Medieval

Snakes and Ladders

Play your way through the history of St Audoen's Church

St Audoen's Church

St Audoen's church was founded in 1190, just 20 years after the arrival of the Normans in Dublin. It played a central role in the social, religious and economic life of Dubliners. The success of the Normans in Ireland relied on creating a strong colonial community, where every new Norman could be integrated into the existing community. Religion was an important glue that held the Norman colony together. St Audoen's, with its links across the wider Norman world, was well placed to provide that bond.

The history of snakes and ladders

The game of Snakes and Ladders was played over 1000 years ago in India. The ladders represented virtue, speeding your journey to heaven. The snakes were people's vices, leading down to cycles of re-birth. The dice represented fate and destiny. There were more snakes than ladders, reminding people that the path to heaven is the more challenging one.

In this game of Snakes and ladders, we follow the ups and downs of the medieval community around St Audoen's church in Dublin as it evolved. The ladders represent the improvements in the lives of Dubliners. The snakes represent their set backs. Once again, the dice represents fate.

How to assemble the game

Cut out the two boards and stick them together so that the two arrows match.
Each player needs a game piece; you can use stones.
You will also need a dice.

How to play

Starting with the youngest player, each person shakes the dice and moves in the direction and sequence of the numbers.
If you land on a ladder, you move up to the square at the top of the ladder.
If you land on a snake you move down to the square at the bottom of the snake.
The first person to reach number 84 wins.

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1882 84
St Audoen's buildings were handed over to the state.

83

82

1829 81
Catholic Emancipation Act

80

79

1820 78
The roof was removed from the South Nave.

71

1758 72
Wide Streets Commission established to improve Dublin streetscape.

1773 73
The roof of the east end of the church was removed.

74

1801 75
The Act of Union between Great Britain and Ireland.

76

77

1690 70
Catholics are no longer allowed to be officers of St Anne's Guild.

69

68

1667 67
Storm damages St Audoen's tower.

66

1650 65
Plague arrives in Dublin.

1649 64
Cromwell arrives in Ireland.

1597 57
Famine sweeps the city of Dublin.

1597 58
St Anne's Guild pays for repairs to St Audoen's tower

59

1598 60
Increased taxation during the 9 year war.

61

1611 62
Catholic worship no longer permitted in St Audoen's.

63

1597 56
Gunpowder explosion on the quays damages St Audoen's tower.

55

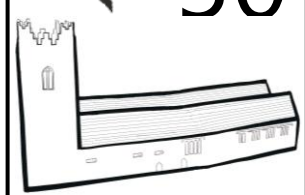
1540s 54
Reformation enforced in Ireland.

1534 53
Silken Thomas' rebellion against the English starts in Dublin.

52

1506 51
Guildhall for Carpenters established at St Audoen's.

50



43

1430 44
St Anne's Guild established.

45

St Anne's Guild Seal

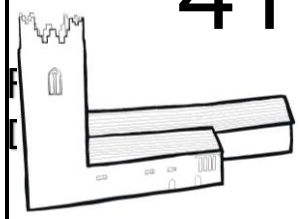
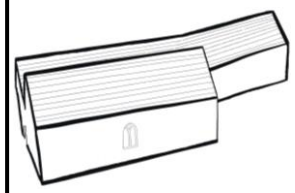
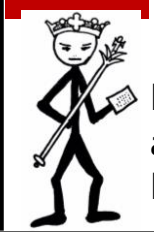
46

47

48

Portlester cenotaph

1480 49
Portlester Chantry added to St Audoen's church.

1423 42 3 new bells cast for St Audoens and the western tower built	41 	1350 40 St Audoen's north chancel is added	39 	1348 38 Plague arrives in Dublin.	37	36
29	1314 30 Famine sweeps through Dublin	31	32	1317 33 Bruce Invasion prompts fires in west Dublin.	34	35
28	27	1260 26 Pillory installed in Castle Street	1260 25 Larger boats are now able to dock at a new stone quay wall	24	1250 23 Dublin now has a public water and sewage system.	22
c. 1228 15 Dublin Castle towers are built.	16	1229 17 Freemen of Dublin elect their first Mayor.	1240 18 St Audoen's gate and city wall built.	19 	20 	c. 1240 21 St Audoen's church doubles in size due to increased number of parishioners
14	1221 13 Toll gates are introduced to help pay for city walls.	12	1209 11 Black Monday; 500 Normans were killed by Gaelic clans	10	9	8
1170 1 The Normans capture Dublin	2 Strongbow	1171 3  Henry II arrived in Dublin	4	1188 5 Newgate Prison opens	6 Romanesque Door St Audoen's Church	1190 7 St Audoen's church established

The Story of St Audoen's church, the longest serving parish church in Dublin.

