

# The Iron Age

## Romans on the Don Teachers Pack – Background Information

### The Iron Age around Doncaster

**Tribes.** The period of time in Britain immediately preceding the Roman period is known as the Iron Age due to the discovery and use of iron. Before the Iron Age the only metal used in Britain to make tools was bronze, which is an alloy of copper and tin (hence the Bronze Age), and before that tools did not utilise metal at all (hence the Stone Age). The Iron Age in Britain lasted for approximately 800 years until the arrival of the Romans around AD 43. During the Iron Age large rivers often marked important boundaries and the River Don marked the border between the tribes of the *Corieltauvi* (sometimes also known as the *Coritani*) to the south and the *Brigantes* to north.

**Forts.** In some areas of Britain during the early Iron Age people built big defended sites typified by the hill fort at Wincobank near Sheffield.



**Wincobank hillfort, Sheffield with well defined defensive banks and ditches**

Another type of defended site from the Iron Age in South Yorkshire was the marsh fort found at Sutton Common near Doncaster (below).

## The Iron Age



The Iron Age enclosures at Sutton Common, visible as D-shaped earthworks in the centre of the picture

**Farms and houses.** It seems likely that people were still living in small undefended farming settlements and that defended sites were a place where they could seek refuge when under threat. Many of these fell into disuse in the late Iron Age as life became more peaceful and settlement became more firmly established in small farming communities and isolated farms connected by tracks and droveways. The people of these communities lived in round houses made of timber with wattle and daub walls and a thatched roof.

## The Iron Age



A reconstruction of Iron Age roundhouses excavated near Brodsworth

**Fields.** Fields and tracks were marked by ditches and possibly hedges. However, ditches were often dug much deeper than their use just for control of animals would require. This could indicate that the ditches served more than one purpose, acting both as animal control and as marks of land ownership. People would have had no title deeds to prove ownership of land so the cutting of deep ditches may have acted like boundary agreements. In the Bronze Age there had been fewer well-defined fields and areas were marked by raised monuments such as barrows, henges and stone circles. This makes it seem as if in the Iron Age fields became more important than burial or ceremonial places. We know that some of the field systems around South Yorkshire were there before the arrival of the Romans because parts of them often underlie later structures. Aerial photographs of the Roman road at Rossington show it crossing over field boundaries.

## The Iron Age



This reconstruction shows the sort of Iron Age landscape that the Romans would have found when they arrived in Doncaster.

**Climate.** The climate in the Iron Age became gradually cooler and wetter. It also seems as if lots of trees were cleared for farmland. We know this from fossil pollen from the period which shows a reduction in tree pollen. Iron Age farmers grew wheat and barley, and reared sheep, goats, pigs and cattle. Cattle were also a form of wealth and status.

**Pottery.** Iron Age people knew how to make their own pottery, but not very much seems to have been made or used in South Yorkshire. This is not unusual for Iron Age sites. The lack of pottery on Iron Age sites implies that many areas of northern England did not appear to use pottery in the Iron Age. In these areas, as for South Yorkshire, it may be that people used other materials for vessels, storage and eating. When Iron Age pottery is found it is often many pieces (sherds) from a single vessel that seems to have been deliberately placed in a ditch or pit. This contrasts with Roman pottery which is found in much greater quantities but often appears to be little more than waste disposal. This may show that in the Iron Age pots were saved for special events or rituals. We know that Iron Age people threw other things into water for special purposes. Examples include casting away prestigious unused metal goods into rivers such as the Thames and Witham, and the disposal of bodies of people who appear to have been sacrificed such as the famous bog body of Lindow Man from Cheshire.

## The Iron Age



Iron Age pot found at Brodsworth and reconstructed. The pot is now on display in Doncaster Museum

**Language.** Due to the lack of written records it is difficult to be certain about the language spoken in Iron Age Britain but it is thought that all Celtic languages originated from Indo-European and that the British version had close similarity to that spoken in Gaul. The British Celtic language is known as *Brythonic*. *Brythonic* appears to have remained in use after the Roman invasion and by the fifth century AD had two forms one of which developed into Welsh.

**Clothes.** Iron Age people would have made their own clothing, mainly made from wool but with some animal skin utilised as well. Before being woven the fleece wool would have to be spun and it is thought that the main way of doing this was by using drop spindles. A drop spindle is simply made, being a notched stick with a weight at the bottom to help the spindle to turn when spun round. The weight is known as a spindle whorl and many examples of these have been found on Iron Age sites in Britain.

## The Iron Age



**Drop spindle with spindle whorl and wool**

After being spun, wool was washed and dyed as required and then woven into cloth. Roman writers refer to the clothes of Iron Age Britons as being brightly coloured with stripes and checks. The colours of the cloth would have come from natural vegetable dyes from plants and berries. The wool cloth would have been sewn together using a bone or metal needle and wool thread. Men wore trousers (or *bracae*) which could be either knee length or ankle length, and a tunic and belt. Women wore simple dresses fastened at the shoulder with a brooch.

**Money.** In the Iron Age the *Brigantes* who lived immediately to the north of Doncaster did not use money. The *Corieltavi* to the south had some coins but there is little evidence of its use around Doncaster. Romans used money but it is likely that its adoption in the area would have been fairly slow. However, the Romans also introduced taxes to the area and it is likely that payment of these was one of the first ways in which Britons had to use money.