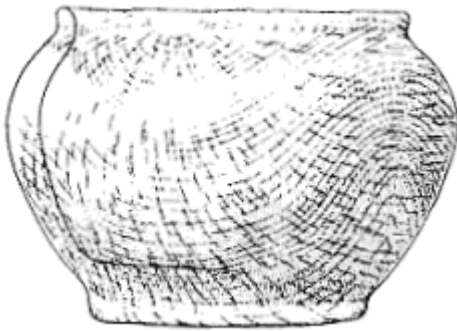


[Cymraeg](#) / English**Key Stage 1: Life in Early Wales and Britain****Everyday Life in the Past**

Before the industrial revolution most people in Britain lived in the country and worked on the land. Since Roman times there had been towns and cities but compared to modern ones they were very small. Before the Roman period (from the mid 1st century AD) there were no towns or cities although some people lived grouped together in settlements, often within hillforts. Here some aspects of everyday life of people of the prehistoric, Roman and medieval periods are described.

During the **prehistoric period** the majority of people were **farmers** who grew sufficient crops for their own use with a small surplus to exchange for goods that they were unable to make themselves. Such goods included raw materials like stone and metals used for making tools, weapons and personal ornaments. Although many **tools** and household articles were homemade others were made by **village craftsmen** such as blacksmiths, woodworkers, potters, leatherworkers and craftsmen in precious metals. Some of these craftsmen (or women) probably worked part-time, the remainder of their time being taken up with agricultural and domestic activities. This is likely to have been the case for the more simple types of woodworking, potting and metalworking where people were making objects for their own households. The number of specialised craftsmen who worked full-time at their craft was probably quite small, they supplied those items which farmers could not make for themselves as well as weapons and high quality goods for the small class of nobility and warriors.

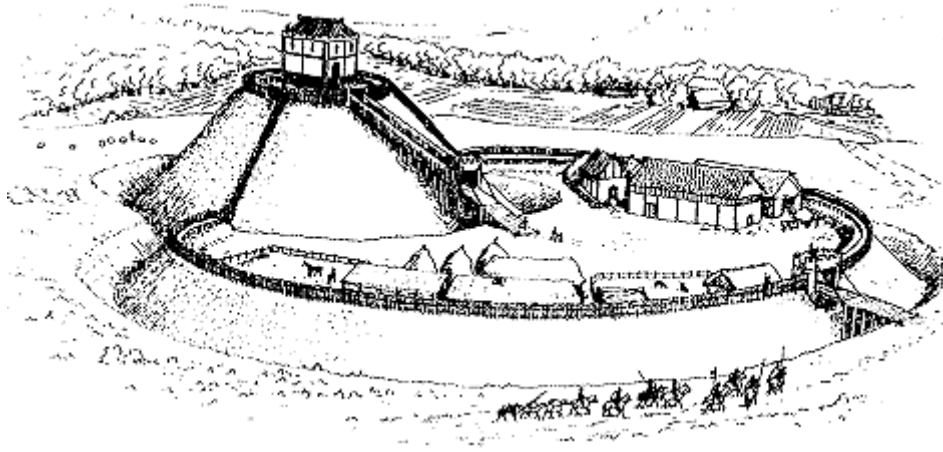
**An Iron Age Wooden bowl****An Iron Age mirror**

Most prehistoric people lived in **small settlements** or in single farms scattered across the countryside. There is evidence that many settlements were located in the more fertile and sheltered valleys but the stone burial cairns of the Bronze Age are often located on high ground as are the later Iron Age hillforts. Good examples of the latter are preserved at Ffrydd Faldwyn in Montgomeryshire or Moel Fenlli in the Clwydian hills.

