

The Coffey Surname in Ireland



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INTRODUCTION

There are approximately 5000 surnames associated with medieval Ireland. Those surnames can be of Irish, Viking, Norman, English, Welsh, and Scots origin. Some of these surnames have changed considerably since they first appeared, with essentially all Gaelic-Irish surnames being extensively anglicised. As a result of this Anglicisation process the original meaning of many Gaelic-Irish surnames and their origin was essentially lost, as the anglicised surname became gradually indistinguishable from its English equivalent. Additionally, as the English language has evolved, the spelling of each surname has changed over both time and distance, with spelling variations typically arising as ones ancestors moved further and further from the place of origin.

However, since Ireland has remained an agricultural based society each surname can still be found concentrated in the area where the surname first appeared or where one's ancestors first settled. Hence an examination of each surnames distribution can reveal clues as to whether a surname was of Gaelic-Irish, Viking, Norman, or Scots origin. In addition one's ancestors have left evidence of their ancestral link with an area in its history, castles, and placenames, which means that an examination of modern maps and historical records can reveal additional information about one's ancestral origin and the origin of one's surname.

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The Coffey surname is associated with Ireland where it is primarily regarded as an Anglicisation of 'O'Cobhthaigh.' Land like the surname is typically passed from father to son and since Ireland has remained essentially an agricultural based society, this means that Coffey farmers can still be found farming the lands where their ancestors settled or where that surname first appeared. An examination of the 1911 census of Ireland reveals nearly 300 Coffey farmers (or farmers with similar sounding surnames) who were overwhelmingly Catholic, see **Figure 1**. Coffey farmers are not uniformly distributed throughout Ireland, there appear to be multiple clusters in geographically distinct locations which means that there were potentially quite a few genetically unrelated 'Coffey-Adams' from whom anyone with the Coffey surname can be descended from.

There are numerous Coffey placenames, many of which are townlands found almost exclusively within Leinster and South Ulster, see **Figure 2**. The 'townland' is the smallest unit of geographical land division in Ireland. The entire country is divided into an estimated 62,000 ancient townlands which predate the arrival of the Normans in Ireland in 1169AD, many of these townlands reflect the Clans and families that lived there.

