

STRONGBOW

part 1



Figure 1: The De Clare castle

RICHARD

Richard De Clare was born in Pembroke, Wales. Richard's family were Norman nobles. The Normans were warriors who ruled over England and Wales.

Because they were nobles, his family owned huge lands. Many peasants worked hard and created wealth for the De Clare family.

Growing up in a castle, Richard learned **hunting, hawking**, reading and writing and, of course, **how to fight**. He served as a **page**

when he was a boy, became a **squire** when he was a teenager, and finally became a **knight**, battling against fierce Welsh warriors.

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When Richard was 18, his Dad passed away. Richard **inherited** everything: he became Earl of Pembroke, ruling over his father's lands. He even inherited his Dad's nickname, "Strongbow". So Richard "Strongbow" De Clare became the Earl. Hundreds of knights were his **vassals**: the knights swore to serve him, and in exchange he gave each one a **manor**. Strongbow, in turn, was a **vassal** of the King of England, Henry II (pictured below).

Strongbow had big ambitions: he wanted more lands, and he wanted fame and glory. There was one big problem: King Henry was angry with the de Clare family, because of past disputes. King Henry wouldn't give Strongbow more lands or titles. In fact, Strongbow was worried that sooner or later the King would take his lands off him.

So Strongbow was frustrated and worried.



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PART 2

One day an older Irishman named Diarmat Mac Murchada came to Strongbow's castle.

"I used to be the King of Leinster," Diarmat told Strongbow. "But then I got into trouble, and all the other kings in Ireland ganged up on me, and kicked me out of the country."

"Why did they kick you out?" asked Strongbow, suspicious of this man.

Diarmat frowned. "Irish stuff. You wouldn't understand."

Strongbow said nothing. He wondered what crimes Diarmat had been guilty of. Maybe the wild Irish chiefs and kings were right to kick him out.



Figure 2: Diarmat

Diarmat leaned forward. "Come back to Ireland with me. Bring all your knights, all our warriors. Together, we'll teach my enemies a lesson they'll never forget."

"What's in it for me?" said Strongbow.

Diarmat said, "Aoife, the daughter of my second wife. She will agree to marry you if you help me. Then when I die, you will be like my son: you will become King of Leinster."

Strongbow was silent for a while, deep in thought. This might be his big opportunity! An Irish princess for a wife. And he be King Richard of Leinster! That would be some wedding gift.

On the other hand, King Henry would be very angry. He would see Strongbow's actions as a threat to his power. And Ireland was a strange, foreign, dangerous place. In England and Wales, there was one king; in Ireland, there were many.

The Irish seemed to Strongbow to be a strange, wild bunch of people with savage traditions and ideas – like 'elections' and 'sharing'! Above all, he was not sure if he trusted this Diarmat character.

Strongbow felt the call of battle, adventure, glory and conquest. But he was scared of what the consequences might be.



Figure 3: King Henry II of England

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part 3

Finally Strongbow made his decision.

“I will go to Ireland.”

Diarmat clasped his hand, and grinned.

preparations

Strongbow visited all of his major **vassals**. He visited other Norman lords in Wales. He visited his cousins, uncles and in-laws.

“You have sworn to fight for me,” he said to each of them. “Now the time has come. And if you fight well, I will reward you with more lands in Ireland.”

Diarmat and Strongbow watched as the ships were filled up with hoses, armour, swords, spears and arrows. There were Norman knights and Welsh warriors, English archers and Flemish spearmen.

war

The Normans landed at Baginbun Head. The Irish surrounded them with great numbers. But the Normans sent a herd of cows stampeding into the Irish forces, then charged while the Irish were in disarray. The Normans won, and then killed their Irish prisoners.



Figure 4: Baginbun Head

Diarmat’s Irish supporters joined up with the Normans. Together they marched all over Leinster fighting battle after battle. The Normans had hundreds of knights and thousands of archers and men-at-arms. The lightly-armoured Irish found it difficult to fight them.

At Achad Úr, up in the hills, a battle was fought for three days. Afterwards, Normans watched in horror as Diarmat inspected the chopped-off heads of fallen Irish soldiers, searching for old enemies of his.



Figure 5: Knights in battle

In 1170 Diarmat and the Normans captured Wexford, Waterford and finally Dublin. Strongbow and Aoife were married.

But this was a bitter victory for Diarmat and Aoife. Ruaidhri, the High King of Ireland, had Diarmat’s son Conor as a hostage. In taking over Leinster, Diarmat had broken a treaty with Ruaidhri, so the High King killed Conor.

In May 1171 Diarmat returned to his home in Ferns, Co Wexford. There he died. So Strongbow was finally King of Leinster!

But a summer of slaughter was about to begin.

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part 4

Strongbow had Dublin and was King of Leinster. But the Irish were not happy. Neither were the **Hiberno-Norse** – that is, the half-Viking, half-Irish people who used to control Dublin.

The former King of Dublin, Ascall, attacked from the sea. By the time Ascall was defeated, another force threatened from the land: an enormous Irish army, led by High King Ruaidhri O'Connor from Connacht.

The Irish army laid siege to Dublin for two months, surrounding it, starving it and hoping that Strongbow would surrender.

One night the Normans sneaked out and struck hard and fast at the Irish camp at Castleknock. The Irish were taken by surprise, and they panicked. Ruaidhri himself was in the bath when the attack came! Hundreds were killed. The rest ran away.

AN UNEXPECTED ARRIVAL

In the autumn something surprising happened. **Henry, King of England**, landed in Ireland with 4,500 soldiers.

Henry had been watching all of Strongbow's conquests, and was scared that Strongbow

was going to get too big for his boots. So Henry had decided to deal with things himself.

After so many defeats at the hands of Strongbow, no Irish king was strong enough to fight King Henry.

So half of the Irish kings surrendered to Henry without a fight. The others, including King Ruaidhri, retreated to their own lands, and watched and waited.

DEFEAT IN VICTORY

Strongbow had fought hard and killed many people to gain power. But after all his hard fighting, King Henry just marched in and took it all. Henry let Strongbow continue as King of Leinster, but he did not enjoy his power for long. He died in 1176, and at once King Henry took Leinster all for himself.

But Strongbow had changed the destiny of a whole country. Now England controlled large parts of Ireland. England continue to rule Ireland for another 800 years, with many terrible wars right down to the very recent past.



Study the painting at the end of the slideshow.

This was painted 700 years after the events we have just learned about. So it is just the artist's own imagination; he wasn't there and he had no idea what the events looked like.

1. What event does the painting show?
2. Is this a normal wedding? Why or why not?
3. Based on how she looks, how do you think Aoife feels at this moment?
4. Why do you think there are people lying on the ground?
5. Why do you think there are images of ruins and destruction in the background?

