



Prehistory

KS2 History Resource



Museum
Gallery
Archive

The Box is Plymouth's new multi-million pound museum, gallery and archive. With brand new exhibition spaces alongside state-of-the-art facilities for research and learning, it's the perfect place to teach, inspire and engage students of all ages.

Contents

4

About this
resource

5

Timeline

6

Plymouth and
Devon during the
Stone Age

11

What changed?
Technology, travel
and religion in the
Early Bronze Age

16

Plymouth in the
Iron Age

20

Ideas for activities

About this resource

This resource explores The Box's collection of objects from Prehistory. It provides examples of objects that are relevant to the subject and offers activity ideas for the classroom.

Archaeologists and historians use the term 'prehistory' to refer to a time in a peoples' history before they used a written language.

In Britain we use the term 'prehistory' to describe the period before we became part of the Roman Empire after the invasion of AD 43.

The prehistoric period in Britain lasted for hundreds of thousands of years, but Britain has only been permanently occupied by people for about 12,000 years. We often divide this long period up into shorter periods - a simplified version of these dates can be found on the prehistoric timeline on page 5.

The earliest humans living in Britain were hunter-gatherers. They survived by hunting wild animals and finding food to eat. Very gradually, people living in Britain learned new skills. They began to herd animals together and grow crops. Later they discovered how to use metals to make tools and other objects. These new innovations were brought to Britain by people from Europe.



