

Unit 1: Prehistoric Britain

← Pre-inhabitation

800,000BCE – 43CE

Roman Britain →

Period Overview

The Stone Age, Bronze Age and Iron Age covers 98% of human history in Britain. The evolution of humans from the earliest hominins to *Homo sapiens* occurred in this period. Some of the major advances in technology were achieved during this period, including the control of fire, agriculture, metalworking and the wheel. The earliest sign of humans is marked by footprints of *Homo antecessor* on a beach at Happisburgh in Norfolk dated to 800,000 years ago. Traditionally the end of the Iron Age is marked by the second Roman invasion under Claudius in 43CE. The useful term prehistory was coined by a Scottish archaeologist, Daniel Wilson, in 1851 to refer to this time before written history. The main way to study this period is through archaeology.

Life in Prehistoric Britain

For most of prehistory people who lived in Britain were hunter-gatherers. During the Ice Ages they hunted woolly mammoth, reindeer and wild horses and, as the climate warmed, new species such as red deer, roe deer, aurochs (wild cattle) and wild pig. The warmer climate also brought more plant life to forage, including fruit, nuts, berries, mushrooms and leafy plants. During the Ice Age people were very mobile. The same people roamed from the south of France to the Peak District. In the warmer phase that followed, rich returning plant and animal life meant that groups did not have to move around quite as much and may have had very small territories, perhaps around a single lake. When farming was introduced people still moved around, this time with cows, pigs and sheep in tow. Communities came together regularly to feast, exchange gifts and perhaps marriage partners. Significant places in the landscape were elaborated with stone or earth monuments, often associated with the dead. There were times when an elite seem to have held power, such as the Early Bronze Age, but other periods were more egalitarian.

Changing Times

During the first 790,000 years of human activity in Britain, the climate oscillated between Ice Ages and interstadial warm stages. Britain was usually connected to the continent by a land bridge, but this was periodically flooded. The last time this happened was 6000BCE. The earliest hearth in Britain was found at Beeches Pit in Suffolk, and also dates to about 400,000 years ago, possibly tended by Neanderthals. *Homo sapiens* (us) arrived around 30,000BCE. The end of the last Ice Age was about 10,000BCE. Agriculture was developed in the Near East soon after but wasn't adopted in Britain until 4000BCE, and then only piecemeal. Britain was quicker on the uptake with metalworking. Copper was used on the continent from 3000BCE or earlier, and spread to Britain by about 2300 BCE. The addition of tin to make bronze was then exported from Britain back to the continent. Proper mixed farming with crops, permanent settlements and fields kicked in during the Middle Bronze Age for most areas of England. Iron working took a couple of centuries, from 800-600BCE, to overtake the use of bronze as it took skill to make better blades.

Possible Enquiry Questions

- Would you like to be a hunter-gatherer or a farmer?
- Why did people build Stonehenge?
- Did the Beaker folk really exist?
- Who were the kings and queens in prehistory?
- Barrows, bogs and druids: what did people believe in prehistory?
- Which is better, bronze or iron?
- Did Celts ever come to Britain?

Key Individuals

- **Swanscombe woman** – three parts of a cranium of a Neanderthal woman c. 400,000-350,000BCE
- **Red Lady of Paviland** – actually a young man buried in a cave in South Wales c. 26,000BCE
- **Amesbury Archer** – visitor from the Alps buried with earliest bronze near Stonehenge c. 2300BCE
- **Wetwang tribal queen** - buried with a spectacular chariot in a Yorkshire village c. 200BCE
- **Lindow Man** – sacrificed in a religious ceremony and placed in a bog in Cheshire c. 40CE



Skara Brae, Neolithic village in Orkney¹

What have Prehistoric people ever done for us?

Most of the major technological achievements were made during the prehistoric period, such as control of fire, metalworking and farming, without which our modern life would not be possible. British culture, though disturbed and modified by incursions of Romans, Anglo-Saxons and Vikings, was also forged in this period, and one prominent archaeologist, Francis Pryor, believes it is essentially the same. "I genuinely believe that the British belief in individual freedom has prehistoric roots."

Big Concepts

The nature of the evidence for prehistory is essentially material, rather than written. It is the record of human impact on the landscape and the artefacts they made, used and left behind. The development of the economy from a mobile hunter-gatherer lifestyle to settled farming, contrasting long-distance trade and gift exchange to the adoption of coinage can all be explored in this period. The extent of a hierarchy fluctuates throughout prehistory. Religious activities range from building monuments to depositing objects in wet places.

Places to Visit:

There are hillforts, barrows, cairns and stone circles on public land across England as well as plenty of collections in local, regional and national museums. Possible visit sites include:

- [Cresswell Crags](#), Nottinghamshire
- [Butser Ancient Farm](#), Hampshire
- [Bodrifty Iron Age Settlement](#), Cornwall
- [Museum of the Iron Age](#), Hampshire
- [Flag Fen](#), Cambridgeshire

Timeline of Key Events:

- Stone Age:** Palaeolithic to 10,000 BCE
 Mesolithic to 4000 BCE
 Neolithic to 2300 BCE
- Bronze Age:** 2300 BCE to 800 BCE
- Iron Age:** 800 BCE to 43 CE
- All dates below are approximate
- 800,000 BCE** Earliest footprints in Britain
 - 400,000 BCE** Earliest hearth in Britain
 - 10,000 BCE** End of the last Ice Age
 - 6000 BCE** Land bridge to Europe flooded
 - 4000 BCE** Adoption of agriculture
 - 3000 BCE** Stonehenge started
 - 3000 BCE** Skara Brae built
 - 2300 BCE** Bronze working introduced
 - 1600 BCE** Stonehenge abandoned
 - 1500 BCE** Villages and mixed farming
 - 1200 BCE** First hillforts
 - 800 BCE** Ironworking introduced
 - 120 BCE** Coins introduced from Europe
 - 100 BCE** Belgae arrived from Europe
 - 80 BCE** Roman amphorae imported
 - 54 BCE** First Roman invasion (Julius Caesar)
 - 43 CE** Second Roman invasion (Claudius)

Broader Context

- Hominins evolve in East Africa c. 2.5 mya
- *Homo erectus* travels out of Africa c.1.8mya
- *Homo sapiens* evolves in East Africa c. 200 kya
- *Homo sapiens* travels out of Africa c. 60kya
- Agriculture developed in Near East c. 10,000 BCE
- Agriculture spreads to Germany c. 6000 BCE
- Bronze working starts in the Near East c.3000 BCE
- First Egyptian pyramid built c. 2600 BCE
- Ancient Greek civilisation starts c. 500 BCE
- Philip II of Macedon issues coinage 359 BCE
- Romans conquer Greece 133 BCE
- Romans conquer Gaul (France) 55 BCE

Further Information:

- BBC Pre-History: <http://bit.do/BBCprehistory>
- British Museum : <http://bit.do/BritishMuseum1>
- Pastscape: <http://pastscape.org.uk/>
- Schools Prehistory: <http://bit.do/schprehistory>
- English Heritage Pre-History Teachers' Kit: <http://bit.do/EnglishHeritage1>