

# celtic

## life in iron age britain



A British Museum exhibition of Iron Age objects from collections across the UK



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The period of human history when the use of iron became widespread is called the Iron Age. In Britain it begins around 800 BC and ends in AD 43 with the Roman invasion. There is a longer Iron Age in Scotland, which was not conquered by the Romans. The ancient Greeks and Romans called the Iron Age people of western Europe 'Celts'. Many of these Celtic peoples spoke related languages and created similar abstract art styles, suggesting that intermarriage, trade and other links brought communities from the Atlantic to the Black Sea into regular contact. Although Britain and Ireland were never explicitly referred to as Celtic by the Greeks and Romans, they were part of this world of shared art and languages. Iron Age peoples did not write down their own histories. This means that archaeologists must use the objects that these peoples left behind to reconstruct their lives. This exhibition contains a diverse collection of objects from across Britain. Each community used different objects and held different beliefs. Why not visit your local museum to learn more about how Iron Age people lived in your area?



K. Mitch Hodge  
Stonehenge, England  
Unsplash.com



*The Snettisham Great Torc (151 BC - 51 BC)*  
*British Museum*



# ritual, magic, and hoarding

Religious beliefs and rituals in Iron Age Britain were complex and are likely to have been woven into everyday activities such as farming, cooking and metalworking. Archaeologists rarely find remains of Iron Age temple buildings or places of worship. Offerings were deposited in homes, fields, hilltops and rivers and could come in the form of single objects, sacrificed animals or 'hoards'. These buried groups of objects ranged from everyday tools to gold and silver jewellery. While some may have been buried for safekeeping, most were probably offerings to the gods. Burying or cremating the dead was unusual in Iron Age Britain, but the rare graves we do find provide valuable insights into the lives of individuals and communities.

ABOVE: Weighing just over one 1kg (about the same as a bag of sugar), this neck-ring or 'torc' is made from 64 twisted wires, with hollow terminals cast onto the ends. Known as the 'Great Torc', it is one of the most elaborate golden objects made in the ancient world and rivals pieces by contemporary Roman, Greek and Chinese goldsmiths. It is very similar to the Netherurd torc, which was found in Scotland, demonstrating links between craftspeople across Britain.



*The Penbryn Spoons (51 BC - 99 AD)*  
*The Ashmolean Museum, Oxford; British Museum*

The decorated handles of these spoons suggest that they were important objects. People may have dripped a liquid through the hole in one spoon into the other, perhaps using the pattern made by the droplets to make predictions about the future. Spoons like these are a British phenomenon. Only one pair has been found on the Continent.

These small boar figurines would originally have been attached to helmets or buckets. They were buried in a hoard with other model creatures and a model wheel. Depictions of animals are rare in Iron Age Britain and it's unusual to find a group of animal figurines buried together. Much older objects were found in the same field, suggesting that this was an important site over a long period.



*Bronze boars from the Hounslow Hoard (51 BC - 26 BC) | British Museum*



*Cow bone hoard (61 BC - 2 BC) | Lynn Museum; British Museum*

Twenty gold coins minted in northern France were packed into this cow bone and buried as an offering to the gods or for safekeeping. Normally found in pots, hoards like this are occasionally also found in hollow stones. Coins were not only used for exchange in the Iron Age; they were often used as offerings at sacred sites or on boundaries, and some were buried without being used.



# warfare and status

Although the people of Iron Age Britain are often depicted as warlike, the decoration on their weapons shows that flamboyant display in itself played an important role in warfare. Many weapons are preserved today because they were chosen as offerings to be cast into rivers or placed in graves with the dead.

Dubbed the ‘Ferrari of the Iron Age’ by its excavator, this is a reconstruction of a chariot found in a grave at Newbridge. It indicates that an important person was buried here. Later sources, such as Julius Caesar, describe the fearsome use of chariots in warfare. Chariots were also used for travelling between communities and funerary procession.

