



HISTORY COURSE

Britain Before English

10 Chapters

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Britain Before English

Course 1 · Chapter 1 · First People

People lived in Britain for hundreds of thousands of years before anyone spoke English, and for most of that time they came and went with the ice. This chapter follows what the sources say about the earliest visitors, the long gaps, the land that is now under the North Sea, and the hunter-gatherers who stayed.

The story in one box

The oldest evidence of people in Britain is about 900,000 years old, from Happisburgh in Norfolk. Britain was settled in warm periods and abandoned in cold ones, at least nine times according to Wikipedia's *Prehistoric Britain* article. Modern humans arrived by about 41,000 to 44,000 years ago, left again during the coldest period, and returned about 15,000 years ago. Rising seas cut Britain off from the continent by about 6500 BC (the date is disputed).

Watch out: how to read these dates

Every date in this chapter is an estimate. For ages of hundreds of thousands of years the sources give ranges or say "about", and sometimes two sources give different figures for the same thing. I show the figure as the source gives it and say when two sources disagree. Dates before the year 1 are shown as BC (the sources use BC and BCE; I use BC).

The first visitors

According to *Prehistoric Britain*, the earliest evidence is of stone tools and footprints at Happisburgh in Norfolk, about 900,000 years old, possibly made by *Homo antecessor* or *Homo erectus*. The article says a 2020 study suggests the footprints resemble *H. erectus*, and that no human fossils were found there. Wikipedia's *Happisburgh* article gives the flint tools two alternative date ranges, "somewhere between 866,000 to 814,000 years ago or 970,000 to 936,000 years ago", and says the tools were probably left by *Homo antecessor* hunter-gatherers living on floodplains beside an ancient course of the Thames. It reports the footprints as "more than 800,000 years old" and the oldest human footprints found outside Africa.

Site	Age (per the article)	What was found
Happisburgh, Norfolk	about 900,000 years	Stone tools and footprints; no human fossils
Pakefield, Suffolk	about 700,000 years	Tools, with animal remains showing a mild, warm climate
Boxgrove, West Sussex	about 480,000 years	The oldest human skeletal remains in Britain, possibly <i>Homo heidelbergensis</i> , with refined handaxes and butchered animal remains
Swanscombe, Kent	about 400,000 years	Neanderthal fossils (the "early Neanderthal" identification is "suggested")
Clacton	about 400,000 years	A spearhead, described as the oldest known wooden weapon
Pontnewydd, Wales	about 225,000 years	Neanderthal fossils

One site is disputed. A 2025 study of Fordwich Pit in Kent proposes handaxes of about 712,000 to 621,000 years ago, but the article says other authors doubt the dating and suggest about 620,000 to 560,000 years ago.

Coming and going with the ice

The article says Britain was repeatedly settled in the warm interglacial periods and abandoned in the cold glacial ones, at least nine times. It notes that the Anglian glaciation (about 480,000 to 430,000 years ago) was thought to have emptied Britain, though the Fordwich finds suggest some visits.

- **Neanderthals:** the article gives two versions of the gap. The introduction says Britain was unoccupied from about 180,000 to 60,000 years ago, and the Palaeolithic section says only "absent from about 180,000 years ago". It also suggests a possible earlier return around 115,000 to 84,000 years ago at Great Pan Farm. It says Neanderthals are thought to have died out in Britain by about 40,000 years ago.

- **Modern humans:** they arrived by about 41,000 to 44,000 years ago (Kents Cavern). The Red Lady of Paviland dates to about 34,000 years ago.
- **The coldest period:** humans probably left again by about 28,000 years ago, during the Last Glacial Maximum, and returned around 15,000 years ago.
- **The Younger Dryas** (about 12,900 to 11,700 years ago): there is no dated evidence of occupation, so Britain may have been abandoned again.

Art and remains from the last Ice Age

The article names three sites from the end of the glacial period:

- **Creswell Crags:** about 15,700 to 12,800 years ago, with figurative art including a horse's head engraved on a rib.
- **Gough's Cave:** about 14,700 years ago, with evidence of ritual cannibalism and skull cups.
- **Howburn Farm, Biggar:** about 14,500 to 14,000 years ago, the earliest known human presence in Scotland.

A peninsula, an island, a peninsula again

The article says that before about 130,000 years ago Britain was a peninsula of Europe, joined by a chalk and clay ridge. The link eroded and Britain became an island in the Last Interglacial, and it reconnected during the last glacial period. Wikipedia's *Doggerland* article describes the result: a large landmass in the southern North Sea joining Great Britain to northern France, Belgium, the Netherlands, north-west Germany and Jutland. It is named after the Dogger Bank, a remnant upland.

Question	What the sources say
Land	At the Last Glacial Maximum sea levels were about 120 m lower; by about 12,000 BC the area was tundra; in the early Holocene it had lagoons, saltmarshes, rivers and lakes and may have been Europe's most productive hunting and fishing ground (<i>Doggerland</i>)
Flooding	Rising seas broke it into islands between 10,000 and 7,000 years ago; Britain was cut off by about 6500 BC; the Dogger Bank stayed an island until at least 5000 BC (<i>Doggerland</i>)

Question	What the sources say
Full submergence	<i>Prehistoric Britain</i> gives 6200 BC in its introduction and "largely complete by 5000 BC" in its Mesolithic section
Storegga Slide	A tsunami at about 6200 BC; one estimate suggests up to a quarter of Britain's Mesolithic population died; how much it devastated the area, and whether land survived, is disputed
How we know	A 1931 trawler catch of peat with a barbed antler point; a 2003 to 2007 seabed survey of about 23,000 km ² using seismic data; later coring and sediment DNA

The *Doggerland* article also warns that seabed contours are not a reliable guide to the former landscape (the view of Bryony Coles), and gives an alternative to the tsunami story: a burst of Lake Agassiz that raised sea levels over about two years. I did not read further into either argument.

After the ice: the Mesolithic

The Holocene began around 9,700 BC, according to *Prehistoric Britain*. Temperatures rose and forests replaced the open tundra, so diets shifted toward deer, boar and aurochs. The Mesolithic is dated there from about 9,700 to 4,300 BC.

- **Star Carr, North Yorkshire** (about 9,300 to 8,500 BC): red deer headdresses, wooden platforms and the Star Carr Pendant (about 9000 BC), described as the oldest Mesolithic art in Britain.
- **Howick, Northumberland:** huts from about 7800 BC.
- **A cold spell** around 6200 BC lasted about 150 years.

Cheddar Man

Wikipedia's *Cheddar Man* article says workmen found the skeleton in December 1903 in Gough's Cave, Somerset, and removed the skull before its position was properly recorded. He lived around 8300 BC and probably died in his early twenties; two direct radiocarbon dates give calibrated ranges of 8540 to 7990 BC and 8470 to 8230 BC. The article calls him the oldest nearly complete human skeleton found in Great Britain.

A 2018 analysis by a Natural History Museum team extracted DNA from the skull, and placed him in the Western hunter-gatherer population. The article says he most likely had intermediate (blue-green) eyes, dark brown or black hair and dark to dark-to-black skin, and it stresses that these are predictions, not measurements: they rest on low sequencing coverage and on associations in modern populations. The skin-colour model's sensitivity for intermediate skin was low (0.26 in the article).

Watch out

Cheddar Man is often called "the first Brit". The article notes that older modern human remains are known from Britain. It also says his cause of death is unknown (a skull injury once thought fatal is now considered more likely to have happened after death) and that whether he was deliberately buried is debated. The 1996 mitochondrial DNA result differed from the 2018 one, and the article attributes the difference to older methods and possible contamination.

Words to know

Term	Meaning
Palaeolithic	The Old Stone Age, the long period of early stone tools
Mesolithic	The Middle Stone Age; here about 9,700 to 4,300 BC (<i>Prehistoric Britain</i>)
Interglacial / glacial	A warm / a cold stage of the ice ages
Hunter-gatherer	A person who lives by hunting animals and gathering wild food, without farming
Radiocarbon dating	A way of estimating the age of organic remains; results are given as a range
Doggerland	The now-flooded land in the southern North Sea

Try It Yourself

Think of the answer first, then click to check.

1. Where is the oldest evidence of people in Britain, and about how old is it?

▼ Show answer

Happisburgh in Norfolk, about 900,000 years old (the *Happisburgh* article gives the flint tools two date ranges, 866,000 to 814,000 or 970,000 to 936,000 years ago).

2. Put in order, oldest first: Boxgrove, Pakefield, Happisburgh, Pontnewydd.

▼ Show answer

Happisburgh (about 900,000 years), Pakefield (about 700,000), Boxgrove (about 480,000), Pontnewydd (about 225,000).

3. Why was Britain settled and then abandoned repeatedly?

▼ Show answer

People came in the warm interglacial periods and left in the cold glacial ones, at least nine times according to the article.

4. When did modern humans first arrive, and what happened at the Last Glacial Maximum?

▼ Show answer

By about 41,000 to 44,000 years ago (Kents Cavern). Humans probably left by about 28,000 years ago during the Last Glacial Maximum, and returned around 15,000 years ago.

5. What was Doggerland, and how do we know about it?

▼ Show answer

A land area in the southern North Sea joining Britain to the continent. We know of it from fishing finds, such as a 1931 trawler catch of peat with an antler point, and from seabed surveys.

6. Two articles disagree on when Doggerland was fully submerged. What are the two dates?

▼ Show answer

6200 BC (in the *Prehistoric Britain* introduction) and "largely complete by 5000 BC" (in its Mesolithic section); the *Doggerland* article says the Dogger Bank stayed an island until at least 5000 BC.

7. What did the 2018 analysis predict about Cheddar Man, and how firm is it?

▼ Show answer

Blue-green eyes, dark hair and dark to dark-to-black skin. They are predictions, not measurements, based on low sequencing coverage and modern associations.

8. Why is "the first Brit" a poor description of Cheddar Man?

▼ Show answer

Older remains of modern humans are known from Britain, such as the Red Lady of Paviland, about 34,000 years ago, according to the *Prehistoric Britain* article.

Note on sources

This chapter uses Wikipedia's *Prehistoric Britain* (the first 100,000 of about 200,000 characters, to the end of the Protohistory section), *Doggerland* (the whole article), *Happisburgh* (the whole article) and *Cheddar Man* (the whole article), each as the page tool summarised it. I did not read the later part of *Prehistoric Britain* or any scholarly paper. The article says parts of it need better citations, so specific dates should be checked against the primary studies. I did not read the separate article on the Happisburgh footprints, and its page cites a BBC report dated February 2014 for a May 2013 find, which I could not reconcile. The term definitions and the section grouping are mine and unverified. The separate course *Prehistoric Times: How Much Do We Know, and How?* covers prehistory more widely.

Coming up in Chapter 2: Farmers and Monuments. The arrival of farming, Skara Brae, long barrows and the great stone circles.

Britain Before English

Course 1 · Chapter 2 · Farmers and Monuments

Chapter 1 ended with hunter-gatherers in a forested island. This chapter covers the next great change: farming, and the tombs, villages and stone circles of the people who practised it. The sources are clear about what was built and cautious about why.

The story in one box

According to Wikipedia's *Neolithic Britain* article, the Neolithic lasted from about 4100 to 2500 BC, and farming came from the continent. Whether it spread by migration or by natives adopting it is debated, though a 2019 genetic study argues for mass migration. The period left chambered tombs, the stone village of Skara Brae (about 3180 to 2500 BC) and Stonehenge, whose first phase is dated to about 3100 BC. The people who built them left no writing, so their reasons are matters of argument.

Watch out

"No writing" means every statement about beliefs in this chapter is an interpretation of objects and sites. I mark what the sources call supported and what they call speculative. Dates are approximate, and the articles sometimes give two different dates for the same site.

Farming arrives

The *Neolithic Britain* article says farming reached the islands from the continent, where it began in the Near East. The earliest evidence in the British Isles is from Ireland and possibly the Isle of Man, not southern Britain. Archaeologists disagree on whether the shift was gradual over centuries or rapid within a century or two.

