

The local impact of the 'Shannon Scheme': the workforce living in Parteen, Co. Clare, in 1926

Leaving Certificate History	Strand 3 Ireland, option 2 1919–66 Economy: Shannon Hydroelectric scheme
Leaving Certificate History Learning Outcomes	1.2 Locate and select relevant source material and resources and identify appropriate repositories. 1.5 Evaluate source material through the process of historical analysis. 1.6 Situate their sources within wider historical contexts, events, ideas, and processes. 3.10 Explore the influence of economic factors on wider developments in this time period.
Learning Intentions	To be able to: • Locate and navigate the 1926 census returns for Parteen, Co. Clare, using the National Archives of Ireland online records • Extract evidence from the census returns of Irish and German workers living in Parteen and employed on the construction of Ardnacrusha • Compile a list of the occupations recorded for employees of Siemens-Schuckert living in the village • Explore the lived experience of the workforce on the Shannon Scheme from a variety of perspectives, using census evidence • Analyse the economic impact of the construction of the power station on the local area • Explain what the recruitment of a German firm and German workers suggests about the significance of the scheme to the new Irish Free State



Senior Cycle History Lesson Plan

The local impact of the 'Shannon Scheme': the workforce living in Parteen, Co. Clare, in 1926

Success Criteria	• I can locate the 1926 census returns for Parteen, Co. Clare, using the county and street/townland fields on the National Archives of Ireland search page • I can identify individuals recorded in Parteen whose entries connect them to the construction of Ardnacrusha, and say which part of the record told me so (occupation, employer, birthplace) • I can compile a list of occupations recorded in Parteen linked to the Shannon Scheme, and sort them into groups such as skilled and unskilled, or Irish-born and German-born • I can use evidence from the census to describe at least two ways the construction of Ardnacrusha affected the local economy of Parteen • I can suggest, using census evidence, why workers recruited by a German firm were living in a small Clare village in 1926, and identify this as a conclusion I have drawn rather than something the record states • I can distinguish between what the census record states as fact (a name, age, occupation or birthplace) and what I have inferred from it • I can identify at least one thing the census cannot tell me about the lives of the men working on the scheme
Resources	<u>National Archives of Ireland online census records</u> <u>Footage of construction of the Shannon Hydro-Electric Scheme at Ardnacrusha (1928), IFI Film Archive</u> <u>The 1926 Census Guidance Note for Teachers</u> Internet access Access to digital devices

Senior Cycle History Lesson Plan

The local impact of the 'Shannon Scheme': the workforce living in Parteen, Co. Clare, in 1926

Lesson Activities	At the start of any lesson using census records, teachers should make students aware of sensitivity around the personal nature of the census data. See document <i>The 1926 Census Guidance Note for Teachers</i>. Starter: Check in with students' prior knowledge of what a census is. Students may have knowledge of participating in a census. 1. Students study the Ardnacrusha hydro-electric scheme as part of Strand 3, Option 2 of the Senior Cycle therefore they should have some prior knowledge of the scheme before this lesson. If not, teachers should provide an overview of the Ardnacrusha hydro-electric power station that was under construction in 1926 by the German company Siemens-Schuckert (see 'background information' below). The scheme was designed to produce electricity on a large scale for the first time in Ireland in conjunction with the simultaneous development of the national grid. It was the first major infrastructure programme undertaken by the Irish Free State. 2. Students navigate to the search page for the 1926 census: In the county field, enter 'Clare' and in the street/townland field, enter 'Parteen'. The search results should yield a list of 38 people who were present in Parteen on the night of 18 April, 1926. The village of Parteen was in close proximity to the construction site at Ardnacrusha. 3. In small groups, students work through the list to find evidence of both Irish and German workers living in Parteen and working on the construction of Ardnacrusha. They should make a list of the jobs held by employees of Siemens-Schuckert. 4. Based on their findings, ask students to consider the following questions: • Why do you think German workers were needed for the construction of Ardnacrusha? • How do you think the construction of Ardnacrusha impacted the local economy in Parteen? • What does the hiring of German workers indicate about the significance of the project to the new Irish Free State?
Plenary	The 1926 census was taken while Ardnacrusha was under construction. Students should write a paragraph explaining what census returns from Co. Clare and Co. Limerick might reveal about the scheme's impact on local communities or Working in small groups will help all students to decipher census records. For the plenary activity, some students might prefer to write an account of the German workers living in Parteen in 1926, using evidence from the census records.

Background Information – The Shannon Hydro-Electric Scheme:

In 1925 the Irish Free State was three years old, deeply cautious with money, and still recovering from civil war. It nonetheless committed roughly £5.2 million to a single undertaking, a hydro-electric power station on the River Shannon at Ardnacrusha, Co. Clare. The Shannon Electricity Bill became law in June 1925, and on 13 August the government signed a contract with the German firm Siemens-Schuckert, which undertook to finish the job in three and a half years.