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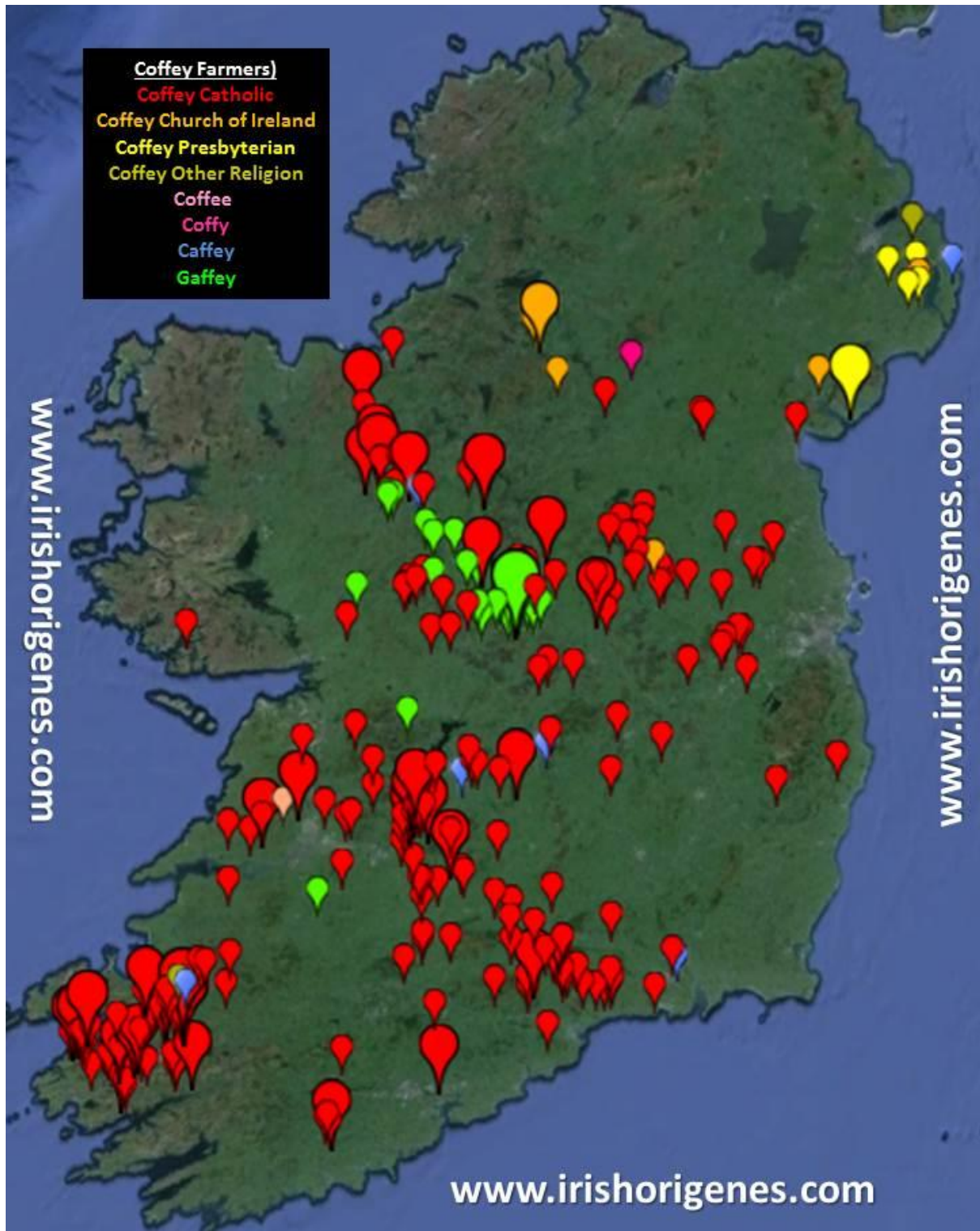


Figure 1: Distribution of Coffey farmers throughout Ireland. Pins have been placed in the townlands where Coffey, Coffee, Coffy, Caffey and Gaffey farmers (heads of household) lived in 1911. Pin size is indicative of frequency. Coffey farmers appear to cluster in distinct geographical areas indicating the existence of numerous genetically unrelated Coffey Clans.

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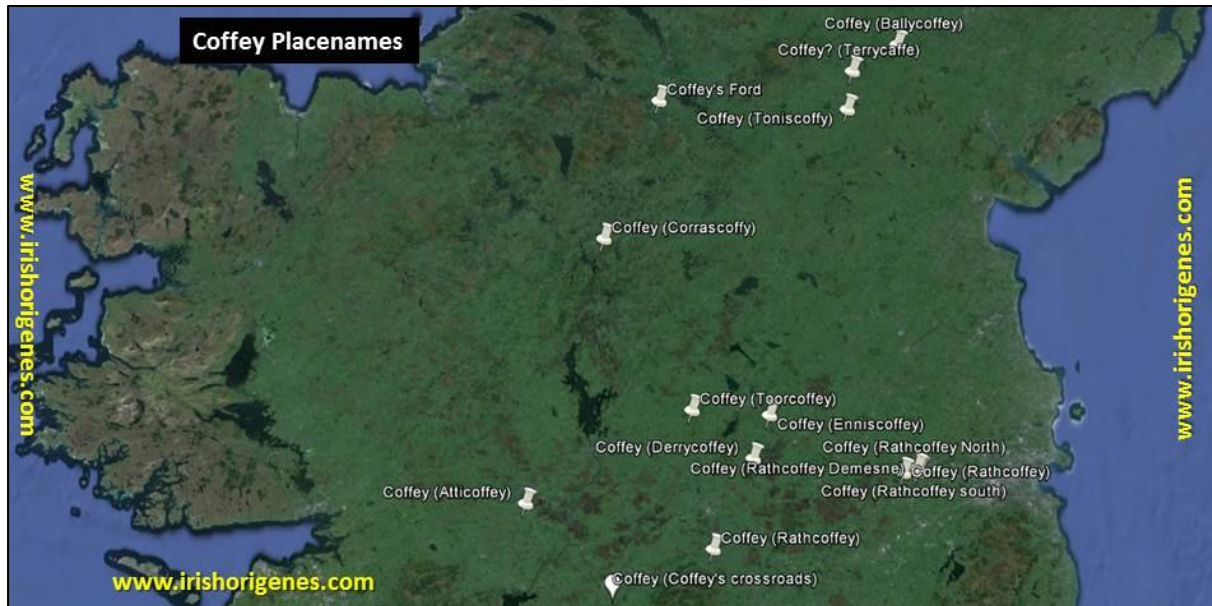


