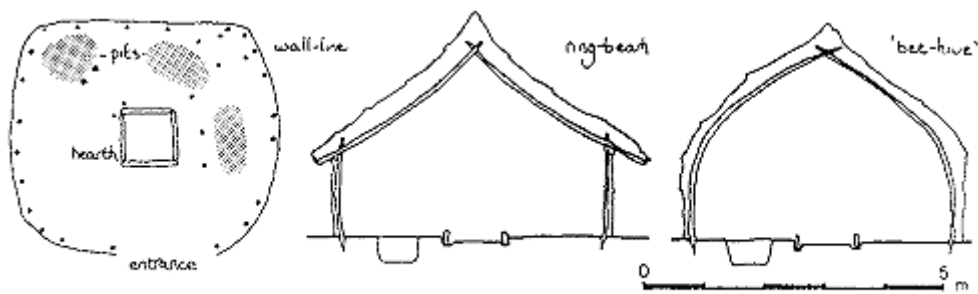


Cymraeg / English**Key Stage 2: Life in Early Wales and Britain****The Earliest People**

Towards the end of the last Ice Age, between 12,000 and 15,000 years ago, as the climate became warmer, people returned to live in Britain. At that time there were still land links between Britain and the continent, and, between Britain and Ireland. The earliest settlers did not need boats. These people lived by **hunting** and later by **gathering** roots, nuts and berries in the woodlands which gradually spread northwards with the improvement in climate. As they were constantly moving from one site to another there is less trace of their settlements than in later periods. They lived in tents, probably made of wood and skins, and sometimes in caves.

About 7,000 years ago people in Britain started to grow **crops** and keep **domestic animals** including pigs, sheep, goats and cattle. Some of these animals must have been brought from Europe as they are not native to Britain. By this time the last land bridge with the continent was gone so people, their animals and seed corn must have travelled across the seas in boats. We do not know how many farmers travelled to Britain and Ireland: it may be a small number who introduced the new way of life to the people already living here or it may have been a greater number who gradually pushed the existing population out of their hunting and gathering territories.

The new way of life produced a great **change in the landscape**. Woods were cut down to provide land for growing crops and for pasture for the animals. Wood was also needed for building houses and making agricultural and domestic equipment. In much of the country however, especially in Wales, there were still large forests where wild animals lived. People of this period (known as the **neolithic**) generally lived in isolated farms or small settlements. Not many houses have survived because most were built of wood. Some were rectangular, some were round.

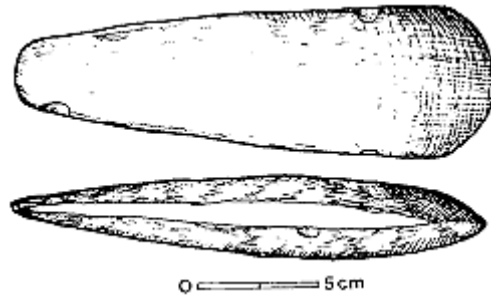


Plan and alternative reconstructions of the Neolithic houses at Trelystan

Alternative reconstructions of a Neolithic house

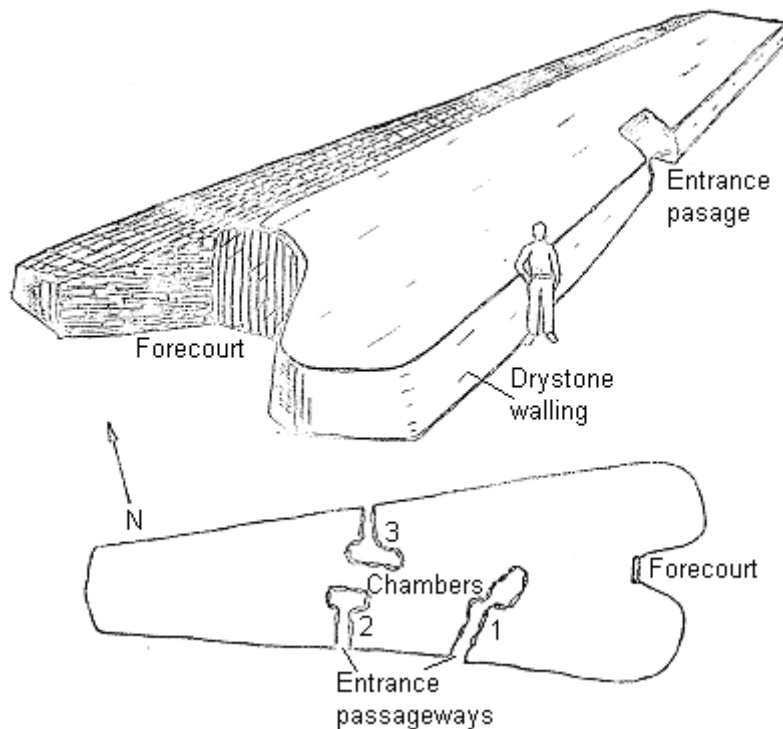
At this time the use of metal was unknown, all tools were made of stone or wood. The most commonly found tools and weapons are stone axes and a range of cutting tools made from flaked flint or other stone. These would have been mounted on wooden or occasionally bone handles.

