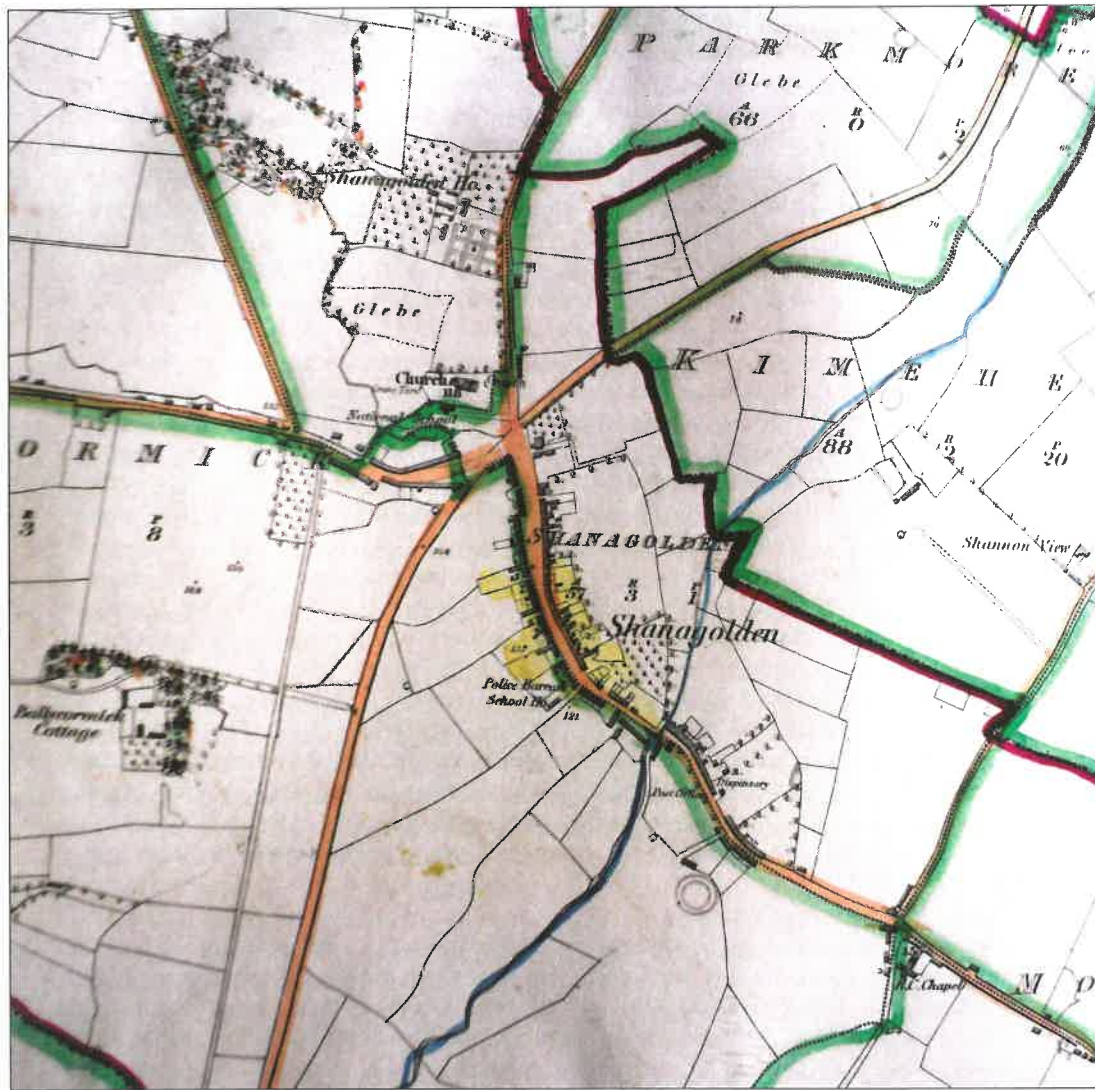
Throughout the seventeenth century sponsored emigration resulted in the influx of new English families in the region. By 1622, 788 families had settled in County Limerick and the land transfers that took place from 1660 with the Cromwellian confiscations also brought in English newcomers, so that by 1690 over twenty per cent of the population of Shanagolden village were described as new English settlers.¹² Villages seem to have been an attractive settlement focus for many of these new settlers. It was a safer option than a house on its own in the countryside, as it provided strength in depth if a number of new settlers put down roots together. There were large scale land transfers to new English landlords during this period and there was an unwillingness of these new landlords to deal directly with Irish farmers for the payment of the rent. A social pyramid emerged from the mid-seventeenth century where the new English landlords generally rented the land to an English chief tenant who in turn sub-let the land to Irish farmers and small holders. The main reason for this was the religious difference; many Catholics were not trusted by their new Protestant overlords.¹³ This is seen in the Rental of the Manor of the Mount Trenchard Estate on 25 March 1747, thirteen (sixty-eight per cent) of the nineteen chief tenants or middlemen on the estate had English surnames. However within thirty years this situation had changed drastically, an Irish middle class had developed in the mid-eighteenth century and by 1770 seventeen (sixty-five per cent) of the twenty-six middlemen on the estate had Irish surnames. Change to the social structure of Shanagolden village is also evident from this period. The 1770 Map of the Manor of the Mount Trenchard estate indicates that of the ten lessees who held land on the eastern side of the main street in Shanagolden village, six had Irish surnames and four (forty per cent) had English surnames.¹⁴ In *Griffiths Valuation* of 1852, only six (four per cent) of the 151

