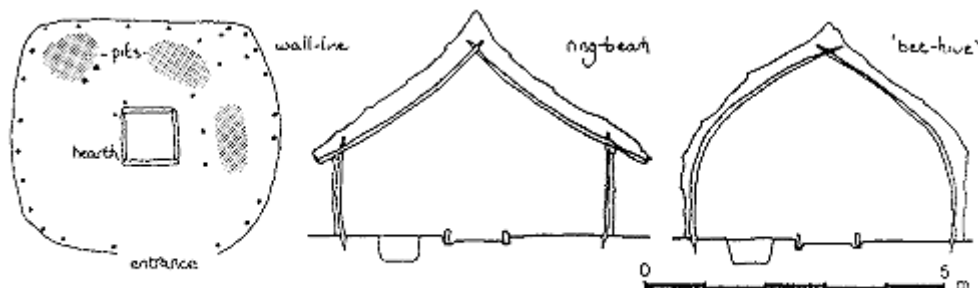


Cymraeg / English**Key Stage 2: A study of a historical theme**

# Houses and Households: from Neolithic to medieval times

The first people who lived in Britain after the end of the last Ice Age, about 12,000 to 15,000 years ago, did not have permanent houses. They lived by **hunting, fishing and gathering of wild foods** and moved from place to place. They made temporary shelters or tents with branches and skins, some lived in caves.

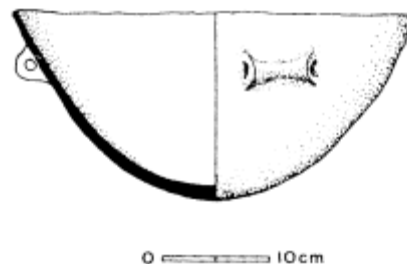
About 6000 years ago people started to grow **arable crops** like wheat and barley and to keep **domestic animals**: pigs, sheep and cattle. These people lived in permanent houses, other buildings probably included barns and byres. Not very many of these settlements have survived - after all 6000 years is a long time for structures to survive even as marks on the ground or postholes. From the few **houses** that have been found and excavated we know that some were rectangular buildings which were occasionally divided into two rooms. The best preserved are in Orkney, these were built in stone and have very thick walls. The main rooms were fitted with stone dressers and benches. Near the middle of the floor was an open fire, the smoke escaped through the roof. Other rectangular **houses were built in wood** and were sometimes quite large, up to 7 metres long. They would probably have been roofed with wood and straw or reeds. A possible house of this type was identified during excavation at Moel y Gaer, Rhosesmor in Clwyd and another in Trelystan.



*Plan and alternative reconstructions of the Neolithic houses at Trelystan*

The first farmers made most of their own tools, clothes and agricultural equipment. Skins were treated to make leather for shoes and clothes, wood was used for house building and for making simple furniture, bowls and tools, clay was dug and processed for pottery. The sheep provided wool which was spun and woven into cloth, flax was grown and made into linen cloth.

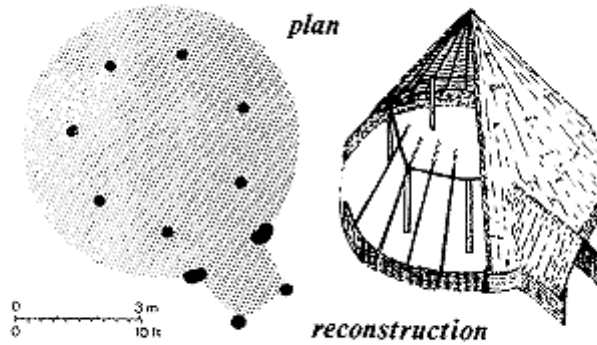
A typical range of objects in the household and farm would have included pots to cook in and from which to eat, a stone saddle quern for grinding grain, wooden bowls, dishes and agriculture tools such as spades and simple ploughs (known as ards), a wooden loom for weaving the wool and flax. Tools such as axes and knives were made from stone mounted in wooden handles.



