

# ANCIENT BRITAIN

MESOLITHIC (MIDDLE STONE AGE)  
9500–4000 BC

NEOLITHIC (NEW STONE AGE)  
4000–2200 BC

BRONZE AGE  
2200–800 BC

IRON AGE  
800 BC–43 AD



# THE PREHISTORY OF BRITAIN

Prehistory is all around us. Settlements, mines, megaliths, barrows and brochs litter the landscape. Many are marked on maps, and some can be visited. Much more remains hidden, with new discoveries coming to light every day. All enrich the story of diverse cultures predating the Roman Conquest of AD 43. Knowing them is like exploring a foreign country: much is familiar, but they did things differently then.

Mobile hunter-gatherers were already visiting northwest Europe over half a million years ago. By the time our own species, *Homo sapiens sapiens*, first appeared on the North European Plain around 40,000 BC, the territory was well trodden. Recolonisation around 13,000 BC, near the end of the last Ice Age, started an abiding tradition of occupation that continues to this day. Cave walls within Creswell Crags, Derbyshire, were decorated with images of wild animals around 12,000 BC, celebrating an ancient land. Peripatetic hunters deeply rooted in European traditions tarried beside rivers and lakes, as at **Star Carr, North Yorkshire**, around 9000 BC.



BARBED RED DEER ANTLER SPEAR TIPS FOUND AT STAR CARR, NORTH YORKSHIRE, c.9000 BC.



BELAS KNAP LONG BARROW, GLOUCESTERSHIRE, c.3800-3300 BC.



STONEHENGE, WILTSHIRE, c.3000-1600 BC.



A PETERBOROUGH WARE BOWL FROM HEDSOR, BUCKINGHAMSHIRE, c.3300 BC (LEFT) AND A BEAKER VESSEL FROM RUDSTON, NORTH YORKSHIRE, c.2000 BC.

## LIVING ON AN ISLAND

Rising seas separated Britain from the continent by 6000 BC. Those living on the islands forged new distinctive identities, although they maintained contact with their forebears across the sea.

Farming as we know it originated in the Near East but spread rapidly across Europe. Whether it was adopted in Britain around 4000 BC through migration or local people emulating their continental neighbours remains uncertain. But major impacts can be seen: woodland was cleared, wheat and barley cultivated, and domesticated cattle, pigs and sheep tended. No longer did people live with the land: now they controlled it.

Extended families lived in longhouses built mainly of timber or stone. Elaborate earthwork enclosures were constructed as seasonal meeting places, and long barrows as monuments to the dead were raised in earth and stone. Plain pottery vessels were replaced after 3500 BC with highly decorated Peterborough Ware in southern Britain and Impressed Wares in the north. Woodworking was highly accomplished, and specialist tools and weapons were made of flint and stone. Quarries were opened in the uplands, while flint was mined across the chalklands, as at **Grime's Graves, Norfolk**. Trackways facilitated movements and trading between communities.

## MAKING MONUMENTS

After 3200 BC, new kinds of circular monuments appeared, many looking heavenwards and orientated towards the movements of the sun and moon. Grooved Ware pottery found right across the British Isles shows a widespread common culture. Small square houses, such as those at **Skara Brae, Orkney Islands**, were common. Ceremonial enclosures known as henges were built, many incorporating timber settings or stone circles, including those at **Avebury, Wiltshire**. Cremation became the preferred burial rite.

By 2500 BC, a regular pattern of ceremonial centres, each comprising henges and burial grounds, can be seen across the British Isles. Stonehenge, Wiltshire, lies at the heart of the largest and best known. Pilgrimage to these centres, perhaps to celebrate the ancestors or to find spiritual and physical healing, is shown by movements of material and people.

Increased contacts across northwest Europe after 2200 BC spread the know-how to mine metal ores and produce prestige objects. Copper and gold were initially of interest, but bronze (an alloy of copper and tin) soon became popular for tools, weapons and ornaments. Closely associated with these changes was the adoption of Continental-style Beaker pottery, distinctive because of its high quality and fine decoration. Houses of oval plan became common, and burial by inhumation under a round barrow was favoured. Important people were accompanied into the afterlife by fine objects, of which the **Mold cape**, likely buried around 1800 BC, is one of the most spectacular.



RECONSTRUCTION SHOWING IRON AGE ROUND HOUSES AT MAIDEN CASTLE, DORSET, c.400 BC.



HOARD OF BRONZE AXE-HEADS FROM COLLEONARD, BANFFSHIRE, c.1800 BC.

