

Roundhouses are characteristic of British later prehistory, but are absent on the continent, with the exception of parts of north-west France and Iberia. They appear initially in the Middle Bronze Age and, together with hillforts (see Iron Age Factsheet 3), become the dominant form of archaeological evidence for later prehistoric societies, continuing amongst indigenous communities into the Romano-British period. Even more remarkable than that roundhouses were recognised rather late in the study of later prehistory. With an eye to their rectangular counterparts in continental Europe, and the adoption of excavation via narrow trenches, it was not until large area stripping at sites such as Little Woodbury in Wiltshire, excavated by German archaeologist Gerhard Bersu in 1938, that the circular roundhouse plan was recognised for what it was.

Though they appear at first to represent simple structures, roundhouses are in fact sophisticated and hugely diverse constructions, well adapted to changing social needs and environmental conditions. Indeed, the roundhouse phenomenon encompasses a whole range of structures (large and small; timber, turf and stone), which vary over time and space, depending on social structure and available resources. These include the large timber multi-ring structures of southern Britain, composite timber/turf/stone ring-ditch structures of central Britain, the timber crannogs of northern British lochs and the monumental stone broch towers of Atlantic Scotland (see Factsheet 4). Based on the simple geometry of self-supporting conical roof on a cylindrical wall, their adaptability made roundhouses (in their various forms) an enduring pan-British later prehistoric phenomenon.

Some roundhouses, particularly those of the Early Iron Age, are very large. That at Longbridge Deverill Cow Down (also in Wiltshire), for example, measures over 18 m in diameter, which ethnographic parallels suggest could have housed an extended family or kin group of up to 50 people. As such, these were not 'huts' but monumental structures on a grand scale. A reconstruction of the Pimperne

roundhouse (with a diameter of 12.8 m) at Butser Ancient Farm in Hampshire, for example, required the felling of over 200 trees, 0.5 ha of hazel coppice and 12 tonnes of thatching straw. Though timber was available in later prehistory, much woodland had been cleared during the Neolithic, and what remained would therefore have had to have been carefully managed, across the generations. As such, these were large investments in terms of resources and labour, even if construction itself was fairly straightforward.

The post-rings needed to take the weight of the roof off the wattle and daub outer walls (particularly in the large timber structures) likely dictated the internal use of space, which was divided into annular rings. The 'core' space (inside the post-ring) is often dominated by a central hearth and appears to have been a communal area for sharing and processing food. The 'peripheral' space (outside the post-ring) may have provided more private or specialised space for sleeping or storage. In some roundhouses (particularly those of northern and central Britain) this peripheral space is slightly sunken and paved, suggesting that livestock were housed in this area (at least in winter); the paved area minimising erosion and aiding 'mucking out'. Though they rarely survive archaeologically, partitions (perhaps in the form of non-earthfast screens of textile or hide) may, in other instances, have been strung between the posts of the post-ring and the outer wall, creating more private radial bays. Indeed, this radial division is the defining characteristic of one group of roundhouse – the 'wheelhouses' of Atlantic Scotland – so-called because their radial piers (constructed in stone) resemble the spokes of a wheel.

Pairs of postholes and lines of loomweights are also occasionally found near the entrances to roundhouses, suggesting that these areas may have been preferentially used for craft activities due to greater levels of light – since so little often survives of roundhouse superstructures it is unclear whether they had windows, but surviving stone structures in Atlantic Scotland suggest that they probably did not. Roundhouses

are therefore likely to have had relatively dark interiors (particularly structures like wheelhouses, which were semi-subterranean), though they could have been made brighter with beaten chalk floors (as in southern England) or lime-washed walls. It is also unclear whether roundhouses had upper floors, though they could certainly have been supported by internal post-rings (where present), and upper floors clearly existed in broch towers (see Iron Age Factsheet 4).

In addition to their role as domestic dwellings, roundhouses also seem to embody the cosmological beliefs of Iron Age communities, and some have indeed drawn links between the circular plan of Bronze Age barrows and the emergence of roundhouses. Certainly, in the Iron Age especially (and in contrast to preceding and successive periods), there is a lack of overtly funerary and ritual landscapes, with increasing evidence suggesting that sacred and profane were closely intertwined and played out in domestic contexts. Firstly, roundhouse doorways tend towards easterly or south-easterly orientations, even in structures where such orientations are disadvantageous for protection from prevailing winds, and semi-subterranean dwellings (such as wheelhouses) where light penetration into the interior is minimal. It was noted however that these orientations corresponded to major solar alignments, such as mid-winter sunrise and the equinox. Ethnographic studies reveal that certain communities, such as the Hopi, organise space within their roundhouses according to their cosmological beliefs. It is possible, therefore, that Iron Age communities might have constructed their roundhouses with similar concerns in mind.

Roundhouses, like Iron Age settlements more generally also appear to be a focus for special deposits of human bone, animal bone, and artefacts, supporting the interpretation of a cosmological dimension in their design, and suggesting that they played a role in the construction and maintenance of social identity. Special deposits frequently appear to mark the construction or abandonment of a roundhouse, but are (as at Broxmouth in south-east Scotland) also being increasingly recognised as accompanying other intermediate stages of their modification. Pits cut into the soft sand floor of the Sollas wheelhouse in North Uist, and variously filled with butchered, burnt and articulated animals, suggest that animal sacrifice and feasting may have accompanied the construction of this (otherwise ordinary)

domestic dwelling, while the quartered remains of a young boy in similar contexts at Hornish Point, South Uist indicates that it was not merely animals which were deemed suitable for marking these important events in the life of the house, and the life of the community.

Further Reading

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*Reconstruction of the Little Woodbury roundhouse (15.2m in diameter) at Butser Ancient Farm, Hampshire
(courtesy and copyright: Lindsey Büster)*

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