

Changing Fingal

**BARRACK LANE AND THE ELUSIVE
CONSTABULARY PRESENCE IN LUSK**



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Introduction

Barrack Lane, stretching southwards from the historic heart of Lusk, is a street whose name carries more weight than its surviving buildings can reveal. For many years local tradition has maintained that the Royal Irish Constabulary once maintained a barrack along the lane. Yet a careful examination of historic maps, archaeological investigations and surviving documentary evidence presents a more nuanced picture, one in which the memory of policing survives long after the physical traces have disappeared.

One of the earliest cartographic representations of the area appears on Rocque's map of 1760. At that time Lusk remained a compact rural settlement focused upon its medieval church, round tower and surrounding agricultural lands.

When the eighteenth-century landscape is compared with the modern street pattern, the area now occupied by Barrack Lane reflects what would have been a land division between the inner and outer enclosures of the ecclesiastical settlement fossilised in the curves of Church Road and Dublin Road.

Archaeological investigations undertaken during development projects in 2009 and again in 2020

revealed extensive evidence of this beneath and around the modern roadway. A long curving ditch was confirmed during excavation in 2022 where the Ballough Place arts studio now stands. With material dating from the 10th/11th century this ditch corresponds with the outer enclosure reflected by the Dublin Road.



Another large ditch was identified running north-south along Barrack Lane, again reflecting ancient layout of this area.

On the stylised map of the 18th century Barrack Lane appears largely undeveloped, consisting of fields and boundary divisions on the southern edge of the village and one or two buildings.



Lusk village, Rocque's Map, 1760

The First Edition Ordnance Survey mapping undertaken in the 1830s and 1840s shows the Barrack Lane as one of the major access ways into the village core. Clearly developed, with plots and houses on either side most notable is

the cluster of buildings where it joins with the Dublin Road.

Here is marked a Post Office and to the rear of the buildings is a large garden within which is St MacCullin's well.



First Edition Ordnance Survey, Map, c.1837 ©Taillte Eireann

Saint MacCullin's Well is now situated in the garden of Barrack House. It was a source of water for the early monastic settlement in Lusk. The well was frequented for the cure of sore eyes and up until the 1920s it was used to

supply water for Lusk. In 1980 local craftsman Aidan Devine built a stone surround over the original enclosed stone well. Later a decorative wooden roof was added and the former holy well became a garden feature.



Saint MacCullin's Holy Well, Lusk, Rear of Barrack House. Courtesy of Pat Kelly

As recorded by Tom Seaver of Commons in the 1930s School's Collection 'St. Macculinn (sic) is the patron St of Lusk. He lived towards the end of the fifth century. The present Catholic Church in Lusk is called St Macculinn's. It is said that

he jumped from the round tower, and he landed about a hundred yards away, where there stands an old Barrack now. There is a well at the back of the Barrack's and it is said St Macculinn's footprints are there yet'.



1848 map of Barrack Lane sourced from the Valuations Office, courtesy of Dermot Russel. Note the Post office is still located to the south of what is to become Barrack Lane

By the later decades of the nineteenth century, the detailed twenty-five-inch Ordnance Survey maps depict a cluster of cottages and modest houses stood close to the western entrance to the lane near the medieval church enclosure. To the south of the Lane, the Post Office has now been removed to what will become Post

Office Road and the Constabulary Barrack is clearly marked. These structures bear little resemblance to the substantial purpose-built barracks constructed by the Royal Irish Constabulary elsewhere in Ireland. Instead, they resemble the ordinary rented houses frequently used by constables in smaller villages.



