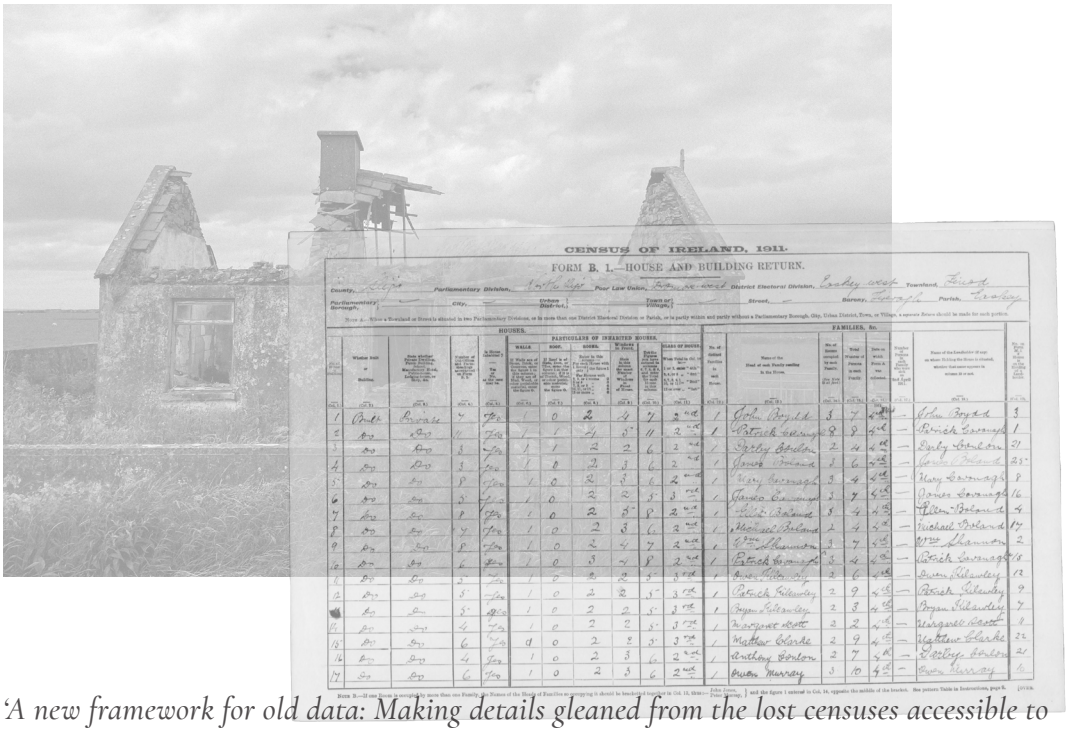
OVERLAYING FACT AND MEMORY:

Creating an Archival Framework that Bridges the Gaps in the Written History of the Rural West Coast of Ireland.

Grace Thornham



'A new framework for old data: Making details gleaned from the lost censuses accessible to local researchers requires careful planning. How to attach every found name to its correct address and for the relevant census year? An entirely new framework was needed. So, a major part of our research involves creating a robust structure, showing provinces, counties, baronies, statutory parishes, and townlands for the entire island of Ireland, which can accommodate thousands of names across multiple censuses.' (Virtual Treasury Record of Ireland, 2022).

Fig. 1. *House and Building Return* (1911) overlaid onto *Photograph of Abandoned Homestead* (my archival kit).

ABSTRACT

Set against the backdrop of the 1922 fire that destroyed the Public Record Office of Ireland, The Virtual Treasury Record of Ireland curated *Census Gleanings Map* (2022), an interactive repository of surviving and reconstructed data. Many artefacts, censuses, and genealogical documents were destroyed in the fire, leaving only fragments of Irish history behind. Underpinned by the same historiographical context, my design research utilises a similar method of mapping history against place. Instead of fixating on recording and archiving fact, my enquiry explores the critical question: *Can memory be used to fill in the gaps in Irish written history*?

