

Early Inhabitants

Pre-Roman Britain

The first inhabitants

Until 6000 BC, Great Britain was still joined to the European Continent by a land bridge between the East coast and the Netherlands (Pays-Bas). Great Britain was not an island, easily accessible by migrants. But the land bridge was cut when the sea started to rise in 6000 BC.

Consequences: Britain became an island and stopped participating in European civilization in the same way as continental country.

From about 4000 BC, during the new Stone Age, people turned to agriculture. In about 3000 BC, some other early inhabitants crossed the sea from continental Europe in small boats. They were short and dark haired and they probably came from Iberian Peninsula or even from North Africa. Many stone circles were created in England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales. The most famous of them is “Stonehenge”. Its function is not very clear but it’s probably a center of economic, religious and political power. Stonehenge people also created giant hill-figures such as the “White Horse of Westbury”. They were great builders and had a concrete culture.

The Beaker Folks

They arrived after 2400 BC from the Netherlands of the Rhine Country. They made bronze tools and beakers (goblets). They enlarged Stonehenge with stones from Wales. They traded a lot with Continental Europe and finally, they were overtaken by the Celts after 700 BC.

The Celts

During the Iron Age (1000 to 500 BC), the Celts were the main inhabitants. They had probably been arriving from Continental Europe, They were a widespread population. The oldest center is in Hallstatt (Austria) but also Spain or Turkey (Anatolia). They could work with iron, they were fairly advanced technologically. They could make better weapons than the people who used bronze and they started to control the lowlands (basses terres).

Celtic society had a tribal organization; they were divided between tribes and clans. Each tribe had a chief. Members of the tribe took the name of the chief preceded by “Mac” (son of). There was no unity, tribes attended to fight each other. They were warriors. They were pagans and their priest called “druid” played an important part. They were very good

farmers who used iron to make ploughs (charrues), swords (épées) and they produced a lot of food. They built hill-forts which were economic and political centers, and they traded extensively with Gaul and Italy using coins. They spoke Celtic languages such as Gaelic.

The Celts play an important part in British civilization; they are the ancestors of many people of Scotland, Wales, Ireland and Cornwall (South-West of Ireland). Celtic languages such as Gaelic are still spoken by a smaller number of people in Ireland, Scotland, and the Isle of Man but also in Wales, Brittany (in France) or Galicia (in Spain).

It would be more accurate to describe British civilization as Anglo-Celt rather than Anglo-Saxon but we will see that the Celtic culture was largely taken over by the Romans and then by the Anglo-Saxons.