

## A HISTORY OF IRELAND IN 100 OBJECTS, A SELECTION 5TH & 6TH CLASS LESSON PLAN

### Waterford charter roll 1373



The Anglo-Normans were great town builders. More towns were built in Ireland in the 100 years after their coming to Ireland in 1170 than at any other time in history.

They built castles and, oddly enough, they also built towns that looked like castles, with a stone wall and towers surrounding the town to keep it safe from attack.

Just like today, towns in Norman times were the centre of trade; places where goods were bought and sold. The most important towns were built on the bank of a river. Rivers in medieval times were like our motorways today because goods were more easily moved by ships on water. Wool was brought into a town from the farms around and sold to foreign merchants, who sent it in ships to other countries like England and France.

So towns were busy places, filled with people. But by far the busiest Norman towns were the ones along the coast, where the great ships of the day came and went. Dublin was an important town, as was Waterford, and they both became even more important when they were officially declared to be 'royal' ports.

This was big news for Waterford, because it could now charge royal taxes for allowing all kinds of goods, such as wool, salt and especially wine, into its port. This charge was known as a toll, and Waterford became very busy with all this trade and very rich with all those tolls.

So, royal ports had certain advantages or rights. In Waterford, these rights were hand written on parchment (the skin of animals), and these parchments were known as charters. And the townspeople of Waterford took great care of these charters because they proved that the king had given them special treatment.

However, the situation didn't last. The Anglo-Normans built another town, New Ross, as a rival port to Waterford, which, as you can imagine, didn't go down too well in Waterford.

For some 300 years (between 1210 and 1518) Waterford and New Ross were great rivals; sometimes there were even pitched battles on the river between the merchants of the two ports. But when everything quietened down again, nothing really changed.

After around 150 years of this rivalry between Waterford and New Ross, the king called a meeting in 1373 to try to sort things out. And it was then that the Waterford people came up with a plan: they would ask the king that all trade be returned to them and them only.

Not much of a plan, you might think. What if Edward simply said ‘no’?

That was certainly a possibility, but the Waterford people didn’t go to that meeting empty-handed. They brought along with them all of their charters, stitched together in a 4 m long roll, to prove that long before New Ross was built, Waterford controlled all trade in that area.

To make an even stronger case to the king and to keep his attention (after all, looking at charter after charter could get a bit boring), they decided to make things more interesting by adding 20 coloured pictures. And as they argued their case, they paused and pointed to the various pictures on the Waterford charter roll.

Coloured pictures? Nothing unusual about that, you may think.

But actually it was unusual. In fact, it was more than unusual. It was groundbreaking and extraordinary.

Nobody had ever stood in front of an English king and argued their case using coloured pictures before.

And what kind of pictures were they? Well, an artist had painted all the kings of England back to the very first king to come to Ireland, and because these kings were Edward’s own ancestors—his father, grandfather, great grandfather, great, great grandfather, and so on—Edward was, of course, really interested.

And there were two portraits of Edward III himself, the first portraits of a living English king to survive today. There were also portraits of Irish town mayors, the people who ruled the royal towns on behalf of the king, as well as a picture of the city of Waterford surrounded by a high wall and towers all painted white.

The group from Waterford went to a lot of trouble to show the king in England how much they admired kings, in general; how much they liked the English system of town mayors; how much they loved living in a busy town like Waterford; and, of course, how much they looked up to Edward himself.

And what was Edward’s reaction?

He couldn’t have been more delighted.

And was it all true?

Probably not. But that didn’t really matter. The group got what they wanted.

Ships were instructed to avoid New Ross and head for the port of Waterford instead.

And the tolls were charged once again, and the money flowed in once again ...