Palaeolithic
c800,000 – 9,000 BC

Mesolithic
c9,000 – 4,000 BC

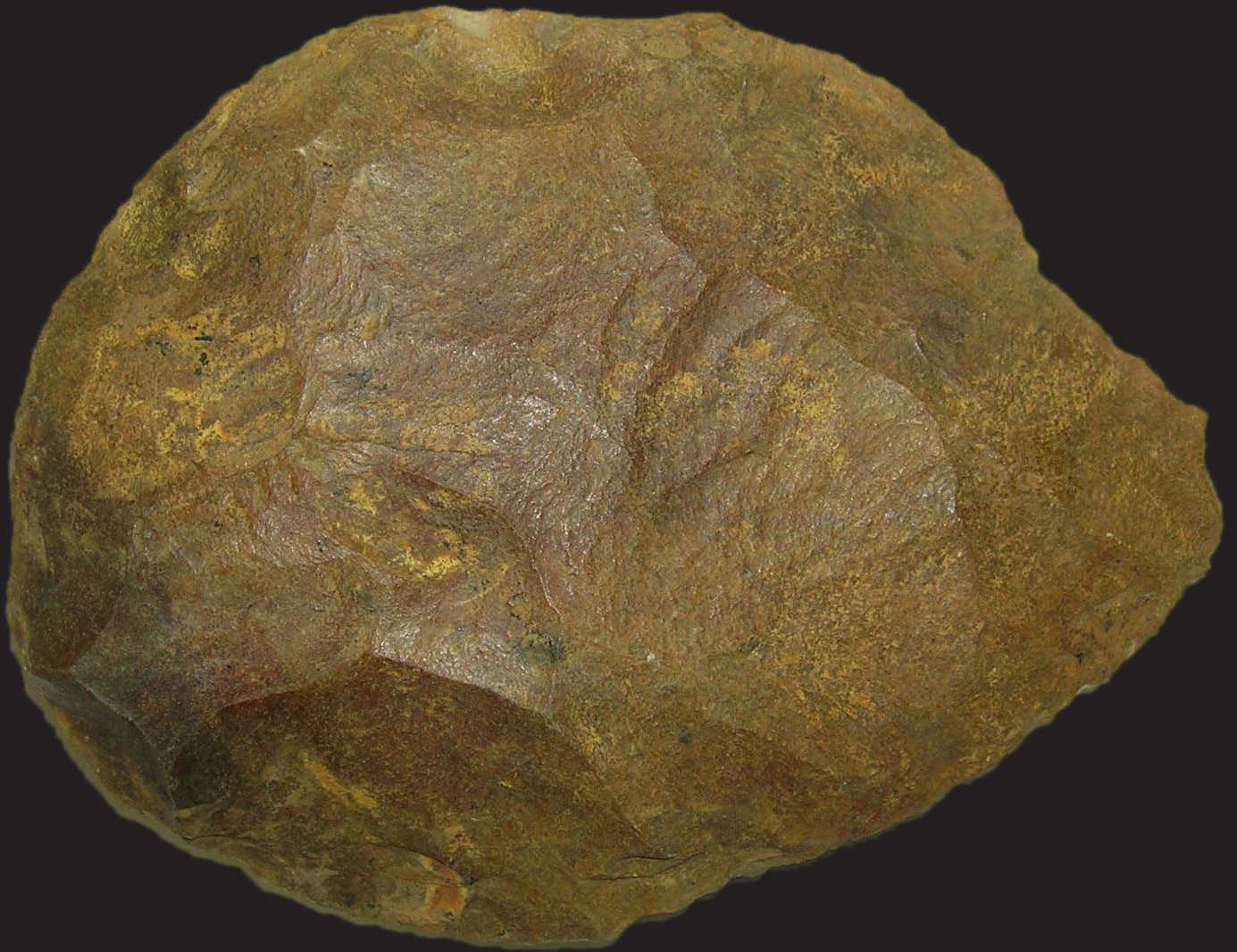
Neolithic
c4,000 – 2,300 BC

Bronze Age
Early – c2,300 – 1,500 BC
Middle – c1,500 – 1000 BC
Late – c1,000 – 750 BC

Iron Age
c750 BC – AD 43

Roman Britain
AD 43 – AD 410

Plymouth and Devon during the Stone Age



Cave sites

Two cave sites - Cattedown Caves in Plymouth and Kitley Caves in the South Hams – allow us to imagine how we lived during the Stone Age.

Animal and human bones were found on both sites. Although we often call this period the Stone Age, we can break this down into three separate periods:

Palaeolithic (pay-lee-oh-lith-ic)

Old Stone Age

c800,000 – 9,000 BC

Mesolithic (mee-so-lith-ic)

Middle Stone Age

c9,000 – 4,000 BC

Neolithic (nee-oh-lith-ic)

New Stone Age

c4,000 – 2,300 BC

Some of the finds from Kitley Caves could be as old as 120,000 BC. The Cattedown Caves finds are slightly more recent – around 35,000 BC.

Some of the finds from these caves included animal bones such as hyena, woolly rhinoceros, bison, cave lions, cave bears and woolly mammoths – all once found roaming across the South Devon countryside. The Palaeolithic ovate (oval-shaped) hand axe on page 6 was found in Devon, meaning early humans were living alongside these animals. This hand axe is made of chert, a rock similar to flint. Often stone tools are referred to as flint, but a wide variety in the

stone was used.

During the early Palaeolithic period, Britain was joined to continental Europe by a land bridge that allowed humans and animals to move across what is now covered by sea. Parts of this period saw much of Britain covered in glacial ice and mainly treeless. During warmer periods trees and shrubs would have returned providing food and shelter for the animals. The extreme cold of the ice ages saw humans move out of Britain to seek warmer locations in which to live and hunt.

Kent's Cavern near Torquay was occupied by three different species of human - Homo Erectus, Neanderthals and Homo Sapiens. It contains the oldest known example of human occupation in Britain.

Along with the animal remains from the Kitley and Cattedown Caves, human remains were also found at both sites, though in the case of the Cattedown examples, these probably date to around 5,000 BC.

Some reindeer bones found at Kitley show signs of cut marks made with flint tools, indicating humans were occupying these sites, if only for a short period.

Food and farming

Britain was finally cut off from continental Europe around 6,500 BC.

Mesolithic humans were still using the older hunter-gatherer knowledge passed down through the generations to collect their food, tracking their prey across large areas. As larger food sources such as reindeer declined, new foods entered their diets, such as wild boar and freshwater fish. People still continued to occupy sites seasonally and exploited the natural environment around them, leading to the extinction of some species in Britain, such as reindeer and wild horses.

