

An Iron Age roundhouse: Background information for teachers

Evidence for distinctive roundhouses begins about 1500 BC but they are most common during the Iron Age (800 BC–43 AD). This was because the introduction of iron working from the continent allowed stronger tools to be made from an ore that was more widespread and readily available than copper and tin. Stronger axes meant that woodland could be more rapidly cleared, and plough tips reinforced with iron meant heavier soils could be brought into cultivation. Farming settlements multiplied.

Roundhouses had various plans. Bigger ones could have outer walls of stone or turf with a ring of posts inside to hold the roof up. Smaller ones just had a ring of posts that basket-like wattling was fixed to and then covered in daub (clay, straw, cow dung and water) to make the outer wall. Many had a pair of posts in front of the doorway, presumably marking a porch. These and the entrance posts were often larger than those around the wall, which suggests they may sometimes have supported an upper room. Perhaps this explains the separate room looking into the house that features in the early Irish story of Bricriu's Feast (see page 2 in [PS Teaching 8a-Roundhouse Lesson Plan](#)).

All the residential roundhouses had a central hearth that would have been used for cooking, light and literal 'central heating'. Quern stones were used to grind grain into flour and large clay or stone lumps with holes in them show where upright looms stood for weaving wool into cloth. Cloth was used to make clothing and blankets for beds that would have lain on the floor around the wall. Joints or strips of meat would have been hung from the roof above the fire as smoking was the easiest means of preservation; salt was being produced by evaporation at the coast and traded but we don't know how widespread its use was. Iron Age bread was probably of simple Scottish bannock variety, cooked on a hot stone.

As roundhouses were made of wood they do not survive. However, excavation at Must Farm, Cambridgeshire has revealed houses that were partially burned and then collapsed, along with the platform they were built on, into the water of the underlying fen. This has preserved invaluable evidence. Look at the [Must Farm](#) website to see what has been found and the exceptional evidence it provides of life in a roundhouse.

Reconstructed roundhouses can be visited at a number of sites notably Castell Henllys, Pembrokeshire, St Fagan's near Cardiff, Butser Ancient Farm near Petersfield, the Ancient Technology Centre, Cranborne, the Peat Moors Centre near Glastonbury, Chiltern Open air Museum, Chalfont St Giles, Flag Fen, Peterborough, Scottish Crannog Centre, Perthshire and Navan Fort, Co Armagh.

Further reading

Reynolds, P.J. 1987. *Ancient Farming*. Aylesbury: Shire Archaeology

Cunliffe, B. 2004. *Iron Age Britain*. 4th edition. London: English Heritage

Harding, D.W. 2009. *The Iron Age Round House: Later prehistoric building in Britain and beyond*. Oxford:

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