

# Normans in Ireland

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A tower house near [Quin](#). The Normans consolidated their presence in Ireland by building hundreds of castles and [towers such as this](#)



[Trim Castle](#) (1169-) is a major construction of this period

The **History of Ireland 1169–1536** covers the period from the arrival of the [Cambro-Normans](#)<sup>[1]</sup> to the reign of [Henry VIII of England](#), who made himself King of Ireland. After the [Norman invasion](#) of 1171, [Ireland](#) was under an alternating level of control from Norman lords and the [King of England](#). Previously, Ireland had seen intermittent warfare between provincial kingdoms over the position of [High King](#). This situation was transformed by intervention in these conflicts by Norman mercenaries and later the English crown. After their successful conquest of [England](#), the Normans turned their attention to Ireland. Ireland was made a [Lordship](#) of the King of England and much of its land was seized by Norman barons. However, with time [Hiberno-Norman](#) rule shrank to a territory known as [The Pale](#), stretching from [Dublin](#) to [Dundalk](#).<sup>[*citation needed*]</sup> The Hiberno-Norman lords elsewhere in the country became Gaelicised and integrated in [Gaelic](#) Irish society.

## Contents

- [1 Arrival of the Normans \(1167–1185\)](#)
  - [1.1 Papal Bull and Henry's invasion](#)
  - [1.2 Short-term impact of the invasion](#)
- [2 Lordship of Ireland \(1171–1300\)](#)
- [3 Norman decline \(1300–1350\)](#)
- [4 Gaelic resurgence \(1350–1500\)](#)
- [5 See also](#)

- [6 Notes](#)

## Arrival of the Normans (1167–1185)

Main article: [Norman invasion of Ireland](#)

By the 12th century, Ireland was divided politically into a shifting hierarchy of [petty kingdoms](#) and over-kingdoms. Power was concentrated into the hands of a few regional dynasties contending against each other for control of the whole island. The Northern [Uí Néill](#) ruled the west and center of what is now Uladh ([Ulster](#)), with the east still controlled by the ancient [Ulaid](#) themselves. The kinsman of the Northern Uí Néill, the Southern Uí Néill, were [Kings of Mide](#) and [Kings of Brega](#). The kingship of Laighean ([Leinster](#)) was by this time held by [Uí Cheinnselaig](#) dynasty, who had replaced the [Uí Dúnlainge](#). A notable kingdom between Leinster and [Munster](#) was [Osraige](#). Most of Munster was controlled by the [Eóganachta](#) and their principal royal sept the [MacCarthy dynasty](#), with the remainder under the control of the [Dál gCais](#) or [O'Brien dynasty](#) of [Thomond](#). North of Thomond and west of Ulster, [Connacht](#)'s supreme rulers were the [Uí Chonchobhair](#). Between Connacht and Ulster and Mide lay the [Kingdom of Breifne](#).

After losing the protection of Tír Eoghain ([Tyrone](#)) Chief, [Muircheartach Mac Lochlainn](#), [High King of Ireland](#), who died in 1166, [Dermot MacMurrough](#) (Irish *Diarmaid Mac Murchada*), was forcibly exiled by a confederation of Irish forces under the new High King, Ruaidhrí Ó Conchobhair.

Diarmaid fled first to [Bristol](#) and then to [Normandy](#). He sought and obtained permission from [Henry II of England](#) to use the latter's subjects to regain his kingdom. By 1167 MacMurrough had obtained the services of [Maurice Fitz Gerald](#) and later persuaded [Rhÿs ap Gruffydd](#) Prince of [Deheubarth](#) to release Maurice's half-brother [Robert Fitz-Stephen](#) from captivity to take part in the expedition. Most importantly he obtained the support of Cambro-Norman [Marcher](#) Lord [Richard de Clare, 2nd Earl of Pembroke](#) known as Strongbow.

