

Why is the Irish Famine important in British & Irish History?

Student workbook



The Discovery of the Potato Blight in Ireland
by Daniel McDonald, c. 1847

Contents

Your key question	3
1. What was it like to live in Ireland in the early 19th century?	4
2. What happened to the potato crop in Ireland in the 1840s?	6
3. How did people deal with death during the Famine?	9
4. What effect did the Famine have on relations between Britain & Ireland?	12
Extension	16
Assessment	17
Map	
Ireland during the Famine - affected areas	16

Your key question

In this workbook you will be looking at a traumatic event in Irish and British history, the Irish Famine, 1845-50. It was the last famine in the history of Western Europe.

You will be trying to answer one key question:

Why is the Irish Famine important in British and Irish history?

To help answer this key question, you will be asking and trying to answer four sub-questions:

What was it like to live in Ireland before the Famine?

What happened to the potato crop in the 1840s?

How did people deal with death during the Famine?

What effect did the Famine have on relations between Britain & Ireland?

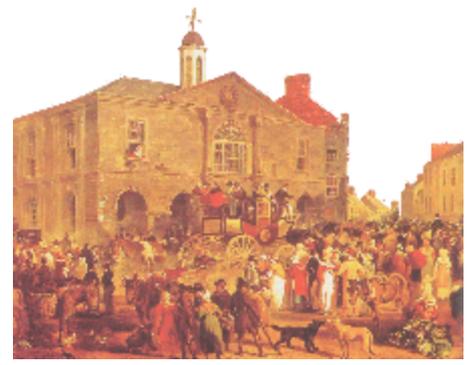
1. What was it like to live in Ireland in the early 19th century?



1. Festive group dancing to the 'uilleann' pipes, Waterford, by S.T. Roche, 1820s



2. *Children Dancing at the Crossroads* by T. Fowler, c. 1850



3. *The Market-place at Ennis* by W.T. de Lond, c. 1845

'The young women carry their white stockings and dress shoes in their hands going to the Cushendall Fair, till they are just at the entrance to the village; they then stop at the nearest stream and wash and dress.'

4. Cushendall Fair, early 19th century, M.E. Collins, *Ireland 3*



5. A landlord's house



6. His tenants' cabins

80 per cent of Irish people lived in the countryside and worked on the land. However, they did not own the land they farmed. Instead the land was owned by about 20,000 landlords. Each landlord had a large estate of thousands of acres. He divided his land into farms and rented them out to tenant farmers. If the tenants did not pay their rent they were evicted from (thrown out of) their farms. Tenants lived in farmhouses or small cabins. Landlords lived in large houses with servants and fine food. Some, called absentee landlords, did not live in Ireland at all, but lived on estates in England.

7. Landlords and tenants

	GB	Ireland
1801	10.7	5.2m
1821	14.2	6.8m
1841	18.5	8.2m

8. Population growth

Population growth was higher in some parts of Ireland than others, putting great pressure on land. A common practice, especially in the West, was for tenants to divide their land among their sons. Sub-division created many small farms in Ireland as the sons themselves also sub-divided land. Many thousands of families thus had to exist on smaller and smaller plots of land.

9. Sub-division of land

Upon average, a man, his wife and four children, will eat thirty-seven pounds of potatoes a day. The family live on potatoes and buttermilk six days a week; the Sabbath is generally celebrated by bacon and greens ... An Englishman, seeing a number of fine florid children in a cabin, said to the father: 'How do your countrymen manage to have so many fine children?' 'It is the potato, sir,' said he.

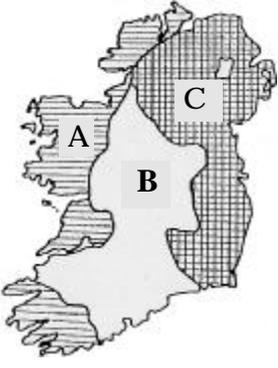
10. A visitor to Ireland, 1806

For about a century and a half, the potato has been the only food of the peasantry of Ireland. A very limited portion of land, a few days labour, and a small amount of manure will create a stock upon which a family may exist for twelve months.... Nearly every soil will produce potatoes; they may be seen growing from almost barren rock on the side of a mountain, and in the bog where the foot would sink many inches in the soil.

