

When the Irish Potato Famine Struck

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The word 'vulnerable' is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as; 'open to harm'. The defenceless position Ireland found itself in at the time of the great hunger will be explained by examining the political and economic system of the time, and the way in which the peasant class lived because of the social structures that were set in place.

From the 1790s through to 1815, [Ireland](#) experience economic growth due to the demand for grain during the Napoleonic war and the export of textiles. This growth came to a halt when the war ended. Britain's rapid industrialisation at this time held a demand for Irish food produce, but it also led to the demise in bids for Irish goods such as linen. Irish cottage industries suffered greatly as mass produced British products flooded the Irish markets. Ireland simply could not compete with the industrial might of its neighbour. Domestic industry workers fell into [poverty](#) and further reliance on the potato (which before had only subsidised their diet). Rather than alleviating poverty by stimulating the economic infrastructure of Ireland through 'massive works' programmes, the state decided that elementary schooling and 'public works' such as inland navigation would cure the nation's ills. These solutions would take years to yield results. Lack of economic foresight and state inaction placed the inhabitants of Ireland in a precarious position. Due to a lack of domestic industry, there was no way out for those living at subsistence level when the

blight struck, as there was no employment.

The population of Ireland rose from 4 million in 1700 to 8 million in 1840. The reasons for this surge in population growth are still not certain, but economic historians have suggested many reasons for the...

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...Quakers, no one died of starvation at Killaloe in County Clare.

Prior to the [famine](#) the Irish ate up to 17 pounds of potatoes per day. Although the diet was monotonous, it was nourishing. When the blight came, those forced into the workhouse were fed a diet that was lacking in essential nutrients. The loss of required vitamins led to diseases such as scurvy and ophthalmia. Workhouse diets had little to offer an already famished populace.

When the blight struck Ireland, those living at subsistence level had very few options, and were in an extremely vulnerable position. To evade the blight and the brutal remedies of the establishment would have been a gargantuan task. The poor were totally bereft of the assets needed to help them escape the famine, even those who did manage to flee from Ireland often found themselves in equally difficult situations.

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