English grammar: Past perfect tense

There are two past perfect tenses in the English language.

Past perfect simple

Form

It is formed with the auxiliary verb "had" + past participle (-ed ending for regular verbs, e.g. worked, travelled, tried, different forms for irregular verbs, e.g. written, made, sung): I had done, I had not done (I hadn't done), Had I done? Had I not done? (Hadn't I done?)

Use

1. We use the past perfect to make it clear that an action was completed before another action in the past.
The door bell rang at last. I had been in the room since breakfast.
(The bell rang at noon. I came in the morning - before that.)
When I arrived there Sarah had already left.
(I arrived after lunch. Sara went before lunch.)
I was so hungry! I had not eaten anything since the morning.
(It was late at night.)

2. It is used to refer to an activity that was completed before a point of time in the past.
In 2005 I had lived in the same place for ten years.
Had you ever travelled by plane before your holiday in Spain?

Past perfect vs present perfect simple

1. The past perfect is often used with expressions indicating that the activity took some time, such as: for 10 years, since 1995, all week, all the time, always, ...
When the plane landed Tim had travelled all day.
My parents moved away from Leeds. They had lived there since they got married.
In 2005 Derek started to work in Berlin. He had always planned it.

These expressions are also used with the present perfect. The difference is, however, that the present perfect refers to events that started in the past and still continue, the past perfect expresses events that began before a point of time (or another action) in the past and continued to that point of time in the past.
I have been in Paris for a week. (the present perfect - I came a week ago and I am still in Paris.)
When I met Annie I had been in Paris for a week. (the past perfect - I came to Paris a week before I met Annie and I am not there anymore.)

2. If we use the past perfect simple it does not always mean that an activity continued up to a point of time in the past. The event can end a long time before the point of time in the past that we refer to.
In 2001 Angie worked in Glasgow. In 1980's she had worked in Wales.
(Angie left her job in Glasgow in 1989. In 2001 she worked in Glasgow. But we do not know what she did in the meantime.)

Past perfect vs past simple

1. The past simple is used for actions that happened some time ago. The past perfect is used for actions that happened before a point of time in the past.
Jim returned at 4 o'clock. He had called Jane on the way back home and now she appeared at the door.

In this story the sentences are in a reversed order, because in reality, first Jim called Jane and then he returned. If we want to keep this sentence order, we must use the past perfect to make it clear that Jim called Jane first.

2. If the sentence order is the same as the order of the events, we can use the past tense.
Jim called Jane on the way back home. He returned at 4 o'clock and now she appeared at the door.

This difference is important. In some situations these two tenses have a completely different meaning.
I arrived at the garage. They told me to pay in cash. But I only had my credit card. I couldn't pay.
I arrived at the garage. They had told me to pay in cash. I paid and left immediately.
In the first case I did not know that I had to pay in cash. They told me after my arrival.
In the second case I was informed before my arrival and had no problems.

Past perfect in time clauses

In time clauses after **when** we can use either the past tense or the past perfect tense.
We use the past tense if we want to express that the first action led to the second and that the second followed the first very closely.
When the film ended he switched off the television.

The past perfect is used when we want to make it clear that the first action was completed before the second started and that there is no relation between them.
When she had washed the dishes she had a cup of tea.
But:
When she washed the dishes she put the plates in the cupboard.

If we use **after** in a time clause the past perfect is much more usual.
After Zidane had scored the goal the fans went wild.

We use the past perfect similarly with: as soon as, until, before, by the time.
He got up as soon as he had heard the alarm clock.
We did not stop until we had reached the coast.
Maria had finished her meal by the time I arrived.
Before she cut her hair she had consulted it.

Past perfect continuous

Form

It is formed with the auxiliaries had been + present participle (-ing ending, e.g. working, trying, writing, singing): I had been doing, I had not been doing, Had I been doing? Had I not been doing?

Use

The past perfect continuous is used for activities that began before a point of time in the past and were still continuing at that point of time.
Last summer Josh had been renovating his house for two years.
(He started three years ago and last summer he was still renovating his house.)

Past perfect continuous vs present perfect continuous

The past perfect and present perfect continuous are basically very similar. The difference is, however, that in the past perfect we refer to the point of time in the past, while in the present perfect we refer to the present times.
I have been practising since the morning. (present perfect - I am still practising.)

At 11 o'clock I had been practising for two hours. (past perfect - I began at 9 o'clock and at 11 o'clock I was still practising.)

Past perfect simple vs continuous

For an action that can continue for a long time we can use both the simple and continuous forms (work, run, study, travel, sleep ...). There is practically no difference in meaning, but the continuous form is more usual in English.
Stephen was pretty tired. He had worked all day.
Stephen was pretty tired. He had been working all day.

In other cases these two forms have a completely different meaning.
Before midnight Paul had translated the article. (He finished his work.)
Before midnight Paul had been translating the article. (He did not finish it. He was still translating at that moment.)

If we refer to a number of individual actions or actions that were repeated, we must use the past perfect simple.
Before the lesson ended they had written three tests. (three individual completed activities)
But:
It was exhausting. They had been writing tests since the lessons started. (one uninterrupted incomplete activity)
See also the past tense and present perfect rules to study the continuous aspect of the tenses.