**Neolithic bowl**

For thousands of years people continued to live in a similar way. From about 6000 years ago they began

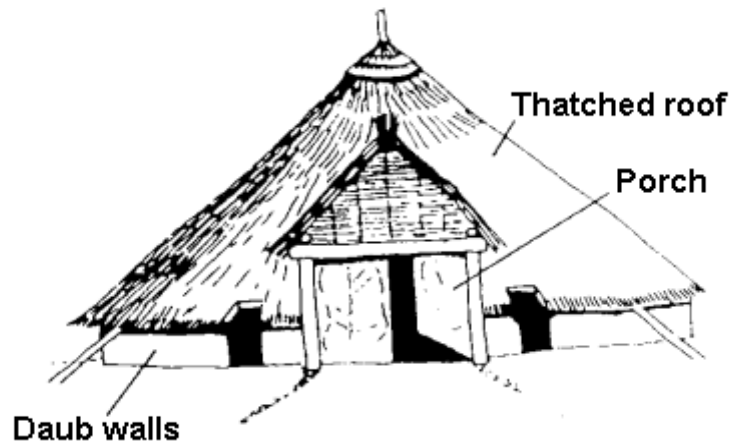
to use **metal** for tools and other objects, first copper mixed with lead or tin and later, from about 700BC, iron. Most of the **houses** from this period were **round** in shape. Many were built in **wood** but in some areas where stone was plentiful this was used instead. Some had a central post to hold up the roof, others had a ring of posts around a central open fire. The houses were usually set amongst small fields and sometimes in groups. Later in the bronze age (around 1500BC), in some areas of Britain, the land was divided up into large fields by banks or earth and stone. The best explored of these systems of fields is on Dartmoor in Devon. Round bronze age houses have survived in Wales at Mynydd Poeth and Frith Bryn Helen, Clwyd.



### Bronze Age house

About 3,000 years ago people began to live in larger **groups of houses which were often enclosed by a stout wooden fence or palisade**. We do not know exactly why they built their settlements in this way but it seems they were defending themselves from other people. After a few hundred years the fence was replaced by a large bank with a ditch dug on the outer edge. On the top of the bank was built a wooden palisade.

During the Iron Age (from about 700BC to the Roman conquest) many of the smaller **hillforts** were abandoned and larger ones were built. Many of these had up to three lines of banks and ditches to protect the inhabitants from attack. In the eastern and northern part of Wales there were many hillforts some of which survive today as impressive features in the landscape. Within the forts people lived in round houses built in stone or wood, in some there were so many houses they were arranged neatly along roadways. Not all buildings were houses, some were used as workshops and others, usually rectangular, were used for storing grain.