Stroll along Dublin's High Street on Sunday morning and listen to the bells of St Audoen's. You will be listening to the same bells that have peeled in St Audoen's since 1423.

A new Church for a new Norman colony

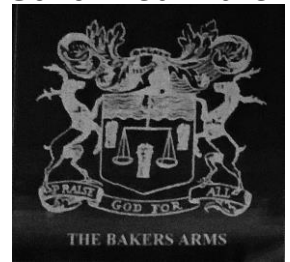
St Audoen's church was built in 1190, just as the Norman colony in Dublin was established. King Henry II had arrived in Dublin less than 20 years earlier and his descendants would go on to rule Ireland for the next 800 years. Henry II granted Dublin to the men of Bristol with the instruction that they establish a colony as if this were unoccupied land. They built St Audoen's and named the church after St Ouen, a French saint that had a large following in the Norman world.

St Audoen's Church brings the new colony together

Within 70 years of the founding of St Audoen's, the church had cemented its status as a core part of Dublin life. Many wealthy Dubliners built homes around the church, connecting the parish to the power base at Dublin Corporation and Dublin Castle. During that time, the north nave was constructed, doubling the size of the church. The population of the city continued to grow, as did it's dedication to St Audoen's. Side chapels were installed to accommodate devotion to particular saints. Religion provided a system of shared beliefs that was important in building trust between the founding Normans and the waves of new arrivals in the following years as the colony expanded. Dublin continued to grow under the watchful eye of Dublin Castle. The walls were fortified further and St Audoen's Arch was completed by 1240, allowing merchants to access their warehouses at the quays.

The Guilds of Dublin

St Audoen's also had strong links to the guilds in Dublin and many guild members donated generously to the church. The Tanners Guild met in the church tower and the Bakers Guild occupied an adjoining building. The Merchants Guild was the most important guild; its members held positions of power in the city during the week and attended services in St Audoen's on Sundays and holy days.



By 1310, St Audoen's Church was settled and prosperous. Donations continued to flood into the parish and these funded a new north chancel. Church rituals were becoming increasingly elaborate. By moving the altar into the new north chancel, they maintained a sense of distance between the clergy and the congregation. This also increased the dignity and sense of mystery of the ceremonies. Burial within the church was popular with wealthier parishioners.

Famine, invasion and plague

But the church was also facing into extremely challenging times. In 1314, famine struck. In 1317, facing the threat of the Scottish Bruce invasion, the western suburbs of the city were set alight, fires that must have felt very close to St Audoen's. But the biggest challenge came in 1348, when plague arrived on a boat from France. Over 2 years, it killed half the population of Dublin. Priests visiting the sick soon followed parishioners into the grave. Plague returned again in 1360, 1370, 1383, 1390 and 1398. Dublin struggled to recover, as people lived their lives close to death.

St Anne's Guild

In the face of adversity, the parishioners of St Audoen's came together to form St Anne's Guild in 1430. They believed that before their souls could ascend to heaven, they spent time in purgatory so that they could be purified. Masses sung or said for people after death could speed up this journey through purgatory and into heaven. Supported by a Royal Charter, the guild accepted donations and accumulated a substantial portfolio of properties. Income from these properties funded six chaplains and six altars within St Audoen's. Sir Robert Dowdall, a knight, gave a gift of 100 marks (about £66) to be invested and the income used to support two priests who were to pray for him after his death. He believed that these prayers would speed his journey to heaven. Richard Talbot, merchant, bestowed properties to St Anne's Guild on condition that guild chaplains on the Saturday before the feast of St Barnabas walk around Dublin ringing a bell and announcing the anniversary of his death and the following day sing mass for his soul.

St Anne's Guild Seal

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Although independent of St Audoen's church, St Anne's guild supported the work of the parish. They provided grants for the support of priests and the upkeep of the building. Every year on the 26th of July, the members of St Anne's guild held a procession around St Audoen's church in full regalia and donated money to the local poor.

New bells for St Audoen's

Donations to St Audoen's continued throughout the 15th century, as Dublin began to look forward to better times. Almost every corner of the church was occupied by devotional altars to different saints. In 1423, three new bells were cast for St Audoen's church. These three bells still ring out every Sunday to this day, accompanied by three additional bells. The bells were located in the newly built western tower.

