



Introduction

Until 1990, with the introduction of developer-funded archaeology, Early Neolithic houses in Britain were rare indeed. There had been a few chance finds of rectangular arrangements of postholes and wall slots (for timber walls) but the paucity of domestic structural evidence and the wealth of food and pottery remains in some ditches resulted in some early archaeologists believing that Neolithic people lived in elongated pits. We now know that these pit deposits represent ritual activity at causewayed enclosures (see Factsheet 5) and over the last 30 years an increasing number of Early Neolithic houses have been found, especially in Ireland.

Homes of the First Farmers

With the arrival of the Neolithic 'package' (farming, pottery, polished and distinctive stone tools) just after 4000 BC came a distinctive domestic architecture. Comprising features dug into the subsoil, and occasionally flimsy, these buildings are unlikely to survive in areas of intensive arable agriculture and we rely on protected contexts for their preservation. The structures beneath long cairns such as Gwernvale, Powys, or Ascot-under-Wychwood, Oxfordshire, or below hillwash and alluvium such as Whitehorse Stone, Kent, or Yarnton, Oxfordshire, are cases in point. The long established pastoral economy in large parts of Ireland also provides such protection. As a result our distribution of such sites is always likely to be skewed by such factors as preservation and detection as well as by the propensity of large-scale developer-funded excavation projects.

The Early Neolithic houses so far discovered in Britain and Ireland have been rectangular, often irregularly so, and usually under 10 m in length although there are some notable exceptions such as the 'halls' of Claish, Stirling, Balbridie, Grampian, and Crathes, Aberdeenshire, which belong to a smaller group of buildings over 12 m long. Curved gable ends and extensions are also encountered such as at Claish or at Ballygalley I in Co. Antrim. The walls of these Early Neolithic structures generally comprise bedding trenches (wall slots) for upright timbers or individual

postholes though the method of construction does not seem to affect their dimensions with large and small structures being found in both major techniques. Many houses, including at the smaller end of the size spectrum, have internal postholes or bedding trenches suggesting internal partitions and/or roof supports. This internal division is also notable in the stylistically similar but stone-built houses at the Knap of Howar, Orkney which also fall within the smaller cluster. Their stone-built walls give the two conjoined Knap of Howar buildings a very different superficial appearance to the timber constructions but in size and internal lay-out they bear a strong comparison.

Despite the preponderance of bedding-trench-defined sites over post-defined structures, there are instances where the two techniques are combined. This may be in part due to agricultural attrition as the two exterior wall techniques do not seem to be so combined in Ireland. Despite this observation, construction techniques within the bedding trenches are varied. Large structural posts are encountered at most sites with the intervening spaces filled with a variety of plank walling, smaller postholes or wattle and daub panelling. Some sites, such as Kishoge, Co. Dublin, for example, combined areas of linear plank walling, post construction and plank uprights and that at Barnagore, Co. Cork, combined post and stake uprights, wattle and daub and planking.

