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Opening extract from

50 Things You Should Know About Prehistory

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INTRODUCTION

Prehistory means the time before history was written down. It can refer to the whole span of time on Earth before writing, including the billions of years before there was human life on this planet! But for most historians, 'prehistory' means human history before written records.



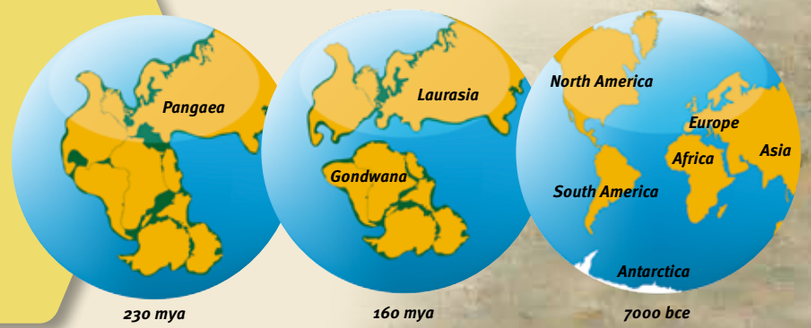
▲ *About 140 to 100 mya, what is now southern Britain was swampy woodland, home to dinosaurs such as* Iguanodon, Polacanthus *and* Baryonyx.

BRITAIN BEFORE PEOPLE

The time from 230 to 65 million years ago (mya) was the age of the dinosaurs. The oldest dinosaur remains found in Britain belong to *Thecondontosaurus*, which lived 210 mya. At that time, the British Isles didn't exist as separate islands – they were part of the one huge area of land called Pangaea.

LAND MASSES

At the start of the dinosaur age (230 mya), all the land was clumped into one giant continent, called Pangaea. By 160 mya, Pangaea had broken apart into two land masses, Laurasia and Gondwana. The land slowly broke apart to form the continents. Britain had separated from mainland Europe by 6000 BCE.



230 mya *160 mya* *7000 bce*

▼ *Early hunter-gatherers worked together to bring down rhino and other large animals. They butchered their kills quickly before hungry lions moved in!*

PREHISTORIC BRITAIN

The first humans in prehistoric Britain arrived about 900,000 years ago (ya). These people were hunter-gatherers, who lived simple lives scavenging or hunting, picking berries and nuts to eat, and sleeping in caves or other simple shelters. Gradually, over hundreds of thousands of years, humans learnt how to grow crops and live more ordered lives in villages and towns. The prehistoric period in Britain ended about 43 BCE, when the **Romans** arrived and began to conquer the land.

THREE AGES

There were three main periods of prehistory in Britain: the Stone Age, the Bronze Age and the Iron Age. The names of these periods are based on the types of tools that people were using at the time.

▶ *A human species called* Homo heidelbergensis *arrived in Britain about 500,000 ya. He made simple stone tools.*

KEY EVENTS

c. 3.3 mya
The Old Stone Age begins, as early humans in Africa begin to use simple stone tools.

c. 900,000 ya
The earliest humans arrive in Britain. They are **hunter-gatherers**.

c. 11,500 ya
In Britain, the Old Stone Age ends about the time of the last **Ice Age**. The Middle Stone Age begins.

c. 6000 ya (4000 BCE)
The New Stone Age begins in Britain. People begin to live as farmers instead of hunter-gatherers.

c. 2500 BCE
The Copper Age begins in Britain when people learn to shape copper. Soon they can work tin and gold, too.

c. 2200 BCE
People in Britain learn how to make things from bronze. The Bronze Age begins.

c. 1000 BCE
People in Britain learn how to make things from iron. The Iron Age begins about 200 years later.

c. 43 BCE
The Iron Age ends. The Romans invade Britain and written history begins.

Iron Age farms

During the Iron Age, most people lived by farming. New, strong iron tools made lighter work of breaking up the soil and harvesting crops, so people were able to produce more food than in earlier times.

▼ *This is what an Iron Age farm may have looked like.*

NEW TOOLS

Farmers had iron axes for clearing the land. The trees they chopped down were used to build homes or make tool handles. Iron shovels and ploughs were used to work the soil. In the farmhouse, grinding grain into flour became easier with the arrival of the rotary quern, about 400 BCE.



▲ *Rotary quern*

CROPS AND LIVESTOCK

The main crops were still wheat and barley, which were slowly becoming hardier (stronger and better at surviving cold weather) and producing fatter grains. People also grew peas, beans, cabbages and parsnips, as well as flax for the fibres in its stems. These were spun to make linen (a type of cloth). People kept cattle, sheep and pigs for meat, manure, milk, leather and wool.