AN ARCHIVE GROUNDED IN FACT

Upon entering *Census Gleanings Map*, the user is invited to navigate a map, revealing data restored from the 1821 Census of Ireland, pinned to its relative location. The digital platform's framework allows researchers to easily negotiate the content of the archive through visual interactive cues.

As a historical database, *Census Gleanings Map* has a commitment to impartiality, accuracy, and fact. The Virtual Treasury Record of Ireland enact their responsibility to objectivity through meticulous engagement with International Standard for Archival Description (ISAD[G]), as laid out by The International Council of Archives (1994). Their position is made explicit through the careful cross-analysis with Herbert Wood's *A guide to the records deposited in the Public Record Office of Ireland* (1919), corroborating the factuality of the reconstructed records with the pre-1922 repository. There is no dimension of fabrication within the archive, only an aspiration to restore with accuracy.

The Virtual Treasury Record of Ireland (2022) articulate their position in relation to the context of the fire through a 'conceptual distinction between the 'Inventory of Loss' (referring to the contents of the Public Record Office of Ireland, destroyed in 1922) and the 'Inventory of Survival' (referring to any archival or other historical record which can serve as a replacement or para-replacement for the destroyed records).' Arguably, the territories with no data are equally as informative as the locations with surviving documentation. *Census Gleanings Map* (2022) acts as both a reconstruction of lost records, and a historiographical testimony of the dissemination and destruction of Ireland's written history.

MEMORY AS A PARAMETER

Grounded in the same context and desire to archive Irish history, the friction between *Census Gleanings Map* and my own work is borne from our differing positions in relation to the parameters of archiving. Less enamoured with fact, I began to collect memories.

My initial intention was to restore knowledge about the uninhabited stone cottages that populate the rural West Coast of Ireland, driven by a concern that the memories associated with these homes were degrading, along with the buildings. Through engagement with the community in Easkey, County Sligo, memories of these unoccupied homes were gathered through an act of participatory archiving. Here, my position shifted from archivist to enumerator.

This line of enquiry was synthesised through the design and fabrication of an archival kit: a framework for collecting memories. The kit established a visual and rhetorical language, borrowed from the 1911 Census *House and Building Return* (The National Archives of Ireland, 1911), through which I could explore my new role as the enumerator.

The preamble introduced participants to the motivations behind my research and contextualised the work through my own relationship with the West Coast of Ireland:

Many of my earliest memories are tethered to the West Coast of Ireland. Having spent my formative years visiting family in County Mayo, it is a place I associate with home.

Since I can remember, I have been fascinated with the uninhabited homes that populate the road from Enniscrone to Easkey. As I grew older, I started to notice the pattern of unoccupied buildings extended beyond this one road. The landscape of the West Coast is inundated with these stone cottages. I have spent many years imagining the stories seeped into the walls, saturating every corner of these abandoned homesteads.

I would like to collect a memory about your home.