Domestic equipment included pottery, stone saddle querns used for grinding grain, wooden tools, bowls and troughs, spindles and looms for spinning and weaving wool and linen to make cloth. Bone was used also for making tools and for pins to fasten peoples' clothes.



A Stone Axe

During the **neolithic period** (from about 4500 BC to around 2300 BC) people were usually buried in large **stone-built tombs**. These vary in construction from one area to another but generally they have one or more chambers reached via a stone corridor. The whole thing was covered by an earth or stone mound. In many of these tombs the bones of large numbers of people have been found, some of the bones are in disorder as if they were put in the tombs after the bodies had decayed. At some sites archaeologists have found evidence that bodies were laid out in special enclosures, later the bones were gathered up and put in the tomb along with those of relatives who had died years before. We cannot now know what kind of religion these people had, although study of the tombs and of the wooden and stone circles which have been found in many parts of Britain suggest that the neolithic people studied the movement of the sun, moon and other stars. These changes would have been important in marking the changing seasons and the best time to plant crops and to harvest. Similar, probably religious, structures consisted of an circular enclosure marked by an earth bank. Sometimes there were standing stones inside the banks. These structures are known as **henges**.

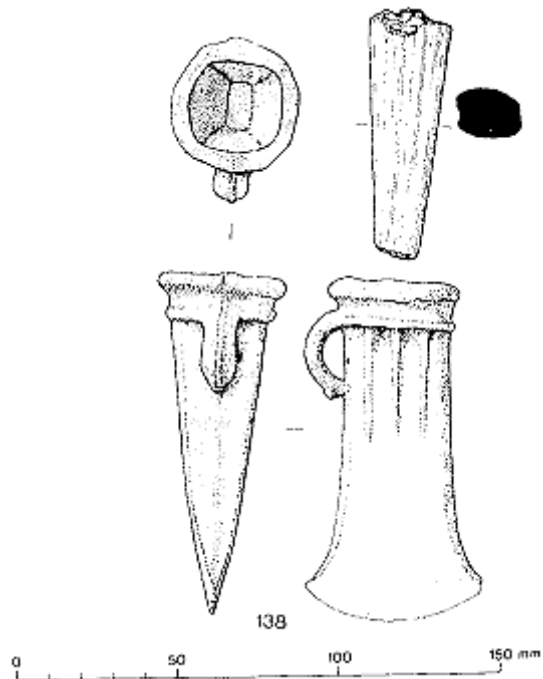


Reconstruction and plan of Gwernvale Neolithic chambered tomb

About 4500 years ago people first learned the **use of metals**. The earliest metal to be used was copper which was soon mixed with tin or lead to make a harder metal suitable for daggers, knives, axes and many other types of cutting tools used in woodworking, leatherworking, etc. This new technology started on the continent and spread to Britain. We do not know whether

this means that many new people travelled across the seas to settle here or whether the new skill was brought by a small number of craftsmen. We do know that during the **bronze age** (about 2300 to 700BC) people travelled in boats between southern Britain and the continent carrying cargoes of metal tools, weapons and scrap metal.

