

# THE STORY OF THE POTATO

People first began collecting and eating potatoes that grew in the wild around Lake Titicaca in Peru and Bolivia about 8,000 BC. This wild species of potato eventually gave rise to the first cultivated potato about 5,000 BC in the same area. But it was not until 1,400 BC that the first farming communities developed around the lake. It was at this time that the potato began to spread to other parts of South America.

The earliest historical record of the potato was in 1537 and was made by Juan de Castellanos, a Spanish 'conquistador' (conqueror) in Colombia. He wrote in his journal:

*The houses are well stocked with maize, beans and truffles (potatoes), spherical roots which are sown and produce a stem ...they are attached under the earth and are the size of an egg more or less.*

The Spanish soldiers brought the potato back to Spain around 1570, and from there it spread through Europe. In fact the word potato comes from the Spanish word, *patata*.

In 1606, the potato was documented as growing in Ireland. By the late 1700s, it was being widely cultivated throughout Europe. Even today, Europeans eat more potatoes per head than any other people. Across the world, the potato is the third most important food crop after rice and wheat. Potatoes are grown in 130 countries and consumed by over a billion people.

1. Find Peru and Bolivia on a map of South America. Then list all the countries of that continent with their capital cities.
2. What do you know about Spain? Write a report under these headings: climate, language, food, sport, history. Draw and colour a picture of the Spanish flag.
3. List all the different ways potatoes can be served up as a food today, whether at home, in cafes or in the shop.



*The Potato Eaters*, painted by Vincent Van Gogh

# THE LIFE OF THE FARM WORKER IN IRELAND

Read the following letter written by an engineer named Richard Griffin to the Earl of Lincoln. It describes the situation of farm workers (called cottiers) at the time of the famine. Answer the questions that follow.

*Limerick, 18 April 1846*

*One-fourth, and in many cases upwards of one-third, of the rural population have no land, or at least less than half an acre which is usually held under a farmer or middleman. These people live chiefly by barter. They rarely have any money transactions, except, perhaps, from the sale of a pig. They are usually employed part of the year by the farmers or neighbouring gentlemen. They take from the farmer a sufficient quantity of land on which they plant potatoes for their support. ...The cottier plants his crop, and works out the rent with the farmer. When unemployed, he has his potatoes to live on, and with the small potatoes he rears and fattens a pig, from the produce of which the family are clothed. Such is the state of dependence of at least one-fourth, or probably one-third, of the Irish people.*

1. Was the letter written before, during or after the Famine?

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2. What 'fraction' (proportion) of the people living in the countryside had no land?

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3. What was the main food for these people?

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4. Where did they get the money to buy clothes?

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5. Why were these farm workers and their families in danger in 1846?

6. What is barter? (use a dictionary to help you)

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7. Describe the picture below.



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THE CENSUS OF IRELAND 1841

A Census was taken in Ireland in 1841. It showed a population of 8,175,124. On page 4 there is data from that Census on the size of farms. Four farm sizes were covered: 1 to 5 acres, 5 to 15 acres, 15 to 30 acres and above 30 acres. Look at page 4 to help you answer the questions below.



1. Which two Leinster counties had names different from those in use today?
2. Use a map of Ireland to try and find out what these two counties are called now.
3. How many farms of 1 to 5 acres were there in your county in 1841?
4. How many farms above 30 acres were there in your county?
5. Name the three counties with the largest number of farms of 1 to 5 acres

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6. Why might you expect those three counties to suffer if the potato crop failed?
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7. In what way do you think farm sizes are different in Ireland today?
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8. Find County Mayo on page 4. Round to the nearest 1,000 the numbers of farms in the four size categories in Mayo

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(1 to 5 acres)                      (5 to 15 acres)                      (15 to 30 acres)                      (above 30 acres)

