

# PREHISTORIC BURIAL IN BRITAIN

---

**Schools'**  
**information pack**  
featuring Michael Rosen poems



Image: 'Folkton Drums' by Rose Ferraby

# Schools' Information Pack

This information pack is designed to facilitate the teaching of prehistory (Stone Age to Iron Age) in primary schools (ages 7-11). It has been put together by a team of academics from the Universities of Manchester and Reading and the British Museum, with input from teachers across the UK. The main focus is prehistoric burial and the often spectacular or fascinating objects placed with the dead by prehistoric people.

## Highlights

- Poems by Michael Rosen – inspired by three real prehistoric burials
- Artworks by Rose Ferraby, Chie Kutsuwada and Kelvin Wilson – inspired by the same burials
- Prehistory timeline
- Key facts about the Stone Age, Bronze Age and Iron Age
- Suggested class activities and links to other areas of the curriculum
- Photos of real objects buried with the dead
- Links to other websites where you can find out more about prehistory and burial archaeology

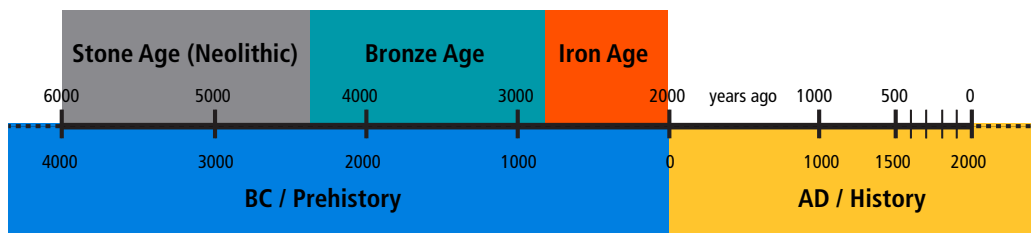
## Why are prehistoric burials important to archaeologists?

Prehistoric burials are vitally important to archaeologists as they represent one of the main areas where we actually have direct evidence about past people's lives (whereas settlements can be harder to find). Burial archaeology can also tell you a great deal about someone – how they died, but also where they lived at different points in their life, how they were related to other people, the kinds of object they had access to, their status or identity in life. Burials also allow us to understand past people's beliefs through the often dramatic rituals associated with death, which can be very different to our own! This is important as we have no written records for prehistory – for this reason, objects are especially important in trying to understand the past.

## Why teach burial archaeology in the classroom?

Prehistoric burials are an ideal topic of study within the classroom. Many of the best-known and most spectacular prehistoric objects – most of them located in museums that you can visit – come from burials. Equally, burials allow you to explore a wide range of different areas of the curriculum – from PSHE to geography and from science and technology to literacy and art. While the topic of burial might seem a bit 'spooky' to children at first, it can enable them to explore a range of fascinating issues to do with prehistory in the classroom. Burials also allow you to get close to individual people from the past, bringing them – and prehistory more widely – to life in the most direct way possible.

# Introducing prehistory: the human past before writing



Although 'prehistory' begins with the Palaeolithic (Old Stone Age) around 1 million years ago in Britain, formal human burials only become widespread around 6000 years ago at the beginning of the Neolithic period (New Stone Age).

## Suggested activity to get started – a human timeline

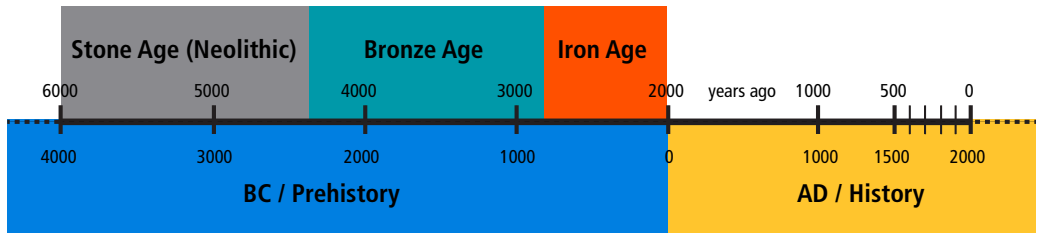
Firstly, find a large space (perhaps outside in the playground). Imagine that each person in your class/group represents 100 years in time. Make a line of pupils standing next to one another and use them to make a 'human timeline' to take you back in time... Think about what was happening 'one person' ago = 100 years (World War 1) – how were people's lives different to ours? What kinds of objects that we use today didn't even exist back then? Keep adding more pupils. Four more takes you back to the Tudor period (c. 500 years ago)? What was life like then? The Battle of Hastings (c. 1000 years ago) – the Roman invasion of Britain (c. 2000 years ago) – the Ancient Egyptians (c. 4500 years ago) – the Neolithic or New Stone Age (c. 6000 years ago). The beginning of the Palaeolithic or Old Stone Age (c. 1 million years ago) would require us to build a timeline of 10,000 pupils to get back that far!