The first Norman knight to land in Ireland was Richard fitz Godbert de Roche in 1167, but it was not until 1169 that the main forces of Normans, along with their mercenaries which consisted of [Welsh](#) and [Flemings](#) landed in Loch Garman [Wexford](#). Within a short time Leinster was regained, Port Láirge [Waterford](#) and Baile Átha Cliath [Dublin](#) were under Diarmaid's control, and he had Strongbow as a son-in-law, after offering his eldest daughter [Aoife](#) to him in marriage in 1170, and named him as heir to his kingdom. This latter development caused consternation to [King Henry II](#) of England, who feared the establishment of a rival Norman state in Ireland. Accordingly, he resolved to visit Leinster to establish his authority.

### Papal Bull and Henry's invasion

Pope [Adrian IV](#), the first (and only) English [pope](#), in one of his earliest acts, had already issued a [Papal Bull](#) in 1155, giving Henry authority to invade Ireland as a means of curbing ecclesiastical corruption and abuses. Little contemporary use, however, was made of the Bull [Laudabiliter](#) since its text enforced papal suzerainty not only over the island of Ireland but over all islands off the European coast, including England, in virtue of the Constantinian



Gaelic society with efficient land use, introducing [feudalism](#) to the existing native tribal-dynastic crop-sharing system. Feudalism never caught on in large parts of Ireland, but it was an attempt to introduce cash payments into farming, which was entirely based on barter. Some Normans living further from Dublin and the east coast adopted the Irish language and customs, and intermarried, and the Irish themselves also became irrevocably "Normanised". Many Irish people today bear Norman-derived surnames such as Burke, Roche and Power, although these are more prevalent in the provinces of Leinster and Munster, where there was a larger Norman presence.

The system of counties was introduced from 1297, though the last of the [counties of Ireland](#) was not [shired](#) until 1610. As in England, the Normans blended the continental European county with the English shire, where the king's chief law enforcer was the shire-reeve ([sheriff](#)). Towns were perhaps the Normans' greatest contribution. Starting with Dublin in 1192, royal charters were issued to foster trade and to give extra rights to townspeople.

The church attempted to center congregations on the [parish](#) and [diocese](#), not as formerly on abbeys, and built hundreds of new churches in 1172-1348. The first attempt to record Ireland's wealth at the parish level was made in the records of Papal Taxation of 1303 (Ireland's equivalent of the [Domesday Book](#)), which was required to operate the new [tithing](#) system. Regular canon law tended to be limited to the areas under central Norman control.

The traditional Irish legal system, the "[Brehon Law](#)", continued in areas outside central control, but the Normans introduced Henry II's reforms including new concepts such as prisons for criminals. The Brehon system was typical of other north European customary systems and required fines to be paid by a criminal and his family, the amount depending on the victim's status.

While the Norman political impact was considerable, it was untidy and not uniform, and the stresses on the Lordship in 1315-48 meant that *de facto* control of most of Ireland slipped from its grasp for over two centuries.

## Lordship of Ireland (1171–1300)



[King John's Castle](#) sits on the southern bank of the [River Shannon](#). It was built in the 12th century on the orders of King John of England

Main article: [Lordship of Ireland](#)

Initially the Normans controlled large swathes of Ireland, securing the entire east coast, from [Waterford](#) up to eastern [Ulster](#) and penetrating as far west as Gaillimh ([Galway](#)) and Maigh Eo ([Mayo](#)). The most powerful forces in the land were the great Hiberno-Norman Earldoms such as the Geraldines, the [Butlers](#) and the de Burghs (Burkes), who controlled vast territories which were almost independent of the governments in Dublin or [London](#). The Lord of Ireland was King John, who, on his visits in 1185 and 1210, had helped secure the Norman areas from both the military and the administrative points of view, while at the same time ensuring that the many Irish kings were brought into his fealty; many, such as [Cathal Crobhdearg Ua Conchobair](#), owed their thrones to him and his armies.

