



Strand | The Island of Ireland

Strand Unit: Identity and heritage	
Stage	Stages 4 (Fifth and sixth classes)
Subject	History
Learning Outcome	<i>Through appropriately playful and engaging learning experiences children should be able to identify and discuss the similarities and differences in the lives of people in their locality, both past and present. AL, C, CL.</i>
Relevant Key Competencies	AL – Being an active learner C – Being creative CL – Being a communicator and using language
Topic: <i>The Great Famine</i>	Learning about <i>The Great Famine</i> helps children understand one of the most significant events in Irish history, shaping population, culture, and identity. Exploring its causes, impact, and legacy encourages empathy, critical thinking, and connections between local and national history, while also highlighting themes of resilience, migration, and change that remain relevant today.

Why is learning about this topic important?	What will this look like in the classroom?
<p>The Great Irish Famine (1845–1852) was a pivotal event in Irish history, profoundly affecting the nation’s demographic, social, and political landscape. Understanding this period helps children grasp the complexities of historical events and their long-term impacts. It fosters critical thinking about issues such as food security, governance, and human rights.</p> <p>By exploring the Great Irish Famine, children can develop a sense of empathy and can be provided with opportunities to discuss the significance of cultural heritage and the importance of memory in shaping national identity.</p> <p>Children have opportunities to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • discover how the Great Famine affected families, communities, and the Irish landscape • explore the causes and consequences of the Famine, recognising what changed in society and what endured • connect local and national history by investigating nearby famine memorials, famine-era buildings, or stories from their own area • develop curiosity and historical thinking through exposure to maps, diaries, photographs, and imaginative activities such as role play or creative writing 	<p>Children have opportunities to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • explore and interpret different sources related to the Great Famine (e.g., maps, photographs, newspaper reports, diaries, or artefacts) • investigate how the Famine changed life in Ireland, considering farming, housing, work, and population patterns • appreciate what aspects of Irish life endured despite the Famine, such as traditions, local communities, and place names • use creative methods such as drama, storytelling, diary writing, art, or digital tools to show their understanding of Famine experiences

Ideas for children working as historians

Concept	Ideas
Time and chronology	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Place the Great Famine (1845–1852) within a timeline of 19th-century Irish history and understand that events happen in sequence (<i>e.g., alongside the Act of Union 1801, the Repeal Movement, and the rise of Irish emigration</i>)• Use a classroom wall display or digital timeline to track key developments such as the arrival of the potato blight, successive crop failures, and emigration patterns• Link local history by plotting famine-affected areas, workhouses or emigration points on the timeline to see how national events connected with local experiences
Cause and effect	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Explore why the Great Famine happened, the multiple causes (<i>e.g., potato blight, dependence on a single crop, socio-economic conditions, British government responses pre-, during and post-Famine</i>) and how it caused widespread suffering• Investigate how the Famine affected daily life (<i>e.g., starvation, disease, migration, changes in farming practices</i>)• Reflect on how the Famine had multiple effects and has shaped Ireland today (<i>e.g., population decline, family histories, memorials, and Irish diaspora communities</i>) to show continuing effects
Change and continuity	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Compare life in Irish rural communities before, during, and after the Famine (<i>e.g., diet, housing, work, family life</i>)• Discuss local changes caused by the Famine (<i>e.g., abandoned villages, changes to land use, migration patterns</i>)• Examine aspects that endured over time, such as traditional place names, community ties, and cultural memory preserved in stories and local commemoration

Skill	Ideas
Historical thinking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explore how the Great Famine changed Ireland and understand that events and policies can shape society's development • Consider the experiences of people during the Famine (<i>e.g., children, farmers, families who emigrated, workhouse inmates</i>) to build empathy and perspective • Recognise that different sources tell different stories (<i>e.g., newspapers, personal diaries, government reports, letters from emigrants</i>) and evaluate what each source shows and what questions it raises
Chronological thinking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Compare different stages of the Famine (<i>e.g., early crop failures, peak starvation, mass emigration, recovery</i>) and note patterns across regions • Situate the Famine within the broader sweep of 19th-century Irish and world history (<i>e.g., Industrial Revolution, European famines, British colonial policies</i>) • Notice patterns such as migration routes, settlement of emigrant communities, or the spread of workhouses, recognising how historical decisions influenced outcomes
Using evidence and sources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explore images, maps, artefacts, or replicas (<i>e.g., famine-era tools, workhouse records, photographs, letters</i>) to gather clues about daily life during the Famine • Read or listen to first-hand accounts or stories from families affected by the Famine, discussing what these reveal about the time • Observe and handle models or digital recreations of famine-era settlements, workhouses, or emigrant ships and reflect on what they show about how people lived, worked, and survived
Questioning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Generate their own questions about the Famine, such as: "<i>Why did the potato crop fail?</i>" or "<i>What was life like in a workhouse?</i>" • Carry out a small class inquiry into a local Famine story, famine memorial, or emigrant family history using maps, photographs, or community knowledge • Develop follow-up questions as they explore sources (<i>e.g., "Why did some areas suffer more than others?" or "What happened to families who emigrated?"</i>)