Question	What the article says
Migration or adoption?	Debated for a long time

Question	What the article says
The 2019 study	Brace et al. argue for a mass migration around 4100 BC, linking the farmers to Iberian Neolithic people and suggesting they almost fully replaced the native hunter-gatherers
A later claim	Beaker-associated migrations around 2500 BC replaced over 90% of Britain's Neolithic gene pool (see Chapter 3)
The counterview	Mike Parker Pearson lists several routes by which animals and plants could have reached Britain by boat, and calls the question unresolved

The article reports the genetic findings but gives little detail on the counterarguments, so I do not rank them.

Tombs and barrows

The *Neolithic Britain* article uses the term "chambered tombs", and says most were built around 4000 to 3200 BC, "a relatively short-lived fashion in archaeological terms" in the words of Parker Pearson. A widely held theory is that they imitated long timber houses from the Danube basin. Wikipedia's *Long barrow* article describes them as elongated earthen mounds flanked by ditches, usually 20 to 70 metres long, some with a timber or stone chamber at one end. It says earthen long barrows in Britain were likely built between about 3800 and 3000 BC.

- **West Kennet (Wiltshire):** human remains were deposited intermittently over about 1,500 years. The earliest burials are from the early to mid 4th millennium BC, and a later deposit belongs to the Beaker culture (Chapter 3).
- **Wayland's Smithy (Oxfordshire):** in the Iron Age and Roman periods it became a cemetery, with at least 46 skeletons in 42 graves, many decapitated.
- **What they held:** many chambers held human remains, sometimes up to 50 people, often with bones of different individuals mixed. Grave goods were rare. Bodies may have been exposed to the air first, and some bones appear to have been removed for ritual use.

The *Long barrow* article lists four interpretations of what they were for: tombs and ancestor veneration; religious and cosmological centres; territorial markers (popular in the 1980s and 1990s, and later challenged); and broad religious and social roles, comparable to churches in later Europe. It says archaeologists have not agreed. The *Neolithic Britain* article quotes Barrett: "There never was a single body of beliefs which characterise 'neolithic religion'".

Skara Brae and Neolithic Orkney

Wikipedia's *Skara Brae* article describes a stone-built village on the Bay of Skail, Mainland, Orkney, occupied from about 3180 to 2500 BC. A storm in the winter of 1850 stripped earth from a mound and exposed the outlines of roofless houses. Professional excavation began in 1927 under V. Gordon Childe, and major digs in 1972 to 1973 provided radiocarbon dates.

Topic	What the article says
Houses	Ten structures and four passageways are visible; free-standing, insulated with midden (refuse); each with a central hearth, beds on either side and a dresser facing the entrance
Furniture layout	Seven houses share a similar layout; a gendered reading, linked to recent Hebridean custom, is an interpretation
Livelihood	Herders of cattle, sheep and pigs; they also grew barley and ate a lot of seafood
Pottery	Grooved Ware, a style that had recently appeared in northern Scotland
Unknown	The fuel for the hearths; why the village was abandoned (a colder, wetter climate and storms have been proposed, but Anna Ritchie argues it was abandoned before it was buried); claims of a priestly class lack archaeological support
Context	One of four sites in the "Heart of Neolithic Orkney" World Heritage Site (1999) with Maeshowe, the Ring of Brodgar and the Standing Stones of Stenness

The *Neolithic Britain* article dates Maes Howe to about 2800 BC and the Ring of Brodgar to about 2500 BC, and gives two dates for the Ness of Brodgar: about 3500 BC in its introduction and about 3300 to 2800 BC in a caption. It describes that site as possibly religious. I could not tell which date is right, so I give both.

Stonehenge

Wikipedia's *Stonehenge* article gives its phases as approximate:

Phase	Date (per the article)	What was built
Before	about 8000 BC	Mesolithic postholes
Stonehenge 1	about 3100 BC (remains now suggest about 3000 BC)	A circular chalk bank and ditch with about 56 Aubrey holes
Stonehenge 2	about 2900 to 2600 BC	Timber structures; the site became a cremation cemetery
Stonehenge 3	about 2600 to 1600 BC	Stone replaced timber: the sarsen circle about 2600 to 2400 BC, bluestones in several phases (the latest about 2400 to 2200 BC), the Y and Z holes about 1600 BC

- **Sarsens:** a 2020 study matched 50 of 52 sampled stones to West Woods, about 26 km to the north.
- **Bluestones:** generally linked to the Preseli Hills in Pembrokeshire, Wales, about 140 miles away. Some researchers proposed glacial transport, but a 2019 study favours human quarrying.
- **The Altar Stone:** a 2024 study proposed a source in the Orcadian Basin of north-east Scotland. The article treats this as newer and less firm.

Why was it built?

The article lists these, and I give its own rating of each:

- **Solar and lunar alignment:** well supported; the axis lines up with the midsummer sunrise and midwinter sunset. The idea of a 56-year prediction cycle (Hawkins) is less firmly established.
- **A place of the dead:** supported by many cremations; Mike Parker Pearson calls it "a domain of the dead".
- **A ritual landscape with Durrington Walls:** plausible but debated, with the living and the dead linked by the River Avon. At Durrington Walls, animal-tooth evidence suggests up to about 4,000 people gathered for festivals; the article says the estimate is uncertain.
- **A healing place, a symbol of peace, or acoustic stones:** speculative.

The article says what remains unknown includes the construction techniques, the original purpose, whether it was used continuously, the function of the Aubrey holes, and who the

builders were.

After the monuments

The *Neolithic Britain* article assigns the Late Neolithic to 3000 to 2500 BC and says the Neolithic ended with the arrival of Beaker people around 2500 BC. Parker Pearson describes the end of a way of life "based on ancestral tombs, forest clearance and settlement expansion" after over a thousand years. Chapter 3 picks up there.

Words to know

Term	Meaning
Neolithic	The New Stone Age, the period of the first farming; here about 4100 to 2500 BC
Chambered tomb	A burial monument with a chamber of stone or timber
Midden	A heap of refuse; at Skara Brae it was used for insulation
Grooved Ware	A style of pottery of the late Neolithic
Sarsen	A large block of silicified sandstone
Bluestone	The smaller, mostly igneous stones of Stonehenge
Henge	A circular earthwork, often with a ditch and bank (my definition; the sources I read did not define it)

Try It Yourself

Think of the answer first, then click to check.

1. About when did the Neolithic begin and end in Britain, according to the article?

▼ Show answer

About 4100 to 2500 BC.

2. Where does the earliest evidence of farming in the British Isles come from?

▼ Show answer

Ireland, and possibly the Isle of Man, not southern Britain.

3. What does the 2019 study argue, and what does Parker Pearson say about the question?

▼ Show answer

The study argues for a mass migration around 4100 BC that almost fully replaced the hunter-gatherers. Parker Pearson calls the question unresolved.

4. Name two interpretations of what long barrows were for.

▼ Show answer

For example tombs and ancestor veneration, religious and cosmological centres, territorial markers, or broad religious and social roles.

5. What exposed Skara Brae in 1850?

▼ Show answer

A severe storm, which stripped earth from a mound and showed the outlines of roofless houses.

6. Which two things about Skara Brae do the sources leave unresolved?

▼ Show answer

The fuel used in the hearths and why it was abandoned (the article also says claims of a priestly class lack archaeological support).

7. Where did the sarsens and the bluestones of Stonehenge come from, according to the article?

▼ Show answer

The sarsens from West Woods, about 26 km north (a 2020 study); the bluestones generally from the Preseli Hills in Wales.

8. Which theory of Stonehenge's purpose does the article rate as well supported, and which as speculative?

▼ Show answer

The solar alignment is well supported (midsummer sunrise and midwinter sunset). The healing place, the symbol of peace and the acoustic stones are speculative.

Note on sources

This chapter uses Wikipedia's *Neolithic Britain* (the first 100,000 of about 108,000 characters), *Skara Brae* (the first 100,000 of about 135,000), *Stonehenge* (the first 100,000 of about 295,000, which stopped before its folklore, access and modern-use sections) and *Long barrow* (the first 100,000 of about 108,000), each as the page tool summarised it. The *Neolithic Britain* excerpt did not discuss causewayed enclosures or henges, and the *Stonehenge* excerpt said little about Avebury, so I say nothing about them except Avebury's listing in the World Heritage name. I did not read any scholarly paper. The term definitions, the table groupings and the "Henge" definition are mine and unverified. The course Prehistoric Times: How Much Do We Know, and How? covers prehistory more widely.

Coming up in Chapter 3: Beakers and Bronze. Beaker pottery, metalworking, trade, and the argument over migration.

Britain Before English

Course 1 · Chapter 3 · Beakers and Bronze

Around 2500 BC a new kind of pottery, and with it the first metal, appears in Britain. This chapter covers what the sources say about the Beaker period and the Bronze Age, and about two large genetic claims: that new people replaced most of the old, and that a second migration followed in the Late Bronze Age. Both claims are reported here as claims.

The story in one box

According to Wikipedia's *Bell Beaker culture* article, the Beaker period in Britain began about 2450 BC and lasted until as late as 1800 BC, and it brought single burials, copper, gold and a new style of pottery. The article reports a 2018 genetic study (Olalde et al.) finding that Steppe-related ancestry replaced about 90% of the local Neolithic-derived gene pool within a few centuries. The Bronze Age is usually dated from about 2500 to 2200 BC to about 800 BC, and a 2021 study (Patterson et al.) reports a further migration between 1300 and 800 BC.

Watch out: culture is not people

The articles stress that a style of pottery is not the same as a population. In the 1970s Burgess and Shennan's "pots, not people" view stressed cultural contact, while earlier writers explained the spread through migrating elites or traders. The 2018 study found only "limited genetic affinity" between Iberian and Central European Beaker individuals, and the article says migration played a limited role in the early spread of the culture. In Britain the genetic claim is much stronger than elsewhere. I report each claim with its source and do not choose between the views.

The Beaker period

The *Bell Beaker culture* article says Beaker pottery is part of a wider "package" that includes copper daggers, V-perforated buttons and stone wrist-guards. An example from England is a stone wrist-guard with gold studs (about 2200 BC). Single burials are a key feature. A 2014 review, the article says, found single, communal and reused Neolithic burial sites across the

Beaker zone, overturning the older view that single burial was absent from the early or southern zone.

The article treats the term "culture" as contested. Strahm used "Bell Beaker phenomenon" in 1995 "to avoid the term 'culture'", and the article notes that the Beaker artefacts are not tied to one architecture or burial style in their early phase, which complicates reading them as one people.

The Amesbury Archer

According to Wikipedia's *Amesbury Archer* article, the grave was uncovered in May 2002 at a housing development site in Amesbury, near Stonehenge. He is dated to about 2340 to 2300 BC and died at around 40 (the estimate ranges from 35 to 45).

Topic	What the article says
The grave	More artefacts than any other early British Bronze Age grave: five Beaker pots, three tiny copper knives, sixteen barbed flint arrowheads, metalworking tools including cushion stones that may have served as portable anvils, wrist-guards and a pair of gold hair ornaments, the oldest gold objects known from England
Where from?	Isotopes in his teeth suggest he spent his childhood in Central Europe, probably the Western Alps
The nickname	The press called him the "King of Stonehenge", and some suggested he helped build it; archaeologists have rejected that
Why he came	Tim Darvill proposes a pilgrim drawn to the bluestones' supposed healing properties; the article calls this one interpretation, not an established fact
Language	His DNA was hard to analyse; a later analysis placed his male line in Steppe ancestry, but whether he spoke an early Celtic language is unresolved (see Chapter 5)

The 2018 genetic claim

According to the *Bell Beaker culture* article, the Olalde et al. (2018) study reports a "massive population turnover" in western Europe linked to the Beaker culture. For Britain it says Steppe-related ancestry rose sharply and replaced about 90% of the local Neolithic-derived gene pool

within a few centuries, and that the Y-chromosome type R1b-M269 went from absent in Neolithic individuals to over 90% of Y-chromosomes in Copper and Bronze Age Britain. The article also says the Beaker arrivals carried more variants linked to light skin and eye pigmentation. Chapter 2 noted a similar figure from the *Neolithic Britain* article: a claim that Beaker-associated migrations around 2500 BC replaced over 90% of Britain's Neolithic gene pool.

