



CHILTERN
OPEN AIR
MUSEUM

*Where buildings come
alive through history*

Life 2000 years ago



Location:

- Iron Age House enclosure.

Practical Notes:

- Please note that the path to the Iron Age House slopes in places and can be slippery in wet weather. Ensure that the children walk and do not rush ahead.
- A fire may be lit when you enter the Iron Age House. The smoke from the fire usually rises above the heads of the children but teachers should be aware of possible difficulties with asthmatics.
- The house is surrounded by a ditch and a bank on top of which is a fence.
- Children and adults can sit on the benches inside the house.
- Please do not cross the rope barrier.

Purpose and content of the activity session:

- During this session the Museum teacher will explore the reconstructed Iron Age House at a level suitable to the age group of the children.
- They will look particularly at the building's construction, its interior contents and the lifestyle of its inhabitants in pre-Roman Britain.
- The session will begin by looking at the outside of the building.
- The children will be encouraged to compare and contrast the building and its contents with their own homes.
- An optional experience is traditional storytelling in the Iron Age House (this option must be arranged in advance of your visit).
- The session is particularly suitable for Key Stage 1 History and as a background or introduction to Key Stage 2 History: Romans.
- It also incorporates cross-curricular elements of materials and structures and is therefore appropriate for History, Science or Design and Technology at Key Stage 1 or 2.

The explanation will vary in emphasis having regard to the age, ability and current or recent schoolwork (e.g. Houses and Homes or Materials) or interest if known beforehand.

The Iron Age House - Background Information

The Iron Age House differs from the rest of the Museum's collection in that it is a replica rather than an original building.

Construction of the roundhouse began in 1995 and should be fully completed in 2005. It is not based on one specific excavation but incorporates features from several sites within the Chiltern area.

This replica uses a ring of oak posts, with the gaps between the posts filled with woven hazel (wattle). The walls are being daubed, which provides extremely efficient insulation. The roof rafters are made of ash covered with a thatch of wheat straw, tied in place with a mixture of twine and some sparring held together with sways. The roof eaves overhang the wall to protect the daub from being eroded by rain. Telltale archaeological features that remain from original roundhouses are lush vegetation surrounding them and the drip trench by the door. Based on local evidence the floor has been laid with rounded flints and compacted chalk.

It is thought that a building of this size would have housed a family unit, and the interior of the Iron Age House depicts a home of around 50 AD.

Inside there is a clay hearth for the fire and a circular wooden lid on the floor that covers a clay-lined pit. This pit may have been used for storing food and is sometimes referred to during the activity as the 'fridge'. A new domed clay oven has been built.

Smoke from the fire rises to the top of the house and then finds its way out through the thatch without the need for any kind of chimney or other opening. The layer of smoke that is produced acts efficiently as a fire precaution as it inhibits sparks from the fire from reaching the thatched roof. This is because the smoke layer contains very little oxygen to support combustion and therefore sparks are extinguished. The layer of smoke also protects the thatched roof from damage by vermin, especially squirrels.

The surrounding ditch and bank with a fence on top were intended to keep animals out of the enclosure: wild animals living in the woodland 2000 years ago included bears, wild boar and wolves.

Celts in the Chilterns - Historical Background:

During the first millennium BC a large part of Western Europe, including France, Switzerland, Northern Spain, the British Isles and parts of Germany, were inhabited by a collection of tribes sharing a common culture and similar language. These tribes of people are referred to today as the Celts. The earliest evidence for the Celtic tribes dates from around 1200 BC in Austria. Archaeological evidence suggests that Celts had settled in Britain by 900 BC.

Celtic tribes are thought to have numbered anything from 20000 to 250000 people. A king, or sometimes a queen, ruled each tribe, whilst most of the population were farmers. There were also skilled craftsmen, potters, carpenters and metalworkers, a warrior aristocracy and a priesthood called the Druids.

