Overview: From Neolithic to Bronze Age, 8000 - 800 BC

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The British Isles have been populated by human beings for hundreds of thousands of years, but it was the introduction of farming around 7,000 years ago that began a process of radical change.

The dawn of farming

Human beings have been living in the part of northern Europe that is today called Britain for about 750,000 years. For most of that time, they subsisted by gathering food like nuts, berries, leaves and fruit from wild sources, and by hunting.

Over the millennia there were phases of extreme cold, when large areas of Britain were covered in ice, followed by warmer times. Around 10,000 years ago, the latest ice age came to an end. Sea levels rose as the ice sheets melted, and Britain became separated from the European mainland shortly before 6000 BC.

The introduction of farming was one of the biggest changes in human history.

The people living on the new islands of Britain were descendants of the first modern humans, or Homo sapiens, who arrived in northern Europe around 30,000 - 40,000 years ago. Like their early ancestors they lived by hunting and gathering.

The introduction of farming, when people learned how to produce rather than acquire their food, is widely regarded as one of the biggest changes in human history.

This change happened at various times in several different places around the world. The concept of farming that reached Britain between about 5000 BC and 4500 BC had spread across Europe from origins in Syria and Iraq between about 11000 BC and 9000 BC.

Neolithic revolution?

The change from a hunter-gatherer to a farming way of life is what defines the start of the Neolithic or New Stone Age. In Britain the preceding period of the last, post-glacial hunter-gatherer societies is known as the Mesolithic, or Middle Stone Age.

It used to be believed that the introduction of farming into Britain was the result of a huge migration or folk-movement from across the Channel. Today, studies of DNA suggest that the influx of new people was probably quite
small - somewhere around 20% of the total population were newcomers.

**Farming took 2,000 years to spread across the British Isles.**

So the majority of early farmers were probably Mesolithic people who adopted the new way of life and took it with them to other parts of Britain. This was not a rapid change - farming took about 2,000 years to spread across all parts of the British Isles.

Traditionally the arrival of farming is seen as a major and rapid change sometimes called the 'Neolithic revolution'. Today, largely thanks to radiocarbon dates, we can appreciate that the transition from hunter-gatherer to farmer was relatively gradual.

We know, for example, that hunters in the Mesolithic 'managed' or tended their quarry. They would make clearings in woodland around sources of drinking water, and probably made efforts to see that the herds of deer and other animals they hunted were not over-exploited.

The switch from managed hunting to pastoral farming was not a big change. The first farmers brought the ancestors of cattle, sheep and goats with them from the continent. Domestic pigs were bred from wild boar, which lived in the woods of Britain.

Neolithic farmers also kept domesticated dogs, which were bred from wolves. It is probable that the earliest domesticated livestock were allowed to wander, maybe tended by a few herders.

Sheep, goats and cattle are fond of leaves and bark, and pigs snuffle around roots. These domestic animals may have played a major role in clearing away the huge areas of dense forest that covered most of lowland Britain.

**Burial and belief**

Neolithic farmers also brought with them the first seed grains of wheat and barley, which had been bred many millennia earlier from wild grasses that grew in region of modern-day Iraq.

![Stonehenge stone circle, near Amesbury, Wiltshire](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/british_prehistory/overview_british_prehistory_01.shtml)

Initially, cereals were probably grown in garden plots near people's houses. Once harvested, the grain needed to be stored and protected from natural pests and from raiding parties.

This tended to encourage a more settled way of life than that of the Mesolithic communities, who would move around the country on a seasonal pattern, following the animals, birds and fish they hunted.

The 'henge' monuments, like Stonehenge, incorporate lunar and solar alignments.

In many cases the earliest Neolithic sites (approx 4000 - 5000 BC) occur alongside late Mesolithic settlements, or in areas that we know were important in post-glacial times.

From the start of the fourth millennium BC (about 3800 BC), we see a move into new areas that had not been settled or exploited previously.

This period, sometimes referred to as the Middle Neolithic, also witnesses the appearance of the first large communal
tombs, known as long barrows, or mounds, and the earliest ceremonial monuments, known as 'causewayed' enclosures.

Here people from communities in a particular region would gather together, probably at regular intervals, to socialise, to meet new partners, to acquire fresh livestock and to exchange ceremonial gifts.

During these ceremonies, rituals took place which often involved the burial of significant items, such as finely-polished stone axeheads, complete pottery vessels, or human skulls.

Some of the great ceremonial monuments of the Middle Neolithic, such as the so-called 'passage' graves, were aligned according to the position of the sun during the winter or summer solstice.

The long passage of a passage grave could be carefully positioned to allow the sun on the shortest few days of the year to shine directly into the central burial chamber. Passage graves were also constructed to provide good acoustics, and it seems most probable that they were the scenes of ritual or religious theatrical performances.