11. A visitor to Ireland, 1843

Year	Acres (000)	Produce (000 tons)
1844	2,378	14,862
1845	2,516	10,063
1846	1,999	2,999
1847	284	2,046
1848	810	3,077
1849	719	4,024

12. The potato crop, 1844-49

		A. West	B. Midlands & the South	C. North & East
	Farm size	Small, less than 5 acres (usually ½ - 1½).	Usually large, most were over 30 acres.	Mostly under 30 acres.
	Type of farming	Infertile land made potatoes the main crop.	Dairy farms for milk and butter. Cattle fattened for export to Britain.	Fertile land made mixed farming possible and profitable - wheat potatoes and flax in the North. Cows were also kept for meat, milk and butter.
	Homes	Small cottages or cabins housing farm labourers or cottiers.	Sturdy, comfortable but usually not luxurious.	Small, thatched cottages
13. Economic regions of Ireland				

- Look at sources 1, 2, 3, 5 and 6.
Freeze-frame one of the scenes.
What do the pictures tell you about life in Ireland in the early nineteenth century?
- Look at sources 7 & 8.
Make a bar chart, comparing population growth in Great Britain and Ireland.
Calculate the rate of population growth in Britain and Ireland.
Using source 7 and your knowledge of the economic development of Britain in the early nineteenth century, why do you think that Britain could absorb population increase more readily than Ireland?
- Look at sources 9-11.
How do they help to explain how Ireland was able to support a more rapid increase in population than Britain?
- Look at sources 12 & 13.
What are the disadvantages of relying on the potato as the main source of food?
Which part of Ireland would you expect to be worst hit by the failure of the potato crop?
- Taking into account all these things, how far do you think that 'the grinding poverty endured by the poor, pre-Famine Ireland' was balanced by 'the exuberance of its folk tradition in music and dance'?

2. What happened to the potato crop in Ireland in the 1840s?

1. With your partner read the cards carefully.
Discuss different headings (categories) you could put each card under.
2. Make sure you understand why you have sorted the cards in the order/categories you have chosen. You will be asked to explain your choices to the class.
3. Now arrange the cards onto the A3 grid provided by your teacher.
Do not stick anything on yet!
4. Look carefully at the cards you have chosen for the 'course' of the Famine.
With your partner discuss and arrange these in a rank order - What were the worst events during the Famine?
5. Now do the same for the cards you have chosen for the 'consequences' of the Famine .
What were the most important consequences of the Famine?
You will be asked to share your ideas with the rest of the class.
6. Before you stick your cards on to the sheet, underline any words or phrases which show why you decided to put each card in the category.
7. Think about what you have learnt in this lesson.
At the bottom of your A3 grid, write what you think the Irish people during the Famine would have thought about the British.

Searching for potatoes
Illustrated London News
20 February 1847

'At Cahera ... a famished boy and girl turning up the ground to seek for a potato to appease their hunger.'



An Irish Eviction by F. Goodall, 1850



A Soup Queue, Anonymous, 1847

Searching for potatoes in
a stubble field
Illustrated London News
22 December 1849

'The people were digging ... like dogs after truffles ... in the hope of finding a few potatoes the owner might have overlooked ... it is the only means by which the gleaners could hope to get a meal.'



