

[Cymraeg](#) / English**Key Stage 2: A study of an Historical Theme****Food and Farming**

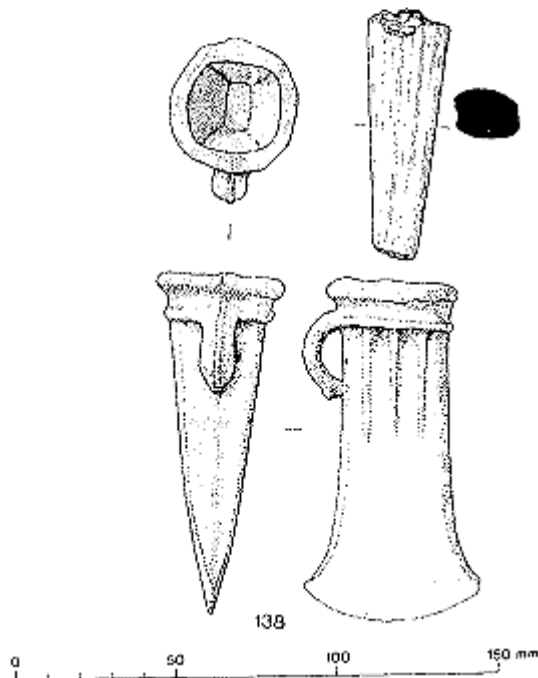
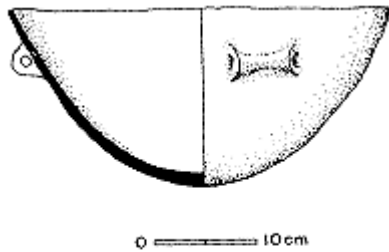
**Until about 6000 years ago in Britain people lived by hunting, fishing and gathering of wild plants.** There is evidence of humans living here before the last ice age when Britain was part of the landmass of Europe. Even during the last ice age there were periods when the climate was less severe and humans occupied parts of southern Britain. During this long period (from c220,000 years ago to about 18,000 years ago) man lived alongside animals such as leopards, horse, bear, rhinoceros, roe deer and beaver, some of which he hunted. After the final retreat of the ice sheets the climate became warmer. At first the vegetation which existed was similar to that which grows in the tundra today but this was gradually replaced by birch and pine forests and later still by mixed deciduous forest. Man now hunted the animals of the forest: wild boar, wild ox, red and roe deer; as well as fishing, fowling and gathering wild foods.

**The first evidence of farming** in Wales dates back to around the middle of the 4th millennium BC. It is still unclear to what extent the indigenous people of Britain adopted farming from new people who settled here with their domestic animals and cultivated crops or whether the farmers gradually encroached on the tribal hunting territories of mesolithic people. Few neolithic settlements have been found in Wales although the evidence for farming is to be found in the changing vegetation. A decline in tree species and a rise in grassland and cereals can be detected in the pollen record. Evidence of **neolithic buildings** have been found at Gwernvale near Crickhowell, Trelystan on the Long Mountain in Montgomeryshire and on the site of the later hillfort at Moel y Gaer, Rhosesmor in Clwyd. These were rectangular buildings made of wood. It would appear that most neolithic settlements in Wales were isolated farms.

The first farmers used **stone axes to fell and clear the forests** to allow them to plant **barley and Einkorn and Emmer wheat**. The domestic **cattle, sheep and goats** would graze the harvested fields and such clearings as existed naturally or were made by man. They would also browse within the forests on leaves of deciduous trees including lime and elm. Although the domestic animals provided the bulk of the meat hunting and fishing continued to be of some importance not only for meat but for skins and furs. Dairy products (milk, butter and cheese) and wool were important secondary products. Grain was ground into flour by rubbing between two stones (known as a **saddle quern**) and bread was baked on the open fire or in stone or clay ovens. **Wool** was spun and woven into cloth for clothes and bedding. **Flax** was also grown to make linen textiles.