The wheel and body construction show that it was made in Britain, but it is very similar to chariots found in graves in Belgium and France. Whole chariots are rare finds in Iron Age Britain. This is the only Scottish example; the others all come from later graves in Yorkshire.

*Newbridge chariot reconstruction  
(501 BC - 401 BC)  
by National Museums Scotland  
British Museum*



*Chalk figurine (301 BC - 201 BC)  
by Hull and East Riding Museum | British Museum*



Although depictions of people were very rare in Iron Age Britain, several small, chalk human figurines have been found in East Yorkshire. This figurine’s gleaming white appearance would have been very striking when it was first carved. His left hand appears to be extended in a gesture of greeting, while his right hand reaches behind his back, ready to draw his sword.

The pristine appearance of this bronze shield facing suggests that it was never used for defence. Its elaborate patterns and red glass inlays suggest that its function in battle may have been to dazzle onlookers, rather than to protect its owner. This shield was found in the River Thames at Battersea, London. Other finds of bronze weaponry and elaborate defensive gear in the Thames, and other rivers, have led to suggestions that these objects were deliberately deposited in the water.

*The Battersea Shield (351 BC - 351 BC)  
British Museum*





# personal identity

The inhabitants of Iron Age Britain did not leave any written records, so it can be challenging for archaeologists to gather information about individuals. As today, people expressed their identities through their clothes, jewellery and belongings. By examining items found in graves and settlements we can start to build up a picture of how people saw and presented themselves, and what was important to them.

*Balmaclellan Mirror*  
*National Museums Scotland | British Museum*

Mirrors were probably valuable and prestigious objects, used for grooming but also a way for people to display status. At a time when most people saw their reflections only in water, they may have thought that mirrors held magical properties, giving them the power to look into another world. They are often found in burials, showing that they may have been important personal objects. This mirror, however, was found in a hoard of other bronze objects, carefully wrapped in woollen textile. Decorated bronze and iron mirrors are most common in Southern Britain, but this bronze example is from Balmaclellan in south-western Scotland.

*Pictured right: Pitalpin Armlet (100-200 BC)*  
*National Museums Scotland | British Museum*

*Pictured below: Glass bead (-500-100 BC)*  
*Wiltshire Museum | British Museum*



Excavated from an Iron Age settlement at Swallowcliffe Down in Wiltshire, this bead is decorated with a distinctive 'eye' pattern. Beads in Iron Age Britain were usually glass, but could also be made from other colourful materials such as amber, sandstone and jet. They may have been worn strung on necklaces and are occasionally found in graves, showing that they were important personal objects.



This bronze bangle was found at Pitalpin in Angus, in north-eastern Scotland. The distinctive decoration at the ends evokes an animal with stylised snout, eyes and ears. The type is found only in this region, and an Iron Age woman probably wore it to express her local identity. Similar styles in larger sizes were worn by men. Chunky jewellery like this developed in Scotland after southern Britain came under Roman rule.



*Surgical instruments from The Doctor's Grave (40-60 BC)*  
*Colchester Castle Museum | British Museum*

This set of surgical instruments, excavated from a grave in Stanway, Essex, gives a rare glimpse into Iron Age medicine. Among the 13 instruments in the medical kit were scalpels, forceps, needles and a surgical saw. The grave dates to the decades around the Roman conquest in AD 43 and the objects of the medical kit are similar to Roman types. The man or woman buried here may have been versed in Roman medical practices as well as local healing traditions.



# daily life

Everyday items, such as pottery and tools, are the most frequent finds from Iron Age sites in Britain. Life centred around farming crops and animals, and other essentials were grown or made locally. Many settlements have evidence of craft activities such as weaving, pot-making, wood and metal-working. Evidence for the trading of pots, and stones used for grinding grain, show that neighbouring communities were in touch through trade and possibly marriage.



*Ceramic butt beaker (-100-100 BC)*  
*Yorkshire Museum | British Museum*

This type of large, ceramic cup dates to the very end of the Iron Age and reflects changing dining habits. It was probably used for drinking beer, mead or wine. Some cups were imported from the Continent, while others were made in Britain. This one was decorated by rolling a cylindrical stamp across the surface, a technique called ‘rouletting’.