The scale was without precedent in Ireland. The £5.2 million committed by the Irish government was approximately a fifth of the state's budget for 1925. Six or seven miles of farmland between O'Brien's Bridge, below Killaloe, and Longpavement near Limerick city became one continuous building site. Sixty-two miles of railway track were laid. Locomotives, cranes, stone-crushers and diggers arrived from Hamburg. For Siemens it was the largest foreign contract a German company had won since the Baghdad railway at the end of the nineteenth century.

An advertisement in Irish newspapers in September 1925 sought 3,000 unskilled workers. The wage was 32 shillings for a 50-hour week, with free lodgings promised and canteens selling food at cost. Men came from all over Ireland and even from neighbouring Scotland. The historian Michael McCarthy describes the townland of Ballykeelaun taking on the appearance of 'an Irish Klondyke'.¹

The unions reacted angrily and a bitter strike followed, with workers arguing that a great national project such as the Shannon Hydro-Electric Scheme should pay better than farm work. Siemens countered that the going agricultural wage was only 25 shillings for a longer week. The dispute was broken rather than settled when Joseph McGrath, a former Minister for Industry and Commerce, was appointed Director of Labour by Siemens and recruited ex-servicemen outside the Transport Union at 50 shillings a week. The strike was over by Christmas 1925.

Employment passed 2,000 by mid-1926 and eventually reached 5,000 by 1928. Camp accommodation never kept pace as the on-site huts could sleep at most 720, and that figure was only reached in 1928.² In 1926 roughly 1,300 men had to find lodgings in Limerick city or in the countryside around the works.

1 Michael McCarthy, 'How the Shannon Scheme Workers Lived', in Andy Bielenberg (ed.), *The Shannon Scheme and the Electrification of the Irish Free State*, Lilliput Press, Dublin (2002).

2 If you'd like to use these in class you can access the B Form at [STAT/1/5/9/Castlebank Town/B/1](#) and browse the 705 people living in the camp by browsing county 'Clare', DED 'Ballyglass', and Townland 'Castlebank Town (Camp)'.

Senior Cycle History Lesson Plan

The local impact of the 'Shannon Scheme': the workforce living in Parteen, Co. Clare, in 1926

In June 1926 the story broke that workers were sleeping in barns, stables and pigsties. The Home Assistance Officer for Ardnacrusha reported to the Clare County Board of Health that a man and his wife had taken over a pigsty attached to a labourer's cottage, and that twelve to fourteen men were living in a stable at Blackwater. An *Irish Independent* investigation found an outbuilding where fifteen men had slept on heaps of hay, paying two shillings a week for the privilege.

The matter reached the Dáil on 1 July 1926, where the Minister, Patrick McGilligan, dismissed the press reports and attacked the official who had made them. A medical inspection days later confirmed the substance of the complaints: eleven men sleeping on wood shavings in a ruined building, a family of four in a sty, an average of twenty-six men to a hut in the camp itself. The problem recurred in February 1928, when 94 people, including wives and children, were found living in one Blackwater yard, with a typhoid case among them.

Costs of living give the wage some context to what workers were earning on the scheme. Lodgings ran from two shillings to a pound a week, canteen meals cost eleven shillings and eightpence a week, a pint of porter sixpence, and the cinema a shilling or eighteen pence.

The construction of such an ambitious scheme to supply electricity to the country prompted the establishment of the Electricity Supply Board (ESB) in 1927. President Cosgrave opened the scheme on 22 July 1929 before an audience of nearly a thousand, and commercial supply began that October. A national grid of some 3,400 km of overhead line had been erected between 1926 and 1929. The Shannon Scheme laid the foundation for the electrification of the country in the twentieth century, and supplied 87% of Ireland's electrical demand within a decade of opening.

That the new Irish Free State was prepared to take such a risk on this project highlights how it was viewed as much more than a simple feat of engineering – it was a national symbol of modernisation. Éamon de Valera called the project 'an experiment of great sociological value'.³ Historian Michael McCarthy's considers it an economic and political triumph for the government, and a black mark in the labour history of the new state.

3 Dáil Debates, Public Business – Electricity (Supply) (Amendment) Bill, 1931 – Second Stage, 8 July 1931. Access at https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/dail/1931-07-08/43/?highlight%5B0%5D=sociological&highlight%5B1%5D=sociological#spk_497.

Two workers drilling rivet holes
during the construction of the
Shannon Hydro-Electric Scheme.

National Archives,
DFA/6/419/22/2

