

14. The Great Famine

Paired Units: History: 15. Emigration in the 1800s; Geography & Science: 17. Food for Life

This is the first unit of a pair based on life in Ireland in the 1800s, with a focus on life during the Great Famine. In this unit, explore land division and the lives of the rich and poor. Discover more about how a dependence on potatoes led to widespread famine when the potato crops failed. Explore the options people faced to provide for their family, including scavenging, soup kitchens and workhouses.

Notes

Units 14 and 15 provide good opportunities to link what was happening on a national level with what was happening locally at the same time. Local libraries are a good starting point when researching events of the Famine on your own locality. Try to locate sites of interest in your locality, e.g. soup kitchens, workhouses, fever hospitals or famine graveyards. If possible, make a class visit to a local site relating to the Famine. If this is not possible, photographs of the site with maps to show the location in relation to the school will suffice.

An important point to deliver during this lesson was that the Great Famine was not caused solely by blight. Deeper issues such as unfair land division and poor treatment of Irish tenant farmers and cottiers were major contributing factors. Note that there was plenty food being exported from Ireland during the Great Famine.

Due sensitivity should be applied when discussing illness and disease. Consideration should also be given to the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects on the class. If approached appropriately it could provide a link between the content in this unit and an event that the children have experienced.

When examining sources, refer to Skills: Sources on p. 36 of the Student Book.

When dating artefacts, refer to Skills: People at Work on p. 68 of the Student Book.

When carrying out research, refer to Skills: Research on p. 90 of the Student Book.

Curriculum Information

History

Strand and Strand Unit

Life, society, work and culture in the past: Life in the 19th century

- become familiar with aspects of the lives of these people
- examine and become familiar with evidence from the periods studied, especially evidence which may be found locally
- record the place of peoples on timelines

Skills

Working as a historian

- Time and chronology
- Change and continuity
- Cause and effect
- Using evidence
- Synthesis and communication
- Empathy

Resources

- *Explorers History 4th Class Digital: 14. The Great Famine: Unit Stimulus*
- Digital timelines
- *Explorers History 4th Class Student Book: 14. The Great Famine pp. 74–79*
- Land division demonstration: a chocolate bar made up of eight squares
- Photographs of local sites (if you won't be visiting them) relating to the Famine: workhouses, fever hospitals, famine graveyards, etc.

Useful Links

Visit a website which features a variety of sources on the Great Famine, such as contemporary newspaper articles and illustrative material:

<https://viewsofthefamine.wordpress.com/>

Read an article from a Dublin newspaper in November 1845, describing the potato rot (high-level language):

https://www.newspapers.com/clip/24860322/firsthand_account_of_levels_of_potato/

Read an account from William Carrigan of the story his grandfather told him about a turnip being stolen from a field in Co. Tipperary during the Famine:

<https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4922258/4864917/5020877>

Visit the Dúchas website for research purposes:

<https://www.duchas.ie/en>

Find photographs of the four ‘classes’ of homes in Ireland around the time of the Famine (1841):

<https://dahg.maps.arcgis.com/apps/MapSeries/index.html?appid=8de2b863f4454cbf93387dacb5cb8412>

Read a scientific study on people who were buried in workhouses at the time of the Great Famine. This demonstrates how science can confirm oral history:

<https://phys.org/news/2019-09-teeth-vital-clues-diet-great.html>

Watch a video about a famine memorial in Battery Park City in Lower Manhattan. It is a good example of a famine memorial outside of Ireland:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J8nMDwUBEqU>

Read an article from 2018 about the famine in Yemen. This is a good starting point for further research on famine in modern times:

<https://www.trocaire.org/news/millions-face-famine-yemen>

Keywords

the Great Famine, landlord, tenant, cottier, hovel, potato, exported, blight, fungus, Black '47, evicted, soup kitchen, workhouse

Lesson Suggestions

- Use the digital Unit Stimulus to examine the Great Famine population graph. Before the mid-1840s, Ireland's population was increasing. The highest point was around 8.5 million. In the mid-1840s, Ireland's population plummeted. This was caused by people dying of starvation and disease during the Great Famine, as well as emigration.
- Use the digital timelines to locate the key dates in relation to the Great Famine. What else was happening at the time?
- Use a chocolate bar (with eight squares) to demonstrate the concept of land division. The teacher is the landlord who owns the chocolate bar (land). Invite two children to be ‘tenant farmers’. Say you will give them each square of chocolate and in return they must pay you rent (for example one item from their pencil case each day for the week). If they don't pay, you will take back their squares of chocolate. Pick two more children to be ‘cottiers’. Explain how cottiers couldn't afford to pay rent. They had to work on the landlord's big farm (six squares). In return, they get a crumb of chocolate for themselves. Discuss the fairness of this. Explore why the cottiers agreed to this arrangement. They had no other choice.
- Look at the photographs of the four classes of homes in Ireland just before the famine began (see ‘Useful Links’). This effectively highlights what life was like at this time, and the kinds of wealth disparity that existed.

Lesson Suggestions

- Examine the primary source evidence of the arrival of the blight (see ‘Useful Links’). Discuss whether this evidence is more valuable than something written by a historian in the present day. In what ways might it be more valuable? In what ways might it be less valuable?
- Use the Dúchas website to research recounts of the Famine from your own locality (see ‘Useful Links’).
- Visit a local site related to the Famine. Invite children to imagine what it would have been like during the time of the Famine. Encourage children to visualise their surroundings, using all their senses. Recap the lesson content that relates to the site.
- Research famine in the present day. The recent famine in Yemen is a good example. To start, visit the Trócaire website (see ‘Useful Links’).
- As per the ‘Working as a Historian: Using Evidence’ activity on p. 79 of the Student Book, look at the painting by Daniel McDonald and answer the questions. More paintings by the same artist from the same era are listed in Linkage and Integration.
- As per the ‘Working as a Historian: Change and Continuity’ activity on p. 79 of the Student Book, answer the questions about the Famine.

Linkage and Integration

History: 15. Emigration in the 1800s pp. 80–83.

Geography & Science: *Explorers Geography & Science 4th Class:* 17. Food for Life pp. 92–97.

Visual Arts: Look at and respond to other pieces of art by Daniel McDonald from this era, including *An Irish Peasant Family Discovering the Blight of Their Store* and *The Village Funeral*. At first, do not tell children the titles of the paintings. Instead, ask what is happening in the picture. Then ask the children to come up with titles themselves. Ask the children to describe what they see in detail.

Language: *Abair Liom 4th Class:* 3. Ag an ollmhargadh pp. 22–29, 4. Bia blasta pp. 30–37. *Starlight 4th Class:* 3. Healthy living pp. 30–41, 9. All change! pp. 98–109, 10. Children around the world pp. 110–121. 11. Family ties pp. 122–133.

Home/Parental Involvement

Parents and grandparents can be a great source of local knowledge. Invite children to ask at home about areas of interest, sites and stories related to the Great Famine in their locality.