



DISCOVER GROOMSPORT

The Early History of Groomsport

This paper seeks to summarise the history of the village before the 17th century and discusses the linguistic links between the many names by which the village has been known.

1. The Earliest Human Activity

Groomsport occupies a distinctive position on the north Down coast, facing the North Channel and sheltered by Cockle Island and Ballymacormick Point. Its natural harbour – shallow, protected, and tidal – has shaped human activity in the area for thousands of years.

Prehistoric Activity

Although no permanent prehistoric settlement has been excavated within the modern village, archaeological investigations, including those associated with recent development projects, demonstrate that people were active in the landscape from at least the Mesolithic period.

- Cove Bay Development (2000): Excavation revealed sixteen flint tools and flakes, suggesting activity between 4000 and 3000 BC. These flints, characteristic of early domestic or hunting tasks, indicate repeated use of the coastal zone.
- Islet Hill Farm: Additional flint artefacts discovered nearby reinforce the idea of sustained prehistoric presence along the higher ground overlooking the bay.
- Southshore Apartments (2004): Test trenches produced no material older than the eighteenth century, showing that archaeological visibility varies greatly across the area.

Early Medieval Settlement: The Ringforts

Three forts have been mapped at Fort Hill (beside Andrews' Shorefield), Islet Hill Farm, and Nelson's Hill (in the grounds of the old Presbyterian manse). Ringforts (*raths*) were farmsteads enclosed by circular banks of earth, built during the early Christian period (c. AD 500–1100). Their presence demonstrates that the Groomsport area formed part of a thriving agricultural hinterland associated with early ecclesiastical centres such as Bangor.

2. The Viking Age

Raids on Bangor and Implications for Groomsport

Bangor Abbey, one of the most important monastic schools in early medieval Ireland, was attacked by Viking forces in AD 810 and 822. Although the annals do not name Groomsport directly, its harbour would have been an ideal landing site for raiders approaching Bangor from the sea.

The sheltered inlet between the shore and Cockle Island allowed longships to be manoeuvred and drawn up safely even at low tide. Groomsport may well have been a waypoint or staging post during Viking incursions.

Artefactual Evidence

A tradition in the village, handed down the centuries, is that the Vikings built the first harbour at Groomsport

Stronger evidence of the presence of Vikings in the village is the discovery in 2018 of a silver ring on land near the village. Only about fifteen Viking rings (most of which are gold) have been found across Ireland, making this a rare and important find.

Norse Place-Name Influence?

The nearby headland of Orlock has long been associated in local tradition with Old Norse roots—sometimes interpreted as Or-log or Orlag, "golden headland". Although linguists remain cautious about this derivation, the possibility reflects the wider pattern of Norse influence along the Antrim–Down coastline.

3. The Anglo-Normans (late 12th–14th centuries)

When John de Courcy landed near Downpatrick in 1177, north Down was part of the *tuatha*, or petty-kingdoms, of *Ui-Blatmac* and *Ui Echach Ard* which, in turn were part of the Kingdom of *Dal Fiatach* or *Ulaid*, which covered most of County Down.

De Courcy took control of the old *Ulaid* kingdom and the area was in Anglo-Norman hands until the 14th century. His conquest led to the reorganisation of landholding, the establishment of feudal manors, and the revitalisation of Bangor Abbey under Norman patronage.

The Anglo-Normans constructed mottes and baileys, including a major fortification at Donaghadee. They also reorganised land holdings into townlands, which have persisted until today.

The Earliest Recorded Name: Mollerytoun (1333)

The first documented reference to the Groomsport area appears in the 1333 Inquisitions post mortem following the death of William de Burgh, Earl of Ulster. The name recorded—**Mollerytoun**—likely derives from the Old French "*maloret*", meaning "unfortunate" or "ill-starred fellow". The Anglo-Normans often used descriptive nicknames as surnames. The inquisition shows that a settlement existed here in the early fourteenth century, forming part of the extensive de Burgh estates in Ulster.

4. Gaelic Resurgence and the Clandeboye O'Neills (14th–16th Centuries)

Beginning in the mid-fourteenth century, Anglo-Norman control in Ulster weakened. Into this vacuum stepped the *Clann Aoidhe Buidhe* (Clannaboy, later Clandeboye) O'Neills, a branch of the wider O'Neill dynasty.