Between 2000 BC and 1200 BC, the climate was warmer and drier than today. Settlement expanded, and many upland areas were colonised. Population grew, and the landscape was laid out as a patchwork of enclosed fields and open grazing. Burial traditions shifted back to cremation. Round barrows continued to be built, and extensive barrow cemeteries developed. Beakers were replaced by new styles of pottery: food vessels and collared urns.



ROUND BARROW CEMETERY WITHIN A LATER HILL FORT AT FOEL TRIGARN, PEMBROKESHIRE, c.1900 BC.

## CLIMATE CHANGE AND HILL FORTS

The centuries between 1200 BC and 800 BC were a time of crisis. Climate change and environmental degradation put many upland areas into serious decline and people retreated to lower ground. Wet places attracted special attention, with much fine metalwork, including the **Drumbest horns**, given to the gods of the watery underworld.

Competition for land caused unrest. An arms race prompted the adoption of new kinds of swords and shields alongside horse riding and the first wheeled vehicles. Iron became widely used for tools and weapons.



BRONZE LEAF-SHAPED SWORD WITH A TONGUED HILT FROM THE RIVER LEA, LONDON, c.1300-1100 BC.

From about 800 BC, hundreds of hill forts were built across the country. Early examples were often small and heavily fortified, but some were later remodelled as central places within emergent tribal systems, as at **Maiden Castle, Dorset**. Around each hill fort were homesteads where the majority of people lived while farming their land. Regional differences can be seen in the crops grown, the animals kept and the form of settlements: cliff castles and raths along the Atlantic coasts, courtyard houses in the southwest, and brochs and duns in Scotland.

Burial rites varied across the country, but the tradition of depositing prestige items in wet places continued, well-illustrated by the **Battersea shield**, retrieved from the River Thames in London.

Long-lived regional traditions remained fast, except in southeastern Britain. Here, communities were influenced by the Roman world, and they traded for wine, luxury food and exotic goods. Coins came into use, again following Mediterranean practices, and settlements known as *oppida* became centres for commerce before Claudius's army annexed Britain to the Roman Empire in AD 43.

### BATTERSEA SHIELD IRON AGE

FIND SPOT: RIVER THAMES, BATTERSEA, LONDON, ENGLAND  
EXHIBITED AT: THE BRITISH MUSEUM, LONDON

### SKARA BRAE VILLAGE NEOLITHIC

LOCATION: BAY OF SKALL, MAINLAND, ORKNEY ISLANDS, SCOTLAND  
PUBLIC ACCESS: HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND

