Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

IRON AGE HOUSE PH 9

The Iron Age

The term 'Stone Age' is used by archaeologists to designate the vast prehistoric time period during which humans used stone for toolmaking. In 1865 John Lubbock subdivided the Stone Age into the Palaeolithic, Mesolithic and Neolithic periods. These three periods were further subdivided. In reality, the succession of phases differs enormously from one area of the world to another. The Neolithic (or New Stone Age) is traditionally the last part of the Stone Age. It is thought of as beginning with the start of farming and ending when metal tools became widespread, depending on geographical region. In Great Britain the Neolithic extends from about 4000 BC to 2000 BC.



The Bronze Age is the next period. In Great Britain, the Bronze Age is considered to have been from around 2000 to 700 BC. During this period the techniques for smelting copper and tin from naturally occurring outcroppings of ore and then making tools from the resulting alloy became common. Finally, the Iron Age began in Britain in about 700 BC. In this period 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.



Iron Age Britain was essentially rural. People lived in large communities, with 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. 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 left: The Battersea Shield, which was found in the River Thames. It is thought to date from the first century BC.

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

Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

IRON AGE HOUSE PH 9

Iron Age Houses



The model shows the construction of an Iron Age roundhouse, with a thatch roof and wattle-and-daub walls.

The roundhouse is the name given to a type of house with a circular plan, built in western Europe both before and during the Iron Age. The wall was made either of stone or of wooden posts joined by wattle-and-daub panels, and the roof was probably thatched. Most of what is assumed about these structures is derived from the layout of the post-holes uncovered by archaeological digs and the rest has been filled in by experimental archaeology, which has suggested the ways such buildings may have been constructed and used. For example, experiments have shown that a conical roof with a pitch of about 45 degrees does not require internal supports. It has also been shown that while a fire would have been lit inside for heating and cooking, a chimney at the roof apex made it difficult to control, causing an updraft that might set the thatch ablaze. Because of such experiments, it is assumed that smoke from a central hearth would have been allowed to accumulate inside the roof space and then leak out through the thatch.



The photograph on the right shows the construction of a wattle-and-daub wall. A woven latticework of wooden stakes called wattles is daubed with a mixture of clay and sand (and sometimes animal dung and straw) to create a structure. The technque continued to be used in Britain f*or* many centuries after the Roman period - many black-and-white half-timbered buildings from the seventeenth century used wattle-and-daub between the wooden beams.



The illustration on the left shows a reconstructed Iron Age roundhouse at Flag Fen, Cambridgeshire, which was made using archaeological evidence from the site.

Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

IRON AGE HOUSE PH 9



It needs to be remembered, however, that not all Iron Age houses were made of these materials - and neither were they all round!

In mountainous, rocky areas stone was more readily available as a building material than wood. The illustration on the right shows a reconstruction of an Iron Age house at Bostadh, on the Western Isles of Scotland. An excavation which took place in 1996 revealed a series of five *jelly baby* or *figure of eight* houses, in a remarkable state of preservation. The names come from the shape of the house, which is like a vaguely circular blob, with a separate and smaller vaguely circular blob attached to one end of it, linked by an internal doorway.

The houses had been built by excavating a floor level well below the surrounding sand, and building up a double layer of dry stone walling, with the gaps between the walls filled with turf, clay, sand and midden. The walls all stood to their full height and undisturbed floor deposits remained in the houses, beneath the preserving infill of sand. The houses were believed to date back to about 500 AD.

The excavations in 1996 revealed nothing about the style of roofing used on the houses. A double conical approach was considered for the reconstruction (reflecting the figure of eight shape), but it was felt that this would cause water to flow in where the two partial cones met. So a single, double skinned structure was used instead. The original aim was to give the outer surface a turf covering, but the summer of 1998 was exceptionally wet and many of the turfs cut for the purpose rotted before they cured. So the roof was thatched instead. The thatch was held down using heavy rocks attached to ropes, a technique that continued in use in the area until the early twentieth century.



It is also becoming clear from archaeological evidence that the shape of Iron Age houses varied considerably. The photograph on the left shows a reconstructed house from Århus, Denmark, which has a rectangular shape.