FIELD & LANDSCAPE
PRESS

BEFORE ENGLAND
LEARNING COMPANION 7

THE IRON AGE

Hillforts, Tribal Life and the Landscape of Power

A companion research paper supporting the *Iron Age* section of *Before England*

MATTHEW ARMITAGE



Explore Britain's Past, One Period at a Time.

Before England Learning Companion 7

The Iron Age

Hillforts, Tribal Life

and Landscapes of Power

Text copyright © Matthew Armitage 2026

Published by Field and Landscape Press

All rights reserved.

This Learning Companion is made available as a free educational resource to support the study of Britain's ancient past. It may be downloaded, shared and used for personal, educational and classroom purposes, provided that the text is not altered, sold or reproduced commercially without written permission from the author.

Matthew Armitage has asserted his right to be identified as the author of this work.

Part of the Before England Learning Companion series.

www.matthewarmitage.co.uk

Contents

BEFORE ENGLAND LEARNING COMPANION 7 4

Period at a Glance 5

What Was the Iron Age? 7

Who Were the Iron Age People? 8

How Do We Know? 9

Main Discoveries 11

Climate and Environment 13

Everyday Life 14

Technology and Innovation 15

People and Society 16

Beliefs and Burial 17

Britain in the Wider World 18

Why the Iron Age Matters 19

Glossary 20

Suggested Reading 21

Places to Visit 21

About the Author 22

About Before England 22

Continue Exploring Britain's Past 22

BEFORE ENGLAND LEARNING COMPANION 7

Welcome to the Seventh Volume in the *Before England Learning Companion* Series

Each Learning Companion explores the archaeological evidence behind one period of Britain's past. Rather than presenting a complete history, these guides explain how archaeologists reconstruct ancient lives through discoveries, scientific investigation and the evidence preserved in the landscape.

The Iron Age began in Britain around 800 BCE and lasted until the Roman invasion in CE43. It takes its name from the widespread use of iron, a metal that gradually replaced bronze for making tools, weapons and many everyday objects. Iron was stronger, more durable and more widely available than bronze, allowing communities to farm more efficiently, build more effectively and produce an extraordinary range of practical and decorative objects.

Although iron transformed technology, farming remained at the heart of everyday life. Most people lived in timber roundhouses surrounded by fields and grazing land, raising cattle, sheep and pigs while growing cereals such as wheat and barley. Across much of Britain, communities became increasingly organised, trade expanded and regional tribes emerged with their own territories and leaders.

One of the most distinctive features of the Iron Age was the construction of hillforts. These impressive earthwork enclosures, often built on prominent hills, dominated the landscape. Some probably offered protection during uncertain times, while others became centres of trade, craft production, farming and local government. Today they remain among Britain's most recognisable prehistoric monuments.

The Iron Age also marks the point at which Britain begins to appear in written history. Greek and Roman writers described the tribes, rulers and customs they encountered, although archaeology provides a far richer understanding of how ordinary people lived. Excavations of settlements, burials, hillforts and ritual sites continue to transform our knowledge of this remarkable period.

This companion introduces the principal archaeological discoveries, important sites and scientific evidence that allow us to understand Britain's Iron Age and the technological, social and cultural developments that shaped the centuries before the Roman conquest.

Period at a Glance

Period: Iron Age

Date: c. 800 BCE –CE43

(In much of Scotland, Iron Age traditions continued for several centuries afterwards.)

People: Iron Age farming communities (Homo sapiens)

Climate: Similar to today, supporting widespread farming and permanent settlements.

Landscape: A patchwork of fields, grazing land, woodland, rivers, wetlands and hillforts.

Homes: Timber roundhouses, enclosed farmsteads, villages and some hillfort settlements.

Food: Wheat, barley, oats, beef, pork, lamb, dairy products, fish, fruit, nuts and wild plants.

Technology: Iron tools and weapons, blacksmithing, improved farming equipment, pottery, weaving, coinage and sophisticated metalworking.

Beliefs: Sacred rivers, springs and wetlands, ritual deposits, shrines and the traditions associated with druids during the later Iron Age.

Important Sites: Danebury, Maiden Castle, Cadbury Castle, Glastonbury Lake Village, Wetwang Slack, Stanwick and Broxmouth.

Why It Matters: The Iron Age saw the emergence of tribal societies, widespread use of iron technology and the development of communities that the Romans encountered when they invaded Britain in CE43.



Research Companion 7

The Iron Age

Key Sites in Britain

Danebury, Hampshire

Danebury is Britain's best-known Iron Age hillfort and one of the most important archaeological sites ever excavated. Excavations uncovered roundhouses, grain storage pits, workshops, animal pens and massive defensive earthworks. Rather than simply being a fortress, Danebury was a busy farming community where people lived, worked and traded for hundreds of years.

Evidence found: Roundhouses, storage pits, iron tools, pottery, animal bones, workshops, defensive banks and ditches.