Extract from Ordnance Survey 25-inch Map, c.1860s ©Taillte Eireann

Little surviving documentary evidence has yet been discovered proving the existence of an officially designated constabulary barracks on Barrack Lane. Nevertheless, the possibility remains that one of these houses functioned as a police residence or temporary station. The fleeting glimpses associated with Barrack in Lusk are visible through the records of the people associated with it. In 1902 a Constable Henry McKee was transferred from Co. Down to Dublin and then allocated to Lusk. While in the following year Constable Joseph Browne 'a very well-known veteran recently stationed at Lusk, has retired on pension after 27 years service... he has gone to reside amid scenes of childhood in Lurgan'. In 1908, Sergeant William Bourke of

Garristown was appointed to the charge of Lusk subdistrict while in 1913 Patrick Brady was listed as being based in Lusk reinforcing the small nature of Lusk barracks.

An account of 'an attack made on Rush and Lusk police barracks' in May 1920 is perhaps even more telling. It describes that 'At Rush and Lusk the telephone wires at the station and the wires connecting the villages of Rush and Lusk were severed'. However, all the action was based at Rush where 'in normal times only a sergeant and three or four constables at Rush'. It may be that like that Lusk barracks was no longer in use, and like many of the guards today, the constables were stationed in bigger towns.



Barrack House before restoration, early 1990s. Courtesy of Pat Kelly



Barrack House, 2026. Photo: Aidan Arnold

It appears the Constabulary Barrack in Lusk was small and active for a relatively short period of time. Barrack Lane therefore illustrates how place names can preserve historical memory long after physical evidence has disappeared. While no purpose-built constabulary barracks appears to have stood on the lane, the possibility of a modest police presence is evident.

The name survives as a reminder of a chapter of local history that

has largely vanished from the visible landscape. Yet while the physical appearance of the lane remained relatively stable, the lives of the people who occupied it changed profoundly. Census records reveal a community shaped by demographic growth, emigration, war, political upheaval and social transformation. To understand Barrack Lane fully, it is necessary to look beyond maps and buildings and examine the people who lived there.



Members of the Material Survey Group arriving at the village to start work.

ILLUSTRATIONS OF LUSK

In 1943 students of architecture at University College Dublin surveyed, sketched and painted a series of Thatched cottages in Lusk. The students usually travelled abroad during their summers to undertake architectural surveys.

During World War II this was not possible. Lusk was the first of five coastal villages surveyed by the students in 1943. A selection of their paintings is included here, courtesy of the National Museum of Ireland and www.museum.ie



Sherry's cottage, Church Road, adjoining Barrack Lane, 1943. F:2006.228_measured and drawn by C. Flanagan. ©National Museum of Ireland



Andy Wright's cottage, Church Road, adjoining Barrack Lane, 1943. F:2006.231_drawn by Denis Buckley ©National Museum of Ireland



Adjoining cottages, home of Jack and Mary Kavanagh and Mrs. Gough, Barrack Lane, 1943. Dermot Russell's abiding memory of Kavanagh's cottage was of quietness, the only sound being the ticking of clocks. There were clocks all around the cottage on shelves and in a cubby. F:2006.215_Lusk No.28_measured and drawn by Patrick Tuite ©National Museum of Ireland

THE PEOPLE OF BARRACK LANE

Barrack Lane may have only occupied a small physical space within the village of Lusk, yet it provides a remarkable window into the social history of the community during the first quarter of the twentieth century. Through the surviving census returns of 1901, 1911 and 1926, together with valuation records, historic mapping, parish registers, military records, local family history and oral tradition, it is possible to reconstruct the lives

of the people who called Barrack Lane home. Among the surnames associated with the lane during this period were McCann, McNally, Hoare, Reilly, Monks, Byrne, Sheils, Murphy, Hand, White and Callan. Some of these names can be traced through Griffith's Valuation in the mid-nineteenth century, suggesting a continuity of occupation extending back several generations.

The Census of 1926 provides the next clear snapshot of the lane. It records a number of

adult McCanns in Lusk, including Christopher McCann, Matthew McCann, Thomas McCann and Peter McCann. However, the picture that emerges is necessarily incomplete. Although the census returns identify households, occupations, family relationships and housing conditions, they do not always permit precise identification of every dwelling on the modern lane or which modern property corresponds to which census household. One complication associated with the 1926 Census is that it records residents by townland and street sections rather than providing the level of detail that would allow every household on Barrack Lane to be identified with absolute certainty.

