

B B C

HANDS ON HISTORY

THE ANCIENTS

Get into the mind of our ancient ancestors

Step outside and stand quietly and still.
Switch off your phone.
Breathe slowly and deeply.
Gradually clear your mind.
Try to forget the modern world.
Feel all of your senses.
Use your imagination to fall back
through time to ancient Britain.

It's 2500BC, the large stone
circle at Stonehenge has just been
completed. You are a farmer living
in a small, ancient tribe.

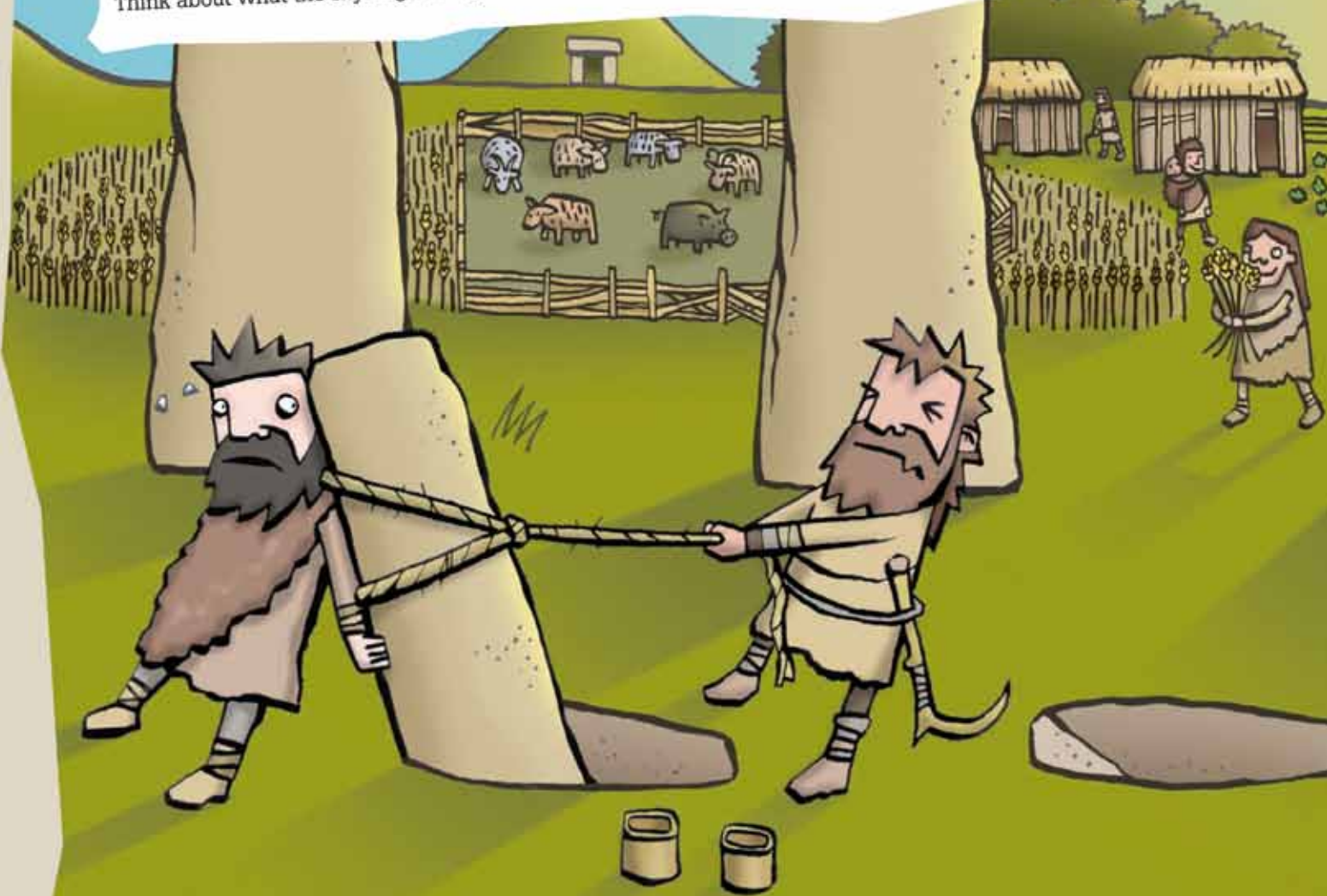


What can you see?

Turn a full circle on the spot and look around you. Ignore anything modern, like buildings, pylons or vehicles. Replace them in your mind with grassland, trees, scrubland, rocks and rivers. Imagine you are standing on this spot thousands of years ago.

Now look up. Wherever you are, and whatever time of day, look up and think like an ancient. How do you feel when you see the sun, the clouds, the moon, the stars? Imagine you are seeing them for the first time, what would you think the lights in the sky are? spirits... gods... ancestors...