Maiden Castle, Dorset

Maiden Castle is the largest hillfort in Britain. Its enormous banks and ditches dominate the surrounding landscape and demonstrate the remarkable engineering skills of Iron Age communities. Excavations have revealed houses, storage pits, burials and evidence for centuries of occupation before and after the Roman invasion.

Evidence found: Massive earthworks, roundhouses, burials, iron objects, pottery and evidence of long-term occupation.

Glastonbury Lake Village, Somerset

Built on an artificial platform within the Somerset Levels, Glastonbury Lake Village provides one of the clearest pictures of everyday Iron Age life. The waterlogged conditions preserved timber buildings, wooden tools, textiles and many ordinary household objects that rarely survive elsewhere.

Evidence found: Timber roundhouses, wooden walkways, weaving equipment, tools, jewellery, pottery, food remains and preserved wooden artefacts.

Wetwang Slack, East Yorkshire

Wetwang Slack is one of Britain's most important Iron Age cemeteries. Archaeologists discovered a remarkable chariot burial together with weapons, jewellery and other grave goods. The site provides valuable evidence for burial customs and the importance of high-status individuals in Iron Age society.

Evidence found: Chariot burial, iron weapons, jewellery, horse harness and high-status grave goods.

Stanwick, North Yorkshire

Stanwick is one of the largest Iron Age earthwork complexes in Britain. Surrounded by many kilometres of banks and ditches, it is thought to have been an important tribal centre during the final years before the Roman conquest.

Evidence found: Earthwork defences, settlements, pottery, iron tools, animal bones.

What Was the Iron Age?

The Iron Age began in Britain around 800 BCE and lasted until the Roman invasion inCE43. It followed the Bronze Age and marked the beginning of a period in which new technologies, expanding trade and increasingly organised communities transformed both society and the landscape. Although the period takes its name from the widespread use of iron, its importance extends far beyond the introduction of a new metal.

Iron gradually replaced bronze for making many tools and weapons. Although it was more difficult to produce, iron was stronger, tougher and far more plentiful. Skilled blacksmiths learned how to smelt iron ore and shape the metal into axes, knives, sickles, spearheads, swords and many other everyday objects. These innovations improved farming, woodworking, construction and craft production throughout Britain.

The Iron Age was also a time of expanding agriculture. Farming remained the foundation of everyday life, with most people living in roundhouses surrounded by fields and grazing land. Woodland continued to be cleared, enclosed farmsteads spread across the countryside and many landscapes became increasingly organised through field systems, trackways and boundaries that can still be recognised today.

Society also became more complex. Britain was divided into a number of tribes, each controlling its own territory. Some communities constructed impressive hillforts that became centres of farming, trade, craft production and local authority. Archaeological evidence suggests that wealth, status and leadership became increasingly important, although farming families continued to form the heart of society.

Britain became part of extensive trading networks linking communities across the British Isles and continental Europe. Iron, salt, livestock, grain and finely crafted objects were exchanged over considerable distances, while new ideas, technologies and artistic styles spread alongside them. During the Late Iron Age, some southern tribes even produced their own coins.

The Iron Age also witnessed important developments in religion and belief. Valuable weapons, tools and ornaments were deliberately placed into rivers, lakes and wetlands, suggesting these places held special spiritual significance. Shrines and ceremonial sites continued to play an important role, while Roman writers later described the religious leaders known as druids.

The Iron Age therefore represents far more than the introduction of iron. It was a period during which technology, farming, trade and increasingly organised tribal societies reshaped Britain, laying the foundations for the arrival of the Romans and the beginning of recorded British history.

Did You Know?

Unlike bronze, iron had to be heated to extremely high temperatures before it could be worked. Producing a single iron sword required great skill, making blacksmiths some of the most important craftspeople in Iron Age society.

Who Were the Iron Age People?

The people of the Iron Age were Homo sapiens, the same human species as ourselves. They lived in farming communities across Britain, growing crops, keeping livestock and making widespread use of iron tools and weapons. Although they inherited many traditions from the Bronze Age, the Iron Age saw important changes in technology, trade and social organisation that gradually transformed everyday life.

Most people lived in small farming settlements made up of timber roundhouses surrounded by fields, grazing land and storage pits. Families worked together throughout the year, cultivating cereals such as wheat, barley and oats, while cattle, sheep, pigs and horses provided meat, milk, wool, hides and labour. Farming remained the foundation of society, but people also hunted, fished and gathered wild foods to supplement their diet.

Iron Age people were highly skilled craftspeople. Blacksmiths learned how to smelt iron ore and forge strong tools, weapons and household equipment. Other crafts flourished alongside ironworking. Potters produced cooking pots and storage jars, weavers made cloth from wool, and woodworkers built houses, carts, fences and farming equipment. Many of these skills were passed from one generation to the next.