Consequently, the discussion that follows should not be regarded as a definitive house-by-house reconstruction. Rather, it represents an informed historical interpretation based upon the best available evidence. The aim is to understand the people who lived on the lane, how their lives changed over time, and how broader events in Irish history affected a small community in North County Dublin. The evidence is compelling but not conclusive.

BARRACK LANE IN 1901

At the opening of the twentieth century, Barrack Lane was known locally as Back Lane. The census of 1901 presents the lane at its most crowded and youthful. It was lined with modest cottages occupied by labourers, craftsmen, agricultural workers and their families. Children were everywhere. Most households contained several young sons and daughters, while three generations frequently lived under one roof.

The majority of adult men earned their living through agricultural labour. Others worked as craftsmen, masons, carpenters or general labourers. Employment was often seasonal and incomes modest. Yet despite economic hardship, there is little evidence of instability. Barrack Lane appears to have been a settled and closely connected community where families remained in the same locality for long periods.

Among the many families associated with Barrack Lane during this period, none provides a clearer thread through the surviving records than the McCann family.



CENSUS OF IRELAND, 1901.
(Two Examples of the mode of filling up this Table are given on the other side.)

FORM A.
MEMBERS of this FAMILY and their VISITORS, BOARDERS, SERVANTS, &c., who slept or abode in this House on the night of SUN

Serial Number	NAME and SURNAME.	RELATION to Head of Family.	RELIGIOUS PROFESSION.	EDUCATION.	AGE.	SEX.	RANK, PROFESSION, OR OCCUPATION.	MARRIAGE.	WHERE BORN.
1	Charles Dean	Head	Roman Catholic	Read & write	56	M	Carriage Labourer	married	Co. Dublin
2	Sarah McFarlane	Wife	Roman Catholic	Read & write	40	F	Carriage Labourer	married	Co. Dublin
3	Matthew McFarlane	Father	Roman Catholic	Read & write	15	M	Retired Carriage Labourer	married	Co. Dublin
4	Christopher McFarlane	Son	Roman Catholic	Read only	20	M	Groom	not married	Co. Dublin
5	David McFarlane	Son	Roman Catholic	Read & write	18	M	Agricultural Labourer	not married	Co. Dublin
6	John McFarlane	Son	Roman Catholic	Read & write	14	M	Agricultural Labourer	not married	Co. Dublin
7	Thomas McFarlane	Son	Roman Catholic	Read & write	11	M	School Car	not married	Co. Dublin
8	James McFarlane	Son	Roman Catholic	Read & write	7	M	School Car	not married	Co. Dublin
9	Joseph McFarlane	Son	Roman Catholic	Read only	5	M	School Car	not married	Co. Dublin
10	Michael McFarlane	Son	Roman Catholic	Read & write	4	M	School Car	not married	Co. Dublin
11	Peter McFarlane	Son	Roman Catholic	Read & write	1	M	School Car	not married	Co. Dublin
12									

1901 Census entry. Reproduced with the kind permission of the Director of the National Archives

The 1901 Census reveals a household that would have been familiar and recognisable across rural Ireland, with two rooms housing three generations of eleven people, living under a simple thatched roof. Such conditions may seem extraordinary today, but they were not unusual in 1901. Across Ireland, large families frequently occupied dwellings containing only two or three rooms, while mud walls and thatched roofs were everywhere.