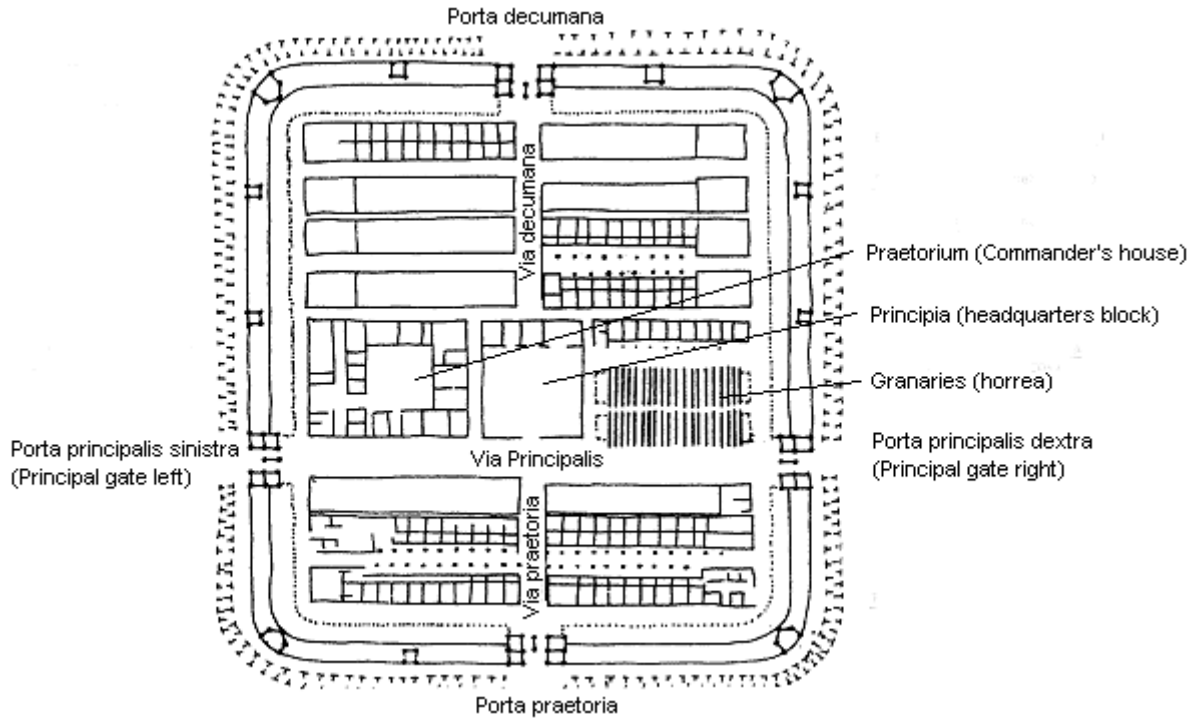
### Iron Age house

Not all people lived in the hillforts, there were many **farmsteads** dotted around the countryside. Most of these were small groups of round houses with a few rectangular granaries. Some were enclosed by a wooden fence, perhaps for defence. The farms were surrounded by rectangular **fields** (sometimes known as "celtic fields") where crops were grown. Animals would probably have been pastured in larger fields or open ground away from the farmstead. In most areas large areas of woodland still existed, wood was an important resource used for building houses, making tools and implements and for firewood.



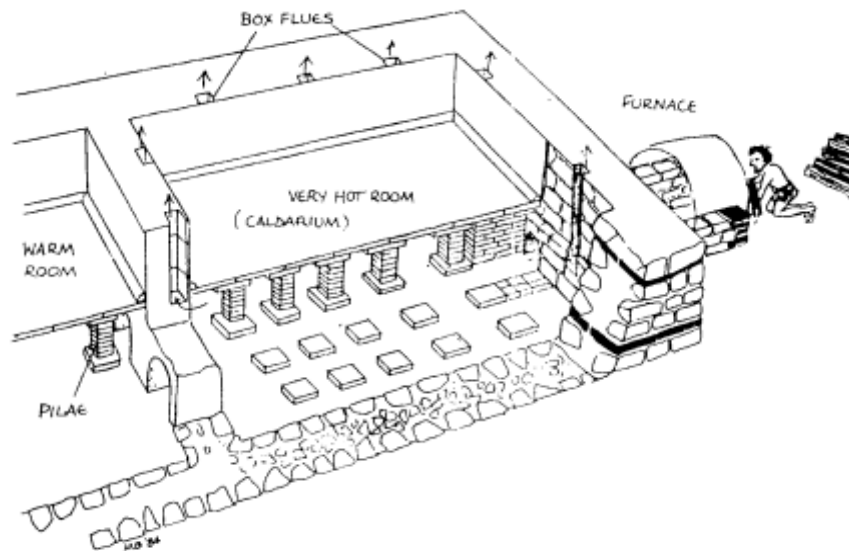
### Iron Age 'four post' granary

When the Romans conquered Britain life in many areas changed dramatically. The Romans forcibly removed people from the hillforts and encouraged them to settle in towns and cities which they founded. In Wales the Roman conquest did not lead to such big changes. Some hillforts were still occupied and few towns were founded. Farms generally consisted of a small number of buildings set within small fields. Some settlements of civilians leading a romanised way of life have been found including at Prestatyn where a bath-house has been excavated. Warfare between tribes and smaller groups was prevented by the **Roman army** which was divided into legions and other groups which were based in **forts**, a considerable number of which are known in Wales including Brecon Gaer. Roman towns close to the eastern border of modern Wales include Chester and Wroxeter (near Shrewsbury).