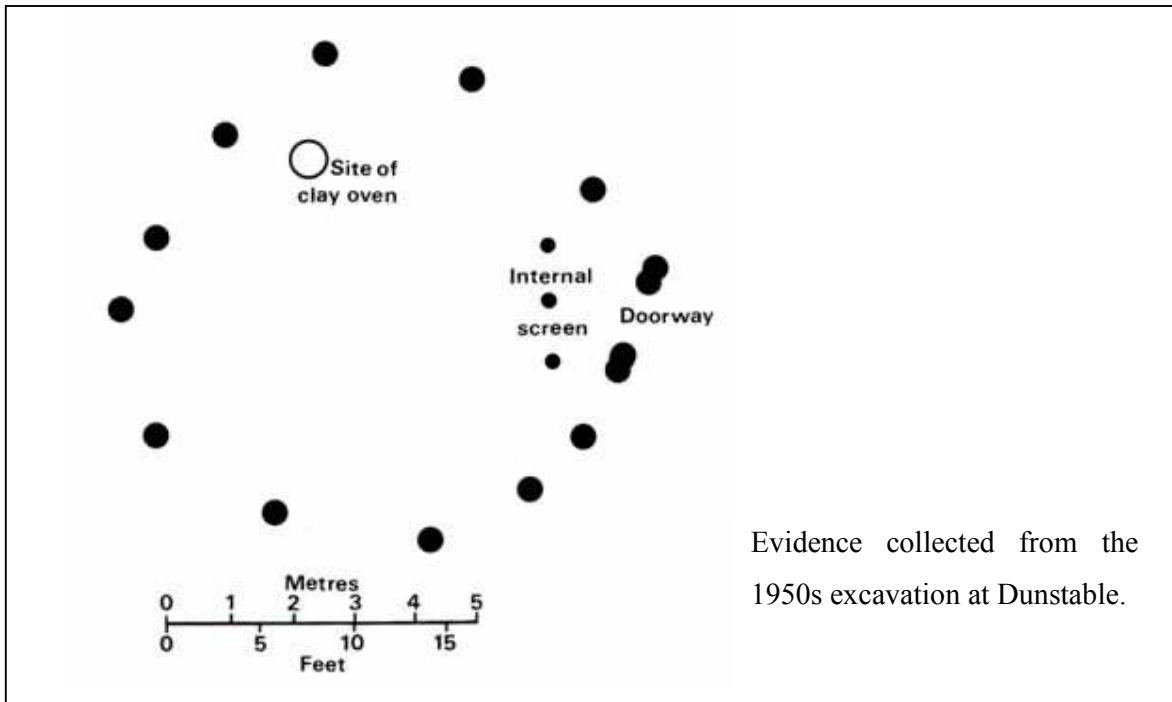
Some tribes grouped together into confederations such as the Brigantes in Lancashire and Cumbria and the Chiltern-based Catuvellauni. This latter confederation controlled most of the tribes of South East Britain prior to the Roman Conquest.

Homes:

The most common dwellings found in Celtic Britain were roundhouses. Although this style of building actually pre-dates the Celts (the oldest evidence discovered so far dates to the late Mesolithic period of circa 4500 BC).

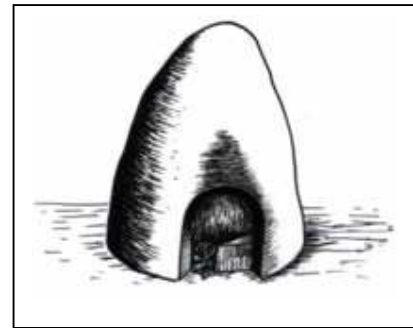
In the Chilterns, as with most of southern and central Britain, houses were made from wood, but in areas with a shortage of good timber, stone houses have been found.

In the 1950s an archaeological excavation at Dunstable, Bedfordshire discovered evidence of a farmhouse from the early Iron Age (circa 800 BC). A clear pattern showed the location of a series of postholes, from which the two double postholes and internal features seemed to indicate a door with an internal screen. Based on excavated evidence such as this, and of timbers and joints, a reconstruction can be made using basic building principles. However the level of skill and craftsmanship used originally by the Celts is not known.



Evidence collected from the 1950s excavation at Dunstable.

Evidence was also found of a clay oven within the house. This would have been constructed in a beehive shape and could have been used for both cooking and heating. It is thought that an oven such as this would have prevented its own smoke from escaping into the house.



A wooden house would consist of one or two rings of posts supporting the roof rafters. The gaps between the posts in the outer ring would then be filled to form the wall of the house. The most common form of walls to be found was of woven hazel (a very flexible green wood) called wattle. The gaps in the wattle wall would then be filled in various ways, an outer wall of turf could be constructed or else the wattle could be filled with daub. Pieces of ancient daub have been found that still carried the imprint of the woven wattle. The roofs would usually be thatched.

Various types of flooring were used. These could range from beaten earth, compacted until it was nearly as hard as cement, to cobbled floors of polished

flints or even ox knucklebones. Evidence has also been found of mats made from woven rushes.

The interior layout may have been a single, open plan room, with the height of the wall plate (the top of the wall) allowing the use of the entire floor area, with adequate headroom using the minimum amount of material. At some excavations, however, rows of small postholes have been found that might have supported wicker screens dividing off parts of the house.