During the **Roman** and medieval periods **towns** were built and developed. In Wales there were few Roman towns, particularly in the Borders where the settlements of this period are mainly military Roman forts or native settlements little different than ones of the Iron Age. Towns often grew up around castles which were built originally to hold newly conquered areas by force and as centres of local government. Many have **Norman origins** although many were rebuilt in later times. Wales had fewer towns than England and until the 13th century most were along the south coast or in the Borders including at Rhuddlan, Presteigne

and later Builth and Montgomery. In North Wales many castles and towns were built by Edward I after his conquest of that area in the late 13th century. Initially these were populated by burghers from outside Wales including English and Flemish. A well-preserved town with a castle is Conwy, at Flint and Rhuddlan the castles are also still upstanding but less can be seen of the medieval town.

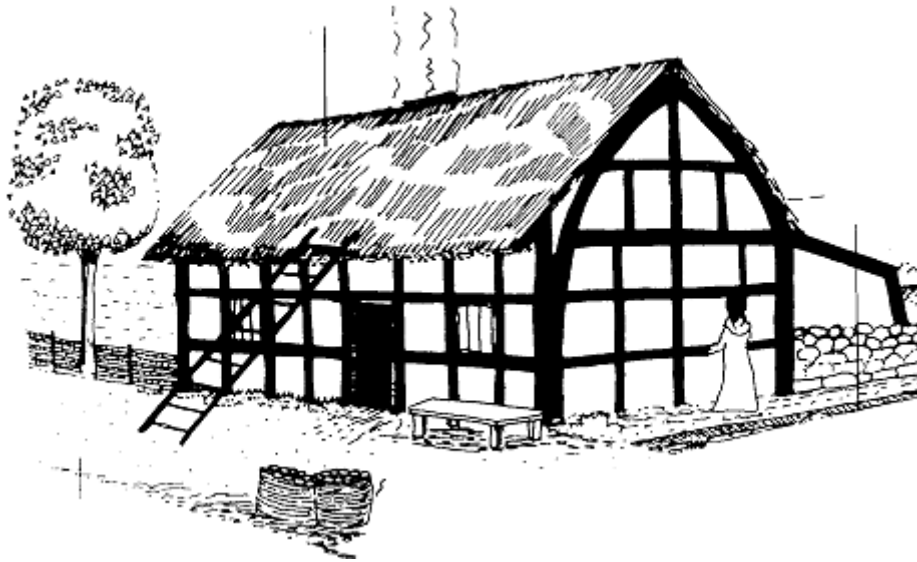
In **medieval towns** would be found the **homes and workshops of craftsmen** each specialising in their own trade often with each type of craftsman living in their own area of the town. Hence we find the butchers' row and the coopers' street (for example "Coppergate" in medieval York). Other crafts included the weavers, mercers, shoemakers, goldsmiths, silversmiths, haberdashers and many more. Some trades which produced particularly obnoxious waste, such as the tanners, or who used fire, for example the potters, were sometimes located on the edges of the built up areas for safety and to reduce pollution in the streets and streams. In the towns and cities lived officials who ruled the region for the emperor (in Roman times) or for the king. In the medieval period these included the sherriff of the county. Many towns were protected by **walls**, at first earth ramparts topped by a wooden palisade and later by stone or brick walls. The main roads entered the town through **gates** often massive in size and defended by a portcullis.