Trade connected communities across Britain and with continental Europe. Salt, iron, grain, livestock and finely crafted objects travelled considerable distances, while imported goods such as wine, glassware and decorated pottery reached southern Britain from across the English Channel. These exchange networks spread not only valuable materials but also new ideas, artistic styles and technologies.

Archaeological evidence suggests that society became increasingly organised during the Iron Age. Powerful tribal leaders controlled territories and some communities constructed impressive hillforts that became centres of farming, trade and local authority. Although certain individuals probably held greater wealth or influence than others, farming families continued to form the backbone of everyday life.

Children learned practical skills from an early age by helping with farming, caring for animals and observing experienced craftspeople at work. Knowledge of agriculture, blacksmithing, weaving, pottery and woodworking was passed from one generation to the next, allowing communities to prosper and adapt to changing conditions.

Although life could be demanding, Iron Age communities were resilient, innovative and well organised. Their achievements in farming, craftsmanship and trade created the thriving tribal societies that the Romans encountered when they invaded Britain in CE43.

Did You Know?

Many Iron Age children probably began helping with everyday jobs from a very young age. By watching adults at work, they learned essential skills such as farming, weaving, pottery making and caring for livestock long before they reached adulthood.

How Do We Know?

Everything we know about Britain's Iron Age comes from archaeological discoveries and scientific investigation. Although Greek and Roman writers described Britain during the later Iron Age, most of our knowledge comes from excavating settlements, hillforts, burials, artefacts and the environmental evidence preserved beneath the ground. Together, these sources allow archaeologists to reconstruct life more than two thousand years ago.

Excavations have uncovered thousands of Iron Age settlements across Britain. The remains of roundhouses, storage pits, fences, field systems and workshops reveal how people built their homes, farmed the land and organised their communities. At sites such as Danebury, archaeologists have excavated entire hillforts, revealing houses, grain stores, workshops and evidence for centuries of occupation.

Iron objects provide some of the clearest evidence for this period. Axes, knives, plough fittings, swords, spearheads and everyday tools demonstrate the remarkable skill of Iron Age blacksmiths. Scientific analysis allows archaeologists to understand how these objects were made, where the iron came from and how metalworking developed over time.

Burials also provide valuable evidence about Iron Age society and belief. Although burial practices varied across Britain, graves sometimes contain weapons, jewellery, pottery and personal belongings that help archaeologists understand status, identity and changing religious traditions. In some parts of Britain, archaeologists have also discovered carefully arranged ritual deposits placed in rivers, lakes and wetlands.

Environmental archaeology plays an equally important role. Pollen, seeds, charcoal and animal bones reveal what people grew, what they ate and how they managed the landscape. Scientific techniques such as radiocarbon dating help establish when settlements were occupied, while isotope analysis can show where some individuals grew up and what they ate during their lifetime.

Unlike earlier prehistoric periods, archaeologists can also compare their discoveries with the writings of Greek and Roman authors such as Julius Caesar and Tacitus. Although these writers viewed Britain from a Roman perspective, their accounts provide useful information that can be compared with the archaeological evidence.

Every excavation adds another piece to the story of the Iron Age. Advances in scientific research continue to improve our understanding of farming, technology, trade and tribal society, making the Iron Age one of the best understood periods of Britain's prehistoric past.

Did You Know?

At Danebury Hillfort, archaeologists excavated more than 2,000 storage pits. Many contained broken pottery, animal bones and everyday rubbish, providing an extraordinary picture of life in an Iron Age farming community.

TIMELINE

c. 800 BC

The Iron Age begins in Britain

Iron gradually replaces bronze for making tools and weapons. Farming communities continue many Bronze Age traditions while new technologies slowly spread across Britain.

c. 700 BC

The first hillforts appear

Communities begin constructing large earthwork enclosures on hills and other prominent locations. Some become centres for farming, trade, craft production and local leadership.

c. 600 BC

Enclosed farmsteads become widespread

Many families live in permanent settlements surrounded by fields, grazing land and storage pits. Farming continues to expand across much of Britain.

c. 500 BC

Iron transforms everyday life

Blacksmiths produce stronger axes, knives, sickles and farming tools. These innovations make woodland clearance, building and agriculture more efficient.

c. 400 BC

Large hillforts dominate the landscape

Some hillforts develop into impressive centres containing roundhouses, workshops, grain stores and livestock enclosures. Many remain important for generations.

c. 300 BC

Powerful tribes emerge

Britain is divided into tribal territories, each controlled by its own leaders. Trade and communication between regions continue to grow.

c. 150 BC

Trade with continental Europe expands

Merchants exchange grain, livestock, iron and salt for imported wine, pottery, jewellery and other luxury goods from across the English Channel.

c. 100 BC

The first British coins are produced

Several tribes in southern Britain begin minting their own coins, reflecting increasing wealth, trade and political organisation.