9. Draw a bar chart of these figures titled 'Farm Sizes in County Mayo in 1841'.

**CENSUS 1841**

|                 |                  | <b>LAND HOLDINGS IN ACRES</b> |                |                 |                 |
|-----------------|------------------|-------------------------------|----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
|                 |                  | <b>1 to 5</b>                 | <b>5 to 15</b> | <b>15 to 30</b> | <b>Above 30</b> |
| <b>MUNSTER</b>  | <b>Clare</b>     | 11,593                        | 12,049         | 2,234           | 1,052           |
|                 | <b>Cork</b>      | 13,683                        | 15,790         | 10,362          | 5,691           |
|                 | <b>Kerry</b>     | 8,689                         | 10,830         | 4,068           | 2,172           |
|                 | <b>Limerick</b>  | 6,841                         | 6,840          | 3,700           | 2,346           |
|                 | <b>Tipperary</b> | 13,032                        | 12,787         | 4,938           | 2,960           |
|                 | <b>Waterford</b> | 3,190                         | 3,024          | 2,179           | 2,336           |
| <b>LEINSTER</b> | <b>Carlow</b>    | 1,933                         | 2,357          | 1,056           | 950             |
|                 | <b>Dublin</b>    | 1,866                         | 1,285          | 749             | 1,102           |
|                 | <b>Kildare</b>   | 3,104                         | 2,123          | 991             | 1,845           |
|                 | <b>Kilkenny</b>  | 5,131                         | 5,752          | 3,601           | 2,006           |
|                 | <b>King's</b>    | 5,675                         | 4,502          | 1,374           | 1,213           |
|                 | <b>Longford</b>  | 4,396                         | 4,880          | 1,045           | 411             |
|                 | <b>Louth</b>     | 3,992                         | 2,589          | 628             | 632             |
|                 | <b>Meath</b>     | 5,339                         | 3,971          | 1,637           | 2,554           |
|                 | <b>Queen's</b>   | 5,629                         | 4,825          | 1,813           | 1,334           |
|                 | <b>Westmeath</b> | 4,266                         | 4,076          | 1,648           | 1,385           |
|                 | <b>Wexford</b>   | 5,219                         | 6,313          | 4,151           | 2,457           |
| <b>Wicklow</b>  | 2,620            | 2,922                         | 1,891          | 2,000           |                 |
| <b>CONNACHT</b> | <b>Galway</b>    | 27,992                        | 12,663         | 2,030           | 1,645           |
|                 | <b>Leitrim</b>   | 9,373                         | 7,971          | 877             | 202             |
|                 | <b>Mayo</b>      | 33,790                        | 10,331         | 1,265           | 1,135           |
|                 | <b>Roscommon</b> | 17,472                        | 8,066          | 913             | 895             |
|                 | <b>Sligo</b>     | 11,291                        | 6,190          | 705             | 398             |
| <b>ULSTER</b>   | <b>Antrim</b>    | 6,991                         | 10,766         | 4,314           | 1,922           |
|                 | <b>Armagh</b>    | 11,632                        | 9,428          | 2,072           | 666             |
|                 | <b>Cavan</b>     | 10,807                        | 12,208         | 1,958           | 668             |

|                    |                |                |               |               |
|--------------------|----------------|----------------|---------------|---------------|
| <b>Donegal</b>     | 15,567         | 12,931         | 3,527         | 1,699         |
| <b>Down</b>        | 13,753         | 11,991         | 3,865         | 1,508         |
| <b>Fermanagh</b>   | 7,371          | 8,540          | 1,696         | 529           |
| <b>Londonderry</b> | 7,866          | 8,755          | 2,675         | 1,143         |
| <b>Monaghan</b>    | 12,275         | 9,702          | 1,216         | 317           |
| <b>Tyrone</b>      | 14,555         | 14,671         | 3,766         | 1,139         |
| <b>TOTALS</b>      | <b>306,915</b> | <b>251,128</b> | <b>78,954</b> | <b>48,312</b> |

**NOTE:** Returns are in Irish acres (= 1.62 Statute acres). Waste land not included.

## REPORTING ON THE FAMINE

James Mahoney was an artist at the time of Irish Famine. He was living in Cork and in 1847 the *Illustrated London News* asked him to tour the countryside and send reports and pictures on what he found. He wrote:



*I started from Cork, by the mail, for Skibbereen and saw little until we came to Clonakilty, where the coach stopped for breakfast; and here, for the first time, the horrors of the poverty became visible, in the vast number of famished poor, who flocked around the coach to beg alms.....After leaving Clonakilty, each step that we took westward brought fresh evidence of the truth of reports of the misery as we either met a funeral or a coffin at every hundred yards...*

Mr. Mahoney's reports appeared in the *Illustrated London News* on 13 and 20 February 1847 (see his illustration p. 27 of *The Irish Famine*). They made a big impression on readers of this popular newspaper, creating sympathy for Ireland's starving cottiers.