**Wheat**

Most buildings, tools and equipment were made from **wood**. There was no shortage of timber from the forests but neolithic people were selective in their use of wood using the species best suited to the task in hand. Our knowledge of the details of many crafts practised in this period are inadequate but is constantly improving as archaeologists excavate more sites. **Stone tools** include knives, scrapers (for scraping hides?), boring tools, adzes (for shaping wood) and arrowheads. These would have been used for many everyday activities such as killing and skinning animals, preparing hides, working wood and leather, and preparing food. Other tools, including digging and harvesting implements, were made of bone and wood. Food and drink was stored in **pottery** containers.



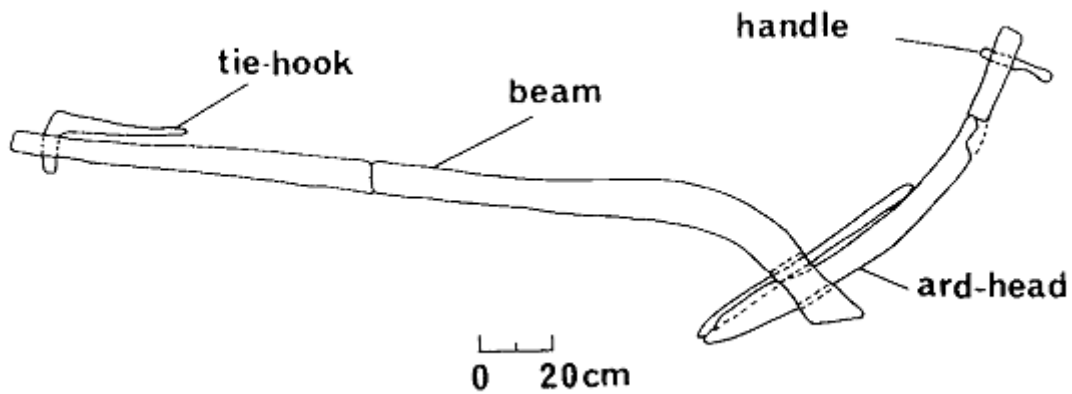
### Neolithic bowl and Bronze Age axe

by a bank and stone revettment. None of the buildings were found during excavation but extensive evidence of bronze smelting and casting were identified.

From the late bronze age and throughout **the iron age** the most common type of settlement were **hillforts**. These were often large containing many round buildings some of which were dwellings, others being workrooms. The majority of the iron age people were farmers. Those that lived in the **hillforts had fields on the surrounding land** but many others lived in **smaller defended settlements** lower down the slopes and in the valleys. An excavated example in Montgomeryshire is **Collfryn** near Llansantffraid Deuddwr. Other settlements were single farms without defences. The **houses were usually circular and built of wood**. The frame was made of upright posts linked together with wooden beams. The walls were made of interwoven rods of hazel or other pliable wood and finished off with mud (daub). The roofs, which were conical, were made of round poles and thatched with straw or reeds. Some houses had porches over the doorway. In mountainous areas the house walls were sometimes made of stone.

In some respects farming did not change much during the next few thousand years. However from about 4000 years ago people learned the ways of **working metals**. The use of bronze for cutting tools may have been important in improving agricultural techniques. During the 2nd millennium BC people began to **settle and farm in upland areas** such as the landscape around the **Brenig** reservoir in Clwyd. Here pollen analysis suggests that a considerable proportion of the forests had been felled and the landscape was mainly one of **grass and sedge moorland used for pasture**. Cereal crops were also grown. The houses of the settlement at Brenig have not been found but the remains of burial mounds and stone circles associated with religious activities have been excavated. At other sites such as **Ffrith Bryn Helen** in Clwyd the remains of **round stone huts and enclosures** have been identified. The clearance of woodland and subsequent farming on the uplands led to a deterioration in the soils which were thin and easily leached. Waterlogging occurred followed by peat growth. This was not necessarily entirely the result of farming but reflected a shift in climate towards wetter, colder conditions in the late bronze age when upland farms were abandoned.