55–54 BC

Julius Caesar visits Britain

The Roman general leads two expeditions across the English Channel. Although he does not conquer Britain, he leaves the first written descriptions of its people and tribes.

AD 43

The Roman invasion begins

Emperor Claudius orders the conquest of Britain. Roman armies establish control over much of southern Britain, bringing the Iron Age to an end in England and Wales.

DID YOU KNOW?

Many of Britain's best-known hillforts, including Maiden Castle and Danebury, remained important centres for hundreds of years. Some were rebuilt and enlarged several times as communities grew and changed.

Main Discoveries

The Iron Age has produced some of Britain's most remarkable archaeological discoveries. From great hillforts and well-preserved settlements to rich burials and ritual sites, these places reveal how Iron Age communities lived, farmed, traded and expressed their beliefs. Together they provide an increasingly detailed picture of Britain's last prehistoric age.

Danebury, Hampshire

Danebury is Britain's best-known Iron Age hillfort and one of the most important archaeological sites ever excavated. Excavations uncovered roundhouses, grain storage pits, workshops, animal pens and massive defensive earthworks. Rather than simply being a fortress, Danebury was a busy farming community where people lived, worked and traded for hundreds of years.

Evidence found: Roundhouses, storage pits, iron tools, pottery, animal bones, workshops, defensive banks and ditches.

Maiden Castle, Dorset

Maiden Castle is the largest hillfort in Britain. Its enormous banks and ditches dominate the surrounding landscape and demonstrate the remarkable engineering skills of Iron Age communities. Excavations have revealed houses, storage pits, burials and evidence for centuries of occupation before and after the Roman invasion.

Evidence found: Massive earthworks, roundhouses, burials, iron objects, pottery and evidence of long-term occupation.

Glastonbury Lake Village, Somerset

Built on an artificial platform within the Somerset Levels, Glastonbury Lake Village provides one of the clearest pictures of everyday Iron Age life. The waterlogged conditions preserved timber buildings, wooden tools, textiles and many ordinary household objects that rarely survive elsewhere.

Evidence found: Timber roundhouses, wooden walkways, weaving equipment, tools, jewellery, pottery, food remains and preserved wooden artefacts.

Wetwang Slack, East Yorkshire

Wetwang Slack is one of Britain's most important Iron Age cemeteries. Archaeologists discovered a remarkable chariot burial together with weapons, jewellery and other grave goods. The site provides valuable evidence for burial customs and the importance of high-status individuals in Iron Age society.

Evidence found: Chariot burial, iron weapons, jewellery, horse harness and high-status grave goods.

Stanwick, North Yorkshire

Stanwick is one of the largest Iron Age earthwork complexes in Britain. Surrounded by many kilometres of banks and ditches, it is thought to have been an important tribal centre during the final years before the Roman conquest.

Evidence found: Earthwork defences, settlements, pottery, iron tools, animal bones and evidence of large-scale occupation.

Why These Sites Matter

Each of these sites reveals a different aspect of Iron Age life. Some preserve evidence for farming and domestic life, while others demonstrate engineering, craftsmanship, trade, burial customs and tribal organisation. Together they show that Iron Age Britain was home to skilled craftspeople, successful farmers and powerful communities whose achievements laid the foundations for Roman Britain. Ongoing excavations and scientific research continue to transform our understanding of this remarkable period.

Did You Know?

At Glastonbury Lake Village, waterlogged conditions preserved wooden bowls, tools, weaving equipment and even fragments of cloth. Finds like these give archaeologists a rare glimpse into everyday life more than 2,000 years ago.

Climate and Environment

The Iron Age climate was broadly similar to that of the late Bronze Age, with conditions generally favourable for farming across much of Britain. Although the weather varied from year to year, communities had learned to adapt to their surroundings, creating productive landscapes that supported growing populations. By this time, people were shaping the countryside as much as nature itself. Seasonal changes remained important, and successful harvests depended upon understanding local weather patterns, fertile soils and the careful management of crops and livestock throughout the year.

Much of Britain's original woodland had already been cleared during earlier prehistoric periods, but Iron Age farmers continued to create new fields and grazing land. Rather than being covered by dense forest, the landscape consisted of a patchwork of farmland, grassland, woodland, rivers and wetlands. Different regions developed in different ways depending on their soils, climate and local resources. In upland areas, rough grazing supported sheep and cattle, while fertile river valleys became centres of cereal production and permanent settlement.

Agriculture remained the basis of everyday life. Farmers grew cereals such as wheat, barley and oats, while cattle, sheep, pigs and horses grazed on surrounding pasture. Enclosed fields became increasingly common, and many communities carefully managed their land to keep it productive from one generation to the next. Storage pits allowed grain to be preserved for the winter months, helping communities survive poor harvests and ensuring a reliable food supply.