¹¹ Séamus Pender (ed.), *A Census of Ireland circa 1659 with Supplementary Material from the Poll Money Ordinances (1660-1661)*, (Dublin, 1939), p. 281.

¹² O'Connor, *Exploring Limerick's Past*, pp 29-31.

¹³ David Dickson, *Old World Colony, Cork and South Munster, 1630-1830*, (Cork, 2005), pp 181-2.

¹⁴ Rental of the Manor of Mount Trenchard, 1747, Monteagle Papers; Division of the Mount Trenchard Estate, 1770, Monteagle Papers. The western side of the main street in Shanagolden village which is part of the townland of Ballycormick was not part of the 1770 survey, as Ballycormick was not part of the Mount Trenchard estate at that time.



Shanagolden Ordnance Survey map 1840.

properties in Shanagolden village were held by a lessee having an English surname. By 1886 there was no English Protestant presence; none of the thirty tradesmen and shopkeepers recorded in *Guy's Directory* had English surnames.¹⁵

By the mid-eighteenth century Shanagolden was on the main route from Limerick City to Tralee on the fledgling road network. The bridge at Newbridge, five miles east of the village was constructed in 1747 and this facilitated an easier crossing of the river Deel and faster journey times. In Taylor and Skinner's Map of 1777 the road from Limerick came by Kilmoylan through the village and by Mount David going towards the Five

¹⁵ Griffiths Valuation, Barony of Shanid, 1852, pp 737-745; *Guy's Directory of Munster*, 1886, pp 824-5.

Crosses road- junction and on towards Loghill. This map suggest that a mile stone may have been situated at the junction of the Kerry Hill and Mount David roads giving the distance to Limerick City of twenty Irish miles. The maps also shows that road by the Kerry Hill is described as the 'Old Road' and was the former main route west to Glin and beyond.¹⁶

The patronage of a resident landlord was an important factor in the survival of medieval village settlements. The Mount Trenchard estate embraced an area of almost seven thousand acres and Taylor and Skinners Map of 1777 records a change of ownership of the estate from an absentee to a resident landlord with Mount Trenchard House, then known as Cappa shown as 'Cappo, Rice Esq.'. This was Thomas Rice, native of County Kerry who had by then leased one half of the estate and later in 1803 his son, Stephen, purchased the entire estate. Shanagolden was the only large village in the estate and its importance grew from the early nineteenth century with the influence of the Rice and Spring-Rice families.¹⁷ Due to having no resident landlord the medieval village of Dunmoylan declined and the settlement at Robertstown while part of the Mount Trenchard estate lost out to Shanagolden but lingered on as a small settlement with a number of houses shown on Pelham's 1797 Map of County Clare and in the 1840 Ordnance Survey there was a cluster of thirteen houses in close proximity to the 'old mill' and medieval churchyard.¹⁸

The first detailed map showing Shanagolden in the surrounding countryside is Pelham's Map of County Clare in 1797. This map reveals that much of the modern road network was already established. The Kerry Hill Road, Mount David Road and the Dark Road are all shown north of the village. The Dark Road was likely laid down in the late sixteenth century as it is on a direct route from Corgrig Castle (where the Trenchards the lords of Shanagolden Manor lived) to Shanagolden Village. At the south of the village, at the road junction where the Catholic Church is today, the roads to the west by Clashganniff and to the east by Old Abbey are shown, the road to the south by Kilmoylan graveyard is also shown, but has been misrepresented by being placed north of the village.