SEARCHING FOR POTATOES IN A STUBBLE FIELD

<p>1. In 1845 a new disease struck the potato crop in Ireland - potato blight.</p>	<p>2. The first sign of the problem was when the leaves of the potato plant went black and died. By the time people noticed this it was too late to save the potatoes, because the disease spreads quickly in moist, mild conditions.</p>	<p>3. So many died on the emigration ships that they became known as coffin ships.</p>												
<p>4. In 1846 the blight struck again, completely destroying the potato crop. The people, already exhausted and starving, were hit even harder.</p>	<p>5. The summer of 1845 was very humid; the weather was very warm and also very damp. These weather conditions led to the failure of the potato crop.</p>	<p>6. The Census of 1841 revealed that the population of Ireland had risen from 5 million in 1800 to over 8 million.</p>												
<p>7. Charles Trevelyan was a very important person who worked in the Treasury, where the British Government's money was managed. He believed the Famine was sent by God's 'Divine Providence' to control the population increase.</p>	<p>8. Most people in Ireland lived in rural areas and made their living from farming land which they rented from landlords.</p>	<p>9. The policy of the British Government at that time was called <i>laissez-faire</i>, which means 'Let be'. Basically the government believed it should not interfere with anything to do with trade or the economy.</p>												
<p>10. It is estimated that 1 million people died from hunger and disease during the Famine and another million emigrated to England, North America or Canada.</p>	<p>11. By February 1847 there were over 700,000 public work schemes. Trevelyan said this was costing the government too much. By June 1847 nearly all the schemes were stopped.</p>	<p>12. Perhaps a road was started where a road was needed; the order would arrive that distress in that area was over and the work would stop ... <i>The Nation</i>, 29 August 1846</p>												
<p>13. Cowering wretches almost naked in the savage weather, prowling in turnip fields and endeavouring (trying) to grub up roots that had been left ... little children... their limbs fleshless, their bodies half-naked, their faces bloated yet wrinkled and of a pale greenish hue (colour) - children - who could never, oh it was too plain, grow up to be men and women. John Mitchel</p>	<p>14. This vessel left with 476 passengers, of whom 158 died before arrival, including the Master, mate and nine of the crew ... Three days after her arrival there remained of the ship's company only the second mate, one seaman and a boy, able to do duty; all others were dead or ill in hospital.</p>	<p>15. In July 1848 a rebellion was raised by a group called the Young Irelanders. It had no general support and was quickly put down by the government. However, it was important for later generations. It made the Famine a bone of contention in Anglo-Ireland relations and promoted a romantic sense of nationality.</p>												
<p>16. A group of Christians called the Quakers gave food, clothing and seeds, and also helped to make people in England aware of the seriousness of the Famine.</p>	<p>17. What did the British Government do to help the situation in Ireland? They built more workhouses, set up public work schemes, opened soup kitchens.</p>	<p>18. Irishmen serving in the Indian army collected £50,000.</p>												
<p>19. Some landlords went bankrupt trying to help - others did almost nothing.</p>	<p>20. A group of Native Americans, called the Choctaws, collected 710 dollars (1 million dollars in today's value) and sent the money to the Famine victims.</p>	<p>21. By 1847 diseases like typhus, scurvy and 'famine fever' became widespread, killing more people than starvation.</p>												
<p>22. Over crowding in the workhouses made matters worse. Workhouses which were built to accommodate 100,000 had to provide for 111,000 people.</p>	<p>23. Soup kitchens provided a type of porridge called 'stirabout'. Local ratepayers were responsible for paying for this. Anyone who had more than a quarter of an acre of land was not entitled to this food.</p>	<p>24. The Government set up Public Work Schemes so that workers could buy food instead of relying on charity. The work was hard, the hours long and the pay very low and uncertain.</p>												
<p>25. There was a great deal of resentment in Ireland. Many people believed the government did not do enough to help the Irish people during the Famine.</p>	<p>26. Potatoes are a good, nutritious food but it is not advisable to depend on only one food crop.</p>	<p>27. The first sign of the blight was a sweet, sickly smell from the potato fields, then the stalks withered.</p>												
<p>28. Quaker soup kitchen, Cork, with two big soup boilers. People received soup and a piece of bread.</p>		<p>29. Bridget O'Donnell. Her family were evicted (forced to leave their home) when they could not pay the rent. Bridget was pregnant and had a fever. Neighbours took the family in but the baby was born dead and her 13 year old son died of hunger.</p> 												
<p>31. Nothing in our history, perhaps, fills us with so much pity and sorrow; pity for the poor of our country, for it was they who suffered most; no other events leave us with so much to ... wonder at - how, for instance, an ignoble ascendancy stood idly by and watched the export of great quantities of corn, exported to pay rents to absentee landlords, corn which might have saved a million lives.</p>	<p>32. The policemen are commanded to do their duty. Reluctantly indeed they proceed, armed with bayonet and muskets, to throw out the miserable time-worn stools and bed-frame, if any, ragged cover-lid [coverlet], iron pot; all must be cast out, and the very roof of the hovel itself thrown in.... Six or seven hundred persons were here evicted; young and old, mother and babe were alike cast forth without shelter and without the means of subsistence. Eviction in Connaught, autumn, 1847</p>	<p>33. Many thought that the decay was caused by bad vapours in the air, or by insects that lived in the soil. Others reckoned that the decay was caused by electricity from the hundreds of railway engines that had been brought into Ireland at that time. Still others believed that Irish people had offended God and that he was punishing them by sending the blight to destroy their food.</p>												
<p>34. POTATO BLIGHT Appeared September 1845 Worse in 1846 None in 1847 Returned in 1848</p>	<p>35. Queen Victoria sent £2,000 for Famine victims.</p>	<p>36. Irish people in Britain</p> <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th></th> <th>England/Wales</th> <th>Scotland</th> <th>Nottingham</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>1841</td> <td>289,404 (1.8%)</td> <td>126,321 (4.8%)</td> <td>781 (1.4%)</td> </tr> <tr> <td>1851</td> <td>519,959 (2.9%)</td> <td>207,367 (7.2%)</td> <td>1,686 (2.8%)</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>		England/Wales	Scotland	Nottingham	1841	289,404 (1.8%)	126,321 (4.8%)	781 (1.4%)	1851	519,959 (2.9%)	207,367 (7.2%)	1,686 (2.8%)
	England/Wales	Scotland	Nottingham											
1841	289,404 (1.8%)	126,321 (4.8%)	781 (1.4%)											
1851	519,959 (2.9%)	207,367 (7.2%)	1,686 (2.8%)											

