



Prehistory: Bronze Age

2150BC – 850BC

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.

In this section we look at the Bronze Age. During this period people start using metal as the main material for tools, jewellery, and weapons. The knowledge for creating Bronze comes from the Mediterranean and is bought over by a group of people from the region around Switzerland called the 'Beaker People' because of their distinctive pottery. Farming really takes off and with the new metal tools the woodlands of Britain are cleared on a massive scale. Chiefdom's form and social hierarchies develop, along with competition for resources, prestige, and wealth. By the end of the period settlements are beginning to become defended giving rise to the Iron Age hill forts and warrior elites.

Quick facts!

1. The British Isles are packed with natural resources including tin, copper, gold, lead, silver, and iron. Tin (mixed with copper to make Bronze) is quite rare and the seams found in Devon and Cornwall in the Bronze Age would be mined until AD1998.
2. Metal weapons explicitly for warfare are created for the first time. Competition over resources and political conflict between communities gave rise to a warrior elite class in society.
3. Obtaining and displaying individual wealth with ostentatious weapons and jewellery is seen across the country. People living in a Bronze Age community would be able to trade for these expensive items if they could afford it.
4. Archaeologists and metal detectorists find hoards of metal objects buried in the ground, either buried during times of trouble and never retrieved or possibly as a religious offering. Some bronze and gold items were deposited in wet places, like rivers or lakes. We think this is a type of ceremonial offering. Hoards stop around 700 BC.

5. With access to better tools widespread deforestation of the landscape occurs across Britain. Field systems are created and route ways are cut through the forests, some are still in use today!



A beaker found at Monkton, Thanet.

The Bronze Age in Britain

The Beaker People

The new settlers arriving to Britain brought with them a distinctive style of pottery. Many of the Neolithic monuments were used as sacred sites for a short while but are often 'sealed' with one of these Beaker pots and abandoned.

Opinion is divided as to whether these people came peacefully but genetic evidence tells us they had a monumental impact on the existing population with 90% of the Neolithic gene pool being replaced by the end of the period.

Death and Burial

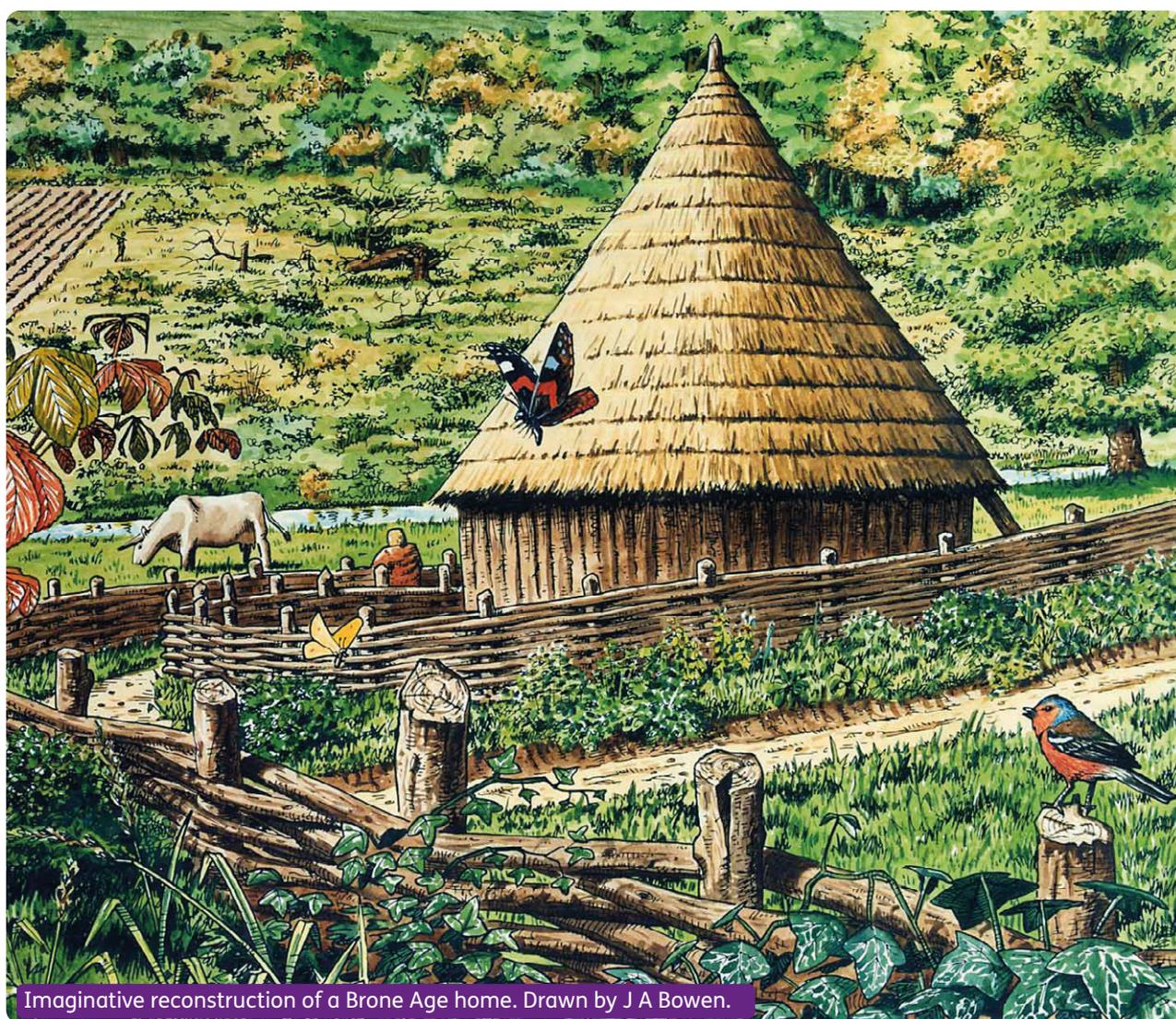
People were buried in individual cairns (where the grave is covered with a pile of stones to make a mound), rather than being buried altogether in a barrow. Some of these cairns are placed on high ground and sometimes there are clusters of cairns, forming a barrow cemetery.

