



Prehistory: Neolithic

4000BC–2150BC

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 Neolithic (New Stone Age). This is the period where agriculture takes off and communities settle down in permanent locations. Surplus resources and new technological developments allow for the construction of ceremonial monuments on a scale not seen before in the UK, some of which, like Stonehenge, are still with us today.

Quick facts!

1. People are mostly sedentary (living in one place) and are domesticating animals and crops. Farming as we know it was around in 9,500BC in the Levant (in the Middle East) and reached the UK around 3,500BC. The move from foraging and hunting to farming would have gradually happened and there would have been overlap between the different ways of living.
2. Some of these early crops are called ancient grains and you can buy bread made from them today. In the UK they would have grown barley, wheat, oats, spelt, and rye, and kept early breeds of dogs, cats, cows, pigs, sheep and goats.
3. Houses become more robust and made from wood, thatch, mud, and woven hazel. Some houses were square, some were round. Archaeologists have been reconstructing these houses to better understand how they were made and used.
4. Tool technology changes to adapt to new farming methods, although metal is not used until the very end of the period. Along with sickles and scythes for cutting grains there are quern stones for grinding grain and pottery for storage. Polished stone artefacts were highly prized objects because they took a long time to make.
5. Communities are growing larger with some villages forming. People begin to build larger monuments, usually associated with burying their dead and with the sun, moon, and stars.

The Neolithic in the UK

Farming came slowly to the UK compared to the rest of Europe. It is thought to have been introduced by new communities coming over from Europe and making their homes here from around 4,000BC. The first farming communities settled along the south coast before spread in land. The new farmers would have started to cut down the woodlands to make their farms, changing the landscape forever. No one is really sure what happened to the people who were already living on the land, although new DNA analysis suggests the communities mixed and that the foragers eventually converted to farming.



Photo by Hulki Okan Tabak on Unsplash.

In comparison to the Palaeolithic and Mesolithic we have much more information from the Neolithic period. Neolithic people left more material culture (artefacts) than in previous periods, and the sites are easier to find and identify. Some of the sites still around today are enormous and it is no wonder they have stood the test of time. Among hundreds of Neolithic sites across the UK some of the best known are, **Stonehenge** and **Avebury** in Wiltshire, and the village of **Skara Brae** on the island of Orkney.

The Neolithic in Kent

The people of Kent and those on the opposite side of the Channel would have been in close contact throughout the Mesolithic period, so it is no great surprise to find evidence for very early Neolithic communities in Kent.

Megalithic monuments in Kent

Along the river Medway there is a cluster of megalithic monuments dating to around 4000-3500BC. The word megalithic literally means ‘big stone’ and some of these structures and sites are large even by today's standards.

These earliest monuments were stone chambers covered by a earth mound (called a long barrow). In the Neolithic the barrows are typically long rectangular structures with one or more stone chambers inside them, Inside the chamber the people would put the bones of their ancestors, usually mixing ages and genders. These monuments would have been places to honour the ancestors and the bones would have been frequently moved around, removed, and added to. Whilst this is not something we would do in the UK today, many countries still do either putting the bones in tombs or in an ossuary.

You can visit some of these monuments today although they are damaged after centuries of treasure hunting, excavation, and stone robbing. Kit's Coty and Kit's Coty House is managed by English Heritage. Coldrum Long Barrow is managed by The National Trust. Other barrows in the group are managed privately and may not be publicly accessible.

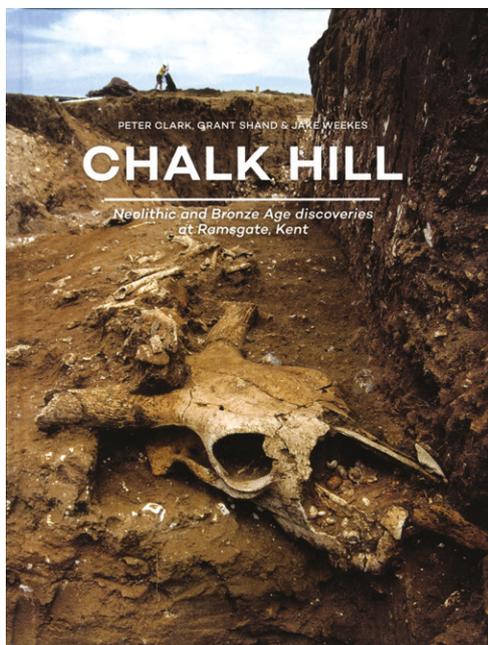


C·A·T Sites

The Meads, Sittingbourne: henge monument

Excavations in 2008 and 2013 at The Meads development in Sittingbourne uncovered a large Neolithic henge with circular ditch (that has a diameter of 30m) and associated post-holes arranged into two horse shoe shapes. When it was first constructed the circular ditch would have had a bank too.

Finds recovered from the ditch tells us that it came first and was built in the early-middle Neolithic. Struck flints, pottery, and evidence of burning was found, possibly associated with ceremonial feasts. The site is not used much in the mid-late Neolithic but the site is recut and the posts added in the late Neolithic-Bronze Age.



Chalk Hill: causewayed enclosure?

In December 1997 to January 1998 excavations were conducted on the edge of Ramsgate, ahead of the construction of the Royal Harbour Approach road scheme. The remains of a possible early Neolithic causewayed enclosure were visible on aerial photographs, however, the monument could not in fact be categorised as a causewayed enclosure, but instead represented a type of early Neolithic ritual monument unique to the British Isles.

Using scientific analysis and environmental data it was established that the site was abandoned around 3630–3595BC.

To read more about it there is publication to purchase or read online for free at [Sidestone Press](#).

Learning about the Neolithic

There are some Neolithic artefacts in our [Prehistory Box+](#) including replica tools, and animal bone.

For information on Neolithic houses and daily life check out the [English Heritage 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](#).

C·A·T 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](#).