Prehistory was such a long time ago – just imagine how different things might have been...

Here is a map of Britain showing the location of our three case studies.



# The Neolithic (4000-2500 BC)



Key facts about Neolithic burial

- Communal burial in large tombs
- Bones of different people often mixed up together
- Grave goods are rare

## The period

The Neolithic period (or New Stone Age) began in Britain around 4000 BC. At this time, people started to grow crops (wheat, oats and barley), to keep farm animals (cows, pigs and sheep), and to use pottery for the first time. A great deal of effort was put into building large monuments, including long barrows (tombs for the dead), causewayed enclosures (ceremonial meeting places), henges and stone circles like Stonehenge (ritual sites). While some Neolithic houses are known, there aren't many; as a result, archaeologists think that people may have been moving around a lot, living quite mobile lives – following their herds and moving between temporary campsites and specific places that they regularly used (stone quarries, hunting grounds, etc.).

## Burial

During the Neolithic, burials mostly took place in specially built large tombs. Usually, lots of people were buried together over a period of time – sometimes hundreds in one tomb. Archaeologists think that, once someone had died, their body was placed in the tomb and left there until the flesh had rotted away and only bones remained. Quite often, people came back into the tomb and rearranged the bones or took them off somewhere else. People might have worshipped their ancestors (like gods) and so wanted a piece of them nearby as they went about their daily lives: a keep-sake or relic.

## Grave goods

Grave goods (objects placed with the dead) are not very common during the Neolithic. It is possible that people felt everyone should be treated equally in death and not distinguished as different or special by what they were buried with. Archaeologists do find some objects in Neolithic tombs – some pottery and the odd example of the arrowhead that killed the person! Animal burials could also be placed alongside people, especially in the islands of Orkney where we find dogs, cattle, eagles and deer in certain tombs.

## Case study burial: the Folkton Drums

Folkton is in North Yorkshire, and the burial we will be focusing on dates to around 3000 BC. The burial is of a young child – we don't know if they were a boy or a girl – around six years old. The



child was buried with a small, worn pin made of bone. However, the most impressive objects in the grave were three carved cylinders, made of chalk (measuring 10-15 cm diameter); archaeologists have called them 'drums' but they might well have been made to represent boxes or baskets. They are decorated with lots of carved lines, dots and zigzags, above which seem to peer little faces with dots for eyes and curved eyebrows. What can you see in the designs? A granny in a cloak, or a baby, wrapped in a blanket? A diving whale's tail or a butterfly? Archaeologists really have very little idea what purpose these mysterious objects served. They may have been designed to be turned in the hand, perhaps to tell different stories. Tucked behind the back of this young child, they were special, mysterious objects... perhaps they were meant to guard their journey into the next life? The poem on page 7 is written in the voice of the child itself, reaching out to you across the past.



*The Folkton Drums (© The Trustees of the British Museum)*

*A reconstruction of the Folkton child burial (© Craig Williams)*





### *The Folkton Drums by Rose Ferraby*

The screen print made by Rose Ferraby tries to capture lots of things in one picture: the colours of the landscape, the shape of the burial mound, the plan of the grave and the objects found in it. It is influenced by the work of artists like Paul Nash, Eric Ravilious and Ben Nicholson, who mixed up objects and places.