Portlester Chapel

In 1482, Sir Roland FitzEustace, First Baron Portlester endowed a private chapel at St Audoens and a new south chancel was built. At the time of his donation to St Audoen's church, he was granted the use of lands by St Anne's Guild. The religious and economic interests of the parishioners were closely linked. He donated a life-size cenotaph of himself and his wife Margaret to lodge in the newly created Portlester chapel, lest anyone forget his generosity after his death.

The Reformation divides the parish of St Audoen's

The rebellion of Silken Thomas, Lord Deputy of Ireland in 1534, was the first sign that turbulent times lay ahead for St Audoen's church. Following the capture of Silken Thomas, King Henry VIII began to take a closer interest in the affairs of Ireland. Embroiled in disputes with the church in Rome, Henry VIII established the Church of England. In 1536, Henry VIII began enforcing the Reformation in Ireland. While some in Ireland adopted this new protestant religion, the vast majority of people remained loyal to the pope in Rome. In the winter of 1580, Margaret Ball was carried on a wooden palette to the dungeons of Dublin Castle. Her crime was that she was a Catholic and refused to take the oath of Supremacy . Her persecutor was her son Walter, recently converted to the protestant faith and Lord Mayor of Dublin. Margaret died in the Dungeons three years later aged 69, willing to die for her Catholic faith. She is buried in St Audoen's church.

St Audoens managed to continue to serve both religious communities in the church, thanks to its integration into the social and economic life of the wealthy and elite in Dublin. However, by 1611, Catholic worship was outlawed in the church. Catholics continued to meet in St Audoen's college on the site of the Catholic St Audoen's church today.

The Reformation and St Anne's Guild

St Anne's guild continued to play an important part in the life of St Audoen's church. However, from the 1630s there was a concerted effort by the state religion to seize the assets of St Anne's guild. There was suspicion that the guild was using its resources to promote and protect the Catholic church, especially as there existed a Papal Bull dating to 1569, saying that the resources of the Catholic lay guilds should be applied only to Catholics. This attack on the guild failed, but it was not the last one. From 1690, as part of the penal laws, Catholics were forbidden from becoming officers of the guild, but could remain as members. The guild survived until at least 1740 and was one of the few religious institutions that had both Catholic and Protestant members.

A church in decline

Throughout all these difficulties, St Audoen's church continued as a parish church for the protestant Church of Ireland parishioners. It remained a popular place for burial. Fees for maintaining the graves within the church continued to be paid into the 20th century. However, the church had begun a period of decline. As the number of parishioners fell, the finances came under strain. In 1777, the east side of the chapel was unroofed to reduce the cost of maintaining the building. In 1820, the south nave was also unroofed. Church of Ireland services are now restricted to the north nave.

A new chapter for St Audoen's

A new chapter in St Audoen's history opened in 1882, when all but the north nave was handed over to the state. The south nave was re-roofed and now houses a heritage centre that tells the unique history of the longest serving parish church in Dublin. When you hear the church bells ringing out on Sunday morning, think of Margaret Bell, Richard Talbot and Roland FitzEustace who shared that moment with you so many years ago.

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Gothic arches of the unroofed chancel at St Audoen's Church

Check out St Audoen's opening hours:
https://heritageireland.ie/places-to-visit/st-audoens-church/

Cheat Sheet

Impress your guide when you visit St Audoen's church!

Altar: a type of table used in church services

Catholic: a member of the Roman Catholic Church, who continued to follow the Pope in Rome after the reformation

Cenotaph: a monument to someone buried elsewhere

Chancel: the part of the church containing the altar and seats for the clergy

Chantry: an endowment for a priest to celebrate masses for the soul of the founder

Clergy: a body of people ordained for religious duties in the Christian churches

Endowed: to give or bequeath income or property for a purpose

Guild: medieval association of people pursuing a common goal

Nave: the central part of the church where the congregation sit. In medieval churches, it was separated from the chancel by a screen, step or rail.

Papal Bull: a public decree issued by the pope in Rome

Parish: a small administrative district having it's own church and priest

Parishioner: a person living in in a particular parish, usually a regular churchgoer

Plague or Bubonic plague: a contagious bacterial disease usually causing fever, delirium and often causing death. There were no medical treatments for plague in medieval times.

Protestant: a member of the Christian churches that separated from the Roman Catholic Church during the Reformation

Purgatory: a place where the souls of the dead waited for purification before entering heaven

Reformation: a 16th century movement for the reform of the abuses in the Catholic Church that ended in the establishment of Protestant churches

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