Figure 2: Coffey placenames in Ireland. There are a total of 12 townlands (while pins) that bear the Coffey surname. In addition there is one local placename called Coffey's crossroads (white balloon).

How many Coffey Clans?

A closer inspection of the distribution of Coffey farmers is required to determine how many distinct Coffey Clans existed in medieval Ireland. Each of these distinct groups could have arisen from an unrelated 'Coffey-Adam' (the first to take that surname who lived approximately 1000 years ago). Some of these groups may be related, and arose as a result of later migrations.

Kerry Coffeys

The largest cluster of Coffey farmers are concentrated on the Inveragh peninsula which lies west of Lough Leane in County Kerry, see **Figure 4**. Upon commercial ancestral YDNA testing Coffeys with ancestral links to this group will have genetic matches to people with Gaelic Irish surnames that are associated with this area which include notable ones like McCarthy, Sullivan, McGillicuddy and Sugrue.

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Figure 3: The Coffeys of the Iveragh peninsula. The largest cluster of Coffey farmers are found on the Inveragh peninsula that lies to the west of Lough Leane in West Kerry. Pins have been placed in the townlands where farmers lived in 1911. Pin size is indicative of frequency.

Waterford Coffeys

There is a second significant cluster of Coffeys in Munster, located in central Waterford between the Knockmealdown and Monavullagh Mountains, see **Figure 4**. Upon commercial ancestral YDNA testing Coffeys with ancestral links to this group will have genetic matches to people with Gaelic Irish surnames that are associated with this area which includes Magrath, Fraher, Hally and Killigrew.

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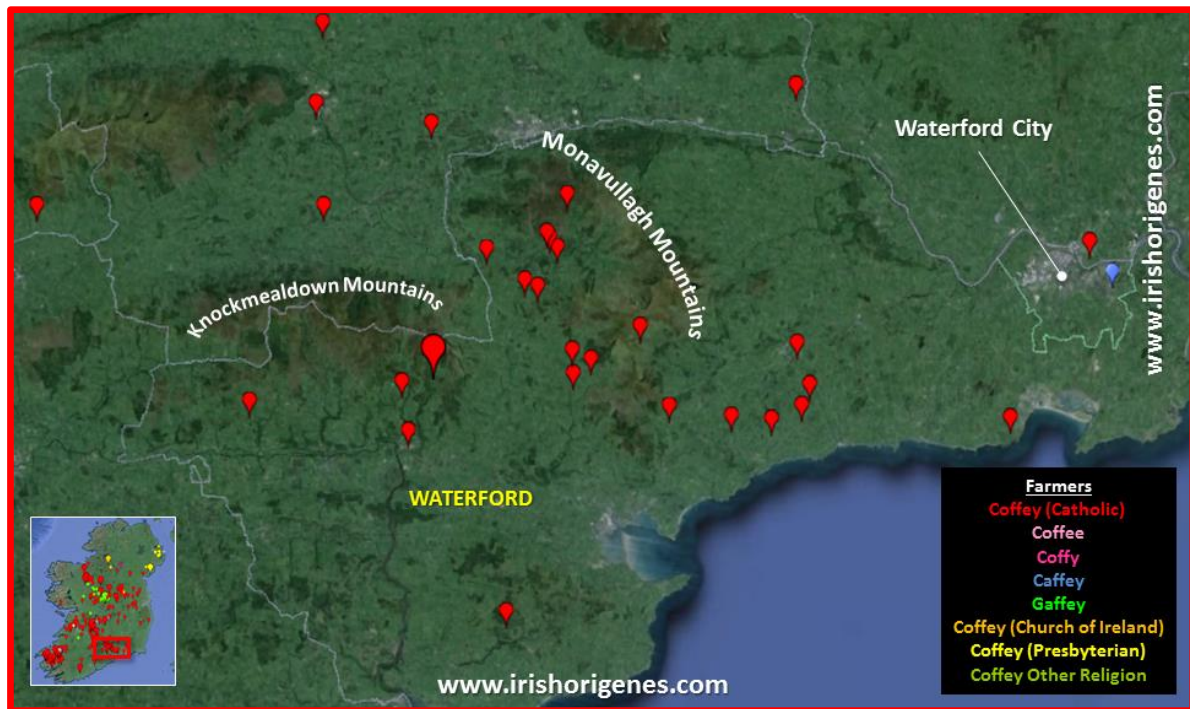