By 1360, the O'Neills dominated both:

- Lower Clandeboye (south Antrim), and
- Upper Clandeboye (most of north Down).

During this period, many Norman place-names were adapted into Irish. Mollerytoun appears to have evolved into **Baile Mhullaíreach** - a Gaelicised rendering of "Mallory's town". This was later anglicised as **Ballymulleragh / Ballymullery**. It has been suggested that one of the variants – **Ballevullecragh** – may refer to the important O'Mulcreevy family who lived locally.

This hybrid name reflects the mixture of Gaelic and Anglo-Norman influences typical of late medieval Ulster.

5. The Turbulent Sixteenth Century: Colonisation and Conflict

The Smith Colony (1572–1579)

Queen Elizabeth I granted Sir Thomas Smith a huge tract of east Ulster, stretching from the River Bann to the Ards Peninsula, to establish a colony of Englishmen. These lands were already home to Gaelic communities and claimed by Sir Brian McPhelim O'Neill. This grant of land infuriated O'Neill who had been knighted in recognition of his loyalty to the Crown.

The English colonists arrived on the Ards peninsula in August 1572 and planned to build three forts in the north Down area to defend the colony. O'Neill responded by burning Bangor, Holywood and Movilla Abbeys and other large houses to prevent them from being used by the colonists.

The colony struggled from the start—beset by local resistance, poor planning, and Smith's inability to attract settlers—and was finally abandoned in 1579.

The 1587 Grant and the Division of Clandeboye

After the Smith failure, the Crown sought new strategies for controlling Ulster. In 1587, Con O'Neill of Clandeboye was formally re-granted territories in county Down. But tension between Con O'Neill and the authorities continued, eventually leading to the partition of the lands in 1605 between O'Neill and two Scottish noblemen – James Hamilton (who was given land that included Groomsport) and Hugh Montgomery.

Hamilton and Montgomery initiated a systematic settlement of Scottish tenants, reshaping the population, agricultural economy, and cultural landscape of the Ards and north Down.

6. Owen O'Mulcreevy

Little is known about Owen O'Mulcreevy (*O'Maolchraoibhe*) except that he held land at Groomsport as a follower, or client, of the O'Neills.

Sir James Hamilton's will of 1616 includes the following:

"Owen Omulcreve his towne is requisit for seafaringmen and fishers at Gilgroomes port and may be lett at a very good rate, but then the poor man should be elswer pro-vyded for with favour; the lyk is also of Towl Og Ogilmore for his part of Ballesallagh, who is to be lykwise provyded for, and may be better in some other place, and these townes with far greater advantag, and far better service to his Majestie, lett to Scottishmen."

(Hamilton Manuscripts, page 55)

Modern version:

"Owen O'Mulcreev's town is needed for seafaring men and fishermen at Groomsport, and it could be rented at a very good rate; but the poor man should then be provided for elsewhere, with kindness. The same applies to Towl Og Ogilmore for his part of Ballysallagh—he is also to be provided for and may actually be better placed somewhere else. And these towns, for much greater profit and much better service to His Majesty, should be let to Scotsmen."

This extract highlights several important points:

- A settlement existed at the harbour suitable for "seafaring men and fishermen".
- The name "Gilgroomes port" is clearly recognisable as an early form of Groomsport.
- Irish tenants, such as Owen O'Mulcreevy and Towl O'Gilmore, still occupied land in the area before they were displaced by the incoming Scots.

7. The Evolution of the Village Name

As mentioned in earlier sections:

- the earliest recorded name of the village is **Mollerytoun** (1333); and
- when the village was under the control of the O'Neills, Mollerytoun appears to have evolved into **Baile Mhullaíreach** - a Gaelic rendering of "Mullery's town".