Pollen preserved in peat bogs and lake sediments allows archaeologists to reconstruct these ancient environments. By studying microscopic pollen grains, they can identify which trees and plants were growing at different times, showing how woodland gradually gave way to farmland and grazing pasture. Animal bones, seeds and charcoal recovered during excavations also help archaeologists understand the crops that were grown, the animals that were kept and the ways in which people managed the landscape.

Rivers, lakes and wetlands remained important features of the landscape. They supplied fresh water, fish, reeds and timber, while also serving as natural routes for travel and trade. Archaeological discoveries show that many of these watery places were regarded as sacred, with valuable weapons, tools and ornaments deliberately placed into the water as offerings.

Although Britain had become a largely agricultural landscape, natural resources were still essential. Woodland provided fuel and building timber, while rivers, coasts and wetlands supported fishing, transport and wildlife. The careful management of these environments helped Iron Age communities thrive for centuries before the arrival of the Romans.

Did You Know?

Many of the hedgerows, field boundaries and ancient tracks that cross the British countryside today still follow routes first established by prehistoric farmers during the Bronze and Iron Ages.

Everyday Life

Life during the Iron Age revolved around farming, family and the changing seasons. Most people lived in small farming settlements where roundhouses stood within enclosed fields and grazing land. Daily life was shaped by the demands of growing crops, caring for livestock and maintaining homes, creating communities that were closely connected to both the land and one another.

Agriculture formed the basis of the economy. Farmers cultivated wheat, barley and oats, while cattle, sheep, pigs and horses provided meat, milk, wool, hides and labour. Fields had to be ploughed, sown and harvested at the right time of year, and grain was carefully stored in underground storage pits to provide food throughout the winter. Quern stones were used to grind grain into flour for making bread and porridge, and archaeological evidence shows that farming methods continued to improve throughout the Iron Age.

Homes were usually circular timber roundhouses with walls made from woven branches coated in clay and roofs thatched with straw or reeds. A central hearth provided warmth, light and a place for cooking, while storage areas held food, tools and household possessions. Some settlements contained only a few houses, while others grew into busy communities within large hillforts.

Craftwork formed an important part of daily life. Blacksmiths forged iron tools and weapons, potters produced cooking pots and storage jars, and skilled craftspeople worked wood, leather, bone and textiles into a wide variety of useful objects. Many families probably made their own clothing from woven wool, while specialist craftspeople created finely decorated jewellery and other objects for trade.

Although farming dominated everyday life, people continued to make use of natural resources. Rivers and lakes supplied fish, woodlands provided timber and fuel, and wild fruits, nuts and plants supplemented cultivated food. Hunting also continued, although it was less important than it had been during earlier prehistoric periods.

Life was closely connected to the wider community. Families worked together during planting and harvest, shared knowledge and skills, and gathered for markets, ceremonies and seasonal celebrations. Building hillforts, maintaining field systems and organising large communal projects required the cooperation of many people.

The archaeological evidence reveals hardworking and adaptable communities whose success depended upon careful planning, skilled craftsmanship and a detailed understanding of the landscape. Their settlements, fields and everyday possessions provide one of the clearest pictures of Britain's final prehistoric society before the arrival of the Romans.

Did You Know?

Excavations at Danebury Hillfort uncovered quern stones, weaving equipment, blacksmiths' workshops and hundreds of storage pits, showing that Iron Age settlements were busy communities where people farmed, crafted and traded every day.

Technology and Innovation

The Iron Age witnessed another major technological advance in Britain's prehistoric past with the widespread use of iron. Although bronze continued to be used for jewellery and decorative objects, iron gradually became the preferred material for making tools, weapons and farming equipment. Stronger and more durable than bronze, it transformed the way people worked, built and farmed. The introduction of iron did not happen overnight, however. For many years bronze and iron were used alongside one another, with craftspeople choosing the material best suited to each task.

Iron was produced by heating iron ore in a furnace known as a bloomery. Unlike bronze, which could be melted and poured into moulds, iron had to be heated until it formed a solid mass of metal called a bloom. Blacksmiths then hammered this repeatedly to remove impurities before shaping it into finished objects. Producing good-quality iron required considerable skill and experience. Evidence from excavations has revealed bloomeries, smithing hearths, iron slag and unfinished tools, helping archaeologists understand how these workshops operated.

Iron tools made everyday work more efficient. Axes were used to fell trees, adzes and chisels shaped timber, while sickles helped harvest crops. Iron plough fittings, knives and woodworking tools allowed farmers and craftspeople to work more quickly and effectively than before. These improvements increased productivity and made it easier to clear woodland, build houses and maintain enclosed fields.

Blacksmiths became some of the most important craftspeople in Iron Age society. They produced not only farming tools but also swords, spearheads, shields, horse fittings and household equipment. Many of these objects were carefully decorated, showing that Iron Age craftspeople valued beauty as well as practicality.

