

Background Information: The Celts

It should be remembered that the word 'Celt' wasn't used until the 17th and 18th Centuries. Today the word 'Celts' is used to refer to people who speak a group of related languages, including Welsh, and who live in countries in the very North West of Europe. However, the origin of these people, their language and their culture extends back almost 3200 years from the 21st Century to what is now modern day Switzerland and Austria. This culture spread across Western Europe. Its language and identity changed as it migrated, and was taken up by groups of people living in the islands of Britain and Ireland.

According to the accounts of Roman writers there were at least four different groups living in what is now Wales. The Silures lived in South Wales, and the Deceangli in North East Wales. Central North Wales was occupied by the Ordovices and the Llŷn peninsula by the Gangani. Archaeologists refer to the period before the Romans invaded Britain as 'The Iron Age' because this was when iron was first used to make tools and other items, rather than bronze which had been used previously. Iron is a much stronger metal than bronze and can be made much sharper.

In North Wales, the Iron Age began in about 800 BC (Before Christ) and lasted until about 78 AD (*Anno Domini* which is Medieval Latin for '*in the year of the Lord*'). These dates are approximations, as they are based on the latest archaeological evidence and may change as new evidence is found and studied. We do not have any first-hand accounts of the lives of these peoples who lived in Wales, which is why the study of archaeological evidence is very important in understanding how people lived, worked and died during that time. This archaeological evidence can vary from large things such as stone walls enclosing a settlement, to tiny things such as pollen grains from crops (which can only be studied under a microscope). This evidence can tell us about how people lived and what sort of crops they grew.



We can divide the places the 'Celts' lived in North Wales into different types, the most well-known being Hillforts and forts. These are enclosures situated on top of hills or on coastal promontories (raised areas of land). They often had roundhouses (people's homes) inside them. Sometimes these

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settlements were abandoned after the Romans conquered an area, but many continued to be used. Many of these sites have been excavated in order to try and understand them and how people lived there.

Other types of settlement were less well defended and include enclosed and unenclosed groups of roundhouses. These settlements lay within an agricultural landscape where crops were grown and



animals were kept. The roundhouses themselves usually had a circular foundation of stone. Other building materials might include wood, clay and wattle and daub. A fire on a hearth or in a cooking pit, often in the centre of the living space would probably have meant the inside of a roundhouse was dark and smoky. Sometimes animals lived in the roundhouses too. As well as being people's homes, roundhouses were sometimes used for public events or meetings.

The remains of these types of settlements can sometimes be hard to locate and are often found by looking at aerial photographs. In the right conditions, differences in the growth or parching of grass can show the presence of a ditch even when it has been completely filled in and levelled by ploughing. In North Wales some of these sites can be easy to find because they survive in the hills and were not damaged by later farming. They are completely collapsed but often the walls of the houses can be seen buried under a thin layer of grass.

Most people in the Iron Age lived on farms in extended families; growing crops and looking after different animals, including sheep and cows. They made their own clothing by spinning sheep's wool into strands using a spindle whorl. These individual strands were then woven together using a loom. When animals were killed to provide food, their skins could be treated and made into waterproof clothing. This was important because people spent a great deal of time outside. Some people didn't have to farm to earn their living but became craftsmen, making personal jewellery items like brooches and pins out of tin, gold and bronze. These were used to help fasten different layers of clothing together.



All of these families would have helped look after the important people who governed the community. Religion would have been an important part of life. Some religious figures were referred to by the Romans as druids. We know something about how religion worked because the

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Romans wrote about the druids and described how they worshipped. However we must remember that the Romans were often the enemies of the druids and were unlikely to present them in a good light and much that they wrote may not have been true. However, some Romans did adopt local Celtic Gods and worshipped them. They gave the Gods Roman names and these survive on stone inscriptions. We also find items and sometimes even the remains of people that druids and others placed in bogs, rivers or lakes as a ritual offering.

The invasion of Wales by the Roman army did not see a complete end to the Iron Age or 'Celtic' way of life. Some native words were replaced with Latin words, for example *pysgodyn* and *bont*, but much of the language survived intact to become the Welsh spoken today. Roman soldiers from Europe who finished their military service in Wales sometimes did not go home, deciding instead to marry locally and stay close to their former army friends. At the other extreme, some people tried to live as far away from the Romans as possible, avoiding all but the most infrequent contact. This is something we can see from archaeological evidence found when their farms are excavated.