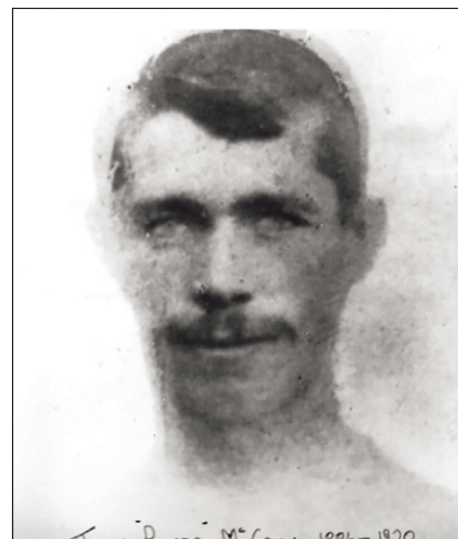
The McCann household was notable not merely because of its size but because it represented the continuity that characterised Barrack Lane. The family had deep roots in the district. Daniel and Sarah raised nine sons, each of whom would experience a very different Ireland from that known by their grandfather Matthew. The census of 1911 records many of the same families, often occupying the same cottages. At first glance, little appears to have changed. The houses remained where they had always stood. The lane itself was little altered. Yet beneath this appearance of continuity, demographic changes had begun. The children of 1901 were becoming adults. Some

remained in Lusk, while others travelled to Dublin and further afield in search of work. Many young Irish men and women emigrated to Britain, America and elsewhere.

The years between the 1911 and 1926 censuses transformed Ireland. The First World War was followed by the Easter Rising of 1916, the War of Independence, and the Civil War. Among the McCann sons was John, born in 1886, later remembered throughout the district as 'Rover' McCann. His life would carry him beyond the confines of the lane and into the turbulent politics of revolutionary Ireland. John 'Rover' McCann's life became intertwined with this period of upheaval. After marrying, leaving Lusk and settling in Rush, he became involved in republican activities. On 22 November 1920 he was killed by members of the Black and Tans.

Another younger son, James McCann, would experience a very different fate. When war broke out in Europe in 1914, his brother James McCann enlisted in the 1st Battalion of the Royal Irish Rifles. He was killed near

Calais on 9 December 1914 at only twenty-one years of age. His death brought the First World War directly into a small labouring household on Barrack Lane. Yet while national events unfolded, daily life on the lane continued

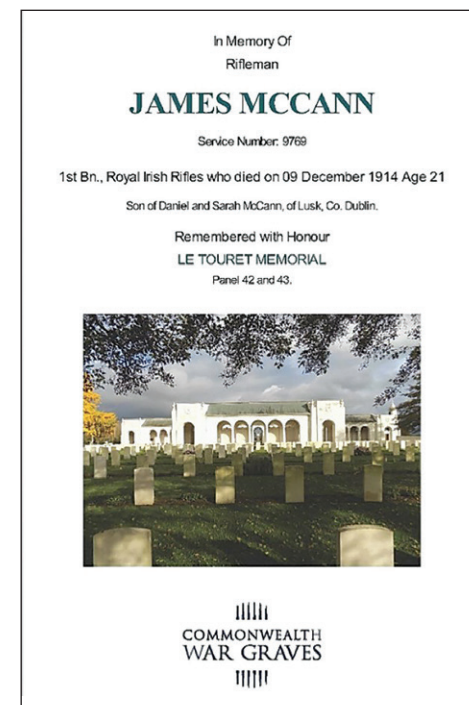


John 'Rover' McCann (1889-1920)

BARRACK LANE IN 1926

The Census of 1926 provides the next snapshot of the lane. Perhaps surprisingly, the dominant theme is not change but continuity. Many of the same family names remained present in Lusk, including Christopher McCann, Matthew McCann, Thomas McCann and Peter McCann. These names strongly suggest that the large McCann household recorded

much as before. Families still worked, married, raised children and cared for ageing relatives.



James McCann (1893-1914)

in 1901 had not disappeared. Instead, it had evolved into several related family units. Such a pattern was common throughout rural Ireland, where adult children frequently established new households close to their parents. Later local memory confirms that McCann families continued to reside on Barrack Lane throughout the twentieth century and remain associated with the lane today.



Home of Tom McCann, Church Road, adjoining Barrack Lane, 1943. F:2006.201_artist unknown ©National Museum of Ireland

RECONSTRUCTED OVERVIEW OF THE LIVES AND FAMILIES ALONG BARRACK LANE, 1901–1926

The family sketches that follow are reconstructed from census returns, Griffith's Valuation, valuation revision books, local family-history evidence and surviving records. They should be regarded as informed historical interpretations rather than definitive household histories.



