

1 Foundations.

There are no certain answers to the fundamental questions of how the earth was created and how old it is. The British Isles have an unusually complex geological history because over the hundreds of millions of years during which they were formed continents fused together and broke apart several times, leaving the British Isles with one of the earth's most varied landscapes. In the north-west of Scotland and the south-east of Ireland there are rocks thought to be 2,500 million years old. During the **Carboniferous** period (about 360-286 million years ago) the limestone Mendips and Pennines were formed, though in the **Triassic** and **Jurassic** periods which followed shallow seas and deserts were created, and the land was populated with many kinds of dinosaur. The Atlantic Ocean is thought to have begun to form about 180 million years ago and by about 40 million years ago the earth was populated with many species of monkeys and apes, with 'hominoids', apes which walked erect, appearing about 20 million years later. The English scientist Charles Darwin argued in the 1860s that these hominoids evolved into humans but it has not yet been established exactly how and when this came about.

Archaeologists and scientists are reasonably confident about the main developments over the last two million years. Four major cold spells resulted in **Ice** covering most of northern Europe though there were warmer intervals when the ice melted. We know that humans were hunting in what is now southern England between the second and third Ice Ages because their flint implements have been found in the Thames Valley and elsewhere, together with traces of lions, elephants and rhinoceros. The Barnsfield gravel pit on the south bank of the Thames near Swanscombe has yielded up some of the earliest human fossils in the British Isles, now to be seen in London's Natural History Museum. Dating back 200,000 years they give evidence of an early breed of thick-skinned people and the elegant hand-axes they made from stone.

About 40,000 years ago much of the region which was to become the British Isles consisted of open grassland on which roamed large herds of bison, reindeer and mammoth, and they were hunted by **Early Stone Age** (Palaeolithic) or 'Neanderthal' people who lived in caves. The Neanderthal folk seem to have developed a spiritual dimension to their lives and they buried their dead with careful rituals. About 30,000 years ago they were displaced by more intelligent and better organized races who made efficient weapons and tools from flint as well as inventing the bow and arrow. These people also developed intricate rituals and decorated themselves with beads, pendants, face-paint and feathers.

The last Ice Age was most severe in the region which was to develop into the British Isles about 25,000 years ago and though the ice reached only as far south as a line drawn from the present South Wales to York, the rest of the region was probably uninhabitable for another 10,000 years, after which the temperature began to rise and pine forests grew profusely, populated by elk and giant deer. Hunters returned to establish what has been called the **Middle Stone Age** (Mesolithic) culture, and they relied on powerful bows over two feet long with which they killed deer, wild ox and boar in the forests. The melting ice created streams, lakes and swamps and the inhabitants developed light canoes with wooden paddles from which they could catch fish with hooks and nets. They were very similar in appearance to the peoples of north-west Europe, to which the land mass of the British Isles was still joined.

When the sea flooded in to separate Britain and Ireland from each other and the rest of Europe about 8,000 years ago, the 'British Isles' can be said to have begun their distinctive history. About 6,000 years ago peoples of the Neolithic or **New Stone Age** crossed the Channel and the North Sea in skin-covered boats, bringing with them wheat, barley, sheep, pigs and pet dogs as well as an advanced knowledge of farming acquired from the peoples of eastern Europe. They were also able to make pottery and polished stone axes used for tree-felling and woodworking. Some of their earliest settlements were in the north-east of Ireland though they spread rapidly, seeking high ground and avoiding dense forests. Over many generations they established farming communities, made stone axes and implements and raised remarkable monuments for use in rituals. These monuments include the 'causewayed camps' constructed from about 3,500 BC and consisting of between one and four rings of banks and ditches : about twenty are known, mostly in southern England, and they are generally presumed to have been tribal rallying-places.

Tribes also collaborated to build **long barrows** (mounds) from 30 to 80 metres in length in which their leading families were buried, and many of these can still be seen on the chalklands of Hampshire, Dorset, Sussex, the Chilterns, Lincolnshire and Yorkshire. About 3,000 BC both long and round barrows began to be built, containing chambered tombs constructed from massive stones (or megaliths), and this practice continued for another thousand years. Today many chambered tombs, some in very good condition, can be seen in the Cotswolds, Wiltshire, south-west Wales, Argyll and Arran, the Isle of Man and northern Ireland, among other places. The finest megalithic tombs in the British Isles are to be found at Maes Howe in the Orkneys and New Grange in Ireland. Constructed about 2,500 BC they display an element of symmetry and architectural skill that is far from primitive. In Cornwall and Wales much simpler chambers were constructed, resembling large stone tables with uprights and a capstone and called 'dolmens' by historians. Taken together, these megalithic tombs can be considered the first real buildings to be erected in the British Isles.