I read only the first 100,000 of about 308,000 characters of that article and did not reach its Britain entry. I did not read the study itself or any critique of it.

The Bronze Age

Wikipedia's *Bronze Age Britain* article gives the period as usually c. 2500 to 2200 BC to c. 800 BC. Some sources put the start as late as 2000 BC, and the 2500 to 2000 BC span is sometimes called "Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age" because the boundary is hard to define. Whether Britain had a copper-using phase before bronze is disputed.

Phase	Date (per the article)	Some features it lists
Early Bronze Age	c. 2500 to 1500 BC	Beaker; copper and tin; barrows with single burials, often with a beaker
Middle Bronze Age	1500 to 1000 BC	Palstaves, socketed spearheads, rapiers
Late Bronze Age	1000 to 700 BC	Socketed axes; leaf-shaped swords

- **Metal:** metalworking arrived with Beaker culture around 2500 BC, using copper, gold and arsenical bronze. Tin-bronze appeared by about 2200 BC. The article says Britain was the first region in Europe to switch fully to tin-bronze (about 2200 to 2100 BC).
- **Sources:** Cornwall and Devon held large tin reserves, and the South West has the earliest known tin ore exploitation in Europe. Copper came from places such as the Great Orme mine in northern Wales.
- **Trade:** analysis of Mediterranean shipwreck tin ingots points to south-west Britain as a source, and Williams et al. (2025) argue British tin drove the east Mediterranean's adoption

of bronze around 1500 to 1300 BC. Herodotus (about 450 BC) mentions "tin islands" in the north-west. I did not check any of these.

- **Boats:** the Dover Boat is dated to about 1500 BC and the Ferriby Boat (a reconstruction) to about 2000 BC.
- **Hoards:** unused axes are often found together, suggesting ritual deposits. The Isleham hoard has over 6,500 pieces, and the Milton Keynes Hoard (about 1000 BC) is gold.

The 2021 genetic claim

The article's section on Late Bronze Age migration reports Patterson et al. (2021). The study dates the migration to 1300 to 800 BC. Its genetic marker spread through southern Britain between 1000 and 875 BC, and newcomers made up around half the ancestry of later Iron Age people there. The authors describe a process of sustained contact rather than a single violent invasion, and see it as a plausible route for early Celtic languages. The article also says some scholars link the Atlantic Bronze Age trading network to the spread of Celtic languages, though this is contested. That link is the subject of Chapter 5. The article describes a disruption around 1200 BC that may reflect migration, with cremation becoming common.

The end of the period is dated to about 800 BC (800 to 700 BC for the end of the Late Bronze Age phases), when Chapter 4 begins. The *Amesbury Archer* article notes that a 2021 study favours a much later arrival of Celtic languages than his date, and I did not read further into that.

Words to know

Term	Meaning
Beaker	A style of drinking vessel and a wider set of goods, named by archaeologists
Steppe-related ancestry	DNA traced to the grasslands of eastern Europe and western Asia (the article's term; I did not read its definition)
Arsenical bronze	Copper alloyed with arsenic, used before tin-bronze
Tin-bronze	Bronze made from copper and tin
Barrow (tumulus)	A mound over a burial

Term	Meaning
Hoard	A group of objects deliberately buried
Isotope analysis	A test on teeth or bones that can show where a person grew up

Try It Yourself

Think of the answer first, then click to check.

1. When did the Beaker period begin in Britain, according to the article, and what did it bring?

▼ Show answer

About 2450 BC; single burials, copper and gold goods, and Beaker pottery as part of a wider package.

2. What does "pots, not people" mean?

▼ Show answer

The mid-1970s view of Burgess and Shennan that the Beaker style spread by cultural contact, not by migrating people.

3. What did isotope analysis suggest about the Amesbury Archer?

▼ Show answer

That he spent his childhood in Central Europe, probably the Western Alps.

4. Why were the "King of Stonehenge" claims rejected?

▼ Show answer

Archaeologists rejected the idea that he helped build the monument; Darvill's pilgrim idea is one interpretation, not an established fact.

5. What did the 2018 study claim for Britain, and what caveat does the article give?

▼ Show answer

That Steppe-related ancestry replaced about 90% of the Neolithic-derived gene pool within a few centuries. The caveat: the study found only limited genetic affinity between Iberian and Central European Beaker individuals, and migration played a limited role in the early spread of the culture.

6. Put in order: Beaker period begins, tin-bronze appears, the Dover Boat, the Late Bronze Age.

▼ Show answer

Beaker (about 2450 BC), tin-bronze (by about 2200 BC), the Dover Boat (about 1500 BC), the Late Bronze Age (1000 to 700 BC).

7. Where did Britain's tin come from, and why does it matter?

▼ Show answer

Cornwall and Devon, with the earliest known tin ore exploitation in Europe; analysis of Mediterranean ingots points to south-west Britain as a source, and a 2025 study argues it drove bronze use in the east Mediterranean.

8. What did Patterson et al. (2021) report, and how do the authors describe it?

▼ Show answer

A migration between 1300 and 800 BC; newcomers made up about half the ancestry of later Iron Age people in the south. The authors describe sustained contact, not a single violent invasion.

Note on sources

This chapter uses Wikipedia's *Bell Beaker culture* (the first 100,000 of about 308,000 characters, which stopped before the Britain entry under "Extent and impact"), *Bronze Age Britain* (the first 100,000 of about 100,110 characters) and *Amesbury Archer* (the whole article), each as the page tool summarised it. I did not read the 2018 or 2021 studies, any critique of them, or the Williams et al. paper. The article text on the Late Bronze Age migration is headed "Late Bronze Age migration", and I use that heading. The *Bronze Age Britain* article's date for the end of the Late Bronze Age differs a little between its

sentences (about 800 BC and 800 to 700 BC), and I show both. The term definitions are mine and unverified, and the "Steppe-related ancestry" gloss is the article's term, not a definition I checked. The sentence about the Archer's study and the 2021 one is from the *Amesbury Archer* article, which says a 2021 study favours a much later arrival of Celtic languages.

Coming up in Chapter 4: The Iron Age. Hillforts, tribes, coins and the first names written down.

Britain Before English

Course 1 · Chapter 4 · The Iron Age

The Iron Age is the first period of British history where outsiders describe the people. Before it, everything comes from objects and bones. This chapter follows the settlements, the hillforts and the coins, and then the first written accounts, by a Greek voyager and by Julius Caesar, each of which has to be read with care.

The story in one box

Wikipedia's *British Iron Age* article dates the period from about 800 BC to the Roman conquest beginning in AD 43. Britain had many tribes and kingdoms, farmsteads of roundhouses, and hillforts that became common from about 550 to 400 BC. The first written descriptions come from Pytheas (about 325 BC) and Julius Caesar, who invaded in 55 and 54 BC and left without conquering anything.

Watch out

The names we use for Iron Age peoples come from Roman writers, and the Britons left no writing of their own in this period. A tribe name tells you what a Roman called a group, not what the group called itself. The coins are the nearest thing to the Britons' own voice, since some British kings put their names on them.

How people lived

According to the *British Iron Age* article, the Iron Age in Great Britain runs from about 800 BC to the Roman conquest beginning in AD 43 (its infobox gives about 800 BC to AD 100). Its sub-periods, after Cunliffe (2005), are Earliest (800 to 600 BC), Early (600 to 400), Middle (400 to 100), Late (100 to 50) and Latest (50 BC to AD 100). The end date is flexible because Romanisation took time.

- **Population:** it grew, possibly to over a million, mostly in the densely settled south.
- **Homes:** lowland farmsteads had roundhouses (Little Woodbury and Rispaan Camp are named), and Chysauster in Cornwall is a village example. Brochs appear in northern Scotland, with the Broch of Mousa dated about 300 to 100 BC.

- **Society:** between about 400 and 100 BC regional identities emerged and social hierarchies became more defined.
- **The word "Celtic":** the article says most inhabitants were "Celtic Britons speaking Brittonic". That phrase is the article's, and Chapter 5 asks whether "Celtic" is the right word.

Hillforts and Maiden Castle

The article says hillforts first appeared in Wessex in the Late Bronze Age but became common about 550 to 400 BC. Evidence shows storage, industry and occupation, but many forts show little occupation, and their use is debated. Against Roman attack they were largely ineffective: it says Suetonius reports Vespasian took more than 20 "towns" in AD 43.

Wikipedia's *Maiden Castle, Dorset* article gives the best-known example. It describes a Neolithic causewayed enclosure (about 4000 BC), then a first hill fort of 6.4 ha about 600 BC, expanded about 450 BC to 19 ha, "the largest hill fort in Britain" and possibly the largest in Europe depending on the definition. Habitation declined about 100 BC, and the hilltop was abandoned in the 6th century AD.

Question	What the article says
Defence or display?	Defence was part of the purpose, but the elaborate ramparts were likely also statements of power; granaries and sling-stone hoards were found
The Wheeler excavation	Mortimer and Tessa Wheeler dug in 1934 to 1937; Wheeler read a cemetery of 14 violent deaths as the "war cemetery" of a Roman legion's sack of the fort
The reassessment	Miles Russell (2019) finds little evidence for a siege or massacre; the charcoal layer is tied to iron working; there is no proof the 14 died at Maiden Castle; a 2015 survey found no Roman fort
Still uncertain	Whether the Romans occupied it; whether it is Ptolemy's <i>Dunium</i> ; the reason for its unusual double entrance; the origin of its name

So the old story, a legion storming a British stronghold, is the part a reader should not repeat as fact.

Tribes and kings

The *British Iron Age* article names the Caledonians (north), the Silures (southern Wales), the Durotriges (Dorset), the Corieltavi (Leicestershire) and the Belgae. The Catuvellauni, Icenii and Brigantes do not appear in what I read, and I leave them to the chapters on the Roman conquest, where I will give their sources. It mentions two kings who put their names on coins: Tasciovanus (at Verulamium) and Cunobelinus (at Camulodunum).

- **Coins:** many Iron Age coins survive. Gold staters were often imported, and the south-eastern cast bronze (potin) coins were influenced by Roman originals. The Hallaton Treasure comprised 5,294 coins from 14 hoards buried over several decades in the early 1st century AD.
- **Trade:** Hallstatt swords and daggers were imported early on, then copied and improved locally, and later La Tène items were adopted. Late Iron Age Atlantic networks linked Britain to south-west Gaul through Brittany, with Hengistbury Head as the key site. After Caesar's conquest of Gaul, trade with the nearby continent grew, including wine and olive oil in amphorae. Strabo lists British exports as grain, cattle, gold, silver, iron, hides, slaves and hunting dogs.
- **The Belgae:** Caesar says they arrived in southern Britain from the late 2nd century BC. The article says archaeology may not show a sudden arrival, and it discusses whether this was invasion or diffusion.

Migration and continuity

The article repeats the 2021 study by Patterson et al. met in Chapter 3: gradual migration from Gaul about 1000 to 875 BC, with newcomers making up about half the ancestry of later Iron Age people in southern Britain. The authors describe sustained contact and small-scale movement, not a violent invasion. The article says Cunliffe suggests Celtic was already spoken and the late Bronze Age migration introduced the Brittonic branch. That is one scholar's suggestion, not a settled finding (Chapter 5).

The first outsiders' accounts

Pytheas

The article on Pytheas of Massalia says this Greek geographer made a northern voyage about 325 BC (estimates run from about 330 to the 320s BC), the earliest recorded Greek voyage to

Britain. His work, *On the Ocean*, is lost, and is known only from fragments quoted by later writers, chiefly Strabo, Pliny and Diodorus (one scholar counts at least 39). He described the inhabitants as simple in manner, living in thatched cottages and storing grain underground. He says Cornish miners smelted tin, carried at low tide by wagon to the island of Ictis. Strabo called him a liar, though the article argues Strabo's objections were often flawed, and some of his figures look inflated. The *British Iron Age* article adds that he named the island Albion and described its inhabitants as Keltoi.