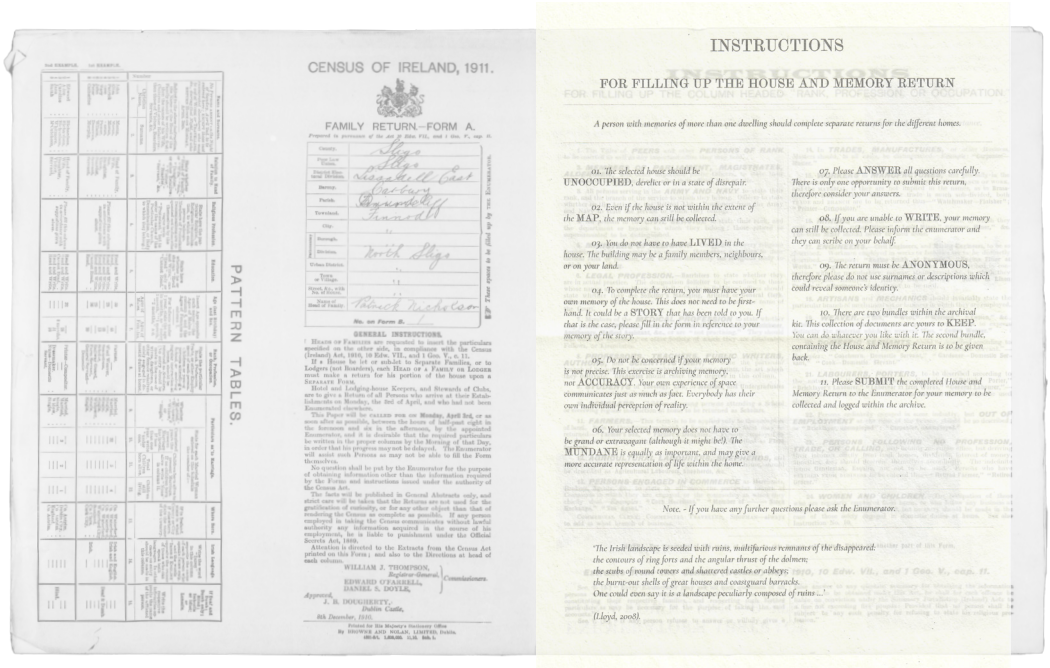


Fig. 2. *Instructions* (my archival kit) overlaid onto *Form A (Page 2) for Finned, Easky West, Sligo* (1911).

POSITIONS IN TENSION

In both bodies of work, the collected data is inextricably tethered to the place from which it was gathered. My research currently focuses on Easkey but serves as a gesture towards a greater effort to collect, catalogue and perpetuate memories of uninhabited buildings across the entirety of Ireland. Clearly, there is a limit to the scale of my work due to its analogue nature and my capacity to workshop the archival kits with members of the community. My research conducted thus far is merely the first fragment towards the creation of a cohesive map of memories, with the intention to slowly grow to the government-wide scale of *Census Gleanings Map* (2022).

The historical records which populate *Census Gleanings Map* have been immortalised through their digitisation. The catalogued information is fixed and static, mimicking history itself. This is, perhaps, the antithesis of my work. The assembled knowledge of the derelict homesteads collected in my research is fluid, permutable and labile, often rooted in emotion as the participator recounts memories from years gone by.

By alleviating the impulse to record fact, the research is free to explore individual perception. Memory is neither accurate nor inaccurate; merely a reconstruction of lived events, warped by one's own experience. In *BBC Science Focus*, cognitive neuroscientist Dr Christian Jarrett (2026) astutely writes: 'each time you invoke a memory, you're not simply taking a file out of an archive, you're writing and editing that file anew – potentially incorporating new information or beliefs – and then it gets stored again. It becomes a memory of a memory, if you will.' Despite the dimension of subjectivity, recollection can store just as much, if not more, information as fact. Emotion, position and understanding are all woven into memory, creating a richer account of a place or moment.

CONCURRENT VIEWING

With written documentation eradicated, and unoccupied buildings derelict and degrading, the best chance of preserving the lost history is by archiving the stories that once filled the rooms. I propose that *Census Gleanings Map* and my own project are most productive when viewed concurrently. By overlaying fact and memory, a more cohesive map of Irish history is revealed. The fragments of memory collected through my studio work build upon, and fill in the gaps, in the foundation of knowledge stored within the *Census Gleanings Map*.

The initial intention of my design research was to start a broader conversation about the future of the uninhabited homesteads in the West Coast of Ireland through the restoration of memory associated with place. Triangulating with *Census Gleanings Map* encouraged a critical reflection about my position within the

territory of existing historical documents, and the purpose of my archival efforts. Celebrating the duality of fact and memory, my studio practice will begin to address the question: *Is the perpetuation of memory a legitimate form of archiving? And how can you create an archival framework that appropriately records the simultaneity of fact and memory?*