▲ *Iron Age piglets would have looked like these – stripy rather than pink.*



▲ *By the Iron Age, emmer wheat (shown here) was being sown as well as spelt. Both were very tough but didn't produce much grain.*

Ironworking

Iron ore was plentiful in most parts of Britain. This meant that iron was cheap, even though the metal itself was harder to extract than copper or tin. By the end of the Iron Age, iron was being used for all sorts of things, from tiny rivets to impressive swords.

SMELTING IRON

The process of smelting iron was similar to how copper and tin were smelted, but required much higher temperatures. The crushed iron ore was heated with charcoal inside clay furnaces called bloomeries. The iron, or 'bloom', melted down to the bottom of the furnace. Smelters shaped this iron into ingots (oblong blocks).

▼ *This 19th-century etching imagines what an Iron Age forge would have looked like.*



THE WORK OF A BLACKSMITH

The forge was a hot, smoky and dangerous place to work. The blacksmith shaped ingots of raw iron or old scrap metal. First he heated the iron over a charcoal fire until it was red-hot and beginning to soften. Then, using hammer and tongs, he battered it into shape. Joining pieces of iron required higher temperatures – the iron had to be heated until it was white-hot.



▲ *This is one of a pair of iron fire dogs. It propped up logs in the fireplace, so air could flow under them and the fire would burn properly.*

Treasure hoards

Archaeologists have built up a picture of prehistoric Britain by looking at clues – bones, tools, weapons, buildings and treasure. Hoards of treasure may have been gifts to the gods, or simply belongings that were hidden to keep them safe. These are some of Britain's best prehistoric hoards:

HOARDS

A hoard is a collection of valuable objects – coins, jewellery or objects made from precious metals.



6 Isleham Hoard c. 1150–1000 bce



8) Stirling Hoard c. 300–100 bce



9 Ipswich Hoard c. 75 bce



10 Snettisham Hoard c. 75 bce



▶ *This person is using a metal detector. It will beep if it senses metal underground – perhaps it will be an ancient treasure hoard!*

PRECIOUS FINDS

Some hoards are found by treasure hunters using metal detectors. Others are uncovered accidentally by construction workers or farmers. Finders have to report their find to an official. If it counts as a hoard, it is offered for sale to a museum.

1 ***YORK HOARD***
c. 3000 bce
This New Stone Age hoard was found in 1868 and included more than 70 flint tools.

2 ***AYTON EAST FIELD HOARD***
c. 3000–2500 bce
This New Stone Age hoard was found in a burial cairn in North Yorkshire in 1848. It included flint axes, flint knives and boar-tusk blades.

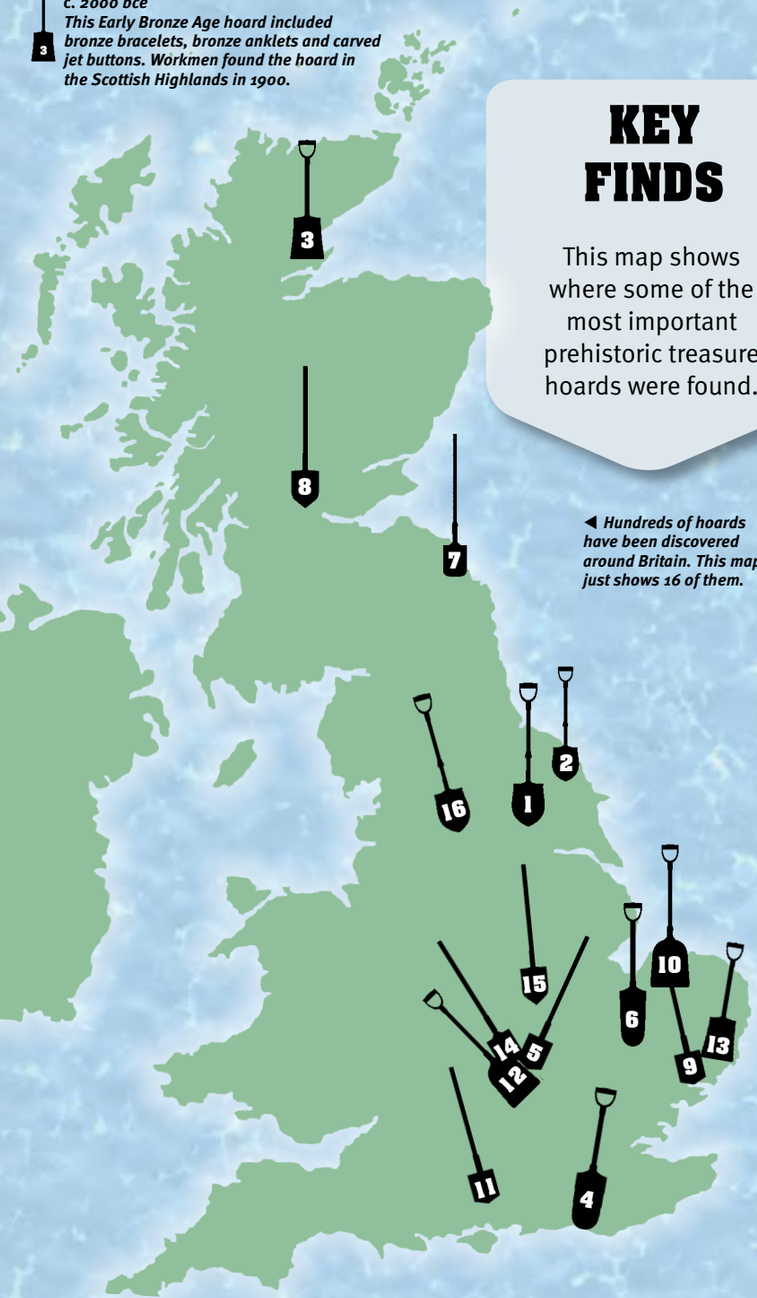
3 ***MIGDALE HOARD***
c. 2000 bce
This Early Bronze Age hoard included bronze bracelets, bronze anklets and carved jet buttons. Workmen found the hoard in the Scottish Highlands in 1900.