Caesar

According to Wikipedia's *Caesar's invasions of Britain* article, Caesar invaded in 55 and 54 BC during the Gallic Wars.

Year	What happened (per the article)
55 BC	Two legions and a small cavalry force landed mostly in Kent; he achieved little beyond the landing; storms damaged his fleet; he withdrew; mainly a propaganda success in Rome
54 BC	About 800 ships, five legions and 2,000 cavalry; he defeated British forces at a river crossing, probably the Stour, and pushed toward the Thames
The enemy	Cassivellaunus, a warlord from north of the Thames, avoided pitched battle and used guerrilla tactics, with about 4,000 chariots according to Caesar
The outcome	The Trinovantes submitted and their king Mandubracius was restored; Cassivellaunus gave hostages and agreed to annual tribute; Caesar left without a garrison, and whether the tribute was paid is unknown

The article says Caesar's own account, in the *Gallic War*, Books 4 and 5, is the main source and the earliest surviving detailed eyewitness description of Britain's people, but that he wrote for a Roman audience with political reasons to promote his achievements. It says his geographic and ethnographic claims were partly hearsay, that he probably never went far inland, and that his statement that tin came from the Midlands is inaccurate. It quotes Tacitus on the campaigns: "he revealed, rather than bequeathed, Britain to Rome." It also says Caesar's arrangement with Mandubracius is seen as the start of client kingdoms. Chapter 6 picks up the story with the invasion of AD 43.

The *British Iron Age* article reports Caesar describing the Druids as a religious elite, with Britain as the seat of Druidic religion, and Tacitus describing a raid on Anglesey. It says no archaeological evidence of Druidry survives. I did not read more on Druids; Chapter 7 returns to religion.

Words to know

Term	Meaning
Hillfort	A hilltop settlement enclosed by banks and ditches
Roundhouse	A circular house, the usual Iron Age home
Broch	A tall stone tower of northern Scotland
Stater	A gold coin
Potin	A cast bronze coin of south-eastern Britain, here as the article names it
Client kingdom	A ruler's kingdom that is allied to and dependent on a greater power
Hearsay	Information passed on at second hand, not seen by the writer

Try It Yourself

Think of the answer first, then click to check.

1. About when did the British Iron Age begin and end, according to the article?

▼ Show answer

From about 800 BC to the Roman conquest beginning in AD 43 (the infobox gives about 800 BC to AD 100).

2. When did hillforts become common?

▼ Show answer

About 550 to 400 BC, although the first appeared in Wessex in the Late Bronze Age.

3. What did Wheeler claim at Maiden Castle, and what has changed?

▼ Show answer

He read 14 violent deaths as a "war cemetery" from a Roman legion's sack. Miles Russell (2019) finds little evidence for a siege or massacre, and there is no proof the 14 died there.

4. Why are the names of Iron Age tribes not the Britons' own words?

▼ Show answer

They come from Roman and Greek writers; the Britons left no writing, though some kings put their names on coins.

5. Who was Pytheas, and why is his account hard to use?

▼ Show answer

A Greek geographer who voyaged to Britain about 325 BC. His book is lost and is known only from fragments quoted by later writers, and some of his figures look inflated.

6. When did Caesar invade, and what was the outcome?

▼ Show answer

In 55 and 54 BC. He left without conquering territory or leaving a garrison, after hostages and a promised tribute from Cassivellaunus; whether the tribute was paid is unknown.

7. Why should Caesar's account be read with care?

▼ Show answer

He wrote for a Roman audience with political reasons to promote his achievements, his claims were partly hearsay, and he probably never went far inland.

8. Name two kings who put their names on coins.

▼ Show answer

Note on sources

This chapter uses Wikipedia's *British Iron Age* (the first 100,000 of about 184,000 characters), *Maiden Castle, Dorset* (the whole article), *Pytheas* (the first 100,000 of about 244,000) and *Caesar's invasions of Britain* (the first 100,000 of about 119,000), each as the page tool summarised it. The *British Iron Age* article notes that parts need more citations, and the summary flagged several "citation needed" claims, so its dates and interpretations are approximate. The Catuvellauni, Iceni and Brigantes did not appear in what I read, and neither did Caesar's expeditions in that article. I did not read Caesar's text, Strabo or any scholarly paper. The term definitions are mine and unverified. The word "Celtic" is used only as the sources use it, and Chapter 5 examines it.

Coming up in Chapter 5: Were They Celts? The word "Celtic", the Celtic languages of Britain, and the argument over whether the label fits the Iron Age Britons.

Britain Before English

Course 1 · Chapter 5 · Were They Celts?

Most people would answer "yes" at once. The sources are more careful. "Celtic" names a family of languages, and it also names a group of peoples in Greek and Roman writing, and the two do not line up neatly with Britain. This chapter separates the questions and reports what the sources say about each.

The story in one box

According to Wikipedia's *Celts* article, most classical writers did not call the people of Britain and Ireland *Keltoi*, and some scholars prefer not to call the Iron Age inhabitants "Celts". The same article says they are still "Celtic" because they spoke Celtic languages and shared other cultural traits. The modern idea of "Celtic" peoples dates from about 1707, when Edward Lhuyd used the term for the language group.

Watch out: three different questions

(1) What did ancient writers call the peoples of Britain? (2) Which languages did they speak? (3) Who counts as "Celtic" today? These have different answers. The sources I read answer (1) "mostly not Celts", (2) "Brittonic, a Celtic language" and (3) "a modern idea". Mixing them up is the commonest mistake.

The word

The *Celts* article says the first recorded use is the Greek *Keltoi*, by Hecataeus of Miletus in 517 BC, for a people near Massilia (Marseille). Julius Caesar reported that the Gauls called themselves *Celtae* in their own language. The origin of the word is unclear: one suggestion is that it meant "descendants of the hidden one" (Kim McCone), from a verb meaning "to hide".

- **Herodotus** placed the *Keltoi* near the source of the Danube and in the far west of Europe.
- **Strabo** applied Celtic names to Gaul and to peoples in Iberia (*Celtiberi*, *Celtici*).
- **Britain:** most classical writers did not call the inhabitants of Britain and Ireland *Keltoi* or *Celtae*. Tacitus did say the Britons resembled the Gauls in customs and religion. (The *British*

Iron Age article in Chapter 4 reports that Pytheas described the Britons as Keltoi; the two articles do not agree, and I did not check Pytheas's fragments.)

The modern argument

The article names Simon James, John Collis and Francis Pryor as scholars who prefer not to call the Iron Age inhabitants of Britain and Ireland "Celts". It says that they are still "Celtic" because they spoke Celtic languages and shared other cultural traits. It also notes that no ethnic group called themselves Celts again until about 1700, and that "Celt" in English is first attested in 1707, in the writing of Edward Lhuyd.

View	What the sources say
"They were Celts"	The Britons spoke Brittonic, a Celtic language, and shared cultural traits (<i>Celts</i>)
"The label is misleading"	Most classical writers did not use the term for Britain and Ireland, and no ethnic group called itself Celtic until about 1700 (<i>Celts</i>)
"Celtic from the West"	John Koch and Barry Cunliffe propose that proto-Celtic arose along the Atlantic coast as the common language of the Atlantic Bronze Age network; the article says Cunliffe's dating to 3000 BC and his claim that Tartessian was Celtic are widely rejected by linguists
Bronze Age migration	The 2021 study (Chapters 3 and 4) is read as a plausible route for early Celtic languages, with the authors describing sustained contact; Cunliffe suggests Celtic was already spoken and the late Bronze Age migration introduced the Brittonic branch (<i>British Iron Age</i>)

The last two rows overlap and I could not tell from the excerpts how they fit together. The *Celtic languages* article's section on how Celtic arrived in Britain was not in the part I read.

The language family

Wikipedia's *Celtic languages* article gives these branches:

Branch	Languages (per the article)
Goidelic	Irish, Scottish Gaelic, Manx
Brittonic	Welsh, Breton, Cornish, the lost Cumbric, and possibly Pictish
Continental (all extinct)	Gaulish, Lepontic, Celtiberian, Callaecian, Galatian
"Pritenic"	A hypothetical Insular subgroup, ancestor of Pictish, once spoken across most of Scotland

- **The split:** since the 1970s many scholars have favoured an Insular and Continental division, described as the more widely held view. The older P-Celtic and Q-Celtic model, divided by one sound change, was revived by Lambert (1994).
- **When:** estimates for when the family split vary widely: about 900 BC (Gray and Atkinson) and about 3200 BC (the "controversial" Forster and Toth study).
- **Living languages:** Ethnologue lists six. Four have substantial native speakers: Irish, Scottish Gaelic, Welsh and Breton. Cornish and Manx died out in modern times and have been revived. Welsh is the only one UNESCO does not classify as endangered.

The Brittonic languages are the ones that matter for this course: in *The Story of Old English*, Chapter 1, Common Brittonic is the main language of Britain before Latin and English. Chapter 9 and Chapter 10 here return to what happened to it.

Where the modern idea came from

The *Celtic languages* article says Edward Lhuyd first used "Celtic" for this language group in 1707, following Paul-Yves Pezron, who linked the classical Celts to Welsh and Breton. Wikipedia's *Celtic nations* article says the idea of "Celtic nations" comes from linguistic work by George Buchanan (16th century) and Lhuyd, and that it was accepted from the 18th century. "Celtic Fringe" gained currency in late-Victorian times, and the pan-Celtic movement is more recent: the Celtic Congress was founded in 1917.

- **The six nations:** Brittany, Cornwall, Ireland, the Isle of Man, Scotland and Wales, "widely considered Celtic countries in modern times", with Galicia often included. Asturias, Cantabria and northern Portugal are claimed by some but not typically counted, since no Celtic language survives there.

- **Genetics:** a 2006 Oxford study claimed most Britons descend from pre-Celtic migrants from Iberia. The article says three later studies largely invalidated this, linking R1b lineages to a Bronze Age migration from the steppe. A 2015 UK study found no unified "Celtic" genetic identity, and Cornish populations are closer to English groups than to other Celtic ones.
- **Dispute:** the article notes "some dispute as to whether Lhuyd's theory is correct". It also flags a statement about the Celtic League as needing a non-primary source.

So, were they Celts?

As far as these three articles go: the Iron Age Britons spoke a Celtic language, so in the linguistic sense the answer is yes. In the sense of what ancient writers called them, mostly no. As a description of a single people with a shared genetic or cultural identity, the sources I read give no support, and the 2015 study found none. The word is useful for the languages and is a modern label for the rest. This chapter does not pick a side beyond reporting each.

Words to know

Term	Meaning
Keltoi / Celtae	The Greek and Latin forms of the name
Goidelic	The Irish, Scottish Gaelic and Manx branch
Brittonic	The Welsh, Cornish and Breton branch, with Cumbric and possibly Pictish
Insular Celtic	The languages of Britain and Ireland as one group
Continental Celtic	The extinct Celtic languages of the continent
Lingua franca	A language used between speakers of different languages
Celtic Fringe	A Victorian phrase for the Celtic-speaking regions on the western and northern edge



Try It Yourself

Think of the answer first, then click to check.

1. What is the first recorded use of *Keltoi*, and for whom?

▼ Show answer

By Hecataeus of Miletus in 517 BC, for a people near Massilia (Marseille).

2. Did most classical writers call the people of Britain *Keltoi*?

▼ Show answer

No, according to the *Celts* article. Tacitus said the Britons resembled the Gauls in customs and religion.

3. Why do some scholars still call the Iron Age Britons "Celtic"?

▼ Show answer

Because they spoke Celtic languages and shared other cultural traits.

4. When was "Celt" first attested in English, and by whom?

▼ Show answer

1707, in the writing of Edward Lhuyd.

5. Name the two living branches of Celtic and one language in each.

▼ Show answer

Goidelic (Irish, Scottish Gaelic, Manx) and Brittonic (Welsh, Breton, Cornish).