You might also like to have a look at this comic strip about the Folkton Drums: <https://prehistories.wordpress.com/2013/04/03/archaeological-oddities-no-1/>

# The Folkton Drums

by Michael Rosen

*If I am not to last the summer  
If I am not to live out the light  
If, when the mists hang in the air  
lay me down slow  
lay me down soft  
lay me down low  
just as I lay between you  
as a new born.*

*If I am not to last the summer  
If I am not to live out the light  
If, when the mists hang in the air  
lay at my head  
lay at my back  
lay at my hip  
the treasures I have had  
since I was on all fours*

*If I am not to last the summer  
If I am not to live out the light  
If, when the mists hang in the air,  
lay me close to the paths  
lay me close to the star  
lay me close to the eyes  
traced on my treasures  
watching me walking into the mist  
watching me walking into your minds*

## Curriculum links and suggested activities

### Literacy and PSHE

Write a poem in someone else's voice, perhaps from the past, like Michael Rosen did in his poem. How did they live? What mattered to them? What did they like to do and is this similar or different to yourself?

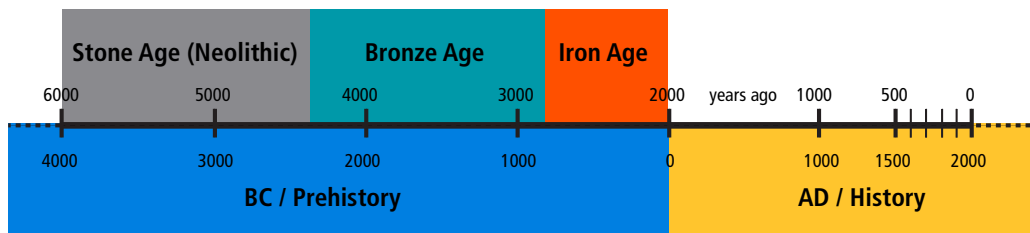
### Art and Geography

Taking inspiration from Rose Ferraby's screenprint, you could make a 'print block' using scraps of corrugated paper, tissue, sand, etc. to produce different textures, or a 'collage': cutting out and mixing-up images of your local landscape and things from your home or school which are important to you.

### PSHE

Imagine the funeral of an important or special person in the Neolithic. Think about how different things can be used to show what a person is like. What objects could you bury with them that would tell guests at the funeral where they came from, what they did or what was important to them in life?

# Bronze Age (2500-800 BC)



## Key facts about Bronze Age burial

- Burial evidence is especially important for this period; there are big differences between the Early Bronze Age (2500-1500 BC) and later Bronze Age (1500-800 BC)
- Individual burials under round mounds (barrows or cairns) in the Early Bronze Age
- Cremation introduced, becoming more common in the later Bronze Age
- Lots of impressive grave goods, especially in the Early Bronze Age

## The period

The Bronze Age sees the arrival of metalworking and trade for copper, glass, jet, gold and amber. Analysis of ancient DNA extracted from Bronze Age human bones suggests that there were large movements of people from continental Europe into Britain at the beginning of this period. Many of the earlier Neolithic monuments went out of use, and instead funeral ceremonies were often carried out at round burial mounds ('barrows' or 'cairns'). In the Early Bronze Age, settlements remain hard to find: it is likely that people still lived fairly mobile lives. By the later Bronze Age, more of the land had been cleared of trees; people created fields and trackways in these spaces and built round-houses of timber or stone – they were probably living more settled farming lives.

## Burial

Burial practices changed significantly at the start of the Bronze Age, with people buried individually within graves under round barrows. Groups of burial mounds (or barrow cemeteries) would have dominated many landscapes. Sometimes, when a round barrow is excavated, only one body is found under it, but on many sites lots of people were buried, sometimes over the course of hundreds of years. After 2000 BC, cremation (when the body is burnt on a bonfire pyre) became more common; often, the cremated bones were gathered up and placed inside a pottery container or leather or plant-fibre bag. During the later Bronze Age, cremation continued, but sometimes only parts of bodies were buried (for example a leg or a skull) – in settlements, field ditches, rubbish heaps, and in rivers and bogs. The bones that were not buried might have been seen as relics, kept in the world of the living in bags or boxes: there are also rare examples of mummified bodies, stored for hundreds of years before being buried in a grave. While this might seem gruesome to us, it would have been perfectly normal to prehistoric people – archaeology shows just how different to our own beliefs in the past might have been.

