Maps of Irish towns were produced for a variety of purposes over the last four centuries. Some had a military or propagandist function while others were drawn to assist in planning the future development of towns. While the accuracy of early maps varies, they are always a fascinating resource for the study of the development of Irish towns over time.

The earliest maps of Irish towns were produced by English cartographers. These include picture maps of Cork, Limerick, and Waterford, dated to c. 1577, and published in revised form in Thomas Strutt's, Titus Historiae, or a history of the towns in Ireland (1633). The dual context from which these maps emerged was that of the wars of the late sixteenth century combined with a Renaissance interest in geographical discovery. Strutt's map of the battle of Kinsale is a pictorial narrative of the event.

The Seventeenth Century

John Speed’s plans of Cork, Dublin, Galway, and Limerick were published in his Irish propaganda work, Theatre of the empire of Great Britain (London, 1611). Speed’s maps were derived from the research of others, and his maps of Irish towns are not always accurate. Thus, his map of Limerick misrepresents the street pattern of the city. Speed’s maps of Irish cities were extraordinarily influential, and continued to be copied down to the eighteenth century.

The Ulster Plantation also created opportunities for early seventeenth-century cartographers, including Joassie Bulley (d. 1647), Nicholas Fryer, and Thomas Penn.

Sir William Petty (d. 1687) drew a series of maps to accompany the “Down survey” which he commenced in 1654. The survey was intended to record lands available for distribution to English soldiers having been confiscated from the Irish defeated in rebellion. Petty’s maps of Irish counties were later redrawn and published in his Tabernacle delineator (1665), and are detailed enough to include depictions of towns.

Above: Detail from Sir William Petty’s map of County Dublin (tabernacle delineator), 1665.
The Early Eighteenth Century

Henry Pratt's Tabula Helvetica: Maps of the kingdom of Helvetia were created and inspired by actual observations. (1708) was acclaimed by his contemporaries as a significant achievement. Pratt's work was extensively used by later cartographers, including Homann, Bellin, Gavrilov, Colomann, Gert, Derry, Dingbodh, Dublin, Dungannon, Galway, Killarney, Kinsale, Limerick, and Waterford.

Pratt's map of Ireland was commissioned by a series of declared plans of cities and towns, including Athlone, Belfast, Carrickfergus, Coleraine, Cork, Derry, Dingbodh, Dublin, Dungannon, Galway, Killarney, Kinsale, Limerick, and Waterford.

Among the eighteenth-century cartographers of Dublin, Charles Bridgens's 1728 Map of the city and suburbs of Dublin was the most popular map of Dublin to be published. This map was on a much larger scale than its predecessors and is noteworthy for its depictions of architecturally significant buildings.

Note: Detail from A map of the city and suburbs of Dublin by Charles Bridgens, 1728.

Note: Detail from A map of the city and suburbs of Dublin by Charles Bridgens, 1728.

Note: Detail from A map of the kingdom of Ireland, 1708.

Mapping Urban Ireland
John Rocque's maps of the city of Dublin published in the 1750s showed a greatly enlarged urban area, extending well beyond the medieval walled city. Rocque (d. 1762), a French Huguenot, was an experienced cartographer and surveyor when he visited Dublin in 1745, having already produced exceptional maps of Bristol and London. His most important contributions to urban cartography in Ireland: The city and suburbs of Dublin (1756) and The city and suburbs of Dublin (1757) were among Rocque's most important contributions to urban cartography in Ireland. He also mapped Cork, Kilkenny and Athlone. His other major achievements included his survey of the estates of the Earl of Kildare (1755-60). Some of the decoration on Rocque's Irish maps is attributed to his assistants, Bernard Scall, who later became a cartographer in his own right.

George Taylor and Andrew Simpson's Maps of the roads of Ireland was published in 1778 to cater for the demand among the gentry for road maps. Towns are depicted on the maps, together with the grand houses or the gentry, and a variety of other settlement features.

Below: Dublin as depicted in a map by Thomas Jeffreys, c. 1689. Reprinted courtesy Trinity College Dublin.
Surveyors and Administrators

Travel and commerce prompted the production of maps of new harbours. Bernad de Gama's An estate survey of the city of Dublin and part of the harbour annex 1665 was reproduced regularly throughout the nineteenth century. Similarly, Mardock Maclean's A marine survey of Ireland (1776) was still of interest to those approaching Irish cities and towns from the sea long after Maclean's death in 1797.