**Typical Roman fort plan**

**Houses in Roman towns** were usually built of stone, brick or tile, they were rectangular in plan with several rooms and faced onto a street which was sometimes paved or cobbled. Drains were laid to take away rain and foul water. **Fresh water** was supplied to public buildings and some private buildings via aqueducts. The main **public buildings** were the forum (where the market was held), the temple and the public baths. Buildings were heated by hot circulated under the floors and rich people had their own private baths. Many buildings had mosaic floors and the walls were plastered and had painted decoration.



**Roman bath house**

**New cooking habits** were introduced, food was ground in mortaria (a special type of pot), olive oil and wine were imported from the continent as were fruits such as figs and grapes. Wine and oil were transported in tall pots (amphorae) or in wooden barrels. The barrels were often used later for lining wells. Special finely-made pottery, known as samian, was imported from Gaul (present day France).



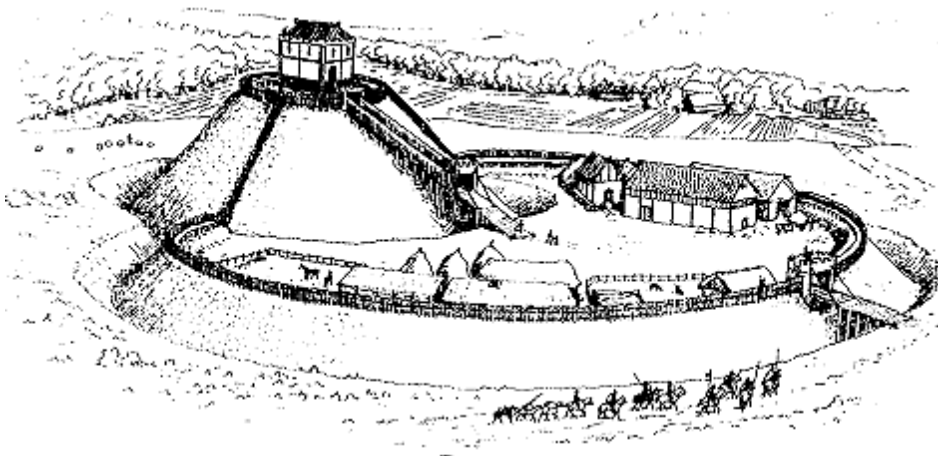
**In the 5th century AD** the Roman empire collapsed, Roman rule and the Roman army was withdrawn from Britain. At this time many parts of the country were under sporadic attack from people from Ireland and Germany. In the north the people (usually called Picts), from what is now northern Scotland, were attacking areas further south. There was no longer a central government in Britain but many rulers (kings and princes) took control of small areas of the country. At this time Wales was made up of a number of small kingdoms, including Gwynedd, Powys and Brycheiniog (Brecon).

### Post Roman Memorial stone



**Roman Amphora** **People no longer lived in towns.** Defended settlements became more common again but were generally smaller than they had been during the Iron Age. They now housed the wooden hall of the local king or prince and other buildings for sleeping and cooking. Some were built within old hillforts, others in new enclosures. The homes of ordinary people, craftsmen and farmers, have not survived. They must have been built in wood and perhaps were not very substantial. We know that one of the important factors in peoples' lives was the new religion of christianity. Although little survives of the early monastic sites which were common in Wales a considerable number of **engraved stones**, which commemorate the dead, and crosses, have been preserved.

