



Prehistory: Iron Age

850BC – 43AD

The prehistoric period is arguably one of the most fascinating periods to study because it is the longest (approximately 800,000 years) and we have little evidence surviving, especially from the earliest times. To understand what life was like we have to draw on archaeological evidence, science, experimental archaeology, research, and anthropology to form our understanding. New discoveries are being made all the time, and what we thought we knew about this period is constantly evolving.

The Iron Age in Britain is probably the best understood prehistoric period because much more of it survives in the archaeological record. Also the Phoenicians, Greeks and Romans wrote about it on their travels including details such as how the people lived, the economy, how society worked, what they believed, and their names.

At the end of the Iron Age the southern tribes were trading freely with the Roman Empire and coins (called potins) start circulating. We often think of the conquest in 43 AD as an invasion, but in reality a lot of the southern tribes liked the Roman lifestyle and were happy to have them.

Quick facts!

1. There is no single 'Iron Age' culture in Britain as the regional tribes developed their own styles, for example the infamous Picts in Scotland have their own very distinct art and language. In the south east of Britain the culture was influenced by mainland Europe, suggesting close contact with the people living there. The best known art is La Tène style which spread from Switzerland. Communities to the west traded with France, Spain, and Portugal, and those in Wales had strong links with Ireland.
2. Languages from this period survive in small pockets today. These are Irish, Welsh, Scots Gaelic, Manx (from the Isle of Man), and Breton (from Brittany).
3. Iron Age people were obsessed with their appearance. How they wore their hair, their clothes, and their jewellery all conveyed messages about who they were. Hairstyles varied between communities, often in the form of braids (worn by men and women).
4. The way they buried their dead has been a subject of much study. Some people were buried in elaborate graves with food, personal possessions, and sometimes even chariots

and horses! We find other individuals in places we would find unusual, like under houses, in ditches, and in storage pits, sometimes the skeleton has been disturbed at a later date.

5. The belief system of this period is known from the writings of the Romans. They worshipped a variety of deities connected to nature, were led by The Druids, and continued the tradition of depositing offerings of metal objects, animals, and even people into water. During peat cutting in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries bog bodies started to appear. These people and animals were deposited in the bog after death and the waterlogged conditions preserved their skin, hair, nails, and clothes. Huge amounts of information has been learnt from the bog bodies of northern Europe, especially those from Denmark and Ireland.

The Iron Age in Britain and Kent

Hillforts and warfare

Society is structured in much the same way as in the Bronze Age with different communities controlling particular areas of the UK, led by a ruling warrior elite. Cooler and wetter summers cause a crisis in agriculture and competition for resources to support the growing population results in the creation of hill forts and defended sites. Some of the sites have evidence for warfare, especially towards the end of the period, but there are suggestions that these are expressions of wealth rather than for defence. The largest examples are **Maiden Castle**, Dorset, **Old Oswestry**, Shropshire, and **Danebury**, Hampshire. This list is not exhaustive however, and there are hundreds of hill forts scattered across the country. In Scotland they built **brochs**, a tall tower like structure made of stone - an impressive feat of engineering for the time!

There are a couple of surviving hill forts in Kent, including Oldbury Hill, Ightham, and Bigbury Camp, Canterbury.

Death and Burial

As with the rest of the UK there have been a few late Iron Age cemeteries found across Kent, with a mixture of inhumation (burials) and cremations. One of the most spectacular burials found was the Mill Hill burial in Deal dating to 200 BC and contained a man with a sword, shield, a brooch, rings, and wearing a bronze crown. Other warrior burials have been found in Ashford too. Some people were buried with imported pottery and bronze items, with cremations being placed in a bucket until the middle of the first century BC.

The way people are buried in the Iron Age shows us that the eastern part of Kent continued to have closer cultural links to the people living in mainland Europe where as the people of west Kent had more in common with the inland British culture.

Settlement

Roundhouses were prevalent across the country up until the 43AD. Areas which had contact with Roman Empire, such as Kent, began to experiment with square buildings before the Romans came to Britain. For the most part people lived in farmsteads and small settlements but larger

towns began to develop, especially around some of the larger hill forts, sacred places, and trade centres.

Towns in Kent that have known Iron Age archaeology include Canterbury and Rochester, but there are many more who are in close proximity to these settlements.



Further Information

For information on finds check out the [Portable Antiquities website](#).

For further information on Kent sites check out the [Kent County Council Historic Environment Record](#).

CAT sites and reports are searchable on our [Gazetteer](#).

For sites to visit in England go to the [English Heritage Website](#); for Scotland try [Historic Environment Scotland](#); for Wales the [Cadw](#) website; and for Northern Ireland the [National Trust](#).

