
Background information

Prehistoric Britain

Archaeologists and historians use the term 'Prehistory' to refer to a time in a people's history before they used a written language. In Britain the term Prehistory refers to the period before Britain became part of the Roman empire in AD 43. The prehistoric period in Britain lasted for hundreds of thousands of years and this long period of time is usually divided into: Palaeolithic, Mesolithic, Neolithic (sometimes these three periods are combined and called the Stone Age), Bronze Age and Iron Age. Each of these periods might also be sub-divided into early, middle and late. The Palaeolithic is often divided into lower, middle and upper.

Early Britain

British Isles: Humans probably first arrived in Britain around 800,000 BC. These early inhabitants had to cope with extreme environmental changes and they left Britain at least seven times when conditions became too bad. Continual human occupation probably began about 10,000 BC as humans returned to Britain following a very cold period.

Scotland: During the Ice Ages Scotland was almost permanently covered by a thick layer of ice making it uninhabitable for early humans. When the climate cooled and glaciers covered the whole of Scotland the region became uninhabitable. When the ice melted and the climate improved, Mesolithic hunter-gatherers moved into southern Scotland around 14,000 BC and an early settlement near Edinburgh dates from around 8500 BC.

Wales: The earliest known human remains in Wales date from a mild spell around 220,000 BC. However, settlement in Wales was intermittent. Changing temperatures led to ice advancing and retreating and humans appear to have abandoned Wales for long periods until the start of continuous settlement from about 10,000 BC.

Ireland: Around 37000 BC Ireland was separated from Britain by rising sea levels. Human settlement in Ireland began around 8000 BC as the climate warmed following the last Ice Age. Inhabitants arrived from Britain and continental Europe. Few traces of these early hunter-gatherers remain. During the Neolithic the population increased and stone monuments such as Newgrange were built.

Palaeolithic Britain

Around 800,000 years ago Britain was joined to continental Europe by a wide land bridge allowing humans to move around the whole region. Animal bones and flint tools found in East Anglia show that humans (*Homo antecessor*) were present in Britain at this time alongside animals such as the mammoth. A human leg bone and flint tools from Boxgrove in Sussex show the arrival of a new human species called *Homo heidelbergensis* around 500,000 years ago. These early people made flint tools called handaxes and hunted large animals such as rhinoceros.

The extreme cold of the Ice Ages in Britain probably forced humans to leave when living conditions became impossible, but they returned during warmer periods. A final Ice Age covered Britain around 70,000 to 12,000 BC. The landscape during the Ice Ages was treeless tundra with glaciers covering northern and sometimes southern Britain. During warmer spells there would be an expansion of birch trees, shrub and grasses and eventually oak woodland.

There is evidence of Neanderthal humans living in Britain from around 60,000 BC. By 40,000 BC modern humans (*Homo sapiens*) were spreading across Europe soon reaching Britain. It is not known exactly when Neanderthals died out but there may have been a period when Neanderthals and modern humans both lived in Britain. The cave burial of the 'Red Lady of Paviland' (Wales) is a modern human and dates from about 30,000 BC. 'She' is actually a man and is one of the first burials to have grave goods.

Modern humans in Britain produced flint tools and used bone, antler, shell, amber, animal teeth and mammoth ivory for tools and jewellery. Flint tools are found in areas of limited flint resources, suggesting that people moved over wide areas carrying flint tools with them and it is possible that groups travelled to meet and exchange goods. The main food species were wild horse and red deer. Artistic expression occurred through engraved bone and cave art such as that found at Creswell Crags. By 10,500 BC as the ice retreated for the last time the climate got warmer and dryer, and woodlands expanded. Tools involved smaller flints. Known sites from this period include open air sites such as Hengistbury Head which was first occupied around 10,000 BC.