Other technologies continued to develop alongside ironworking. Potters produced strong cooking pots and storage jars, weavers made cloth from wool using upright looms, and woodworkers built houses, carts, wagons and fences with increasing precision. Some tribes in southern Britain even began producing their own coins, making trade easier and demonstrating growing political organisation.

The manufacture of these objects required specialist knowledge passed from one generation to the next. Blacksmiths, potters, carpenters and weavers all played vital roles within their communities, while expanding trade networks spread new ideas and techniques across Britain and continental Europe.

The wide variety of tools, weapons and beautifully crafted objects recovered from Iron Age sites demonstrates a society becoming increasingly skilled, organised and technologically advanced. These innovations helped prepare Britain for the changes that accompanied the Roman conquest.

Did You Know?

Iron is one of the most common metals found in the Earth's crust, but turning iron ore into useful tools required expert blacksmiths and extremely hot furnaces. This made ironworking one of the most skilled crafts of the Iron Age.

People and Society

Iron Age society was built around farming communities whose lives were closely connected to the land, their families and the changing seasons. Most people lived in small settlements made up of one or more roundhouses surrounded by fields and grazing land. Although these communities were largely self-sufficient, they maintained close links with neighbouring settlements through trade, shared traditions and seasonal gatherings. Archaeological evidence suggests that most settlements were occupied by extended families who worked together to produce food, maintain buildings and care for livestock throughout the year.

Families formed the heart of Iron Age life. Parents, children and older relatives worked together to cultivate crops, care for livestock, build houses and produce many of the goods needed for everyday living. Children learned practical skills from an early age by watching and helping adults with farming, weaving, pottery making, woodworking and ironworking. Knowledge was passed from one generation to the next, ensuring that communities continued to thrive. Elderly members of the community also played an important role by passing on experience, traditions and practical knowledge accumulated over many years.

As the Iron Age progressed, society became increasingly organised. Britain was divided into tribal territories, each led by powerful individuals or families. Some tribes controlled large areas of land and became wealthy through farming and trade. Hillforts often served as important centres where people gathered to exchange goods, settle disputes, hold ceremonies and organise the affairs of their community. Some archaeologists believe that seasonal markets and festivals may also have brought together people from many different settlements.

Although some people probably held greater wealth or influence than others, cooperation remained essential. Building hillforts, clearing woodland, maintaining field systems and harvesting crops all required the combined efforts of many people. Communities depended upon shared labour, careful planning and a detailed understanding of the landscape.

Trade strengthened relationships between different tribes. Iron tools, salt, livestock, pottery, jewellery and other valuable goods travelled across Britain and beyond. These exchange networks spread not only materials but also new technologies, artistic styles and ideas, helping communities remain connected despite the distances between them.

The archaeological evidence reveals adaptable and resourceful communities that balanced local traditions with new ideas from across Europe. Their ability to organise farming, develop specialist crafts and maintain extensive trade networks created the strong tribal societies that greeted the Roman invasion in CE43.

Did You Know?

Some Iron Age tribes became so powerful that they produced their own coins. These coins often carried symbols such as horses, wheels or stylised patterns rather than portraits, making each tribe's coinage distinctive.

Beliefs and Burial

The Iron Age witnessed important developments in religion, ceremony and the way people remembered their dead. Although no written records survive from Iron Age Britain itself, archaeology has revealed a rich variety of religious practices. Hilltops, rivers, lakes, springs and wetlands all appear to have held special significance, while shrines and sacred places formed an important part of community life. Archaeologists believe that many ceremonies were closely linked to the changing seasons, successful harvests and the wellbeing of both people and livestock, although the details of these beliefs remain uncertain.

Burial practices varied across Britain. In many areas, surprisingly few formal graves have been discovered, suggesting that some communities treated the dead in ways that left little archaeological evidence. Elsewhere, archaeologists have uncovered cemeteries, cremations and richly furnished burials containing weapons, jewellery, pottery and other personal possessions. These discoveries suggest that some individuals held positions of importance within their communities. In eastern Yorkshire, for example, a number of high-status chariot burials demonstrate that certain individuals received elaborate funerals, reflecting their status and influence within Iron Age society.

One of the most distinctive features of Iron Age belief was the deliberate placing of valuable objects into rivers, lakes and wetlands. Swords, spearheads, shields, tools and ornaments were carefully deposited rather than simply thrown away. Many show little sign of use or were deliberately bent before being placed in the water, suggesting they were offerings made during religious ceremonies. Similar discoveries have been made throughout Britain, showing that watery places were widely regarded as sacred and formed an important part of Iron Age belief.

Roman writers described religious leaders known as druids, who are believed to have acted as priests, teachers and advisers within Iron Age society. Although these accounts were written by outsiders and must be treated with caution, they suggest that religion played an important role in community life and decision-making. Archaeologists cannot confirm every detail recorded by Roman authors, but their descriptions provide valuable clues when considered alongside the archaeological evidence.