4 ***NEAR LEWES HOARD***
c. 1400–1250 bce
This Middle Bronze Age hoard contains more than 50 objects. There are torcs, bracelets, gold discs and rings, as well as amber beads from the Baltic.

5 ***MILTON KEYNES HOARD***
c. 1150–800 bce
This Late Bronze Age hoard was made up of a plain pottery bowl containing more than two kilograms of gold torcs and bracelets.

KEY FINDS

This map shows where some of the most important prehistoric treasure hoards were found.



◀ *Hundreds of hoards have been discovered around Britain. This map just shows 16 of them.*

6 ***ISLEHAM HOARD***
c. 1150–1000 bce
Discovered in Ely, Cambridgeshire, in 1959, this is England's largest Bronze Age hoard. It contained more than 6,500 bronze items.

7 ***COLLETTE HOARD***
c. 1000–800 bce
This Bronze Age hoard was found in 2005 near Berwick-upon-Tweed, Northumberland. It included gold hair decorations, bracelets, rings and tools.

8 ***STIRLING HOARD***
c. 300–100 bce
Discovered in Stirlingshire, Scotland, in 2009, this Iron Age hoard is made up of four gold torcs, one of which was broken.

9 ***IPSWICH HOARD***
c. 75 bce
Construction workers found this Iron Age hoard in Suffolk in 1968. It included six spectacular gold torcs.

10 ***SNETTISHAM HOARD***
c. 75 bce
This spectacular Iron Age torc was found in Norfolk in 1948. Further excavations in 1990 led to 75 more torcs being discovered.

11 ***WINCHESTER HOARD***
c. 75–25 bce
This Iron Age hoard was found in a field in Hampshire in 2000. Its two torcs were made from a chain of looped gold rings, rather than the usual twisted thread.

12 ***LITTLE HORWOOD HOARD***
c. 50 bce
Metal detectors found this Iron Age hoard of more than 70 staters (ancient coins) in 2006. It was probably part of the Whaddon Chase hoard.

13 ***WICKHAM MARKET HOARD***
c. 25 bce–25 ce
This hoard of 840 Iron Age gold coins was discovered in Suffolk in 2008 with a metal detector. Almost all of the coins had been made by the Iceni tribe.

14 ***WHADDON CHASE HOARD***
c. 0–100 ce
Farmworkers found this Iron Age hoard of staters (ancient coins) in 1849. There may have been as many as 2000 coins, but onlookers pocketed some of the treasure!

15 ***HALLATON TREASURE***
c. 40s ce
A metal detector discovered this Iron Age hoard in 2000. It was made up of more than 5000 gold and silver coins, guarded by a real dog, and a Roman helmet.

16 ***SILSDEN HOARD***
c. 50 ce
A metal detector found this Iron Age hoard in West Yorkshire in 1998. It consists of 27 gold coins and a Roman gemstone ring.