Late bronze age houses such as that found recently at Llandinam in the upper Severn valley were usually round. **At Llandinam the house was built of wood** and survived as a ring of post-holes. Pottery and cereal remains were found also. Other bronze age settlement in the Severn valley is known from **The Breiddin hillfort**. Around the 10th or 9th century BC a settlement was built on the hilltop and defended

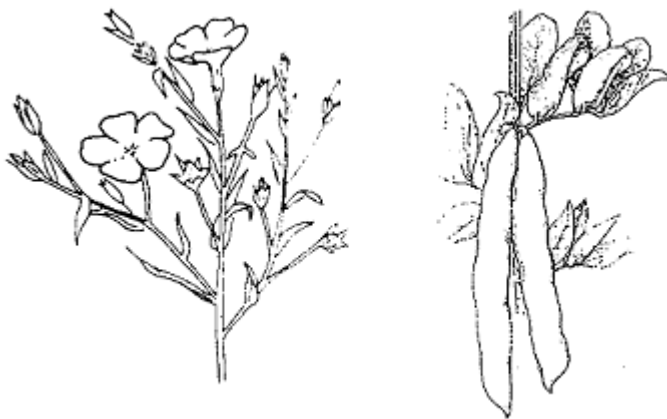


**An Ard**  
(source: Rees, S 1981)

During the iron age the main cereal crops were **Emmer and Spelt wheat**. The ground was broken using a primitive form of plough known as an **ard**, grain was either broadcast or sown in furrows made with a wooden stick. If the seed was broadcast the ground would have been turned afterwards with a harrow. No harrows are known from the prehistoric period but these could have been very primitive and made of natural branches. The crop was **harvested** with either a sickle or by breaking off the ripe heads by hand. Unlike today the fields of wheat and barley would have been mixed with wild flowers and weeds. The seeds of weeds are found mixed with charred grain. The charring is the result of accidental firing during drying or of the burning of a granary. Grain was stored either in pits, or more commonly in Wales, in **wooden granaries** raised above the ground on posts. Other crops included **Celtic bean** which is similar to broad bean and **flax** the leaves of which would have been used for animal fodder, the fibres for linen and the seeds for oil. Other plants which we regard as weeds may have been eaten, used for medicinal purposes or for dyeing. **Woad** falls into the latter category producing a blue dye used for cloth and tattooing.



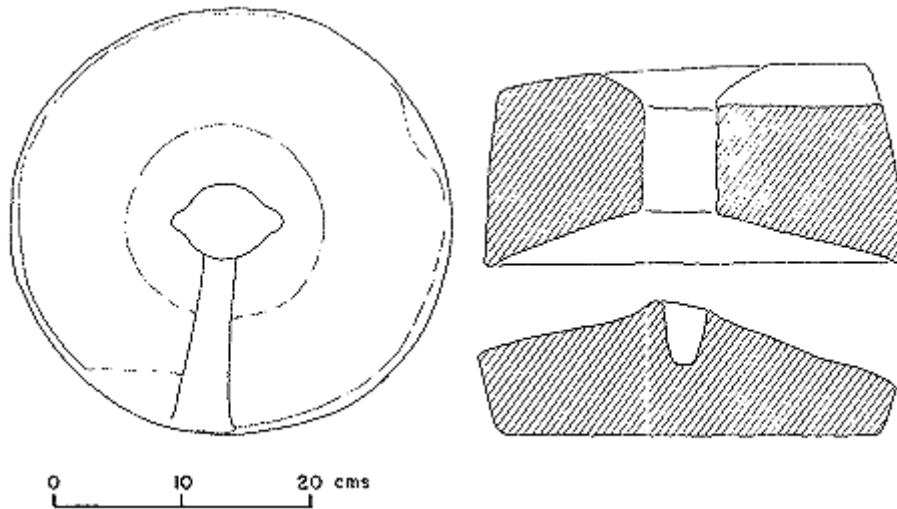
**Iron Age granary**



**Flax and Celtic beans**  
(source: Somerset Level Project)

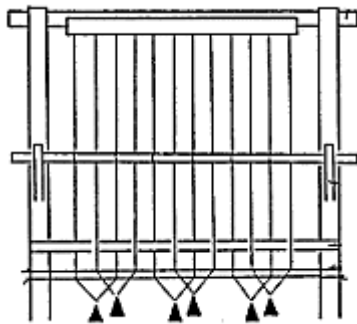
Grain was now ground in a **rotary hand quern** and bread or cakes were baked either on the edge of an **open fire** (usually in the centre of the wooden roundhouse) or in **clay ovens** set to one side of the hearth. Meat could be cooked in **metal cauldron**, baked in the hot ashes or roasted on iron spits over the fire. In some parts of western Britain meat was cooked in large open pits, often lined with stone or wood, which were filled with water. The water was brought to boiling temperature by throwing in stones which had been

heated in an adjacent fire. These sites are known as **burnt mounds** after the large piles of burnt and split stone which was discarded after each cooking session.