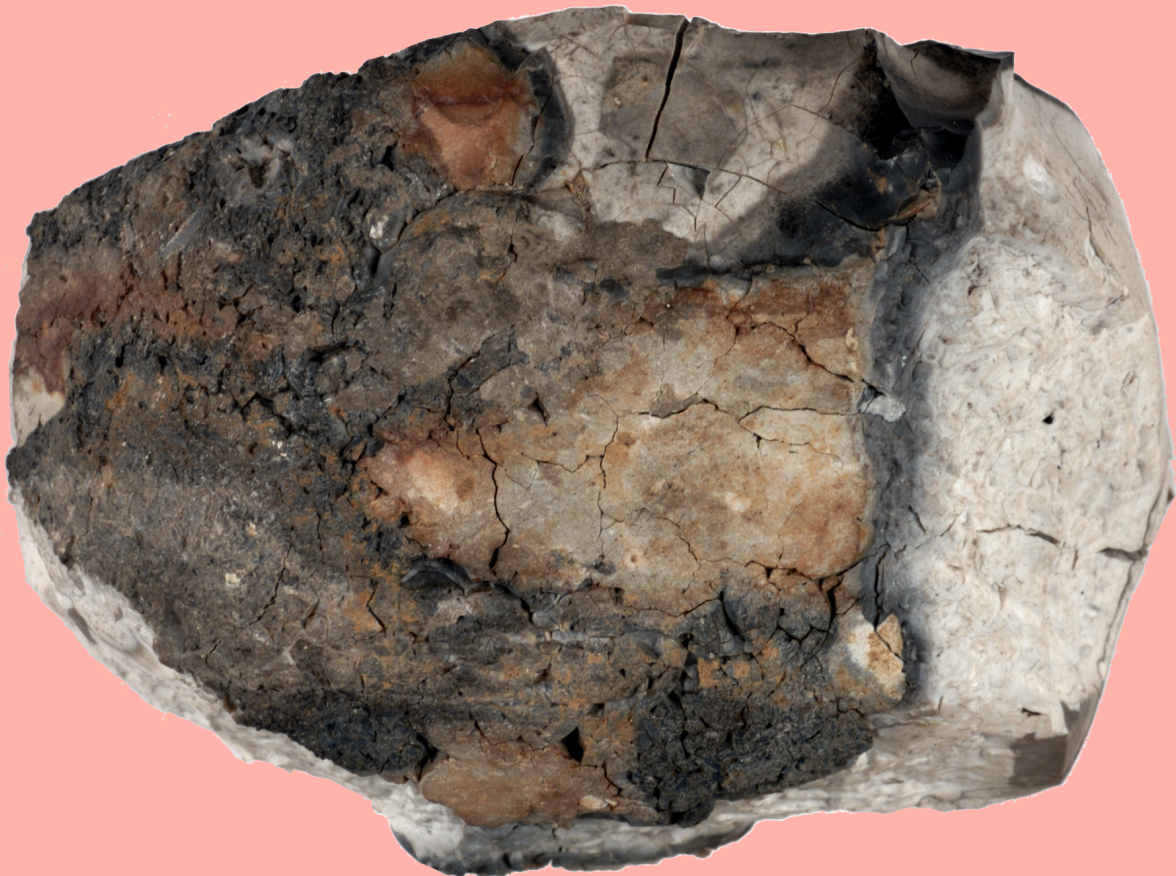
Farming was introduced to Britain around 4,000 BC, marking the beginning of the Neolithic period. The older hunter-gatherer ways of collecting food continued, but people began to associate themselves with particular areas, meaning settlements developed and people moved around less frequently. Crops such as wheat and barley were introduced - either by small parties travelling to Europe by boat and returning with the plants and animals required, or more likely by people migrating to Britain.

Large areas of woodland were cleared so crops could be planted and livestock reared, including areas of Dartmoor.