Reconstruction of a wooden castle

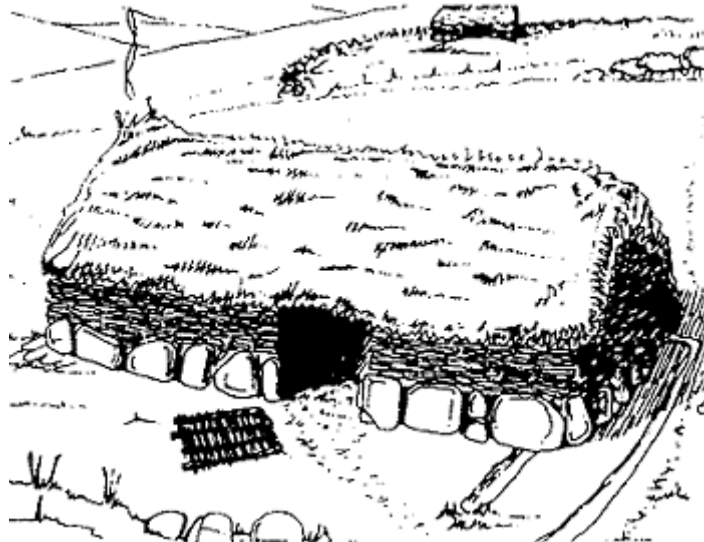
In the country medieval people lived in a variety of types of settlements. The local lord lived in a timber or stone castle set on a **motte** (a manmade mound) surrounded by its fortified bailey. In those areas occupied by the Normans each manor had its serfs or villeins, workers who were bound by law to stay on the estate and work the lord's land. Other farmers owned or leased their own land but might still owe some labour to the local lord. They lived often in villages spread around different parts of the manor estate which was divided up into open arable fields, pasture land on moor and meadow and woods where the lord hunted deer and other wild animals and where he and the villagers obtained wood for building, carpentry and for fires. Some of the villages were later abandoned and their remains can sometimes be seen as low earthworks where once stood wooden buildings set on small plots divided by earth trackways.

In much of Wales the nobility rarely lived in stone castles but in timber castles or in fortified **manors (llys)** sometimes set within moats. Most houses were built of wood, many of those belonging to the better-off people consisting of a **timber-framed hall-house** with a hall, private parlour and bedroom for the owner and service rooms. In the hall the fire was on an open hearth with the smoke escaping through the roof, the only furniture was benches, tables and a few chairs for important people.



A timber framed house

Farmers lived more often in dispersed settlements with few villages. Because of the hilly nature of much of the countryside and the higher rainfall and shorter growing season pasture animals were more important than in most of England. Upland settlements *hafotai* were used as seasonal dwellings when cattle were taken to the summer pastures. Other settlements include **monastic** sites where groups of monks or nuns lived a life of seclusion devoting their time to prayer whilst being supported by the work of lay members who farmed their estates and worked in their mills, fisheries and mines. Monasteries offered shelter to travellers of all types as well as being teachers and caring for the sick. Many of the monastic sites in Wales were founded by the Cistercian order including that at Valle Crucis Abbey near Llangollen. Other sites were much smaller with wooden buildings set within an enclosure or "llan", these included monastic sites and local churches.



A hafod

Suggested sites to visit:-

Hillforts of the Iron Age at Moel Fenlli, Castell Dinas Bran, Ffrydd Faldwyn or Dinas Castell (near Talgarth).

Conwy castle and medieval town

Stone Castles at Flint, Rhuddlan, Denbigh, Ewloe, Dinas Bran (Llangollen), Montgomery, Dolforwyn, New Radnor, Builth or Hay.

Remains of **timber castle** (motte and bailey) at Hen Domen (near Montgomery)

Monastic sites at Valle Crucis Abbey (Llangollen), Basingwerk or Brecon (now the cathedral).

Leaflets prepared by the Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust are available on some of these sites.

Details of other sites in your area can be obtained by contacting the SMR Officer.

Further reading:-

Arnold, C J 1990 *The Archaeology of Montgomeryshire*. Welshpool: Powysland Club.

Cooper, R 1992 *Abbeys and Priors of Wales*. Swansea: Christopher Davies.

Dyer, J 1981 *Hillforts of England and Wales*. Aylesbury: Shire Archaeology.

Howell, R (ed) 1994. *Archaeology and the National Curriculum in Wales*. Council for British Archaeology.

Manley, J (ed) 1991 *The Archaeology of Clwyd*. Mold: Clwyd Archaeology Service.

Musson, C 1994 *Wales from the Air*. Aberystwyth: RCAHMW.

Soulsby, I 1983 *The Towns of Medieval Wales*. Chichester: Phillimore.

This information was compiled by Caroline Earwood and Neville Townsend for Clwyd Powys Archaeological Trust, 7a Church Street, Welshpool, Powys, SY21 7DL. tel: 01938 553670 fax: (01938) 552179

E-mail: trust@cpat.org.uk

You may reproduce this material free of copyright for teaching purposes only

[Privacy and cookies](#)