Figure 4: Waterford Coffeys. In 1911 a significant cluster of Coffeys could be found between the Knockmealdown and Monavullagh Mountains. Pins have been placed in the townland where farmers lived in 1911. Pin size is indicative of frequency.

Coffeys of the Tipperary, Limerick and Clare borderlands

A third cluster of Munster Coffeys cluster in the Northwest corner of Tipperary close to border with Counties Limerick and Clare, see **Figure 5** Upon commercial ancestral YDNA testing Coffeys with ancestral links to this group will have genetic matches to people with Gaelic Irish surnames that are associated with this area which include Crow, Hogan and O'Brien.

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Figure 5: The Coffeys of Northwest Tipperary. The Coffeys of Northwest Tipperary cluster to the east of Limerick City near the River Shannon. Pins have been placed in the townland where farmers lived in 1911. Pin size is indicative of frequency.

Kildare Coffeys

In 1911 a small number of Coffey farmers could be found close to Rathcoffey in Northeast Kildare, see **Figure 6**. This part of Kildare was colonised by the Normans which may account for the scattering of Kildare Coffeys. One would expect that upon YDNA testing Coffeys with ancestral links to this group would have significant numbers of matches to people with surnames that arrived with Normans in Ireland which would reflect non-paternal events that have occurred between neighbours over an 800 year time frame. Coffeys from this area will also have YDNA matches to people with Gaelic Irish surnames like Kelly, Casey and Dempsey together with Norman surnames like Fitzgerald and Fitzharris.

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Figure 6: The Coffeys of Kildare. The Coffeys of Kildare cluster close to Rathcoffey in an area that was part of the medieval Pale. Pins have been placed in the townland where farmers lived in 1911. Pin size is indicative of frequency.

Midland Coffeys and Gaffeys

There are 2 distinct clusters of Coffey farmers found within Count Westmeath in the Irish Midlands, see **Figure 7**. The Coffeys of East Westmeath are found in an area where a number of Coffey townlands are found, see **Figure 7**. To the west one finds a scattering of Coffey farmers close to a cluster of 'Gaffey' farmers who cluster to the south of Athlone town on the Westmeath, Offaly and Roscommon borderlands, see **Figure 7**. The Coffey surname in the area surrounding Athlone town appears to be a corruption of the more common Gaffey (or McGaffey). The Coffeys of Westmeath were a notable Gaelic Irish Clan and some may also have been transplanted to Connacht during Cromwellian times. The Coffeys of East Westmeath will upon YDNA testing have genetic matches to individuals with surname like Fagan and Whelehan. Coffeys who may be Gaffeys in disguise will match people called Gaffey or have genetic matches to people with surnames like Dunican, Claffey and Egan; which are common along the Roscommon, Offaly and Westmeath borderland.