The Famine in Ireland

enlarge to A3

CAUSES	COURSE	CONSEQUENCES

3. How did people deal with death during the Famine?

Famine deaths

About one million people died during the Irish Famine. Historians cannot be sure of the exact number since accurate records were not kept owing to the vast number of people dying.

People died from diseases like dysentery, typhoid and cholera as well as starvation. There were so many deaths that burial rituals, such as keening and waking, so important to the Irish, had to be overlooked.

In fact, bodies were often taken away in carts to be buried, without coffins, in mass burial places (Source 1). Sometimes, the bodies were not found until they were half-devoured by dogs or rats.

1. Funeral at Skibbereen, Co. Cork, one of the worst hit areas
Illustrated London News
30 January 1847

‘The body of a young man is laid on a cart; a second man whips the horse into action; a third stands by with a spade; onlookers gossip and argue: this well-observed scene shows us death stripped of all dignity.’



2. ‘The deaths in my native place were many and horrible. The poor famine-stricken people were found by the wayside, emaciated corpses, partly green from eating docks and nettles and partly blue from cholera and dysentery.’
Dáothí Ó Ceanntabhnaíl, national teacher, Croom, Co. Limerick

3. The village of Mienies
Illustrated London News
13 & 20 February 1847

Here dogs devoured the unburied dead and ‘the gnawed and mangled skeleton’ of a man named Leahey was ‘contended for by hungry dogs’.



The death of Baby Bridget

Each death caused distress and suffering to already distraught families. On the next page is an extract from an historical novel about the Famine, *Under the Hawthorn Tree*. The extract describes how one family was affected by the death of their ten-month-old baby, Bridget.

Read the extract and then complete the following activities.

- a. Make notes on how the main characters in *Under the Hawthorn Tree* reacted to Bridget's death. You could include how they prepared for her funeral. Set it out like the table below:

	Reactions to Bridget's Death
Mother	
Eily	
Peggy	
Michael	
Dan & Kitty Collins	

- Or*, write a journal entry for Eily entitled: 'May, 1846: The day we buried Bridget'. Express her feelings and fears, as well as recording the events of the day.
- What circumstances surrounding the burial added to the mother's grief?
- Compare Bridget's burial to the burial of the young man in source 1.
- Read the accounts of the Famine victims in sources 2 and 3.
What similarities are there in the different accounts? (You may wish to include source 1 and the extract from the novel in your answer.)

Extension tasks

- There are many customs associated with burying the dead in Ireland.
Find out what you can about these.
The following keywords may help: keening, wake, respect for the dead.
- A twentieth-century leader said 'One death is a tragedy, A thousand deaths merely a statistic'.
 - Think carefully about this statement - can you suggest what he meant by this?
 - In what way could this statement help to explain the seeming indifference to the dead?

'The death of Baby Bridget' from *Under the Hawthorn Tree* by Marita Conlon-McKenna

O'Brien Press, 0-86278-206-6, pp 21-5

They pushed in the door. Mother was dozing with Bridget in the chair near the fire. She looked tired and they could tell she had been crying.

Quiet as mice, they reheated some leftover oatmeal and water. They were all tired out, and glad to fall into bed. With arms and shoulders aching, they scarcely had time to notice the normal rumbling hunger pains that came before sleep.

