The Normans brought big changes to Ireland when they arrived in the 1100s. They shaped the way we talk, the way we grow food and even our surnames! Now, crumbling castles mark the places where they once lived. In this unit we will explore who the Normans were, why they decided to come here and what they brought when they arrived.

Keywords: invade, feud, knight, foot soldier, bowman, fortress, motte and bailey, castle, feudal system, peasant, noble.

Timeline:
- 911: Viking invaders establish Normandy in France.
- 1069: The first Normans arrive in Wexford.
- 1169: Strongbow helps Diarmuid capture Waterford and marries Aoife.
- 1240: The Normans control two-thirds of Ireland.

Who Were the Normans?

In the 700s, a group of people from Scandinavia called the Vikings began to invade parts of Northern Europe. The places they invaded included Ireland, England and northern France. The Vikings who invaded France originally came to steal treasure, but some decided to stay. They married local people, took on the French way of life and eventually became known as the Normans. In 911, they settled in the area now known as Normandy.

When the English king, Edward, died in 1066, the Normans saw their chance to invade England. The Norman leader William, Duke of Normandy, led his soldiers across the English Channel. He defeated the English army at the Battle of Hastings. William – now known as ‘the Conqueror’ – became King of England.
Life in Ireland Before the Normans

In the 1100s, Ireland was divided into kingdoms, each with its own king. The most powerful was known as the High King of Ireland. The kings were always fighting for power. Most people made their living from raising cattle, and stealing cattle was common. People spoke Gaelic and followed Gaelic laws.

Disputes and Deals

Diarmuid MacMurrough was King of Leinster. He was in a feud (fight) with Tiernan O’Rourke, the King of Bréifne. In 1166, Tiernan invaded Leinster. Diarmuid fled to England with his daughter Aoife, to ask the Norman King Henry II for help. Henry offered the help of his lords in Wales, including Lord Richard de Clare, known as ‘Strongbow’. A deal was made – Strongbow would help, and in return he would marry Aoife and become King of Leinster when Diarmuid died.

The Spread of Norman Rule

In 1169, on Diarmuid’s instruction, the first Normans arrived in Co. Wexford, Ireland. A year later, Strongbow arrived with an army. He helped Diarmuid capture Waterford. Then, as promised, Strongbow married Aoife. Diarmuid and Strongbow marched on and captured Dublin. This made Diarmuid King of Leinster once again. A year later, Diarmuid died suddenly. Strongbow became King, which meant that Leinster was under Norman rule. It wasn’t long before more Normans followed Strongbow’s lead and came to Ireland. They conquered land and set up home.

Fact File

A lord was a person who worked on behalf of the king. Lords were given land and property. They had power over ordinary people.

Norman Weapons of War

Norman soldiers were fierce warriors and skilled fighters. They were capable of winning battles, even when they were outnumbered. There were three main types of Norman soldier: knights, foot soldiers and bowmen. Each had their own unique set of weapons.
Motte and Bailey

When a Norman lord conquered a new territory, he needed to build a fortress quickly. This enabled him to defend his land and keep control. Castles took many years to build, so the first fortresses were simple buildings, often made of wood. They were called ‘motte and bailey’ forts.

**Motte**: A small hill with a flat top. The hill was made by digging a circular ditch and throwing the earth into the middle.

**Keep**: A tower built on top of the motte. The lord and his family slept here. It provided a high lookout to keep watch for enemies approaching.

**Bailey**: A courtyard surrounded by a fence at the bottom of the motte. It had a larger ditch around it. The lord’s servants, farmers, craftspeople and soldiers slept here.

**Moat**: A ditch surrounding the motte and bailey. It was deep and difficult for an attacking army to cross. Sometimes filled with water for added protection.

**Fence**: A strong wooden fence around the keep and bailey. It gave extra protection from attack.

**Bridge**: Wooden bridges across the ditches. They joined the keep to the bailey and the bailey to the surrounding land. They were smashed if enemies attacked.

**Stables**: Homes for the animals in the bailey.

Examine the Evidence: What parts of this motte and bailey fort are still visible? What parts are missing?

Remains of the motte and bailey fort at Clough, Co. Down in Ireland.
**Stone Castles**

As the Normans settled in Ireland, they needed long-term fortresses that were stronger and easier to defend. These came in the form of stone castles. The ruins of Norman castles can still be seen all over Ireland today.