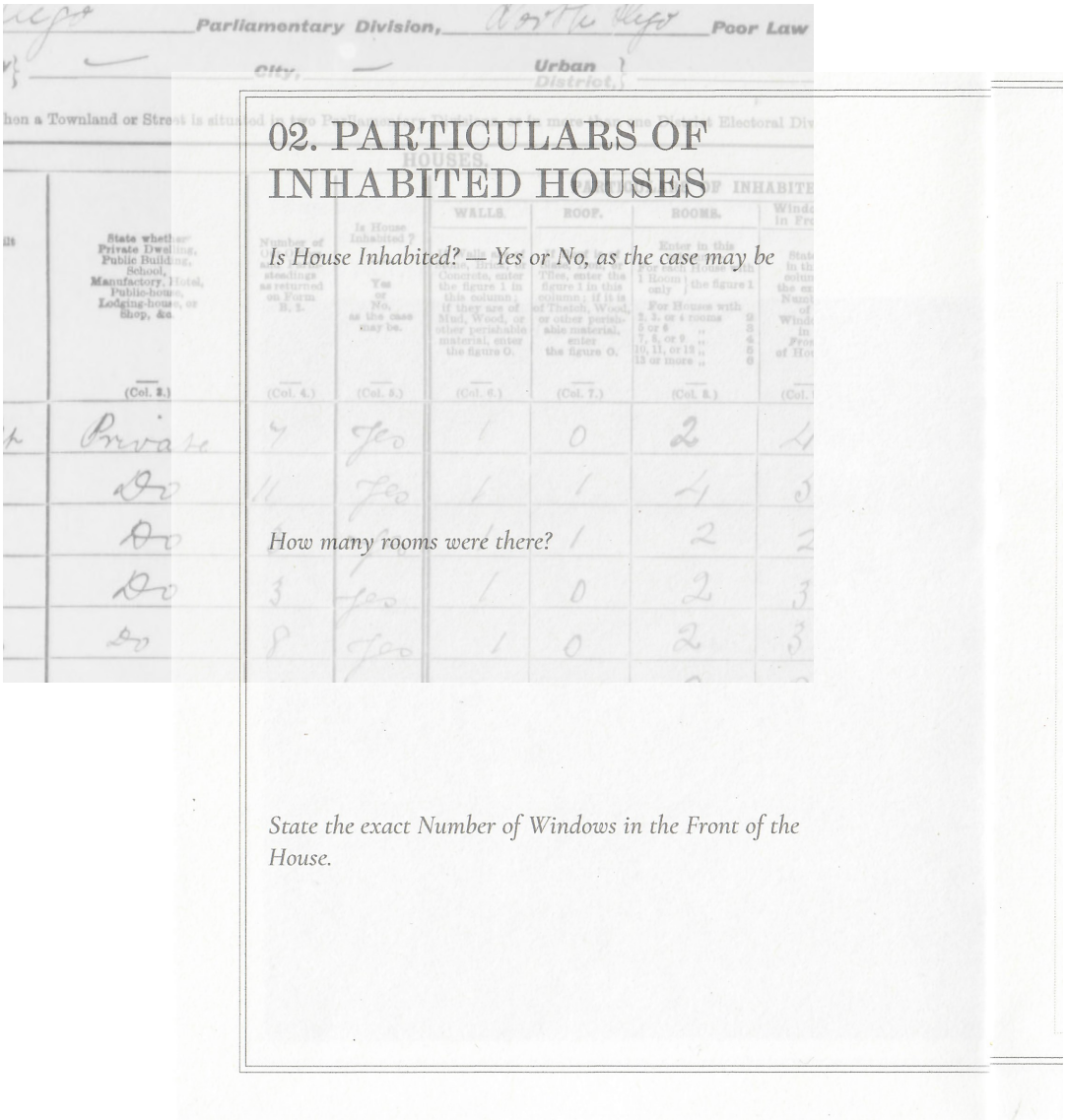


Fig. 3. *House and Memory Return* (my archival kit) overlaid onto *House and Building Return* (1911).

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