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IRON AGE ARCHAEOLOGY PH 6

The term Iron Age refers to the period during which tools made from iron began to supersede tools made from bronze. Iron's hardness, high melting point and the abundance of iron ore sources made iron more desirable than bronze and contributed greatly to its adoption as the most commonly used metal once people learned how to extract it from the rock. In Britain the Iron Age is usually thought to extend from about 700 BC until the Roman conquest which began in AD 43. However, Iron Age ways of life carried on in most of northern England, Scotland and Ireland after this date.

Iron Age Britain was essentially rural. There were no cities, factories, large quarries or major roads. People lived in large communities, some ruled by chiefs, some not. Coinage was unknown until the very end of the period. Britain was a land full of farms and small villages, although in some areas people lived in larger settlements or hillforts. Nevertheless, a surprisingly large number of people lived in Britain at this time; at least a million, perhaps several. They probably spoke one or more Celtic languages.

Although there were many aspects of life that remained the same, there were also important differences between the peoples living in one part of Britain compared to another.



Above: An Iron Age coin of the late first century BC, which was found in Market Place, Reading, in 1927.

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Spear Fragment



The Iron Age in Britain has often been considered as a particularly warlike and violent time. The large number of Iron Age hillforts in some areas and the many weapons that have been found seem to support this idea. However, there is no decisive evidence that the Iron Age was more warlike and violent than other periods of the past. Some weapons were carefully decorated and made to the highest quality; others may even have been made for show, rather than for battle. The way people fought changed over the course of the Iron Age and was also probably different from one part of Britain to another.

Principal weapons used by Iron Age warriors in Britain were spears, shields and swords. The sling was also important. Different types and sizes of spears were used: some were javelins to be thrown; others were carried in the hand. Shields were usually made of wood, leather or hide and the only parts that are usually preserved are those of metal such as the boss or fittings. Different shapes of shield were in fashion at different times in the Iron Age.

The Iron Age blacksmith would make a spear by heating a bar of iron over a charcoal fire until it was white-hot and then hammering it into shape before it cooled. By reheating quenched iron to a moderate temperature and then allowing it to cool slowly, the metal would become much less brittle.

Swords, like shields, changed with fashion and their design may also have been influenced by changes in tactics. Many swords were carried in decorated scabbards. At hillforts, large numbers of sling stones have been found showing that the sling was probably an important weapon. Few Iron Age warriors in Britain appear to have worn armour of any kind: helmets were rare, so too was chain mail.

Because it is unusual for people to throw weapons away, most of the complete swords, shields and spears that have survived are those placed in graves or in rivers, lakes and bogs. It is not known where this sword fragment was found.



Right: The Battersea Shield, which was found in the River Thames. It is thought to date from the first century BC.

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Spindle



Very few clothes have been preserved from Iron Age Britain, so we know little about the clothes that people wore at this time. Clothes made from wool, linen, skin or leather are preserved only in particular kinds of wet, cold or dry conditions. In Britain, archaeologists do not normally find clothes preserved on the sites of Iron Age farms and villages. All that normally survives are some of the tools needed to make clothes, and the pins, brooches and other ornaments that Iron Age people used to hold their clothes together or for show.

The two cloth-making tools that most commonly survive are spindle whorls and loom weights. A modern example of a spindle can be seen on the right. The hole in the centre of this spindle whorl would have held a wooden rod, as can be seen in the modern example, although this part of the spindle is less likely to survive than the clay or stone whorl. Spindles were used to twist the wool into a thread. The threads were woven into cloth on a loom. Although wooden looms are not usually preserved, the weights that were used to keep the warp (down) threads tight are frequently found. A photograph of a modern reproduction of an Iron Age loom can be seen below.





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Animal Remains

Cow Horn, Pig Jaw, Horse Tooth



During the Iron Age, Britain was a land of farms and small villages. Most people would have been farmers, their lives governed by the farming year and the religious festivals that marked it. Most farmers grew wheat and barley. They would have been ground into flour to make bread, using quernstones. Barley and wheat could also be used in porridges and stews.

The most common animals were cattle, sheep and pigs, although which of these animals predominated depended on the nature of the land around the farm. Archaeological evidence shows that beef (cattle), pork (pigs) and mutton or lamb (sheep) were the most common types of meat eaten. The domestic cat and the chicken arrived in Britain in the last centuries of the Iron Age. Not that all animals were there to provide meat. Hens provided eggs. Milk from cows and possibly sheep was available at some times of the year, and was probably used to make cheeses. Cattle (oxen) were also used to pull ploughs.

The horse tooth, however, would probably not have been from a humble farm animal. It is thought that oxen (or human power), rather than horses, were used for ploughing. We know, however, from the writings of Roman historians, that Iron Age British people used horses to pull their chariots and carts. The Roman historian Tacitus, describing the final battle against Boudica, writes that 'on the British side, cavalry and infantry bands seethed over a wide area. Their numbers were unprecedented and they had confidently brought their wives to see the victory, installing them in carts stationed at the edge of the battlefield.' Boudica herself is described as rousing her army from a chariot: 'Boudica, with her daughters before her in a chariot, went up to tribe after tribe, protesting that it was indeed usual for Britons to fight under the leadership of women.'

Iron Age Britons probably considered their horses and the carts, traps or chariots they pulled as things of great value and importance. The remains of wooden carts and the horses themselves are rarely found by archaeologists. But the metal horse harness and other metal parts of carts are sometimes found. These are some of the most highly decorated objects made by Iron Age craftsmen and women.

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Pottery



The use of pottery was not uniform across the British Isles during the Iron Age. In some areas, such as Ireland and parts of Scotland, very few pots were used in Iron Age times. This must mean that these people rarely used pottery for cooking or storing food - but they may have used cauldrons and wooden containers instead. In the Thames Valley area, however, pottery seems to have been quite widespread during this period.



Direct evidence for how food was cooked comes from the pots, ovens, cauldrons and firedogs (iron supports for cooking meat over a fire). Many day to day meals were probably cooked in pots directly on a fire. Archaeologists sometimes find the burnt remains of stews or porridge on Iron Age cooking pots. Ovens were common and could be used to cook bread and other foods. Large amounts of meat would have been boiled in large cauldrons or roasted over a fire. Not all cooking took place indoors - outdoor hearths and ovens have been found on some Iron Age settlement sites. In the last hundred years of the Iron Age in southern England people began to make wheel-made pottery - previously British pots had been built up from coils of clay.





These Iron Age fragments are from Blewburton Hill on the Berkshire Downs. Between 500 and 300 BC a hillfort enclosing 10 acres was built with six metre high box ramparts surrounded by a three metre deep ditch. On the western side was a twelve metre wide gate which probably had a bridge over it. After a period of desertion, the hillfort was occupied once more around 100 BC before being abandoned again in the early Roman period. Interestingly, the remains of 10 horses were found interred in pits on the site.