Many earlier prehistoric monuments also continued to shape the landscape. Hilltops, ancient barrows and stone circles were often respected by later communities, demonstrating that people maintained strong connections with places that had been important for generations. Some ceremonial sites remained in use for centuries, showing that memories of the past continued to influence later communities.

Although the exact beliefs of Iron Age people remain unknown, archaeology reveals communities whose lives were closely connected to the natural world. Their ceremonies, ritual deposits and sacred landscapes reflect a deep respect for their ancestors, their environment and the forces they believed shaped everyday life. Every new discovery helps archaeologists build a clearer picture of the spiritual world of Britain's last prehistoric communities.

Did You Know?

Hundreds of Iron Age swords have been discovered in rivers across Britain. Many appear to have been placed there deliberately as offerings, showing that rivers were regarded as sacred places rather than simply sources of water.

Britain in the Wider World

Although most Iron Age people lived in small farming communities, Britain was far from isolated. Trade and travel connected different tribes across the British Isles and linked Britain with continental Europe. Through these networks, raw materials, finished goods, new technologies and artistic ideas travelled hundreds of kilometres, helping to shape Iron Age society. Archaeological discoveries show that these contacts increased steadily during the later Iron Age, bringing Britain into closer contact with the expanding Roman world.

Britain possessed resources that were valued throughout Europe. Iron was produced in many parts of the country, while salt from places such as Cheshire and the east coast was an essential trading commodity. Farmers also exchanged grain, livestock, wool and leather, creating busy regional trading networks that connected neighbouring communities. Metals such as lead and copper also continued to be exploited, while high-quality crafts were exchanged between different tribal territories.

Finished objects travelled alongside these raw materials. Beautifully decorated brooches, jewellery, weapons and pottery have been found far from where they were made, showing that skilled craftspeople produced goods that were widely exchanged. During the Late Iron Age, imported wine, glassware and fine pottery from the Roman world became increasingly common in southern Britain, demonstrating growing contact with continental Europe.

These trading networks spread more than valuable goods. New ideas about metalworking, farming, coin-making and artistic design also travelled between communities. Some southern tribes even began producing their own coins, reflecting both increasing wealth and stronger links with the European mainland. Archaeologists can often trace these connections by comparing similar styles of pottery, metalwork and coinage found in Britain and on the continent.

Travel took place along well-used trackways, rivers and coastal routes. Boats carried people and goods along Britain's rivers and across the English Channel, while overland routes connected hillforts, settlements and markets. These journeys helped maintain relationships between tribes and encouraged the exchange of knowledge and skills.

Despite these widespread contacts, regional traditions remained strong. Different tribes developed their own styles of pottery, metalwork and coinage, reflecting local resources, craftsmanship and identity. The Iron Age was therefore a period in which Britain remained both deeply connected to Europe and proudly diverse within its own regions.

The archaeological evidence shows that Iron Age Britain was an active participant in a wider European world. These expanding networks of trade and communication prepared the way for the even closer connections that followed with the arrival of the Romans.

Did You Know?

By the first century BCE, merchants were regularly crossing the English Channel. Some of the wine drunk by wealthy Iron Age tribal leaders had travelled all the way from vineyards in what is now France and Italy.

Why the Iron Age Matters

The Iron Age was the final chapter of prehistoric Britain and one of the most important periods in the story of *Before England*. The widespread use of iron transformed farming, woodworking and craftsmanship, allowing communities to produce stronger tools, more effective farming equipment and finely made weapons and ornaments. These innovations supported growing populations and encouraged the development of increasingly specialised skills. Ironworking also laid the foundations for technological advances that continued into the Roman period, influencing agriculture, transport and everyday life for centuries to come.

This period also witnessed important changes in the organisation of society. Britain became divided into powerful tribal territories, many centred on impressive hillforts that served as places of farming, trade, craft production and local leadership. Although each tribe had its own identity, they were linked by extensive networks of trade and shared traditions. Archaeological discoveries show that these communities were far more organised and interconnected than was once believed.

The landscape also continued to change. Farming expanded, woodland was cleared and enclosed fields spread across much of Britain. Many ancient trackways, field boundaries and settlements established during the Iron Age continued to influence later generations, and some can still be recognised in the modern countryside. These surviving landscapes allow archaeologists to trace how people organised and managed the land more than two thousand years ago.

Trade connected Britain more closely with continental Europe than ever before. Iron, salt, livestock and other goods travelled across the country, while imported wine, pottery and luxury goods arrived from the Roman world. New technologies, artistic styles and ideas spread alongside these trade routes, helping to shape Britain's increasingly complex society.

Modern archaeology continues to transform our understanding of the Iron Age. Excavations at sites such as Danebury, Maiden Castle and Glastonbury Lake Village, together with scientific techniques including radiocarbon dating, isotope analysis and environmental archaeology, continue to answer new questions about the people who lived during this remarkable period.