At some time during the night they became aware of their mother's sobs and of Bridget coughing and trying to breathe. Michael came and lay down in the bed beside the girls. They held hands and prayed - every prayer they had ever learned.

'God help us, please help us, God,' they whispered.

No one slept. It was the early hours of the morning before the coughing stopped. Then there was a sudden silence. Mother was kissing the baby's face and each little finger one by one.

'God let the sun come up soon and let this terrible night end,' the children begged.

Suddenly they became aware of their mother's silence. They got up and went over to her. Large tears slid down her cheeks.

'She's gone. My own little darling is gone.' Peggy started to cry. 'I want Bridget back,' she wailed. 'I want her.'

'It's all right, pet,' assured Mother. 'She was too weak to stay in this hard world any longer. Look at her. Isn't she a grand little girl, now she's at rest.'

The baby lay still, as if she were just dozing. Mother told them to kiss her, and one by one they kissed the soft cheek and forehead of Bridget, the little sister they hardly knew.

Mother seemed strangely calm and made them go back to bed. 'At first light, Michael, you must run to Dan Collins and ask him to get Father Doyle. I'll just sit and mind my darling girl for a little while yet.'

Later, Michael set off, his face pale and his eyes red-rimmed. The chill of the early morning made him shiver as he pulled his light jacket around him.

Mother had heated some water and with a cloth she gently washed Bridget, and brushed and brushed the soft blond curls. Eily pulled the old wooden chest from under Mother and Father's bed. As instructed, she opened it. There wasn't that much in it, so she soon found the lace christening robe which her great-grandmother had made. The lace was yellow and old. It was only ten months since Bridget had worn the robe - before, but her little body was so thin and wasted it still fitted her. Dressed in it she looked like a little pale angel, though Eily couldn't help but remember a porcelain French doll she had seen in a shop window in the town once. It stood stiff in a white lace dress with a starched petticoat and long curling real hair. How she had wanted to hold and have that doll. Now she felt the same longing, but much worse. She ached to hold Bridget and never let her go.

Michael came home. They all had a sup of milk and tidied themselves and the cottage as best they could. Dan Collins would get the priest. Father Doyle was a nice man - he and Father were very friendly and sometimes he would drop in for a chat and a bit of company. Father used to say that being a priest was grand, but it was a lonely life.

Mid-morning they were all surprised when Dan Collins and his wife Kitty arrived. Kitty ran straight to Mother and kissed her. Their eyes were full of tears and unspoken words.

'Margaret, we are so sorry. Poor little Bridget,' whispered Kitty.

Dan Collins cleared his throat and shifted uneasily. 'There is more bad news, God spare us. Father Doyle is gone down with the sickness himself and will not be able to bury the wee lassie. Already in the village a few have died of the sickness - Seamus Fadden, the coffin maker, being one - so there are no proper funerals ...' He stopped.

Mother let out a high wailing cry. 'What will become of us, what are we to do?' The air hung heavy.

'We'll bury her decently in her own place,' said Dan.

The three children stared at Mother, waiting for her reply. She nodded her head silently.

'Under the hawthorn tree in the back field,' she whispered. 'The children always played there and its blossom will shelter her now.'

Dan motioned to Michael and they left the cottage and disappeared up to the field carrying a spade.

'We've no coffin,' said Mother hoarsely.

Kitty looked around the cottage and begged Eily to help her. Eily cleared her throat. 'What about using grandmother's wooden chest?'

Kitty and Eily pulled it out from under the old bed and lifted it onto the blanket. Mother walked over and nodded silently. Kitty began to take out the family treasures and lay them to one side.

Kitty and Mother started to get everything ready. Eily and Peggy, sensing they were not wanted, ran outside and pulled bluebells and wild flowers. They sucked in deep breaths of air to try and calm their hearts.

Dan came back down the field and went inside. In a few minutes the three adults emerged, Kitty holding Mother's arm and Dan carrying the carved wooden chest.

A light breeze blew and the blossom bowed and waved in welcome. There was a clear blue sky. A family of bluetits sat on the branch of the tree, helping to keep vigil.

Dan and Kitty led them in the prayers and they all remembered the words of Jesus, 'Suffer the little children to come unto me'. They prayed too that they would 'meet again in Paradise'.