6. What is "Celtic from the West", and how firm is it?

▼ Show answer

The theory of Koch and Cunliffe that proto-Celtic arose on the Atlantic coast as the common language of the Atlantic Bronze Age network. The article says Cunliffe's dating to 3000 BC and his claim about Tartessian are widely rejected by linguists.

7. What did the 2015 UK genetic study find about a "Celtic" identity?

▼ Show answer

No unified "Celtic" genetic identity; Cornish populations were closer to English groups than to other Celtic ones.

8. Which three questions does the Watch out box separate?

▼ Show answer

What ancient writers called the peoples of Britain, which languages they spoke, and who counts as "Celtic" today.

Note on sources

This chapter uses Wikipedia's *Celts* (the first 100,000 of about 288,000 characters, which stopped in the Distribution section, before society, religion and genetics), *Celtic languages* (the first 100,000 of about 207,000, which did not reach the section on how Celtic came to Britain) and *Celtic nations* (the first 100,000 of about 152,000), each as the page tool summarised it, plus the *British Iron Age* article from Chapter 4. The two articles disagree about whether Pytheas called the Britons Keltoi, and I did not resolve it. I did not read any study itself, or Lhuyd. The term definitions and the "so, were they Celts?" summary are mine and unverified.

Coming up in Chapter 6: Rome Arrives. The conquest of AD 43, Boudica's revolt and the northern frontier.

Britain Before English

Course 1 · Chapter 6 · Rome Arrives

Caesar left in 54 BC without a garrison (Chapter 4). Nearly a century later Rome came to stay. This chapter follows the conquest from AD 43, the revolt of the Iceni, the campaigns in the north, and the two frontier walls. For most of it we depend on Roman writers, and the sources say how far to trust them.

The story in one box

According to Wikipedia's *Roman conquest of Britain* article, Emperor Claudius sent a force under Aulus Plautius in AD 43. Boudica's revolt (AD 60 or 61) destroyed Camulodunum, Londinium and Verulamium before it was crushed. Agricola's campaigns reached the far north, and the frontier settled on Hadrian's Wall, begun in AD 122. The Antonine Wall of about AD 142 was a short-lived move further north.

Watch out: Roman sources

Almost everything in this chapter comes from Roman writers. The *Roman conquest* article names Tacitus as the main source for Agricola and Boudica, Cassius Dio for the invasion and Claudius, and Suetonius for Claudius. The *Boudica* article says Dio wrote about 140 years later, is "more lurid" than Tacitus and often fictitious, and that the speeches given to Boudica were invented. Numbers such as the death of AD 60 or 61 are the Romans' own.

The invasion of AD 43

The article says Claudius sent a force under Aulus Plautius, with a stated pretext of restoring the exiled Atrebatian king Verica. The number of legions is unclear, and only Legio II Augusta, under Vespasian, is directly attested.

Question	What the article says
Landing place	Traditionally Rutupiae (Richborough, Kent); the article notes this and the departure port (Boulogne) are uncertain, and some historians propose a landing near the Solent

Question	What the article says
Resistance	Caratacus and Togodumnus, sons of Cunobeline, led the Catuvellauni; Togodumnus died after the Thames battle; Caratacus escaped west and was defeated about AD 50 and handed over by Cartimandua
Client kings	Southern tribes such as the Atrebates already had Roman client ties; Cogidubnus later emerged as a Roman ally and ruler
Claudius	Suetonius says the Britons surrendered "without battle or bloodshed", but the article says the claim that Claudius was a military leader is doubtful, and some claims, such as elephants, are doubted

The Catuvellauni, Cunobeline and the kings of Chapter 4's coins connect: the article calls Caratacus and Togodumnus Cunobeline's sons, and Chapter 4 named Cunobelinos as the king minting at Camulodunum.

Boudica's revolt

According to Wikipedia's *Boudica* article, she was a queen of the Iceni (in what is now Norfolk and nearby counties) and the wife of King Prasutagus, a nominally independent Roman ally. He left his kingdom jointly to his two daughters and to Nero. After his death in AD 60 or 61, Rome ignored the will and annexed the kingdom. The two ancient accounts of the cause differ: Tacitus says Boudica was flogged and her daughters assaulted, and Dio cites recalled loans and confiscations by the procurator Catus Decianus.

- **Camulodunum (Colchester):** rebels captured the veterans' colony; survivors sheltering in the Temple of Claudius were killed after two days, and a relief force under Quintus Petillius Cerialis was destroyed.
- **Londinium (London):** governor Suetonius Paulinus, outnumbered, abandoned the town, and rebels burned it after killing those who remained.
- **Verulamium (St Albans):** also sacked, though the extent of the destruction is unclear.
- **Deaths:** Tacitus and Dio both give about 80,000, and the lead gives an estimate of 70,000 to 80,000 Romans and Britons.
- **The end:** Paulinus gathered about 10,000 men and won decisively from a narrow pass. Tacitus says Boudica poisoned herself; Dio says she fell ill and died. The article notes the accounts are not necessarily exclusive. The site of the battle is unidentified.

- **The name:** thought to derive from a Brythonic word meaning "victory". Dio wrote "Buduica", Tacitus added a second c, and medieval copying produced "Boadicea". The name may have been an honorific, so her birth name is unknown.

The *Roman conquest* article places Paulinus's attack on Anglesey, a stronghold of the druids, in AD 60, and says the revolt delayed the conquest of Wales. The *British Iron Age* article says no archaeological evidence of Druidry survives (Chapter 4).

Agricola and the north

The article says Agricola (AD 78 to 84) completed the conquest of Wales, moved into northern England and southern Scotland, and advanced into Caledonia. He defeated Calgacus's forces at Mons Graupius in AD 83 or 84. Afterwards Rome withdrew from the far north, and by about AD 87 the Stanegate was the frontier. The Caledonians return in Chapter 8.

Hadrian's Wall

According to Wikipedia's *Hadrian's Wall* article, construction began in AD 122. It was probably planned before Hadrian's visit that year, so the visit is not the start date itself. The wall ran about 80 Roman miles (73 modern miles, 117 km) from Wallsend on the Tyne to Bowness-on-Solway, entirely in England.

- **Building:** first planned as a stone wall about 10 Roman feet wide, narrowed to 8 feet in the eastern half; the western section was turf at first and later rebuilt in stone. Three legions and some fleet personnel did most of the work over about six years.
- **Garrison:** large forts of about 600 men, milecastles of about 12 to 20, and turrets; when fully manned it held almost 10,000 soldiers, mostly auxiliaries.
- **Purpose:** mainly a barrier to slow raiders, with gates that let Rome monitor and tax movement. Archaeologist Neil Faulkner calls it "as much a propaganda statement as a functional facility". Scholars debate how serious the threat was.
- **Vindolanda:** a supply fort behind the wall.

The Antonine Wall

Wikipedia's *Antonine Wall* article says construction began in AD 142 under Antoninus Pius. It ran about 63 km across Scotland's Central Belt, from Old Kilpatrick on the Clyde to Carriden on the Forth, a turf rampart on stone foundations, meant to replace Hadrian's Wall as the frontier. The article gives two timelines for abandonment (eight years after completion, and "within two decades", with the legions withdrawing in 162) and two fort counts (16, and 19). It does not reconcile them, and neither do I. It gives no single clear cause for abandonment: the Romans never conquered the Caledonians, the wall suffered many attacks, and they may have reached an accommodation with local tribes.

Date	Event (per the articles)
AD 43	Invasion under Plautius
c. AD 50	Caratacus defeated
AD 60 or 61	Anglesey attacked; Boudica's revolt
AD 78 to 84	Agricola's campaigns; Mons Graupius in 83 or 84
c. AD 87	The Stanegate is the frontier
AD 122	Hadrian's Wall begun
AD 142	Antonine Wall begun
AD 162 / 164	Antonine Wall abandoned (the article's later date); the garrison returns to Hadrian's Wall in 164 (<i>Hadrian's Wall</i>)
AD 208 to 211	Septimius Severus campaigns, dies at York

Words to know

Term	Meaning
Legion	The main Roman army unit of citizen soldiers
Auxiliary	A soldier from the provinces serving alongside the legions
Client king	A local ruler allied to and dependent on Rome

Term	Meaning
Procurator	A Roman official in charge of finance in a province
Milecastle	A small fort at intervals along Hadrian's Wall
Epitome	A shortened version of a larger work; Dio's account survives mainly in one

Try It Yourself

Think of the answer first, then click to check.

1. Who sent the invasion of AD 43, and who led it?

▼ Show answer

Emperor Claudius sent it, under Aulus Plautius.

2. Where did the invasion land, and how sure is that?

▼ Show answer

Traditionally at Rutupiae (Richborough), but the article notes this is uncertain and some propose the Solent.

3. Who was Boudica and what began her revolt?

▼ Show answer

A queen of the Iceni, wife of Prasutagus. After his death in AD 60 or 61 Rome annexed the kingdom despite his will; Tacitus and Dio give different accounts of what was done to her and her people.

4. Which three towns were destroyed in the revolt?

▼ Show answer

Camulodunum (Colchester), Londinium (London) and Verulamium (St Albans).

5. Why should you be careful with the numbers and speeches in accounts of the revolt?

▼ Show answer

They come from Tacitus and Dio; Dio wrote about 140 years later and is often fictitious, and the speeches given to Boudica were invented.

6. Where was Mons Graupius fought, and who was Agricola's opponent?

▼ Show answer

In Caledonia, against Calgacus's forces, in AD 83 or 84. The article does not give the site.

7. Compare Hadrian's Wall and the Antonine Wall: dates and length.

▼ Show answer

Hadrian's Wall: begun in AD 122, about 117 km from Wallsend to Bowness-on-Solway.
Antonine Wall: begun in AD 142, about 63 km from the Clyde to the Forth.

8. What was Hadrian's Wall for, according to the article?

▼ Show answer

Mainly a physical barrier to slow raiders, with gates to monitor and tax movement, and a propaganda statement of imperial power; scholars debate how serious the threat was.

Note on sources

This chapter uses Wikipedia's *Roman conquest of Britain* (the first 100,000 of about 104,000 characters), *Boudica* (the whole article), *Hadrian's Wall* (the first 100,000 of about 176,000) and *Antonine Wall* (the whole article), each as the page tool summarised it. The *Roman conquest* excerpt did not mention the Iceni or Prasutagus, and the *Boudica* article supplied them. The Brigantes did not appear in what I read, so I do not discuss them. I did not read Tacitus, Dio or Suetonius themselves, or any scholarly paper. The Antonine Wall article gives inconsistent abandonment dates and fort counts, and I say so. The term definitions and the date table are mine and unverified.

Coming up in Chapter 7: Life in Roman Britain. Towns, roads, Latin, religion and everyday life.

Britain Before English

Course 1 · Chapter 7 · Life in Roman Britain

Chapter 6 was about armies. This one is about what the province was like to live in, from the evidence the sources describe: the roads, the towns, a set of letters on wooden tablets from a fort on the northern frontier, and the earliest traces of Christianity. It ends by asking what language people spoke, and says what I could and could not find.

The story in one box

Wikipedia's *Roman roads in Britain* says about 2,000 miles (3,200 km) of paved trunk roads were built, most of the known network complete by about AD 180. The Vindolanda tablets, mostly written about AD 95 to 105, are letters in Latin from a northern fort. Christianity reached Britain by about AD 200 according to Tertullian and Origen, and three British bishops attended the Council of Arles in 314.

Watch out

Most of what survives comes from the army, from towns and from the wealthy. The Vindolanda letters are a garrison's, and the Christian evidence is described as "a tiny proportion" of what archaeologists recover. They do not show how most country people lived. I say where the sources stop, and I did not find a reliable figure for how many people spoke Latin.

