Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

IRON AGE LAKE VILLAGE PH 5



This model represents an Iron Age lake village. The term Iron Age refers to the period during which tools made from iron began to supersede tools made from bronze. In the Britain the Iron Age is usually thought to extend from about the fifth century BC until the Roman conquest.



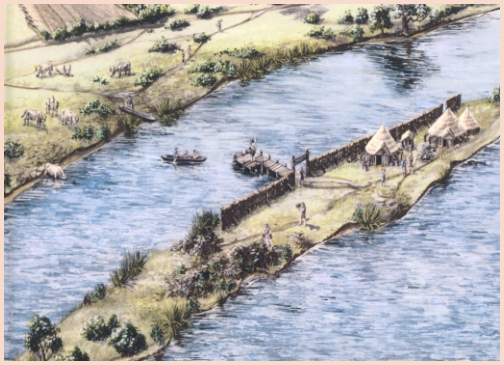
However, settlements on islands have a much longer history. Such settlements are known to have existed in Britain in the Bronze Age and the exploitation of the natural resources of boggy and lakeland landscapes dates back further than that. The Somerset Levels, an area of low-lying land which, in pre-history, would have been waterlogged, is the site of the Sweet Track (right), an ancient causeway which has been dated to 3,600BC. The track consisted of crossed poles of ash, oak and lime which were driven into the waterlogged soil to support a walkway that mainly consisted of oak planks laid end-to-end. It extended across the marsh between what was then an island at Westhay, and a ridge of high ground at Shapwick, a distance close to 2,000 metres (over a mile). The track is one of a network of tracks that once crossed the Levels.



The Levels were also the location of the Glastonbury Lake Village. Discovered in 1892 by Arthur Bulleid, it was at one time inhabited by around 100 people living in 5-7 roundhouses. This village was in use between 250 and 50 BC. Clay and wood were piled up to make mounds on which to site the houses (left).

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Such settlements also existed in the Thames Valley region. Along the Thames islands are called eyots and there are known to have been Bronze Age settlements on eyots at Runnymede and Bray. In the late 1980s a late Bronze Age eyot settlement near Wallingford was excavated. An artist's impression of this settlement can be seen on the right.

Lakes and rivers provided prehistoric people with a source of food - fish and waterbirds - as well as useful material such as reeds. Rivers also provided a means of transport and links to other regions - often it was far easier to travel by water than it would have been to cross the land. Island settlements also created a secure, defendable area, although the downside was that there was little room for animals or for the site to grow. Finally, there is some evidence that rivers and lakes were important sites for religious rituals. Many artefacts dating from the Neolithic Period to the Iron Age, some of them extremely valuable, have been found in the Thames and it is thought that some had been ritually deposited in the river. Perhaps the most famous such item is the Battersea shield (below) which was found in 1857 and is thought to date from the first century BC.



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In Ireland and the Gaelic speaking areas of western Scotland such island settlements are known as Crannogs (from the Old Irish word *crann*, tree). Wherever possible, the crannog builders would take advantage of outcrops of raised bedrock or existing small islands. Sometimes, though, they would have no option but to start their island-building underwater. Either way, the construction process was broadly similar. Large quantities of rock and rubble would be piled up to raise the ground level, with wooden piles being driven into the loch bed to keep the material in place. In some cases the settlement stood on a platform of stilts. Some, also, were connected to the shore by a causeway. Crannogs continued to be used in both Ireland and Scotland into the sixteenth century. The picture on the right shows an Irish Crannog being attacked by English troops in the mid-sixteenth century.



Crannogs come in various shapes and sizes, but the great majority are circular or oval, probably for relative ease of construction. Research in Scotland, where several hundred crannogs have been found shows that most are between 15 and 30 metres in diameter, although there are significant exceptions. Many just contained a single building. A free-standing platform crannog of this size, based on excavations of an original dating to 2,600 years ago, has been recreated on Loch Tay in Perthshire and a photograph of this structure can be seen on the right and below.

The model in this box shows an island settlement with 15 buildings - an unusually large number. The thatched roofs also have a rather strange design!