### Rotary quern

(source: Cunliffe, B. 1983)



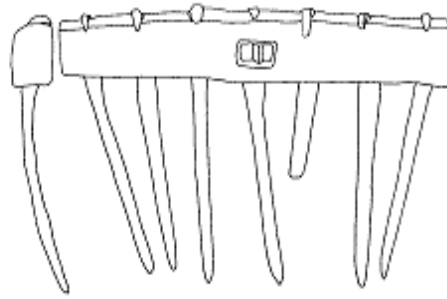
### Vertical loom

(source: Wild, P. 1988)

The main domestic animals were cattle, sheep, goat, pig and horse. **Cattle and sheep** were probably most important, the former for their meat, milk and skins, the latter for their wool. In some parts of Britain the remains of long field boundaries have been found, sometimes centred on a hillfort. These may have been very large fields used for ranching cattle. From early Irish and Welsh literature we know that cattle were of great importance not only in the economy of the Iron Age but socially. Payment was often in cattle and wealth was measured in the size of cattle herds. Cattle would have provided milk, meat, hides and horn. Sheep were clearly important during the iron age for their wool. Equipment used during **spinning and weaving** is extremely common on sites of this date indicating

that fibres and cloth were produced in virtually every household. The most common tools used were spindles which consisted of a shaped stick with a circular loom weight made of stone, pottery or wood, and upright looms. The looms were made of two wooden posts either driven into the ground or leant against the side of the house. Between the two posts was a wooden pole to which were fastened long woollen threads (the warp). These were held in bunches and weighted with stone or clay weights. The cross threads (the weft) were passed back and forth by hand starting from the top of the loom and working downwards. If necessary the woven cloth could be wound onto the cross pole so the weaver did not have to bend down.

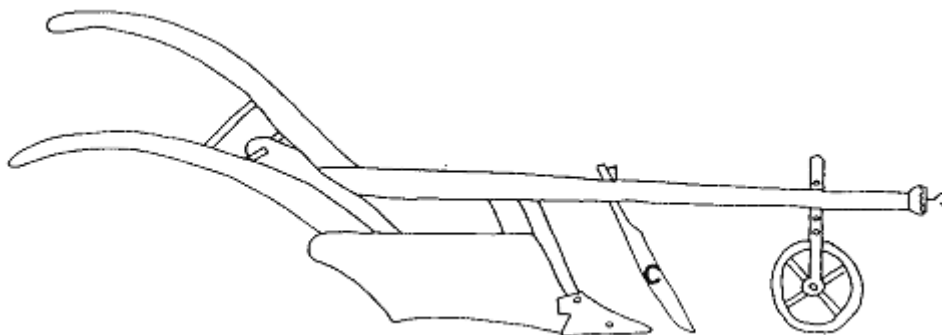
In Wales the **Roman conquest** did not result in a radical reorganisation of land or farming. The main change was that taxes had to be paid to the Roman administrators, some of these may have been paid in farm produce. The Romans introduced **new tools** to Britain although some are only found on military sites or in the more romanised areas of the country. These include hoes, metal coverings for wooden spades to protect them from wear, turf cutters, scythes, pitchforks and rakes. The ard was now more often fitted with an iron share for cutting the ground although some were still made of wood and tipped with iron. The demands of the Roman army may have meant that a greater surplus needed to be produced to feed and cloth the army as well as the growing number of people who lived in towns and cities.