Our ancient ancestors would have known the sky well. They would have understood the clouds and patterns of weather. The night sky would have been brighter and clearer than we see it today, with no pollution of the air and no light pollution from electric lights. Think about what the sky might tell you about the time of day, and the weather to come.



What can you hear?

Close your eyes. Ignore any modern sounds such as cars and planes. What natural sounds do you hear? Listen for the wind, the trees moving, animals, insects or flowing water. If it's noisy where you are, cup your hands over your ears to create the muffled sound of wind in the air.

Think about the other sounds our ancient ancestors may have heard – the crackling flames from a fire... the grating sound of wheat being ground... the sharp chipping noise of tools being made and sharpened.



What can you smell?

Can you cut through the modern smells to the timeless, natural scents? – the earth, plants and foliage, clean air carried on the wind. This world of smells would have been very familiar to ancient people with no modern chemicals, car exhaust, soap, shampoo or deodorant to get in the way.

If it's hard to ignore the modern smells, put your nose close to the ground or scoop up some earth to smell (you could wear a glove for this). Do the same with the foliage around you, smelling leaves, flowers, bark and grass.

Think about the other smells they might have known: wood smoke, raw and roasting meat, berries and fruit.



How would you have lived?

Now you've familiarised yourself with the ancient world around you, look for what would have been important to your way of life –

- Is this a good spot to settle your family?
- Are there trees nearby for you to use to build a shelter?
- Is there undergrowth to hide in while you hunt?
- Is there a river or lake near for drinking water?
- Can you see flint to make tools?
- Is there some flat land to grow crops and graze your herds?
- Are there stones and rocks to make a stone circle for worship?



Get out and about

You can walk in the footsteps of our ancient ancestors by visiting one of over a hundred ancient sites across the UK. Find all the details on our website, along with ancient activities to try at home and an animation with Eric as he travels through time. bbc.co.uk/history/handsonhistory

Schools and groups

Find information and resources to help you explore ancient Britain with groups, including creative, hands-on activity instructions and worksheets. bbc.co.uk/history/handsonhistory

Many historic sites offer pre-booked trips to schools or groups. You can find out more on our partners' websites: www.english-heritage.org.uk, www.historic-scotland.gov.uk, www.cadw.wales.gov.uk



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Follow the changes in ancient Britain between 12000BC and AD43. Before this point Britain was in the grip of the Ice Age at a time when woolly mammoths roamed across the open landscape and Britain was still joined to the Continent. At the height of the Ice Age, ice sheets covered most of Scotland, Wales and Northern England leaving Britain abandoned by people.

PREHISTORY TIMELINE

LATE UPPER PALAEOLITHIC
(End of the Ice Age)

12000BC

12000BC

Britain emerges from the Ice Age and begins to warm. People return to the land for the first time and hunt mammals, such as reindeer and Arctic hare. They also make engravings of animals inside caves, some of which can still be seen in the Church Hole cave at Creswell Crags. This is Britain's oldest art.



REALLY ancient Britons!

The earliest humans in Britain are believed to have lived about 800,000 years ago at a site called Happisburgh on the Norfolk coast.

The oldest human remains were found in Boxgrove, Sussex and are around 500,000 years old. They show evidence that early humans were butchering wild animals and making flint tools.

800,000BC

700,000BC

600,000BC

500,000BC

400,000BC

9000BC

There is evidence that hunter-gatherers lived in groups across Britain. For example, the lake-edge settlement at Star Carr in North Yorkshire dates from this time. Evidence found here includes houses, tools for carpentry and signs of spiritual, shamanic rituals which involved wearing deer antlers.



6000BC

Sea levels rise. Britain is finally separated from the Continental mainland and becomes an island.

Mesolithic (Middle Stone Age)

9500

9000

9500BC

As it continues to get warmer, the cold, dry habitat is replaced by woodland. The large mammals (megafauna) are replaced by forest creatures like red deer and wild cattle. These animals are hunted with bow and arrow.



6000



In a timeline of this scale, the last 2011 years would be just one millimetre wide.

Between 200,000 and 100,000BC Britain is apparently abandoned by humans.

AD2011

1000BC

300,000BC

200,000BC

100,000BC

Period shown above

0



4000BC

Domestic plants and animals are brought over from the Continent and early groups of farming people appear. At the same time technological advances emerge, such as handmade pottery. Flint mining also begins, notably at Cissbury in Sussex.

3500BC

New forms of ceremonial site are constructed. Many are long, rectangular enclosures known as 'cursus monuments'. Parts of the Stonehenge Greater Cursus (located next to the later Stonehenge stone circle) and the Dorset Cursus can still be seen. Elaborately decorated pottery is now being made.