Matt McCann's cottage, 1943, F:2006.234_measured and drawn by John Burke ©National Museum of Ireland

THE MCCANN FAMILY

Unlike some families whose presence on the lane became less certain over time, the McCanns can be traced across successive generations. The 1926 Census records several adult McCanns in Lusk, including Christopher, Matthew, Tom and Peter McCann, together with younger members of the family. Their continued presence reflected the natural development of a large rural family over the course of a generation.

THE MCNALLY HOUSEHOLD

A typical Barrack Lane family in 1926 is represented by the McNally household. It consisted of Head of Household: Male, c. 40s–50s, agricultural labourer. Wife: Home duties, often recorded as “housekeeper” or “farmer’s wife”, Children: 2–4 remaining at home (older children frequently absent by 1926). At least one child was likely working locally on the farm, labouring or in domestic service. Literacy was generally present, a shift from earlier generations. The Irish language was rarely spoken in daily use, though sometimes recorded as known. This household shows clear generational continuity from 1911, but with reduced size.

THE HOARE FAMILY

The Hoare (or Hoar) household stands out as follows: Occupation: Carpenter, mason, or general tradesman. Household structure: Smaller, more economically stable. Dwelling: Likely one of the better-maintained cottages on the lane. By 1926 evidence suggests a move toward semi-skilled independence, rather than purely labouring along with possible occasional work in nearby towns or Dublin. This reflects a subtle upward mobility within the lane.

THE REILLY / MONKS CLUSTER

Long-Term Residents. These families appear deeply rooted, with multi-generational presence from at least Griffith's Valuation. 1926 households often include elderly parent (widow/widower) and one adult child remaining at home. Typical structure displayed 2–3 persons household with strong continuity of dwelling location. This is the clearest example of “staying put” families, people who spent their entire lives on the lane.

THE BYRNE HOUSEHOLD

Shared or Subdivided Dwelling: Either a crowded cottage or a dwelling subdivided between related family units. 1926 characteristics included possibly two families under one roof with younger adults more likely to be in wage labour. This reflects housing pressure, even in a small rural town.

THE SHEILS / SHIELDS FAMILY

A steady presence across all census years: Occupation was mainly farm labouring with household typically of modest size. In 1926 detail children were fewer in number than in 1901 with a greater likelihood of seasonal or mixed employment.

WHITE / CALLAN

Elderly Households: By 1926, one of the most striking features is: The number of reduced elderly households with widows or widowers living alone or with one child, often in the smallest cottages. Typical entry was Age: 60s–80s, occupation: “None” or “formerly labourer”, with literacy: variable. These households gave Barrack Lane a quiet, ageing dimension.

MURPHY, HAND, LAWLESS

Smaller Cottages. These names appear in what were likely: The least substantial dwellings with 2–3 occupants, labouring or irregular work, with some turnover between 1911 and 1926. These houses show the most change, suggesting short-term tenancy and economic vulnerability.

If you walked Barrack Lane in 1926, you would likely encounter children no longer in the numbers seen in 1901; older residents sitting near doorways or hearths; men leaving early for farm work or occasional labour beyond Lusk; a mix of continuity and quiet decline. The houses themselves would appear much the same, low cottages, some whitewashed, some in poorer repair, but the density of life within them had eased.

The lane witnessed the passing of one generation and the emergence of another. It saw the impact of war, revolution, emigration and economic change. Yet throughout these transformations, the community endured.



Home of Johnny Patterson, Barrack Lane, 1943, F:2006.231_drawn by Denis Buckley ©National Museum of Ireland



Barrack Lane 2026, entrance from South end. Courtesy of Tony Healy



Thatched Cottage Mrs. Kavanagh and Mrs. Gough, Barrack Lane; 1960s. Courtesy of Pat Kelly

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Oral-history interviews and local family-history research collected by Lusk Heritage Group



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