Mesolithic Britain

As the Ice Age finally ended around 10,500 BC temperatures rose. Rising sea levels, caused by the melting ice, cut Britain off from continental Europe for the last time around 6500 BC. The warmer climate encouraged pine, birch, and alder forests to grow. As the large herds of reindeer and wild horses declined, they were replaced in people's diets by red deer, roe deer and wild boar while the wetland created by the warmer weather provided fish and wild birds. These food sources required different hunting tools which now began to include barbs while tiny microliths were developed for fixing onto harpoons and spears. Woodworking tools such as adzes appear. This period is usually referred to as the Mesolithic and the term hunter-gather is often used to describe the human life-style.

Mesolithic people followed a complex pattern of seasonal occupation, or in some cases permanent occupation, with associated land and food source management where conditions allowed it. At Howick, in Northumberland, evidence of a large circular building dating to around 7600 BC suggests a permanent dwelling whilst Star Carr in Yorkshire seems to have been only seasonally occupied. Star Carr was occupied from around 8700 BC, for over 300 years. The main feature is a brushwood platform which stood on the edge of a lake. Nearby are a number of hearths. The site was visited by Mesolithic hunters chasing deer, elk and boars. Animal bones indicate that the site was occupied between spring and autumn. Tools such as flint scrapers for cleaning animal skins and worked bone and antler have been found, including 91 barbed points. A fragment of a wooden oar implies that the people built simple boats. Beads made from stone and amber suggest personal adornment. The top part of a stag skull, complete with antlers, has been found. The skull had two holes cut in it and may have been used as a hunting disguise or during a ritual activity. Human success in exploiting the natural environment led to the exhaustion of some natural resources.

Farming was introduced to Britain around 4,500 BC. Hunter-gather ways of life continued but the increasing range of material culture, such as pottery, leaf-shaped arrowheads and polished stone axes, and the control of local resources by individual groups would have caused it to be replaced by distinct territories occupied by different groups. A few Neolithic monuments overlie Mesolithic sites but little direct continuity can be seen. The climate, which had been warming since the later Mesolithic, continued to improve and the earlier pine forests were replaced with deciduous woodland.

Neolithic Britain

Farming began in the Middle East, China, India and South East Asia about 10,000 years ago. As farming gradually spread, settled communities dependent on agriculture supplanted the hunter-gatherer lifestyle in many, but not all areas, and introduced new lifestyles referred to as Neolithic. Archaeologists think that farming arrived in Britain as the knowledge and resources needed to farm were introduced by Neolithic people migrating from continental Europe. Farming led to a more settled way of life and forests were cleared to provide space for crops and animal herds. Native pigs were reared whilst sheep, goats and domesticated cattle were introduced to Britain as were wheat and barley.

The construction of the earliest earthwork sites began during the Early Neolithic (c. 4000 - 3300 BC) in the form of long barrows used for communal burial and the first causewayed enclosures. Evidence of growing human control of the environment is shown by the Sweet Track, a wooden track way built to cross the marshes of the Somerset Levels and dated to 3800 BC. Leaf-shaped arrowheads, round-based pottery types and large-scale polished axe production are common indicators of the period.

The Middle Neolithic (c. 3300 - 2900 BC) saw the development of cursus monuments close to earlier barrows, the building of impressive chamber tombs such as the Maeshowe types and the growth and abandonment of causewayed enclosures. The earliest stone circles and individual burials also appear.

Different pottery types such as Grooved Ware appear during the Late Neolithic (c. 2900 - 2200 BC) whilst new enclosures, called henges were built, along with stone rows. Stonehenge and Silbury Hill reached their peak. Flint mining at sites such as Cissbury and Grimes Graves began during the Neolithic period. The stone-built houses at Skara Brae on Orkney indicate the development of small settlements in Britain. The stone houses at Skara Brae in the Orkneys date to the Late Neolithic and are associated with users of Grooved Ware.