### STAR CARR HEADRESS MESOLITHIC

FIND SPOT: STAR CARR, NEAR SCARBOROUGH, NORTH YORKSHIRE, ENGLAND  
EXHIBITED AT: THE BRITISH MUSEUM, LONDON

### MAIDEN CASTLE HILL FORT IRON AGE

LOCATION: NEAR DORCHESTER, DORSET, ENGLAND  
PUBLIC ACCESS: ENGLISH HERITAGE

### AVEBURY STONE CIRCLES NEOLITHIC

LOCATION: AVEBURY, NEAR MARLBOROUGH, WILTSHIRE, ENGLAND  
PUBLIC ACCESS: NATIONAL TRUST AND ENGLISH HERITAGE

### DRUMBEST HORNS BRONZE AGE

FIND SPOT: DRUMBEST, NEAR BALLYMONEY, COUNTY ANTRIM, NORTHERN IRELAND  
EXHIBITED AT: THE ULSTER MUSEUM, BELFAST

### GRIME'S GRAVES FLINT MINES NEOLITHIC

LOCATION: WEETING WITH BROOMHILL, NEAR THETFORD, NORFOLK, ENGLAND  
PUBLIC ACCESS: ENGLISH HERITAGE

### MOLD CAPE BRONZE AGE

FIND SPOT: BRYN YR ELLYLLON (GOBLINS' HILL), MOLD, FLINTSHIRE, WALES  
EXHIBITED AT: THE BRITISH MUSEUM, LONDON



**Number of stamps:** eight **Date of issue:** 3 October 2017 **Design:** True North **Acknowledgements:** illustrations by Rebecca Strickson; Battersea shield, Star Carr headdress and Mold cape photos © The Trustees of the British Museum; Skara Brae village photo by Rolph Gobits © Royal Mail Group Ltd 2017, taken with the kind permission of Historic Environment Scotland/Arainneachd Eachdraidheil Alba; Maiden Castle hill fort photo © Skyscan Photolibrary/Alamy Stock Photo; Avebury stone circles photo by Rolph Gobits © Royal Mail Group Ltd 2017, taken with the kind permission of the National Trust; Drumbest horns photo by Jonathan West © Royal Mail Group Ltd 2017, taken with the kind permission of Ulster Museum, Belfast; Grime's Graves flint mines photo by Rolph Gobits © Royal Mail Group Ltd 2017, taken with the kind permission of English Heritage **Printer:** International Security Printers **Process:** lithography **Format:** landscape **Size:** 41mm x 30mm **Perforations:** 14.5 x 14 **Number per sheet:** 30/60 **Phosphor:** bars as appropriate **Gum:** PVA Stamp designs © Royal Mail Group Ltd 2017 **Pack number:** 546 **Design:** Paul Felton **Words:** Professor Timothy Darvill (Bournemouth University) **Acknowledgements:** front – barbed antler spear tips © The Natural History Museum/Alamy; Belas Knap © Steve Speller/Alamy; Stonehenge © Skyscan Photolibrary/Alamy; Peterborough ware bowl from Hedsor, Beaker vessel from Rudston and sword from the River Lea © The Trustees of the British Museum; Maiden Castle reconstruction drawing courtesy of Historic England Photo Library © Paul Birkbeck; bronze axe-heads © National Museums Scotland; Foel Trigarn © Crown copyright: Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales; dirt image © Alamy; rear – Skara Brae © robertharding/Alamy; Star Carr headdress, Battersea shield and Mold cape © The Trustees of the British Museum; Grime's Graves © Skyscan Photolibrary/Alamy; Avebury © Francisco Martinez/Alamy; Maiden Castle © Angelo Hornak/Alamy; Drumbest horns © Ulster Museum, Belfast TBC; vintage map from 1870 © Roberto A Sanchez/Getty Images TBC; aerial photograph of sites except for Foel Trigarn featured with permission of Historic England Archive/English Heritage **Printer:** International Security Printers Pack design © Royal Mail Group Ltd 2017 Further details about British postage stamps and philatelic facilities may be obtained from: Royal Mail, FREEPOST, Edinburgh EH12 9PE or visit our website: www.royalmail.com/stamps. Royal Mail and the Cruciform are registered Trade Marks of Royal Mail Group Ltd © Royal Mail Group Ltd 2017. All rights reserved. To send any feedback on the design and content of this product, please email: stamp.team@royalmail.com



## 1 SKARA BRAE VILLAGE ORKNEY ISLANDS, SCOTLAND c.3100–2500 BC | NEOLITHIC



Fierce storms in 1850 stripped away sand dunes on Orkney's west coast to reveal traces of stone-walled houses. Subsequent excavations uncovered ten structures arranged on either side of a subterranean alleyway. The full extent of the settlement is not known, but middens containing domestic waste from centuries of occupation surrounded the houses. There was evidence that some houses had been replaced and the village remodelled during its long history. Each house is roughly square in plan with a single entrance, a central hearth, a dresser opposite the door and bed-boxes and storage facilities to either side. Some have small cells built into the thick walls, perhaps privies or stores. The inhabitants used beautifully decorated Grooved Ware pottery and had a rich material culture of worked stone and bone. Their diet was based on domesticated crops, wild plants, fish, seabirds and the products from sheep, goats, pigs and cattle.



## 8 DRUMBEST HORNS COUNTY ANTRIM, NORTHERN IRELAND c.800 BC | BRONZE AGE



Four complete cast bronze horns were found in a bog in 1840. Such finds from wet places are not uncommon and must have been offerings to the gods of the underworld. Experiments show that these instruments would have made deep resonating sounds when played like an Australian didgeridoo. Two of the horns were side-blown and could have provided a backing drone; the other two were end-blown through a cast-on mouthpiece and could have carried a melody. Rings would have held straps to support the instruments while being played in public rituals, battles or during raids. More than 100 horns are known from over 50 find-spots across Ireland. Regional styles can be recognised, and on a wider compass they are closely connected to the lurs of southern Scandinavia and the Baltic coastlands.



## 7 MOLD CAPE FLINTSHIRE, WALES c.1900–1600 BC | BRONZE AGE

Made by hammering out a 700g (1½ lb) ingot of gold, this dazzling object formed the upper part of an elaborate garment that was restrictive to wear but stunning in its impact. It was found by workmen in 1833 while quarrying stone from a large round barrow. Contemporary accounts suggest that it covered the fragmentary remains of an inhumation burial in a stone-lined cist. Amber beads lay in rows on the cape, and a bronze knife was nearby. Pieces of bronze, two gold straps (perhaps pieces cut from a second cape) and traces of cloth were all that remained from the rest of the garment. With the cape just 465mm (18½in) wide, the wearer must have been young or of slight build. The craftsmanship displayed is exceptional: three zones of repoussé decoration formed of concentric lines of ribs and bosses mimic multiple strings of beads and the folds of cloth.