The so-called 'henge' monuments, like the famous Stonehenge, seem to have developed out of the causewayed enclosures from around 3000 BC.

They also incorporate lunar and solar alignments which are seen as a means of uniting the physical and social structures of human societies with the powers of the natural world.

The Bronze Age

Neolithic houses were usually rectangular thatched buildings made from timber with walls of wattle (woven hazel rods) smeared with a plaster-like 'daub' (made from clay, straw and cow dung).

Some of the larger buildings were the size and shape of a Saxon hall and may well have been communal. Most others were smaller and would have been adequate for a family of six to ten people.

The appearance of metal marks an important technological development, especially in the control of fire.

Neolithic houses are far more commonly found in Scotland and Ireland than in England or Wales, where communities may have retained a more mobile pattern of life, involving fewer permanent buildings.

The first bronzes appear in Britain in the centuries just before 2500 BC, which is the usually accepted start date for the Bronze Age.

On the European mainland the arrival of bronze was preceded by copper tools of the Chalcolithic or Copper Age, but in Britain tin and copper appear at about the same time as bronze.

Although the appearance of metal marks an important technological development, especially in the control of fire, it does not seem to bring a big change in the way that people lived their lives in the Early Bronze Age.

Henges, for example, continue in use, but the larger communal tombs, such as long barrows and passage graves, are replaced by smaller round barrows.

Many of these contain an initial or 'primary' burial, often of an important man or woman, who may be buried with distinctive and highly decorated pottery known as 'Beakers', together with bronze or tin metalwork such as daggers or axes. Sometimes fine goldwork rings, bracelets and earrings adorned the bodies.
In many instances the round barrows of the Early Bronze Age (2500-1500 BC) continue in use, as smaller or 'satellite' burials and cremations are dug into the main primary mound.

These places were clearly important gathering places for people and they were often carefully placed in the landscape either to be seen over a large area, or to mark the beginning or end or a community's land-holding or territory.

Houses in the Early Bronze Age were usually round with a conical roof and a single entrance.

**Accelerated change**

The Middle Bronze Age (1500 - 1250 BC) marks an important period of change, growth and probably of population expansion too. There was a fundamental shift in burial practice away from barrow burial, towards cremation in large open cemeteries where ashes were placed in specially-prepared pottery urns.

Settlements consisted of round houses which were often grouped together, possibly for defence, but possibly too because people preferred to live near one another.

During this period we find an increasing number of metalwork hoards, where dozens, sometimes hundreds of spearheads, axes and daggers were placed in the ground - often in a wet or boggy place, a practice that would continue right through the Iron Age.

**The Late Bronze Age saw the start of the so-called 'Celtic' way of life.**

Certain hoards found in south western Britain contained large numbers of fancy bronze ornaments, such as elaborate dress-fasteners, rings, pins, brooches and bracelets.

The Middle Bronze Age also sees the first field systems in Britain, indicating growing pressure on the land as the numbers of people and animals increased.

The Late Bronze Age (1250-800 BC) is marked by the arrival of new styles of metalwork and pottery, but otherwise life continued much as before. Horse-riding became more popular and Late Bronze Age swords were designed as slashing weapons - resembling the cavalry cutlass.

Houses were still round, a pattern that would continue into the Iron Age, but a number of large hall-like rectangular houses are also known.

The field systems of the Middle Bronze Age continued in use and were enlarged. In the uplands of Britain the Late Bronze Age saw the first construction of a few hillforts and the start of the so-called 'Celtic' way of life.

**Find out more**

**Books**

*A Landscape Revealed: 10,000 years on a Chalkland Farm* by Martin Green (Tempus Books, 2000)
The Age of Stonehenge by Colin Burgess (Dent, 2002)

Prehistoric Orkney by Anna Ritchie (Batsford Books, 1995)

Avebury: The Biography of a Landscape by Joshua Pollard and Andrew Reynolds (Tempus Books, 2002)

Hengeworld by Mike Pitts (Arrow Books, 2001)

Understanding the Neolithic by Julian Thomas (Routledge, London, 1999)

Ancestral Geographies of the Neolithic: Landscapes, Monuments and Memory by Mark Edmonds (Routledge, London, 1999)

The Significance of Monuments by Richard Bradley (Routledge, London, 1998)


About the author

Dr Francis Pryor read archaeology and anthropology at Cambridge. He has made significant finds from the Neolithic, Bronze and Iron Ages at Fengate, Etton and Flag Fen. He has written several books, including Seahenge (HarperCollins 2001), Britain BC (HarperCollins 2003) and Britain AD (HarperCollins 2004). His latest book, Britain in the Middle Ages will be published in June 2006 by HarperCollins.