

From the Stone Age to the Romans: An Introduction to the History

(A summary for anyone who's not quite sure they understand it all)

This summary is aimed at teachers who are seeking a broad overview of the period and especially want to get the hang of what can feel to be confusing terminology – hence it's been kept to 3 pages. The inclusion of details in this summary does not assume they should be taught to children at KS2.

Prehistory – the period of British history before the arrival of the Romans is known as Prehistoric Britain. The word 'prehistoric' means 'before written records' – understanding what the word means makes it more easily remembered and used.

Dates – Don't worry about finding slightly differing dates for prehistoric periods in books and websites. Variations in dates are the result of the complexities of evidence and the vast sweeps of time being discussed – dates are usually roughly similar. The dates below are only approximations.

The Stone Age: the period from perhaps one million BC up to c.2500BC

Why 'Stone'? – because varieties of stone were the main materials used for tools, weapons etc. Stone such as flint can be sharpened to create very fine, sharp, effective edges.

This period is split into three chunks. Each sub-period name contains the word *lithos*, the Greek word for stone.

Palaeolithic Age – perhaps one million BC to c.8000BC (Palaeolithic means Old Stone Age)

This period includes the Ice Age when Britain was covered by ice. The climate began to warm around 8000BC.

Mesolithic Age – c.8000 - c.4000BC (Mesolithic means Middle Stone Age)

Britain became an island c.6000BC. Most people lived as hunter-gatherers – hunting animals for food and for bone, skins etc. but also gathering fruits, nuts, berries etc. for food.

Recent research shows that later in this period small settlements had developed, usually near shallow lakes which provided fish. One such settlement was Star Carr in what is now Yorkshire which was inhabited from c.8700BC.

Farming began to develop c.5000BC – c.4500BC

Neolithic Age – c.4000BC - c.2500BC (Neolithic means New Stone Age)

Farming spread throughout Britain in this period. The spread of farming was not instant! It probably took about 2000 years but was one of the greatest changes in human history. The transition from hunter-gathering to farming is often called The Neolithic Revolution.

Homes were often thatched rectangular buildings with walls made from wattle (hazel branches) and daub (a mix of clay, straw and dung).

This was also the period when burials first took place in mounds known as long barrows. Henge monuments began to be built including Stonehenge where building began c.3000BC

One of the most famous Neolithic settlements is Skara Brae in Orkney.

The Bronze Age: c.2500BC to c.700BC

The use of bronze spread because it is a harder, sharper metal than copper and tin used individually. Bronze is a mix of 90% tin and 10% copper, both metals found in Britain. Bronze created better tools, axes, weapons and other objects and could be decorated more easily and attractively.

This period saw the development of many features that were still common in the Middle Ages:

2000BC and after – sea-going vessels regularly crossed to and from Europe

1500BC and after – the growth of villages, local roads and long distance routeways

Henge monuments continued to be built and used – around 400 henges were built in Britain. Stonehenge continued to be rebuilt and in use c.3000-1500BC.

1200BC and after – hillforts were built to dominate their localities. The word ‘fort’ can be misleading as it suggests a primarily military function. Their main uses were probably more peaceful, acting as local centres for trade and meetings.

The Iron Age: c.700BC onwards

Iron replaced bronze as the most valued metal because again it created harder, sharper tools and weapons than did bronze.

Hillforts continued to be tribal centres. Many people at this time lived in roundhouses such as those that have been built at Butser Ancient Farm in Hampshire.

The people of Britain had split into a series of regional tribes who dominated their regions, such as the Iceni in East Anglia and the Brigantes in the north of England. Many people in the south and south-east had well-established contacts with the Roman empire before the arrival of Julius Caesar in 55BC – there is evidence of the tribal rulers wearing Roman-style clothes and of coins with Latinised inscriptions. Therefore these people were more likely to welcome more contact with the wealth of the Roman Empire than oppose it.

Websites to build up knowledge and provide resources

The **BBC website** has a wide-range of clear, informative articles – these links are the entry points to a lot of interesting material:

http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/british_prehistory/

http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/british_prehistory/overview_british_prehistory_01.shtml

http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/british_prehistory/overview_british_prehistory_ironage_01.shtml

The **Historical Association** is building up a wide range of support material for primary teachers:

<http://www.history.org.uk/resources/primary.html>

Skara Brae

<http://www.orkneyjar.com/history/skarabrae/index.html>

Butser Ancient Farm – the base for much interesting experimental archaeology

<http://www.butserancientfarm.co.uk/>