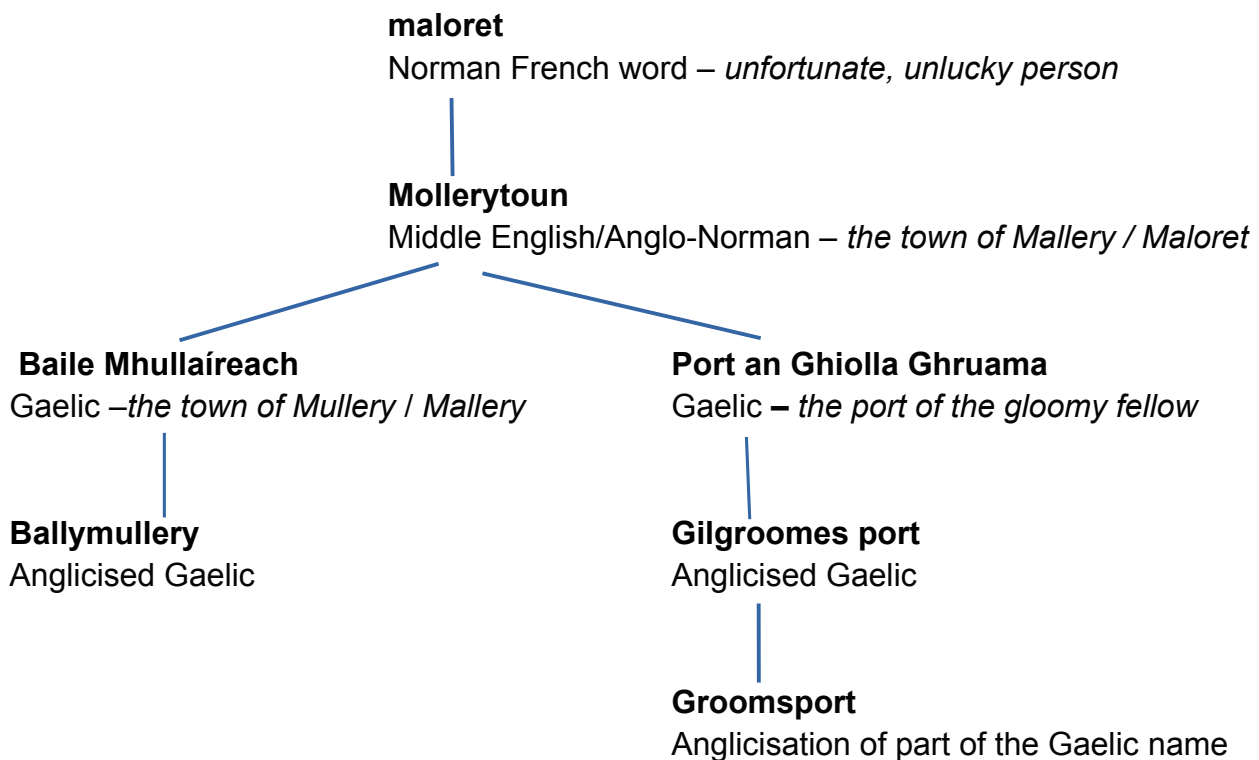
The village's modern name – **Groomsport** – is an anglicised semi-translation of the Gaelic **Port an Ghiolla Ghruama** - "*the port of the gloomy fellow*".

There have been a number of versions of this name since the 17th century. As noted above, James Hamilton's will of 1616 reflects a more complete translation of the Gaelic version – **Gilgroomes port**. The Raven map of 1625, which Hamilton commissioned, has **Gromes Port**. Among the many other versions are **Grahams Port** (1683) and **Grimport** (Lawson's map of 1789).

Hughes and Hannan identified a total of 29 variants of the various names of the village. They did not include "Grimport" from the 1789 map.

Three-Language History

Groomsport is unusual in retaining, across seven centuries, a thematic continuity in its name elements:



This sequence reflects the cultural layers of settlement—Anglo-Norman, Gaelic, and English-speaking Scots – and is thought to be exceptionally rare in Irish place names.

8. Conclusion

By the early seventeenth century, Groomsport was a small but strategically significant coastal settlement. Its history embodies the wider patterns of north Down: prehistoric activity, monastic influence, Norse contact, Anglo-Norman reorganisation, Gaelic resurgence, and transformation by Scottish settlers. Its unique succession of names, spanning three languages, provides a linguistic map of cultural change over seven centuries.

Peter Gibson

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