

NEWSLETTER

Tel: 096 31809

www.northmayogenealogy.com

Email: nmhmanager@gmail.com

Email: northmayo@gmail.com

YouTube



*The importance of
**THE
PLOUGHMAN**
in rural Ireland
and how his role
evolved down
through the years*

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Cover image: The PSPR Pierce of Wexford plough, part of the collection owned by the late Sean Smith of Crossdoney, Co. Cavan (image from independent.ie)

The North Mayo Heritage Centre is dedicated to preserving and promoting the rich heritage of the region

THE PLOUGHMAN

November was the month synonymous with the ploughman. This figure was once a really important part of the rural year. Some men were specialists with the plough, often employed on larger farms or estates. But for many, ploughing was just another task in the annual wheel round of farming life.

Ploughing in the pre-mechanised era of the late 19th and early 20th century usually involved a team of two horses and a single furrow iron plough. If a man only had one horse, he would team up with a neighbour for the ploughing. Ploughing was necessary to prepare the ground for the planting of various crops in the springtime.

November was seen as a good month to plough as the wet winter weather would leave the soil too heavy to turn over in February or March. By turning the sod, and burying last year's weeds, it exposed the soil to the elements of frost, wind and rain for the winter, thus readying it for the harrow and the planting in March. An experienced ploughman, with his two horse team, could plough about one acre in a day. This equated to walking about ten miles behind the plough. The horses worked to voice commands. The ploughman had to be mindful of what was due to be sown in the ground he was cultivating.

It would have to be harrowed in the spring, in preparation for planting. Ground due for potatoes was cultivated several times over, as many as five times, because the soil needed to be loosed to a depth of ten inches. Crops such as oats, barley or wheat needed a seed bed of one and half or two inches.¹

The single furrow iron plough had a wheel, to control the depth of the furrow, and a disc, to cut the soil before it met the blade.

The ploughman controlled the plough by holding the two handles, which were about two feet apart. There were about twenty-five separate components in such a plough.

Most of the ploughs in use in Ireland were manufactured by Pierce of Wexford, who were based on the corner of Distillery and Mill Roads in Wexford Town. This company became the largest manufacturers of agricultural equipment in Ireland, and their ploughs, not to mention other horse drawn implements, were once ubiquitous in rural Ireland, and many are still to be seen today on farms, as ornaments.

'... the rusting coulter of the Pierce plough which broke the rock-ribbed land and burst the bog-sod.'

John Healy, 'Nineteen Acres'.

The tradition is that when not in use, a plough should point north.

Pierce's went into an inevitable decline with the onset of farm mechanisation. The family sold the business in 1964, and it closed for good in 2002. The site which produced a plough for every parish in Ireland is now a supermarket.²

The Pierce Factory on Mill Road, Wexford, (from buildingsofireland.ie)



DID YOU KNOW?

On Monday, the 16th of February 1931, the first National Ploughing contest took place in Mr W.K. Hosie's field at Coursetown in Athy.

The ploughman and his horses began to fade from the Irish rural landscape, not so much replaced by the tractor alone, but by the changing demands of agriculture, and a decline in tillage production, particularly in the west.

The craft of the ploughman has been preserved by enthusiasts who still compete in ploughing matches around the country.

Horse drawn ploughing is a central part of the National Ploughing Championships, an event which has grown from small beginnings in 1931 to become the largest outdoor gathering in Europe today.³

Sources:

- ¹ From 'Irish Farming Life' (Youtube Channel)
- ² From [Famouswexfordpeople inhistory](https://www.facebook.com/famouswexfordpeople) (facebook.com)
- ³ Courtesy of the website of the National Ploughing Association

Extract from the Ordnance Survey Letters of 1838

A brief history of the townland of

DOONANARROW LOWER

(Dún an Earraidh, fort of the ploughman, Recte Dún an Arbha, fort of the corn).

Located in the south-west of the parish of Kilfian, it's bounded on the north by Breaghwyanteean; east by Doonanaroo Upper; and south and west by the parish of Moygawnagh. It contains 283 acres, 3 roods, 15 perches*, of which about half is cultivated; the remainder is mountain.

The property of Robert Gardener, Cloonskirtaun, Killala, who holds all the mountain part and about ¼ of the arable, which he lets in conacre at 50 shillings per acre. The remainder of the arable he lets to tenants at will at 25 shillings per acre. Soil, stiff heavy clay, producing oats, flax and potatoes. Fourteen families live here, all Catholic, and all in middling circumstances.

* There are 40 perches in a rood, and 4 roods in an acre.

PIERCE P.B.P. STEEL BAR POINT PLOUGH

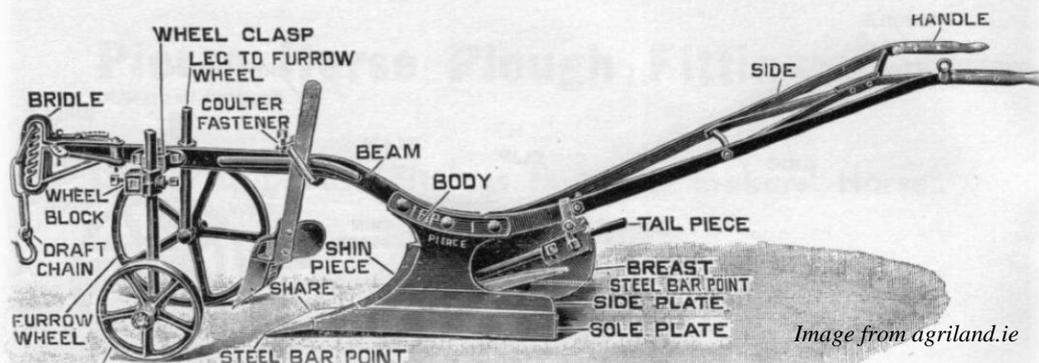


Image from agriland.ie