Eily and Michael gently placed the flowers beside the chest. Peggy clung to Mother as huge sobs racked her body. Mother stroked her hair. They all sang a favourite hymn of Father Doyle's, then Kitty led them back to the house. She had brought some tea and made a mug for the adults. She made Mother sit down near the fire as she warmed some leftover potato cakes.

For the next few days, Mother stayed in her shift with the shawl wrapped around her, and barely bothered to do anything. Eily and Michael fetched the water, swept out the cottage and searched for food. They wished that Father would come back. Eily was scared. How long would it last?

4. What effect did the Famine have on relations between Britain & Ireland?

1. What help did the British government give during the Famine?

Ireland was part of the United Kingdom and during the Famine, Irish people looked to the British government to help them. As one Irishman said in 1846, *'If ministers regard us as fellow subjects and wish to snatch us from the jaws of death, let them interfere without loss of time.'*

Daniel O'Connell repeated this appeal in 1847 in a despairing speech in the House of Commons: *'Ireland is in your hands, in your power. If you do not save her she cannot save herself. I solemnly call on you to recollect that ... a quarter of her population will perish unless you come to her relief.'*

Look at the following details (overleaf) of the actions taken - or not taken - to relieve famine in Ireland.

As a class, identify the main actions taken or not taken.

In groups of four, chose one action or inaction and fill in the grid below to explain how your chosen action angered Irish people.

Report back to the whole class and complete the master grid.

Action (e.g., public works)	Explanation	Anger justified or not?

(For teachers & plenary session)

Action	Explanation	Anger justified or not?
Grain import		
Public works		
Soup kitchens		
Making landlords responsible		
Food exports		



Food riots in Dungarvan, 1846
Pictorial Times, 10 October 1846



Quaker soup kitchen, Cork, 1847
Illustrated London News, 16 January 1847



Ejection (eviction), 1848
Illustrated London News, 16 December 1848

British action & inaction during the Famine

1. The government tried to improve the supply of food by importing maize, called 'yellow meal' or 'Indian corn'.
2. The maize was not given freely. It was sold at low cost, but, as the Famine continued, prices rose. A family needed a stone of meal a day to survive. By November 1846, a stone of meal cost 15p.
3. The maize needed to be cooked carefully - very slowly - and many people lacked the skill and utensils to do this. Hunger drove some people to eat it raw, which caused health problems.
4. Public works were set up so that people could earn money to buy food.
5. According to one Co. Monaghan farmer, 'Several local relief schemes were organised during the Famine. New roads were built and bogs drained. Churches were also built.'
6. Many of these works were poorly administered and badly organised. Some men had to walk four or five miles a day - or even farther - to their work.
7. Many people were too weak from hunger and disease to earn much money on the public works. In November 1846 a labourer employed on the Public Works scheme earned no more than 4p a day.
8. Denis McKennedy died on October 24 while working on a public works road in Co. Cork. He had not been paid since October 10. The post-mortem revealed death to be the result of starvation: no food in the stomach or in the small intestines, but in the large intestine was a 'portion of undigested raw cabbage, mixed with excrement'. The verdict at the coroner's inquest was that McKennedy 'died of starvation caused by the gross neglect of the Board of Works'.
9. In 1846 soup kitchens were set up. These were organised by government agencies as well as private organisations and religious groups, including, most notably, the Quakers.
10. By the end of 1847, government funding for public works schemes and other aid was withdrawn. The cost of Famine relief was passed to the Irish landlords.
11. Many landlords acted kindly towards their tenants, as one man from Co. Cork recalled: 'My grandfather, God rest his soul, went to pay part of his rent to his landlord ... "Feed your family first, then give me what you can afford when times get better," he told him.'
12. Other landlords continued to evict any tenants who could not pay their rents. 'Fifty families were evicted from this district of Kileaskin by a local landlord. The thatch of the roofs was torn off even before the people had time to leave.'
13. Despite food shortages, grain continued to be exported from Ireland. However, the government refused to ban the export of food.
14. Banning foodstuffs would not have stopped widespread starvation. Ireland did not produce enough food for the whole population, and it would not have been possible to ensure that the food reached the people who really needed it.
15. If the government had stopped food exports, some people would have been saved from starvation and suffering. Desperate from hunger, and seeing food being shipped for sale abroad, people began to accuse the government of deliberately trying to starve the Irish people.

2. Why did the British government not do more?

Many complained that the British government should have done more to help Ireland during the Famine. You are now going to explore why the government did so much and no more.