Most importantly, the Iron Age prepared Britain for one of the greatest turning points in its history. The Romans did not invade a primitive land but a country of skilled craftspeople, successful farmers, thriving trade networks and organised tribal kingdoms. The landscapes, monuments and artefacts left behind by Iron Age communities provide some of the richest evidence for Britain's prehistoric past and form the bridge between prehistory and recorded history. Every new excavation adds to this picture, helping archaeologists understand how Britain's last prehistoric societies developed and adapted before becoming part of the Roman world.

Did You Know?

Many of Britain's hillforts remained important long after the Iron Age had ended. Some were reused by the Romans, while others became strongholds again during the early medieval period, showing how these impressive sites continued to shape the landscape for centuries.

Glossary

Artefact-Any object made or used by people in the past.

Blacksmith-A skilled craftsperson who heated and shaped iron into tools, weapons and everyday objects.

Bloomery-A simple furnace used to extract iron from iron ore.

Coinage-The making and use of coins for trade and exchange.

Cremation-The burning of a body before the ashes are buried.

Druid-A religious leader described by Roman writers as serving as a priest, teacher and adviser in Iron Age society.

Earthwork-A bank, ditch or other structure made by moving large quantities of soil.

Excavation-The careful archaeological investigation of a site by digging and recording evidence.

Hillfort-A large enclosed settlement, usually on high ground, protected by banks and ditches.

Iron Age-The period from about 800 BCE to CE43 when iron became the main metal used for tools and weapons in Britain.

Isotope Analysis-A scientific technique used to study where ancient people grew up, what they ate and how they moved during their lives.

Pollen Analysis-The study of preserved pollen grains to reconstruct ancient environments and landscapes.

Quern Stone-A pair of stones used to grind grain into flour.

Radiocarbon Dating-A scientific method used to determine the age of organic materials.

Roundhouse-A circular timber house with a thatched roof, occupied by many Iron Age communities.

Smelting-The process of extracting metal from ore by heating it to very high temperatures.

Storage Pit-An underground pit used to store grain and other food.

Tribe-A group of people living within the same territory under shared leaders and traditions.

Wetland-An area of marsh, bog or shallow water that often held religious importance during the Iron Age.

Suggested Reading

Cunliffe, B. *Iron Age Britain*.

Cunliffe, B. *Britain Begins*.

Haselgrove, C., and Pope, R. *The Earlier Iron Age in Britain and the Near Continent*.

Hill, J. D. *The Iron Age in Britain*.

James, S. *Exploring the World of the Celts*.

Parker Pearson, M. *Iron Age Britain*.

Sharples, N. *Maiden Castle*.

Places to Visit

Danebury Hillfort, Hampshire

Maiden Castle, Dorset

Cadbury Castle, Somerset

Glastonbury Lake Village Museum, Somerset

Stanwick Earthworks, North Yorkshire

British Museum (Iron Age Collections), London

National Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh

Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge

About the Author

Matthew Armitage is a writer and former archaeologist who worked with five major archaeological organisations before moving into the heritage sector. His field experience includes excavation, landscape survey and artefact recording across Britain and overseas.

He is the author of *Before England*, a narrative history of Britain from the Ice Age to the Norman Conquest and writes to make archaeology accessible through evidence-based storytelling.

Matthew is also Managing Director of the historic Tooley's Boatyard in Banbury and continues to promote Britain's archaeological and industrial heritage through research, publications and public engagement.

About Before England

Before England traces Britain's story from the earliest evidence of human occupation to the Norman Conquest, following almost a million years of history through archaeology, landscape and changing environments.

The *Before England Learning Companion* series complements the book by exploring the archaeological evidence behind each major period. Together they provide both the story of Britain's past and the discoveries that allow archaeologists to reconstruct it.

Continue Exploring Britain's Past

This guide is one volume in the **Before England Learning Companion** series.

1. **The Lower Palaeolithic**
   Britain's First People and the Earliest Evidence
2. **The Middle Palaeolithic**
   Neanderthals and Ice Age Britain
3. **The Upper Palaeolithic**
   Modern Humans and the Return to Britain
4. **The Mesolithic**
   Hunter-Gatherers and a Changing Landscape
5. **The Neolithic**
   Farmers, Monuments and the First Communities
6. **The Bronze Age**
   Farming, Communities and the First Landscapes
7. **The Iron Age**
   Hillforts, Tribal Life and the Landscape of Power
8. **Roman Britain**
   Conquest, Settlement and Life in a Provincial World
9. **Early Anglo-Saxon Britain**
   Settlements, Faith and the Forging of Kingdoms
10. **Later Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms**
    Kings, Kingdoms and a Changing Britain
11. **Viking Britain**
    Raids, Settlements and the Making of England
12. **The Norman Conquest**
    Invasion, Conquest and a New Order