The Normans also were fortunate to have leaders of the calibre of the Butler, Marshall, de Lyvet ([Levet](#)), de Burgh, [de Lacy](#) and [de Braose](#) families, as well as having the dynamic heads of the first families.<sup>[3][4][5]</sup> Another factor was that after the loss of [Normandy](#) in 1204, John had a lot more time to devote to Irish affairs, and did so effectively even from afar.

## Norman decline (1300–1350)

The high point of the Norman lordship was the creation of the [Irish parliament](#) in 1297, following the Lay Subsidy tax collection of 1292. The first [Papal Taxation](#) register was compiled in 1302-07; it was the first Irish census and list of properties, similar to the [Domesday book](#). The Hiberno-Normans then suffered from a series of events in the 1300s that slowed, and eventually ceased, the spread of their settlement and power. Firstly, numerous rebellious attacks were launched by [Gaelic](#) lords upon the English lordships. Having lost pitched battles to Norman knights, to defend their territory the Gaelic chieftains now had to change tactics, and deal with the charging armored knights. They started to rely on raids against resources, and surprise attacks. This stretched the resources of the Normans, reduced their number of trained knights, and often resulted in the chieftains regaining territory. Secondly a lack of direction from both [Henry III](#) and his successor [Edward I](#) (who were more concerned with events in England, Wales, Scotland and their continental domains) meant that the Norman colonists in Ireland were to a large extent deprived of (financial) support from the English monarchy. This limited their ability to hold territory. Furthermore, the Normans' position deteriorated due to divisions within their own ranks. These caused outright war between leading [Hiberno-Norman](#) lords such as the de Burghs, FitzGerald, Butlers and de Berminghams. Finally, the division of estates among heirs split Norman lordships into smaller, less formidable units—the most damaging being that of the Marshalls of Leinster, which split a large single lordship into five.

Politics and events in Gaelic Ireland served to draw the settlers deeper into the orbit of the Irish, which on occasion had the effect of allying them with one or more native rulers against other Normans.

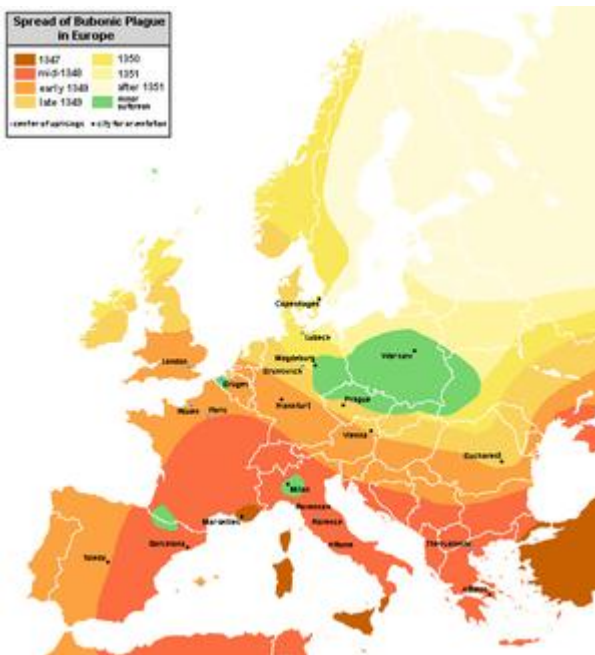
Hiberno-Norman Ireland was deeply shaken by four events in the 14th century:

- The first was the invasion of Ireland by [Edward Bruce](#) of [Scotland](#) who, in 1315, rallied many of the Irish lords against the English presence in Ireland (see [Irish-Bruce Wars \(1315–1318\)](#)). Although Bruce was eventually defeated in Ireland at the [Battle of Faughart](#), near [Dundalk](#), his troops caused a great deal of destruction, especially in the densely settled area around Dublin. In this chaotic situation, local Irish lords won back large amounts of land that their families had lost since the conquest and held



them after the war was over. A few English partisans like Gilbert de la Roche turned against the English king and sided with Bruce, largely because of personal quarrels with the English monarchy. <sup>[6][7]</sup>