### Wooden rake

(source: Rees, S. 1981)

Not enough is known about **medieval farming** in much of Powys and Clwyd. The physical prominence of many former timber and earth castles makes these notable features in the landscape but in very few instances have the former **medieval fields** been discovered. One notable exception is at Hen Domen near Montgomery where the remains of ploughing ridges were excavated below the later castle. These fields are earlier than the castle and must therefore be dated to before the Norman conquest. Over much of the country **ridge and furrow** has been preserved where former arable fields have been turned over to permanent pasture. The ridges are the earth thrown up from ploughing in a deliberate attempt to improve drainage. Medieval **ploughs** were fitted with a coulter board which turned each sod after it was cut throwing it to one side. Unfortunately it is rarely possible to date this type of field precisely: they may be of any date from about the 12th or 13th century through to the 19th century. At the ends of the ridges there is usually an area of flat land where the plough was turned, this is known as a headland. Some of the best preserved ridge and furrow fields are in Maelor. Here many of the small medieval settlements were placed within moats which helped drain the water away from the buildings in this lowlying and wet landscape. In some areas fields of ridge and furrow may be associated with small banked enclosures which contained farm buildings which may be approached by embanked tracks.

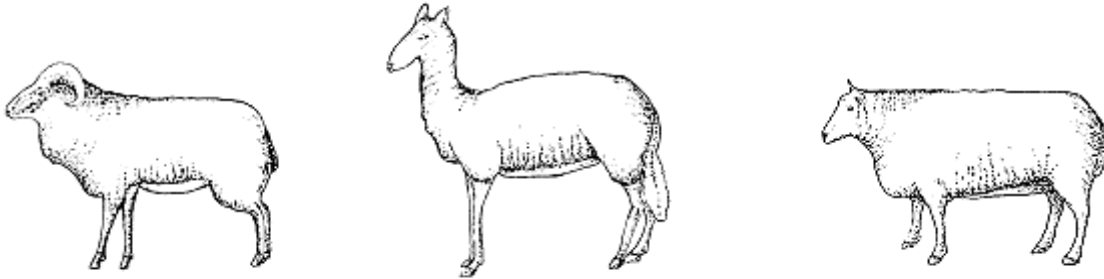


### Medieval plough

(source: Rees, S. 1981)

Other farming tools did not change very much although more were now made of iron than previously. After ploughing the seed would have been broadcast by hand and the fields harrowed. Any weeding that was required would have been carried out by hand and the crops of **wheat (spelt or club wheat), barley, rye or oats** would have been harvested with scythes. Some of the grain was ground into flour but barley was used also for making ale as well as being cooked whole or as porridge. The grain was ground either by hand or at water-driven mills on rivers and streams. Hay and straw would have been raked up with wooden rakes and stored for animal fodder and bedding. **Herbs, vegetables and fruits** were grown near farms, manors and monasteries. These were used for food and medicines. The selective breeding of **domestic animals** and introduction of new types meant that they were no longer the same breeds as had

been kept during the Iron Age although compared to modern breeds they were small. Woollen cloth was still produced in farm and manor by the women of the household but now much of it was also sent to professional weavers in towns who sold their cloth all over the country and abroad. The animals were grazed on the fields after the crops were harvested, on meadows by the rivers, on salt marshes and on upland pastures. The rights and ownership to land were controlled by the manorial court.



**Development of breeds of sheep**  
**Iron Age (left), Medieval (centre), Modern (right)**

(source: Wild, P. 1988)

drawn by Priscilla Wild

For thousands of years the **reeds** growing besides lakes and rivers would have been important for thatching. Considerable areas of **woodland** survived where timber could be cut for building, carpentry and fires. The woods also provided shelter for **wild animals** such as deer and boar which were hunted with dogs by the nobility. There were severe penalties for poaching, even the amputation of a hand. Wild birds were hunted with tamed hawks or shot with a long bow and fish were caught with nets in the seas and rivers. It was obligatory to eat fish on certain fast days laid down by the church. To help provide sufficient **fish** for their needs people kept them in artificial **ponds** close to their houses. They were particularly common at monasteries as monks kept a greater number of fast days than ordinary people. Most poorer people did not eat meat very often but lived on bread or meals made of cooked grain or beans.

In the uplands of Wales the higher ground was commonly used for summer pasture for cattle which were cared for by groups of young people who lived for the summer months in a temporary dwelling or *hafod*. The milk from the cows was made into butter and cheese which was stored until it could be taken to the home farm where it was used or to market for sale.

During the medieval period **rabbits** were introduced to Britain for their flesh and fur. They were kept in specially built warrens. The rabbit runs were built of stone and covered by mounds often referred to as **pillow mounds**. These are found in upland areas in groups sometimes associated with an enclosure which contained the house of the rabbit warrener.

#### **Further reading:-**

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