2500BC

Large and more elaborate monuments are built at major ritual centres. These include the massive henge at Durrington Walls, the sarsen circle at Stonehenge and the Ring of Brodgar in Orkney. The earliest copper objects and Beaker pottery (distinctive bell-shaped pots) date from this time.

Neolithic (New Stone Age)



4000

3700

3500

3000

2500

3700BC

The first monuments in Britain are built. These communal tombs (called long barrows) and enclosures appear to be used for feasting, funerals and for exchanging stone and flint axes. Examples include West Kennet Long Barrow and Windmill Hill causewayed enclosure, both near Avebury, Wiltshire.

3000BC

The first henges (circular enclosures defined by a ditch and bank) are built, including Thornborough in North Yorkshire, and Stenness in Orkney. The first timber and stone circles date to this period too, such as Castlerigg in Cumbria.



1500BC

Settled farming communities emerge. Ceremonial monuments are largely abandoned, with much of southern Britain covered by fields and roundhouses. Some of the best surviving examples are on Dartmoor (such as the settlement at Grimspound). Metal tools begin to replace flint. The Dover boat, the world's oldest seagoing vessel, belongs to this period.

800BC

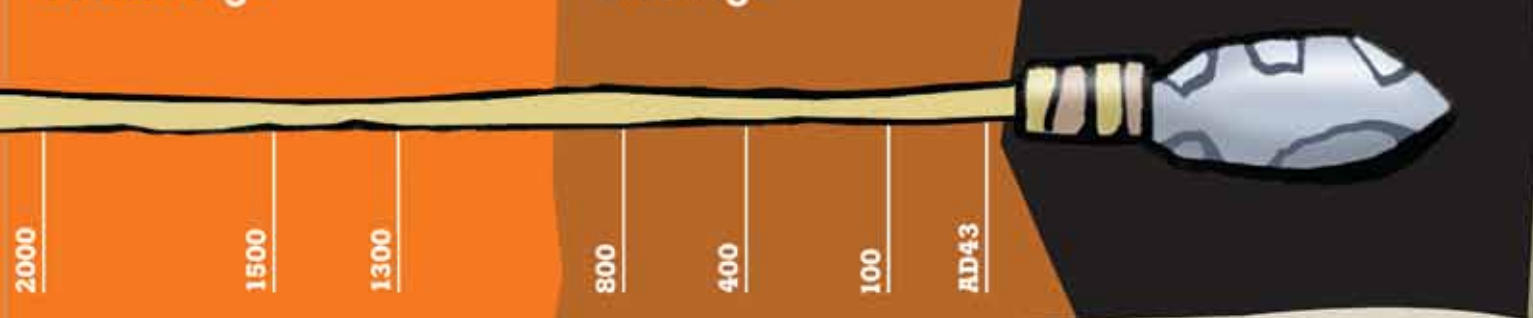
A new type of metal – iron – comes into use, replacing the trade in bronze. Large settlements of humans grow in many areas and the first defended hill forts are built. In some regions 'ranch boundaries' are put in place to mark out areas of grazing land.

100BC

New elite groups of humans emerge with access to innovative machines and ideas from the Continent, such as the potter's wheel and coinage. These are associated with a few large settlements known as 'oppida', including Colchester in Essex and Silchester in Hampshire. The hill forts are abandoned, though smaller roundhouse settlements continue to be built. Eventually tribal kingdoms develop, starting in south-east England.

Bronze Age

Iron Age



2000BC

Round borrows (mounds of earth) are constructed all across Britain, marking the locations of graves and ceremony sites. Burial rituals shift from burying human remains with beakers to cremating the dead in pots called urns. Small stone and timber circles are still built, including the 'Seahenge' timber circle, now in Lynn Museum, Norfolk.

1300BC

A timber causeway is built over the wetlands at Flag Fen near Peterborough. It becomes the focus for leaving ceremonial offerings of bronze objects such as swords, spearheads, daggers and pins. In other locations metalwork is buried in hoards or deposited in rivers.

400BC

A small number of 'developed hill forts' with massive ramparts are built, perhaps marking the emergence of tribal territories. Examples include Maiden Castle in Dorset and Danebury in Hampshire. These sites are for display as much as for defence.

AD43

The Romans invade. Their arrival leads to the development of towns and roads across much of England. The Prehistoric Age has come to an end and a new era is dawning.

The rest of the world

- 6000BC** An estimated 7 million people inhabit the earth.
- 3000BC** The earliest known writing is produced in South Mesopotamia (Ancient Iraq).
- 2800BC** One of the earliest settled civilisations is formed in the Indus Valley, Pakistan.
- 2560BC** The Great Pyramid at Giza, Egypt is built.
- 776BC** The first Olympic Games are held in Greece.
- 753BC** Romulus and Remus found Rome.
- AD2011** Between 6 and 7 billion people inhabit the earth.

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