New churches were built by the Protestant and Catholic religions at opposite ends of the village in the early decades of the nineteenth century. At the north of the village the nave of the old medieval church at Shanagolden was reconstructed and a new roof put on and bell tower added in 1815 as the Church of Ireland parish church. The eighteenth century Catholic mass house was situated on the upper eastern side of the main street. At the south of the village a new Catholic Church was built in 1814 and reconstructed in 1824.¹⁹ Like many Catholic churches of this period it was built on high ground and had a commanding view of the surrounding countryside. In the forty years from 1797 Shanagolden village had grown on its southern flank reaching halfway from the bridge to the Catholic Church by 1840. This street is known as Dane Street and in the mid-nineteenth

¹⁶ George Taylor and Andrew Skinner, *Taylor and Skinner's maps of the roads of Ireland surveyed 1777*, (Dublin, 1778), pp 103-4.

¹⁷ In 1785 Stephen Edward Rice, married Catherine, only child and heir of Thomas Spring of Castlemaine, county Kerry, adding her name to the family: their son Thomas Spring Rice was created 1st Lord Monteagle in 1839.

¹⁸ Gerard Curtin, *Recollections of Our Native Valley. A history of the parish of Loughill-Ballyhahill and the Owvaun valley*, (Ballyhahill, 1996), p. 204; Pelham's Map of County Clare, 1797, Clare County Library; *Ordnance Survey Map, No. 19*, County Limerick, 1840.

¹⁹ Richard and Charles Frizell, *Map of the Manor of the Mount Trenchard Estate, 1770*, Limerick Museum; Samuel Lewis, *A History and Topography of Limerick City and County*, (Dublin, 1980 edn.), p. 171; Liam Irwin, *The Diocese of Limerick-An Illustrated History*, (Limerick, 2013), p. 215.



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century contained the dispensary and post office. Around the Catholic Church too there was development with as many as six houses including a blacksmiths workshop at the Catholic Church road junction by 1840.²⁰

Shanagolden Fairgreen was situated where the creamery is today. This was a very popular fair venue in the early nineteenth century. During these years faction fighting was a common occurrence. Factions were mainly comprised of long tailed families in a district, often many hundred strong who fought each other in open conflict at fairs and other community gatherings. In June 1825, a major faction fight at Shanagolden village resulted in the death of the leaders of the two factions, Kennedy O'Brien, a farmer and John Sheehan, a labourer. Much of this unrest was fueled by alcohol. Michael Kennedy giving evidence to the inquiry into these deaths at Shanagolden, recalled that he met one of the McMahan faction 'drunk in the street' before hostilities began. It was a similar situation at Shanagolden in September 1831; the factions were seen by the police to be 'marshalling their forces for battle' after 'mountain dew was liberally given'.²¹ Towns and villages, such as Shanagolden with its long main street on a hill had a strong attraction as venues for these factions. As a setting it maximized the impact of these faction fights.

The ending of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 and the economic depression that followed had a major effect on livelihoods. The prices received for agricultural produce by farmers plummeted and as a consequence employment opportunities for labourers declined. In 1836, at Kilbradran, four miles east of Shanagolden only seventeen (fifteen per cent) of the 118 labourers in the district were regularly employed.²² This stagnation was also felt in small urban centres. Shanagolden village was not described in glowing terms by Samuel Lewis in 1837 and he stated, that, 'the town consists of a long irregular street, comprising 150 houses, of which only three are slated, the remainder being thatched, and all are small and ill-built'.²³

During the pre-famine years public works were widely utilized by the government to provide employment in many districts. The modern day road network was completed around the village during these years. The road from Ardagh to Shanagolden was opened in 1837 and the road from Shanagolden northwards towards the main Limerick to Tarbert road was completed in 1840.²⁴ By the mid-nineteenth century Shanagolden had reached the climax phase of its development. In the 1841 census the population of the village was 548 living in 94 houses, of these 35 (thirty-seven per cent) were considered fourth class one roomed cabins. Like many urban centres during the famine years of 1845-49 the population of Shanagolden village increased, as it was easier to secure employment in an urban setting than it was in rural districts. By 1851 Shanagolden had a population of 770 in 129 houses, only eight (six per cent) of these houses were described as fourth class.²⁵ There was a clear movement of people from rural areas into the village and the famine years also witnessed the demise of the poorer classes of society.