**Curtain wall:** A thick stone wall. This was the castle’s first defence against an enemy attack.

**Battlements:** The top of the curtain wall. During battles, soldiers would shelter behind it and fire or throw things at the enemy through the gaps.

**Castle:** A stone building to replace the earlier keep of the motte and bailey fortress. This is where the lord and his family lived. In some larger castles, soldiers lived here, too.

**Bailey or inner ward:** A courtyard where the servants, farmers and craftsmen worked.

**Drawbridge:** A bridge across the moat. Could be raised using ropes or chains if the castle was under attack to stop the enemy crossing.

History Hunt: Find pictures of a Norman castle near where you live. Identify the parts of the castle.

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**The Feudal System**

In Norman times, control was very important. The Normans introduced the feudal system in Ireland.

Under the feudal system, the King of England owned all the land and gave sections of it to Norman lords. The lords then divided the land further between their noble friends. These were usually Normans who had come to Ireland from England or Wales.

**Peasants** worked the land for the **nobles**. Peasants were the poorest people in the feudal system. They were usually Irish people from the area, or poor people brought over from England. They paid a rent to live on the land. Most peasants were farmers, but some were tradespeople such as carpenters, bakers and blacksmiths.
The arrival of the Normans was an important moment in Irish history. They shaped not only the landscape but our culture, too. So, now that we know who they were, why they came here and what they brought with them, let’s ‘storm the castle’ and find out how they lived!

What Changes Did the Normans Bring?

By 1240 the Normans controlled two-thirds of Ireland. Their influence had spread all over the country.

**Towns**

Outside the castle walls, towns began to grow up for the first time. Towns like Kilkenny, Drogheda, Trim, Carrickfergus, Carlingford and Cahir grew round their castles. People liked to live near the castle as it offered protection and a place to trade. Markets and fairs started to take place in the towns.

**Farming**

Before the Normans, Irish farmers raised cattle rather than growing crops. But every winter, grass for the cows was scarce. The Normans solved the problem by making hay – drying and storing grass for feed.

The Normans also split their farms into three fields. Each year a different crop was grown in two fields and the third was not used. This gave the land time to get its nutrients back so that crops would grow well the following year.

**Christianity**

Christianity had come to Ireland long before the Normans, and many monasteries already existed. The Normans introduced the system of parishes, each with its own church and priest. They brought new orders of monks, such as the Franciscans and Dominicans, which are still in Ireland today.

**Surnames**

Before the Normans, many Irish people had surnames starting with ‘O’ or ‘Mac’, from the Irish for ‘son of’. Overtime, the Normans began to marry Irish people and new names appeared. Many are still popular in Ireland today, such as Butler, Cusack, Fitzgerald, Fitzpatrick, Keating, Power, Sinnott, Tobin and Walsh.

Fact File

The Normans spoke English and French, but soon after their arrival in Ireland, some Normans started adopting Irish customs and the Irish language.

Carrickfergus Castle

A Norman parish church in Lusk, Co. Dublin

History Hunt: Do you know anyone with a Norman surname? What about shops or businesses? Can you think of any famous Irish people with Norman surnames?

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Activities

Fact Finding

1. How many years ago did Normans first come to Ireland?
2. What was a motte?
3. What activities happened in a bailey?
4. What were battlements used for?
5. How and why were drawbridges used in Norman castles?

Explore More

1. Name two similarities between a motte and bailey fortress and a castle.
2. Why do you think castles were more useful than motte and bailey forts?
3. What do you think was the most important feature of a Norman castle?
4. How do you think the local people felt about the new Norman lords?
5. What do you think was the biggest impact the Normans had on Ireland?

Working as a Historian: Using Evidence

Study the painting The Marriage of Strongbow and Aoife and answer the questions.

1. Who do you think the two people in section A are?
2. Describe the Norman knights in section B.
3. What symbol of Ireland is included in section C?
4. Did the wedding take place before or after the battle to conquer Waterford? What evidence in the painting supports your answer?
5. Is this painting a primary or a secondary source?

Working as a Historian: Synthesis and Communication

The Bayeux Tapestry tells the story of the Normans coming to England. Create a comic strip to tell the story of the Normans coming to Ireland.

- Summarise the main events before, during and after Strongbow’s arrival.
- Draw a scene to illustrate each event in your summary.
- Arrange the scenes in order with captions to create your comic.