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“Postcodes in Ireland”

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The Charles Close Society was founded in 1980 to bring together all those with an interest in the maps and history of the Ordnance Survey of Great Britain and its counterparts in the island of Ireland. The Society takes its name from Colonel Sir Charles Arden-Close, OS Director General from 1911 to 1922, and initiator of many of the maps now sought after by collectors.

The Society publishes a wide range of books and booklets on historic OS map series and its journal, *Sheetlines*, is recognised internationally for its specialist articles on Ordnance Survey-related topics.

Postcodes in Ireland

Paul Ferguson¹

With the exception of Dublin and Northern Ireland, postal addresses do not use a postcode system in Ireland. Instead addresses are made up of a house number or name, street, town and county names. However, moves are afoot to introduce a national postcode system in anticipation of deregulation of postal services across Europe by the end of 2010. While a standardised system may increase efficiencies in deliveries and spatial planning there are fears for the high costs involved and the possible erosion of local placenames, especially townland names so carefully mapped by Ordnance Survey in the 1830s and 40s.

Responsibility for the Irish postal service is currently devolved to the semi-state organisation An Post which enjoys a monopoly in mail delivery. Manual sorting of post had long been labour intensive and expensive and An Post was slow to modernise. Centralisation and an automated sorting system were introduced in the 1990s. The new system relies on optical character recognition (OCR) to read full mail addresses rather than just postcodes, as well as a sophisticated address database to locate each building and house. The database was developed by GeoDirectory, a partnership between An Post and Ordnance Survey Ireland using up-to-date mapping and air photography to geo-reference every building in the country, estimated at 1.87 million properties (see www.geodirectory.ie). This technical leap has allowed An Post to skip a generation and it has argued that postcodes are unnecessary, that they are ‘a 1960s solution to a twenty-first century problem’. GeoDirectory is now used widely by the emergency services, logistics, electricity providers, insurance, local authorities, waste collection, and even pizza delivery. It is the index behind *Looking for an address* on the OSI website www.osi.ie which allows browsers to go straight to a map of a specific address. Occasionally there are gaps in coverage but overall it is direct and fast.

However, liberalisation of the market is not best served while An Post controls the leading address database as well as mail delivery. The Irish Government, together with the communications regulator ComReg which controls the standard and form of addresses, has strongly disagreed with An Post about the need for postcodes.² In 2005 the Minister for Communications came out in favour of the introduction of a postcode system and optimistically announced implementation by January 2008. By August 2007 the introduction of postcodes was postponed indefinitely pending public consultation and further benefit analysis. A new minister announced in October 2007 that postcodes would be introduced ‘as a matter of priority’. A proposal was brought to cabinet in February 2008 with a view to implementation that summer. However, tenders for project management services to ‘advise on, lead and drive the

¹ The author is the Map Librarian, Trinity College Library, Dublin.

² For a fully-referenced account of the postcodes debate in Ireland see the article in Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Republic_of_Ireland_postal_addresses).

implementation of a national postcode system' were delayed until September 2010. No contract has yet been awarded.

There has been plenty of time in the interim to debate the benefits and costs of postcodes. A government report in 2008 found that benefits went beyond mail delivery or street navigation, citing the 'need for efficient databases based on postcodes reducing inefficient service delivery and infrastructure planning'. They are essential for spatial planning, health research, education, housing, social care, etc. Increased efficiency in business could result in savings of €40 million which would more than offset the estimated €2.5 million annual maintenance costs. In 2005 the National Statistics Board welcomed the development of postcodes as they would be useful for the collection and organisation of social and economic data. While the arguments for post codes seem compelling, those against argue that a pinpoint system already exists in GeoDirectory, and that any efficiencies in a new system that only locates groups of twenty to fifty houses would be negligible. Such a postcode system would hardly repay the initial investment of up to €50 million and ongoing maintenance costs.

Apart from financial considerations, it is likely that the use of postcodes will gradually erode knowledge and usage of local placenames, especially the names of townlands, the smallest administrative unit in Ireland. This was a contentious issue when postcodes were introduced in Northern Ireland. Townland names have evolved over hundreds of years and resonate with meaning. Many were originally in the Irish language until they were standardised in English by Ordnance Survey in the nineteenth-century. Research into the form and meaning of the names has been ongoing for years at both academic and official levels. The Placenames Branch (formerly OSI and now part of the Department of Community, Equality and Gaeltacht Affairs) maintains an online database of placenames at www.logainm.ie and similar work is carried out in Northern Ireland (www.placenamesni.org). When postcodes were introduced in Northern Ireland unnamed roads were given the name of the townland through which they passed. Fermanagh District Council refused this solution and a postcode was assigned to each townland instead. This is not an ideal solution as townlands vary greatly in size and some names are already archaic. However, the loss of names as a direct result of postcodes has not been demonstrated in Northern Ireland.

The likely format of a postcode has also been debated, some advocating an alpha-numeric code incorporating the county name, e.g. G08 123, the 'G' referring to County Galway and the '123' fixed to a group of buildings as in UK codes. In anticipation of the introduction of postcodes private companies such as GPS Ireland have developed their own system. Loc8Codes are aimed at the satnav, mobile phone, iPhone, PC and web-based markets and cover both the Republic and Northern Ireland using mapping from OSI and OSNI (see www.myloc8ion.com). Their eight digit postcodes are clunky, alpha-numeric codes for specific 120 by 120m areas which, though hierarchical in content, lack

obvious intelligence, e.g. LSD-78-PY9, Y9S-73-NQ8. Despite Loc8Code's claim that the codes are easy to remember their use may be best suited to Garmin or similar navigation devices rather than as postcodes.

Given the current difficulties in the Republic's state finances it seems unlikely that funds will be available for the design and implementation of postcodes in the short term. Postcodes will only be introduced by the state if they will bring about savings and greater efficiencies in the public service.