The province

According to Wikipedia's *Roman Britain* article, Britain became the province of Britannia after the AD 43 invasion, with Londinium (London) and Camulodunum (Colchester) listed as capitals and York (Eboracum) as a provincial capital. It gives the later structure in stages:

Date	Change (per the article)
c. 197	The Severan reforms split Britain into Britannia Superior and Inferior

Date	Change (per the article)
by 312	A division into four provinces; the part I read does not name the emperor responsible
later 4th century	A fifth province, Valentia, whose location is disputed
by 314	A <i>Dux Britanniarum</i> commands the northern frontier; a <i>vicarius</i> governs from Londinium under a prefect at Trier

The article puts the population of Britain at "c. 2 million" when discussing the period of Mons Graupius (AD 84). It dates the main sources of economic life: tin from Cornwall and Devon, important from the Bronze Age, gold mines at Dolaucothi developed under Frontinus after about AD 75, improved agriculture, trade focused on the Strait of Dover with London and Richborough the main ports, and villas such as Chedworth, with new mosaics in the 4th and 5th centuries. Copper coins became very rare after 402, and coinage was likely abandoned as a medium of exchange by about 430. I read only the first 100,000 of about 289,000 characters, which stopped partway through the Trade section, so I did not reach its sections on government, demographics and religion.

Roads

Wikipedia's *Roman roads in Britain* article says the roads were "initially designed for military use", built by the army during about four centuries of Roman rule, and later supported trade.

Road	Route (per the article)
Watling Street	From the Kentish ports (Dover or Richborough) through London to Wroxeter; its Anglo-Saxon name was <i>Watlingestræte</i>
Fosse Way	Exeter to Lincoln; built early and marking the effective boundary of the early province; its name may come from Latin <i>fossa</i> ("ditch"), probably a popular, not official, name
Ermine Street	About 200 miles (322 km) from London to York via Lincoln

Road	Route (per the article)
Akeman Street	Two separate routes: St Albans to Cirencester, and Wimpole to Brancaster

- **Building:** a raised central carriageway (the agger) in a strip bounded by shallow ditches; a typical trunk road was 5 to 8 m wide; two layers of metalling.
- **The Antonine Itinerary:** dating from the later 3rd century, it has 14 itineraries for the island and is a key source for place names and distances.
- **Names:** the original Roman names of most roads are unknown. Most carry Welsh, early Old English or later Middle English names applied after Roman rule ended, and the prefix *strat-* survives in places like Stretham and Stretford. This is a small piece of the evidence The Story of Old English, Chapter 1 draws on.

Letters from Vindolanda

The article on the *Vindolanda tablets* says they are thin wooden leaf-tablets, roughly postcard-sized, found in March 1973 at a fort in northern England. Excavators first took them for wood shavings until one was seen to have writing inside. They darkened on exposure, and infrared photography later revealed the text. The ink is carbon mixed with gum arabic and water.

- **Dates:** late 1st to early 2nd century AD, most written in the fort's expansion phases about 95 to 105.
- **Content:** official and personal letters among the garrison, their families and slaves, including a cavalry officer's polite request for more beer, and roles such as bath-house keeper and shoemaker. Tablet 291 is a birthday invitation from Claudia Severa to Sulpicia Lepidina, about AD 100, which the article calls "one of the earliest known examples of writing in Latin by a woman". Another tablet mentions "two pairs of underpants" and socks.
- **Writing:** Latin in Old Roman cursive. The article says the tablets testify to "a high degree of literacy in the Roman army".
- **The Britons:** *Brittunculi*, a diminutive of *Britto*, was used by the garrison as a patronising or derogatory term for the local Britons. The article says it is the only published Vindolanda text that explicitly refers to the native Britons.
- **Uncertainty:** much of the ink is faded and transcription often depends on judgement; why Vindolanda has yielded far more ink tablets than other sites is unresolved. The article says

the Bloomberg tablets from London are older.

Religion and early Christianity

The *Roman Britain* article says the Roman goddess Britannia became the female personification of Britain, and that Paulinus attacked the Druids on Mona (Anglesey) in AD 60 to 61 (Chapter 6). Wikipedia's *Christianity in Roman Britain* article gives the Christian side:

Topic	What the article says
Earliest evidence	About 200, Tertullian and Origen both wrote that Christianity had reached Britain; the article says their rhetorical aims make their accuracy questionable; Dorothy Watts suggests it arrived in the later second century
Alban	The only martyr whose cult clearly survived the end of Roman administration; he died at Verulamium, but the date is disputed; Germanus described visiting the shrine in 429
Arles, 314	Three British bishops attended: Eborius (York), Restitutus (London) and Adelfius (possibly Lincoln); the <i>Roman Britain</i> article adds that the list is corrupt and scholars disagree on the sees
Archaeology	The Lullingstone chi-rho fresco (a villa built about 360); the Hinton St Mary mosaic; the Water Newton silver hoard; no house churches or purpose-built churches have been found in Britain
Later figures	Pelagius, likely born in Britain, spent most of his life on the continent; Saint Patrick was also Romano-British, and his <i>Confessio</i> is the only surviving written testimony by a Romano-British Christian
How many?	Probably small in numbers early on; Martin Henig suggests that by the end of the 4th century "a large proportion of British society, however materially impoverished," was Christian

The article says Christianity survived in western Britain after Roman administration collapsed and was later reintroduced as an institution by the Augustinian mission (The Story of Old English, Chapter 4 mentions the mission of 597).

What language?

The sources I read for this chapter say little. The Vindolanda tablets are in Latin and show a literate army, and *Brittunculi* shows the garrison distinguishing itself from the Britons. The *Roman Britain* excerpt did not reach its language section. For what the sources say about Brittonic, the Latin loanwords it took, and the survival of Brittonic after Roman rule, see *The Story of Old English*, Chapter 1, which draws on Wikipedia's *Common Brittonic* article. I did not find a figure for how many people spoke Latin, or how widely, and I do not give one.

Words to know

Term	Meaning
Colonia	A town of Roman citizens, often settled by veterans
Agger	The raised central carriageway of a Roman road
Metalling	The hard stone surface of a road
Cursive	Joined-up handwriting
Chi-rho	A Christian symbol made from the first two Greek letters of "Christ"
Martyr	A person killed for their religion
Villa	A large Roman country house and estate



Try It Yourself

Think of the answer first, then click to check.

1. How long was the paved Roman road network, and when was most of it complete?

▼ Show answer

About 2,000 miles (3,200 km), most of the known network complete by about AD 180.

2. Name two Roman roads and say where each ran.

▼ Show answer

For example Watling Street (Kentish ports through London to Wroxeter) and the Fosse Way (Exeter to Lincoln).

3. Why are the Roman names of most roads unknown?

▼ Show answer

Most carry Welsh, early Old English or Middle English names applied after Roman rule ended.

4. What are the Vindolanda tablets, and what language are they in?

▼ Show answer

Wooden leaf-tablets with ink letters, mostly from about AD 95 to 105, found in 1973; they are in Latin, in Old Roman cursive.

5. What does *Brittunculi* show?

▼ Show answer

The garrison used it as a patronising or derogatory term for the local Britons; it is the only published Vindolanda text that explicitly refers to them.

6. Who attended the Council of Arles from Britain, and what does it suggest?

▼ Show answer

Bishops Eborius (York), Restitutus (London) and Adelfius (possibly Lincoln), suggesting a regionally organised church by the early 4th century; the list is corrupt and scholars disagree on the sees.

7. What kinds of Christian evidence exist, and what is missing?

▼ Show answer

The Lullingstone fresco, the Hinton St Mary mosaic and the Water Newton silver; no house churches or purpose-built churches have been found.

8. What does the chapter not say about language in Roman Britain, and why?

▼ Show answer

How many people spoke Latin or Brittonic; the sources I read did not give a figure, and the *Roman Britain* excerpt stopped before its language section.

Note on sources

This chapter uses Wikipedia's *Roman Britain* (the first 100,000 of about 289,000 characters, stopping partway through its Trade section), *Vindolanda tablets* (the whole article), *Roman roads in Britain* (the whole article) and *Christianity in Roman Britain* (the whole article), each as the page tool summarised it. I did not read the *Roman Britain* sections on government, demographics, religion or legacy, nor any tablet text. The date table and the grouping are mine, and the term definitions are mine and unverified. I did not check the claim that the early fourth-century division into four provinces was by Diocletian, because the excerpt did not say so, and I do not make it.

Coming up in Chapter 8: The North. The Caledonians and Picts, their carved stones, what is known of their language, and the kingdom of Dál Riata.

Britain Before English

Course 1 · Chapter 8 · The North

The Roman frontier walls of Chapter 6 divided Britain in two for the Romans. North of them lived peoples whose own writing is almost entirely lost: first called the Caledonians, then the Picts, with the Gaelic kingdom of Dál Riata on the western coast. This chapter reports what the sources say, and a large part of what they say is that we do not know.

The story in one box

According to Wikipedia's *Caledonians* article, the Caledonians were a Brittonic-speaking tribal confederacy in what is now Scotland, and after Rome conquered the south the northern peoples came to be called Picts. The *Picts* article says the name is first recorded in a Latin speech of AD 297. Pictish is an Insular Celtic language, probably related to Brittonic, known mainly from place and personal names. Dál Riata, a Gaelic kingdom in Argyll and Antrim, is dated 498 to 850 in its infobox, and the Picts and Dál Riata later merged into the Kingdom of Alba.

Watch out

"The painted people" is the usual explanation of the name, from Latin *pingere*, but the *Picts* article says there is little direct evidence that the Picts tattooed themselves, and also mentions a native origin, possibly related to the Gallic *Pictones*. The Picts left no books. Most of what is said about them comes from Roman writers and from later Irish and Northumbrian sources, which may be biased.

The Caledonians

The *Caledonians* article says Ptolemy's 2nd-century *Geography* lists related northern groups, including the Vacomagi, Taexali and Venicones. The Greek *Kalēdōnes* gave rise to the name "Caledonia". Older explanations are rejected, such as a Gaelic "forest-people"; Stefan Zimmer proposes a Proto-Celtic root meaning "hard" plus "foot", though the article says some scholars doubt this.

- **Tacitus** described them as red-haired with large limbs and argued this suggested a German origin, and recorded Mons Graupius (AD 83 or 84, Chapter 6). The article says it is unclear whether Calgacus was a king or an elected war-leader.
- **Cassius Dio** recorded Caledonian attacks in 197 and 209 to 210, claiming they inflicted 50,000 Roman casualties through attrition and guerrilla tactics.
- **Severus (209 to 211)**: Septimius Severus led an expedition north and died at York in 211. Caracalla made peace and withdrew, and the Caledonians retook their land. Historians disagree on whether the war was truly concluded.

The article says the Caledonians are not clearly separated from the Picts: Roman writers grouped northern tribes together, and Peter Salway assumes the Caledonians were Pictish tribes speaking a language closely related to Common Brittonic. It gives 305 as the first recorded use of "Pict", while the *Picts* article says 297. I could not tell why they differ, so I give both. The *Antonine Wall* article in Chapter 6 says the Romans never conquered the Caledonians.

The Picts

Wikipedia's *Picts* article says the Latin *Picti* first appears in a panegyric from 297 (the part I read does not name the speaker). The Picts lived north of the Firth of Forth, and Fortriu, the dominant kingdom, is now thought to have been centred on Moray. The Picts are assumed to descend from the Caledonii and other northern Iron Age tribes.

Topic	What the article says
Kingdoms	Later sources list seven kingdoms, but the article treats the list cautiously, since it matches the seven sons of the legendary founder Cruithne; some evidence suggests an Orkney kingdom too
Conversion	When the elite converted is uncertain; traditions link Palladius, Ninian and Columba to Pictland; excavation at Portmahomack suggests a monastery by the late 6th century
Stones	Class I (symbols, such as Aberlemno I) and Class II (such as the Aberlemno Kirkyard Stone) are described; symbols such as the double disc and Z-rod, and the mirror and comb, have resisted translation
Dun Nechtain, 685	The Anglians of Northumbria were defeated, which halted their northward expansion

Topic	What the article says
End	The Pictish and Dál Riata kingdoms merged into the Kingdom of Alba under the House of Alpin, with Kenneth MacAlpin becoming king in the 840s
Unknown	Early history, origins, the meaning of the symbols, whether Alba was new or a renaming, and whether succession was matrilineal

The Pictish language

Wikipedia's *Pictish language* article says Pictish was an Insular Celtic language. Most scholars think its ancestor was a branch of Brittonic, though some see it only as "related", and it may have been "a number of discrete Brittonic varieties". It is extinct.