Bronze Age Britain

Around 2400 BC a new set of beliefs and practices, known as the Beaker 'package', arrived in Britain via cross-channel connections with mainland Europe bringing new burial rites, people, objects and technology including the skill of copper and gold metal working. Initially items were made from copper, then from around 2200 BC bronze (which is harder than copper) was made by mixing copper with tin. Bronze gradually replaced stone as the main material for tools and by 2200 BC the period known as the Early Bronze Age had begun in the Britain. Tin was mined in south-west England and copper and gold were being sourced from Ireland and Wales. This changed after 1600 BC when metal from mainland Europe became increasingly important.

Early Bronze Age people buried their dead beneath earth mounds known as barrows, often with a beaker alongside the body. These barrows became more elaborate in size and shape up to about 1600 BC. The barrows were usually built near older stone, earth and timber monuments such as Stonehenge and Avebury to form ceremonial landscapes. Later in the period, cremation was adopted as a burial practice with cemeteries of urns containing cremated individuals. From about 1100 BC little evidence has been found to explain how the dead were buried though cremation appears to have continued.

From about 1500 BC round houses were built in Britain and their use continued into the Iron Age. Most round houses were built from local materials: wooden walls and a roof thatched with reeds or straw. Round houses usually contained one room, although some may have been partitioned internally. In larger houses, the roof space may have been floored over to be used as a loft. Most round houses had a fireplace at the centre for cooking, warmth and light. There were no windows and the doorway often pointed towards the east or southeast to let in the morning sun.

Large livestock holdings developed in the lowlands which lead to increasing forest clearance. From 1800 BC, field systems developed becoming more common by 1500BC. Settlements grew to include a greater variety of building types, sometimes enclosed by a ditch or fence. There is evidence for the emergence of social elites. A greater density of finds and settlements in some parts of Britain, which may relate to increased population. The appearance of swords and other weaponry (many of them deposited in rivers and other watery places) suggests a rise in conflict and war. Some of these objects may have been worn and deposited for show by social elites.

Iron Age Britain

Around 800 BC iron working techniques reached Britain from mainland Europe. While bronze was still used for objects such as jewellery, iron was used for tools. In England and Wales, the Iron Age ended with the arrival of the Romans in AD 43. In Scotland and Ireland, Iron Age ways of life continued after this date, and for some people in other parts of Britain aspects of Iron Age ways of living may have carried on for a long time after the Roman conquest.

Iron Age Britain was essentially rural. Most people lived in small villages and farmsteads with communities run by an individual or small group. Most people lived in thatched roundhouses with wooden or wattle and daub walls, and a central fire. Iron axes and iron tipped ploughs made farming more efficient and agricultural production increased. Wheat, barley, beans and brassicas were grown in small fields. Timber was used for fuel and for building houses, carts, furniture and tools. Cattle provided milk and leather and were used to pull ploughs. Sheep provided milk, meat and wool. Chickens were introduced at the end of the Iron Age. Pigs were also kept, and sometimes eaten as part of special feasts.

Another form of community space was the hill fort. These began to be built in the late Bronze Age, around 1000 BC, but became much larger and more elaborate in the Iron Age. Hillforts can still be seen in the modern landscape, for example at Maiden Castle in Dorset. These may have been defensive or used for social and trading gatherings. Individual communities had contacts with each other and peoples in Western Europe. Internal trade and trade with continental Europe flourished during this period based on Britain's mineral resources. About 100 BC, iron bars began to be used as tokens of wealth and around 150 BC the use of coins developed within the elite of south-east Britain.

Religious belief and offerings to gods, spirits and ancestors were an important part of life. People did not build temples and few statues of Iron Age deities are preserved. Instead, gods were seen as being everywhere and religious offerings were made in the home, around farms and in the countryside, especially in watery places. Many decorated Iron Age weapons and other objects have been found in rivers, lakes and bogs including the Witham shield found near Lincoln and the Battersea shield found in the River Thames.