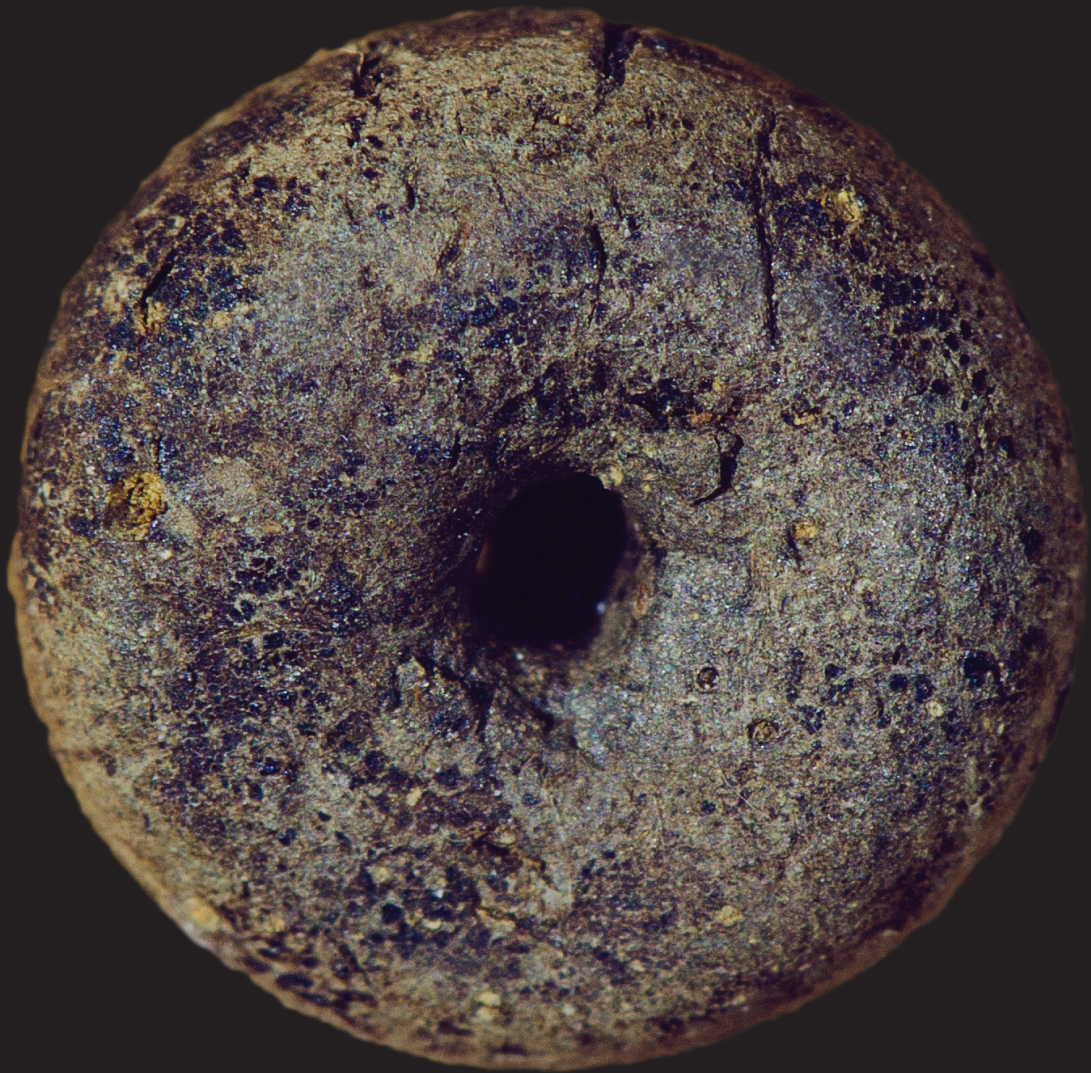
These changes to domestic life were labour intensive. Cleared land required digging, tilling and fertilising each year. The precious seed would need to be stored safely ready for germination and the crops would need protection from wild animals. If your crops were eaten, you would have no food. Harvesting, storing and processing the food would also require significant time and effort.

Despite this, farming became the primary way of producing food and it continues to this day. We also still maintain our hunter-gatherer tendencies - often called 'foraging' today. People collect wild mushrooms, herbs, fruits and vegetables and use them alongside farmed and processed foods.

At this time, humans also made their first steps towards imposing themselves on the landscape for other reasons. Monuments of differing shapes and sizes appear in the landscape - stone rows, stone circles and perhaps most impressively, henge monuments such as Stonehenge in Wiltshire. People living in Devon and Cornwall would have visited Stonehenge, as would people from across the country and continental Europe. Stone axes from every area of Britain have been found at the site.



What changed? Technology, travel and religion in the Early Bronze Age



Bronze

The biggest change to life was bronze.

The material that gave its name to this period in British history played a significant role in changing the way people lived. Bronze is an alloy of copper and a small amount of tin, the combination of the two makes for a far harder material. Arsenic is also occasionally added to the mix and all three materials are found in large quantities in Devon. The earliest known bronze objects in Britain date from around 2,150 BC.