- The [European famine](#) of 1315-17 affected Ireland as well. The Irish ports were unable to import wheat and other crops, or other foods, as none were available to buy. This was compounded by widespread crop burnings during the Bruce Invasion.
- The third was the murder of [William Donn de Burgh, 3rd Earl of Ulster](#) in June 1333. This resulted in his lands being split in three among his relations, with the ones in [Connacht](#) starting the [Burke Civil War](#), rebelling against the Crown and becoming new Irish clans. This meant that virtually all of Ireland west of the [Shannon](#) was lost to the Dublin administration. It would be well over two hundred years before the McWilliam Burkes, as they were now called, were again allied with the Dublin administration. In [Ulster](#) the [O'Neill dynasty](#) took over and renamed [Clandeboyne](#) in the earldom's lands in [County Down](#), and in 1364 they assumed the title King of Ulster.



**The Black Death** rapidly spread along the major European sea and land trade routes. It reached Ireland in 1348 and decimated the Hiberno-Norman urban settlements

- The fourth calamity for the medieval English presence in Ireland was the [Black Death](#), which arrived in Ireland in 1348. Because most of the English and Norman inhabitants of Ireland lived in towns and villages, the plague hit them far harder than it did the native Irish, who lived in more dispersed rural settlements. A celebrated account from a monastery in Cill Chainnigh (Kilkenny) chronicles the plague as the beginning of the extinction of humanity and the end of the world. The plague was a catastrophe for the English habitations around the country and, after it had passed, Gaelic Irish language and customs came to dominate the country again. The English-controlled area shrank back to [the Pale](#), a fortified area around Dublin.

In the background the [Hundred Years' War](#) of 1337-1453 between the English and French dynasties drew off forces that could have protected the Lordship from attack by autonomous Gaelic and Norman lords.

## **Gaelic resurgence (1350–1500)**

Additional causes of the Gaelic revival were political and personal grievances against the Hiberno-Normans, but especially impatience with procrastination and the very real horrors that successive famines had brought. Pushed away from the fertile areas, the Irish were forced to eke out a subsistence living on marginal lands, which left them with no safety net during bad harvest years (such as 1271 and 1277) or in a year of famine (virtually the entire period of 1311–1319).

Outside the Pale, the [Hiberno-Norman](#) lords adopted the Irish language and customs, becoming known as the [Old English](#), and in the words of a phrase coined in later historiography, became "[more Irish than the Irish themselves](#)." Over the following centuries they sided with the indigenous Irish in political and military conflicts with England and generally stayed Catholic after the Reformation. The authorities in the Pale grew so worried about the "Gaelicisation" of Ireland that, in 1367 at a parliament in [Kilkenny](#), they passed special legislation (known as the [Statutes of Kilkenny](#)) banning those of English descent from speaking the [Irish language](#), wearing Irish clothes or inter-marrying with the Irish. Since the government in Dublin had little real authority, however, the Statutes did not have much effect.

Throughout the 15th century, these trends proceeded apace and central government authority steadily diminished. The monarchy of England was itself thrown into turmoil during the last phase of the [Hundred Years' War](#) to 1453, and the [Wars of the Roses](#) (1460–85), and as a result, direct English involvement in Ireland was greatly reduced. Successive kings of England delegated their constitutional authority over the [lordship](#) to the powerful Fitzgerald [earls of Kildare](#), who held the balance of power by means of military force and widespread alliances with lords and clans. This, in effect, made the English Crown even more remote to the realities of Irish politics. At the same time, local Gaelic and Gaelicised lords expanded their powers at the expense of the central government in Dublin, creating a polity quite alien to English ways and which was not fully overthrown until the successful conclusion of the [Tudor conquest](#).