## Grave goods

The Early Bronze Age is the first time when grave goods really become popular. It is possible that the arrival of metal made people think differently about the objects and materials in the world around them – something which they expressed in their burial practices. Pots were the most common item, but many other objects were also included in burials – bronze daggers, gold and amber jewellery, archery kits (including arrowheads and wrist-protectors) and much more. Fewer grave goods were buried in the later Bronze Age and were extremely rare by the end of this period – they appear to have gone out of fashion. Many cremated bodies were buried in or under a pot, sometimes with a stone, clay or wooden lid on top. Occasionally these pots also contained one other object such as an amber bead, a bone pin, a flint tool, quartz pebble, a bronze finger ring, or a spearhead – perhaps a small memento from that person's life. Sometimes the objects mixed in with cremated human bone were burnt too – they were probably placed with the body on the funeral pyre; it is possible that the object was so closely associated with that person it had to be cremated and buried along with them.

## Case study burial: the Knowes of Trotty cremation

This burial comes from the islands of Orkney, off the north coast of mainland Scotland. It dates to around 2000 BC. In this case, the grave goods were placed in a stone-lined grave that archaeologists call a 'cist'. We don't know if this was the burial of a woman but it is likely: by the side of the cremation burial was a wonderful amber necklace made of many decorated beads, and four round discs made of gold. These were thin, fragile and decorated with circles, triangles and rays... perhaps to look like the shining sun! In Orkney, the summer days are long and the sun barely sets but, in the winter, the days are very short and the darkness overshadows the land. Perhaps this woman was seen as someone who could keep the power of sunlight in the golden discs and would be able to bring it back each year. In the poem below, we can hear the voice of her family and her community, mourning her loss.



*The Knowes of Trotty discs*

(© National Museums Scotland)



*A reconstruction of the Knowes of Trotty cremation*

(© Craig Williams)





*The Knowes of Trotty woman (© 2017 Kelvin Wilson. Reproduced by kind permission of the artist)*

## Knowes of Trotty

by Michael Rosen

*We have watched the fire die  
We have watched the sun die in the sky  
We have watched the light die in your eye*

*But we have a light that lives  
A light that winks in the water  
A light that gathers within gold*

*And you will wear the light that lasts  
You will walk with the light that lives  
You will wander through the wilds  
with the light that lingers.*

*But you will be safe with your suns  
You will be helped by their heat  
And you will be loved by their light.*

## Curriculum links and suggested activities

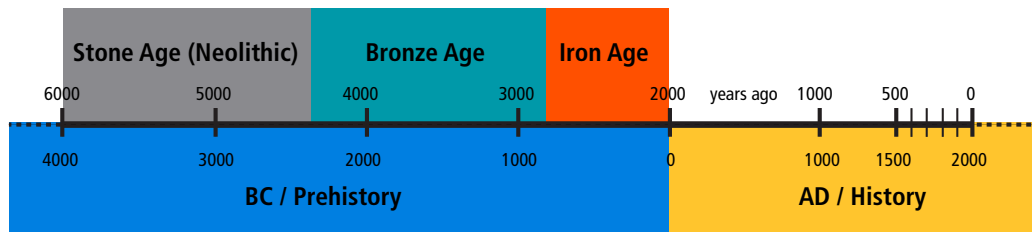
### Literacy, Religious Education and Art

The golden discs from this burial can be seen as symbols of light. Use them to discuss the concept and the power of a symbol – find examples from school or the locality, e.g. the crown on a coin for royalty, a ring for a relationship, an 'eye' bead or clover leaf for good luck. You might want to design your own symbol.

### Art and Materials/Technology

Why is gold special? Discuss its properties compared with other metals (e.g. rarity, softness – easily worked and inscribed, heavy, does not tarnish, etc.). Discuss the fact that although it is not a 'strong' metal it is thought of as both attractive and powerful. Find other shiny materials and investigate how they are made and what they are used for or identify other metals which are superior in different ways.