Cremation starts to appear in the archaeological record for the first time. Personal items were placed in the graves so we can see what was important to Bronze Age people in life and in death.

Settlement

People lived in roundhouses made of thatch, wattle and daub, and stone (if it was available). Settlements could be located on hills, near rivers, or even built on platforms on lakes. Most of these settlements would have been made up of a few households sharing resources and skills.

The best examples of a Bronze Age settlement in the UK is at Must Farm, Cambridgeshire. This was a settlement built on a platform over a river which was destroyed by fire, preserving the objects in the mud below.



Imaginative reconstruction of a Brone Age home. Drawn by J A Bowen.

The Bronze Age in Kent

Kent was perfectly positioned to take advantage of cross-channel connections bringing in trade and new ideas. Evidence from the numerous round barrows suggest that the communities living in the area were relatively wealthy. Large high status enclosures are found along the eastern coast, along the Thames Estuary, the Medway, and the Isle of Thanet. There were some settlements inland too, probably placed to control route ways. Settlements were concentrated along the coast and rivers to take advantage of route ways.

Some of the finds in Kent have connections, or even originate from, areas of West Europe and there are suggestions that the communities of Kent and Northern France were better linked than Kent was to the rest of the UK. The communities living across Kent and into the Thames Valley would have competed with each other for dominance over the economic and political connections, with the manufacture of metal items in the centre of the power struggle. The collapse of this network at the end of the Bronze Age saw a massive cultural change, seen in the archaeological record by the large funerary monuments and landscapes falling out of use and being abandoned.

C·A·T Projects and Discoveries

Thanet Earth: early farmers

A complex field system, trackways, six ring-ditches (representing round barrows), and other enclosure ditches were found at the Thanet Earth excavations running between 2007 and 2012. Out of the funerary features twenty-nine individuals were recovered from the site. Nine of these were associated with Beaker pots. Carbon dating of the bones tells us that the cemetery was used from approximately 2199BC to 1537BC. The people were a mixture of Kentish locals and British people from the West.



The double ring-ditch of an early Bronze Age burial mound at Thanet Earth, 2008.

One burial in particular stood out with its grave goods. In Barrow 1 (main picture above) a grave of a man aged 30–44 years old was found roughly in the centre of the barrow. He was carbon dated to 2193 – 1981BC and isotope analysis suggests he was local to Kent. He had with him a beaker from East Anglia, a copper tang from a dagger, and a stone wrist guard used in archery. Although not confirmed the stone is believed to come from Spain or the Alpine region of Europe.



Ringlemere Cup (1950BC – 1750BC)

The Ringlemere Cup was found by a metal detectorist in Woodnesborough, Sandwich, in 2001. The site was excavated by C·A·T between 2003–2006 uncovering complex archaeology from the Mesolithic to the Early Anglo-Saxon period. The cup is on display at the British Museum and further information can be found on the [British Museum website](#). A 3D model can be viewed on [Sketchfab](#).

Image © The Trustees of the British Museum (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).



The Dover Bronze Age boat during excavation.

Dover Bronze Age boat (1500BC): trading by sea

The boat was found in 1992 during the construction of the pedestrian underpass under the A20 in Dover. 9.5 metres of the boat was lifted, conserved, and it is currently on display in [Dover Museum](#).

The boat was made from oak planks sewn together with yew withes. Animal fat, moss, and beeswax were used to make the boat water tight. It is thought to have been used to cross the Channel and to trade along the coast of Britain. The yew withes had been cut suggesting the boat had reached the end of its useful life and had been beached.

Further information on the story of the boat can be found on the [C·A·T website](#).

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](#).

Here you will find an overview of [Bronze Age Kent](#).

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](#).

Learning about the Bronze Age

There are some Bronze Age artefacts in our [Prehistory Box+](#) including replica tools, books, and a replica Beaker pot.

As part of the Boat 1550BC project we have a Bronze Age themed resource called the [BOAT KIT](#). This includes a loan box, downloadable classroom resources, a teacher pack, and other activities.