In 1886 Guy's Directory stated that there was a butter market in the village every Tuesday. The commercial market for local farmers was to change five years later with the founding in 1891 of Shanagolden Co-Operative. A creamery was built at the north of the village, a little east of the Pound. In the 1840 Ordnance Map the northern boundary of the

²⁰ Ordnance Survey 6 inch Map No. 19, 1840.

²¹ *Limerick Chronicle*, 18 March 1826; *Limerick Chronicle*, 7 Sept. 1831.

²² *British Parliamentary Papers, Poor Inquiry (Ireland), Appendix (F)*, Volume 31, 1836.

²³ Samuel Lewis, *A History and Topography of Limerick City and County*, (Dublin, 1980 edn.), p. 171.

²⁴ *Limerick Chronicle*, 1 November, 1837; *Limerick Chronicle*, 12 August, 1840.

²⁵ *Census of Ireland for the Year 1841*, pp 218-9; *Census of Ireland for the Year 1851*, pp 304-5.

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Pound had a circular profile, perhaps suggesting this was an ancient boundary of some kind. The creamery was to remain the central focus of daily life in the village for the following eighty years with milk been taken from the local farming community and butter and cream manufactured and sold by the creamery. In 1974 Shanagolden Co-operative was purchased by Golden Vale Co-Op, Charleville, Co. Cork.

Shanagolden village suffered population loss in every census for one hundred years from 1851. By 1911 the population had fallen to 271 and by 1951 it was 224. There was a small increase in population in the 1970s. However, the construction of the large Aughinish Alumina plant from 1977 and the thousand construction jobs it created resulted in large scale demographic changes. Between the censuses of 1979 and 1981, Shanagolden village increased in population from 249 to 352 (41.4%).²⁶ Good local employment resulted in many young local people putting down roots and not emigrating as many would have in previous decades. In particular an influx of migrants from outside west Limerick who settled in the district after securing employment resulted in substantial population increases and the need for housing. Two new housing estates, the Rural Housing Organization estate on the Mount David Road and a Limerick County Council estate on the demesne of the former Shanagolden House were built on the northern side of Shanagolden village in the early 1980s. The village had increased in size for the first time in over a century.

The heyday of villages as commercial centres lasted from the late nineteenth century to the 1960s. Villages were primarily agrarian-service centres, tied to cow country and the needs of the dairy farmer. In 1886 there were nine publicans and eight grocers in Shanagolden village.²⁷ Modernizing influences from the 1960s, such as the car in many households began the process of a refocusing of commercialization to larger urban centres. The closing of the creamery network and the modernization of farming practices that resulted in the demise of the small and medium size farmers meant that villages no longer retained the same centralizing focus for the community. In 2014 Shanagolden village has four public houses and two supermarkets.

The village of Shanagolden has been an ever-present part of the landscape of County Limerick for almost one thousand years. The village has survived the coming and going of Norman lords and English landlords, it has seen famine and pestilence and witnessed boom and burst. The significance of small urban centres in their rural communities can be observed on Ordnance Survey maps with regard to the number of roads radiating from villages and towns.²⁸ In County Limerick three old urban centres stand together at the top of the rankings, Kilmallock, Newcastle West and Shanagolden; eight roads emanate from each centre. In the case of Shanagolden this signifies its importance over many generations to the surrounding rural hinterland in northwest County Limerick.

²⁶ *Census of Ireland, 1911*, pp 58-9; *Census of Ireland, 1951*, p. 107; *Census of Ireland, 1986*, p. 34.

²⁷ *Guy's Directory of 1886*, pp 824-5.

²⁸ *Discovery Series Maps, Nos. 64, 65, 72 and 73*, (Dublin, 1996).