# Iron Age (800 BC-AD 43)



## Key facts about Iron Age burial

- Death is dealt with in many different ways – inhumations, cremations, excarnations, mummification (including bog bodies)
- Grave goods are rare but sometimes spectacular
- Burial is very regionally specific (only occurs in certain places, at certain times)

## The period

A new metal (iron) was introduced to Britain around 800 BC but it took a while to spread and be used for weapons and tools: people continued to use bronze for many things, especially those with beautiful 'Celtic art' decoration. Hillforts became common in many areas: some were permanently lived in, filled with roundhouses; others were only occasionally used, for gatherings, markets and as a refuge in a crisis. Most people lived in small farms, with ditches and banks used to gather cattle and sheep or to protect crops. Towards the end of the Iron Age, the influence of the Roman world spread across the Channel: there was a lot of trade for Roman goods, and some people fled to Britain as the Roman army conquered modern-day France. Certain people in Britain were quick to adopt Roman customs and burial rites, especially the elites of south-east England.

## Burial

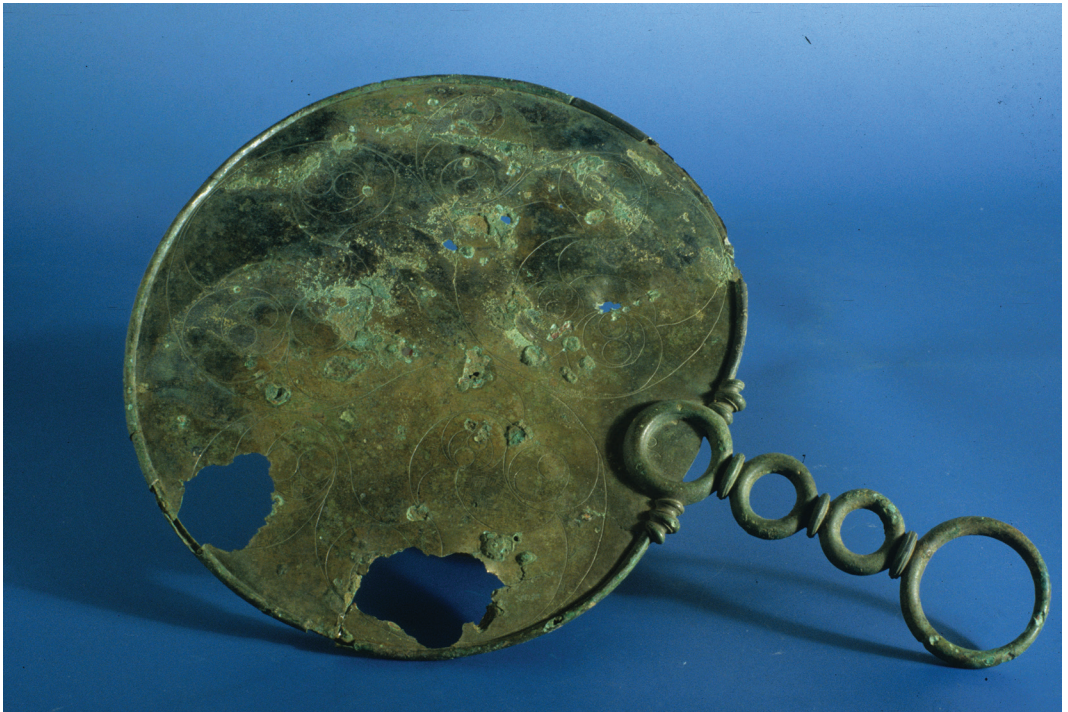
Many people were not formally buried in the Iron Age: they were 'excarnated' – allowed to decay in the open air or placed in rivers, to return their soul and life-force to the earth. In a few areas like East Yorkshire and Dorset, they did bury their dead in large numbers but many smaller cemeteries only lasted for a generation or two. Some people were placed in old storage pits or 'mummified' by placing them in bogs, and parts of other bodies (especially heads!) were kept as trophies, relics or guardians for the living. Around the time of the final Roman Conquest in AD 43, new beliefs were being introduced by Rome and cremation burial in pits and large wooden chambers became common especially in the south-east of England.