Inside a roundhouse

Separation of internal areas into different spaces – could be described as rooms.

Sometimes animals lived in parts of a roundhouse.

Some roundhouses were large – these could have been the homes for important members of society. Roundhouses may also have been used for communal purposes – such as gathering spaces or for meetings, political functions or ceremonies etc.

Midden heaps (domestic waste) have been found outside the entrances to roundhouses and settlements. These were often shell midden (piles of shells, thrown away after the contents has been extracted for eating / cooking). An example of this was: Cytiau'r Gwyddelod (Grŵp Cytiau Mynydd Twr - Holyhead hut circles), Anglesey, where limpet shells were found

Querns (grinding stones often used for making flour from wheat) were sometimes built into the floor of roundhouses.

The hearth was usually in the middle of the roundhouse. Smoke would have escaped through holes in the roof or thatch rather than through a chimney. But interiors may have been dark and smoky. The hearth may have been kept alight 24 hours a day; it would have been used for cooking

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and as a heat source. It is possible that the movement of the sun during the day and how it shone into the roundhouse might have influenced what activities took place and when.

A hut circle is the stone remains of a roundhouse.

There are various similarities and differences between how 'home life' might have been 'then and now'. An example of one obvious difference is of course that there was no electricity in the Iron Age, so there was no electric light, cookers, microwaves, showers, devices, computers or televisions

Spindle whorls

Spindle whorls were used in the process of twisting wool into yarn.

A thin piece of wood (spindle) is inserted into the hole in spindle whorl. Fibres of wool are then attached to the spindle.

Spinning the whorl twisted the fibre into yarn.

They were used before the use of spinning wheels.

As archaeological finds spindle whorls are evidence of cloth production and keeping sheep.

Spindle whorls could be used whilst walking.

Spindle whorls and spindles are still used today.



One of Storiell's spindle whorls

A pair of Romano-British ox-head bucket-mounts, Dinas promontory fort, Anglesey

Mountings found at a shallow depth, close together.

Found by a metal detector named Mr Peter Roberts in 1977.

They were conserved in a laboratory at the National Museum of Wales for a period of time.

A member of Gwynedd Archaeological Trust visited the site with Mr Roberts to see if they could find anything else but sadly the hole had been enlarged and other holes made nearby.

The mountings were cast in a brassy metal using the same model, with an element of afterworking responsible for differences between the two. (Casting – duplicate objects made from a mould.) The oxen don't have any ears – this is unusual in such designs, but not unheard of. It is an artist's quirk. Could the side lugs (for attachment to the bucket) have represented ears?

It is difficult to ascertain the exact date of the mountings – possibly between second and fourth century AD if we consider the dates of similar finds.



Pair of Romano-British bucket mounts



Romano-British Glass Beads, Llandygai

230 glass beads and at least 16 red cylindrical glass beads were found by Gwynedd Archaeological Trust at Parc Bryn Cegin, near Bangor in 2005.

The site being excavated was a late Iron Age / Romano-British roundhouse settlement.

The beads were found in a small pit in the north east corner of the site.

Evidence of glass working was found at the site.

The beads are blue with a white wave pattern.

They were made by wrapping molten glass (heated by fire) around a mandrel (a shaft or spindle.) The beads would have been joined.

When cooled, the beads would have snapped apart from each other.

Rough areas would have been filed or ground down.

The beads had not been used and were perhaps made to be sold to Romans.

They were possibly made in the first or second century AD.

The beads may have been buried in order to hide them.

They were probably made in the roundhouse nearby.



Romano-British Glass Beads - Llandygai



Two Romano-British Iron Bars, Penrhos Lligwy, Anglesey

These two Romano-British iron bars are made of wrought iron and were excavated by Neil Baines at Penrhos Lligwy, Anglesey in 1920.

The iron bars were found in an isolated rectangular structure near Din Lligwy (a Romano-British settlement.) The soil was hard where the bars were found, made up of coal dust, small pieces of coal and iron rust.

There were also some pieces of slag (hard waste material formed during the smithing process). The iron bars were found amongst these pieces of slag.

Coal from Malltraeth or Trefdraeth may have been used in the smithing process. The bars would have been quite valuable during the time they were made.

It was probably intended for the iron to be made into something else.

We do not know whether the bars were produced locally or were imported from elsewhere.

Future scientific developments might enable us to find out where the bars were made.



Two Romano-British Iron Bars

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