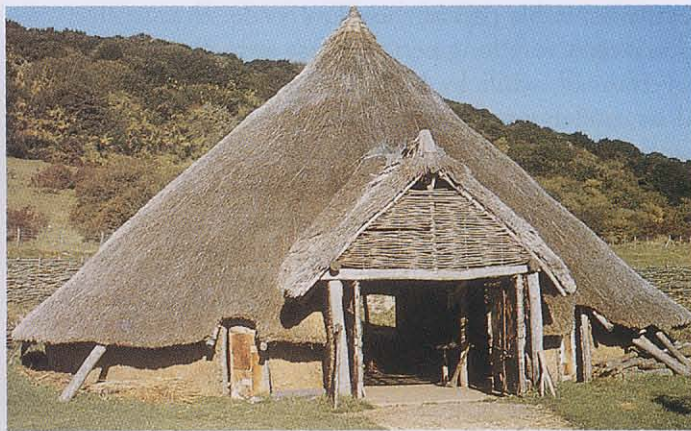




Maiden Castle, Dorset, is one of the largest Celtic hill-forts of the early Iron Age. Its strength can still be clearly seen, but even these fortifications were no match for a disciplined Roman troop.



A reconstructed Iron Age farm. Farms like this were established in southeast Britain from about 700 BC onwards. This may have been the main or even only building; larger round huts were used for smaller ones. "Their houses are large, round, built of planks and wickerwork, the roof being a dome of thatch," wrote the Greek philosopher Strabo. In most of Celtic Europe huts were square.

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The Beaker people probably spoke an Indo-European language. They seem to have brought a single culture to the whole of Britain. They also brought skills to make bronze tools and in some cases to replace stone ones. But they accepted many of the old ways. Stonehenge remained the most important centre until 1300 BC. The Beaker people's richest graves were there, and they added a new circle of thirty stone columns, this time connected by stone lintels, or cross-pieces. British society continued to be centred on a number of henges across the countryside.

However, from about 1300 BC onwards the henge civilisation seems to have become less important, and was overtaken by a new form of society in southern England, that of a settled farming class. At first this farming society developed in order to feed the people at the henges, but eventually it became more important and powerful as it grew richer. The new farmers grew wealthy because they learned to enrich the soil with natural waste materials so that it did not become poor and useless. This change probably happened at about the same time that the chalk uplands were becoming drier. Family villages and fortified enclosures appeared across the landscape, in lower-lying areas as well as on the chalk hills, and the old central control of Stonehenge and the other henges was lost.

From this time, too, power seems to have shifted to the Thames valley and southeast Britain. Except for short periods, political and economic power has remained in the southeast ever since. Hill-forts replaced henges as the centres of local power, and most of these were found in the southeast, suggesting that the land successfully supported more people here than elsewhere.

There was another reason for the shift of power eastwards. A number of better-designed bronze swords have been found in the Thames valley, suggesting that the local people had more advanced metalworking skills. Many of these swords have been found in river beds, almost certainly thrown in for religious reasons. This custom may be the origin of the story of the legendary King Arthur's sword, which was given to him from out of the water and which was thrown back into the water when he died.

The Celts

Around 700 BC, another group of people began to arrive. Many of them were tall, and had fair or red hair and blue eyes. These were the Celts, who probably came from central Europe or further east, from southern Russia, and had moved slowly westwards in earlier centuries. The Celts were technically advanced. They knew how to work with