A great change took place, particularly in the border areas of Wales, after the **Norman conquest (1066)**. The Normans built **castles** in their newly conquered territories where their lords and knights lived. The first castles were wooden towers set on an artificial earth mound, some of these were later replaced by stone castles. **Towns** often grew up around the castles or were newly founded including at Rhuddlan, Presteigne, Builth and Montgomery. In North Wales many castles and towns were built by Edward I after his conquest of that area during the late 13th century.



### Reconstruction of a Medieval motte and bailey castle

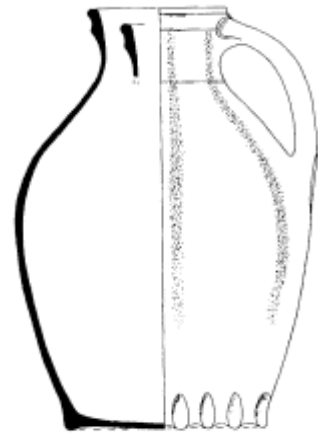
In **medieval towns** would be found the homes and workshops of craftsmen each specialising in their own trade. Most **houses** were built of wood and had **workshops** and shops attached to them. The family lived and worked there with their servants and apprentices. Typical medieval **craftsmen** were the

weavers, shoemakers, goldsmiths and tanners. Other crafts were carried out in the country including pottery making. At the front of the house would be a workshop and shop where goods would be sold. Sometimes goods were sold also in town markets and regional fairs which merchants travelled to from great distances. Most craftsmen and merchants were men although medieval documents record some women.

People in towns and villages used a range of **domestic items** distinctive to the period in which they lived. Kitchens would be equipped with pottery, some of it now decorated and glazed, iron pots for cooking and a range of tools including knives for cutting up meat and vegetables and spits for roasting meat.

People ate off pottery, metal (often pewter) or wooden plates and platters. They rarely used forks but used a knife and their fingers to eat with. Sometimes their food was placed on thick slices of bread which soaked up the juices. The better off

drank wine from silver or glass goblets, the less well off made do with ale, milk or water. The care of the home was the job of the woman of the house who had to store food from one season to another, to keep careful account of what was used and what remained, to prepare or supervise the provision of meals, to see to the cleanliness of the house and household, to supervise the upbringing of the children and to be ready to welcome guests. Poorer women also worked in the fields or as servants in other households, those who were rich had servants and occupied their time with needlework and pleasures such as riding, hunting and enjoying music and dance. The nobility would sometimes visit the court where such amusements were more lavish. More learned people read stories or religious works. Many however could not read or write but relied on priests and monks to look after their accounts and write their letters.



**Medieval pottery jug**



**A Medieval timber framed house**

### **Suggested to sites to visit:-**

To appreciate the former contents and internal layout of houses, particularly of the prehistoric period, is not always easy. Visits to surviving houses or castles can help but often they lack furnishings and equipment. For the latter periods, not covered by this leaflet, visits to surviving houses (usually large country houses or mansions) belonging to the National Trust or others can be an excellent way of understanding the lives of people of former generations.

**Reconstructions of prehistoric houses can be visited at the Museum of Welsh Life, St Fagans, Cardiff.** Arrangements can be made for pupils to take part in household and other activities supervised by members of the museum staff. Later buildings from all parts of Wales can be seen in the open air museum.

**Local museums** will have collections of household objects from the prehistoric, Roman and medieval periods.

Museum of Welsh Life, St Fagans, Cardiff (01222 569441)

Local museums at Welshpool, Brecon and Llandrindod Wells.

National Museum of Wales at Cardiff (01222 397951)

**Suggested further reading for teachers:-**

**English Heritage.** *Resources 1994.* (practical materials for teachers to use the historic environment for any subject).

**English Heritage.** *The Archaeology Resource Book 1992.*

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

**Reynolds, P.J.** 1979. *Iron Age Farm.* Colonnade. (description of experimental construction of Iron Age houses and farming techniques).

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