- **Place names:** Aberdeen, Perth and Cupar, with elements like *aber*, *pen* and *tref*, appear mainly north of the Forth.
- **Personal names:** names such as Uurgust and Taran show Brittonic features, drawn largely from the Poppleton manuscript.
- **Ogham:** some inscriptions have been read as Brittonic, but Rodway (2020) argues most apparent Celtic matches are chance resemblances. The article says the corpus is tiny and the key to the readings is unknown.
- **Other theories:** John Rhys (1892) proposed a non-Indo-European language; Kenneth Jackson (1955) combined a P-Celtic Pictish with a possible non-Celtic substratum, a view the article says has been weakened by archaeology and newer Celtic readings of ogham. Jackson also proposed a separate branch, Pritenic, which Guto Rhys heavily criticised but the article says remains popular.
- **End:** Pictish was gradually replaced by Gaelic. The infobox gives extinction "by c. 1200 AD", and the article suggests the Pictish identity was forgotten in the 12th or 13th century.

Chapter 5 listed Pictish among the Brittonic languages with the words "possibly". This is why: the article says the exact affinity with Brittonic or Gaelic remains unresolved.

Dál Riata

According to Wikipedia's *Dál Riata* article, it was a Gaelic kingdom on both sides of the North Channel: roughly Argyll in Scotland and north-east County Antrim in Ireland, with its capital

believed to be the hillfort of Dunadd. The infobox gives 498 to 850.

Question	What the article says
Founding	By the legendary Fergus Mór, dated 498 to 501; the <i>Duan Albanach</i> (11th century) says three sons of Erc conquered Alba about 500; Bede names Reuda
Origin debate	Eoin MacNeill proposed Irish settlement first, then rulers moving from Ireland; Ewan Campbell argues there is no archaeological or place-name evidence of migration or takeover and suggests the medieval accounts were dynastic propaganda, a view that has been challenged
Height	Áedán mac Gabráin, r. 574 to 608; defeated about 603 at Degaстан by the Bernician king Æthelfrith
Iona	Áedán granted Iona to Columba, and the Convention of Druim Cett (575) allied Dál Riata with the Cenél Conaill; the article does not give a date for Columba's arrival, so I give none; the Book of Kells, about 800, was probably begun there
Decline	Defeats at Mag Rath (637) and Strathcarron (642); under Pictish overlordship by 741; Viking raids from 795
The merger	Cináed mac Ailpín (Kenneth MacAlpin) is traditionally credited with becoming king of the Picts about 843; the article says it is contested whether he ruled Dál Riata first

The article does not date the arrival of Gaelic. It notes that Campbell's theory would explain how Argyll stayed Gaelic-speaking while the rest of Scotland spoke Pictish or another Brittonic language, and that Adomnán's *Life* shows the distribution of Gaelic and P-Celtic place-names by the end of the 7th century. It says the sources are uneven: the annals leave gaps (the record ends in 792), Adomnán's *Life of St Columba* is hagiography, not history, and the *Duan Albanach* and the royal genealogies are "less reliable than one might wish".

Words to know

Term	Meaning
Panegyric	A formal speech of praise
Ogham	An early Irish alphabet of strokes along a line, found on stones

Term	Meaning
Pritenic	Jackson's proposed Pictish branch of P-Celtic
Hagiography	A saint's life written to honour the saint
Substratum	An earlier language that influences a later one
Matrilineal	Descent or inheritance through the mother's line
Overlordship	Rule of one king over another's kingdom

Try It Yourself

Think of the answer first, then click to check.

1. Who were the Caledonians, and what happened to the name?

▼ Show answer

A Brittonic-speaking tribal confederacy in what is now Scotland; after Rome conquered the south, the northern peoples came to be called Picts.

2. What is the usual meaning of "Picts", and what is the doubt?

▼ Show answer

"Painted", from Latin *pingere*, taken as a reference to tattooing; the article says there is little direct evidence of tattooing and notes a possible native origin.

3. Which two articles give different first dates for the name "Pict", and what are the dates?

▼ Show answer

The *Picts* article says 297; the *Caledonians* article says 305.

4. What is known of the Pictish language, and from what?

▼ Show answer

It was an Insular Celtic language, probably related to Brittonic, known mainly from place and personal names and a few ogham inscriptions whose readings are disputed.

5. What happened at Dun Nechtain in 685?

▼ Show answer

The Anglians of Northumbria were defeated, which halted their northward expansion.

6. Where was Dál Riata, and what language did it speak?

▼ Show answer

Roughly Argyll in Scotland and north-east Antrim in Ireland; it was a Gaelic kingdom.

7. What are the two views on Dál Riata's origin?

▼ Show answer

Irish settlement and rulers moving from Ireland (MacNeill and the medieval accounts), or a native development with the medieval accounts as dynastic propaganda (Campbell, a view that has been challenged).

8. Why should the sources for the north be read with care?

▼ Show answer

The Picts left no books; Roman, Irish and Northumbrian writers may be biased; the annals leave gaps; and the Life of St Columba is hagiography, not history.

Note on sources

This chapter uses Wikipedia's *Picts* (the first 100,000 of about 165,000 characters), *Pictish language* (the whole article), *Dál Riata* (the first 100,000 of about 181,000) and *Caledonians* (the whole article), each as the page tool summarised it, plus the *Antonine Wall* article from Chapter 6. The *Picts* excerpt did not mention a Class III stone, did not name the speaker of the 297 panegyric, and did not give a date for the union with Dál Riata, so I give none of those. The *Dál Riata* excerpt gave no date for Columba's arrival, so I give none. I did not read the Pictish stones, the annals, Adomnán or any scholarly paper.

The date differences between articles are shown, not resolved. The term definitions are mine and unverified.

Coming up in Chapter 9: After Rome. The end of Roman rule, what the sources say about the Britons, and the question of Arthur.

Britain Before English

Course 1 · Chapter 9 · After Rome

Roman rule in Britain is often said to end in 410, and the next two centuries are often called the Dark Ages. The sources I read are more careful than both phrases. This chapter covers what happened around 410, what the evidence of the next century and a half is, and how the figure of Arthur appears and grows in the sources.

The story in one box

According to Wikipedia's *End of Roman rule in Britain* article, 410 is the traditional year but twenty-first-century scholarship generally rejects an abrupt end, and describes different kinds of decline in different regions. The *Sub-Roman Britain* article dates the period from 407 to 577 (or, traditionally, 410 to 597) and says written sources are scarce. The earliest source on Arthur that can be dated is the 9th-century *Historia Brittonum*, and the article says most modern historians do not consider him a historical figure.

Watch out

"Dark Ages" is a statement about the sources, not about the people. The articles say the contemporary British writing is thin and the later writing is heavily shaped by legend. When a source on this period sounds confident, check how late it was written, and who it was written for.

Around 410

The *End of Roman rule in Britain* article gives these events:

Date	Event (per the article)
407	Constantine III takes the remaining mobile troops from Britain to Gaul and tries to become Western emperor
408 and 409	Severe Saxon raids; Britain has no troops

Date	Event (per the article)
409 or 410	Britain and some Gauls expel Constantine's magistrates
c. 410	Honorius sends a rescript telling British communities to look to their own defence; some historians think it concerned the Bruttii of southern Italy and that "Britannia" in Zosimus may be a copying error for "Brettia"
411	Constantine's cause fails; his son is killed and he is assassinated

The main source for the expulsion is Zosimus, who wrote in the late 5th to early 6th century. He says the Britons "rejected Roman law, reverted to their native customs, and armed themselves to ensure their own safety". The article gives the scholars' positions: Theodor Mommsen (1885), "It was not Britain that gave up Rome, but Rome that gave up Britain"; Michael Jones (1998), the opposite, that usurpers and poor administration led Britain to break away; and Christopher Snyder, who argues that the rescript, being addressed to communities, implies the cities were then the highest Roman authority. E. A. Thompson's idea of a peasant revolt like the Gallic Bagaudae has, the article says, no direct textual support. Government reportedly reverted largely to the city level around 410.

My excerpt did not mention the Gallic Chronicle of 441 (the one that says Britain passed under Saxon power), so I do not give its wording. The Anglo-Saxon side of these years is covered in *The Story of Old English*, Chapters 1 and 2.

The sub-Roman centuries

Wikipedia's *Sub-Roman Britain* article says the term first described 5th- and 6th-century sites where locally made pottery had declined from Roman standards. It now uses 407 to 577 (the Battle of Deorham), and gives the traditional span 410 to 597, ending with Augustine's arrival, noting the end date is arbitrary because the culture lasted longer in the north and west.

- **Archaeology:** declining villas, a sharp break in town life (with exceptions such as London, York, Canterbury and Wroxeter), the end of stone building, and no new coins in circulation after the early 5th century. Fortified hilltop sites such as Tintagel and South Cadbury show refurbishment and overseas trade.

- **Written sources:** Patrick's *Confessio* and Gildas's *De Excidio* are the closest contemporary British sources. Continental sources include Zosimus and the *Gallic Chronicles* of 452 and 511, whose reliability is debated. Later sources, including Bede, the *Historia Brittonum*, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and the *Annales Cambriae*, are treated with caution because they are heavily shaped by legend.
- **"The Age of Tyrants":** a popular name for the period, reflecting the usurpers.
- **The kingdoms:** in the west and north, Gwynedd, Dumnonia and Rheged, with Powys, Dyfed and Gododdin. The northern British kingdoms are known as the Hen Ogledd, the "Old North". The article says that until the 570s the Britons still controlled roughly half of England and Wales.
- **Brittany:** migration from the south-west to Armorica may have begun as early as 300 and largely ended by 500, reflected in names such as Cornouaille and Domnonée. A British bishopric in Galicia shows similar settlement.
- **Uncertain:** the article says the extent of British survival is contested, and that estimates of Anglo-Saxon migration numbers have been revised downward since the 1990s (Chapter 2 of *The Story of Old English* gives the range).

Gildas

Wikipedia's *Gildas* article gives his life as c. 450/500 to c. 570, a British monk and abbot who later moved to Brittany. His *De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae* is a religious sermon in three parts: a short history of Roman Britain with criticism of his countrymen's sins, a condemnation of five British kings (Constantine, Aurelius Conanus, Vortiporius, Cuneglasus and Maelgwn), and an attack on the clergy. It praises Ambrosius Aurelianus as a leader of resistance against the Saxons, the first source to do so, and mentions the victory at Mons Badonicus without saying who led it.

- **Date:** estimates range from about 479 to 484 to the 540s; his death date of 570 is "at best, traditional" according to one scholar (the article).
- **Reliability:** the article says the work is "not intended to be an objective chronicle". The *Sub-Roman Britain* article calls it a moralising polemic with no absolute dates.
- **Vortigern:** the *Sub-Roman Britain* article says Gildas describes a council of Vortigern's hiring Saxon mercenaries who later turned on the Britons.
- **Arthur:** *De Excidio* does not mention him.

Arthur: what the sources say

Wikipedia's *King Arthur* article is cautious about the early evidence:

Source	What it says about Arthur
Gildas (6th century); Bede (early 8th)	Neither mentions him; Gildas mentions Badon
<i>Y Gododdin</i>	A Welsh poem praising a warrior says he "was not Arthur"; dated to the early 7th century on linguistic grounds, but historians disagree about the date and whether the line is a later addition
<i>Historia Brittonum</i> (9th century)	The first datable mention; it lists twelve battles including Badon, where Arthur reportedly killed 960 men single-handedly; recent studies question its reliability
<i>Annales Cambriae</i> (10th century)	Dates Badon to 516 to 518 and Camlann, where Arthur and Mordred died, to 537 to 539; the Arthurian entries were probably added in the 10th century, and the Badon entry likely derives from the <i>Historia Brittonum</i>
Geoffrey of Monmouth (about 1138)	The first narrative account of his life, much of it apparently Geoffrey's own invention; it introduced Uther Pendragon, Merlin, Guinevere, Excalibur and Avalon

The article does not give a definitive answer on whether he existed. It says most modern historians do not consider Arthur a historical figure and that the evidence is weak. Some scholars argue for a real Romano-British leader who fought the Anglo-Saxons in the late 5th to early 6th century, and the article says Andrew Breeze's identifications are disputed. Proposed models such as Riotamus and Ambrosius Aurelianus have no convincing evidence behind them, and other scholars think Arthur began as a folklore hero or a Celtic deity who was later given historical deeds. The date of Badon itself is given as about 490 in the *Sub-Roman Britain* article, 516 to 518 in the *Annales Cambriae*, and the late 5th to early 6th century in the *King Arthur* article. I show all three and do not choose.