## Grave goods

Only a few people were buried with objects in the Iron Age, and these were usually simple: a jar with food (beef, pork or lamb – perhaps to sustain them in the afterlife?), a bronze brooch or iron knife, for example. There are some more spectacular grave goods however – men and women buried with chariots, iron mirrors, tools, weaponry, jewellery and even Roman 'dining sets'. Especially towards the end of the Iron Age, important and politically powerful individuals rose to prominence. It is possible that their status in life was reflected through offerings made by others in death.

## Case study burial: the Portesham mirror

This burial comes from the south of Britain, in Dorset and it dates to the time when the Romans were trying to conquer Britain around AD 40-50. It is the burial of an older woman, and at her funeral, they ate roasted pork and put aside some for her to carry into the afterlife. She was also provided with some pots and a bronze pan for making warm wine. Alongside some fine brooches and a 'beauty set' (tweezers, nail and ear cleaners) was a beautiful bronze mirror. Was she a vain woman? Perhaps not: this mirror would never have worked as well as the ones we use – it would have given a shadowy reflection. The swirly-whirly Celtic art decoration on the back might also have been seen as giving the mirror magical powers – patterns like these are used on other powerful Iron Age objects like swords and shields. Her mirror might have been a kind of weapon: allowing her to see into the past or future, or to contact her ancestors. We think she may have been a very influential figure in her community, living at a time of great change in Britain. The Romans were coming! In the poem below, it is the mirror which speaks to you... what stories might it tell?



*The Portesham Mirror* (Elaine Wakefield © Wessex Archaeology, courtesy of Dorset County Museum)



## *A reconstruction of the Portesham mirror burial*

(© Craig Williams)



*The Portesham Burial manga by Chie Kutsuwada*  
(following pages)

## Portesham Mirror by Michael Rosen

*The power is in me  
The power is me  
I am the power*

*I am the one and only  
that sees it all  
for now and for ever.*

*It looked like you looked in me  
like people look in rivers  
but you weren't looking for you.  
You wanted my power  
to see beyond yourself,  
to see what it is  
we will be.*

*The power is in me  
The power is me  
I am the power*

*And now you are there  
beyond yourself  
in the company of what  
you let people see  
mattered to you most:  
the tastes on your tongue  
the shine of your show  
the blood on the blade.*

*But I saw that look  
to see yourself beyond yourself  
And see:  
I am  
in the time beyond yourself  
I am  
in the time you looked for  
when you looked in me.*

*The power is in me.  
The power is me.  
I am the power.*

# The Portesham Mirror

## A True Story

In October 1994, archaeologist Dave Murdie (working for Wessex Archaeology) gets a fascinating phone call...

It's Dorchester Museum here. We've had an amazing find out at Portesham ...

A metal detectorist has found a rare Iron Age mirror in a farmer's field.

Off to investigate!

The farmer, the detectorist, and the farmer's dog are waiting for him by the hole.

It's late in the year and the days are short. Dave begins digging and more finds emerge... and then...

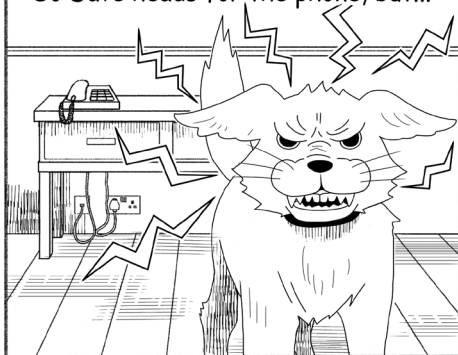
... a skull !

It's a burial with some of the most impressive grave goods ever found in Dorset.

There's a phone at the farm if you need it!

Time to phone his boss. Dave sets off for the farmhouse...

The door is open but no one is in.  
So Dave heads for the phone, but...



It's an Iron Age  
mirror burial! Send  
the photographer,  
quickly!