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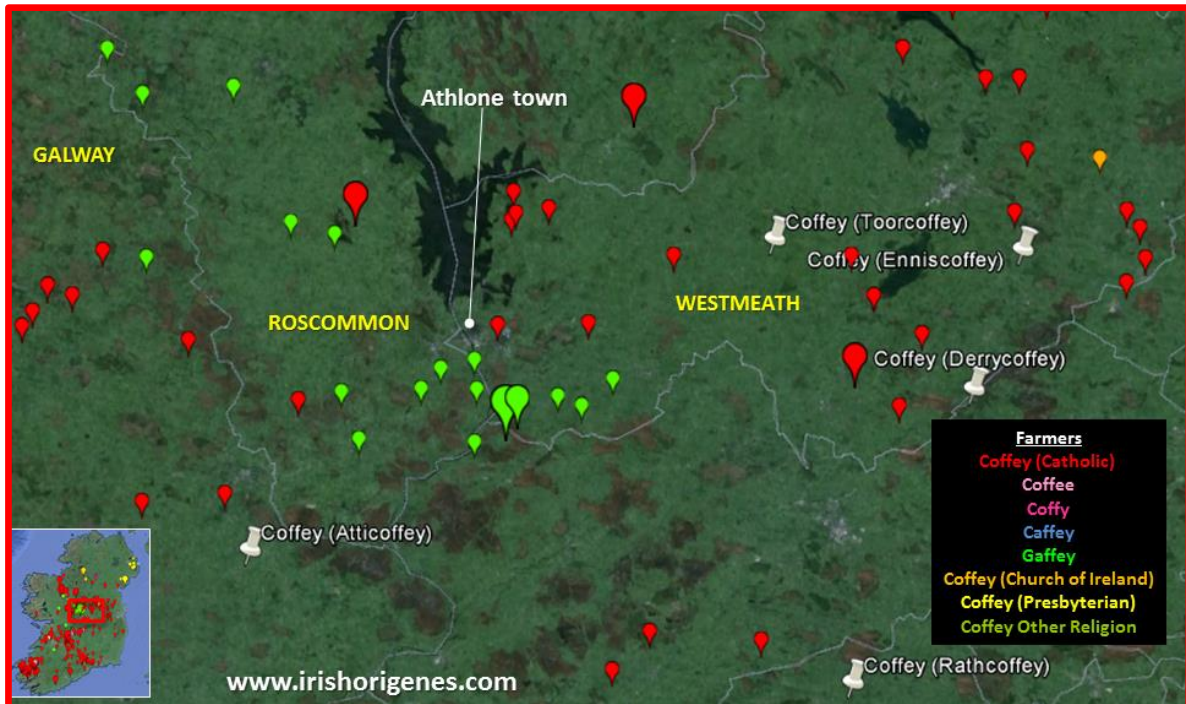


Figure 7: Coffeys and Gaffeys of the Irish Midlands. There is one distinct Coffey cluster associated with East Westmeath in an area where one finds plenty of Coffey townlands. The Coffeys that surround Athlone town may actually be Gaffeys in disguise. The Coffeys of Westmeath were a prominent clan and some members of that Clan may have been transplanted to Roscommon in Connacht during Cromwellian times.

Northwest Roscommon Coffeys

In 1911 a cluster of Coffey farmers could be found on the Roscommon and Mayo borderland, see **Figure 8**. Upon commercial ancestral YDNA testing Coffeys with ancestral links to this group will have genetic matches to people with Gaelic Irish surnames that are associated with this area which include Freely, Glavey and Gannon.

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Figure 8: The Coffeys of Northwest Roscommon. A significant cluster of Coffeys cluster in Northeast Roscommon close to the Mayo border. Pins have been placed in the townland where farmers lived in 1911. Pin size is indicative of frequency.