Ideas for children’s learning through the elements:

Inquiring	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ask questions about the causes and effects of the Great Famine, such as “<i>Why did the potato blight have such a devastating impact?</i>”, encouraging children to explore why Ireland was so dependent on the potato, and how social and political conditions (e.g., <i>landlord v tenant</i>) made the impact far worse than just a crop failure• Investigate local or family and community connections to the Famine using maps, records, or oral histories (for example <i>children might trace famine graves, visit local famine memorials, or look at family names in parish records to see if they can find links to migration or emigration</i>)• Conduct research projects using primary sources like photographs, letters, newspapers or workhouse records, providing children with simplified extracts from 19th-century newspapers, images of soup kitchens, or workhouse admission records so they can examine what life was like and compare accounts
Communicating	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Present findings to the class through posters, slideshows or short presentations (<i>children could create group projects—e.g. a poster showing a “before and after” comparison of a village affected by the famine, or a slideshow mapping emigration routes from their county</i>)• Write diary entries, letters, or newspaper reports from the perspective of someone living through the Famine (e.g., <i>A diary could follow the daily struggles of a child in a workhouse, while a letter might describe the journey of a young emigrant leaving Cobh for America</i>)• Use role-play, storytelling or drama to express the experiences of famine-affected families (e.g., <i>children could act out a family discussion about whether to stay in Ireland or emigrate, or role-play a workhouse inspector visiting a famine-stricken village</i>)
Understanding and connecting	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Explain how the Great Famine affected people’s lives, communities and the Irish landscape, recognising different experiences such as those who stayed, migrated or lived in workhouses (e.g., <i>children could discuss how emigration led to smaller rural communities, abandoned cottages and lasting impacts on the landscape</i>)• Relate local history to the national story by exploring nearby famine memorials, abandoned villages, or family histories connected to the Famine (e.g., <i>children might visit a famine memorial cross, see ruins of famine cottages, or hear local stories inking the national catastrophe to their own community</i>)• Compare the Great Famine with other historical famines or crises around the world to identify patterns, consequences and learnings for today (e.g., <i>children could compare with more recent food shortages or migration crises globally. Discuss themes like over-reliance on one crop, inequality or forced migration and consider what the experience of people in Ireland during the famine can teach us and encourage sustainable practices</i>)

Ideas for teaching:

Pedagogical approach	Ideas
Story	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• tell the fictional story of a 12-year-old child living in a small rural cottage during the Famine, highlighting daily life, struggles, and choices made by their family• use extracts from contemporary letters or folklore accounts to enrich the story with authentic voices while keeping the language accessible• encourage children to retell or dramatise parts of the story, helping them connect emotionally and imaginatively with the period
Place-based learning and fieldwork outdoors	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• children visit a local famine site (<i>e.g. a famine graveyard, workhouse, or memorial</i>) and record observations through sketches, photos, or short notes.• organise a field walk where children trace features of the local landscape (<i>old cottages, ridges in fields, famine roads</i>) that provide clues about life during the 1840s.• after the visit, children create a simple map or display linking the places they explored with the wider story of the Famine, reinforcing connections between local and national history
Inquiry	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• provide children with a set of sources (<i>e.g. maps showing population changes, an illustration of a soup kitchen, a landlord's notice</i>) and guide them to ask questions about causes and consequences.• use a “mystery” approach: give children pieces of evidence and ask them to figure out why so many people left Ireland during and after the Famine• encourage small groups to discuss and present different interpretations of the same event (<i>e.g. eviction notices from a tenant's vs. a landlord's perspective</i>)

Ideas for integration:

Subject	Learning Outcome	Ideas
Geography	<p>Strand: <i>The island of Ireland</i></p> <p>Through appropriately playful and engaging learning experiences develop an awareness of the motivation for people's migration to and from Ireland over time and the impact of these movements</p>	<p>Children explore causes of mass migration during the Famine (<i>looking at hunger, eviction, poverty</i>), examine the experiences of emigrants (<i>e.g., conditions on "coffin ships", arrival in America, Canada, Britain</i>). Children discuss long-term impacts on families, communities, and Irish identity</p>
Mathematics	<p>Strand: <i>Data and Chance</i></p> <p>Through appropriately playful and engaging learning experiences children will collect, organise, represent and interpret data in a variety of ways (<i>e.g. charts, tables, diagrams, graphs</i>)</p>	<p>Children examine population data from Ireland before, during, and after the Famine (<i>using simplified census figures</i>).</p> <p>In groups, children plot population changes on a bar chart or line graph. They compare figures across different decades (<i>e.g. 1841, 1851, 1861</i>) to identify patterns of decline and engage in discussion linking mathematical findings to historical causes (<i>potato blight, death, emigration</i>)</p>
Drama	<p>Strand: <i>Performing and presenting</i></p> <p>Through appropriately playful and engaging learning experience children prepare, structure, participate in, refine and/or record improvised or rehearsed dramas, for sharing in class or with the wider school community</p>	<p>Children create and perform short dramatic scenes based on the experiences of families during the Great Famine.</p> <p>Working in small groups, children imagine moments such as leaving home, queuing for food, or arriving at Ellis Island. They use improvisation to explore emotion and dialogue, shaping each scene with a clear beginning, middle and end. Through role and performance, children express themes of loss, hope and resilience, deepening empathy and understanding of the Famine's human impact</p>

Ideas for assessment:

Assessment method	Ideas
Teacher observation	During a group activity where children analyse sources (e.g. <i>an illustration of a soup kitchen, population data, or a local famine site photo</i>), the teacher could observe how children engage – noting thoughtful questions, if and how children make connections and how children explain causes and consequences
Questioning	After focusing on emigration during the Famine, the teacher could pose higher-order questions such as: “ <i>Why do you think so many people chose to leave Ireland?</i> ” or “ <i>What might have been the hardest decision for families at this time?</i> ” Children’s responses will demonstrate their depth of understanding and ability to think critically
Portfolios	Children create a project (e.g., <i>poster, booklet, digital presentation, or drama piece</i>) exploring the impact of the Famine in their locality. They present their findings, showing how they gathered information, organised it and interpreted causes and effects

Progression

Progression in Social and Environmental Education involves the gradual development and extension of key concepts and the skills of working as a historian and geographer, enabling children to question, investigate and interpret the world around them - past and present - with increasing depth and confidence. Please note that more detailed, specific guidance on progression within Social and Environmental Education will follow in due course.

In the case of the concept of ‘*Time and chronology*’, children’s learning across the four stages could be described as follows:

‘*Time and Chronology*’ involves understanding a sequence of events (past, present and future) and how they relate to each other over time



The child:

creates very simple timelines using objects and pictures to order recent events

creates more detailed timelines using objects, pictures and other appropriate artefacts to order familiar events

analyses and compares key events in the school or local community over time identifying patterns and changes and presenting findings using appropriate timelines

evaluates the significance of key events in the school or local community, interpreting how patterns and changes have shaped current practices

In the case of the skill of 'Chronological thinking', children's learning across the four stages could be described as follows:

'Chronological thinking' involves understanding and organising events in the order they happened, recognising how time influences change and continuity in the past.



The child:

creates very simple timelines using objects and pictures to order recent events

creates more detailed timelines using objects, pictures and other appropriate artefacts to order familiar events

analyses and compares key events in the school or local community over time identifying patterns and changes and presenting findings using appropriate timelines

evaluates the significance of key events in the school or local community, interpreting how patterns and changes have shaped current practices

Ideas for resources

- Illustrations and paintings from the period (e.g., *depictions of soup kitchens, evictions, famine cottages*)
- Children's historical fiction set in Famine Times
- Photographs of famine memorials, workhouses, famine graveyards, and local heritage sites
- Maps showing population density before and after the Famine, emigration routes, or locations of workhouses
- Artefacts/replicas (e.g., *a spade, a pot, a ship ticket*) to support object-based learning
- Extracts from eyewitness accounts including newspapers, letters, or folklore
- Census data and statistics to show population decline and emigration trends
- Folklore and oral traditions (e.g., *stories collected from the Schools' Folklore Collection*)
- Diary entries or reconstructed accounts written in child-friendly language
- Songs and ballads from or about the Famine (e.g., *laments, emigration songs*)
- Documentary clips (*short, age-appropriate extracts*)