N-nice  
dog!



When the burial is cleaned up, it is amazing...

① The burial is a woman.  
A pottery, bowl and jar,  
made in Dorset, were placed  
behind her back and hips:  
Did they once contain drink  
or were they her pots?



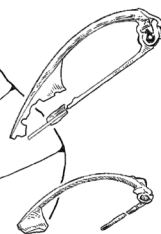
③ A bronze  
wine pan suggests  
she was trading  
directly with  
the Romans,  
and enjoyed a  
change from  
the local beer!

⑤ The mirror  
had been placed  
with its reflective  
surface face down  
over her hips. It was  
decorated with beautiful  
Celtic art... But is this  
merely a mirror for  
her own vanity?

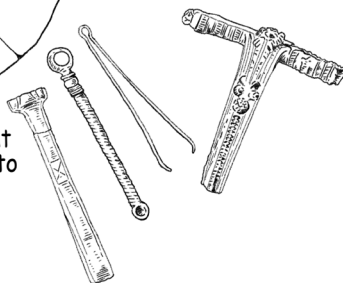


⑥ Joints of  
pork were  
placed in front  
of her, close to  
an iron knife.

② Two brooches at  
her shoulder probably  
pinned together her  
cloak, or a shroud.



④ A small brooch  
and a "toilet"  
set (two pairs of  
tweezers and an  
ear scoop) were found  
around its handle,  
which was worn from use.  
It suggests she took care  
in her appearance.



Archaeologists used to think that Iron Age mirrors like these were just beautiful vanities for powerful women to look at their reflection. But ideas change...

...the bronze polished surface would probably never have reflected your face well: it is not silvered or tinned. Instead you might have glimpsed a blurry reflection, a movement of light and shadow. Did the woman see herself when she looked into the mirror or was she seeing into a different world? Glimpsing a grandmother, a ghost or even a goddess?

The handle was very worn from where it had hung, perhaps in a bag, fastened by the brooch. Maybe it was only brought out on special occasions?

The decorated side is entrancing. Swirling and curving designs flow into each other like flowers or eddies in a stream.

What can you see in the swirls?

Bequiling  
Enchanting  
Dazzling  
Powerful

The art looks complicated but it is made up of a few simple designs, entwined together, and left open or shaded. The design is cleverly asymmetrical so your eye is drawn round and around again.

Trumpet  
Void

Peltae

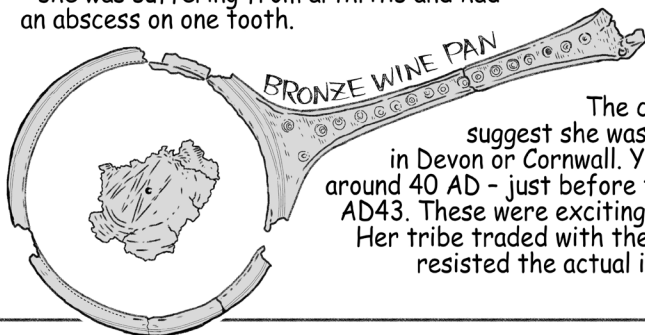
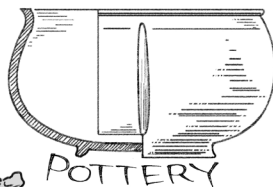
Crescent  
Rings

And now,  
who was she?  
When did she die  
and why??