Although the Bronze Age marks the period when metalworking first began in Britain, it did not lead to the sudden abandonment of the earlier way of life enjoyed during the Neolithic period.

The use of metal had a gradual impact but people continued to use much older traditions such as hunting and using stone for making tools.

By the late Bronze Age, bronze objects were more commonplace, with an abundance of axeheads still in existence from this period.



Mining

Devon and Cornwall have significant deposits of both copper and tin.

These would have certainly been exploited during the Bronze Age as the demand for bronze goods increased.

The recent discovery of an undisturbed burial cist at Whitehorse Hill (on Dartmoor, near Okehampton) included a barrel-shaped tin bead and a spectacular tin-studded wrist/arm band, which may provide some evidence for tin mining at this early date.

By around 1,600 BC - around the time of the Whitehorse Hill burial - the South West of Britain was experiencing a trade boom as tin was exported across Europe.

It's tempting to think that the relatively high status of the grave goods associated with the burial at Whitehorse Hill, and the tin objects in particular, could mean that the community in which this person lived were connected to this trade boom.



International travel

We often assume that international travel is a recent development in people's lives.

In fact, international travel was happening in Britain in the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age and probably even earlier. Evidence of this travel can be seen at Stonehenge, the great late-Neolithic/Early Bronze Age monument in Wiltshire. The 'Amesbury Archer', dated to c2,300 BC, and 'Boy with the Amber Necklace', dated c1,550 BC, are both burials discovered near Stonehenge. Both individuals are known to have travelled from sites in Europe with their personal possessions and were buried in Britain following their European burial practices, which suggests they didn't travel alone.

If small populations of people were travelling into Britain at that time, then people from Britain must have also been travelling to Europe. Amber beads have been discovered at Whitehorse Hill at and numerous other burials across Britain. Clearly trade links had at least been established with our European counterparts at that time to allow amber to be imported. Being exposed to other cultures or ways of life would allow ideas to travel between people too - clothing, pottery shapes, body adornments and even language would have been shaped by these international connections.

Later in the Bronze Age, travel was far more frequent. Remains of a Late Bronze Age boat were recently discovered off the coast at Salcombe. The trading vessel was carrying an extremely valuable cargo of tin and hundreds of copper ingots when it sank. Archaeologists believe the copper demonstrates the existence of a complex network of trade routes across the continental Europe.

Burial practices

There are over 1,000 burial cairns on Dartmoor.

They are not confined to special enclosures like modern cemeteries, instead they are spread throughout the landscape, often in prominent locations. The size and shape of burial cairns on Dartmoor varies greatly. Their diameters range from 2 metres to 40 metres. Some are mounds of earth, turf or stone. Others have a kerb of upright stones around the cairn.

Many cairns contain stone built cists (pronounced kist). These are boxes formed by slabs of granite, with a slab laid on top to form a lid. There are over 200 cists on Dartmoor of varying sizes. Whilst the size of some suggests that they were built to hold inhumations (the whole body), from the available evidence it seems that burial deposits within cists were largely cremations. This form of burial was to remain the norm for the rest of the Bronze Age, but the reason for this change is not known.

The excavation at Whitehorse Hill revealed that cremated human bone, together with burnt textile, was wrapped within an animal pelt inside the cist. This was laid on top of a very fine leather and textile object, itself placed on a mat of plant material. Placed at one end of the pelt was a beautifully constructed basket with its fine stitching still visible. The contents of the bag included over 200 beads, two pairs of wooden studs and a flint tool. A delicate woven band, studded with 32 tin studs lay beneath the bag, possibly this was originally also inside the bag. A layer of plant material covered all these objects.

Plymouth in the Iron Age



Divisions in society

During the Iron Age, modern Devon and Cornwall (and part of Somerset) were known as the tribal area of Dumnonia, and the residents as Dumnonii.

This information was first described by the Roman geographer Ptolemy in his book *Geographia* around AD 150 - long after the Roman invasion of AD 43.