The Ulster Coffeys

The Coffeys of South Ulster are overwhelmingly Protestant and found in 2 small clusters located within Counties Down and Fermanagh, see **Figure 9**. The Coffeys of County Down are found close to the townland of Ballymagaughey. Often when ones Gaelic Irish ancestor adopted the Protestant faith they often anglicised their surname, the Coffeys of County Down may be McGauheys in disguise. In Monaghan and County Armagh one finds a number of Coffey townlands which may in fact be references to the McCaugheys, McGaugheys and Hauhey surnames that are far more numerous in this area. A small number of Coffeys can be found in County Fermanagh close to a place called Coffeys ford. Similarly these Coffeys may in fact be McCaugheys or McGaugheys in disguise. Coffeys with South Ulster roots may see genetic matches to people with the surnames McCaugheys, McGaugheys or Haughey and have a predominance of Northern Irish surnames like O'Neill, O'Doherty and McLaughlin in their YDNA genetic matches.

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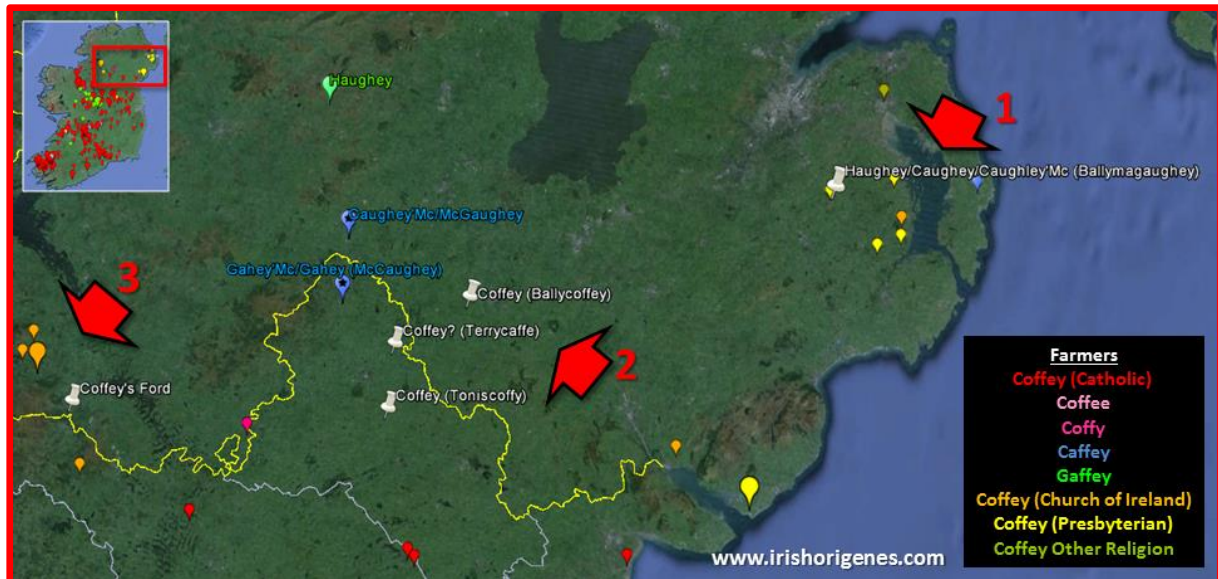


Figure 9: Ulster Coffeys. The Coffeys in Ulster are predominantly Protestant. Often when ones Gaelic Irish ancestor adopted the Protestant faith they also anglicised their surname. Coffey in Ulster is likely to be an anglicised version of a number of surnames including Haughey, McCaughey and McGaughey. In East County Down (number 1 red arrow) one finds a small cluster of Coffeys close to a Ballymagaughey. In North Monaghan and bordering Armagh one finds many Coffey townlands that may in fact be references to the McCaugheys (number 2 red arrow). A small cluster of Protestant Coffey farmers are found in Fermanagh in 1911 (number 3 red arrow).

SUMMARY

If your surname is Coffey then science has demonstrated that there is a 50% chance that after an estimated 1000 years that you are directly descended from a Coffey-Adam (the first to take that surname who lived approximately 1000 years ago). However this study has demonstrated that there were at least 10 distinct groups within Ireland that have contributed to the Coffey gene pool. If your surname is Coffey then only the results of a simple painless commercial ancestral Y-DNA test can be used to determine which of these 10 Coffey clusters or Clans you are descended from.