Excavations of an Iron Age site at Meare in Somerset have produced evidence for weaving woollen cloth, along with an exceptional range of other craft and industrial activities. A large number of bone and antler weaving combs were found, some incised with elaborate designs. Weaving combs are found across Iron Age Britain and were probably used to make woollen straps and decorative clothing accessories.



*Weaving combs (-250/-50 BC)*  
*Museum of Somerset | British Museum*

*Saucepan pot (-250/-100 BC)*  
*Hampshire Cultural Trust | British Museum*



Pottery was an integral part of Iron Age life. Ceramic vessels were used for cooking and storing food and it is rare to find them whole. This pot was found at Danebury Hillfort in Hampshire and is the type used for everyday food preparation. Dark marks on the outside show it was heated over an open fire. If you look carefully, you can see subtle decoration around the rim.

*Fiskerton log boat (-500/-300 BC)*  
*The Collection, Lincoln | British Museum*

Blow by blow, this boat was worked from a single oak tree trunk. We can still see the axe marks on the sides. Few wooden boats survive from the Iron Age and the two found at Fiskerton were deliberately sunk, perhaps as offerings. This type of boat most likely would have been used to travel along rivers, perhaps transporting objects such as those shown in this exhibition.





Welwyn Garden City Burial Reconstruction  
101 BC - 2 BC | British Museum

## wider contacts

Iron Age people in Britain traded not only with their neighbours, but also with communities in Continental Europe. Some of the first gold coins were imported across the Channel from northern France. Increasingly, after 100 BC, Britain began to have contact with the expanding Roman empire. The classical writer Strabo wrote that gold, slaves and hunting dogs arrived in the Roman world from Britain. In exchange, wine and other new products made their way to south-eastern England, where they were sometimes buried with the dead.

From around 100 BC, people in south-eastern England began to practise new funerary rites, similar to those of north-western France. The goods in this cremation grave include pottery vessels, wine vessels (amphorae) imported from the Mediterranean, glass gaming pieces and the fitting from a shield. The exotic imports and high-quality tableware suggest that the individual buried here may have been part of an important ruling family. The mixture of local and imported grave goods reflects increasingly close ties to the Roman world.



*Gallo-Belgic type E stater (61 BC - 51 BC)*  
*Portable Antiquities Scheme | British Museum*

One side of this solid gold coin was deliberately left blank, while the other shows a stylised running horse. This design is typical of Iron Age coins from France and Belgium, where this coin was probably made. Large quantities were minted between 60 and 50 BC, when Julius Caesar was leading the Roman army against the Iron Age tribes of Gaul (modern France). Many are found in Britain, suggesting that British warriors may have fought as mercenaries in Gaul, taking coins like this one home as payment. The style was quickly adopted on later coins in Britain where it became a more abstract pattern of lines and dots.




## the end of the age

The Iron Age is traditionally thought to end with the Roman conquest, led by the Emperor Claudius in AD 43. In fact, the reality is more complex. Native culture in the British Isles continued to flourish and incorporated Roman traditions. Dragonese brooches, worn Roman-style as a pair, one on each shoulder, are a good example of this. The idea of an animal-headed brooch is Roman, but the sinuous, s-shaped curves of the dragon-like creatures developed from local art styles. These hybrid designs would continue to influence art made in the British Isles for many centuries to come.



*Dragonese brooches (100/200 BC)  
From the collection of British Museum*



An aerial photograph of Dunnottar Castle, a medieval ruin on a rocky promontory. The castle's stone walls and foundations are visible, with a prominent staircase leading down from the top. The foreground is filled with tall, dry grass, and a few people can be seen walking on a path near the castle's base.

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More information about the exhibition can be found on the British Museum website.

Curators: Helen Chittock, Rachel Wilkinson and Julia Farley  
Production: Joanne McAleer, Natalie Tacq and Emmanouil Ramos

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