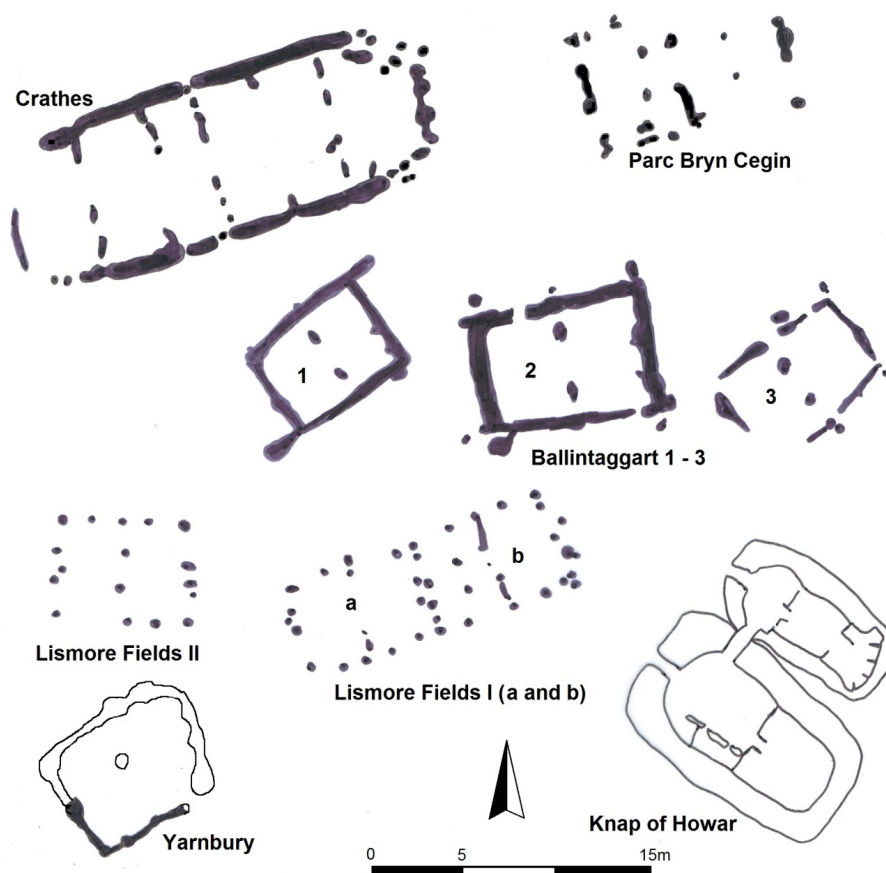
Various arguments have been proposed for roof construction based on the size and packing of postholes, the presence of external (presumed) eave supports at some sites and the positioning of some internal posts. Generally pitched roofs covered with thatch are envisaged.

Regarding the distribution of Early Neolithic structures, those so far discovered in Britain tend to be larger than the majority of Irish examples and they also favour posthole construction. We should, perhaps, not read too much into this apparent structural difference as it may reflect available resources, geology, later land-use or, indeed, a combination of the three. For example, short lengths of bedding trench are

also found as part of structures constructed mainly from postholes such as at Gwernvale or Parc Bryn Cegin, Anglesey. It is more in the arrangement of internal partitions that these large structures bear closer similarities once again combining posthole and bedding trench techniques.

Lismore Fields Building I near Buxton in Derbyshire is worthy of note as it appears to be formed of two mirrored components each component similar in ground plan to a smaller structure (Building II). The central row of postholes that form the short axis of Building I also appear to be duplicated: the only apparent

duplication at the site. It may well be that this structure actually comprises two similar and smaller structures placed end to end as originally suggested by the excavator. This may represent two structures of slightly different date, an extension to an existing building or a tradition of modular construction. Ostensibly different in scale, the Crathes hall nevertheless seems to represent an elaboration or duplication of smaller structures. Some larger structures also appear to have had central aisles respected by internal partitions. Although made of stone, the Knap of Howar houses also seem to follow this plan with internal cross-partitions respecting central access points to the internal rooms.



Plans of Early Neolithic houses mentioned in the text.

Dating

The dating of these structures has been modelled by a number of independent authors to have started probably between 3715–3680 BC and lasted until 3635–3615 BC. This has become known as the ‘house horizon’ lasting for roughly between 50 and 100 years but is in common with the construction of other major monuments in the Neolithic. Parc Bryn Cegin, a posthole constructed site, may have started slightly before this horizon or at least at the very

start of it at 3760–3700 BC. White Horse Stone and Yarnton, both larger structures and of largely posthole construction, suggest a still earlier date probably in the 41st–39th century BC. The larger Scottish ‘halls’ started in the 38th century BC but carbonised grain from Lockerbie Academy may suggest a date as early as the 40th–38th century BC. More dates from more sites are admittedly needed but it may be possible to suggest that the larger post-built structures of Southern England are considerably

earlier than the smaller bedding-trench-defined constructions of Western Britain and Ireland but only slightly earlier than the larger hall constructions in Eastern Scotland.

Further Reading

Smyth, J. 2014. *Settlement in the Irish Neolithic: new discoveries at the edge of Europe*. Prehistoric Society Research Paper 6. Oxford: Oxbow Books & The Prehistoric Society

This factsheet was prepared for the Prehistoric Society by Alex Gibson (University of Bradford)