### Did you know...?

- In the 1800s, newspapers looked very different. They didn't have lots of news stories and photos on the front page. Instead they had adverts for women's clothing, food and drink, etc. The inside pages sometimes had one or two long articles, often about politics, but these had more opinion in them than facts. The 'news' was to be found in short little articles written by correspondents – people who wrote letters to the paper on a regular basis.
- The *Illustrated London News* cost 6 pence per issue (€3 today) and the pictures were printed from wood cuts. Founded in 1842, it is still published today.

### Writing a news story

Imagine a newspaper asks you to write a report on a special event, like a fund-raiser for your school, a match or a concert. You need to include 'facts' (what happened, when and where) and a bit of 'colour' (personal stories and description). Plan the story below and write it overleaf. Paste in a picture (sketch or photo) to illustrate it. Don't forget a title and try to make the first sentence really interesting.

*Facts (When, where, what and who)*

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*Colour (description, what people said or felt, a funny story...)*

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THE FAMINE QUIZ



1. Where in the world did the potato first grow in the wild?
2. Who first brought the potato to Europe?
3. In what year did the potato crop fail in Ireland?
4. What caused the failure of the potato crop?
5. Before the Famine struck in Ireland, what was the population?
6. Who was the British Prime Minister in 1845?
7. How did the Quakers try to help the starving people?
8. 'Workhouses were full of mainly women and children.' True or False?
9. Name a disease that killed many during the Famine.
10. What does it mean to 'evict' somebody?
11. Name two countries that people emigrated to during the Famine?
12. What was Ireland's population in 1851 at the end of the Famine?

## IMMIGRATION CLEARANCE

Imagine it is 1847. You have just disembarked from a sailing ship at Ellis Island in New York, having fled the terrible famine in Ireland. U.S. Immigration officers are waiting and they now ask you to write as much information as you can on this sheet (and on the back of it if necessary) explaining how you came to leave your home and your country. Then give good reasons why you should be allowed into the United States.



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**FAMINE CONNECTIONS**

**Spot the odd one out:**

- A. Potato      Turnip      Carrot      Pear
- B. 1844      1846      1848      1850
- C. England      Canada      Australia      Italy
- D. Typhus      Blight      Cholera      Dysentery



**Can you unscramble these words?**

- LEPE .....  
.....
- ATTOPO .....  
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- IMFNEA .....  
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- PRSEUO .....  
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**Do you remember?**

How many potatoes did the average child aged 11 eat before famine struck?  
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Which chef thought up the Number 1 Soup Recipe?

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Can you think of another name for Indian Corn ?

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What is the Irish word for potato?

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## GROW YOUR OWN POTATOES

Potatoes, like any other plant, need these things to grow properly:

|   |                         |
|---|-------------------------|
| Light   | Air                     |
| Water   | Space                   |
| Food (compost alone or soil mixed with compost) | The correct temperature |

Here are some tips on how to grow a big crop of your own potatoes. Plant them from just before St. Patrick's Day until April. You will need the following:

### *Equipment*

- ! A bit of garden that gets plenty of sun **or** an old plastic bucket
- ! Soil **or** compost
- ! Three seed potatoes **or** small potatoes from your own kitchen that are sprouting
- ! An egg box
- ! A pair of gardening gloves **or** rubber washing-up gloves



### *Getting started*

Put your seed potatoes in an open egg box in a sunny windowsill for two weeks, with the sprouts facing upwards. This lets the sprouts harden, a process called 'chitting'.

#### *If planting in a bucket...*

1. Ask an adult to make holes in the bottom of the bucket, using a hammer and nail.
2. Half fill the bucket with compost or soil/compost. Put in the potatoes with the sprouts facing upwards, spaced well apart.
3. Add more compost/soil and pat it down. Put the bucket outside.
4. Water with 1 litre of water.

#### *If planting in the garden...*

1. Dig the soil and mix in compost, if you have any.
2. Make 3 holes for your potatoes about 12 inches apart and 4 inches deep.
3. Plant the potatoes and cover with soil.
4. Water well. Give extra water when the leaves are growing, especially in dry weather

You can harvest early potatoes from June onwards when they are the size of hens' eggs, or wait until autumn when they are fully grown. The leaves of your potato plant may start dying in mid-summer. This is normal. However, blight may strike if the weather is warm and wet. Remove diseased leaves (or the whole plant) and water the surviving plants with 1 gallon of water mixed with 3 tablespoons of vinegar.

**Websites with useful information**

[www.internationalyearofthepotato.ie](http://www.internationalyearofthepotato.ie)

[www.agriaware.ie](http://www.agriaware.ie)