It's difficult to know what the division in control between the Dumnonii and Romans was during this time. Although it appears that the Dumnonii came under Roman control by AD 78, there is no evidence of local large scale building or occupation by the Romans, as there is for example in Exeter. One interpretation of this is that the Dumnonii had more freedom to govern areas by themselves under Roman rule and were not that interested in Roman ways of life. Another is that while the Romans wanted to exploit local resources such as tin, little of the wealth created was available for local people to develop a Roman lifestyle.

Divisions within the physical landscape were starting to take place, with large boundary ditches and hill forts being built. The number of hill forts constructed in the Iron Age indicate a change in society. It's still not clear what the purpose of building these forts was. They were possibly for defence, created as a deterrent, or perhaps were used for ritual or ceremonial activities.

Whatever the reason, many of these forts were built and still exist today. Boringdon Camp (north of Plympton) is a great local example of a hill fort, as are Brent Tor, Wasteberry Camp and Bolt Tail. Divisions were also happening between groups of people. The Dumnonii were one of many independent social groups across Britain and even within the Dumnonii there may have been a further division - the Cornovii.

The silver coin on page 16 was made by the Dobunni tribe from what is now Bristol, Gloucestershire and North Somerset. The Dumnonii tribe didn't produce their own coinage. This suggests that they still relied upon trading methods that stretch back to the Bronze Age - using local metals and other precious goods to barter for coins and other highly valued commodities. The Dumnonii shared a border to the east (possibly the River Axe) with the coin producing Durotriges tribe.



Iron

Iron was first worked in Britain around 700 BC.

It offered the first real alternative to bronze as a material for the mass production of tools and weaponry. The knowledge required to kickstart this new exploitation of local materials appears to have come from migration from continental Europe, particularly people and goods from the Halstatt culture centred on modern Austria. Bronze was still used throughout the period. This connection with a wider cultural European heritage had a huge impact on our local traditions, influencing the design of decorated items such as swords and jewellery.

A smelting furnace was discovered in the 1950s at Kestor on Dartmoor suggesting this mass production of iron was also utilised by the Dumnonii, although no modern excavations have taken place to confirm this. Agricultural and domestic tools could have been made, along with brooches, pins and other ornamental goods for use locally and for exchange.



Ideas for activities



Ideas for activities

Prehistoric timeline

Using the basic timeline in this teachers pack (see page 5) as a starting point, why not create a huge timeline of Prehistoric Britain in the classroom? Your class can research key events, known movements and burials of people, and when monuments were erected on Dartmoor, such as the Merrivale stone row or Grimspound settlement. They can also add monuments from across the country such as Stonehenge. Our finds from Whitehorse Hill date from around 1,900–1,500 BC – older than Tutankhamun's reign in Ancient Egypt, and much older than the Terracotta Army in China.

Why not plot dates from other cultures onto your timeline and see where Prehistoric Britain fits within an international context?

Materials

Explore the materials first developed in the Bronze Age. The clever combination of copper and tin meant that stronger tools could be made out of this new material – bronze.

- How was this discovered? Could there have been outside influences?

Explore how alloys are made – how might the materials be found in the landscape?

- How might they be prepared before smelting?
- What equipment is required to smelt metal?
- How are the materials changed during the smelting process?
- Do they remain solid for example?
- What other materials were used in prehistory?
- Were they always metal?

Explore other alloys such as brass, steel, and pewter – what metals must be combined to make these alloys?

Role play

Explore the differences between prehistoric Britain and Britain today through some short drama pieces devised by your students.

Imagine that we are living in the Iron Age in Plymouth – it may have been known as Tamara – and you and your classmates are Dumnonii. Have a look around the school grounds, or by remembering trips to the City Centre or Hoe.

- You need somewhere to live - what do you need?
- What materials might you find nearby to help with this?
- Is there anywhere nearby where you could find fresh water?
- Where might you find some food?
- How might you catch some food?
- How might you make some tools to help process your food?
- Could you grow some food?
- Why all these questions about food? It's making me hungry...
- Could you find something nearby to make some beads?
- Is there a way of trading goods nearby?
- How might you tell other people that you are living in this particular place?
- How might you show other people what your beliefs might be?
- How might you bury members of your family?

At the end of the lesson, gather your students to discuss what differences there are between prehistoric Britain and Britain today.

How many assumed you could buy all your food from a shop, or had a tap to turn on the water, or even buy a house rather than build it yourself?

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