At first people in England did not believe that the crisis in Ireland was as severe as it was. However, even when its severity began to dawn on England, sympathy was limited by two factors.

First, there was a feeling that the Irish had brought about the Famine themselves by their ‘indolence’ (idleness).

Secondly, and more importantly, was the Victorian belief about the proper role of government. That role should be confined to maintaining law and order and defending the realm with the minimum of public expenditure. Governments should not interfere with the economy or with people’s private lives. This policy of *laissez-faire* ensured a ‘free market’ and encouraged people to stand on their own two feet.

These views of the Irish and the role of the state thus combined to limit state aid during the Irish Famine. Little sympathy was shown towards Famine victims. Instead press and government emphasised the benefits of hard work - by ‘self-help’ and ‘industry’. This was particularly the view of Charles Trevelyan, the British government official in charge of Famine relief policy.

- a. Look at the following two quotations by contemporary observers. From what you know about the causes of the Famine, what do you think of these comments?

‘The astounding apathy of the Irish themselves to the most horrible scenes under their eyes and capable of relief by the smallest exertion is something absolutely without parallel in the history of civilised nations.’

‘The whole of them, with a few exceptions are, as usual, idle, reckless, lazy and improvident; many of them I could see as I passed along sitting idly smoking on the back of a ditch, without making the slightest attempt even at digging their gardens.’

- b. In what ways do the following two sources agree.

<p>1. Charles Trevelyan</p> <p>‘Dependence on charity is not to be made an agreeable mode of life.’</p> <p>‘Too much has been done for the people. Under such treatment the people have grown worse instead of better and we must try what independent exertion will do.’</p>	<p>2. <i>Punch</i>, an English satirical journal, 17 October 1846 (Hint: what is John Bull giving his Irish ‘brother’?)</p> <p>UNION IS STRENGTH</p> <p>John Bull: ‘Here are a few things to go on with, Brother, and I’ll soon put you in a way to earn your own living.’</p> 
---	--

- c. In the light of your consideration of the British policy during the Famine, go back to the first question in this section and review your conclusions, especially as to whether Irish anger was justified.

3. What effect did the Famine have on Anglo-Irish relations?

Read the words of the song about the Famine, 'Skibbereen', which was written some years after the event.

Oh, Father, dear, I often hear you speak of Erin's isle
Her lofty scenes, her valleys green, her mountains rude and wild
They say it is a lovely land, wherein a prince might dwell
Oh why did you abandon it, the reason to me tell.

My son, I loved my native land with energy and pride
Till the blight came over all my crops, my sheep and cattle died
My rent and taxes were so high, I could not them redeem
That's the cruel reason I left old Skibbereen.

It's well I do remember the year of '48
When I arose a Fenian to battle against our fate
I was hunted through the mountains as a traitor to the Queen
That's another reason I left old Skibbereen.

It's well I do remember the cold November day
When the landlord and the sheriff came to drive us all away
They set our roof ablaze in fire with their damning yellow spleen
That's another reason why I left old Skibbereen.

Your mother, too, God rest her soul, fell on the snowy ground
She fainted in her anguish, the desolation round
She never rose but passed away from life to mortal dream
She found a grave and place of rest in dear old Skibbereen.

You were only two months old, and feeble was your frame
I could not leave you with my friends, you bore your father's name
I wrapped you in my cótamóór, at the dead of night unseen
We heaved a sigh and bid goodbye to dear old Skibbereen.

Oh father, dear, the day will come when on vengeance we will call
When Irishmen both stout and stern will rally one and all
I'll be the man to lead the van, beneath the flag of green
And loud and high we'll raise the cry, 'Revenge for Skibbereen'.

- Identify the two characters in the song and say which verses belong to each.
- Describe the circumstances surrounding the father's departure from Skibbereen (keywords: blight, rent, eviction and death).
- What emotions and feelings are aroused by the song?
- What effect, to judge from the song, did the Famine have on relations between Britain and Ireland?
- What do you think are the strengths and weaknesses of using such songs as historical evidence? What do they tell us?



The past informing the present conflict in Northern Ireland
A republican mural commemorating An Gorta Mór (the Great Famine), Ardoyne Avenue, Belfast 1997. 'They buried us without shroud or coffin' is from a poem by Seamus Heaney.

