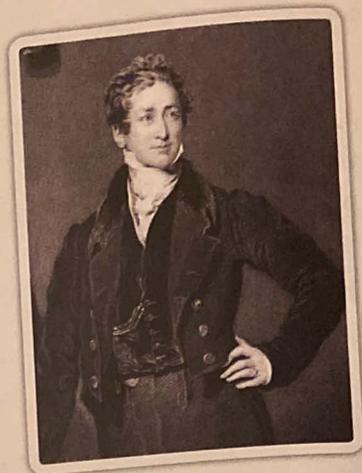# What Caused the Famine in Ireland

Before the start of the famine in 1845, the population of Ireland reached eight million people. Most were poor farmers who rented land from landlords. The land was divided into large estates and often owned by Protestant landlords.
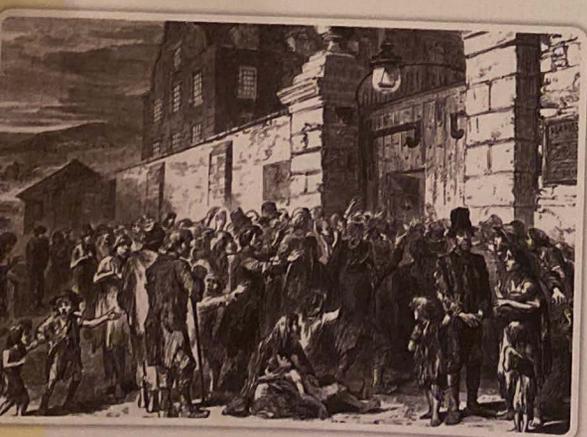
The farmers fed themselves by growing potatoes, a nutritious crop that was cheap to grow. However in 1845, a potato blight quickly spread across Ireland. It was caused by a fungus called 'Phytophthora Infestans' and destroyed the potato crop. By the following spring, many people had run out of food. The British Prime Minister Robert Peel shipped £100,000 worth of cheap Indian corn to Ireland. But most Irish people did not know how to cook this, and the yellow porridge they created made them sick.

▲ Robert Peel

The British government believed it was better to give people paid work than hand out charity. This often meant hard labour building roads or piers.

The potato crop failed again in 1846. The new government in Britain told Irish landlords that it was up to them to feed the poor people on their land. Many tenants had no money to pay their rent. Some landlords paid their tenants to leave the country, or emigrate. Others simply forced them out, or evicted them.

Starving people outside a workhouse

History Detective

One eyewitness to the famine was Fr. Theobald Matthew. In December 1846 he wrote in a letter:

'Men, women and children are gradually wasting away. They fill their stomachs with cabbage leaves, turnip tops and the like to appease the cravings of hunger. At this moment, there are more than 5,000 half-starved wretched beings from the country begging in the streets of Cork. When utterly exhausted, they crawl to the workhouse to die.'

1. What in this letter tells you how desperate for food some people were?

2. Why do you think people fled to cities like Cork and Dublin during the famine?

3. What does this letter tell you about how people felt about the workhouses?

Overview of the Famine

During the nineteenth century Ireland went through enormous changes. At this time, Ireland was part of the United Kingdom. Under the Poor Laws Act workhouses were built as many Irish people were very poor. When the famine arrived many people died, others were forced to seek refuge in workhouses and many hundreds of thousands left the country.

TIMELINE: THE GREAT FAMINE

1801	1838	1841	1845	1846
The Act of Union – Ireland becomes part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland	Poor Laws Act – Workhouses established in Ireland	The population of Ireland reaches eight million, an increase of almost 50% since 1800	The potato crop fails due to blight Britain responds to the crisis by starting public works and importing food	The potato crop fails again; people die of starvation

1847	1848	1849	1850	1851
Half the population is reliant on soup kitchens and 714,000 people are employed on public works	The crops fail again; over one million people are dependent on the Poor Law for relief	Queen Victoria visits Ireland	The harvest is healthy this year	The population has fallen from 8,175,124 people to 6,552,385 from 1841 due to the famine because of starvation and emigration

Checkpoint

1. When did Ireland become part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland?

2. How did the British government respond to the crisis of the potato famine at first?

3. Which British monarch visited Ireland during this period? When did they visit?

4. What effect did the famine have on the population of Ireland?

Over to You

The Society of Friends (the Quakers) believed it was their duty to help the poor. They opened soup kitchens in many areas and handed out clothing. Have you ever heard about a famine or disaster in another country and wanted to help? Write a list of things that you could do to raise money.

Did You Know?

1847 was the worst year of the famine and was known as 'Black '47'. People died of starvation and of diseases such as typhus and cholera. While people all over the country were dying, many emigrated in search of a better life.