Words to know

Term	Meaning
Sub-Roman	Of the centuries after Roman rule ended; also "post-Roman"

Term	Meaning
Usurper	A person who seizes power, here a would-be emperor
Rescript	An emperor's written reply to a petition
Polemic	A forceful written attack or argument
Hen Ogledd	"The Old North", the British kingdoms of northern England and southern Scotland
Mercenary	A soldier hired for pay
Historicity	Whether a person or event really existed or happened

Try It Yourself

Think of the answer first, then click to check.

1. What happened in 407, and why does it matter?

▼ Show answer

Constantine III took the remaining mobile troops from Britain to Gaul, leaving Britain without them; the *Sub-Roman Britain* article uses 407 as the start of the period.

2. What did the rescript of about 410 say, and what is the doubt about it?

▼ Show answer

It told British communities to look to their own defence; some historians think it concerned the Bruttii of southern Italy and that "Britannia" in Zosimus is a copying error for "Brettia".

3. Contrast the views of Mommsen and Jones.

▼ Show answer

Mommsen: Rome gave up Britain. Jones: Britain broke away from Rome because of usurpers and poor administration.

4. Give two kinds of archaeological evidence for the sub-Roman centuries.

▼ Show answer

For example declining villas, the break in town life, the end of stone building, no new coins after the early 5th century, and fortified hilltop sites such as Tintagel and South Cadbury.

5. What is *De Excidio*, and why is it not an objective chronicle?

▼ Show answer

Gildas's religious sermon in three parts, criticising his countrymen, five British kings and the clergy; the article says it is "not intended to be an objective chronicle".

6. Which is the first datable source to mention Arthur, and when?

▼ Show answer

The *Historia Brittonum*, in the 9th century.

7. Which early writers do not mention Arthur?

▼ Show answer

Gildas (who mentions Badon) and Bede.

8. The articles give three dates for Badon. What are they?

▼ Show answer

About 490 (*Sub-Roman Britain*), 516 to 518 (*Annales Cambriae*), and the late 5th to early 6th century (*King Arthur*).

Note on sources

This chapter uses Wikipedia's *End of Roman rule in Britain* (the whole article), *Sub-Roman Britain* (the first 100,000 of about 166,000 characters), *Gildas* (the whole article) and *King Arthur* (the first 100,000 of about 210,000), each as the page tool summarised it. The *End of Roman rule* article did not mention the Gallic Chronicle of 441, and the *Sub-Roman Britain* excerpt did not name Constantius's *Life of Germanus*, so I do not discuss them. I

did not read the later part of the *King Arthur* article, any of the early texts, or any scholarly paper. The term definitions are mine and unverified.

Coming up in Chapter 10: What Remained. Place names, the surviving Brittonic languages, a recap of the whole course, and a pointer to The Story of Old English.

Britain Before English

Course 1 · Chapter 10 · What Remained

The last chapter asks what is still here. The main traces of the people before English are in the map: river and town names, and three living languages, Welsh, Cornish and Breton. It ends with a recap of the whole course.

The story in one box

According to Wikipedia's *Brittonic languages* article, the surviving Brittonic languages are Welsh, Cornish and Breton, all derived from a common ancestor; Cumbric is extinct and Pictish is uncertain. The article says Brittonic had likely disappeared everywhere except Cornwall, Wales and nearby English counties by the 11th century. Few English words are Brittonic, but many river and place names are.

Watch out

Many of the name meanings below are hedged in the source ("possibly", "probably", "perhaps"), and the Scottish ones depend on scholars' reconstructions of Cumbric and Pictish that the article says are not uniformly accepted. A name that looks Celtic may also come from a Latin form of an older name, or from Old English *wealh*, "Briton", which records Britons without being a Celtic word.

Names on the map

Wikipedia's *Celtic toponymy* article lists these survivals. The article carries a "needs more citations" banner, so treat the details as provisional.

Name	Proposed origin (per the article)
Avon	Brythonic <i>abona</i> , "river" (Welsh <i>afon</i>); several English rivers bear it
Axe, Exe	Celtic <i>iska</i> , "water"
Thames, Tamar, Tame, Teme	Possibly from <i>tames-</i> , "dark" (given only as a possibility)

Name	Proposed origin (per the article)
Dover	Latin <i>Dubris</i> , from <i>dubr-</i> , "water"
Lincoln	Latin <i>Lindum</i> , from <i>lindo-</i> , "pool"
York	Latin <i>Eboracum</i> , from <i>eburo-</i> , "yew"
Gloucester	Latin <i>Glevum</i> , possibly "bright place"
Penn, Pendleton	<i>penn-</i> , "hill, top, head" (Welsh <i>pen</i>)
Aberdeen	<i>aber</i> , "river mouth"
Edinburgh	From <i>Din Ediyh</i> , "fort of Ediyh"
Glasgow	Compared to Welsh <i>glascau</i> , "blue hollow"
Lanark	Compared to Welsh <i>llanerch</i> , "glade"

The pattern is that rivers and a few major towns keep their older names while most villages carry English names. The same article says Welsh and Cornish place-names are mostly Welsh or Cornish, or anglicised forms of them. I did not read its later sections or its last citations.

Words in English

Wikipedia's *List of English words of Brittonic origin* says few English words are definitely Brittonic: academia accepts "fewer than ten" beyond reasonable doubt among words that are neither historic nor obsolete. The most widely accepted are *bin*, *brock* (badger), *carr* (rock), *coomb* (valley), *crag* and *tor* (hill). Others, such as *gull*, *dun*, *hog* and *peat*, are disputed. Place names show more: *coomb* in the south-west, *tor* in names such as Glastonbury Tor, and *funta* ("spring") in Bedford, Chalfont and Fontwell.

The living languages

The *Brittonic languages* article says Brittonic is one of the two branches of the Insular Celtic languages, the other being Goidelic. It is also called P-Celtic, because it has /p/ where Goidelic has /k/. Common Brittonic was spoken across Great Britain in the Iron Age and Roman period

and borrowed many Latin words during Roman rule; about 800 survive in the three modern languages. By the post-Roman period there were at least two groups, Southwestern and Western. Western developed into Cumbric and Welsh, and Southwestern into Cornish and Breton.

Language	Where	Position (per the articles)
Welsh	Wales	Spoken continuously. The 2021 census counted 538,300 people aged three and over (17.8%) able to speak it; other surveys give higher figures. Official status confirmed by the Welsh Language (Wales) Measure 2011. Old Welsh dated to the 9th century onward; William Morgan's 1588 Bible standardised the language
Cornish	Cornwall	Died out as a community language in the 18th or 19th century (the last-speaker claims are contested). A revival began around Henry Jenner's 1904 handbook. UNESCO changed its label from "extinct" to critically endangered in 2010. The 2021 census gives 563 people
Breton	Brittany, France	Brought from Britain to Brittany in the Early Middle Ages and closest to Cornish. The article quotes a fall "from more than one million speakers around 1950 to 107,000 in 2024"; UNESCO classes it severely endangered. French is the sole official language of France
Cumbric	Northern England, southern Scotland	Extinct, replaced by Goidelic and Anglic speech
Pictish	Northern Scotland	Marked uncertain; often placed in a separate Pritenic branch (see Chapter 8)

The article says Brittonic was displaced from the 5th century by Gaelic and Germanic speakers, and notes that western Herefordshire spoke Welsh until the late 19th century. The speaker figures come from different surveys with different questions, so I give them with their sources and do not compare them directly.

The course in ten steps

Chapter	Title	One-line recap
1	First People	Humans in Britain long before farming; Doggerland, Happisburgh, Cheddar Man
2	Farmers and Monuments	Neolithic farming, Skara Brae, long barrows and Stonehenge
3	Beakers and Bronze	The Beaker culture, the Amesbury Archer and the Bronze Age
4	The Iron Age	Hillforts such as Maiden Castle, Pytheas, and Caesar's invasions
5	Were They Celts?	The term "Celt", the Celtic languages and the debate about it
6	Rome Arrives	The conquest, Boudica, Hadrian's Wall and the Antonine Wall
7	Life in Roman Britain	Towns, roads, Vindolanda tablets and Christianity
8	The North	Caledonians, Picts and Dál Riata
9	After Rome	The end of Roman rule, sub-Roman Britain, Gildas and Arthur
10	What Remained	Names and the surviving Brittonic languages

Where the story goes next

This course stops at about 450. The arrival of the Anglo-Saxons, the beginning of English and the first English texts are told in The Story of Old English. Its Chapters 1 and 2 cover the same years from the Anglo-Saxon side. A further planned course, The History of the English Language, would carry the story on; it is not written yet.

Words to know

Term	Meaning
Brittonic	The branch of Celtic that includes Welsh, Cornish, Breton, and the extinct Cumbric
Goidelic	The other Insular Celtic branch (Irish, Scottish Gaelic, Manx)

Term	Meaning
Toponymy	The study of place names
Loanword	A word borrowed from another language
Revival	Bringing a language back into use after it stopped being a community language
Substrate	A language that leaves traces, such as names, in the language that replaces it (my gloss)

Try It Yourself

Think of the answer first, then click to check.

1. Name the three surviving Brittonic languages.

▼ Show answer

Welsh, Cornish and Breton.

2. Which Brittonic languages are extinct, or uncertain?

▼ Show answer

Cumbric is extinct. Pictish is marked uncertain: often placed in a separate Pritenic branch.

3. Why is Brittonic called "P-Celtic"?

▼ Show answer

Its reflex of Proto-Indo-European *kw* is /p/, while Goidelic has /k/.

4. Give two river names that may come from Brittonic and their meanings.

▼ Show answer

For example Avon (*abona*, "river"), Axe and Exe (*iska*, "water"), Dover (*dubr-*, "water").
Thames and Tamar are given only as a possibility ("dark").

5. Name two English words widely accepted as Brittonic.

▼ Show answer

Any two of *bin*, *brock*, *carr*, *coomb*, *crag*, *tor*.

6. What happened to Cornish, and what changed in 2010?

▼ Show answer

It died out as a community language in the 18th or 19th century, was revived from the early 20th, and in 2010 UNESCO reclassified it from "extinct" to critically endangered.

7. How did Breton come to be spoken in France?

▼ Show answer

Britons brought it from Great Britain to Brittany in the Early Middle Ages; it is closest to Cornish.

8. Why should you be careful with place-name meanings?

▼ Show answer

Many are hedged ("possibly", "probably"), Scottish ones rest on reconstructions that are not uniformly accepted, and some names record Britons through Old English *wealh* without being Celtic words.

Note on sources

This chapter uses Wikipedia's *Brittonic languages* (about the first 100,000 of 140,260 characters), *Celtic toponymy* (the first 100,000 of 112,629), *List of English words of Brittonic origin* (the whole article), *Cornish language* (the first 100,000 of 226,717), *Welsh language* (the first 100,000 of 267,551) and *Breton language* (the first 100,000 of 211,751), each as the page tool summarised it. I first tried a page called *Brittonic toponymy*, which does not exist, and used *Celtic toponymy* instead. Speaker numbers are the articles' own and are not checked against census sources. The Welsh figure for 2026 in the page tool's summary is not used. The recap table, the "Substrate" gloss and the other term definitions are mine and unverified.

Course complete. The appendix has two pages: a **Timeline** of the dates in the ten chapters and a **Map** of Britain drawn as a simplified sketch.