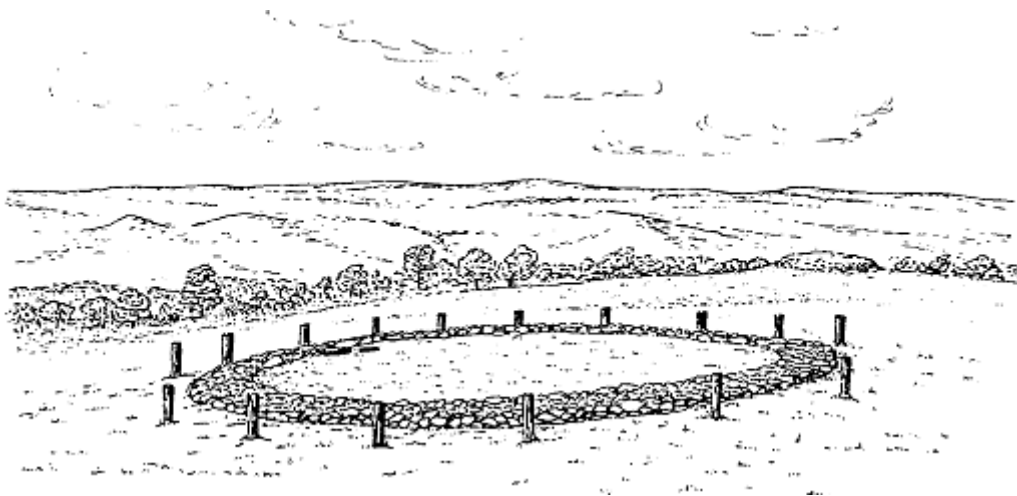
Although most people continued as **farmers** there were changes. Families or local groups were no longer buried together in stone tombs but people were buried in stone lined pits covered by a **round barrow**. Only the most important people were buried under such barrows and many of these were **warriors buried with their weapons** including bronze daggers and, later in the bronze age, with swords. During the bronze age cremation became common, the burnt remains were often buried under a barrow. One of the most common finds in these graves is pottery. Certain types of pottery were used specifically for burials, either to accompany the remains of the body or to contain the burnt bones. In rare cases special people were buried with gold or jet ornaments. Today



Bronze axe head

these tombs are common features of the landscape of upland Wales. This does not mean that all people during the bronze age were buried on the hills, other barrows are known from valley and plains but many have been damaged or destroyed by later farmers who ploughed over them. Sometimes they can be seen from the air as marks in the crops.

People continued to use the **hengés** and **stone circles** of earlier times but these were often changed by altering the position of stones, sometimes people were buried within the area marked out by the circle. Not all standing stones were part of a henge or stone circle, it was quite common to set up individual stones perhaps to mark burials or special spots associated with some religious activity.



Reconstruction of the ring cairn at Brenig (source Lynch 1993)

In the later part of the bronze age the climate became wetter and colder. This would have affected the types of crops the people could grow and make it more difficult to live in upland areas. From this time people began to live in **settlements** which were more defensive, their

houses were surrounded by a **strong wooden fence or palisade** and they were often sited on high ground from where they could see people approaching. At this time the keeping of cattle, particularly in upland areas like much of Wales, became more important. From this time archaeologists have found new types of objects including large bronze cauldrons which would have been hung on chains above the fire. Probably these were used for cooking large quantities of meat to be eaten at feasts. On such occasions the important people wore decorations of gold, such as torcs (a kind of heavy necklace or twisted gold), bracelets and rings. These were worn by men as well as women. We know a little about their **clothes** a few of which have been preserved from waterlogged burials or other wet places. Men and women wore woollen or linen tunics and cloaks of wool fastened with bronze brooches.

Suggested sites to visit:-

Sites of the early prehistoric period have not survived well in Wales. Certain sites were less common than in other areas of Britain. Many of the barrows of the bronze age lie in the uplands. However it is possible to see a range of bronze age sites along a specially constructed trail at the **Brenig Reservoir** in (on B4501 north of Cerrigydrudion). There is also an interpretation centre with video presentation outlining the history of the valley and the building of the reservoir. A guide to the archaeological trail is available at the centre and a short guide is available from CPAT.

Just over the border of Montgomery, in Shropshire, a stone circles survives at **Mitchell's Fold (NGR SO 301984) near Chirbury**. Set on the ridge of Stapeley Hill it is accessible by public footpath.

Other places include:-

Gop Cairn, Gwenysgor (NGR SJ087802)

Museums at: Brecon, Llandrindod Wells and Welshpool.

Suggested further reading:-

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

Bewley, R. 1994. *Prehistoric Settlements*. Batsford/English Heritage.

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Green, S. and Walker, E. 1991. *Ice Age Hunters*. Cardiff: National Museum of Wales.

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

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

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