Working from an administrative perspective, a parliamentary initiative by the House of Commons in relation to the boundary laws of Irish cities and boroughs led to the publication of a series of Boundary Reports in 1832. These reports were accompanied by maps of Irish towns that pre-date the Ordnance Survey maps. Town plans were published for Armagh, Athlone, Bandon, Belmoe, Carlow, Carrickfergus, Cashel, Clonmel, Cloyne, Cork, Drogheda, Dublin, Dunblane, Dunbarton, Dungarvon, Drogheda, Enniskillen, Galway, Killarney, Kinale, Limerick, Londonderry, Malahide, Newry, Partick, New Ross, Sligo, Tramore, Waterford, Wexford and Youghal.

Top left: Bernad de Gama, City and suburbs of Dublin, 1675. (Private Collection, London).

Top right: E.H. Miller, from boundary report ... city and suburbs of Ireland, 1832.

Below: Ordnance Survey, from Maclean, Marine survey of Ireland, 1776.

Mapping Urban Ireland
Undoubtedly, the best-known cartographic project in Ireland is that initiated by the Ordnance Survey. Originating in a military context, Thomas Collier (d. 1822) and his successor Thomas Leaner (d. 1879) were instrumental in ensuring that the project was well planned and the cartographic elements compiled between 1833 and 1846. A series of maps for the entire country was produced at a scale of 6 inches to 1 mile;  a scale sufficiently large to show the more plan of individual towns. In addition, large-scale town plans were also produced.

Artists such as George Vincent du Nayre were also employed by the Ordnance Survey, to sketch significant features in the landscape. Many were of archaeological or antiquarian interest, but some urban scenes were also sketched.

Reg Trench, Graphite from the meadow, 1837, Ordnance Survey Drawing by George Vincent du Nayre 1834 (3/7 9/5)
Leif Wilson, view of Wicklow from Oldwick, 1838, Ordnance Survey, 1850 (20/17 16/5)

Mapping Urban Ireland
Irish Historic Towns Atlas

The aim of the Irish Historic Towns Atlas project is to trace the growth of Irish towns and cities using historical sources and maps in a way that allows people to compare places. All atlases include a detailed text section and a series of maps, views and photographs. Twenty towns and cities, including Dublin and Belfast in parts, have been published in the Irish series, while c. 465 similar atlases have been produced in the wider European scheme. For more information see www.ihp.ie.

Historical maps are reproduced in each atlas and are used to piece together the topographical history of the place.

Simplicity and accuracy are the principal "bird's eye" style maps of cartographers such as Richard Blunt and Thomas Phillips in the seventeenth century often depicting useful architectural details. This can be contrasted with the artistic precision offered by the most notable cartographers of the eighteenth century, John Rocque and his colleagues of the "Roccorial school".

Mapping Urban Ireland
Irish Historic Towns Atlas in Context

The Ordnance Survey produced large scale town plans alongside the 6-inch maps that were produced in the nineteenth century. These town plans are a core source for the drafting of maps and are thus the Irish Historic Towns Atlas as they were done for most Irish towns and include very detailed information. The earliest plans were manuscript and were compiled from 1839-48 at a scale of 1 inch = 1 mile (1:10560). From 1847, these maps were etched and printed, many at the larger scale of 1:500.

Compilation is key to the Irish Historic Towns Atlas project and these town plans are produced at the same scale for each town. One of these, Map 2, re-constructs the town or city in the mid-nineteenth century at 1:2500 using the Ordnance Survey and Valuation Office town plans. Individual plans are depicted and public buildings distinguished to help researchers direct their attention to how the town developed. Thematic and growth maps, and historical compilations are also dealt with compilation in mind. Aerial views and old photographs are used to give a different visual perspective.

Top left: Map 1, Longford, looking north, c. 1900 (National Library of Ireland, in DITA, no. 29, Longford)
Below: Ground map of Aghada, in DITA, no. 56, Aghada

Mapping Urban Ireland