

**The New Junior Syllabus:
Some practical experience of the first year**

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The prospect of the new Junior Certificate history Course both invigorated and intimidated me as I faced my unwary first years last September; invigorated because of its emphasis on social and economic aspects of life in the past; intimidated because of its emphasis on the pre-Renaissance world of which I knew little and on archaeology of which I knew even less. What follows is a short review of the years work which may be of use to someone else.

Due to the radical change in subject matter and approach, I decided as a general rule to follow one of the many fine, beautifully illustrated new text-books. Both teacher and class need some anchor in what could prove a stormy adventure. Periodic reference to the syllabus and teachers' guidelines avoided over-reliance on the book. Teaching in County Meath the obvious areas in which to expand the course were:

Stone Age: - New Grange

Early Christian: - Kells

Medieval: - Trim

Passage Graves

The text-book information, questions and illustrations were meticulously followed. The Department of Education's filmstrip, *Ireland's Heritage in Stone* was quite useful. The art teacher then showed some slides of the stone carvings in her art class. The relevant part of the *Discovering Ireland* cassette tapes when played selectively to the class also helped. A half day trip to the actual site was undertaken which included a very good guided tour. A short questionnaire was completed by the pupils on the trip.

Early Christian Ireland

Again the text-book was used fully as a very comprehensive introduction to the early monastic settlement at Kells where I teach. The visual aspect of the study was considerably helped by the Department's filmstrip, *Early Christian Ireland*. A few very slim volumes concerning the high crosses, Book of Kells and other related items were available in local bookshops. A very brief synopsis of these had then to be given to the pupils. The *Discovering*

Ireland cassette tape pertaining to Kells was of some benefit. An aerial photograph of the town which appeared on the cover of the local Credit Union magazine proved invaluable when explaining the circular nature of the monastic site.

Each pupil did a type of project which included a modern-day town plan of Kells in which they marked the ancient monuments, e.g. the Round Tower, High Crosses, Colmcille's House, etc. The art teacher explained in considerable detail some of the carvings on the High Crosses with the aid of slides in her art class.

She and I took the pupils on a two hour walking tour of the town which did not confine itself entirely to the Early Christian period of its history. We compiled a questionnaire with the following aims:

To (a) Discover the origins of the town as a hill fort

(b) Examine the remains of the Early Christian monastery

(c) Be aware of history all round us (street names, etc.)

(d) Enjoy the rich heritage of art (carvings on Crosses, etc.) Next year we hope to include a visit to view the Lucerne facsimile edition of the Book of Kells, a copy of which has recently been acquired locally.

Medieval Ireland

Once again I began with the text-book, especially with a very helpful illustration of a castle. The pupils viewed a number of slides on castles from the Department's filmstrip *The Normans*. They also saw a fifteen minute edited video of a UTV programme on the castles of Ulster. Having taught them about the Anglo-Normans in Ireland, I then gave them extra information about de Lacy and the Normans in Meath. In a scrap book they did a map of Europe showing the routes of the Vikings, Normans and Anglo-Normans. Using a photo-copy of a recent aerial photograph of Trim, they drew a plan of the town marking in the Boyne, the Castle, its walls and keep and the approach roads. They also drew or traced a castle themselves, marking in the key parts.

The class went on a half day tour of Trim. The Trim Heritage Centre has a very informative half hour video of the history of Meath, including Trim and it also gives conducted tours of the town (1 hour 15 mins. approx.) pointing out the remains of numerous monastic settlements mainly dating from Anglo-Norman times. I took the pupils around the actual castle itself where they could see the various remains and try to identify their function.

Sources

1. Filmstrips

The Department of Education issued numerous filmstrips with accompanying notes to most schools in the mid 1970s. They covered such topics as *The Stone Age*, *The Bronze Age*, *The Celts*, *Vikings* etc. It is cheap and easy to convert these into slides which make them much easier to use in class

2. Cassette

The Discovering Ireland series of cassettes is organised by counties. I am not sure how many counties are completed. They are really a motorist's companion, being informed guided tours scripted by experts on local history. Used selectively, they can be helpful in class. They are useful for the teacher when he/she is planning a visit to a particular historical site. They can be obtained from : *Touring Ireland Cassettes Ltd.*, 27 Holly Park Avenue, Blackrock, Co. Dublin3.

Local History Society Most areas have very active local history society, many of which issue a journal. In Meath *Riocht na Midhe*, published by the Meath archaeological and Historical Society, is an obvious source. Another is the Trim Heritage Centre.

4. TV programmes

RTE screened a UTV series of six half-hour programmes in February-March 1990 on Ulster history the first of which was exclusively devoted to the Anglo-Norman castles. It was very beneficial for first year pupils.

5. Local Monuments

Use whatever is in your locality. I was fortunate in having a great monastic settlement on my doorstep but such extensive remains are by no means essential.

Tips

The following are a few personal observations of the things I learned from teaching the new course for one year.

(a) Many twelve year-olds find it difficult to conceptualise What do we teachers actually want of a Senior Cert.

A time chart on the class room with little notes or drawings showing the lives of people at various times can be very informative and illuminating for them.

(b) Only show a small selection of slides at any one time and use them to illustrate just a few main points.

(c) Similarly with a video or audio cassette. Edit it so as to give the pupils just what is vitally important. It is often very helpful to play it again having briefly discussed what they have seen or heard.

(d) If you intend undertaking a tour, why not turn it into a project. First years love planning, colouring and executing one. A short questionnaire on the actual day helps to focus their minds.

(e) Parents' Councils are frequently willing to help supervise on the tour, thereby eliminating the need to bring another teacher with you and so minimising the disruption caused to the school.

(f) If you have to hire a bus for a tour, try to fit in two places - I managed New Grange and Trim. It is obviously cheaper, less effort on your part and less disruptive of school