Extension

‘Natural factors cause crop failures but Human beings cause famines’.
How far do you agree with this statement?

Can you relate it to the Famine in Ireland or indeed any recent famine?

(You may wish to find out about famine in Ethiopia 1984, Sudan 1998 or the recent food crisis in Southern Africa.)



Ireland during the Famine - affected areas

Tony Allan, *The Irish Famine. The Birth of Irish America*, Heinemann, 0-43106-908-5, p. 18

Assessment

Writing frame (basic)

When you write your report, use the sentence starters and tips in this writing frame as a guide to help you.

Why and how did the Irish Famine happen and what impact did it have on Anglo-Irish relations?
[Anglo-Irish relations = how the British and Irish felt and acted towards each other]

Introduction

The Irish Famine began in ... with ... [describe the potato blight] The weather that summer was ... which
[Tip: Use information from the card sort activity you did.]

Paragraph one

The potato blight caused a famine because ... [write about the population increase]. Another reasons was ... [write about the size of farms]. The most important reason why the famine began was ... [write about how important the potato was to the diet of the population].

[Tip: you will find details about these on page 4 of the student workbook. For higher marks you could include statistics/graphs/a map.]

Paragraph two

Many people died from starvation or disease as a result of the famine ... [now use information from the sources and pictures to describe how people suffered and died during the famine.

[Tip: Page 6 and the card sort activity will help.]

Paragraph three

To make matters worse many families were evicted. This means one million people emigrated to ...

[Tip: Use information from page 6 and the card sort activity to give as much detail as you can.]

Paragraph four

The English government tried to help by ... [explain about public works schemes, importing grain, soup kitchens].

[Tip: There is a lot of information on page 13 which you can use.]

Paragraph five

However, many Irish people were angry about the actions and attitudes of the British government ... [Explain why the actions of the government were not always successful. Explain about the attitude some people in Britain had about the Famine.]

[Tip: Use the information from the grid you made on page 12 and the words of the Famine song.]

Conclusion

[Your conclusion will be made up of the answers to these questions. Try to answer them in full sentences and with as much detail as possible.]

1. Do you think the government did enough to help the famine sufferers in Ireland?
 - If not, what do you think the government should have done?
 - If yes, what was the most successful action they undertook?
2. What do you think angered the Irish people most?
3. Do you agree with/understand the reasons for the anger felt by the Irish people?
4. Overall, what is the most important thing you have learned about the Famine?

Assessment

Writing frame (core/extension)

When you write your report, use this writing frame as a guide to help you.

Why and how did the Irish Famine happen and what impact did it have on Anglo-Irish relations?

Introduction

Here you need to 'set the scene'. Write *briefly* about how and when the Irish Famine began. Give some information about the potato blight and the weather conditions which caused it.

Paragraph one

In this paragraph you need to go into more detail about how the potato blight caused such a devastating famine. Include information about the size of the Irish population, where/how most people lived, size of farms (include sub-division), how dependent were many people on the potato for survival.

Dates are important. You may also wish to include statistics and a sketch map.

Paragraph two

You should write about the physical effects of the Famine, e.g., starvation, disease. Use evidence from the pictures as well as the written sources.

Paragraph three

Use this paragraph to write about other consequences of the famine - include evictions, emigration.

Paragraph four

Here you should explain briefly what relief aid the English government gave.

You should also examine the attitude of government officials, such as Trevelyan.

Is there any evidence that other people had similar attitudes?

Is there evidence that other people/agencies were more generous/helpful?

Paragraph five

In this paragraph you need to examine the impact of the Famine on Anglo-Irish relations.

Discuss the feelings of Irish people. What actions particularly made them angry? What would they have resented even before the Famine? Think of absentee landlords, attitudes towards the Irish, grain exports, the limitations of public works schemes and grain exports.

What evidence is there in the song of this resentment turning to violence against England?

Conclusion

Here you weigh up the actions of the British government and give your point of view.

Decide whether the government could/should have done more.

If you think they should have done more, what do you think they should have done?

Do you think Irish resentment was justified?

These sentence starters may be useful:

There is a lot of discussion about whether ...

Some people claim that ... (it is claimed that ...)

They also argue that ... (it is also argued that ...)

However, there are arguments against this point of view ...

Some people believe that ...

After looking at the different points of view and the evidence for them, I think ...

From studying the Famine the most important thing I have learned is ...