From about 2750 BC the people in the British Isles began to build sacred monuments consisting of rings of stones, now called 'henges' after the most spectacular example, **Stonehenge** on Salisbury Plain. We do not know exactly how the original Stonehenge was built or its precise purpose, though the importance of the summer and winter solstice is reflected in the positioning of the stones which might have been a form of calendar as well as a shrine or place of ritual assembly. The second most impressive site is Avebury rings, also in Wiltshire, but there are many examples of smaller henges throughout the British Isles. Impressive as Stonehenge is, however, it seems a modest achievement compared with the contemporary pyramids of Egypt, phenomenal creations of a far more advanced civilisation.

About 2250 BC the British Isles were invaded by the '**Beaker people**', so called because they made handsome drinking vessels which they buried with their dead. They were widespread in northern Europe but the invaders of the British Isles are thought to have crossed the North Sea from the Low Countries and the Rhineland. They were a warrior race, taller and stronger than the existing population, who seem to have put up little resistance, and they brought with them knowledge of the technique of metal-working. The Beaker people abandoned communal graves and favoured single burials underneath a round barrow, shaped like a pudding and surrounded by a ditch. Six thousand of these have been identified in the area covered by ancient Wessex alone and the total for the whole of the British Isles is probably over 20,000: they generally date from between 2000 to 1200 BC. The Beaker people have left few remnants of dwellings and they may have lived a partially nomadic life

as a warrior elite but they were ready to accept many of the customs of the existing population, in particular the mystical traditions associated with the henges. It was during the ascendancy of the Beaker people that the double bluestone circles were added to Stonehenge, and as it is now thought that these huge stones came from the Preseli mountains of South Wales, a remarkable feat of transportation was achieved.

With their interest in metal-working the Beaker people prospected for copper, gold and tin, finding them in Ireland, south-west England and the west Midlands. Increasingly, stone weapons and implements were replaced by those fashioned out of copper and tin, leading archaeologists to call this the **Bronze Age** (c 1800-700 BC). In the early years of this period hundreds more stone circles were constructed throughout the British Isles: about a thousand are known today and it is likely that hundreds, if not thousands more have been destroyed. Yet about 1,300 BC the creation of stone circles and also barrows appears to have dwindled and the following five centuries of the Bronze Age provided nothing to rival the most impressive of the earlier constructions. Nevertheless, the population of the British Isles grew during this period and what is now southern England established itself as one of the most prosperous regions. There was some trade in minerals with Europe and graves from this period often contain amber and faience beads from the Mediterranean. Most of the population practised mixed farming and increasingly lived in clusters of circular huts, often enclosed by a fence or stone wall.

The **Iron Age** is the name historians have given to the period after 700 BC when iron began to be used in the British Isles, though it was not plentiful until about 200 years later. Most of the people continued to be farmers and during this period they learned to store grain in silos and granaries for use in the winter. This made possible an increase in the population. Contact with Europe, both through trade and the settlement of small numbers of invaders, led to the gradual spread of an iron-using culture which originated among the Celtic peoples of Europe. Life cannot have been peaceful because from about 500 BC the inhabitants of the British Isles began to construct hill forts to which they could retreat in times of danger. Some were small - only big enough for a few families - while others were large enough to accommodate thousands of people. There are well over 2000 known hill fort sites in the British Isles, 1400 of them in England and nearly all those south-west of a line drawn from Chester to Dungeness. The most impressive remains of a hill fort can be seen at Maiden Castle, in Dorset, a vast complex of ditches and earthworks. From about 300 BC the sling began to be used in warfare, making hill fort defences all the more necessary, and from this time onwards there was also an impressive advance in decorative art, most of it lavished on the weapons and uniforms of warriors. All the evidence suggests that in the British Isles at this time the warrior was respected above all, and that constant fighting took place between local tribes and petty chieftains.

About 120 BC south-eastern England was invaded by people of mixed German and Celtic stock who crossed from what is now Belgium. The dominant tribe were the Catuvellauni who established themselves in strongholds near the present St Albans. About 50 years later another Belgic tribe, the Atrebates, settled in what is now Sussex, Hampshire and Berkshire, establishing towns at the present Silchester and near Chichester. The Belgic tribes are credited with introducing the potter's wheel and with much wider use of wheeled vehicles. They also minted coins, some of which carried the names of their chieftains. In general the Belgic tribes did not construct hilltop forts, preferring to defend larger areas with dykes,

though when they conquered older-established tribes they took over their forts - as they did at Maiden Castle.