In most of Britain, funerals did not involve grave burial. Instead, human bones have been found on farms, hillforts and villages. Sometimes bones are found placed in pits or ditches, suggesting that when people died their body was laid out to rot away, leaving just the

bones. Some bones, probably those of special people, were then buried around settlements. However, in some parts of Iron Age Britain, people were buried in graves. In Cornwall, the dead were buried in stone lined graves and in East Yorkshire (c. 400-100 BC) the dead were buried in graves arranged in long cemeteries. Most people were buried with no or only a few objects, such as a simple pot or brooch, but in a small number of the Yorkshire graves, people were even buried with chariots. In south-east England (c. 100 BC until after AD 43) the dead were cremated.

By AD 1, south-east Britain was controlled by powerful rulers who had close contacts with the Roman Empire. Rulers such as Tincomarus (Tincommius), Tasciovanus and Cunobelinus are known from coins. They controlled areas of land from centres such as St Albans, Colchester, Chichester and Silchester.

Early Roman Britain

Migration and trade between Britain and continental Europe was already well established by the time the Roman general Julius Caesar made two expeditions to Britain in 55 and 54 BC, as part of larger campaigns in Gaul (modern France). During these expeditions, the Romans did not conquer any territory, but instead invited the British people to pay tribute in return for peace, established client rulers and brought Britain more fully into Rome's sphere of influence. This might have included the construction of Roman style buildings, such as rectangular dwellings at Silchester in Hampshire.

In AD 43, a Roman invasion force landed in Britain and quickly took control of the south-east before heading north and west. Then in AD 61, while the Roman army was in Wales, Boudica, ruler of the Iceni people, provoked by Roman seizure of land and the brutal treatment of her family raised an army to fight the Romans. The Iceni, joined by the Trinovantes, destroyed the Roman settlements at Camulodunum (Colchester) Verulamium (St Albans) and London before the Roman army finally defeated the rebels in the Midlands.

Roman control of England and Wales was consolidated over a number of decades following this rebellion and Britain remained a province in the Roman empire until around AD 411.

Prehistoric Britain time line

<p>c. 800,000 BC – 10,500 BC</p>	<p>Palaeolithic This is the longest period in prehistory and is often divided up by archaeologists into the Lower, Middle and Upper Palaeolithic. It is also known as the Stone Age due to the fact that the majority of tools used by humans in this period were made from stone (often flint). During this period the climate in Britain changed radically several times with large areas of land covered with thick ice during the coldest periods known as the Ice Ages. There were warm periods in between and humans came and went depending on the climate.</p>
<p>c. 10,500 BC – 4000 BC</p>	<p>Mesolithic This period of prehistory marked the end of the last Ice Age. Humans returned to Britain as the climate got warmer and followed a hunter-gatherer life style moving around the landscape to find the best sources of seasonal food. Stone continued to be the main material for making tools. Small pieces of flint (microliths) were set into wood to make spears and harpoons.</p>
<p>c. 4000 BC – 2400 BC</p>	<p>Neolithic This is the period when farming was introduced to Britain. People moved from a hunter-gather lifestyle to a life-style based on farming domesticated animals and growing crops. Hunting and gathering continued – as it does today – with fishing and berry/fruit collecting. Stone continued to be the main material used to make tools though pottery began to appear especially pots for storing, cooking and eating food.</p>
<p>c. 2400 BC - 800 BC</p>	<p>Bronze Age At the start of the Bronze Age copper started to be used as a material for making tools. This was quickly followed by bronze (an alloy of copper and tin) which is harder and better for making tools and household objects. Roundhouses began to be built and there is evidence for the emergence of social elites and armed conflict.</p>
<p>c.800 BC - AD 43</p>	<p>Iron Age During this period iron emerged as a key material for making tools. Farming productivity increased and the population grew. Regional groups of people – often known as tribes – emerged. In the late Iron Age, there was growing contact with the Roman empire which had extended to include Gaul (modern France).</p>
<p>AD 43 - c. AD 411</p>	<p>Roman Britain In AD 43 England and Wales became part of the Roman province of Britannia. Roman rule continued for the next 400 years after which the Anglo-Saxon period began in England.</p>