

# TEACHERS' NOTES: HOMES IN THE IRON AGE

## The Iron Age

The Iron Age began in around 800 BC. It can be considered to end with the arrival of the Romans in Britain in AD 43, but since the Roman impact was less in Scotland than elsewhere, we often talk about a long Iron Age, which lasts until around the 5th century AD. Iron Age archaeology is characterised by impressive architecture, ancient status symbols such as hillforts and brochs, as well as more modest settlement types such as farmsteads.

## Hillforts

Hillforts are one of the Iron Age's iconic site types. There are over 4000 known or possible hillforts in Britain and Ireland, and over 400 of these are found in the Scottish Borders, making it one of the most densely concentrated distributions in Europe. The site on Eildon North is perhaps the Borders' most famous hillfort. East Lothian has only around 90 hillforts, but this number includes some stunning examples such as Chesters and Traprain Law.



Artist's impression of Friar's Nose hillfort, which sits at the southern end of the Whiteadder Reservoir, with the farmstead at Hungry Snout visible in the distance

Hillforts are enclosed settlements. They are mostly found on hilltops, hence the name, but it is probable that there were similar sites on lower slopes, but these have been eradicated by later farming practices. The sites on summits survive partly because they are safe from ploughing and development. Other defended sites are found on promontories or cliff edges, where they are enhanced by the natural topography.

Traditionally, hillforts were believed to be primarily defensive in nature, but this interpretation was largely borne of the belief that prehistoric tribes were bloodthirsty warmongers, frequently attacking one another. While disagreements and indeed battles were certainly a feature of Iron Age life, they are unlikely to have been an everyday occurrence. Moreover, the very size of some hillforts would render them almost impossible to defend. The largest hillfort in the project study area, for example, is Duns Law, where the

ramparts enclose an area of around 2.5 hectares. How many people would have been required to keep the perimeter safe if it were under attack? Though they may appear strongly defended, they were also intended to astound and intimidate the viewer.

Within the ramparts, roundhouses provided homes for the fort's inhabitants. A large central hearth provided heat and light, and food was cooked in pots or on spits (known as fire dogs) around the fire. Smoke percolated out through the thatched roof.

Crops were grown on the fertile slopes around the hillfort, and cattle and sheep were kept for milk and for meat. Sheep also provided wool which was spun into yarn and then woven to create cloth.

### **Brochs**

Brochs are large drystone towers which are only found in Scotland. There are around 500 of them, mostly in the northern and western reaches of the country, but there are a few outliers in the Borders including Edin's Hall near Abbey St Bathans: .

Brochs are characterised by their tall, cooling tower shape and unusual double-walled construction: small rooms were formed within the thick drystone walls and a spiral staircase gave access to upper floors. Brochs had one small doorway and no windows. The form of their roofs is much debated: it may have been domed or conical, perhaps formed of thatch or turf. Brochs were traditionally interpreted as being the homes of tribal chiefs but it now seems more likely that they were the homes of farming families.



Edin's Hall Broch viewed from the air

### **Farmsteads**

Iron Age farmsteads are formed of roundhouses and associated enclosures and field systems. The roundhouse was the basic building type of the Iron Age: a round building with low walls formed either of stones or timber with wattle and daub, topped by a conical thatched roof supported by timbers. There were no windows and just one door, often on the southern side of the roundhouse to maximise sunlight on the front of the house. Inside, a central hearth provided heat and light and was used for cooking. The smoke would percolate out through the thatch. Internal space may have been divided with wattle screens to mark out sleeping space, for example, and similar panels may have been placed in the rafters to provide more space above head height. Each roundhouse was probably home to an extended family group.

Outside, sheep, pigs and cattle were kept safe at night in enclosures to protect them from predators such as wolves and bears. Traces of ploughing are sometimes visible in the ground today, known as cord rig, showing where crops such as wheat and barley were cultivated.

### **Talking points**

Why do you think people built large homes and complexes such as brochs and hillforts?

What are the advantages of building a home on top of a hill?

How do you think brochs were roofed?

## Activities and resources

On the website you'll find:

What's in a Broch? A worksheet for learners to design the roof of a broch and draw what they think might have been going on inside

A WebQuest to help your learners discover Iron Age brochs, along with teachers' notes, a worksheet for your learners to use, and an evaluation table for teachers, should you decide to formally mark/ evaluate their work

## Useful links

A short video of the hillfort on Duns Law, as visible in LiDAR data: <https://vimeo.com/388457793>

Explore a 3D model of Edin's Hall broch and hillfort: <https://skfb.ly/Nx7r>

Explore 3D models of two brochs via Historic Environment Scotland's Sketchfab: Mousa Broch, Shetland

<https://skfb.ly/6Rutt> and Dun Carloway Broch, Isle of Lewis <https://skfb.ly/6RFtw>

The Atlas of Hillforts is a map of every hillfort in Britain and Ireland: <https://hillforts.arch.ox.ac.uk/>

Videos about the Iron Age from BBC Teach: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/teach/class-clips-video/history-ks2-ancient-voices/zvkj92p>