Most people lived in small farmsteads of one or two family groups. The buildings were often surrounded by a ditch and wattle palisade, not as defence against enemies but to keep their domestic animals in and wild animals out.

The many hill forts that can be found throughout the British countryside do not seem to have been permanently occupied. Current theories believe that they were mainly centres for the storage of agricultural produce and used for ceremonial and ritual activities connected with agricultural production. In troubled times, of course, they would serve as a safe haven for the inhabitants of the surrounding countryside and their animals.

There were towns in Britain before the Roman conquest, and these consisted of a spread-out sprawl of houses, looking more like a collection of small holdings gathered together. The Romans called such town-like settlements as *oppida* (singular *oppidum*). In the Chiltern area they started to appear in river valleys from around 100 BC. There are five known sites in the region, four of which are at Baldock, Braughing, Welwyn and Cow Roast near Tring. They may have operated as trading centres; the site at Braughing has yielded substantial evidence of luxury imports such as wine and oil amphorae and fine quality pottery. There is also evidence of substantial iron-ore processing at Cow Roast.

The largest *oppidum* was at Verlamion near St. Albans, close to the site of the Roman city of Verulamium. This was the capital of the Catuvellaunium

kingdom until it moved to Colchester around 10 AD and seems to have remained the main centre for the minting of coins in gold, silver and bronze.

Farming:

In the Chiltern area, Celtic farmers seemed to practice a mixed-farming economy of cereal crops and sheep rearing. The use of iron ploughs, drawn by oxen, allowed greater areas of land to be cultivated as it became easier to plough heavy soils like clay.

Before the Romans conquered Britain they used to trade with us. Pliny (a famous Roman poet and politician) wrote about our golden fields of wheat. The most common cereal crops were various species of wheat. However barley, rye and oats were also grown.

Pulses, such as beans and peas, were popular vegetables.

The large number of spindle whorls and loom weights found on excavation sites in the Chiltern area would indicate that most farms kept enough sheep to produce their own woollen clothing. The sheep, together with cattle and pigs, would also supplement the people's diet by providing meat and dairy products.

Romans in the Chilterns - Historical Background:

Following the Roman Conquest of 43 AD, the Chilterns were quickly settled by the invaders who founded the new city of Verulamium, near to the site of the Celtic *oppidum* of Verlamion, and the Chiltern Hills were soon dotted with Roman farms. Many of these farms were destroyed, along with Verulamium, during Boudica's uprising in 60/61 AD.

In the peace that followed Boudica's defeat, Verulamium was rebuilt and several smaller market towns grew up at Baldock, Braughing, Dorchester (all of which were pre-Roman sites) and Dunstable. Some of the earlier simple farmsteads expanded into Romanised-villas, most of which seem to have been farming estates although archaeological evidence would indicate that some were industrial centres. Not all villas would necessarily have been owned by Romans. Evidence of native pottery and farming techniques indicate that many were lived in by Britons who were adopting some of the life-styles of their new rulers, possibly a continuation of occupation by the same families who were farming the hills before the Romans came to Britain.

However most of Britain's rural population continued to live in roundhouses like their forefathers for approximately the next 200 years.

In the mid-70s Emperor Vespasian granted self-government to much of southeast Britain, creating local authorities, called *civitates*, based on the old tribal boundaries. Verulamium became the administrative centre for the new *civitates* based on the territory of the Catuvellauni.

Verulamium and the Towns:

Following its destruction by Boudica's army, it was at least 15 years before Verulamium's civic and administrative buildings were rebuilt, probably at the instigation of the province's governor, Agricola. The basilica, forum and public baths and several temples were constructed over the next few decades.

As the centre of local government in the region, Verulamium prospered over the next 300/400 years. There is evidence for many buildings in brick and stone, including some large, extravagantly decorated houses. It was a major market place for the region and there is evidence for industrial production

within the town, although only on a smallscale, probably individual craftsmen or small workshops. During the 5th century Verulamium became an established Christian centre, based around the shrine of Saint Alban. Alban was one of the first Christian martyrs in Britain, probably executed about 200 AD.

By the middle of the 5th century, Verulamium, like most other southeastern Roman towns, slowly fell into disrepair and ruin. There is no evidence for a dramatic end to Verulamium at the hands of the Saxon invaders, but by the mid-6th century the town seems to have been completely deserted and replaced by an Anglo-Saxon village on the opposite side of the River Ver.