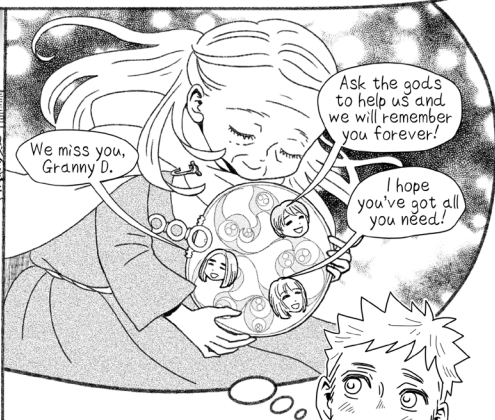
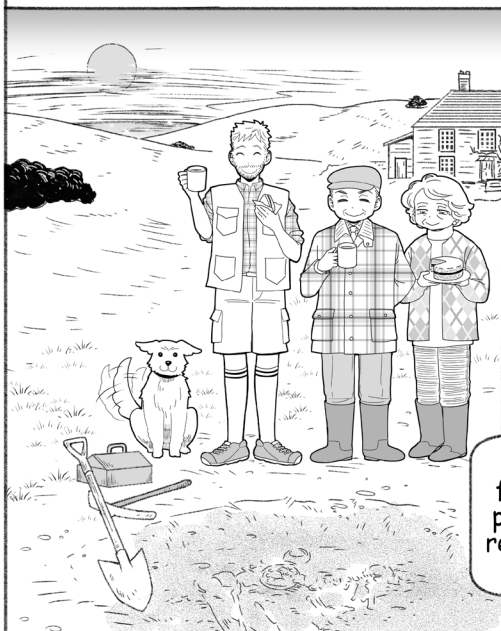
It takes many years to answer those questions, as archaeological scientists work on her skeleton, the animal bones, the metal objects, the pottery and the burial site itself.

From her teeth and bones, we know she was 26-45 years old. She had probably lived quite a hard life - she was suffering from arthritis and had an abscess on one tooth.

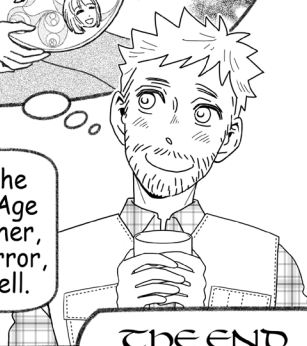


The chemicals in her teeth suggest she was born outside Dorset, in Devon or Cornwall. Yet she lived in Dorset around 40 AD - just before the Roman invasion of AD43. These were exciting but dangerous times. Her tribe traded with the Romans but violently resisted the actual invasion before finally being overcome..

It is late autumn. The light has nearly gone and Dave packs up his tools. The farmer and his family have come for one last look, with tea and freshly baked cake. A last feast in her honour.



And he imagines the faces of the Iron Age people who buried her, reflected in the mirror, wishing her farewell.



There is always more to find out in archaeology and the same evidence can be understood in different ways. What story will you tell?

# Curriculum links and suggested activities

## PSHE and History

Use this burial to discuss the change from Iron Age to Roman Britain: how did people get along once they were living together with different beliefs, traditions and ideas? You could discuss ideas like compromise, alliance, merging to create new traditions, and learning from each other – Roman incomers probably adopted 'local' British customs of dress such as trousers, cloaks and brooches; wealthy Iron Age British people developed a love of 'Roman' food/drink – onions, grapes, many herbs and spices, wine, olive oil and so on.

## Art and Literacy

Use your creative skills to make your own 'Manga' character from prehistory, or develop a comic to tell a story about what you would like to find as an archaeologist or about the discovery of a real archaeological find.

## Further information

To find out more about the sites featured here, follow the links below:

### Folkton

[https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection\\_online/collection\\_object\\_details.aspx?objectId=814086&partId=1](https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=814086&partId=1)

### Knowes of Trotty

<http://canmore.org.uk/site/2035>

### Portesham

<https://finds.org.uk/database/artefacts/record/id/399113>

## Find out more...

The poems, images and information contained here can be downloaded via this link:

<https://doi.org/10.5284/1052206>.

See and hear Michael Rosen reading the prehistoric burial poems on his YouTube channel, 'Kids' Poems and Stories with Michael Rosen' at: <https://www.youtube.com/c/MichaelRosenOfficial>.

Find out more about the Prehistoric Grave Goods project: <http://blogs.reading.ac.uk/grave-goods/>.

And about other fantastic grave goods (and more): <https://www.britishmuseum.org/learning.aspx>.

This information pack was created by a team from The University of Manchester (Melanie Giles and Anwen Cooper), the University of Reading (Duncan Garrow and Catriona Gibson), and the British Museum (Neil Wilkin) as part of the 'Grave goods: objects and death in later prehistoric Britain' project, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