## 2 STAR CARR HEADDRESS YORKSHIRE, ENGLAND c.9000 BC | MESOLITHIC

Excavations over the last 70 years have revealed three brushwood and timber platforms along the edge of what was once Lake Flixton, as well as evidence of houses on drier ground away from the shore. Among the rich collection of worked stone, flint, bone, antler and wood were more than 30 frontlets of red deer. All had been extensively worked, with the antlers trimmed, and some had holes cut through the skull. These strange items were probably masks or some kind of headdresses. They may have been used as a disguise in hunting or during ritual performances in which people took the place of an animal. It is likely that the original skin formed part of the attire, which may have been worn by shamans when communicating with animal spirits.



## 3 GRIME'S GRAVES FLINT MINES NORFOLK, ENGLAND c.2500 BC | NEOLITHIC

Flint was crucial for making edged tools and weapons in prehistoric times. Much of the best flint was obtained from mines in the chalklands of south-eastern Britain. Typically, a shaft some 6m (nearly 20ft) across was dug to reach bands of good-quality flint. Radiating galleries were then cut to follow the flint, often linking with galleries from other nearby shafts. At Grime's Graves, around 600 shafts are currently known, some up to 14m (46ft) deep, but only a handful have been archaeologically excavated. The earliest known workings date to before 3000 BC, with use of the site continuing through to about 1900 BC. Each shaft required the removal of about 1000 tons of chalk and overburden to obtain around eight tons of flint. Some flint was exported to far-flung communities as nodules, but much of it was worked into tools as it came out of the ground, and these were traded across the country.



## 4 BATTERSEA SHIELD LONDON, ENGLAND c.350–50 BC | IRON AGE

A masterpiece of artistry and skilled metalworking, this shield was found in the bed of the River Thames in the 1850s. Only the bronze metal face survives; originally it would have had a wooden backing. The metal part of the shield was made using four sheets of bronze and three circular decorative panels. They were joined together with rivets and enclosed by an edge-binding. A high domed boss in the central panel covered the handle. The complete shield is about 78cm (2½ft) long. The panels are made from thin beaten sheet bronze, decorated with repoussé, engraving and red-enamel inlay. The designs are Celtic in style, comprising interlocking circles and spirals connected by S-shaped curves.

## 6 MAIDEN CASTLE HILL FORT DORSET, ENGLAND c.400 BC | IRON AGE

A long sequence of occupation on this hilltop overlooking the River South Winterborne has been revealed through excavations in 1934–37 and 1985–86. Early occupation includes a causewayed enclosure at the eastern end around 3550 BC, a long mound along the spine of the hill built around 3400 BC and an early hill fort with a single rampart enclosing 6.4ha (nearly 16 acres) built around 600 BC. The great multivallate hill fort whose earthworks dominate the site today was built around 400 BC, enclosing 19ha (47 acres) – the largest hill fort of its type in Britain. Three concentric ramparts follow the contours of the hill. Entrances at either end have strengthened defences with outworks and staggered gateways. Timber gate-towers and palisades along the top of the ramparts provided extra security. The depth and complexity of the defences was an impressive display of strength as a time when sling warfare was common. Numerous round houses and associated storage facilities lay inside.



## 5 AVEBURY STONE CIRCLES WILTSHIRE, ENGLAND c.2500 BC | NEOLITHIC

Avebury is Britain's largest prehistoric ceremonial monument, defined by a bank 5m (16ft) high and an internal ditch originally some 9m (29½ft) deep. Four entrances give access to the flat central space some 350m (383yd) across which once contained a series of stone structures. Following the edge of the ditch was Britain's largest stone circle, comprising 98 unworked pillars of local sarsen stone. Within there were two further circles. The southern circle of 29 pillars surrounded a single standing stone or obelisk. The northern circle of 27 pillars surrounded a 'cove' of three massive uprights forming the sides of a box-like structure open to the northeast. The massive earthworks possibly served to contain powerful spirits while providing a grandstand from which to observe ceremonies inside the henge. At least two of the entrances link with stone-lined avenues defining pathways out into the landscape that connect Avebury with nearby monuments and the River Kennet.