The smaller Roman towns around the edges of the Chiltern Hills served mainly as markets for the local farms and villas. The majority of buildings, other than a few small private houses, seem to have been of timber.

The exception is Braughing where there is evidence for substantial stone buildings that may have been for public rather than private use. Located at the junction of the road linking Verulamium with Colchester and Ermine Street, the main London to York road, Braughing was probably an important stopping-over point for travellers on the Roman roads and prospered accordingly.

Farming in the Chilterns:

Most Roman villas were situated on the slopes of the valleys, mainly because this is where the best arable soils were and because the hillsides offered the best drainage. Most of the hilltops were covered with woodlands, filled with various species of deer, wild boar, pigeons and other birds. It would have been difficult to clear all the trees and the wild animals and birds that lived there provided a rich source of food to supplement the farmer's produce.

As before the Roman Conquest, the majority of farms seem to have operated a mixture of arable farming and stock-raising. Wheat and barley seem to have been the most common crops. With one exception, there has been little trace

found of large granaries on Chiltern sites. This probably means that surplus grain was immediately sent off to market after harvesting, rather than stored on the farms.

The Romans introduced a large variety of fruit and vegetables to Britain, including carrots, celery, radish, watercress and cherries. At least some of these must have been grown on Chiltern villa sites. Pruning saws and knives have been found on archaeological sites, together with various iron spades, that provide evidence of gardening and fruit growing.

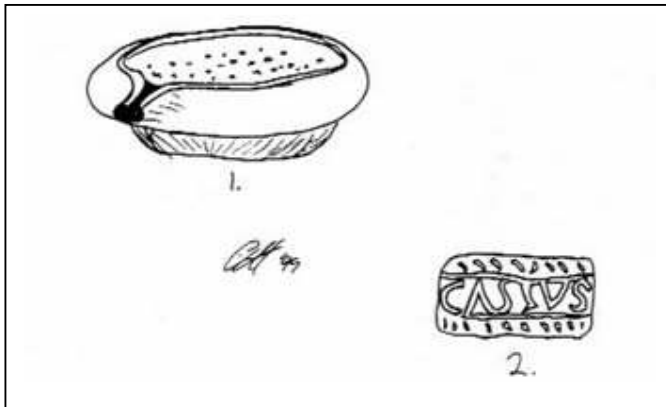
The animals raised on the farms were mainly cattle, pigs and sheep.

Industry in the Chilterns:

Roman towns would have contained a variety of craftsmen, but most evidence of industrial activity and mass-production is limited to rural sites.

The Chilterns have huge deposits of clay and kilns of various sizes have been found on several villa sites. Tile-making was, not surprisingly, particularly common in the area close to the large potential market of Verulamium, where both roof tiles and box flues for hypocaust heating systems were produced. The cost of transporting such heavy goods over any distance would have meant that tile makers were best placed close to their customers.

The kilns at Brockly Hill were used to produce the heavy grinding bowls called *mortaria* (singular *mortarium*). These bowls had small pieces of grit set into the sides and bottom and were used for grinding up food. They were sold over a wide area, covering most of southeastern Britain during the 1st and 2nd centuries AD. The rims of the bowls were stamped with the maker's name, like a trade mark, so we know the names of several of these successful tradesmen: such as Oastrius, Secundus and Castus. The most successful, based on the huge number found bearing his name, was Albinus, who was followed in the family business by his son, Matugenus. These were all probably tenants, renting their industrial units from a single landowner, because the Roman name for Brockly Hill was *Sulloniacis*, which means "the estate of Sullonius".



1. *Mortarium*, note the spout for pouring out ground-up food and liquids.
2. An early trade mark, *Mortarium* stamp from Brockley Hill with maker's name: CASTUS.

used to make domestic pottery but only for local consumption. They may have been seasonal operations, run by farmers on a casual basis to provide a supplement to the income from their farms.

Iron ore smelting occurred at a couple of sites, although it was more common further north towards Northampton. These workings do not seem to be connected to villa sites and were probably specialised industrial settlements. They may have had blacksmiths on site producing finished items, but most of their iron was probably sold to smiths in Verulamium and the other towns.

Access Statement:

- Use the path directly opposite to Garston Forge. Although it is slightly uneven it is the most suitable pathway through the woods for wheelchair users and those with other mobility difficulties and is unobstructed by tree roots etc.
- Within the Iron Age enclosure there are steep gradients and uneven paths, but it is passable for all users.
- The floor of the Iron Age House is of compacted chalk and flint, but heavy-duty matting has covered public access areas. The whole of the interior open to the public is accessible to all users. Please do not cross the rope barrier.